

Knowledge flows, learning and development in an international context

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Editorial: Knowledge flows, learning and development in an international context

Nicholas Theodorakopoulos*,
Charmi Patel and Pawan Budhwar

Work & Organisational Psychology Group,
Aston Business School,
Aston University,
Birmingham, B4 7ET, UK
Email: n.theodorakopoulos@aston.ac.uk
Email: patelcv@aston.ac.uk
Email: p.s.budhwar@aston.ac.uk

*Corresponding author

Abstract: In the editorial of this special issue we argue that knowledge flows, learning and development are becoming increasingly important in all organisations operating in an international context. The possession of capabilities relating to acquisition, configuration and transfer of relevant knowledge effectively within and across different organisational units, teams, and countries is integrally related to superior organisational performance. In mastering such capabilities, internationalised organisations need to grapple with the inherent challenges relating to contextual variation and different work modes between subsidiaries, partners or team members. The papers in this special issue cast light on crucial aspects of knowledge flows, learning and development in internationalised organisations. Their contribution varies from the provision of frameworks to systematise investigation of these issues, to empirical evidence about effective mechanisms, as well as enabling and constraining forces, in facilitating knowledge transfer, learning and human capital development.

Keywords: knowledge flows; learning; staff development; expatriation; inpatriation; team learning.

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Biographical notes: Nicholas Theodorakopoulos is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Management and Strategy and Director of the MSc HRM and Business PT programme at Aston Business School, Birmingham, UK. His specialist areas of research, academic publications and teaching include strategic entrepreneurship, learning and innovation, and diversity at work. Apart from contributing to a number of books and special issues as a guest editor, his papers have been published in reputable academic journals, including *Work*, *Employment and Society*, *International Small Business Journal*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *Journal of Management Development*, *Public Administration*, *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, and *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management*. He has recently been awarded a prestigious ESRC grant to fine-tune and apply a tool assessing and benchmarking the

management skills of business incubation managers. He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the International Association for the Management of Technology.

Charmi Patel is a doctoral researcher in the Work and Organisational Psychology group at Aston Business Group, Birmingham UK. Her current research investigates counterproductive work behaviours and their impact on productivity and quality of work life. More, precisely her PhD thesis looks at developing and validating a scale on 'Presenteeism' within Indian Call Centre context. She has published in *Journal of World Business* and has an upcoming publication in *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. She has also written a book chapter on 'Outsourcing and Offshoring to India' in the book titled *Doing Business in India* (Routledge).

Pawan Budhwar is Professor of International HRM, Director of Aston India Foundation for Applied Research and Associate Dean of Research at Aston Business School, Birmingham, UK. He has published in various top tier journals such as *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of World Business*, *International Journal of Human Resource Management* and he is a member of various editorial boards. He is also the co-founding member and president of the Indian Academy of Management (IAM) at the Academy of Management.

1 Introduction

Recent years have seen a surge of interest in learning and knowledge in organisations. This can be attributed to two distinct, yet interrelated developments. First, at a practical level, capital and labour intensive industries have continued to decline within developed economies, while conversely the relative importance of knowledge-based industries has increased over the last 30 years or so. Second, at a theoretical level, the ability to create and exploit organisational knowledge is regarded as a distinctive, dynamic capability (e.g. Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Zahra and George, 2002). From a Knowledge-based View (KBV) of the firm, organisational knowledge as a product of learning may constitute a key strategic resource; an intangible asset which, being path dependent and causally ambiguous, is hard to imitate or substitute (e.g. Grant, 1996; Spender, 1996). Allied to leveraging knowledge as a strategic resource there is an emphasis on learning and human capital development in organisations. This argument is common currency in the strategic HRM/HRD literature, implying particular challenges to internationalised organisations that have to grapple with the multiplicity and diversity of their operating contexts (Budhwar et al., 2009).

Against this backdrop, this introductory article discusses some key aspects of knowledge flows, learning and development in internationalised organisations. The latter is meant in the wider sense of the term, including the archetype of internationalised organisations, multinational corporations (MNCs), but also less conspicuous forms, such as Western national healthcare systems, where labour and production and application of knowledge have been internationalised, bringing into stark focus issues relating to diversity and cohesion in professional teams. Modules of health care systems in many Western countries have been outsourced and increasingly private companies constitute an

integral element of their value network, with services increasingly being run by MNCs (OPM, 2008). This has implications in the way knowledge flows within and outside these organisations.

2 Facilitating knowledge flows and learning in an international context

The epistemological assumption of the KBV is that knowledge is an ‘asset’, or a commodity that can be located and manipulated as an independent object or stock. In this view, it is possible to ‘capture’, ‘distribute’, ‘use’, ‘reuse’ and generally ‘manage’ knowledge (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). Exchanges of knowledge between individuals and units within organisations, across geographical boundaries, are governed by the functioning of an internal market (Teece et al., 1997). Hence, the ability to identify and especially to manage knowledge is the result of the firm’s continuous effort to engage in learning. This is particularly important for internationalised organisations (Schuler et al., 2009). Having to deal with diverse external and internal operating contexts exacerbates the complexity involved. Therefore, these can be seen as challenges pertaining to engaging with learning and human capital development, across borders and levels (Budhwar et al., 2009; Moingeon et al., 2009).

Recently, practice-based perspectives (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger and Snyder, 2000) have challenged the conventional economist/cognitivist view that knowledge can be abstracted, codified and stored for use and reuse. Advocates of practice-based theorising view tacit and explicit knowledge as non-detachable and non-convertible elements; aspects of knowledge that are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing (Cook and Brown, 1999; Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001). They regard learning and organisational knowledge stemming from social interaction within communities of practice (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Chiva and Alegre, 2005, Roberts, 2006). Such perspectives represent an epistemological shift from ‘knowledge’ as a static object to practice-based knowing as a process and introduce an emphasis on socially-oriented approaches to the understanding of learning and the tacit quality of knowledge. The latter is hard to imitate and substitute, constituting the basis of competitive advantage (Brown and Duguid, 2001). By the same token, it is the tacitness of knowledge that makes challenging the coordination and integration of organisational knowledge in geographically dispersed companies, as this is embedded in differing socio-cultural environments (Lane et al., 2009). Following from this, from a practice-based perspective, what matters is nurturing the conditions that promote social interaction in authentic or near-authentic context. Simulations, mentoring, role playing and the creation of forums where people can socially participate and interact gain prominence in efforts to facilitate knowledge flows and support learning and development within and across organisational units.

International assignments are crucial vehicles for coordinating and integrating resources, which is a strategic activity in internationalised organisations. A significant concern for MNCs relates to facilitating knowledge flows to expatriates and enhancing their learning and development, before their arrival and during their assignment in a host country, so that they can perform successfully. The role of cross-cultural training (CCT) has received the attention of researchers and HR practitioners. The main reason for expatriate failure seems to be a failure to adapt to foreign environments rather than a lack of technical skills and CCT appears to have a considerable positive influence on expatriate

adjustment and performance (Black et al., 1991; Forster, 2000; Anderson, 2003). It is important then to identify the factors that make such training and development activities effective in different settings.

Bonache and Brewster (2001) maintain that the assignment of inpatriates to headquarters may be motivated by the need to enhance knowledge flows within the MNC. There is some indication that inpatriates may act as brokers between the subsidiary and the headquarters during their assignment and be able to explain the headquarters' perspective to their local colleagues upon their return to the subsidiary (Harvey et al., 2000; Reiche et al., 2009). However, most of the international management literature on knowledge sharing focuses on the role of MNC home country expatriates (Vance and Paik, 2006). There is then a need for research on the learning quality of such assignments, and on how MNCs may benefit from using inpatriates' perspectives and cross-cultural experiences.

With phenomenal developments in ICT, tools such as databases and computer networking technologies (e.g. intranets), are often employed to facilitate the management of organisational 'knowledge'. These technological developments purportedly support knowledge flows and learning by developing systematic procedures for capturing and making knowledge accessible to various organisational members across borders (Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Zack, 1999; Adams and Lamont, 2003). Viewing knowledge management as a technological project concerned with encoding organisational knowledge is at odds with social learning adherents; for them such systems are unable to capture the tacit element of knowledge. The role of ICT is acknowledged, not as a knowledge storing and processing device, but in enhancing social participation and interaction, offering a virtual component that complements the authentic (Brown and Duguid, 2001). In this respect, the e-mentoring of expatriates, facilitated via ICT, merits investigation. Despite recent recognition of the value of e-mentoring in expatriate assignments (Beitler and Frady, 2002; Crocitto et al., 2005), published research remains scant.

Home country nationals (HCNs) are a significant source of relevant knowledge for expatriates. They can provide them with critical information about the organisation, as well as support both at work and outside, helping them adjust faster to the new location (Toh and DeNisi, 2007; Varma et al., 2011). However, Varma et al. (2011) note that, HCNs may not always be motivated to help expatriates, for a whole host of reasons. Thus, an examination of the factors that motivate HCNs to help expatriates by providing them the required information and support is valuable.

Regardless of the degree of internationalisation, innovation is a concern of strategic importance for many organisations. The relationship between transformational leadership and team learning is often suggested (Schippers et al., 2008). Also, research examining the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative behaviour indicates that transformational leadership is related to group effectiveness through the effect of cohesion (Jung and Sosik, 2002). Hence, connecting the cohesion perspective with team learning in examining the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative behaviour adds value.

Finally, the importance of line managers in delivering HR services has been emphasised in the literature over the last decade, pointing to the challenges involved and the need for their development, so that they can perform such duties (e.g. Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003; Redman and Wilkinson, 2009). It is important then to see how such efforts materialise empirically in an internationalised organisation and identify the enabling and constraining forces at work.

3 This special issue

Based on the above discussion, the papers contributing to this special issue address the different aspects of knowledge flows, learning and development in an international context.

Van Zolingen, Essers and Vermeer in an in-depth explorative study examine the challenges facing Dutch expatriates during their stay in India and how CCT can be improved to help them adequately handle these challenges. Approaches such as cultural awareness training, attribution training, didactic training and language training are identified as most suitable. The authors suggest that instruction strategies should preferably be based on participatory approaches, such as role play and simulations which require an active participation of the expatriate. They divide CCT into five areas: adjustment to work; adjustment to interacting with the host country nationals; adjustment to the general non-work environment, adjustment to the Indian culture, and adjustment to the Indian context. A number of elements that can be improved during the CCT are identified along these five areas. Unlike previous studies in the field, this paper adds value by taking into consideration the specific destination of the expatriate and identifies the particular aspects of the Indian culture which can pose a challenge for the Dutch expatriates. Yet, knowing about the cultural aspects that are specific to different areas in India, rather than discussing India as a whole, would enhance the preparedness of expatriates. Given the large differences between the different regions and cities in India, the authors suggest further research focusing on different locales of India. For instance, considering the urban-rural dichotomy or the variation across different urban areas in India might be a fertile approach. Also, a gendered approach may produce new insights on gender-specific issues.

Gertsen and S oderberg draw on a qualitative case study of inpatriation in a globalising MNC headquartered in Denmark. Based on analysis of in-depth interviews with inpatriates from the People's Republic of China, the USA, Brazil, and Japan, their paper discusses the respondents' experiences at headquarters, focusing on the potential of inpatriates as mediators of knowledge flows between headquarters and subsidiaries. As per this analysis, inpatriates appear to be well situated to act as boundary spanners and cultural mediators. However, inpatriate knowledge and brokering capacities do not seem to be exploited systematically at headquarters, even though corporate value statements suggest otherwise. The authors suggest the establishment of a forum allowing inpatriates to share their knowledge with their colleagues at headquarters. In addition, they submit that the HR department could act proactively in contacting other departments receiving inpatriates and ensuring that they are aware of them as knowledge resources, not just people who need training. Although their paper is based on a case study, the authors are not extremely particularist in their approach. They note that there might be a tendency across MNCs to focus on the headquarters' approaches and to overlook some of the learning potential inherent in inpatriation. For future research examining inpatriation experiences with boundary spanning and knowledge brokering, the authors call for longitudinal studies that use triangulation of sources, supplementing inpatriates' accounts with interviews with both colleagues at the headquarters and at the subsidiaries.

The paper by Elkin, Gathro and Elkin synthesises a framework to guide research in the area of e-mentoring of expatriates, which is presented as the intersection of mentoring and computer mediated communication (CMC). Their mapping out of the mentioned intersection addresses an uncharted territory and identifies where the three domains form

a central area. These are the e-mentoring of expatriates – which is of contemporary interest, given the growth of expatriation, the explosion of CMC and the rise of generation Y. This paper offers a review of the research domains likely informing the practice of e-mentoring of expatriate performance and presents a model, along with a series of ideas, for further refinement and testing. For future research, the authors suggest conceptual integration of the ideas presented, in an investigation of how they relate with each other, in order to produce a more detailed map of the terrain in the e-mentoring of expatriates arena. They also highlight the opportunity to consider how the mentor–mentee relationship changes over time and in response to a specific situation and highlight the need to better understand the influence of the operating environment and culture, as well as the professional or technical role of the expatriate.

Varma, Grodzicki, Pichler, Kupferer and Ramaswami using data from HCNs in Poland and India, examine the impact of nationality and performance standards information on HCN willingness to provide role information, and their evaluations of expatriate colleagues. Their results confirm that both nationality and performance standards information are significantly related to HCN willingness to provide role information. However, although nationality is not found to be significantly related to task or trait type performance ratings, when performance standards are provided, expatriates give more favourable trait ratings than HCNs. This paper suggests that it is important to understand each bilateral relationship and interaction based on its own merits, rather than trying to generalise findings from the study of one bi-national dyad to another. Moreover, the fact that HCNs are significantly more likely to share such information with expatriates over other HCNs indicates the recognition of the importance of such information for expatriate success. The authors submit that human resource practitioners in MNCs should consider ways to facilitate HCN sharing of role information. To this effect, the authors suggest the creation of a strong organisational identity, mentorship programmes, cross-cultural training, team building, as well as other programmes aimed at building positive work relationships between colleagues. Furthermore, the fact that nationality does not appear to influence trait or task performance ratings alludes to the point that objective, measurable criteria, like those considered in task performance ratings, are not easily influenced by outside factors. The authors call for future studies that include both role information and social support variables in their investigations, which might be longitudinal in nature and informed by different data sources, including personal interviews.

Sanders and Shipton, surveying teams in the Dutch healthcare context, test the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative behaviour and whether team learning or cohesion mediates this relationship, as well as the relationship between team learning and cohesion, in relation to transformational leadership. Their findings indicate that transformational leadership is positively related to innovative behaviour and that both cohesion and team learning mediate this relationship, with team learning being the strongest mediator. Transformational leadership is related to a learning route via which employees learn and is related to a cohesive team, resulting in innovative behaviour. Their study contributes to the communities of practice literature, extending it from a technology management context to a healthcare context. Moreover, their paper lends support to the argument that managers can nurture communities of practices in their organisations. It has implications for managers who want to stimulate innovative behaviour in a healthcare context, placing emphasis on the need to pay particular attention to team learning. Future research might use a longitudinal or experimental design to examine the causal status of the relationships examined in this study, triangulating data and taking a multilevel approach.

Finally, Sheehan's paper reports on a study examining the process of delivery of HR practices within MNCs to test whether devolvement of HR to line managers is practised. The analysis is based on a multi-respondent and a multi-unit method which enables comparisons between HR specialists and line managers and comparisons between the domestic and foreign subsidiaries. By comparing domestic and foreign subsidiaries of the same MNCs, her study provides a more holistic understanding of the complexities inherent in these organisations. Moreover, the author combines neo-institutional, resource-based, and agency theory in this undertaking, offering a more enhanced understanding of devolvement and forces at play. In this analysis mimetic and normative mechanisms are found to be more prevalent at the corporate HQs and within domestic subsidiaries, whereas coercive mechanisms appear to be more likely to exist in foreign subsidiaries. In support of the RBV, the author suggests that devolvement is used selectively and influenced by a drive for efficiency, rather than trends to convergence in relation to the delivery of HR, especially in the foreign subsidiaries. Her analysis highlights a key role for agency in perceptions about the extent and support of devolvement, suggesting that agency is strong in MNCs, especially in their foreign subsidiaries. A higher level of divergence between HR managers and line managers in perception about the delivery and resourcing of devolvement is found to be negatively correlated with perceived subsidiary performance. In that respect, issues of agency are found to be a significant barrier to devolving HR within the sample organisations. Future research in this area should consider in greater detail the interaction of institutional, resource-based and agency factors in organisations of different origin, operating in different sectors, and explore how the problems relating to agency can be reduced.

4 Conclusion

The ability to facilitate knowledge flows within and across different organisational units, enhance learning at different levels and develop human capital has been acknowledged as a capability of strategic significance, often characterised as dynamic capability. In mastering this polymorphous capability internationalised organisations face particular challenges relating to the complexity of their activities, owing not least to the diversity of their internal and external operating contexts. Developing expatriates before and during their arrival to the host country, taking advantage of the knowledge they acquire while on assignment and using inpatriates as brokers between subsidiary and headquarters are important aspects of knowledge flows and learning in internationalised organisations. Other significant aspects include the development of line management to support HR services devolvement, as well as the significance of cohesive learning teams in the management of innovation.

To summarise, the papers in this special issue address important aspects of knowledge flows, learning and development in an international context. Additionally, these papers offer important contributions to relevant streams of literature on expatriation, repatriation, team learning for innovation and HR services devolvement. Nonetheless, additional research is required to understand clearly how organisations engage in facilitating knowledge flows, learning and development within and across units. The role of expatriates, inpatriates, HCN, team learning and cohesion, as well as line management development so that HR services can be devolved, constitute important dimensions in an international context. As such, the work presented in this issue provides a strong base for future research.

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