



# PREDICTORS OF TURNOVER INTENTIONS IN LEARNING-DRIVEN AND DEMAND-DRIVEN INTERNA- TIONAL ASSIGNMENTS: THE ROLE OF REPATRIATION CONCERNS, SATISFACTION WITH COMPANY SUPPORT, AND PERCEIVED CAREER ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

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*International assignments have become an important part of managers' careers and are considered one of the most effective leadership development tools. Yet, studies consistently show that companies fail to integrate international assignments with long-term career development and succession planning and that a substantial percentage of expatriates leave the company upon completion of the international assignment. A total of 1,779 international assignees participated in a study that examined the factors associated with expatriate turnover intentions. The results indicate the importance of differentiating between two types of international assignments—developmental (or learning-driven) and functional (or demand-driven)—to understand expatriates' turnover intentions. While we found turnover intentions to vary depending on whether assignments are developmental or functional, the three sets of predictors of turnover intentions are similar. They are (1) lower satisfaction with company support, (2) higher repatriation concerns, and (3) lower career advancement opportunities within the company (relative to opportunities available outside the company). We discuss the implications for research and practice. © 2009 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

*Keywords:* Careers, international assignments, expatriates, turnover intentions

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As companies are moving toward globally integrated operations while simultaneously experiencing pressure to adapt and make decisions at local levels (e.g., Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1992; Palmisano, 2006), the need to develop a culturally sophisticated workforce and globally savvy business leaders has become pressing. The extensive literature on leadership development suggests a number of practices and activities that companies can utilize to develop global business acumen and intercultural competence. International mobility—in the form of international job rotations, multinational team assignments, or long-term international assignments—has been advocated as one of the most effective among those practices (Evans, Pucik, & Barsoux, 2002; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; Stroh & Caligiuri, 1998). In a recent study of talent management best practices, human resource executives of 35 leading multinational companies (MNCs) rated “job rotations and challenging assignments” (including international assignments) as the most effective talent development tool (Stahl et al., 2007). In fact, some senior executives believe that international assignments are the “most powerful experience in shaping the perspective and capabilities of effective global leaders” (Black, Gregersen, Mendenhall, & Stroh, 1999, p. 2), since they provide managers with an opportunity to improve their general management skills, acquire a global mind-set, and build a worldwide network of contacts—all of which are key assets in today’s globally integrated organizations.

Using international assignments as a training and career development tool is not only critical for developing talent, but also for attracting and retaining high-potential employees. A study of more than 1,000 MBA

students from top schools in North America and Europe (see Adler, 2002, pp. 340–350) found that this group of future managers showed strong interest in pursuing the global aspects of their careers. More than four out of five wanted an international assignment at some point during their career, most of them because they saw it as an opportunity for personal growth experiences. Although this study was conducted in the mid-1980s, the main findings are consistent with the results of more recent surveys on what drives high-potential employees (e.g., Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels, 1998; Gerdes, 2006).

International assignments have thus become an integral part of individuals’ careers and, for most companies, an indispensable tool for attracting, developing, and retaining talent. Yet, research shows that an international assignment can be a double-edged sword for the individual and the organization. Problems reported in the expatriation literature include expatriate adjustment problems, underperformance, career derailment, and high costs to the company due to failed expatriation and repatriation (e.g., Black et al., 1999; Caligiuri, 1997; Kraimer & Wayne, 2004; Tung, 1998).

One problem that is particularly acute from a talent development perspective and has received increased research attention in recent years is the high turnover rate among repatriated international assignees (e.g., Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Yan, Zhu, & Hall, 2002). This article discusses turnover intentions from the perspective of international assignees while they are still on the assignment to better understand the process by which expatriates become vulnerable to turnover upon repatriation. We first review the extant literature on expatriate careers to identify factors that make retention of international assignees challenging. We then introduce a typology of international assignments and develop hypotheses regarding how developmental assignees—the group that is most important to retain in light of the looming talent shortage (Chambers et al., 1998; Stahl et al., 2007)—may differ from functional assignees in terms of their satisfaction with

company support, repatriation concerns, perceived career advancement opportunities within and outside their company, and their turnover intentions. We tested our hypotheses using a sample of 1,779 international assignees from North American, European, and Asian companies located around the world.

## Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

### *International Assignments: A Double-Edged Sword*

Although top managers often claim that global mobility and international experience are highly valued assets and a prerequisite for promotion into senior management, the career implications for employees returning from an international assignment are often disappointing. Research suggests that many companies lack effective expatriate management and repatriation practices and usually fail to integrate international assignments with long-term career development and succession planning (Black et al., 1999; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001; Riusala & Suutari, 2000; Stahl & Cerdin, 2004). Due to poor career planning, repatriates are often placed in a holding pattern and assigned jobs that are available without regard to the individual's abilities and preferences (Harvey & Novicevic, 2006). Not surprisingly, the majority of repatriates report dissatisfaction with the repatriation process. Studies of the repatriation experience of international assignees show that repatriates often feel that their international assignment had a negative career impact, that their reentry positions have less authority and are less satisfying than the positions they held abroad, and that their home organizations do not value their international experience (Adler, 2002; Bolino, 2007; Hammer, Hart, & Rogan, 1998; Stroh, Gregersen, & Black, 1998).

As a result of traumatic repatriation experiences or limited career advancement opportunities, a substantial percentage of expatriates leave the company upon completion of the international assignment. Past research on U.S. companies suggests that between 20 and

25 percent of repatriated employees leave their firm within a year after return (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; O'Boyle, 1989). Some companies have reported losing as many as half of their repatriates through voluntary turnover within three years after repatriation (Black et al., 1999). For example, Baruch, Steele, and Quantrill (2002), in a case study of a U.K.-based financial services firm, found that some 50 percent of repatriated employees left the company within a few years after return, most of them because the company did not utilize their newly acquired skills. Other studies found that 74 percent of repatriates did not expect to be working for the same company within one year after returning to their home country, 42 percent had seriously considered leaving the company, and 26 percent had been actively searching for alternative employment (Black et al., 1992). Those who stay often become frustrated because they have to deal with "xenophobic responses" from colleagues or supervisors or simply because there are limited opportunities for using their newly acquired knowledge and skills (Adler, 2002).

If companies consistently mismanage international assignees and fail to integrate international assignments into long-term career paths, as the above evidence suggests, then why do employees continue to pursue international careers? To explain this paradox, researchers have suggested that employees may accept an international assignment because they see it as a chance to gain the additional skills and experience needed to increase their marketability to other prospective employers (Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002; Tung, 1998). This is in line with new career perspectives, such as Schein's (1996) concept of the "internal" or "protean" (Hall, 1996), "aspatial" (Roberts, Kossek, & Ozeki, 1998), "multidirectional" (Baruch, 2004), or

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“boundaryless” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) careers. According to Schein (1996), the internal career involves a subjective sense of where one is going in one’s work life, whereas the external career refers to advancement within the organizational hierarchy. Individuals pursuing internal careers may no longer perceive their work life as a progression of jobs within a single organization. Rather, they will move from one company to another (or one country to another) to pursue the

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best career opportunities (Parker & Inkson, 1999). The “boundaryless” careerist implicitly admired in this literature is the highly qualified mobile professional who builds his or her career competencies and market value through continuous learning and transfer across boundaries (Thomas, Lazarova, & Inkson, 2005).

The rise of boundaryless careers appears to be a response to broader economic and societal changes in an era of corporate downsizing, reorganizing, and rapidly changing technology. Boundaryless careers are driven by a desire to maintain a permanent state of employability in an environment of increasing economic insecurity and diminished trust between employers and employees (DePhilippi & Arthur, 1996; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). These ideas are consistent with research concerning the changing nature

of the “psychological contract,” particularly the shift from relational contracts based on loyalty to more transactional contracts based on economic exchange between the parties (Altman & Post, 1996; Rousseau & Schalk, 2000). As a result, the responsibility for career development has shifted from the organization to the individual. Collectively, the above evidence implies that managers and professionals increasingly seek international assignments to gain new skills and experiences that will make them more marketable—and thus more likely to leave.

## *Types of International Assignments*

Most companies have dealt with expatriates as if they are a homogenous group (Evans et al., 2002), and recommendations for repatriation generally lump all international assignees into a single category. However, as Caligiuri and Lazarova (2001) pointed out, not all international assignees are created or intended to be equal in terms of their strategic significance to the organization, the learning and development opportunities available to them during the assignment, and the need for the international assignee’s competencies upon repatriation.

The literature proposes various taxonomies of international assignments (see Björkman & Stahl, 2006; Caligiuri & Colakoglu, 2008; Evans et al., 2002; Harzing, 2004). Edström and Galbraith (1977), in their classic article on international assignment objectives, identified three principal motives for the global transfer of managers: (1) to *fill positions* that cannot be staffed locally because of a lack of technical or managerial skills, (2) to support *organizational development*, which refers to the coordination and control of international operations through socialization and informal networks, and (3) to support *management development* by enabling high-potential individuals to acquire international experience. As Edström and Galbraith (1977) noted, these assignment motives are not mutually exclusive. The key point is that international transfers are a strategic tool to address specific organizational objectives and needs to be used as such.

In this study, we adopted a framework proposed by Pucik (1992), which builds on Edström and Galbraith’s (1977) pioneering work. Pucik (1992) differentiates between two types of international assignments: (1) *demand-driven* (or task-driven) assignments, which include coordination and control, communication, knowledge transfer, and problem solving; and (2) *learning-driven* assignments, which are initiated for competency development and career enhancement. Learning-driven international assignments may include short-term learning assignments, such as job rotations across several



countries or regions, as well as longer-term assignments that constitute an integral part of the career development planning for high-potential young managers. From the company's perspective, many assignments combine both elements, but in most cases, one dimension dominates (Evans et al., 2002).

Although there seems to be consensus about the motives for international transfers, very little research has been done with regard to the importance of learning-driven versus demand-driven assignment objectives and their implications for the way international assignees perceive the career management process and, ultimately, whether they remain with the organization. We propose that international assignees with learning-driven or developmental assignment goals (henceforth, *developmental assignees*) and assignees with demand-driven or task-related assignment goals (henceforth, *functional assignees*) may have different perceptions that ultimately influence their turnover intentions.

### *Differences in Repatriation Concerns, Satisfaction With Company Support, Perceived Future Career Advancement Opportunities, and Turnover Intentions*

There is reason to believe that the career management of developmental assignees is, in some ways, easier than for functional assignees. Developmental assignees are, on average, relatively young, mobile, and seen as having high potential—attributes that facilitate the transition back into the home organization. They are thus unlikely to be seen as being “hard to fit back into the company” (O’Boyle, 1989, p. B1). Also, they often know their next assignment well in advance of completing the international assignment, especially if the assignment is part of a formal management development or succession-planning program, and the expatriate is well aware that he or she is being groomed for a given position (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001). Furthermore, developmental assignees are less likely to fall victim to the out-of-sight, out-of-mind syndrome because the duration of their assignments is usually limited

(Black et al., 1999; Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2008). They also tend to remain in closer contact with key people in the home organization through formal mentoring programs or informal coaching relationships (Harvey & Novicevic, 2006). From the individual’s perspective, this significantly reduces the amount of career uncertainty and career risk associated with an international assignment.

Functional assignees, by contrast, are less likely to be part of the company’s formal leadership development programs or succession planning activities. The lack of face-to-face communication with key persons in the domestic organization and loss of domestic social capital can make integrating an international assignment into the career management process more difficult (Gregersen & Black, 1995; Harvey, 1989), especially since the length of assignment is generally longer for this group of international assignees. Functional assignees are thus more likely to be out of sight from the home organization (Harvey & Novicevic, 2006). Furthermore, although the organization needs technical and functional experts, there is a risk that their knowledge and skills will become obsolete or are no longer needed by the end of their international assignments, which makes it difficult for the company to fit them back into the organization (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001). As a result, they may find themselves placed in a holding pattern upon return (Hammer et al., 1998; Harvey, 1989). We hypothesize:

*H1a: Developmental assignees will report lower repatriation concerns than functional assignees.*

*H1b: Developmental assignees will be more satisfied with company support than functional assignees.*

*H1c: Developmental assignees will perceive better career advancement opportunities with their existing company than functional assignees.*

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Paradoxically, despite their organizationally programmed career advancement opportunities, there is reason to believe that developmental assignees are more likely to leave their organizations because they have more career opportunities available outside the company. Since developmental assignees tend to be relatively mobile high-potentials with international experience, other organizations tend to seek them out.

Although the availability of career opportunities outside the company does not necessarily mean that an individual will pursue them, the emergence of boundaryless careers and the changing nature of the psychological contract discussed in the preceding section imply that this kind of job hopping may have become a routine part of international assignees' career plan. Yan et al. (2002) have argued that when the psychological contract is transactional, individuals may see an international assignment as a means to promote their marketability. International assignees may get involved in activities such as cultivating local networks that increase their attractiveness to future employers, jockeying between companies for better job offers, or withholding strategic information to increase their bargaining power. A likely outcome of this scenario is that expatriates betray the company by leaving to pursue better opportunities elsewhere. A shift away from mutual loyalty to opportunity

is particularly likely when the employee's relative bargaining power vis-à-vis the organization increases, as is the case with developmental assignees. The high-potential employees composing this group also tend to be more proactive in terms of their career management strategies and behaviors (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007), which further increases the likelihood that they will look for career opportunities with other

employers. Collectively, these arguments suggest the following hypotheses:

*H2a: Developmental assignees will be more confident than functional assignees that their international assignment will enhance their career prospects with other employers.*

*H2b: Developmental assignees will have higher turnover intentions than functional assignees.*

### ***Predictors of Expatriate Turnover Intentions Upon Repatriation***

Several studies have investigated the factors that predict expatriate turnover intentions or actual turnover rates among repatriates (e.g., Adler, 1981; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Stroh, 1995; Tung, 1998). Although the focus of this study is on *expatriate turnover intentions*, we also draw on research that examines the predictors of repatriate turnover to build our hypotheses.

Lazarova and Cerdin (2007) provide an integrative framework that synthesizes our current understanding of the antecedents and consequences of repatriation success from the perspective of both the individual and the organization. They identify three sets of predictors of repatriation outcomes: individual variables (e.g., demographic characteristics), organizational variables (e.g., availability of repatriation support practices), and environmental variables (e.g., available employment opportunities in the home country). Because we are trying to understand the effects of corporate expatriate career development policies and practices on turnover intentions, our study focuses on organizational variables. These are factors HR professionals and line managers have the most ability to influence or manage, and understanding their effects contributes importantly to practice. We propose that three sets of variables play a key role in international assignees' willingness to stay with the company: (1) the perceived company-provided support during the assignment, (2) the perceived effectiveness of repatriation management practices, and (3) the perceived long-term career advance-

ment and growth opportunities inside the company relative to those available outside the company.

Of the factors suggested in the literature that may affect repatriate turnover, the repatriate's satisfaction with how well the company plans and manages the repatriation process consistently emerged in empirical studies as the most important (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Stroh, 1995; Tung, 1998). This research suggests that if the organization effectively addresses potential repatriation problems in advance, repatriate turnover will occur less often. The underlying assumption is that repatriates who perceive they have more support from their organization will be more committed to that organization—and thus will be more likely to stay (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). These ideas are in line with Yan et al.'s (2002) model of the role that psychological contract fulfillment plays in the exchange relationship between the international assignee and the organization. According to this model, any mismatch of the two parties' expectations for an international assignment can result in assignment failure, both from the perspective of the organization (e.g., repatriate turnover) or the individual (e.g., career derailment). Yan et al. (2002) argue that organization-individual alignment is a dynamic process, since changes in the individual, organization, and environment can occur during the international assignment. For example, as a consequence of changes in the business environment, such as restructuring or a merger, an international assignee's former job may be cut, or his or her contact with a mentor in the home organization might be lost—both of which could cause the individual to fall out of the loop on key career-planning decisions back home. Thus, the original match in loyalty expectations falls apart. Conversely, a company may wish to have a continuing relationship with an international assignee because he or she has acquired valuable skills and is seen as having high potential. The company may thus offer career advancement opportunities and other incentives to induce the employ-

ee to stay. Yan et al.'s (2002) analysis of the social exchange relationship between the international assignee and the organization suggests that "success in repatriation is determined not only by organizational arrangements made at the individual's reentry but also by the extent to which such arrangements are in accordance with the individual's expectations in the expatriation stage" (p. 373).

The idea that the expatriation and repatriation experiences are inherently related is consistent with studies that have found that the availability of organizational support and career development programs during the international assignment is an important factor in repatriates' decisions to stay with the company. Studies have shown that expatriates who see a strong connection between their international assignments and their long-term career paths are more likely to stay with the company upon repatriation (D. C. Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Stroh, 1995). The key issue here is that the international assignee's *perception* about the availability or usefulness of the company's support and career development practices, rather than an objective assessment of whether certain practices are effective, has an influence on whether the international assignee will stay or leave (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). Collectively, these arguments support the following hypotheses:

*H3a: Satisfaction with company support during international assignments is negatively related to turnover intentions.*

*H3b: Repatriation concerns are positively related to turnover intentions.*

Organizations should expect some natural attrition from international assignees as they would from other high-demand professionals in their organizations (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001). In particular, if interna-

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*Of the factors  
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the literature  
that may affect  
repatriate turnover,  
the repatriate's  
satisfaction with  
how well the  
company plans  
and manages  
the repatriation  
process consistently  
emerged in  
empirical studies as  
the most important.*

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tional assignees see a gap between the career advancement opportunities available within their companies and what the job market has to offer, they may be inclined to pursue more lucrative and challenging opportunities elsewhere. As Lazarova and Cerdin (2007) pointed out, "Retention upon repatriation may not necessarily be determined by repatriates' frustration, but rather by a rational choice to move elsewhere in search of a better career fit" (p. 9). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H3c: The greater the perceived career advancement opportunities available outside the company relative to those available inside the company, the greater international assignees' turnover intentions.*

Our final hypothesis addresses how the antecedents of turnover intentions may differ across the two types of international assignees. In predicting turnover intentions, it is important to consider assignees' perceived opportunities inside the company relative to the opportunities available outside the company. Functional assignees, for the reasons discussed above (e.g., partly obsolete knowledge and skills, less demand for the skills they have developed abroad), may be less optimistic about their career prospects within the organization than developmental assignees; since they are likely to have fewer career options outside the company, however, their concerns may not readily translate into higher turnover intentions. Thus, we expect a greater disconnect between functional assignees' repatriation concerns, perceived company support, and perceived career prospects within the organization and their turnover intentions. Developmental assignees, by contrast, may be more inclined to leave if they are unhappy with the company support or career advancement and growth opportunities available inside the company. These arguments lead to our final hypothesis:

*H4: Satisfaction with company support, repatriation concerns, and perceived career advancement opportunities within the organization will be more predictive of turnover intentions for developmental assignees than for functional assignees.*

## Method

### *Sample and Procedure*

To test the hypotheses, we surveyed German, French, American, Singaporean, and Japanese international assignees in 93 countries. A sample of 1,779 international assignees from 141 MNCs participated in this study. Thirty-three companies were based in Germany, 20 in France, 32 in the United States, 31 in Singapore, and 25 in Japan. The companies represented a variety of industries, including electronics, automotive, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, consumer products, telecommunications, airlines, and financial services. To enhance the generalizability of findings, we preferred a broad representation of different industries, countries of origin, and countries of assignment over a more narrow range of industries and countries.

Data were collected through a standardized questionnaire developed after an extensive review of the expatriate career literature. The English version of the questionnaire that was used in the survey of U.S. and Singaporean expatriates was translated into French, German, and Japanese; based on methodological guidelines provided by Brislin (1986), it was back-translated into English to ensure literal accuracy and idiomatic equivalence between the different language versions.

Request for participation in the questionnaire survey was made directly to expatriates and to HR professionals in charge of managing expatriate assignments who forwarded the questionnaires to the expatriates abroad. The proportion of expatriates the researchers contacted directly and those contacted through the central HR offices of participating companies varied depending on the country. For the Singaporean sample, for example, the number of expatriates contacted directly was quite large because we had the assistance of associations such as the Singapore International Foundation, Contact Singapore, the Overseas Singapore Club, and the Singapore National Employers Federation. Completed questionnaires were returned to the respective authors in charge of collecting data for each country sample to ensure confi-



dentiality. The response rates for the German, French, U.S., Singaporean, and Japanese samples were 46%, 38%, 34%, 50%, and 39%, respectively.

Table I shows the demographic profiles of the international assignees who participated in the study across the two types of assignees. The typical respondent was a college-educated, married male in a managerial position who had been on the assignment for less than three years and had a career emphasis that was either on international assignments or a mixture of domestic and international responsibilities. The group of *functional* assignees was composed of individuals who had been sent abroad for various reasons (e.g., knowledge transfer, coordination, and control) but for whom learning and development were not stated goals of the assignment. These individuals could be from all levels within the organization. The group of *developmental* assignees was composed of employees who had been sent on the international assignment to gain exposure and experience for future positions either within the parent company or within foreign operations. In almost all cases, these individuals had been posted abroad with multiple objectives, but the main purpose was professional development (i.e., learning-driven). As indicated by Table I, the two groups of assignees were remarkably similar in terms of demographic characteristics and most aspects of their international assignments. The main difference, apart from assignment motives, was that developmental assignees were on average younger and occupied more junior positions within the company. This group also consisted of a relatively greater percentage of assignees who were single and without children, and had a slightly larger percentage of females compared to the group of functional assignees.

## Measures

### Type of Assignment

We assessed the company reasons for transferring the employee abroad by asking respondents to select the objective(s) of their

current international assignment out of a list of eight possible objectives. The two items measuring developmental assignment goals were: “to gain experience, skills, and exposure for future positions within the parent company” and “to gain experience, skills, and exposure for future positions within the foreign operations of the company.” If the respondent selected either or both of these developmental assignment goals, he or she was categorized as a “developmental assignee.” Otherwise, the respondent was categorized as a “functional assignee.” To test for the moderating effects of assignee type, we created a dummy variable, Assignee Type. Functional assignees were coded 0, and developmental assignees were coded 1.

### Satisfaction With Company Support

We measured this variable with a five-item scale, which included a Likert scale that ranged from 1 to 5, where 1=highly dissatisfied, 3=neutral, and 5=highly satisfied. A sample item is “How satisfied are you/were you with your company’s support concerning the predeparture preparation for the requirements of your new job?” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .78.

### Repatriation Concerns

We measured this variable with a five-item scale with options ranging from 1 to 5, where 1=highly concerned, 3=neutral, and 5=not concerned. A sample item is “How concerned are you about limited opportunities for using your newly acquired knowledge and skills upon repatriation?” Items in this scale were reverse-coded. Cronbach’s alpha was .76.

### Within-Company Career Advancement Opportunities

We measured this variable by a single item. The Likert scale ranged from 1 to 5, where 1=highly unlikely, 3=neutral, and 5= highly likely. The item read, “In your opinion, what is the likelihood that successful performance in your current interna-

**TABLE I Demographic Profiles\***

Demographic Variables	Percentage	
	Functional Assignees (N=848)	Developmental Assignees (N=923)
<b>Position Level</b>		
Senior management	32.9	22.2
Middle management	33.1	37.7
Lower management	19.8	24.6
Others	14.2	15.5
<b>Company Objective of International Assignment**</b>		
Gain experience, skills, and exposure for future positions within the parent company	0	82.1
Gain experience, skills, and exposure for future positions within the foreign operations of the company	0	65.8
Investigate subsidiary's potential for expansion and profit	21.0	23.5
Coordinate subsidiary's activities with overall activity of corporation	41.7	57.7
Ensure that headquarters' policies are carried out locally	48.5	58.4
Conduct transactions for subsidiary and corporation as a whole	19.3	15.7
Transfer of technical, administrative, or management know-how	51.9	38.2
Improve communication between headquarters and subsidiary	38.0	58.3
<b>Age</b>		
20–29 years old	5.4	12.0
30–39 years old	42.6	54.9
40–49 years old	31.5	27.2
>50 years old	20.5	5.9
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	18.6	23.8
Married/Living with someone	81.4	76.2
<b>Has Children</b>		
Yes	71.6	60.3
No	28.4	39.7
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	91.6	89.0
Female	8.4	11.0
<b>Educational Level</b>		
Nondegree holder	31.6	25.8
Degree holder	68.4	74.2
<b>Previous International Assignment Experience</b>		
Yes	58.3	50.6
No	41.7	49.4

TABLE I Continued\*

<b>Career Emphasis</b>		
Domestic operations	11.1	8.0
Mixture of domestic and international assignments	51.3	58.9
International assignments/responsibilities	37.6	33.1
<b>Nationality</b>		
German	32.8	30.4
Singaporean	14.6	12.6
French	23.7	33.4
American	12.5	12.6
Japanese	16.4	11.0
<b>Time on Current Assignment</b>		
<1 year	28.6	30.4
1–2 years	39.2	43.5
>3 years	32.2	26.1

\*Since some respondents cannot be categorized into one of the two types of assignees due to missing data, the total usable sample size of this study is 1,771.

\*\*Respondents were instructed to indicate multiple company objectives for sending them on their current international assignment.

tional assignment will advance your career within your company?"

#### Outside-Company Career Advancement Opportunities

We measured this variable by a single item. The Likert scale ranged from 1 to 5, where 1=highly unlikely, 3=neutral, and 5=highly likely. The item read, "In your opinion, what is the likelihood that successful performance in your current international assignment will be important to your career opportunities among other possible employers?"

#### Perceived Gap Between Within- and Outside-Company Career Advancement Opportunities

We measured this variable by computing the difference between the respondent's scores of the variables "outside-company career advancement opportunities" and "within-company career advancement opportunities." A positive score indicates better-perceived career advancement opportunities with other companies than inside the respondent's own company.

#### Turnover Intentions

A single item measured respondents' turnover intentions. The Likert scale ranged from 1 to 5, where 1=highly willing, 3=neutral, and 5=highly unwilling. The item read, "Are you willing to leave your company for a better job in another firm?" The item was reverse-coded.

#### Control Variables

Since there is evidence that environmental variables such as available employment opportunities in the home country may affect expatriate turnover intentions (e.g., Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007), we controlled for country-of-origin effects as well as individual-level variables that may potentially affect turnover intentions. We created dummy variables to control for respondents' *nationality*. Since there were five nationalities in this study, four dummy variables were created. Other control variables included: *gender* (male, female); *position level* (senior management, middle management, lower management, other professional positions); *tenure* (in years); and *time on the current international assignment* (in years).

## Results

### *Hypotheses Tests: Differences in Repatriation Concerns, Satisfaction With Company Support, Perceived Career Advancement Opportunities, and Turnover Intentions*

Hypotheses 1a–1c and 2a–2b suggest that the two groups of international assignees differ in terms of satisfaction with company support, repatriation concerns, perceived career advancement opportunities with their existing and other employers, and turnover intentions. To test these five hypotheses, we conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses. For each regression analysis, we controlled for individual-level differences and country-of-origin effects, including gender, tenure with the current firm, position level, time on the international assignment, and respondent nationality dummy variables in the first step. In the second step, we entered the assignee-type dummy variable. The dependent variable in each regression analysis was the variable that we hypothesized functional and developmental assignees differed on. Overall, the results presented in Table II provide only mixed support for these hypotheses. As predicted, developmental assignees were significantly more optimistic about their future career advancement opportunities with their existing employers and other employers than were functional assignees. Developmental assignees also had significantly higher turnover intentions than did functional assignees. However, the two groups did not differ in terms of satisfaction with the company support and repatriation concerns. Thus, Hypotheses 1a and 1b are not supported, while Hypotheses 1c, 2a, and 2b are supported.

Satisfaction with the company-provided support, repatriation concerns, and perceived career advancement opportunities within the company relative to those available outside the company are important factors in predicting international assignees' turnover intentions regardless of the type of assignee.

### *Hypotheses Tests: Predictors of Turnover Intentions*

Post hoc analyses suggest that turnover intentions were high across the two groups of assignees. When asked whether they would be willing to leave their company for a better job in another firm, more than one-third of functional assignees and almost one-half of developmental assignees indicated that they were willing or highly willing to leave the company, and an additional one-quarter said they were undecided, which means they could be persuaded to leave with an attractive job offer. Likewise, both types of assignees had an overall low satisfaction with company support and high repatriation concerns, as Figure 1 indicates.

Given the high vulnerability to turnover among both groups of international assignees, what factors influence assignees' turnover intentions? We hypothesized that three sets of organizational-level variables are likely to play a key role in assignees' turnover intentions: (1) the satisfaction with company-provided support, (2) the perception of repatriation concerns, and (3) the perceived career advancement opportunities within the company relative to those available outside the company. To examine the predictors of international assignees' turnover intentions, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis. In the first step, we entered gender, tenure with the current firm, position level, time on the international assignment, and respondent nationality dummy variables to control for individual differences and country-of-origin effects. In the second step, we entered the hypothesized predictors of turnover intentions.

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis presented in Table III support the hypotheses. While satisfaction with the company support was significantly and negatively associated with turnover intentions, repatriation concerns and a perceived gap between the existing employer's career advancement opportunities and those available outside the company were positively related to assignees' willingness to leave. Thus, Hypotheses 3a through 3c are supported.



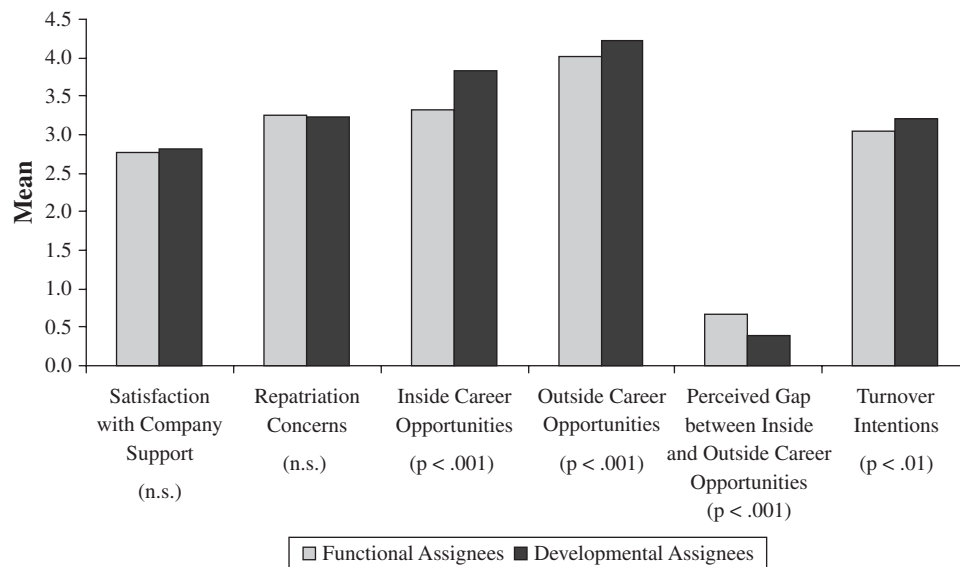
**TABLE II** Regression Analysis to Test Hypotheses 1a–c and 2a–b

Hypothesis	Hypothesis 1a	Hypothesis 1b	Hypothesis 1c	Hypothesis 2a	Hypothesis 2b
Dependent Variable	Repatriation Concerns	Satisfaction with Company Support	Within Company Career Advancement Opportunities	Outside Company Career Advancement Opportunities	Turnover Intentions
<i>N</i>	1,620	1,628	1,607	1,617	1,581
Independent Variable	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta
Step 1: Control Variables					
Gender	-.02	.04	.05	.01	-.04
Nationality dummy 1	.21***	.10***	.05	.01	-.04
Nationality dummy 2	.28***	-.10**	.01	-.11***	-.12***
Nationality dummy 3	.10***	.16***	.01	.03	-.06**
Nationality dummy 4	.27***	.10***	-.02	-.09**	.03
Tenure	.01	.01	-.02	-.09**	-.11***
Years on current assignment	.12***	-.06*	-.03	.04	.03
Hierarchical position level	.02	-.09***	-.07**	-.01	.05*
$\Delta R^2$	.13	.06	.01	.03	.04
Step 2: Main Effect					
Assignee Type	-.02	.05	.26***	.12***	.07**
$\Delta R^2$	.00	.00	.06	.01	.00
Overall <i>R</i>	.36	.25	.28	.21	.21
Overall <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.13	.06	.08	.05	.04
Overall adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.12	.06	.07	.04	.04
Overall <i>F</i>	26.06***	12.28***	14.53***	8.61***	7.74***

\**p*<.05,\*\**p*<.01,\*\*\**p*<.001.

To test Hypothesis 4, whether the antecedents of turnover intentions differ across the two groups of international assignees, we conducted a moderated hierarchical regression analysis. In the first step, we entered gender, tenure with the current firm, position level, time on the international assignment, and respondent nationality dummy variables to control for individual-level differences and country-of-origin effects. In the second step, we entered satisfaction with company support, repatriation concerns, perceived career

prospects within the organization, and assignee type. In the third step, we entered the interaction terms between assignee type and each of the three predictors in step two. As the nonsignificant interaction terms in Table III indicate, type of assignee does not seem to moderate the relationships between the antecedent variables and turnover intentions. This finding suggests that satisfaction with the company-provided support, repatriation concerns, and perceived career advancement opportunities within the company relative to



**FIGURE 1.** Mean Level of Repatriation Concerns, Satisfaction With Company Support, Perceived Career Opportunities, and Turnover Intentions Among International Assignees

those available outside the company are important factors in predicting international assignees' turnover intentions regardless of the type of assignee. Hence, we found no support for Hypothesis 4.

## Discussion

### *Key Findings and Implications for Future Research*

This study begins to disentangle the experiences of expatriates across different categories of functional (i.e., demand-driven) and developmental (i.e., learning-driven) assignments. Compared to functional assignees, developmental assignees perceive their future career advancement opportunities with their existing employer to be better and are also more optimistic about their career prospects with other possible employers. With respect to predicting turnover intentions, developmental assignees are more inclined to leave their companies than functional assignees, presumably because they would have better career opportunities available outside their companies. Surprisingly, however, our data suggest that the perceived gap between the career opportunities inside and outside the company is significantly greater for functional

assignees than for developmental assignees (see Figure 1). One explanation is that the perceived career advancement opportunities outside the company—which are greater for developmental assignees—are a more powerful predictor of turnover intentions than the perceived gap between inside and outside career opportunities. Another possibility is that developmental assignees may place greater importance on future career advancement opportunities compared to functional assignees. With internally driven career motivations, developmental assignees may be more willing to leave (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). In other words, developmental assignees are more career-oriented and may be more likely to be proactive in their career management strategies and behaviors than the group of functional assignees. Another possibility is that turnover intentions may have more to do with how one perceives oneself (e.g., mobile, high potential) rather than the category in which one is placed. The very individuals our study categorized as functional may perceive themselves to be developmental regardless of the nature of the tasks of their assignment.

In general terms, this study found that there are important similarities between developmental and functional assignees, especially with respect to their concerns

**TABLE III** Regression Analysis of Predicting Turnover Intentions Among International Assignees

Independent Variable	Hypotheses 3a–c	Hypothesis 4
	Beta	Beta
Step 1: Control Variables		
Gender	-.02	-.02
Nationality dummy 1	-.03	-.03
Nationality dummy 2	-.15***	-.17***
Nationality dummy 3	-.04	-.03
Nationality dummy 4	.03	.03
Tenure	-.09**	-.11***
Years on current assignment	-.01	.00
Hierarchical position level	.02	.03
$\Delta R^2$	.04	.04
Step 2: Main Effects		
Satisfaction with company support	-.21***	-.21***
Repatriation concerns	.09**	.13***
Within company career advancement opportunities	n.a.	-.03
Perceived gap between within and outside company career advancement opportunities	.18***	n.a.
Assignee type	.11***	.32*
$\Delta R^2$	.11	.08
Step 3: Interaction Effects		
Assignee type $\times$ satisfaction with company support	n.a.	-.05
Assignee type $\times$ repatriation concerns	n.a.	-.08
Assignee type $\times$ within company career advancement opportunities	n.a.	-.12
$\Delta R^2$	n.a.	.00
Overall $R$	.38	.35
Overall $R^2$	.15	.12
Overall adjusted $R^2$	.14	.11
Overall $F$	21.50***	13.91***

## Notes:

For the regression to test Hypotheses 3a–c,  $N=1,534$ .For the regression to test Hypothesis 4,  $N=1,546$ .\*  $p < .05$ .\*\*  $p < .01$ .\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

during the international assignment. Likewise, both types of assignees had an overall low satisfaction with company support and high repatriation concerns. This is significant given that satisfaction with the com-

pany-provided support, repatriation concerns, and perceived career advancement opportunities within the company were all important indicators in predicting turnover intentions.

While some repatriate turnover is expected, in most cases, it is detrimental because it inflicts a costly expense in terms of time, money, and human capital (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001; Stahl et al., 2002). Also, since international assignees acquire valuable tacit knowledge and social capital during their assignments, opportunities for reverse knowledge transfer, organizational learning, and global coordination are often lost (Downes & Thomas, 1999; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). Finally, high turnover rates among repatriates may discourage other employees—especially those designated as high potentials—from accepting an international assignment for fear that it may result in a negative career move (Tung, 1988). Future research should examine ways to alleviate repatriation concerns among the group most critical for the future growth of firms—the developmental assignees.

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*While only self-reports can measure turnover intentions, future studies may include independent variables assessed through a diversity of measures, such as objective measures of organizational support practices or supervisors' ratings of career opportunities.*

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### **Limitations**

Strengths of this study are the national diversity of expatriates surveyed and the associated generalizability. The sample size was large with ample statistical power. Despite this large sample size, however, we were unable to explain much of the variance in turnover intentions. This limitation of the study suggests that we have not included potentially relevant independent variables. Future studies should examine

the full array of variables Lazarova and Cerdin (2007) suggest. In addition to the organizational variables this study examined, potentially relevant predictors of international assignee turnover (or turnover intentions) include individual-level variables, such as proactive career development behaviors or changes in the expatriate's career orientation as a result of the international assignment (e.g., from a focus on career advancement to a more balanced lifestyle), and environmen-

tal variables such as available home-country employment opportunities.

Another limitation of this study is measurement of the self-reported independent and dependent variables. We attempted to reduce potential biases that may result from self-reported variables. For example, we assessed the demographic and control variables at the front end of the survey and placed the self-rated criterion measure at the end of the survey in an effort to reduce self-generated validity (J. M. Feldman & Lynch, 1988). While only self-reports can measure turnover intentions, future studies may include independent variables assessed through a diversity of measures, such as objective measures of organizational support practices or supervisors' ratings of career opportunities.

### **Managerial Implications**

This study has several practical implications, especially with respect to the way in which expatriates are managed. From the organization's point of view, employees who have been posted abroad for leadership development purposes and career enhancement are probably the most important to retain. These assignees are often groomed for higher-level positions within the global organization, and retaining them is critical to the company's leadership development and succession planning efforts (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001; Evans et al., 2002). Although these individuals are usually not sent solely for developmental purposes, the nature of their assignments means that they have acquired knowledge, skills, and social capital by the end of their stints abroad that make them valuable assets. An international assignment of this type represents a significant human capital investment, and turnover upon repatriation is detrimental not only to the company's leadership development and succession planning efforts, but also to its entire globalization plans. Yet, as this study has shown, these developmental assignees are most likely to quit. By enabling high-potential employees to acquire international experience and other transferable—and tradable—skills, companies are automatically



making them more valuable for the external labor market. Companies should pay special attention to these high-risk repatriates.

How can companies that use international assignments as a career development tool make sure they get an adequate return on their investments? While there are no guaranteed recipes for lowering turnover intentions, the growing literature on talent management best practices (e.g., Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001; Stahl et al., 2007) has identified a number of approaches that can help companies retain high-potential employees. These include the development of a compelling “employee value proposition” (Chambers et al., 1998; Lawler, 2003), which is top management’s explanation of why a smart, energetic, and ambitious person might want to join (or remain with) the company. A value proposition that would resonate with international assignees and enhance the company’s ability to attract high-caliber staff for global assignments and to retain them after repatriation would include aspects such as long-term career planning and growth opportunities, mentoring, attention from senior management, an exciting reentry job with international responsibilities, and a culture in which international experience is valued. Developing a compelling international assignee value proposition requires a clear understanding of the factors that push and pull employees toward an international assignment and of the concerns employees may have about the repatriation and career development process. Developing such a tool would be an important step toward designing human resource management policies and career development and support systems that align the company’s interests with those of its international assignees.

In terms of company support and career development programs, integrating international assignments with long-term career development seems to be the most critical variable in retaining international assignees and facilitating repatriation success (Bolino, 2007; Harvey & Novicevic, 2006; Riusala & Suutari, 2000). In a study of German expatriates (Stahl et al., 2002), of the more than 200 expatriates who indicated that they perceived a gap between their company’s stated internationaliza-

tion goals and its HRM policies and practices, more than half said they did so because of a lack of long-term career planning. Of the various aspects of the expatriation and repatriation process this study examined, respondents expressed by far the greatest dissatisfaction with the long-range planning of their repatriation.

Various career-development practices can assist companies in successfully career-pathing international assignees, including managing assignees’ career expectations, providing career-path information, organizing participation in networking activities that allow assignees to stay in touch with key people in the home organization, providing ongoing coaching, establishing mentor relationships between expatriates and executives from the home location, and improving expatriates’ career self-management skills (e.g., Dowling et al., 2008; Mendenhall, Kühlmann, Stahl, & Osland, 2002; Selmer, 1999). Most important, senior management must aggressively—and credibly—demonstrate that it values international expertise and that such experience will enhance one’s career advancement and prestige within the organization. In a study by Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001), repatriates rated visible signs that the company values international experience and that it is beneficial to one’s career as the most important element in the international HRM system. Unfortunately, we found that a substantial proportion of the international assignees surveyed felt that their company did not appreciate their international experience.

While well-designed career development and support programs and developing a culture that values international experience can help in the effective repatriation and retention of international assignees, it is clear that in some cases companies will not be able to retain certain repatriates, no matter how sophisticated their career development and repatriation management programs. In cases where international assignees have acquired

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*Integrating international assignments with long-term career development seems to be the most critical variable in retaining international assignees and facilitating repatriation success.*

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valuable new skills, increased their marketability, and perhaps gained a completely new perspective on life as a result of their international experience, they may be leaving to pursue new opportunities for both monetary gains and self-fulfillment (Harvey, 1982). As Lazarova and Cerdin (2007) have pointed out, in an era of diminished trust between employers and employees, with “boundary-less” careers on the rise, why should companies expect international assignees to stay with them if better opportunities are available elsewhere? From this perspective, it is arguable whether organizations lose internationally experienced managers and professionals because they are not providing enough support. Rather, they may be losing them because the managers are leaving to pursue

other opportunities that help them achieve their personal growth and career goals.

In conclusion, given the rise of globalization and the dynamic changes occurring within the global economy, international experience is becoming a critical asset for global organizations. International assignment experience is valuable and hard to imitate. In the right context, it can create competitive advantage—both for the individuals and for the companies that employ them. To ensure that both the international assignee and the organization will benefit from the experience, companies need to design effective expatriate support systems and career development programs, and they need to cultivate a culture that genuinely values international experience.

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