JOHNS HOPKINS CAREY BUSINESS SCHOOL | Human Capital Development Lab

RESEARCH BRIEF

When international experience helps leaders—and when it doesn't

Leaders with international experience can bring human and social capital, as well as broader cognitive perspectives, to organizations. But a new review suggests that the value of that experience depends on the type of exposure and how well it fits the role and organizational needs. In other words, not all international experience is the same.

Why it matters

Many organizations prioritize international experience when selecting executives and investing in leadership development. However, realizing value from that investment requires understanding how international exposure translates into better decision-making and organizational outcomes.

- Different overseas experiences build different knowledge, relationships, and perspectives, and therefore organizations should evaluate how these experiences match leadership needs.
- International expertise may contribute little if leaders lack local embeddedness or if the organization cannot access their knowledge.
- Leadership teams need to translate international assignment experience into decisions and execution, while managing the coordination challenges that can arise when team members bring different overseas backgrounds.

What researchers found

- **Experience contributes through multiple mechanisms:** Leaders' knowledge and skills, professional relationships, and values and interpretive frames can all influence choices and organizational performance.
- **Different international experiences have different effects:** Work, education, and early-life experiences abroad should not be treated as interchangeable. Location, duration, and the types of roles held abroad can shape workplace decision-making differently.
- **Team diversity brings both benefits and costs:** Internationally diverse backgrounds can broaden knowledge and improve problem-solving, but they can also create faultlines and coordination costs.
- **Context also matters:** Embeddedness, absorptive capacity, and contextual fit help determine whether international experience adds value. as not strong enough to support a firm conclusion.

How we know

The authors conducted a systematic integrative review of 270 studies on strategic leaders' international experience, comparing how researchers defined the concept, what theories they used, what outcomes they examined, and whether they studied individuals, teams, or organizations. They then synthesized those findings into a multilevel framework showing that international experience can matter through leaders' knowledge, networks, and judgment, but its value depends on the kind of experience, how it is distributed across the leadership team, and the context in which it is applied.

What this means

- **For boards and CEOs:** Match leaders' international experience to the strategic complexity of the role.
- **For CHROs:** Look beyond whether someone has any overseas experience and assess what type of experience that may fit with a new role.
- **For leadership teams:** Make sure international know-how is transferable into team decisions and execution. ted practices fit the organization's current needs.

Now what?

- Explore the experience behind the credential. Ask candidates what responsibilities they held abroad, what they learned, and how they plan to apply those lessons in the role.
- Match experience to business needs. Evaluate its relevance to target markets, operating environments, and company priorities.
- Make knowledge sharing part of the role. Use mentoring, cross-functional projects, and structured discussions to help colleagues access leaders' insights.
- Support application and local relationships. Connect internationally experienced leaders with colleagues who understand the organization's context, and review whether imported practices fit the organization's current needs.

LINK TO THE STUDY

For more, see: Qin, F., Meyer, K. E., & Nielsen, S. T. (2026). The impact of strategic leaders' international experience on organizations: An integrative review and multilevel framework. Journal of Management. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063261465642