JOHNS HOPKINS CAREY BUSINESS SCHOOL | Human Capital Development Lab

RESEARCH BRIEF

How Employees Turn Overseas Experience into Organizational Value

What helps employees turn overseas experiences into organizational change back home? A study of South Korean professionals returning from U.S. assignments suggests that strong ties to the home organization and active engagement abroad are key to successful reverse knowledge transfer (RKT).

Why it matters

The OECD reports that there are more than 120,000 intra-company international transfers each year across the OECD countries. These international assignments create value only if employees can bring what they learn back into their organizations, meaning the payoff from overseas experience depends on what employees learn abroad and whether they can share it and get it implemented at home. The study also suggests that preparation matters before the assignment even begins. Employees who already have strong ties and credibility in the home organization may be better positioned to gain support for new ideas when they return. Finally, the assignment design matters. Companies should make sure overseas roles provide meaningful opportunities to collaborate and learn, especially when the goal is to bring useful practices back home after the assignment ends.

How we know

The study surveyed 177 employees from 34 South Korean multinational companies who had returned from U.S. assignments. Using logistic regression, the author examined how pre-expatriation ties to the home organization, overseas engagement, and the presence of fellow returnees related to successful knowledge transfer— defined as both sharing knowledge learned abroad and having it implemented by their organization. Since the data came from employee recollections and self-reports, the findings show associations rather than causation.

What researchers found

- **Strong ties before departure:** Employees who were more connected to their home organization before leaving were more likely to successfully transfer knowledge after returning.
- **Engagement and collaboration abroad matter:** Greater exposure with host organization through contact with colleagues, supervisors, and projects was also associated with successful RKT.
- **Fellow returnees help implementation:** The link between pre-departure ties and successful RKT was stronger when employees worked alongside more colleagues with U.S. assignment experience.
- **Over half reported both knowledge sharing and implementation:** 97 of 177 respondents (54.8%) said they both shared overseas knowledge and saw it implemented by their organization.

What this means

- **For CHROs:** Select employees for overseas assignments with knowledge transfer in mind and prepare them before departure. Their relationships and credibility at home matter alongside their readiness for the international role.
- **For home managers:** Returning employees need opportunities to turn overseas learning into action. Fellow returnees may help build support for new ideas.

Now what?

- **Build connections before departure. I**nvolve employees in cross-departmental projects and mentoring relationships that strengthen their ties to the home organization.
- **Design assignments for active learning.** Set clear goals and give employees opportunities to collaborate with overseas colleagues on meaningful projects.
- **Connect returning employees with fellow returnees.** Create mentoring and knowledge-sharing opportunities that help colleagues adapt ideas and build support for their implementation.
- **Follow through on implementation.** Work with returning employees to identify practices worth adapting, agree on opportunities to test them, and track whether their knowledge becomes part of everyday work.

LINK TO THE STUDY

For more, see: Noh, K. B. (2026). From embeddedness to implementation: A transposition theory perspective on reverse knowledge transfer in South Korean MNCs. Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources, 64, e70062. https://doi.org/10.1111/1744-7941.70062