
Decoding the triad: Knowledge Management, IHRM practices in MNCs & Foreign Subsidiaries – A Systematic Literature Review (2006-2019)

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ABSTRACT

In today's world, with rapid technological advancement and the blurring lines of nationality, the recent generation entering the workforce employees are less restricted geographically, and more attuned to being a "global villager". Managing such a workforce requires different HRM practices. As more and more organizations go international, their strategy gets modified, which in turn shapes the HRM policies and practices. Thus, to manage the global workforce, consisting of parent country nationals, host country nationals and many a times third country nationals, IHRM practices requires continuous upgradation. As employees are the epitome knowledge bearers, especially tacit knowledge, understanding the nuances of knowledge management and how it is being affected in MNCs and IHRM practices followed in them, has become key essential for sustainability and continuity of the organization. Hence, through critically reviewing the extant literature (2006–2019), the author addresses the above-mentioned issues and identifies possible areas of future research.

Keywords: knowledge management, knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, international human resource management, IHRM practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is defined by Nonaka and Takeuchi [1] as: "*Justified true belief that increases an entity's capacity for effective action*"

In the research area, knowledge management has been explored in a variety of ways, owing to the vast gamut of explanation it can provide. From the perspective of Resource Based Theory (RBT), understanding knowledge is considered a resource (for the organization), and hence effective usage of this resource is essential in its performance and sustainability. Halawi *et al.* (2005), provided a model to understand why and how knowledge management can be used as a source of sustained competitive advantage. This view, that is, knowledge as a source of competitive advantage and hence being crucial to business success, especially for knowledge-intensive organizations has been introduced since long (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Drucker, 1998). In fact, in his paper, Gu (2004), did a bibliometric analysis found that since 1975, 1407 publications by 2727 authors have been done on this topic of knowledge management.

In international human resources management (IHRM), knowledge management (knowledge transfer, knowledge sharing, knowledge flow) is again, one of the most important factors to be considered, for various reasons. From the Agency Theory perspective, multi-national enterprises (MNEs, interchangeably called multi-national corporations (MNCs) henceforth), aim to maintain control through sending expatriates to the host country subsidiaries (also called as foreign subsidiaries (FS)), and disseminate their "way of working" in the FS. Thus, knowledge transfer becomes crucial. There has been extensive research on this area, and quite a few literature reviews done in understanding this

covering related arenas – knowledge transfer between MNCs and FS, IHRM practices in MNCs, factors influencing the transfer to knowledge, role of expatriates and/or locals, challenges faced/ barriers, etc. In their paper (Cooke et al, 2019) did a systematic literature review of the researches done on MNCs, for the time period 2000-2014. They identified three main areas, viz., effect of country of origin, managing expatriates and strategy and knowledge flow at intra-organization level.

This article is an attempt to understand and collate the researches done on the triad – IHRM practices in MNCs, knowledge management (transfer/flow/sharing), and foreign subsidiary (performance, knowledge transfer implementation and issues faced therein). While going through the articles, it was observed that the papers can be broadly classified in two arenas – (i) IHRM practices in MNCs knowledge transfer, and (ii) the who/what/how/when/why of knowledge flow between MNCs and foreign subsidiaries (including the various factors influencing them, e.g., expatriate's role, local national's role, strategies, subsidiaries' HR practices, challenges/ barriers faced, etc.). By doing this, it is attempted to understand the research gaps (less explored areas) and limitations of existing studies, and thus provide future scopes of research.

Layout of the Paper

This review paper consists of five main parts – Introduction, Methodology (data collection and analysis), Key Findings, Discussion (on the findings of the papers), Limitations (of this paper, and future scopes of research), and Conclusion. The time period of 2006-2019 (Jan 2006-Mar 2019) has been looked at, from which 66 studies were included in this review.

2. METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION:

Articles published in management journals in English during the period of 2006 till March 2019 were used for writing this review (13-year time period). EBSCO, Emerald, ProQuest, JSTOR, and google scholar databases were searched, through the institute's e-journal databases. Keywords used were a combination of the following – knowledge management, knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, international human resource management, IHRM, IHRM practices, multinational, and MNCs. Post the initial screening (based on keywords and year of publication), the abstracts of the shortlisted articles were read critically, in order to ascertain their relevance. Thereafter, the final list of 63 articles and 2 book chapters (total 65) was arrived at by reading through the ones thus screened. Further details about the journals are given below in Table 1. In the final list, majority of these articles were published in top-tier journals (as per ABDC list – 11 A*, 43 A, 8 B and 3 C category, respectively). Another observation was that over 90% of the papers were qualitative in nature (57 out of 63). Another interesting observation was 18 papers were review papers by nature.

DATA ANALYSIS:

The list of articles (65 papers and 2 book chapters) was summarized in an excel sheet, with the following details – author(s), year of publication, journal published, objective of the paper, period of review (applicable for review papers), qualitative/ quantitative and research methods used.

3. KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While reading the papers, following questions were aimed to be addressed –

- Methods used (case study/ survey/ interview/ combinations)
- Countries studied (host country, home country)
- Themes studied
- Implications mentioned
- Future scope for research mentioned

The answers to the first three of the above questions, as observed from the articles studied, are given as under. The remaining two questions are answered in the subsequent part of this paper, as it is believed that for the sake of clarity, they are best mentioned along with the detailed discussion on them.

- (i) Methods used – it was observed that for majority of the papers, Survey was the most commonly used methodology for data gathering.

(ii) Countries studied (host country, home country) – It was observed that from the home country perspective, US, UK, Germany Japan and France were studied most (Cooke et al, 2019), whereas from host country perspective, UK and China were most studied, with recent trend showing an increase in studies of Asian, Central and Eastern European countries. The top countries whose HRM practices are studied included US, Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, Finland, Italy, South Korea, China, Africa and Taiwan (Lee, Chen, and Chen, 2018).

(iii) Themes studied – broadly, the following themes were studied (these are explained in details in the next section).

- a. IHRM practices in MNCs and Knowledge transfer
- b. Knowledge flow across MNCs and FS (including reverse transfer)

Overall, the most researched area was found to be those related to expatriate, their management, and their role/ effect on the knowledge management (transfer/ sharing) process.

4. DISCUSSION

a. IHRM Practices in MNCs and Knowledge Transfer

- i. HRM structure and its impact – Wang-Cowham (2008), studied Chinese subsidiaries of MNCs, and found that HR structures, by creating learning networks, aids in knowledge sharing.
- ii. Barriers to knowledge transfer – Reige (2007), studied and listed down the barriers to internal knowledge transfer. The barriers identified through literature review were substantiated by in-depth interviews. Organizational, technological, and people barriers were broadly stated to be overcome by sharing. However, there was no significant result to indicate suitable way of overcoming such barriers, specific actions could not be pin-pointed, as different situations required different handling.
- iii. Challenges – Lučkaničová & Oltra, (2014) in the paper, attempted to reveal the challenges to knowledge management and knowledge sharing. They identified challenges to knowledge sharing (needs, trust, involvement) and how they impacted planning, people, processes and IT tools (domains of knowledge management).
- iv. Role of Individual mechanisms – Minbaeva et al (2012), studied employees in Danish MNCs, to understand how HRM practices and knowledge transfer happened through individual-level mechanisms. Their study substantiated that individual perception of organization's commitment, and extrinsic motivation had direct impact on knowledge transfer. Additionally, intrinsic motivation and social engagement/ interactions mediated the relationship of perceived commitment of the organization towards knowledge transfer, and the actual knowledge exchange.
- v. Role of organization mechanisms –
 - (v.1) Centre of excellence and trans-national teams – Adenfelt & Lagerström (2006), in their paper, substantiated the link, the impact organization mechanisms (centre of excellence and transnational teams) have on knowledge development and sharing in differentiated MNCs. They found that both of these are headquarters driven strategies, and the success or failure depended on the relationship with subsidiary as well as the context.
 - (v.2) Virtual teams – Hong & Vai (2008), studied cross-functional virtual team members, in order to understand how knowledge sharing happened. Four mechanisms were distinguished – shared understanding, learning climate, job rotation and coaching. The latter two were found to be increasing collective competency, whereas the former two increased willingness towards knowledge sharing.
 - (v.3) Culture – Chang & Lin (2015), in their study, based on survey of IT companies in Taiwan, aimed to understand the impact of organizational culture (defined as result-oriented, strict-control, job-oriented, closed, and professional-oriented) and knowledge management process intention, and how thus the performance can be boosted. Their results substantiated that organizations displaying a job-oriented culture positively affected employee intention, whereas one with tight control affected the same negatively.
 - (v.4) Climate – Williams & Lee (2016), in their paper, attempted to understand knowledge flow in MNCs by understanding how employees are managed in FS. They surveyed Korean MNC subsidiaries in UK, France, and Germany, and found that formalized procedures of HRM practices deteriorated social capital but boosted human capital, while empowering HRM practices had the reverse effect (i.e., weakened human capital but strengthened social capital). Having a participative climate enhances knowledge flow, bidirectionally.

- vi. HRM practices and effectiveness – Caligiuri (2014), in her article, jotted down the factors influencing the effectiveness of HRM practices, especially those dealing with the organization's knowledge absorptive capacity. She also observed that individual differences impacted the willingness to knowledge sharing. Gope, Elia & Passante (2018), studied Indian IT sector to understand the HRM practices (recruitment & selection, training & development, compensation & reward, employee retention, and career development) which influenced knowledge acquisition and sharing.

b. Knowledge flow across MNCs and FS (including reverse transfer)

- i. Expatriates' role (including their management, challenges, repatriation, etc) –

Choi and Jan (2012), focussed on the tacit knowledge transfer between MNE and FS through the expatriates. They conducted a survey on expatriates of a Korean MNC, and the results substantiated the important role expatriates played. Further, they found that the experience of the expatriate also impacted the international knowledge transfer.

Reiche (2012), studied inpatriates of German MNCs, in order to understand the knowledge benefits that the MNC (social capital) gains upon repatriation. The study found that the perception of career and repatriation support moderated this.

Chang & Smale (2013), brought in the concept of stickiness (difficulty), identifying those peculiarities of expatriates which affect the HRM knowledge transfer most. They interviewed expatriate managers of British subsidiaries of Taiwanese MNCs. The results imply that ability and motivation played a major role.

Park & Mense-Petermann (2014), in their conceptual study, looked at the role expatriate managers played in knowledge in MNCs. They inferred that the role of an expatriate as a boundary-spanner and problem solver in knowledge exchange process augments the MNCs strategies of global integration, national responsiveness, worldwide learning and innovation commitment.

Boyle, Nicholas & Mitchell (2015), in their paper, studied how expatriates share knowledge via interpersonal networks, and how this impacted the knowledge flow in MNEs. They observed that awareness and usage of such networks positively impacted the efficiency and effectiveness of knowledge flow.

Prytzula et al (2018), looked at the role of expatriate managers and local managers/ staff and how knowledge transfer happens. They interviewed employees of five MNCs (German, American, Indian) in Poland. They found that expatriate's skills and abilities, willingness and motivation, ability to transfer knowledge and experience, and ability of positive relationship building – positively impacted knowledge transfer.

Kong et al (2018), surveyed subsidiaries of Chinese MNCs, to understand the effect of relation of expatriate with other managers (subsidiary, HQ) has on reverse knowledge transfer. Their results showed that positive relationship positively affect subsidiary willingness, which mediates the quality and extent of reverse knowledge transfer.

- ii. Inpatriates role – Reiche et al (2008), in their book, examined the role inpatriates played in knowledge flow between MNCs and FS, in both ways. They also substantiated that social processes act as antecedents to cross-unit knowledge sharing.
- iii. Host country nationals' role – Vance et al (2009), looked at the importance of the liaison role of HCNs in knowledge management, especially those having direct interaction with the expatriates. -The roles include that of being a communicator/ facilitator, as source of information, developing talent, and as a partner of change.
- iv. Barriers –

Muqadas et al (2017), studied the challenges to knowledge sharing, and attempted to reason why hoarding happens. They found that reasons of knowledge hoarding included those for power, authority, influence, career opportunities; and is the by-product of unsupportive culture as well as favouritism.

Guo et al (2018), looked at how MNEs overcome barriers to knowledge transfer by using/ creating/ promoting their global network, in the light of restrictions to employee mobility (due to GATS). They found that global teams and internship programs are avenues utilized for tacit knowledge transfer.

Lauring & Zhang (2018), in their book chapter, studied two Danish MNCs to understand the link between the factors (social and sociotechnical) influencing intra- and inter-unit interactions. They observed that these factors had significant impact, and thus MNCs required to deal with the challenges and well as opportunities of having a diverse and geographically spread business.

v. Knowledge management strategies –

Hong & Ngyuen (2009), studied mechanisms adopted by Japanese firms having subsidiaries in China. Their results corroborated that standardized and universal approach was limiting in nature, and that significant contributions were done at the local level.

Fletcher & Harris (2012), looked at the knowledge acquisition of smaller firms (Scottish internationalizing organizations). They found that smaller firms lacked in networking, and tried of indirect avenues (recruitment, consultant).

Lunnan & Zhao (2014), interviewed regional, subsidiary and global managers to understand the role of regional HQ in knowledge flows in MNEs. Based on the data, they inferred that it indeed has influence.

Ciravegno et al (2014), in their study, interviewed Chinese textile manufacturers, to understand their internationalization process. They found that proactiveness and entrepreneurial approach could predict the intensity and scope, but not the speed of internationalization.

Popaitoon & Slengthai (2014), in their paper, examined the facets of the firm's absorptive capacity of knowledge, HRM and performance of project. They found that HRM acts as a moderator between absorptive capacity and long-run performance, whereas, for short-term projects, HRM variates the relation.

Liu et al (2019), studied the knowledge management practices in China, using survey method, to find the relationship between institutional force, organization culture and knowledge management processes. They observed that both partially influenced the knowledge management process.

vi. Subsidiary HR practices – Yamao et al (2009), studied the important role of HR practices of subsidiary in increasing human and social capital. Australian subsidiaries of US, German and Japanese MNCs were surveyed, and found that this was important for knowledge accumulation, strategically important for the subsidiary as well as the HQ.

vii. Effect on subsidiaries' performance –

Simonin et al (2009), studied American and European organizations in Japan, looking at how specific HRM practices helped/ promoted knowledge transfer outflows as also improved subsidiary performance. The HRM practices listed were critical thinking encouragement, supervisory encouragement, learning incentives, deployment of internal mechanisms and processes, expatriation, and corporate training.

Zheng et al (2010), conducted a study to explore the mediating role of knowledge management in organization culture, structure strategy on the organization's effectiveness. They found that impact of culture on effectiveness was fully mediated by knowledge management, while that of the impact of strategy and structure of effectiveness was partially mediated.

Fang et al (2013), in their study, looked at the relation between knowledge sources, HQ-subsidiary relatedness and subsidiaries performance. They inferred that performance improves with integration of resources, higher relatedness (technological and market) – from the data of 572 Japanese MNEs across 47 countries.

viii. Factors affecting knowledge flow and its effectiveness

a. Distance –

Ambos & Ambos (2009), in their study, observed that geographical, cultural and linguistic distance had moderating effects on the effectiveness of knowledge transfer.

Jasimuddin, Li and Perdakis (2015), in their paper, explored the existing linkages between international business, knowledge management and economic geography. Geographical space is defined by cultural distance, geographical distance and relational distance. From analysis of data collected from Japanese MNEs operating in a particular province in China. The result showed that relational distance and cultural distance had a direct and negative impact on knowledge transfer. Additionally. Cultural and geographic distance had both direct and indirect effect on knowledge transfer. Further, relational distance and cultural distance had a direct as well as mediating effect on geographical distance and knowledge transfer, separately.

Vlajčić, Caputo, Marzi & Dabić (2019), in their study, examined the moderating role of geographical distance on cultural intelligence and knowledge transfer process. They studied expatriates working in Croatia (European and non-Eurpoean), and found support that geographical distance acted as a moderator, but only for reverse knowledge transfer (FS to HQ knowledge transfer).

- b. Investment in technology – Driffield et al (2010) inspected what determined technology transfer, and knowledge spill-overs, based on data of MNEs based in Italy. Their study found that investments in R&D and technology significantly and positively impacted its nature and flow.
- c. HRM orientation – Chen et al (2013) studied the impact of HRM alignment (adaptive, exportive, and integrative orientation) on knowledge transfer. They theorized that as per the orientation, consistency, cooperation, competition, channels of transfer, cultural similarity; all influences knowledge transfer, by influencing motivation.
- d. Control mechanism, social capital, and capabilities (of subsidy) – Ahlvik & Björkman (2015), in their paper, looked at how the factors affecting the transfer of organization practices from HQ to subsidiary impacted its implementation, integration and internationalisation. They studied Nordic corporations, and corroborated that control mechanism (formal), social capital (inter-unit), and capabilities (of the subsidy) influenced the implementation, integration and internationalization of HRM practices.
- e. Expatriate/ inpatriates and relevance –

Harzing, Pudelko & Reiche (2016), conducted an empirical study (MNC with presence in 13 countries) to define the relation between international assignees and knowledge transfer. The results supported that expatriates increased function specific knowledge outflow (from HQ), and the relevance of the employee (expatriate/ inpatriate) differs with different knowledge flow between GQ and subsidiaries.

Boyle, Nicholas & Mitchell (2015), in their paper, studied how expatriates share knowledge via interpersonal networks, and how this impacted the knowledge flow in MNEs. They observed that awareness and usage of such networks positively impacted the efficiency and effectiveness of knowledge flow.

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Kong et al (2018), surveyed subsidiaries of Chinese MNCs, to understand the effect of relation of expatriate with other managers (subsidiary, HQ) has on reverse knowledge transfer. Their results showed that positive relationship positively affect subsidiary willingness, which mediates the quality and extent of reverse knowledge transfer.

Sanchez-Vidal, Sanz-Valle & Barba-Aragon (2018), looked at the role repatriates played in knowledge transfer (FS to HQ). The authors studied Spanish MNCs, and found that the repatriate's capacity to disburse knowledge positively affected reverse knowledge transfer, which also depended on the knowledge acquired itself as well as the firm's policy.

Vlajčić, Caputo, Marzi & Dabić (2019), studied the role of cultural intelligence in conventional and reverse knowledge transfer. They studied expatriates working in Croatia, and the results showed that cultural intelligence (meta-cognitive, cognitive, behavioural, and motivational) acted as a filter in the process.

ix. Reverse knowledge transfer –

Nair, Demirbag & Mellahi (2016), examined how Indian MNCs. Gained knowledge by overseas M&A. in their study, they examined and found that subsidiary capability, parent absorptive capacity, and relevance of the knowledge positively affected knowledge transfer (reverse). Additionally, they found that relevance of knowledge acted as moderator, and parent's knowledge absorptive capacity.

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- x. Miscellaneous –
- a. Effect of learning management system on knowledge flow – Ritchie et al (2011) studied the effectiveness of an LMS system in a global US firm (for their sales team), with presence across 70 countries. The results showed positive impact on team training and support, which was determined the perceive ease and usefulness of the system.
- b. Horizontal knowledge flow – Bousseba et al (2014), studied knowledge management systems of MNCs (international consulting), in order to explain horizontal flow of knowledge. Their study substantiated that this happens due to networking.
- c. Knowledge connectivity and innovation – Cano-Kollmann, Cantwell, Hannigan, Mudambi & Song (2016), examined the factors of knowledge connectivity, the MNEs, people (mobile) and location (immobile), and how they drive/ impact the innovation process in such MNEs. The observed that the evolution of innovation depends on three factors – tacit knowledge flows, disaggregation of global value chains, and connectivity across geographical spaces.

5. LIMITATIONS

From the systematic study of the papers (65 articles plus 2 book chapters), it is observed that the research done are wide-spread and varied. The paper is in itself not without its own limitations. The time period of study was chosen based on earlier literature review papers, however, if this time period was extended, one cannot rule out the possibility of obtaining wider and deeper insights, and maybe much greater clarity. The search engines used, as well as the database, was not exhaustive (only available full papers were referred to, thus excluding the ones which required paid access). This had inadvertently caused exclusion of some number of relevant articles, which may have again led to greater understanding of the subject matter. Furthermore, on hindsight, it is believed that referring more book chapters would have been beneficial and added more value to this paper. Nevertheless, notwithstanding all the above, this paper was a sincere attempt at having a clearer understanding of the prior research work done in knowledge management and IHRM practices.

6. FUTURE SCOPES OF RESEARCH

This paper is an attempt to categorize prior researches in broad clusters – (i) examining the relations between IHRM practices in MNCs and knowledge transfer, and (ii) knowledge flow between MNCs and FS (foreign subsidiaries). This, admittedly by no means exhaustive, have thrown up a few arenas where research have been sparse. An overall lacking is that of quantitative research on this arena. Majority of the papers studied have been qualitative in nature. Avenues to quantify researches, with empirical data, needs to be done. Firstly, though there is a clear trend of researches in emerging markets, comparative studies have hardly been conducted, to understand how various factors (like socio-economic conditions, cultural differences, regional variations within country due to geographical spaces) affected the knowledge flow. Secondly, an evident clear area of interest seem to be reverse transfer of knowledge, and the role of expatriates (including repatriates, inpatriates); however, again, researchers have fallen short of comparative study across cultures. Few researchers have attempted to look at the cultural aspect, but further work is warranted. Especially, how the differences across generation of workers affected the knowledge transfer and sharing, as also the whole knowledge management process. This is of prime importance holding managerial implications, as understanding of these would enable better employee handling per se. Additionally, while examining the cultural aspect, power equations, politics, and other such antecedents need to be examined too. Thirdly, expatriate management and the role they play in knowledge transfer has been looked at in quite a detailed manner – one interesting angle of research could be to conduct longitudinal study, following an expatriate across multiple international assignments, to gain insight on the knowledge life cycle, the process as well as explore hidden areas yet unexplored. Fourthly, with technological advancement, globalization, and global village concept (integration of people), whether knowledge management needs to be treated differentially than the standard processes. Fifthly, the concept and treatment of knowledge hoarding from international HRM perspective is lacking in prior researches. It would indeed be interesting to see how such hoarding behaviour is affected, and in tur, impact the HRM practices as well as knowledge management processes in MNCs. And, finally, handling such complex and intricate subjects need multi-level analysis and approach, which is quite strongly lacking in existing researches.

7. CONCLUSION

Through this systematic literature review, an attempt is made to understand the extant researches on knowledge management, knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer, and IHRM practices in multinational corporations. Based on

the papers, two broad clusters are identified, viz., (i) examining the relations between IHRM practices in MNCs and knowledge transfer, and (ii) knowledge flow between MNCs and FS (foreign subsidiaries). Future scopes of research areas are also identified, based on the research gaps observed in the papers reviewed. It is hoped that this paper would be beneficial to the ones consulting it in the future.

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

N.A.

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