

# **Satisfaction towards human resources practices and repatriates' retention. An empirical examination in the Portuguese companies context**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the relationship between the level of satisfaction towards Human Resources Management practices among repatriates and the decision to remain on the home company after expatriation. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews of 28 Portuguese repatriates who remain and 16 organisational representatives from eight companies located in Portugal. The results show that (1) compensation system during the international assignment; (2) permanent support during the international assignment and; (3) recognition upon the return of the work and effort of expatriates during the international assignment are the most important HRM practices for promoting satisfaction among repatriates. Moreover, it is at repatriation phase that repatriates show higher dissatisfaction with HRM support. These findings will be discussed in detail and implications and suggestions for future research will be proposed as well.

**Keywords:** International assignments; expatriation; repatriation; satisfaction, HRM practices, retention

## **Introduction**

One of the most relevant stages of expatriation cycle is repatriation. This stage completes the expatriate's assignment, his/her reintegration, both in the home country culture and in the home company, in career development and the expatriate's retention in the home company (Black et al., 1991; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Lee & Liu, 2007; Taplin & Winterton, 2007). This theme is of great pertinence due to the repatriates' adjustment problems, namely, their dissatisfaction and their attitude towards the company, which

frequently results in job abandonment (Baruch et al., 2002; Lazarova & Caliguiri, 2001, Paik et al., 2002; Reiche et al., 2011, Sánchez et al., 2007). As a consequence, this leads the company to lose human capital (knowledge, relational, cross-cultural, global management) that individuals had previously acquired during their international assignment.

Hence, this study aims at understanding how the level of satisfaction towards expatriation/repatriation support practices can help prevent unwanted job abandonment and channel all human capital, acquired by the expatriate now repatriated, to the company (either at home or in another international assignment).

This phenomenon has a special relevance in the Portuguese context, since (a) there are no empirical studies concerning this issue that involves repatriates from Portuguese companies; (b) the national business reality is incipient as far as internationalisation and, subsequently, the repatriates' management are concerned, and; (c) the organisational and national culture presents characteristics that are distinctive from the most highly studied contexts (e.g., Asia, EUA, Scandinavian countries, Spain, France, The Netherlands, Germany, England, Russia).

One question is central to this research:

- How can the level of satisfaction with the human resources practices support help to explain their decision to remain upon expatriation?

The framework for our research will be this particular scenario. This paper is structured in the following way: the literature on the repatriates' level of satisfaction is followed by the methodology used in the empirical research and the presentation of the main results. Subsequently, the results are discussed and some final considerations are made. In the closing remarks, we will deal with implications, suggestions for future research and limitations of our study.

## **Literature Review**

The literature (e.g., Bossard & Peterson, 2005, Morgan *et al.*, 2004, Sánchez *et al.*, 2007, 2008) suggests that the repatriates' willingness to remain in the company is positively related to the level of satisfaction towards repatriation support practices (e.g., linked to the accuracy of performance description and job autonomy when the expatriate returns). These have clear implications on their retention. Morgan *et al.* (2004) analyse the role that organisational factors play in determining the repatriates' satisfaction level. Indeed, they have shown that factors connected to the organisation and to the duties performed are crucial to the repatriates' reintegration. That is to say that these factors are associated with the repatriates'

reintegration into the home company and their respective functions (e.g., difficulties in finding a job working with a suitable functional content) and are the foremost determining factors of repatriates' dissatisfaction with the organisational support.

According to Black *et al.* (1991), this dissatisfaction results from the strong differences between the work performed during the international assignment and the work performed after returning to the home company. Empirical evidence demonstrates that many repatriates held better professional positions in the company during their expatriation period than those held after returning home. This disparity of professional experience as an expatriate and then as a repatriated leads authors of empirical studies (e.g., Black *et al.*, 1991, Lee & Liu, 2007) to explain the dissatisfaction of repatriates through the organisational support, as a result of restricted career opportunities, after returning to the home company, *i.e.*, preceding organisational factors.

Other studies have been fundamental in order to explain the effects of satisfaction with organisational support in the repatriates' retention. For instance, the results obtained from 81 Spanish repatriated managers have shown that dissatisfaction with the organisational support is the utmost clarifying variable of the repatriates' turnover (Sánchez *et al.*, 2007). In another research study, the same authors (Sánchez *et al.*, 2008) have attempted to measure the satisfaction level of 124 repatriate Spaniards with the organisational support during repatriation. At this particular time, the authors analysed the effects of satisfaction on turnover intentions. They have concluded that satisfaction towards the organisational support reduces turnover intentions and it is directly connected with organisational factors (*i.e.* organisational practices to support repatriation, such as support in career management, changes in benefit packages, training and satisfaction with work expectations).

Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001) have presented results that suggest that satisfaction towards repatriation support practices is positively related to the repatriates' willingness to remain in the company. More recently, Stahl *et al.* (2009) have undertaken a study with 1779 repatriated from Northern-American, European and Asian companies and tried to identify factors to determine the success of repatriation. The authors have concluded that the satisfaction of the repatriates plays a crucial role in the success of repatriation. Based on Cerdin and Lazarova's (2007) work, Stahl *et al.* (2009) propose three dimensions of analysis on the repatriates' satisfaction levels: (1) satisfaction towards the support provided by the company during the international assignment, (2) satisfaction towards management practices and repatriation; (3) satisfaction towards career development and long-term development opportunities within the company, compared to external opportunities.

Due to being closely associated to individual motivation, satisfaction with organisational support is considered, in the literature, as one of the chief explanatory variables of retention (Wintenton & Taplin, 2007) and dissatisfaction with the organisational support is presented as one of the most significant antecedents of repatriates' turnover (Harzing & Christensen, 2004).

## **Methodology**

To accomplish our comparative study, we have adopted a qualitative research design. We have also made a multiple case study. In order to do so, three criteria were adopted to choose the cases for analysis. Firstly, the companies should be located in Portugal. Secondly, they should conform to a formal HRM structure. Thirdly, they should have repatriation experience (*i.e.* have repatriates). Given that Yin (2003) suggests that a multiple study should present between 4 and 10 cases, we have a theoretical and intentional sample (Creswell, 1998) eight companies, which have been interviewed.

A convenience sample was selected which includes eight international companies based in Portugal. To ensure anonymity identification codes were assigned to each company: CDA; CDS; ICA; IEE; IMC; SFA; SSA; ITB. In each company, repatriates who remain in the company after the international assignment (hereinafter called REPRET) and organisational representatives (hereinafter called REPORG) were interviewed. The latter occupy positions connected to the management of expatriates/repatriates in the companies under study (*i.e.*, directors, managers or human resources specialists).

Data collection took place between October 2009 and March 2010.

All interviewees were native Portuguese and all interviews were conducted in Portuguese, by the same researcher and tap-recorded, transcribed and content analysed.

### *a) Characterization of the sample*

All companies were private and based in the North of Portugal: four comprised the industrial sector (companies ICA, IEE, IMC and ITB) and two of them were integrated in the commerce and distribution sector (companies CDA and CDS), one belonged to the services sector (company SFA) and, finally, the last company (SSA) included the sector of telecommunications and information technologies. Seven companies were based in Portugal and one of them was a German multinational branch (company ITB). Half of the companies hired less than one thousand workers. Four companies had had repatriation experience more than ten years before, and four of them had had this experience less than five years before.

Repatriates had never left the organization in the case of four companies (IMC, IEE, SSA and ITB).

Sixteen organisational representatives (ten males; aged 39 in average) have participated in this study. Seven performed technical functions related to the HR department (one lawyer, two operational managers and four technical coordinators) and nine belong to direction boards (eight Human Resources directors and an Administrator). The majority possessed a university degree (n=14), one had a Masters' course and another had finished year 12.

28 repatriates (22 males; aged 42 in average) were interviewed while still working in the expatriation company. Thirty-eight months had been the average period of the international assignment (minimum: 15; maximum: 125). International assignments had several destination countries and Angola (n=6) e Brazil (n=8) were referred to as the most representative. The vast majority of repatriates (n= 17) possessed a university degree, three of them had post-graduated qualifications (MBA and a Masters' Degree) two had a BA, five had finished year 12, and one had finished year 9. As for their marital status, 7 were single, 18 were married or living in a common-law marriage and three were divorced. Six repatriates performed technical functions, 22 performed direction functions (seven managers of intermediate level and fifteen senior managers and two senior top managers).

#### *b) Interviews*

The interview was considered the most adequate approach to get new insights into the effects of expatriation on turnover and permanence of expatriates upon an international assignment.

Semi-direct interviews were made to organisational representatives (two per company) and to repatriates (four or five per company). In total, forty-four interviews were made (sixteen to organisational representatives and twenty-eight to repatriates, who remain in the organization after completing the expatriation assignment).

The interviews were conducted with the help of a script, whose themes were chosen taking into account literature review and the aims of the survey. The first part of the script, which dealt with the repatriates, it contained socio-demographic elements on the interviewee. It also involved information about their professional evolution within the company and the features of the international assignment. The second part of the script contained a set of questions centered on exploration of the factors which could explain the decision-making process, underlying their permanence in a company after returning from an international

assignment. In addition, the interviewees were asked to identify the factors which would allow us to understand the reasons for their permanence.

As far as the organization representatives were concerned, in the first part of the interview script, information on the company and international assignment experience was collected. In the second part of the interview, the script contained a set of questions related to the organization representatives' perception on the factors which could explain the reasons for the repatriates' permanence in the company.

The average duration of each interview was 70 minutes. Permission to record the interviews (43 participants) was always given. In case of refusal of permission for recording the interview (which occurred with one respondent), the answers were transcribed and sent to the interviewee, by e-mail, for posterior confirmation or clarification of some points.

Confidentiality was granted to interviewees and to the companies, as well. Table 1 summarizes the main participants' demographics characteristics in the study.

(Table 1 here)

## Findings

### A) Satisfaction towards Human Resources Management (HRM) practices of support to expatriation/repatriation

All repatriates (n = 28) were requested to identify HRM practices that were considered to be the source of satisfaction and dissatisfaction over the processes of expatriation/repatriation.

Repatriates felt most satisfied towards the support practices during and after expatriation.

The *constant communication and dialogue* (n = 2, linked to ICA and CDA), *proportionate financial supplements* (n = 6, related to CDS, IEE, ICA) and *bureaucratic and administrative support* (n = 6, linked to IMC; IEE) are the HRM practices that have most pleased repatriates during their expatriation. In the case of the three repatriates, retained by CDS, all of them have emphasised the salary package of the international assignment as the most satisfying HRM practice. Here are some of the testimonies of satisfaction levels:

*... I was exceptionally well paid during this [expatriation] period. If you ask me if my life henceforth was marked by these three and a half years, and whether I made a set*

*of adjustments to my personal finances and, therefore, an upgrade on my standard of living ... Yes, that has happened. I recognize that there were three and a half years that I had earned more money than I would have earned if I had been here. From this point of view I'm glad ... (2 REPRET, CDS)*

*...I always felt a lot of support supportive ... both from there as well as from here ... (4 REPRET, IMC)*

*Communication was good and it was always present, every time you asked for anything [from HRM] the answer was given straight away... (REPRET 1, ICA)*

**Professional reintegration support** was also pleasurable for repatriates (n = 2, both related to CDA). When differences in work processes are very different between home and host countries, support to reintegration tends to be more appreciated. Appraisal of the reintegration support comes from repatriates, especially those who remained in the CDA, whose professional reintegration presupposed the performance of new tasks, differing from the previous ones.

*... I think that supporting and monitoring reintegration are always the important aspects, because whomever comes from abroad also brings certain impulses, they are more impulsive and with that "resourcefulness craze" (which is the term) they may have more difficulties in reintegration, because things here work differently in a more orderly and progressive fashion,... (1 REPRET, CDA)*

In the post-expatriation stage, recognition of both work and effort during the international assignment provide a professional environment, suitable for the majority of retained repatriates. Some repatriates (n = 3, i.e., 10.7%, 2 from ITB and from CDS 1) associate this recognition to the development of internal career, they end up performing tasks not only of greater responsibility, but also suitable to the new skills acquired during expatriation. The remuneration improvement and other benefits, commonly associated with new job position, would eventually occur. After returning, the perception of professional enhancement is also associated with an investment in the repatriates' education and training. This can either be seen as a development for personal benefit or as professional optimization required by the new job.

The ITB provides a lot of training on the repatriates' return, which provides them a great source of satisfaction. In addition, *the existence of a mentor figure* at the ITB also contributes to the satisfaction of its repatriates in the post-expatriation period.

*... [after my return] the company has always offered me the possibility of performing different tasks and career progression plans that I have considered interesting and adequate. I also feel that the salary I earn is adequate. I don't feel I am being unfairly treated... (REPRET 2, CDS)*

*The mentor figure is crucial. It is vital for my career, for myself, it gives me internal satisfaction. (REPRET 4, ITB)*

## **B) Dissatisfaction towards HRM practices of support to expatriation/repatriation**

Prior to the international assignment phase, the repatriates from ITB, CDS, SSA and ICA mention dissatisfaction. They focus their criticism on the absence of HRM practices of preparation of the assignment and the formalization of expatriation/repatriation conditions.

The *lack of training on the preparation for expatriation* has brought about some integration difficulties both in the host country/company.

A repatriate from SSA (*i.e.*, 3.6%) refers to the differences in culture and in functions performed both in the home company/country and the host country/company. Moreover, the lack of formalization of expatriation conditions generates some unnecessary anxiety on the expatriate (n = 1, *i.e.*, 3.6%, from CDS). The *creation of false expectations about the next stages* (n = 3, *i.e.*, 10.7%, from ICA and ITB) also gives rise to dissatisfaction, as witnessed by one of the repatriates:

*My difficulty in communicating with others was based on the language ... if I had known or if I had learnt Mandarin [communication difficulties would have been smaller]... (REPRET 1, ITB)*

During the expatriation stage, the HRM aspects that were identified as unsatisfactory by repatriates were the *integration support in the host country* and the *feeling of abandonment*, triggered by the lack of regular communication (n=2, from SSA and ITB). The results seem imply that repatriates with greater integration difficulties in the host country (especially due to

being pioneers in the branches of the host country) are the ones who feel more unsatisfied with the lack of support and communication.

The results illustrate that, during the expatriation stage, there was *a breach of commitment assumed prior to departure* with regards to communication and information (n = 2, from SSA and CDS), giving origin to the perceived lack of respect for the expatriate's condition.

*... then there is a difficulty of the information reaching you. Asking for help and, on an operational level, regarding travelling, hotels,... there wasn't any kind of monitoring... at least I could have been asked how I had been doing... (REPRET 1, SSA)*

*The absence of contact at certain times was the hardest thing for me. Communication should be more frequent. There are certain procedures which require communication with HR and being deprived of that is very distressing for me. (REPRET 4, ITB)*

Another aspect that was not adequately safeguarded is connected to *the lack of respect for the expatriate's condition* (n=2, from SSA). Both repatriates have mentioned the fact that, while expatriated, the company failed to comply with the previously commitments, settled prior to departure. To illustrate this idea, they referred to the conviction they had about benefitting from certain privileges (e.g., having a house maid, access the Internet, cable TV). Nevertheless, as the expatriation progressed, these perks were suspended by the company. Some repatriates (n = 7, i.e., 25%, from CDS, IEE, ICA, SSA, IMC) have underlined the *lack of support in the reintegration process in the country*, this included the repatriation of assets as well. This dissatisfaction is more evident in repatriates who have returned from geographically distant countries (Brazil, Argentina and China), and whose difficulties are higher as far as their logistical and bureaucratic goods are concerned. Nonetheless, repatriates' dissatisfaction may explained by the sense of having been treated lightly when preparing for their reintegration and when a formalization of the conditions of their return did not take place.

The phase in which repatriates feel mostly dissatisfied towards HRM is after returning from an international assignment. The *lack of recognition of both work and effort on an international scale* is actually the aspect that originates the greatest displeasure amongst repatriates after their return (n = 3, from ITB and SFA).

In the case of the ITB, although two repatriates considered their careers to have improved, after their return they felt dissatisfied with the rhythm of their internal professional development. For both, the time to formalize their new functions was exceedingly long. Simultaneously, they think they have potential to take on more prominent roles in the performance of their new functions.

As for the SFA, the career development is conversely processed. That is to say, a remaining repatriate was demoted after returning.

*... My life has changed a lot after my return, I felt a great backward motion in my career after I returned from Brazil ... I feel disappointed and dissatisfied with the way I was treated ... I did not leave because I had no strength to do it [for health reasons] (REPRET2, SFA).*

The *loss of salary benefits after returning home* is another stressed aspect by repatriates (n = 2, from SFA, IEE). Actually, one of the repatriates (2 REPRET, SFA) ended up earning a lower salary when compared to the one earned prior to expatriation. Another repatriate (4 REPRET, IEE) was very displeased at the loss of benefits acquired during the international assignment. After his/her return he/she felt in a disadvantageous condition, in relation to other colleagues who, although they had not had an international experience, were performing the same tasks and were getting a better remuneration.

After expatriation, two repatriates (4 REPRET, IEE; REPRET 1, IMC) indicate *the lack of communication on behalf of HRM* as another source of dissatisfaction.

*... All that had been assumed and identified at the beginning, was not fulfilled in the end ... what was verbally agreed, explicitly or not, was not fulfilled afterwards ... (3 REPRET, IEE)*

*... No host program whatsoever ... nothing at all ... In fact, Human Resources have never contacted me for that effect... I'm talking about the expatriation for the first time, with you. I had never had this conversation with anyone before. (1 REPRET, IMC)...*

### **C) Integrating synthesis of the results on HRM satisfaction/dissatisfaction practices towards repatriates**

The results suggest that dissimilarities can be found between the practices that give origin to the repatriates' satisfaction and dissatisfaction and their expatriation/repatriation process.

Conversely, only three HRM practices emerge as the source of the repatriates' satisfaction and dissatisfaction: (1) *support and communication at the time of expatriation*, (2) *preparation for reintegration*, (3) *recognition of both work and effort during the international assignment*. Generally, these results indicate that there are differences between the sources of both the repatriates' satisfaction and dissatisfaction. This means that expatriation/repatriation support practices towards repatriates, resulting in satisfaction differ from the practices that cause repatriates' dissatisfaction.

The greatest dissatisfaction with the practice of HRM has been registered among repatriates from SSA. In this company, the established relationship with the HRM does not seem to be the finest. In addition to this, the investment on expatriation/repatriation management still remains very incipient. Out of the four repatriates, only two were able to pinpoint satisfaction with HRM practices (especially monitoring logistics during the international assignment). However, when enquired about the practices that generate more dissatisfaction, repatriates could identify a greater diversity of HRM practices. Here are a few that have been pointed out: (1) scarce communication with repatriates, especially during the return phase, (2) lack of respect for working /family time and for interim travelling time, (3) absence of commitment to the agreed conditions for the international assignment, eliminating perks agreed before departing to the international assignment, (4) lack of training in order to prepare for the international assignment, so as to minimize culture shock in the host country and to prepare for the performance of the new tasks. In the course of their expatriation, all SSA repatriates reported having exercised different functions from those they had prior to expatriation. Moreover, they only became aware of this when they were in the host country.

The companies under analysis do not seem to acknowledge all the features of the HRM function from which more repatriates' satisfaction or dissatisfaction may arise. On the one hand, some organisational representatives (n = 6, *i.e.*, 37.5% related to IEE, CDA, ITB) have declared that the repatriates' satisfaction is closely related to the presence of HRM support, given an adequate professional framework. On the other hand, the lack of adequate support within a professional framework may generate repatriates' dissatisfaction.

A few contradictions were found between organisational representatives and IEE and SFA repatriates. For instance, the organisational representatives of IEE stated that one of the HRM practices that gives origin to utmost satisfaction is the fulfillment of duties after the return of the initial expectations. Yet, two of the interviewed repatriates (REPRET 3, 4 REPRET, IEE) have identified this as a cause for dissatisfaction. With respect to SFA, the speech contradiction was described in terms of salary conditions. One of their organisational representatives (1 REPORG, SFA) has claimed that "*knowing that he will not be affected in terms of seniority, or in terms of salary ...*" is the most satisfying aspect for repatriates. Still, one of the repatriates contradicts this assertion with his/her personal case, in which the negative influence of expatriation on payment conditions, after the international assignment, is described as follows:

*... When I returned in 2000, if compared to 1998, wages fell, they had reduced my pay and all perks, car and they still took 100 "contos" [almost 500 Euros]. (2 REPRET, SFA)*

As a final point, the results suggest that the practices that lead to a higher satisfaction level are developed during and after expatriation. This trend may be explained due to a greater involvement of HRM in these two phases (*i.e.*, during and after the international assignment). This does not apply to the period prior to expatriation. The absence of any reference to the repatriates' satisfaction towards HRM practices, developed throughout the phase previous to the international assignment, may be clarified by its scarce intervention. Therefore, the results demonstrate that the administration of the company is entrusted with the responsibility for managing the period prior to expatriation.

ITB repatriates have denoted more satisfaction towards support practices developed in the process of repatriation (*i.e.*, the subsequent stage to homecoming), whereas repatriates from CDA, IEE, ICA, CDS, IMC were more satisfied with the HRM during the stage concomitant to expatriation. On the other hand, there is dissatisfaction towards HRM practices in all expatriation phases. Indeed, and repatriates from SFA and SSA were the ones who revealed greater dissatisfaction with such practices, especially in phases during and subsequent to expatriation.

## Discussion

The literature (e.g., Bonache, 2005, Pate & Scullion, 2010, Pinto *et al.*, 2012, Sánchez *et al.*, 2007, Welch *et al.*, 2009) considers the discrepancy between reentry expectations and the reality repatriates will face after their return, as one of the central problems that negatively affects satisfaction towards expatriation/repatriation process. Notwithstanding, results confirm this argument only partially. On the one hand, none of the interviewed organisation representatives assumed to have created career expectations, either before departure, or on the expatriate's return. On the other hand, and although they feel dissatisfied with their repatriation process, most of the repatriates admit their preference to remain, even though they show strong turnover intentions.

The relationship established between dissatisfaction with the repatriation process and turnover intention is confirmed through the results obtained, which allow for the replication arguments stated previously by some researchers:

(1) Expatriation is not considered by employees in terms of career development plan, with the exception of ITB. This evidence was also confirmed by earlier research by Morgan *et al.* (2004), Sanchez *et al.* (2007), Suutari and Brewster (2003), thus corroborating the intention to leave the job position if more attractive opportunities arise outside the repatriation company.

(2) The degree of internationalization of a company may also influence the organisational support throughout the expatriation /repatriation process, namely at the level of policy transparency and repatriation practices. Sánchez *et al.* (2008) obtained results which confirm that the lack of policy transparency and repatriation practices create high dissatisfaction amongst repatriated Spaniards, accompanied by a high procedural ambiguity. In this investigation, there are reasons that lead us to believe that the enormous dissatisfaction of repatriates can be explained by the nonexistence of policies and practices to support expatriation and repatriation management, not to mention the lack policies and practices to prevent or correct turnover intentions.

(3) From the obtained data, evidence also corroborates previous results (e.g., Black *et al.*, 1991, Sánchez *et al.*, 2008) that pinpoint the significance of having one's job expectations fulfilled in the process of repatriation. Repatriates whose expectations were fulfilled after their return are the ones to feel more satisfied and express lower turnover intentions.

(4) Even though they are dissatisfied with their repatriation process, repatriates remain in the company. However, they cannot feel motivated to share knowledge and skills internationally acquired (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). Besides, they consider that their human

and social capital is a skill that ought to be negotiated with a new employer. Similar evidence has been found by previous researchers (e.g., Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001, Paik *et al.*, 2002, Sánchez *et al.*, 2007, Welch *et al.*, 2009).

(5) Although reinstatement conditions are regularly met by all companies, it is also true that a significant number of repatriates have shown dissatisfaction with their repatriation process. In cases where repatriates remain in the company, despite their dissatisfaction, this behavior indicates a violation of a psychological contract (Pate & Scullion, 2010, Yan *et al.*, 2002). As Pate and Scullion (2010) have concluded, in spite of the broken organizational promises, it is possible that many repatriates are dependent on their employer. This explains the reason why some repatriates remain in the repatriation company even after the breach of a psychological contract has occurred, that is to say, after both (company / repatriate) have experienced changes in their expectations.

(6) It has been pointed out in literature (e.g., Harvey & Novicevic, 2006; Tung, 1998) that satisfaction with organisational support is an essential predictor of repatriates' retention. The results we obtained did not confirm this relationship. On the contrary, they indicate that, despite the reduced organizational support throughout the expatriation/ repatriation process, the repatriates' willingness stay in the company is much greater than the predisposition to leave it.

(7) Results seem to be more aligned with literature (e.g., O'Sullivan, 2002) that proposes that dissatisfaction with the repatriation process may not have negative influence on the decision for retention, thus it cannot be considered a predicting factor for repatriates' turnover. Dissatisfaction with the support practices of the expatriation/ repatriation process is relatively high, therefore the results suggest the existence of other factors that may help us to understand the retention capacity of the companies visited (e.g., seniority, seniority within the company, organisational commitment, personal convenience and the repatriates' fear of the unknown).

(8) Instrumental commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991) seems to legitimize the overlap of job security with the satisfaction towards the intra-organisational career management and leadership relationships. The results suggest that changes in work conditions (e.g., increased unemployment and reduced job security) and organisational management models (e.g., restructuring and leadership role) seem to contribute to a better understanding of the adversities that lead many of the repatriates to remain in the home company even if they are dissatisfied with the organisational support.

In the cases studied here, socio-professional and "age", "gender", "seniority in the company", "type of contractual relationship" are variables that appear to have a predictive effect on organizational commitment, with greater intensity on its instrumental dimension. A viable account for this may be found in older employees. Both company seniors and female repatriates tended to assume they have to struggle over employment alternatives outside the company.

Our results seem to corroborate empirical evidence of a multiplicity of studies conducted in other organizational and culturally different contexts (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1991) in which senior workers, particularly older and female workers, recognize that the costs of abandoning the company appear to be higher than those of staying on the job, even though they feel dissatisfied with the organizational support they were subject to. Thence, there is ground to believe that the contribution of HRM practices tends to be moderated by the repatriates' organizational commitment.

(9) The literature (e.g., Baruch *et al.*, 2002; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001, Sánchez *et al.*, 2008) suggests that high turnover rates among repatriates dissatisfied can be observed. However, no similar results were found in the companies under analysis. Perhaps the period prior to this research may help to understand the dissimilarities. In recent years, Portugal has faced some adversity not only on the evolution of the economy, but also on the labour market. The most pernicious outcome is the drastic rise in unemployment rates (10.3% in November 2009, which was the highest in the Eurozone and the 4<sup>th</sup> highest unemployment rate amongst 30 developed countries, members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD, according to EUROSTAT data, January 8, 2010).

The general crisis, which affects labour and employment market, may help to explain the contradicting results obtained in companies located in Portugal. Indeed, the results are inconsistent with turnover trends found in Northern-American, Asian and North European companies. Conversely, the general crisis may also explain the reason why the current retention rate of dissatisfied repatriates in Portuguese companies is higher in most cases. This argument is in line with O'Sullivan's (2002) assertions. According to this author, when repatriates perceive the existence of more attractive external work opportunities, the retention problems can be aggravated. These problems occur when their skills are perceived as creating windows of opportunity for inter-organizational mobility.

## **Conclusions, limitations and future lines for research**

The method pursued by Portuguese companies to manage expatriates/repatriates was considered as a key factor in determining repatriates' satisfaction towards organizational support.

The limited experience in expatriation / repatriation may possibly elucidate the *ad hoc* repatriate management in the studied companies. Simultaneously, it also contributes to a clear understanding on the repatriates' lack of satisfaction towards the role played by HRM throughout the whole process.

Many expatriates remain dissatisfied after their return to the home company. Most probably, before the international assignment, these companies did not pay adequate attention to the management of expectations after the repatriates' return. Regardless of the hardships encountered during their expatriation / repatriation process, companies seem to be convinced that the expatriates maintain an emotional connection to the company. Nonetheless, the results confirm that the absence of formalized HRM practices is a solid dissatisfaction predictor for the interviewed repatriates. During the stage prior to expatriation, greater involvement of HRM might minimize the dissatisfaction of the repatriates' expectations on their return, so as to possibly contribute to the greater retention rates.

(1) The lack of information on the expatriates' performance, during the international assignment, could explain the mismatch of expectations after their return. In concrete terms, greater attention should be paid to career improvement and promotions when repatriates return. These companies could also rethink their need for human resources strategies, which might consider the repatriates' long-term career aspects and use the experience and skills acquired abroad. Such measures would help to reduce repatriation concerns for future expatriates / repatriates. Thus, this would positively contribute to the repatriates' satisfaction with their repatriation process.

(2) The literature (e.g., Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001; Reiche *et al.*, 2011) emphasises that the lack of a formal expatriation / repatriation support program can be disadvantageous for repatriate retention. For example, if an expatriate feels satisfied with company practices, before departure and during the international assignment, he/she can create expectations which can be dissatisfied in the post-expatriation phase and, subsequently, force him/her to leave the company. Paradoxically, during the two abovementioned phases, a company with good support practices may favour the expatriates' performance, ensuring their success and making them, inevitably, more attractive to competitor companies.

These repatriates stay in the repatriation companies not because they wish to do so, but

because they need to (Meyer *et al.*, 1993).

The key implications of this study suggest that a greater attention should be devoted to:

- the structure of the repatriation process in the companies under analysis;
- the alignment between repatriates' expectations and the reality met on their return;
- the creation of turnover prevention measures.

This investigation has had several limitations. This is why it is suggested that future research may proceed with this study. In practice, (1) it was not possible to expand on the real willingness of retention of newly-arrived repatriates, due to be going through a reintegration stage they still reveal high expectations. This fact shows it is pertinent to revisit such companies and, concomitantly, interview the newly-arrived repatriates again. The objective will be a reassessment of their opinions on the role of the organisational support practices in their decision-making, as far as retention or turnover are concerned. (2) Cultural context seems to be significant, thence, an insight on the subject should be given (in Portugal and among other countries with different cultures). (3) Nowadays, the economic Portuguese context (with a depression and lacking in alternatives for the job market) suggests that a similar study in a *scenario* of economic prosperity may be helpful to better understand the role played by different factors on the decision-making of retention/repatriates' retention.

In short, these results do not corroborate the majority of studies concerning the repatriates' retention (*e.g.*, Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Huang *et al.*, 2006; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007), that mention the individual and the extra-work context as the main predictors for the repatriates' retention. Not only the commitment towards the organisation, the leader and work; the Portuguese culture but also the existence of the instrumental commitment (age, seniority, working ties and external work market perceived in a negative way) emerge as important factors that allow us to explain the repatriates' retention decision in companies operating in Portugal.

In sum, our results show that although they were dissatisfied with the repatriation process, a vast majority of repatriates remained in the company. As a result, there is a strong motive to conclude that satisfaction with the organizational support is not profoundly relevant to make the decision to remain in a company.

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## Appendices

Table 1. Participants' demographics characteristics

Sample Demographics Characteristics	Repatriates		Organizational Representatives		Companies	
	N	%	N	%		
<b>Number of interviews</b>	28	63,6	16	36,4		
<b>Age</b>						
average	42		39			
minimum	24		28			
maximum	66		52			
<b>Gender</b>						
male	22	78,6	10	62,5		
female	6	21,4	6	37,5		
<b>Marital status</b>						
single	7	25,00				
married	18	64,29				
divorced	3	10,71				
<b>Education</b>						
year 9	1	3,57	0	0		
year 12	5	17,86	1	6,25		
BA	2	7,14	0	0		
university degree	17	60,71	14	87,5		
post-graduated qualifications	3	10,71	1	6,25		
<b>Tenure in the assignment (months)</b>						
average	38					
minimum	8					
maximum	125					
<b>Position</b>						
technical functions	6	21,43				
direction functions	22	78,57				
HR technical functions			7	43,75		
HR directors			8	50		
Administrator			1	6,25		

<b>Sector classification</b>						
industrial sector					4	50
commerce and distribution sector					2	25
services sector					1	12,5
sector of TIT					1	12,5
<b>Location of headquarters</b>						
Portugal					7	87,5
Germany					1	12,5
<b>Repatriation experience</b>						
average					7	
minimum					2	
maximum					14	
more 10 years					4	50
less 5 years					4	50
<b>Repatriation rates</b>						
average					75,1	
minimum					58,5	
maximum					100	
with turnover					4	50
without turnover					4	50