



THE VITAL LIAISON ROLE OF HOST COUNTRY NATIONALS IN MNC KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

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This paper broadens the conceptualization of multinational corporation (MNC) knowledge management to include the importance of active involvement in a liaison role by host country nationals (HCNs), particularly those working directly with expatriates. Based on our field research and work experience in international settings as well as current research literature, we identify and consider several beneficial components of this liaison role in local knowledge management, including cultural interpreter, communication facilitator, information resource broker, talent developer, and change partner. We also call for future research to help build upon our present model and to provide practical guidance in human resource (HR) policy and practice to help organizations take advantage of this potentially valuable liaison role. © 2009 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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Introduction

Knowledge management is increasingly recognized as a critical source of organizational success and viability. The overall ability to exploit external knowledge—to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends—characterizes a firm's innovative capability, which in turn is critical for competitive viability (Sharkie, 2003). This growing field of thought asserts that organizations gain competitive advantage by widely distributing knowledge and skills throughout their internal units and to all employees, rather than entrusting knowledge to only a relatively few leaders and

subject matter experts, such as expatriates in the host country and other managers at multinational corporation (MNC) regional and parent country headquarters (Dixon, 2000; Minbaeva, 2007; Takeuchi & Nonaka, 2004).

There has been a dramatic change in perception of the expatriate's role in the international assignment as we increasingly become a global information economy where knowledge management is crucial (Doz, Santos, & Williamson, 2001; Thurow, 2000). As a testimony to this trend, recent extensive empirical and case studies have found that at both subsidiary and headquarters levels, knowledge transfer is seen as the most important reason for expatriation, while direct expatriate control and immediate task fulfill-

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ment are considered less important (Harzing, 2001; Hocking, Brown, & Harzing, 2004). Through international assignments, expatriate managers can not only apply and transfer knowledge from headquarters to the foreign subsidiary, but also acquire new knowledge and know-how from the foreign subsidiary that can ultimately be transferred back to the parent company and throughout its global operations (Downes & Thomas, 2002; Dunning, 2003; Riusala & Suutari, 2004).

A significant amount of theoretical and empirical research in MNC knowledge management renders the impression that the expatriate, in his or her traditional leadership role in a foreign operation on behalf of an MNC, is the exclusive major global player, as if the contributions of the host country workforce were only of minor consequence and not worthy of study in the total picture of MNC knowledge management. However, we contend that MNCs and their assigned expatriates who neglect attention to the host country workforce as a critical source of local knowledge and information may greatly limit their knowledge management effectiveness. This assertion is consistent with a growing call for a refocus in international management research on the needs and contributions of host country nationals (HCNs) in the success of MNC foreign operations (Tarique, Schuler, & Gong, 2006; Toh & De-Nisi, 2003, 2005; Vance & Paik, 2005).

The one or more HCN managers and other administrative professionals and support staff who report to and work with an expatriate typically are involved in two-way knowledge and information flow interactions between the expatriate and the local host country environment (including internal HCN peer and lower-level HCN employees and external local market factors such as legal and regulatory conditions and parties, competitors, vendors, customers, social norms, and customs). This critical juncture

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involving frequent interactions appears to place these particularly influential HCNs in an important liaison role where they may have a unique and valuable contribution to effective knowledge transfer within the foreign operation. And with subsequent expatriate knowledge transfer beyond the local context, this HCN liaison role may ultimately have a significant impact on knowledge acquisition and decision making throughout other foreign operations and at regional and global MNC headquarters. MNCs' failure to understand the nature and appreciate the potential contributions of this HCN local liaison role in effective overall knowledge management likely will lead to the lack of HCN staffing, development, and other human resource (HR) policies that are essential for sustaining this role. On the other hand, organizations that recognize and make appropriate HR plans and investments to support this HCN local liaison role may achieve a decided competitive advantage.

This paper broadens our conceptualization of MNC knowledge transfer to include the active involvement of HCN professionals in a key liaison role. We will identify and consider several beneficial components in a model of this HCN local liaison role between the host country environment and the host operation's expatriate managers. We then will consider implications of this HCN liaison role and will propose areas for future field research to build upon our conceptual understanding and to help provide practical guidance in HR policy and practice for strengthening this vital local HCN liaison role.

Components of the HCN Local Liaison Role

Based on our research and work experience with MNCs in Asia, Europe, and North and South America, and our review of pertinent practitioner and research literature, we have identified five major components of the HCN liaison role that may contribute to improved MNC knowledge transfer and overall effectiveness of the foreign operation: cultural interpreter, communication facilitator, information resource broker, talent developer, and



change partner (see Figure 1). Each of these components of the local host country national liaison (HCNL) role serves as a bridge for relaying critical knowledge and information between the expatriate and local HCN employees as well as other factors in the host country environment. Although presented separately here, these components are clearly not mutually exclusive but are interrelated and can significantly influence one another.

Cultural Interpreter

Managing cross-cultural differences presents an ongoing challenge for effective MNC knowledge management (Elenkov & Fileva, 2006; Li & Scullion, 2006; Paik & Choi, 2005). To help cope with these challenges, the HCNL can serve as a cultural interpreter for clarifying communications, providing cultural guidance, and mediating conflict. On many occasions, the HCNL may interpret for peer and lower-level HCN employees and expatriates any uncertain communication exchanges and events occurring within or outside the host country operation. Due to an expatriate's lack of significant work experience in the host country, and especially when the expatriate is not fluent in the local language, the HCNL's interpretation of puzzling information and verbal and nonverbal messages in the local work environment can be extremely valuable. For example, Lily is a Chinese HR manager in a Chinese subsidiary of a Danish company who translates Danish headquarters policies and programs into Chinese for local HCNs. At the same time, Lily collects and filters local Chinese employee concerns and the broader

surrounding environment demands and communicates these to the local Danish expatriate who heads the People's Republic of China (PRC) operation. Lily is ethnic Chinese and studied at a Canadian university; she now understands both Western and Chinese values and common behaviors. With appropriate training in company strategy, operations, and culture, an HCNL such as Lily also is in a strong position to assist other HCN employees in understanding and making sense of organizational communication, MNC decisions, and events unfolding around and affecting them.

Beyond interpreting language and other knowledge between expatriates and local employees, HCNLs also may help expatriates understand culturally based activities and practices in the host-country operation. In addition, they may help other HCNs in their acculturation to both MNC general organizational culture and parent country culture. For example, one American expatriate in Guadalajara, Mexico, initially believed that his Mexican supervisors were being insubordinate in a planning meeting by not providing their experience-based upward feedback on areas for improvement. However, his Mexican assistant explained in private that these supervisors felt that such "criticism" would violate their need to show respect for the expatriate's leadership position. This assistant also in turn was very helpful in communicating to the local supervisors that such constructive input would actually demonstrate their honor and support for the expatriate in helping to achieve performance improvement goals.

1. Cultural Interpreter
2. Communication Facilitator
3. Information Resource Broker
4. Talent Developer
5. Change Partner

FIGURE 1. Components of the Local Host Country National Liaison Role

The potential lack of common understanding of both expatriates and host country employees often leads to frustration and conflict that result in a lack of trust and collaboration that can severely restrict important knowledge transfer and information sharing (Zhang, Tsui, Song, Li, & Jia, 2008). To illustrate from our actual experience, a Chinese manager in the PRC was fired as a consequence of a major conflict with divisional managers in Denmark. However, this Chinese manager had hired almost all of the local HCNs through his informal connections, and there now was a great risk that a large number of Chinese employees vital to the local operations would leave. Nevertheless, another Chinese member of the local management team met with the local Chinese employees, resolved concerns, and retained a large majority of the HCNs. Thus, with their understanding of both parent company and host country employee perspectives, HCNs may mediate between both parties to clarify perspectives and frames of reference and to manage inevitable conflict constructively.

In addition, HCNs can facilitate an ongoing amiable climate between the two parties that optimizes trust and collaboration and supports effective two-way knowledge transfer. One American HR director within a Japanese bank subsidiary in Los Angeles mentioned that much of her time was spent addressing destructive rumors within the HCN grapevine, dispelling locally held negative cultural stereotypes and even racist attitudes toward expatriate and MNC Tokyo headquarters management, and dealing with other cross-cultural conflicts. She firmly believed that management should acknowledge her important liaison role in managing inevitable cross-cultural conflict within the foreign subsidiary that was often directed toward parent country headquarters. She further believed that HCN professionals should receive ongoing training to support this important morale building and maintenance responsibility among the host country workforce.

Communication Facilitator

The HCNL may frequently deal with individual and institutional communications issues and needs of local employees, expatriates, and the external marketplace (e.g., local recruitment or regulatory agencies). Therefore, as part of effective knowledge transfer within the host country operation and surrounding external environment, the HCNL can make valuable contributions as a communication facilitator. Although not often directly in control of communications, the HCNL still is in a key position to facilitate and promote free-flowing multidirectional communication in the foreign operation and in the local external environment. An important part of this facilitation function—particularly for the HCN workforce—is developing a general climate of trust and expectation that open and honest communication with expatriate management will be valued and even rewarded.

The HCNL also can promote the exchange of information by guiding and encouraging other HCNs in contacting the expatriate directly about issues and concerns. Especially when the expatriate and the local workforce do not share a common language, the HCNL who also is fluent in the expatriate's language can be an invaluable mediator in receiving, translating, and passing on messages between the expatriate and the local employees. Or, when local employees are hesitant to communicate directly with the expatriate in giving bad news or upward negative feedback (Vance, 2006), the trusted HCNL may receive the information from HCNs and relay it to the expatriate anonymously. As a mediator, the HCNL also can serve as an information gatekeeper in receiving messages from external sources, such as the barrage of potential local vendors, and then selectively determining what messages should be passed on to the expatriate for his or her attention and action.

The HCNL professional also can moderate information being transferred between the host country workforce and expatriate management. In the communication process, the HCNL may influence the timing of

message delivery and delay the transfer of information to the expatriates or to the host country workforce until they are best able to receive and process the information (Davy, 2006). For example, when an expatriate requests that an HCNL assistant relay work-related information to local employees during their social celebration or even break time at work, the HCNL may choose to postpone relaying this information to a later work time in which the employees would respond more productively.

In terms of communication content, the HCNL may alter a message, while retaining its essential meaning, to ensure that it has a productive impact on recipients. For example, a Chinese HCNL was translating for a Western expatriate who was displeased with the local employee explanations for production delays. In frustration, the expatriate responded with "You stupid Chinese are always making excuses, but you're just plain lazy!" The HCNL immediately recognized that an accurate translation of the expatriate's message would be very destructive to local workforce morale; she altered the translation in a way that could lead to a productive resolution of the difficulty. Following the meeting, she also privately told the expatriate about her personal displeasure with his statement, saying that she also is Chinese and that his choice of words was insulting to her and would have had dire consequences to the company if she had not altered the translation. This unsolicited feedback from the HCNL also had developmental impact—the expatriate appreciated it and apologized for his careless expression of frustration.

Information Resource Broker

The HCNL can be a vital broker or agent of many forms of information for both other HCN employees and the expatriate. The HCNL who is very familiar with surrounding local market conditions (including government regulations, local resources, customs, obstacles, and competitors) can greatly help the expatriate obtain accurate information upon which to base sound business decisions. This is the case particularly in

countries where there are highly complex structures of intermediaries in the value chain—especially in emerging economies, where institutional arrangements are often less formal and transparent and quite abstruse for nonlocal managers. As we noted in a visit to a Panasonic plant in Tijuana, Mexico, some MNCs rotate new senior expatriates in and out of a foreign operation approximately every three to five years. However, the HCN professionals who report to these revolving expatriates typically remain with the foreign operation in a similar position for a longer duration. Although MNCs hope that preceding expatriates will pass on as much helpful information as possible to their successors, the expatriates inevitably do not transfer much valuable local experience-based knowledge, especially tacit knowledge exchanged informally in the course of daily interactions. The remaining HCNL therefore is an important source of workplace continuity and organizational memory who can pass on knowledge and experience to new expatriates (Moorman & Miner, 1998; Stein, 1995).

Besides serving as a source of organizational memory, the HCNL can be a valuable source of informal organization knowledge that often is not formally encoded in official reports and other documents, such as information about what to avoid and how to get work done efficiently (Pyöriä, 2007). A new expatriate would be wise to seek information early from the HCNL about local internal political dynamics, informal rules, and other aspects of the local organizational culture to prevent unnecessary conflict. Local organization culture change, reinforced by new policies and human resource management (HRM) measures, might be necessary to improve a local operation's performance dramatically. However, it typically is far better for an expatriate, especially where immediate change in the local operation is not called for, to adjust and fit into a preexisting social system that is already functioning effectively rather than to waste valuable time and energy trying to

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change the system to fit the expatriate’s pre-conceived notions. To illustrate, one German expatriate heading up a newly acquired manufacturing operation in South Carolina wisely consulted the existing American training manager at that operation for informal HCN employee grapevine information and feedback to gain a clear sense of internal climate and potential fit of new policies and procedures under consideration.

Talent Developer

Besides being a source of information and advice for the expatriate and HCNs in facilitating productivity, the HCNL can provide formal training and less formal on-the-job coaching to enhance knowledge, stimulate knowledge transfer, and effect productive skill development among expatriates and other HCN workforce members (Vance & Paik, 2005; Wang & Chan, 2006). The HCNL’s on-the-job coaching through regular interaction with expatriates and lower-level HCNs alike can be particularly important for the transfer of tacit knowledge that is difficult to codify and impart by more formal training and information sharing efforts (Napier, 2005). Besides training on specialized skills and local procedures, this developmental focus can include orienting and socializing new HCN employees to ensure that they understand and commit to the host country operation’s key common priorities and values.

Although the HCNL’s training for new expatriates will likely be much less formal than for the new HCN employees, the acquisition of new understanding and insight for recently arrived expatriates can nevertheless be significant and continue over time. For example, Napier (2005) has described Vietnamese school administrators’ helpful knowledge sharing and coaching for Western expatriates with whom they worked in such areas as local procedures and working within

a transition economy that helped to prevent future difficulties and improve the expatriates’ work performance. Besides sharing technical and job-related knowledge, the ongoing coaching support in the HCNL–expatriate working relationship can help influence the expatriate’s positive psychological adjustment to the international assignment (Johnson, Kristof-Brown, Van Vianen, De Pater, & Rigsby, 2003). And in addition to on-site expatriate coaching, Vance and Ensher (2002) describe how HCNL experience-based input and critical incident information can be particularly valuable for increasing the validity of predeparture expatriate training.

Beyond knowledge sharing and skill development with training and coaching activities, the HCNL can develop an ongoing relationship of trust and credibility to assist individual employees as well as expatriates in promoting professional growth and career development opportunities. The HCNL as mentor can be a helpful adviser and provide a strong role model to younger, lower-level HCNs who are interested in career development and advancement within the local MNC operation and beyond. In a form of reverse mentoring directed upward toward expatriates, HCNLs also can provide on-site guidance that has both immediate and long-term positive career development impact (Feldman & Bolino, 1999). Joyce Osland, a prominent scholar in international career development, shared with us examples of how HCNs mentored by providing soft skill and etiquette advice to expatriates with technical, legal, accounting, and engineering backgrounds who had been overly focused in their international work on hard technical skills. Learning about the importance of soft skills in many international work situations remained with them after repatriation and subsequently aided them in their career. In another case, a local HCN cultural mentor also taught an expatriate how to balance his life better, which proved very beneficial in that expatriate’s career. In addition, an HCN taught the expatriate how to cope with the ambiguity of dealing with various government agencies and informal influential parties, which later prepared the expatriate

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for the ambiguity in a higher-level global leadership position. These illustrations are consistent with the research of Hocking, Brown, and Harzing (2007), who emphasize the importance of local host country learning for expatriates' future beneficial career application and, through knowledge transfer, MNC organizational performance success.

Change Partner

Whenever any organization, including an MNC's foreign operation, adopts anything from a broad new strategic direction to a specific new procedure, it faces the significant challenge of implementing change through its workforce. The HCNL can be a valuable partner in providing knowledge and information to contribute to an effective change process. An expatriate may have a reasonable picture of an appropriate new direction or specific new performance goals for a foreign operation but may be ill equipped to formulate specific implementation plans that fit the local context—including timing—and lead to desired change in the host country operation. HCNs, as information brokers, can be potential sources of accurate local information and help the expatriate fine-tune plans for change to ensure effective implementation. Carlos Ghosn, now CEO and president of both Nissan and Renault, is convinced of the importance of obtaining input from HCNs in guiding plans for local change. When he first arrived in Japan in 1999 to turn around the ailing Nissan, he held meetings with Japanese middle managers who provided essential information to help guide his deep cost-cutting, production quality, and sales improvement efforts (Magee, 2003).

The HCNL also can help overcome and greatly decrease potential HCN workforce resistance by providing local employees with accurate, clear information about the purpose and nature of the intended change, as well as how the employees will be affected. Since frequent, open communications are critical for building employee trust and overcoming resistance to organizational change efforts, the HCNL can be a rich communica-

tion source often far more credible than the foreign expatriate in regularly keeping employees informed before and during the change process. This resulting increased understanding and trust regarding the change can help the employees be informed, cooperative, and committed participants in the change effort, lending their experience-based ideas and suggestions as details are worked out in the process of change implementation (Zhang et al., 2008).

Furthermore, the HCNL can promote readiness for change within the local work environment by helping other HCNs understand and embrace common company cultural values and priorities. This increased common identity and purpose through company values alignment contribute to HCNs' ability to receive and share information that is vital to the success of a change effort (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Vance & Paik, 2005). In addition, this company cultural values alignment may minimize employees' resistance and prepare them to move forward in a more organized, predictable, and consistent way (House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002; Krumbholz & Maiden, 2001).

Discussion

We believe that HCNs' influence can greatly augment the effective flow of knowledge within the host country operation and throughout the MNC. The multifaceted HCN liaison role is a significant departure from the traditional role of the MNC parent company expatriate who acts as the sole liaison between MNC headquarters and the host country operation in asserting control on local operations by transferring knowledge to the local workforce, monitoring local performance to

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ensure compliance, and returning to the MNC new knowledge and insights gained in the foreign operation. We have begun to consider the potentially important HCN local liaison role that may contribute to the transfer of knowledge and know-how between the host country workforce and top management in the foreign operation. This flow of information also can benefit all MNC operations, including headquarters and other international units. We also believe that our multifaceted view of the HCN local liaison role may guide MNCs in their future efforts in employee development and knowledge transfer—far beyond their traditional focus on the expatriate.

The HCNL role that we propose here is not intended to negate or detract from the traditional liaison role and influence an expatriate potentially provides. On the contrary, these separate and differing liaison roles may work in concert to enhance overall knowledge transfer and management within the host country operation and throughout the MNC. The HCNL often has the advantage of close interaction with and credibility among HCN peers and lower-level employees, who likely will be more receptive to useful information and ideas the HCNL presents. HCNLs might also be in a stronger position to transfer knowledge and information from upper management to the local workforce in a fashion that has a much more reliable and productive impact. On the other hand, the parent country expatriate in particular will likely be in a stronger position to share critical information from the host country operation to decision makers at the MNC headquarters, and to expatriate internal MNC network colleagues at other host country units (Bird & Dunbar, 1991; Boyacigiller, 1990).

We believe that the proposed HCNL role can significantly improve overall knowledge transfer within the MNC and enhance MNC performance capability by better building MNC HR talent and common identity at foreign operations. As we have discussed, the HCNL role can transfer helpful information more effectively and promote employee socialization regarding MNC culture and

strategic priorities to lower employee levels. Thus, this HCNL role may help effect a greater understanding and commitment among the host country workforce to MNC goals and objectives, as well as build greater common MNC identification within the firm.

We should emphasize, however, that the quality and effectiveness of the two-way flow of knowledge and information through the HCNL are greatly dependent on the degree of trust and credibility that the HCNL has in the eyes of expatriates and local employees alike (Zhang et al., 2008). As Japanese-fluent and culturally attuned Japanese Americans often attest while working in Japan that they can never enter the inner circle and are always considered *gaijin* (foreigner), a person in a liaison position with the same cultural background, ethnicity, and language fluency will not necessarily have adequate trust to support a free flow of communication from local employees. And just as expatriates may be perceived over time by MNC headquarters as going native in their foreign assignment and losing touch with broader MNC objectives, the HCNL may be perceived by the local workforce as disloyal to the local culture and thus lose important trust and credibility. When the local workforce perceives an HCNL as one of the MNC, he or she loses perceived similarity with the workforce, thus potentially reducing the degree of unrestrained flow of useful information. Thus, the HCNL needs to do more work to build trust effectively while maintaining an image of fairness and optimal identification with both expatriates and HCN employees in order to promote unrestricted knowledge transfer.

Future field research and experience also will be very helpful in improving our understanding of effective staffing, training, performance management, compensation, and other HR policies and practices that support our multifaceted HCNL role. For example, prescriptive research should help develop effective measures for selecting job candidates who can best fulfill the various components of the HCNL role that we have examined here. In addition, these role components are a valuable guide for designing

customized training to ensure that the HCNs intended for this important local liaison role actually develop the necessary skill sets to carry it out effectively. With this additional practical guidance, organizations

will have the opportunity to revise their management practices to support and use the HCN local liaison role more fully in effective knowledge transfer to achieve significant competitive advantage.

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