

# An Empirical Study of the Repatriation of Female Managers: An Emerging Issue for European Multinationals

Margaret Linehan, Cork Institute of Technology  
Hugh Scullion, University of Strathclyde

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## Executive Summary

In recent years, researchers have paid considerable attention to the issues of adjustment to international assignments, while comparatively little research activity has been paid to the topic of repatriation. Despite the growth in numbers of women in international management, very few studies have been conducted outside North America on the topic of repatriation of female corporate executives.

This paper reports on the experiences of re-entry to home organizations and home countries by an exclusively *senior* sample of female international managers based in western Europe. The findings establish that the repatriation stage of an international career move may be even more stressful than expatriation. The findings also establish that female international managers experience more difficulties than their male counterparts because of their pioneering roles. The paper suggests that home-based mentors and access to networks while abroad are important factors in contributing to the successful repatriation of international managers.

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## Introduction

The faster pace of internationalization and globalization over the past decade results in the increased mobility of human resources (Gregersen, Black & Morrison, 1998). International assignments usually last from two to five years and during this period international managers are often 'out of sight out of mind' (Allen & Alvarez, 1998; Hammer et al., 1998). The assumption by managers in the corporate headquarters is that the re-entry to the parent country is relatively non problematic or even an non-issue (Black & Gregersen, 1998; Stroh et al., 2000). Yet, research indicates that repatriation can be an even more difficult adjustment than expatriation (Forster, 2000; Black & Gregersen, 1998). The repatriation of a corporate executive into the domestic organization and social environment simultaneously has a sudden and profound impact on the individual as well as family members (Gregersen & Black, 1996; Tung, 1988). There is an unanticipated re-entry culture shock from a lack of current behavioural understanding of the repatriates' home country (Harvey, 1982). While there have been several attempts to define the relevant issues associated with repatriation, little empirical evidence has been presented to support these concerns (Harvey, 1998).

Previous studies have examined some issues relating to repatriation adjustment, however, most of these studies have focused on repatriation problems from the perspective of human resource executives. Research evidence suggests that between 20% and 50 % of all expatriates resign - a significantly higher percentage than among non-repatriate executives (Black &

Gregersen 1998). The costs of losing these expatriate managers is very significant because they are a valuable and expensive human resources who are capable of understanding the workings of both corporate headquarters and overseas operations and in addition they are responsible for critical co-ordination and control functions (Stroh et al., 2000; Stroh & Reilly, 1997).

Relatively few studies have investigated repatriation primarily from the perspective of the repatriates to determine which factors influence repatriation adjustment. In particular, there is a dearth of empirical research which details the repatriation phase of female international managers, presumably because of their relative scarcity. Recent research on factors influencing the adjustment of women on global assignments virtually ignores the repatriation issue (Caligiuri et al., 1999; Caligiuri & Tung, 1999; Caligiuri & Cascio, 1998). Most research on women in international management has been conducted in the United States, with little attention given to this topic in other countries. Analysis of the extensive research conducted in North America by Adler (1994; 1987; 1986; 1984) with female expatriate managers shows that none of the participants in her studies occupied her company's most senior position in North America or in any other country. The majority were employed in *junior* managerial positions, supervising from zero to twenty-five subordinates, with the average falling just below five. This paper takes as its unique focus, therefore, the perceptions of female *senior* international managers in relation to the repatriation phase of the international career move, and is one of the first empirical European studies of female repatriation.

## Methodology

Fifty senior, female managers were selected for inclusion in this study. A listing from *Fortune 500* top companies provided the starting point for targeting interviewees. Initially, an introductory letter was sent to the Chief Executive Officers of these companies in England, Belgium, France, and Germany. First, the women had to be part of the *senior* management team and, second, they had to have made at least one *international* career move. Another source, used for targeting interviewees in Ireland, was the *Dun & Bradstreet Marketing Guide to Ireland*. One hundred and eighty letters were sent in total. One hundred and twelve responses (63%) were received, with fifty--eight of these (52%) replying that their company did not have any female managers with international experience, which left fifty-four managers as potential interviewees. At time of interviewing, four of these managers were unavailable, resulting in a sample size of fifty interviewees. The primary research method used were semi-structured interviews as the research aim was to gain a deep understanding of the perceptions of the female managers. Documentary sources such as company international human resource policies on repatriation and career planning provided supplementary sources of data.

The fifty senior managers who participated in this study were representative of a broad spectrum of

industries including: mining, software engineering, pharmaceutical manufacturing, financial services, car manufacturing, tourism, electronic components manufacturing, management consultancy, international retailing, telecommunications, mobile telephone manufacturing and distributing, oil refining, computer manufacturing, and medical and state-owned enterprises. The first phase of interviews which comprehensively examined the senior female international career move took place between 1997 and 1998, and follow-up interviews focusing specifically on the repatriation phase of the international career move began in October 2000 and fieldwork is continuing.

## **The Re-entry Phase of the International Career Move**

The results of our research indicate that the *majority* of female executives interviewed spent between *three* and *five* years on international assignments. Our research on *senior* female international managers, however, make comparisons with other research rather difficult, as the available data regarding the international transfer cycle is generally based on the experiences of the male expatriate manager, since approximately 97 percent of expatriate managers are male. Adler's North American research (1988) identified that the expatriate assignments of the three percent of female managers in her study lasted two and a half years, while the individual assignments ranged from six months to six years. Adler's female interviewees believed that their international assignments were of shorter duration and were in more junior positions than those of their male counterparts.

Recent research studies indicate that the repatriation process can often be problematic for returning expatriates, their families and their companies (Linehan, 2000; Handler & Lane 1997). Yet, despite the problems associated with repatriation, it seldom receives the organizational attention it requires because repatriation is not expected to be problematic, as all the problems are expected to be connected with going out and getting settled (Gregersen, Black & Morrison, 1998; Torrington, 1994).

The following quotation summarises the sentiments expressed by the majority of interviewees:

*Expatriation policies in our organization are very strong, but the repatriation policies are not. The company assumes that when one is returning one can slot in again. But, I believe that is the time when one needs far more support from one's organization* (Senior Engineer, Manufacturing Company).

Repatriation problems are complex because they involve the challenges of personal re-entry and professional re-entry at the same time. The main difficulties which the female managers in this study experienced in the re-entry process were as follows:

- failure to get recognition from home-country management for their achievements while working abroad
- not having a suitable re-entry position
- outgrowing their home organizations
- problems of social readjustment for themselves and their families
- being overlooked for promotional opportunities due to the loss of political contacts while working abroad.

Finding suitable posts on return, particularly posts of similar status and responsibility to those they held abroad, was highlighted by the majority of executives as a major difficulty:

*The problem is that when one comes back from an international assignment it may happen that there is no position for the person to return to. Sometimes it is necessary to be a supplementary person in a department and one has to wait for a job. That is not very nice to come back to (Bank Manager).*

*When I returned to Ireland after working in Australia for two years I decided to change companies. I could have worked for the same international company, but I did not want to work in the same area again. I think that when potential employers saw on my curriculum vitae that I had worked in the United States and Australia they began to wonder if I am a flight risk. That was a big negative aspect for me. I had a lot of autonomy when I worked in Australia and I believe that the additional skills I gained abroad were very good, but these were not looked upon favourably by potential employers (Manager, Pharmaceutical Company).*

*When I came back to London it was hard to get credit for the work that I had done abroad. I will be perfectly honest: people thought because I worked in Paris that I had a great holiday. I don't think that I got credit for what I did while I was abroad, therefore, I don't think it was beneficial for my career here in Britain. Was it beneficial to me in terms of what I learned and in terms of what I can contribute with my experience? Yes, it was a terrific experience (Managerial Accountant, Technology Company).*

The female expatriates suggested that where companies are seen to deal unsympathetically with the problems faced by expatriates on re-entry, there will be more reluctance to accept the offer of international assignments. The managers suggested that the provision of information and training by organizations prior to the return home should facilitate the re-entry stage. The research findings suggest that information and training should provide details on three major areas (i) the home organization and work related issues, (ii) interacting with friends and family again, (iii) the home-country environment. Given the severe lack of repatriation training, the managers revealed that it took them between six and twelve months to readjust following repatriation:

*Realistically it took me almost a year to settle back in. I was away for five years in total. I decided to change companies on return so I had to cope with settling into a new organization and settling back in socially. The first six to twelve months were difficult as my friends had moved on. It was also difficult seeing a lot of my family again all of a sudden. When I was abroad I had been completely independent and then when I came back I felt that I was answerable to my family again. I also found the bad weather a big factor in settling back (Human Resources Manager, Computer Company).*

*I am only home three months and I have not settled down yet, and I don't know if I will. Apparently it takes twelve to eighteen months to readjust. I am finding it very difficult. Our company has not got any repatriation policies whereas before I left for China I got a lot of cross-cultural training.*

*When one is going abroad one makes a lot more of an effort because one knows that it is going to be very different, but when one returns one has a lot of the same difficulties but no preparation (Research & Design Engineer, Communications Company).*

Two of the executives stated that they are considering another international assignment, but that they would not return to their home organizations after that period. These interviewees believed that at that stage, they would need a new challenge:

*When I came back from the States I moved to another organization, and now I think that if I take another international assignment I would not be able to come back into this organization. It is the re-entry stage that I would worry about. At the end of this year if I decide that I want to go overseas again I really don't know if I would come back in here when my assignment was over. I don't know if I would come back doing what I was doing before I left. I would probably have to come back to a whole new, different challenge. One tends to outgrow one's former situation. Unless one is changing companies or maybe coming back into a start-up environment or coming back into major new challenges it would be difficult (Purchasing Manager, Manufacturing Company).*

The findings from our research on company responses to repatriation problems is similar to previous research on male expatriates (Black et al., 1999; Gregersen & Black, 1995) which suggested that little appears to be done by companies to facilitate returning managers. In our study only two companies (one German and one American) adopted a proactive approach to prepare their managers for coming home. The two female executives in these companies asserted that preparation for re-entry facilitated the process and eliminated many of the problems which are normally associated with repatriation. These interviewees explained that the re-entry process began six months before the employee was due to return to their home organization:

*Our home-company career manager is responsible for facilitating the expatriate's integration back into the workplace. Six months before expatriates come back, they start the process of establishing their next role and the actual job they are coming back to. So, there is a six months preparatory period. It is a difficult period for people coming back, because if a person has gone and played a bigger role than that before they left, their expectation would be to return to a higher level. In the meantime, while they were away, other people have progressed as well, so that is difficult for them. So, six months should be a minimum period which they would have for sorting this out before the person comes back (Human Resources Manager, Manufacturing Company).*

Four managers have decided to turn their international assignment into a permanent move and not to return to their home countries. These four managers (three American and one French) have chosen Ireland as a permanent location for their careers and families. All four managers are married. The three American managers have young children and the French manager has grown-up children now living in the United States. These managers believed that their careers and families would be too disrupted if they had to make another international move. The remaining managers believed that re-entry to their home organizations and reintegration socially were more difficult than the original move:

*Coming back is as bad if not worse. Going abroad is difficult in that one doesn't know what they are going to, whereas when one is coming back they have a fair idea of what they are coming back to. After about six months one settles down again. One's personal life with one's family and friends is also disrupted (Civil Servant).*

The repatriated managers reported that the re-entry phase is usually haphazard and ill-planned for both male and female managers and they believed that uncertainty regarding re-entry was greater for female executives because many female international managers are in a pioneering role. These female executives highlighted the nature of the *additional* problems they experienced as women expatriates which were associated with tokenism, isolation and exclusion, which they felt their male counterparts would not experience. The female executives also outlined their concerns about the likelihood of getting a desirable assignment on their return. Ninety-two percent of the executives suggested that tokenism, isolation, lack of role models and being test cases for future international female managers were significant contributory factors in explaining the scarcity of women in international management. Many of the female executives returned to positions where they felt they did not utilize the skills and experiences they acquired overseas. Thirty-one female executives indicated that they experienced a loss of status, loss of autonomy and faced major changes in their personal and professional lives when they returned to their home countries. They noted that they went through stages similar to those of culture shock - the first being an excited mood which lasted only a short time, then descending to a low mood, and finally returning to their normal mood. They suggested that the difficulties associated with re-entry are underestimated at present, and that the re-entry process should receive more attention in the future. The female executives were also of the view that parent-country senior management paid insufficient attention to the problems experienced by the returning expatriates. The female managers suggested that the re-entry stage should be built in as part of an overall career plan before the expatriates initially leave their home organizations. This plan should be developed to identify the probable length of stay, projected responsibilities while abroad, and subsequent job position upon repatriation. The female managers believed that if they had the support of mentors or networks during their international assignment the re-entry process might have been easier, as they would have been informed of developments in their home organizations while abroad.

The executives also suggested that two important factors were the clarity of the repatriation process and the repatriation training received prior to returning to their home countries. The managers expressed that clearer repatriation policies would have a positive impact on work adjustment. They also perceived that training for international managers and their families for the re-entry process, and for any likely problems related to repatriation, should reduce the uncertainty normally associated with re-entry.

### **The Role of Mentoring for the Effective Repatriation of Female Executives**

Research suggests that mentoring relationships, while important for men, may be essential for women's career development, as female managers face greater organizational, interpersonal, and individual barriers to advancement (Burke & McKeen, 1994; Collins, 1983; Kanter, 1982). According to Harris (1995) and Adler (1987) women may miss out on international appointments because they lack mentors,

sponsorship, role models and access to appropriate networks, all of which are commonly available to men. Forty of the fifty interviewees in this research study had the experience of mentoring relationships. These interviewees believed that their advancement to international management may be partially based on the successful development of mentoring relationships. The findings suggest that in an international management context, and particularly at the repatriation stage of the international career move, a mentoring relationship is even more important than in domestic management.

The female executives indicated that mentors provided information, training, advice, and career direction for re-entering their home organizations. In addition, mentors were seen as important for introducing them to the informal networks which existed in their organizations. The female executives suggested that while participating in international assignments improved their self-confidence and increased their visibility in organizations, mentors provide the contact and support from the home organization which in turn facilitates re-entry. They also suggested that their mentors helped them keep in touch with their home organizations, which meant that when they re-entered their home organizations the 'out of sight, out of mind' syndrome was reduced:

*When you are overseas a home-based mentor is someone who provides that link to when you are going to return. Having a home-based mentor, while I was overseas, kept me in touch with what was happening back home in the company, and I think that is incredibly important (Human Resources Manager, Telecommunications Company).*

The findings from our research support the conclusions of previous studies on mentoring in domestic organizations, which reported that more women than men who advance to senior management positions have mentors, and women who fail to reach these levels cite the absence of mentors as critical to their failure (Burke & McKeen, 1994; White et al., 1992; Ragins, 1989).

Ten of the repatriated interviewees reported that in their senior managerial positions they now attempted to help junior managers deal with barriers to advancement, and provide psychosocial support and role modelling functions. These interviewees believed that they received a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment from fostering the development of junior managers. The forty interviewees who had mentors suggested that mentoring in organizations outside the United States is a relatively recent development and, therefore, denied to many female managers who work in an exclusively European context. A critical question is whether organizations can create conditions that encourage females to take on the role of mentors, as it is clear from our research findings that mentors contribute to the career successes of female managers.

## **The Benefits of Networking for the Repatriation of Female Executives**

Barham and Oates (1991) stress the importance of networking skills in particular for the international manager because he or she will need to be able to exploit information, expertise and other resources wherever they might be found world-wide. Atamer et al., (1994) suggest that networks of interpersonal relationships are created during long-term assignments (three to four years on average) and that these

relationships remain strong after the departure of the manager. Networking may be particularly important for the repatriation of female managers as a significant number of women may not have had mentors. Although the impact of informal networking processes remains an under-researched area, it is clear that managerial women are still less integrated in organizational networks, and it is these networks which can influence promotion and acceptance. Our research confirms the work of Burke and McKeen (1994) who suggested that managerial women are still less integrated with important organizational networks. The findings also suggest that, throughout Europe, the 'old boy' network is still strong in most organizations, and particularly in established industries, such as medicine, accountancy and law. The interviewees spoke of the 'male bonding' which took place after work hours, during sporting events, and in clubs and bars which they felt excluded from:

*Many of the male network 'systems' are not officially through network associations, but are through rugby clubs, football clubs, golf clubs and so on. It is like a natural ready-made contact system that exists, but that women don't have as much ready access to (Manager, Tourism Promotion Agency).*

According to Davidson and Cooper (1992), the task for female managers of breaking into this male-dominated 'club' of managers can prove difficult, and this difficulty thereby denies them social support, contacts, opportunities and policy information. Similar findings resulted from this study, with all of the interviewees being aware of 'old boy networks', and the difficulties associated with breaking into these. The interviewees believed that the exclusion of female managers from business and social networks compounds their isolation, which in turn may prevent female managers from building up useful networking relationships which would be advantageous for their repatriation. The managers noted that peer relationships and interpersonal networks provide an additional source of organizational support for managers.

Finally, in relation to networking, the findings also indicate that, given the absence of family and friends while abroad, the benefits provided by formal and informal networking in international management are of greater value when re-entering home-country organizations. The participants believed that networks provide means of 'keeping in touch' with the home organization and help with future promotional opportunities. There is also considerable evidence that this type of approach reduces the turnover of expatriates which is a growing problem for multinationals (Dowling et al., 1999).

### **Pioneering roles and lack of role models**

Female expatriate managers are still in a pioneering role, and as they do not have female role models or female career paths to follow, this further increases the uncertainties regarding re-entry to their home organizations. The return of pioneering female executives with international experience can cause difficulties for home managers when allocating the returning female executives to suitable positions. Outgrowing home organizations is a risk shared by female and male managers after their international experiences. Missed promotional opportunities because of being overlooked is, however, a greater risk for female international managers, due to the pioneering role the majority of females occupy.



On a positive note, however, forty of the interviewees now see themselves as role models, which they believe will positively influence the careers of future female international executives in their organizations. These female executives believed that as role models they are providing support and encouragement, and are helping to reduce isolation for junior female executives. These interviewees believed that as role models they are providing support and encouragement, and are helping to reduce isolation for junior female managers. These interviewees believed that if they can show junior female managers that it is possible to combine a successful international career with family life, more female managers may be encouraged to apply for international assignments.

## **Implications for Practice and Conclusions**

While it is widely accepted that the costs of expatriate turnover are considerable and are exacerbated by the persistence of repatriation problems (Dowling et al., 1999), our research illustrates that many European multinationals continue to have a low sense of awareness of the need for repatriation programmes in general and, in particular a lack of appreciation of the specific needs of female executives in relation to the repatriation process. Yet for many European organizations the repatriation problem has become more acute in recent years because for many companies expansion of foreign operations had taken place at the same time as the rationalization of domestic operations and a key problem for many European multinationals was finding a suitable post for repatriates (Forster, 2000; Scullion, 2000). This lack of attention to repatriation may have a long run impact on the performance of these organizations because repatriation difficulties exacerbate problems in attracting international managers, which given the shortages of international managers could constrain the implementation of the companies internationalization objectives (Scullion, 2000).

Recent research indicates that managing repatriation was more problematic in decentralized multinational organizations due to the less developed career and succession planning systems and the weaker influence of the corporate human resource function (Scullion & Starkey, 2000). In practice, many firms continue to adopt an ad hoc sink or swim attitude towards both employees and their families and many expatriate managers continue to experience the repatriation process as falling far short of expectations (Stroh et al., 2000).

The lack of understanding of the particular needs of female executives in relation to the repatriation process is a growing concern in international management. Our research suggests that companies should develop integrated approaches to repatriation for female executives which incorporates both organizational/career issues and individual issues and suggests that effective mentoring and networking strategies are key elements of successful repatriation management for female executives. Our research also suggests that companies should regard repatriation as an integral part of the process of expatriation which would involve a fundamental re-examination of the expatriate psychological contract (Guzzo et al., 1994; Rousseau, 1989).

Our research also outlines some key elements of a new research agenda examining the

repatriation of corporate executives. Greater attention in future research needs to be directed towards examining in depth the patterns of social and organizational readjustment of returning female executives and their spouses. Future research should move beyond the individual expatriate manager and begin to examine more comprehensively the re-entry dynamics of spouses and the family. It has been suggested that more work is needed on the support strategies of highly independent groups that relocate abroad and that the study of group dynamics are rare in the cross-cultural adaptation literature (Adelman, 1988). This suggests that examining the role of social support both within the family unit and various social support networks between the family and others offers a potentially useful framework for understanding in greater depth the dynamics of international repatriation (Hammer et al., 1998).

Our study highlights the importance of closing the gap between expectations and reality for expatriates returning to their parent companies and suggests that multinationals which prepare their female managers for coming home with effective repatriation programmes will have a greater likelihood both of retaining these scarce human resources and of helping them make the difficult adjustment to being home. This supports the findings of a recent study by Hammer et al., (1998) which found that the re-entry variable of expectations was significantly related to re-entry satisfaction for managers and significantly related to re-entry satisfaction and re-entry difficulties for spouses. This is consistent with Martin's (1984) research which suggested that one of the key differences between sojourner acculturation and repatriate acculturation revolves around differences in expectations. Our research would support the findings of a recent study which argues that re-entry training should focus primarily on helping the expatriate manager and spouse align their expectations with 'the real world' that will be encountered in the home culture both in the work and non work situation (Hammer et al., 1998).

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Drawing on the perceptions of senior women executives ignores other levels of managerial women, whose experiences might be significantly different to those of their more established colleagues. The study did not gather information directly from the employing organizations which could help clarify if these organizations intend to develop policies in relation to the repatriation process.

Finally, our study suggests there is a need for further empirical and theoretical work in this area to examine the repatriation of spouses as well as managers and to examine the importance of role re-entry expectations in reacculturation.

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