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GRA 19003

Thesis

Characteristics of expatriates' knowledge sharing practices in a humanitarian organization

03.09.2012

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Master of Science in Leadership and Organizational Psychology

This thesis is a part of the MSc programme at BI Norwegian Business School.
The school takes no responsibility for the methods used, results found and conclusions drawn.

Abstract

The topic of this thesis is to examine how expatriates, that is, people taking employment outside one's native country, contribute to organizational learning, and what the characteristics of their knowledge sharing practices are. The study of these issues is conducted through 7 qualitative interviews with expatriates working in a Norwegian, humanitarian, individual, non-profit, non-governmental organization.

In the discussion, five central characteristics of expatriates' knowledge sharing practices are studied. First, the focus is on how they become qualified for working in the humanitarian sector through formal education and practicing with colleagues. Secondly, it is argued that the organizational culture hinders knowledge sharing as learning and knowledge boundaries. Thirdly, the emphasis is on the knowledge goals and how these affect sharing of knowledge that is either of an explicit or tacit character. Fourth, the impact of trusting, social relationships is analyzed and how such relationships either facilitate for, or hamper knowledge sharing, and the formation of communities of practice. Finally, the role of decision making structures is examined and how organizational structures obstruct knowledge sharing.

The thesis concludes that expatriates contribute to organizational learning to a low extent, because of individual ownership of culture, lack of knowledge goals and trusting relationships together with hierarchical organizational structures. Thus, the expatriates' knowledge remains an untapped, valuable resource in the organization.

Acknowledgements

The thesis is written by Benedicte Hauge as the final dissertation for the Master of Science in Leadership and Organizational Psychology at BI Norwegian Business School.

I want to express gratitude to the people who have helped me realize this project. First of all, I owe thanks to supervisor Professor Cathrine Filstad for much appreciated time, good discussions and constructive comments. You inspired me to go into the field of knowledge sharing and it has been a learning experience for life.

I also want to give thanks to the contact who gave me access to the organization where the interview data were collected, the contacts in the head office for helping me out with booking interviews and introducing me to the humanitarian sector and the organization, and the expatriates for sharing valuable knowledge.

Finally, I want to thank the “*Børst and boost*” fellowship in the class, my family and Andreas for support and good times.

Oslo, August 31, 2012

Benedicte Hauge

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1. Introduction

Humanitarian aid organizations work for saving lives; relieve people from suffering, and work to maintain human dignity (Wikipedia 2012a). They are driven by their ability to rapidly react to emergency situations within highly risky, complex and unpredictable circumstances (Van Brabant 1997). The sector accounted for \$15 billion and employed approximately 210.000 expatriate humanitarian aid workers in 2010 (Walker et al. 2010). Humanitarian aid organizations are funded by donations, which together with higher skepticism of the long-lasting impact of this type of work makes it crucial for humanitarian organizations to have focus on accountability and effectiveness (Wikipedia 2012a). Accountability is related to “*demonstrating that an agency or the system showed the best possible performance in a given context, and incorporated past lessons in that performance*” (Van Brabant 1997, 11). Being able to incorporate past lessons in the organization implies a continuous focus on knowledge development, knowledge sharing and change (Filstad 2010a). These factors contribute to organizational learning, and are necessary to improve the work in organizations.

Humanitarian aid organizations work for different objectives and goals as compared to multinational corporations. But they have many shared characteristics as well: Both operate across many locations, they deliver services in more than one country and have to deal with many cultures. A focus that is yet to be seen within the humanitarian aid research is how to transfer and exploit knowledge across locations and divisions. This is considered an important organizational strategy and is regarded as essential to organizational success within multinational corporations (Kogut and Zander 1992; Tung 1982; Fang et al. 2010; Bonache and Zárraga-Oberty 2008; Ipe 2003).

Expatriates have been understood as providing for opportunities “*to acquire, create and transfer valuable knowledge*” (Oddou, Osland and Blakeney 2009, 182; Kamoche 1997). They are by definition skilled people taking employment outside one’s native country, and often take on leadership roles because of low levels of education and high illiteracy rates in the areas where they work (Bonache et al. 2010; Edström and Galbraith 1977; Lansing and Boonman 2011; Wikipedia 2012b). Bonache et al. (2010) list four factors that can explain the larger reliance on expatriates as channels for knowledge-transfer and

organizational development within multinational organizations: The level of international expansion, the cultural and institutional distance between divisions, the required capabilities, and the units' interdependence.

Research have found that expatriates' and their employers may not always take the opportunity to acquire, create and transfer knowledge (Bonache, Brewster and Suutari 2007; Chiva and Alegre 2005; Bonache et al. 2010; Mayrhofer et al. 2007). Suutari and Brewster (2003) found that 53 percent of the expatriates agreed that the organization they were returning to had utilized their knowledge and expertise gained in a foreign country, while 23 percent disagreed. What is more; research has found higher rates of turnover among expatriates as compared to non-expatriates when they return to the parent country (Bonache and Brewster 2001; Black and Gregersen 1999; Stahl et al. 2009). Hence, expatriates' knowledge can be seen as a vulnerable, untapped resource (Antal 2001).

A major challenge for organizations resorting to expatriates as a strategy is therefore to develop processes and policies that can incorporate their knowledge and expertise (Bernhut 2001; Birkinshaw 2001, cited in Taylor and Osland 2011). In addition to knowing what to integrate from expatriates' experiences, it is also a question of knowing when and how to incorporate it (Taylor and Osland 2011).

Research questions

Organizations do to a larger degree rely on expatriates as knowledge sharers, but there is still room for improvement on integrating their knowledge in the organization. There seems to be less focus on the humanitarian sector within expatriation research, which is the field of contribution for this thesis. The aim is to increase the understanding of how expatriates are taking part in organizational learning, and also to get an understanding of the characteristics of expatriates' knowledge sharing within a Norwegian, humanitarian, non-profit, non-governmental organization. Being able to integrate knowledge from expatriates depends on many factors on intrapersonal and organizational levels. Through exploration of these factors, the following research questions are sought to be answered in this thesis:

- How are expatriates contributing to organizational learning?
- What are the characteristics of expatriates' knowledge sharing practices?

The questions are answered through a case study of a Norwegian, humanitarian, non-profit, non-governmental organization. The intention of this thesis is to contribute to the expatriation literature through focusing on expatriates' knowledge sharing within the humanitarian sector. The purpose is also to examine how expatriates' knowledge sharing practices contribute to organizational learning.

2. Theoretical framework

Within the knowledge management perspective, knowledge is often seen as a commodity which easily can be transferred from one place to another. In other words, knowledge is something that individuals *have* and is a property of the individual mind that can be transferred to new contexts or shared with others (Filstad and Blåka 2007; Newell et al. 2009). This perspective on knowledge is also reflected in the research on the functions that expatriates are thought to have. Before, expatriates were seen as medium for the parent country to control and coordinate the foreign subsidiaries (Minbaeva and Michailova 2004; Brock et al. 2008). More recently, the comprehension of expatriation has changed, and is now more related to implementing knowledge procedures, developing top talents and future leaders, improving the trust of the subsidiary, as well as training of local employees, among others (Minbaeva and Michailova 2004). This reflects a standpoint within this research; that expatriates are transferring knowledge from the parent country or the head office, to a subsidiary office, and shows how knowledge is seen as a context-free commodity.

The other perspective understands knowledge as constructed and negotiated through practice (Filstad 2010a). Knowledge must be seen as embedded in social practice, and learning is a result of social interaction (Filstad and Blåka 2007). Expatriates' knowledge is therefore not seen as a commodity, because it is shared through practice. This perspective, also known as "the participation perspective" can bring new insights to the current literature on how organizations better can incorporate expatriates' knowledge.

These issues will be discussed in this chapter. It sets forth the theoretical framework which forms the basis of the analysis, focusing on "knowledge as practice". It starts out to discuss the term knowledge, before settling for a definition. Then different types of knowledge are presented, as well as the concept of "knowing". Towards the end, the term knowledge sharing is introduced, and the impacts of interpersonal, organizational and contextual factors on knowledge sharing practices are given.

Knowledge and learning as possession or participation

Knowledge and learning must be seen as indivisible processes, as they are dependent on each other to take place (Filstad and Blåka 2007). There are two

main perspectives that are used to understand knowledge and learning in organizations. These are known as the “*epistemology of possession*” and “*epistemology of practice*”, respectively (Newell et al. 2009). The “*knowledge as possession*” view understands knowledge as something that people *have* and sees learning as individuals’ acquisition of knowledge. Hence, it is also known as the acquisition perspective. Knowledge is a property of each individual, and is therefore seen as a possession of the human mind which can be transferred to new contexts or shared with others (Filstad and Blåka 2007). Based on their individual, mental resources, humans can create meanings on information and data through subjective experiences, understandings and perceptions (Newell et al. 2009). Within this perspective, knowledge is often juxtaposed as information and statistics. The individuals’ memory is considered knowledge containers that can be filled up with information. In the container, individuals store previous experiences that are applied in future situations (Filstad 2010a). Organizational learning is seen as individuals’ acquisition of knowledge.

This perspective has been criticized by the representatives from the other perspective who sees “*knowledge as practice*”. The proponents argue that we must understand knowledge and learning through its application in practice (Filstad 2010a). Seeing knowledge as constructed and negotiated through practice, knowledge is inherent in all social situations where people act and perform. The concept of knowledge must include both epistemology and ontology, which implies that

“[knowledge is question about] how people come to know about themselves and what it means to be a part of this world and its history” (Filstad and Blåka 2007, 55).

Thus, organizational learning is understood as learning through practice with colleagues.

The perspectives have implications for understanding and analyzing organizational learning and knowledge (Filstad 2010a). The acquisition perspective entails to studying and mapping of individual knowledge. In the participation perspective, the units of analysis are social relations and how knowledge is embedded as competences in social practices. We develop competences through learning processes, where we are able to apply knowledge in practical settings (Filstad 2010a).

Learning and sharing in communities of practice

The focus is on the social contexts where individuals perform and the specific situations and learning through social, communities of practice (Filstad 2010a, Lave and Wenger 1991). Communities of practice are learning arenas, or the building blocks within all social learning systems (Wenger 2000). Individuals can be part of several communities. They are founded on the relations between members through practicing together (Filstad 2010a). The members of a community of practice are informally connected through shared experiences, and individuals develop capabilities through sharing of knowledge and experiences through interaction in these communities (Wenger and Snyder 2000, 139; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002). However, it is important that the focus is on the practice and not the communities (Filstad 2010a).

Learning “the third way”

Elkjær (2004) argues that viewing “knowledge as practice” does not specify *how* learning takes place and what is actually learnt when participating in organizations. Founded on pragmatic theory following John Dewey, Elkjær (2004) states that it is through a combination of seeing “knowledge as possession” and “knowledge as practice” that makes us able to fully understand how individuals learn. This idea focuses on knowledge being developed through acting, thinking and body, and this synthesis of the two perspectives is termed “*the third way*” (Elkjær 2004, 429). It incorporates how learning takes place through transaction and continuous formation. Individuals learn when facing uncertain situations, and have to find a solution through joint inquiry or reflective thinking, which is named thinking-in-action (Elkjær 2004, Filstad 2010a). Such situations are triggered by senses in the body, emotions and intuition. Through these triggers, individual and organizational learning takes place at the same time, as they function as “*point of departure in trajectories of concrete events and situations*” (Elkjær 2004, 431). New knowledge is developed through inquiry when individuals reflect on the problem and its solution.

Definition of knowledge

Based on the discussion above, the following definition of knowledge and learning make the basis for this thesis: “*The ability to discriminate within and across contexts*” (Swan 2008, cited in Newell et al. 2009, 5). This definition

implies that one knows what to do in specific situations and contexts where learning takes place (Filstad and Blåka 2007). The definition is based on Tsoukas and Vladimirou's (2001) perspectives, which says that knowledge is a practice of making distinctions (Newell et al. 2009). This implies that knowledge is ambiguous, dynamic and context-dependent. It is up for many interpretations and meanings as the actors and contexts change and it is hard to separate from the context where meaning is created (Newell et al. 2009).

Types of knowledge

Knowledge is often identified as either explicit or tacit (Polanyi 1962, cited in Newell et al. 2009). Explicit knowledge is easy to store, codify and communicate across contexts (Newell et al. 2009). It is universal and can easily be explained to others in a formal, systematic language through explicit facts and symbols. Explicit knowledge can be processed by computers, sent electronically and stored in a database (Filstad and Blåka 2007). The view on knowledge follows the "knowledge as possession" perspective, where knowledge explicitly is shared through transmitting information, which is stored in others as new knowledge. It also follows the more hierarchical view on knowledge, with data at the bottom, information in the middle, knowledge at the top (Alavi and Leidner 2001, cited in Filstad 2010a). Data is numbers and letters without meaning and context, and becomes information when contextualized and interpreted. Information becomes knowledge when combined with experience, context, reflection and understanding. Information is an explicit representation of knowledge, but not knowledge in itself.

On the other hand, tacit knowledge is grounded in experience and entails know-how on how to perform a task. It is difficult to express tacit knowledge, because we know more than what we can tell (Polanyi 1966, cited in Filstad and Blåka 2007, 94). Such knowledge is personal, context dependent and rooted in individual experience, ideas, values and emotions (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995, viii; Filstad and Blåka 2007).

Filstad (2010a) argues that many dimensions of tacit knowledge are never possible to communicate in practice. This argument follows Tsoukas (2003, 426); stating that "*tacit knowledge cannot be "captured", "translated", or "converted" but only displayed, manifested, in what we do.*" Tsoukas (2003) argues against Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) who claim that knowledge development is a

conversation between tacit and explicit knowledge. Tsoukas (2003) is of the opinion that knowledge development takes place through social interaction, and not through making tacit knowledge explicit. There are no differences between tacit and explicit knowledge, because they are “*two sides of the same coin: even the most explicit kind of knowledge is underlain by tacit knowledge*” (Tsoukas 2003, 425). An alternative perspective on knowledge creation is *sensemaking*, which is the process of action and interpretation (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005). New knowledge is created through practice and meaning construction when trying to make sense of experiences (Voronov 2008). When encountering new situations, we reflect on what we do; which shows how we learn through participation with others and reflection in action (Filstad 2010a).

Hence, it is beneficial to explain and show through practice simultaneously to facilitate for learning in organizations, as it creates meaning of the dimensions of tacit knowledge that are not communicable. Through this approach, both explicit and tacit knowledge are being shared. Also, the tacit dimensions of practice are being reflected upon by both parties through the interaction, which can generate new knowledge (Elkjær 2004). This perspective is also understood as knowing in practice.

Knowing

Knowledge is understood as inseparable from practice, which is a process of social construction that takes place within specific material and social contexts (Chiva and Alegre 2005, cited in Filstad 2010a). This process has been termed “knowing”, and seeks to shed light over how individuals are able to apply their knowledge in practice, as well as the social and context-dependent nature of knowledge (Cook and Brown 1999; Gherardi and Nicolini 2000; Filstad 2010a; Newell et al. 2009). Individuals’ competences are gained through knowing, or what they are able to do in practice (Filstad and Blåka 2007). This has also been termed situated knowing, to show how knowing implies individuals acting in a particular setting which involves the self, the body, as well as the physical and social surroundings (Lave 1988, cited in Orlikowski 2002). Gherardi and Nicolini (2000, 330) list four characteristics of organizational knowledge to illustrate the contextual and processual character of knowing: It is situated in a system of ongoing practice, it is mediated by artifacts, it is dynamic and relational, and it is rooted in an interaction context, and acquired through participation. Artifacts,

such as technologies, tools, computers, physical spaces, but also myths and stories make us able to discriminate between contexts, because knowledge is mediated through them (Newell et al. 2009; Filstad 2010a).

Knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing is understood as “*the act of making knowledge available to others within the organization*” (Ipe 2003, 341). It is about exploiting the existing knowledge within the organization, and also about knowledge creation and development (Filstad 2010a). Based on the participation perspective, knowledge sharing is concerned with developing knowledge through reflection (Filstad 2010a). Working together with others is crucial for sharing of both tacit and explicit knowledge, as previously seen. Actions that together contribute to knowledge sharing leads to exchange of acquired knowledge. These processes can be demanding and uncertain, because there might be conflict of interests, or it leads to vulnerability between the parties involved (Filstad 2010a). Research has called attention towards the factors that facilitate for, or hinder knowledge sharing to take place within organizations, on interpersonal and organizational levels.

Trust

Sharing knowledge can be an uncertain process, and to show vulnerability is one of the most central parts of having a trusting relationship with others. Trust is by definition understood as:

“The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995, 712).

Trust is characteristic of all dimensions of knowledge sharing, because it facilitates for sharing among colleagues and leaders (Politis 2003; Lee et al. 2010).

There are two dimensions of trust that are related to knowledge sharing; benevolence based and competence based trust. To begin with, people rely on other’s benevolence when demonstrating that they lack knowledge about something, and they have to show their vulnerability. This is benevolence based trust. We also have to trust that the person we ask has adequate expertise to give solutions, which refers to the competence based trust (Abrams et al. 2003). Hence,

it is important to build interpersonal relationships to be able to trust others, as it makes it less unsecure to show one's vulnerability.

This perspective on trust may create a picture of conflict-free, harmonious organizations, but it is also important to not create an overly romantic picture of organizations and the needs they are supposed to fill (Filstad 2010a). There are many definitions of trust, and entails relationships based on other's confidence and goodwill. These dimensions capture that trust may lead to both welcomed and feared actions (Adler 2004). To trust somebody also means that it can be taken advantage of, or misused by others, and we see how power is associated with having trusting relationships.

Power

Learning can be seen as a cultural, social and a political process (Chiva and Alegre 2005). We can apply the ideas of Foucault (1995), cited in Filstad and Blåka (2007) to understand how trusting relationships are governed by power. Foucault sees power as a disciplinary force, acted out in the relationships between people. In other words, power is not a force from above, but is exerted from within through self-surveillance. Hardy (1996, S3) defines power following Foucault's ideas: Power is "*a force that affects outcomes, while politics is power in action*". Power has also been understood as the social energy that affects which ideas that are incorporated from individuals to organizations (Lawrence et al. 2005).

Hardy (1996), bases his conceptualizations of power on Lukes (1974), and focuses on the multidimensionality of power when mobilizing change within and across organizations (Newell et al. 2009). The power of resources, processes and meanings can affect the knowledge sharing in an organization. Resource power is how one can "*bring about the desired behavior through the deployment of key resources on which other depend*" (Hardy 1996, S7). Knowledge, information or expertise is examples of such resources (Newell et al. 2009; Hardy 1996). For employees working in competitive environments, knowledge becomes a source of power in itself, as it is a force that leads to certain outcomes.

"[Process power is situated within decision making processes] which incorporate a variety of procedures and political routines that can be invoked by dominant groups to influence outcomes by preventing subordinates from participating fully in decision making" (Hardy 1996, S7).

Meaning power relates to the semantic and symbolic power, which is applied to legitimize or delegitimize certain activities (Newell et al. 2009). These three types of power involve different sources and ways of pursuing power (Hardy 1996, cited in Swan and Scarbrough 2005).

Organizational culture

Trusting relationships, which fosters openness and knowledge sharing, are influenced by the overall organizational culture of the working environment (Ipe 2003). The organizational culture influences the individuals' knowledge sharing behavior, and an indirectly effect the leaders' attitudes toward it (Wang and Noe 2010). Schein (1985), cited in Ipe (2003) defines culture as "*a pattern of basic assumptions*". This means that these assumptions are seen as valid as long as they provide the appropriate way to handle everyday problems. Such assumptions are related to values, norms and practices.

The organizational culture influences the degree of importance of knowledge, and it creates the context for interaction (De Long and Fahey 2000, cited in Ipe 2003). The cultural or environmental impact on knowledge sharing can happen on both the macro and micro levels within an organization (Mooradian, Renzl and Matzler 2006). On the macro level, they refer to the country culture and the organizational culture. The micro level impact is related to the characteristics of the relationships between employees where the knowledge sharing takes place, such as a shared language and strength of ties between them, both horizontally among co-workers and vertically with leaders in the organization. Hence, the organizational culture on the micro level affects the employees' perceptions and behaviors. The micro level could also refer to the subunit or team culture (Ipe 2003).

One should be aware of the cultural diversity within organizations when developing knowledge sharing initiatives. Since culture guides how employees think and act, practices that "*advocate individual ownership of knowledge severely impede the process of knowledge sharing within the organization*" (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995, cited in Ipe 2003, 350). Hence, one should be cautious when implementing universal knowledge sharing systems within global organizations (Wang and Noe 2010). The higher level of cultural complexity within an organization implies more diverse values and norms that shape the employees' practices (Ipe 2003). If some culture is higher valued or seen as more appropriate

than others, it may hinder for knowledge sharing, through what is known as knowledge and learning boundaries (Carlile 2004, cited in Newell et al. 2009). The boundaries affect the overall sharing of knowledge, both horizontally through knowledge boundaries and vertically through learning boundaries.

Carlile (2004) describes knowledge boundaries within a project or group context through three levels: Syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. These relate to the levels of communication complexity, and the degree of novelty. Carlile (2004) focuses on boundaries within a group or a project, and come into sight on the organizational level. The syntactic boundaries come into sight when novelty arises, and there no longer is a common language to facilitate an interaction. The differences between the actors make it necessary to *transfer* knowledge between them to improve knowledge sharing (Carlile 2004, Newell et al. 2009). They have to use the same language, grammar, symbols and labels so that everybody understands each other. The semantic boundaries arise when the novelty increases, and new meanings and interpretations must be made to overcome these boundaries. Carlile (2004) underlines that this must be accomplished through *translation* of knowledge to get on common ground. The pragmatic boundaries exist when the novelty or uncertainty rise and different interests hinder people's ability to transfer and translate the knowledge. Hence, knowledge must be *transformed* by others so that the interests are aligned (Carlile 2004, Newell et al. 2009).

Learning boundaries are related to an organization's ability to exploit existing knowledge vertically in the organization. Organizations that need to develop new solutions through experimentation and adaptation to solve their tasks at the project level may suffer from learning boundaries on the organizational level. This is because the more specific and different the practices are on the project level, the harder it is for the organization to learn from the project (Newell et al. 2009).

Enabling structures for learning and knowledge sharing

Employees learn and acquire new knowledge in the workplace, through the sharing of tacit and explicit knowledge, thus the term knowledge workers is often used to illustrate these practices. The organizational structure has an impact on learning and learning arenas, which is highly dependent on the employees' position and status in the organization (Filstad 2010a). It can provide uneven

learning opportunities and access to knowledge within the organization, which hinders for knowledge sharing. The job design affects who has access to whom: Hierarchical structures impact what employees learn as well as the level and depth of the employees' skills (Ashton 2004). While the people on the top have and get more knowledge and information, it is not the same situation down in the hierarchy. With the positioning within the hierarchy follows a degree of autonomy to make decisions. Autonomy is understood as the degree of freedom and independence to schedule work and decide on the procedures to work towards those decisions (Hackman and Oldham 1976, cited in Foss et al. 2009). Knowledge workers demand a certain degree of autonomy to be able to organize and coordinate their tasks (Newell et al. 2009). The leaders of knowledge workers are not able to directly control or manage knowledge work, so it is more important that they create an enabling context that will facilitate for knowledge sharing.

Hierarchical structures do not promote an enabling context, as people do not have access to each other. Informal structures foster sharing of knowledge; research has shown (Filstad 2010a). Informal learning arenas provide opportunities for employees to discuss, watch others' work, and practice together with them: They have the opportunity to share both tacit and explicit knowledge. It is through social interaction where informal learning takes place. However; practices must change for learning to take place, it is not enough to talk with colleagues. This type of learning takes place when discussing and reflecting over the work, and so on. The organizational structures must be adapted to create an enabling context where informal learning is facilitated for. Many knowledge-intensive firms are now focusing on having a flatter, less bureaucratic ways of organizing to be able to adapt organically and flexibly to the shifting environments (Newell et al. 2009). This type of organizing challenges the leadership functions, as they must be willing to give away decision power to their employees.

Leadership

The management can both hinder and facilitate for knowledge sharing, and it is all based on the level of trust they build up among themselves and the employees. Knowledge sharing does not happen automatically in an organization, and the leaders have important roles for this to happen (Srivastava, Bartol and Locke 2006). They must make sure to create an enabling context to facilitate for informal

learning, and it is important that there is a continuous focus on knowledge and learning. It means that they must see the value of doing so, as compared to formal learning. This type of learning is often carried out in an organized manner, lead by a teacher or expert, has a clearly defined goal and is placed within a framework (Filstad 2010a). Senge (1990), cited in Filstad (2010a) proposes that the principles of learning should guide the leadership principles, and not the other way around. However, to create a context that promotes knowledge sharing means that the leaders should adopt a pragmatic and pluralist approach to their job (Newell et al. 2009). It is important to take the context and diverse cultures into consideration when planning for informal learning arenas.

The impact of context on learning

As we have seen, learning takes place through inquiry or reflection and is triggered by emotions and intuition (Elkjær 2004). The complexity in the situated contexts where the case organization operates and works makes it interesting to see how emotions affect learning of the expatriates through social interactions (Filstad 2010a). It can give insight into how and what employees learn in the organization, because they have an effect on how we act, and how we are able to relate to colleagues. Usually, feelings and emotions are temporary and “they come and go fairly quickly” (Fineman 2003, 8). Emotions have a function to inform the surroundings of a reaction to what is taking place. However, emotions are not the same as feelings, according to Fineman (2003). While emotions are what we openly show, feelings are private, subjective experiences.

Emotions are socially constructed, because norms affect the display of feelings within various contexts (Fineman 2003, cited in Filstad 2010a). The contexts will affect what types of emotions one can express, and to learn these means to handle emotional work. To do so, one must learn how to manage emotions, and this work is part of a meaning-creating process. It means that one should learn how to deal with others’ feelings, which implies both to evoke and suppress feelings when appropriate (James 1989, cited in Filstad 2010b). Emotional management can help coping with stress, conflicts and uncertainty through for instance learning emotional coping strategies (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, cited in Filstad 2010b). First of all, establishing trust is essential before expressing emotions and learning the coping strategies. This is usually done through informal socialization (Filstad 2010b).

The application of the theoretical framework in the thesis

Considering that most research on expatriates' knowledge transfer or sharing across subsidiaries have been founded on theories from knowledge management and economics, it seems as the social and participative characters of knowledge and knowledge sharing have not been given due attention in expatriate research (Mäkelä 2007; Chiva and Alegre 2005). This establishes a need for research on expatriation founded on a perspective that knowledge is constructed and situated in practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Chiva and Alegre 2005; Gherardi 2000).

The situated, context-dependent perspective of knowledge and learning is used to study how expatriates' knowledge sharing practices take place within specific contexts and also within a certain organizational culture. In this thesis, the theory will be applied by looking at how expatriates are qualified for doing humanitarian work through practice, and how the contexts and culture impacts on what knowledge that is shared. Moreover, it is crucial to study the characteristics of knowledge sharing; what they share through practice and how they do it. These characteristics are influenced by interpersonal factors, such as trust or power relations, and more organizational factors, such as the culture, structure and leadership.

Through this approach, we get an understanding of how expatriates contribute to organizational learning, through studying the social interactions and constructions within the specific contexts. We can also see how the characteristics of expatriates' knowledge sharing contribute to organizational learning.

3. Description of the case organization

This study is based on a case study of one humanitarian organization, referred to here by the pseudonym *Norwegian Aid Foundation* (NAF). The organization is a Norwegian, humanitarian, individual, non-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO) and works worldwide with providing assistance and protecting people through emergency relief efforts.

Focus and goals

NAF have programs in around 20 countries, where most of them are located in Africa. NAF's goal is to help people in the emergency stage when people's needs are most critical. This is accomplished through cooperation with other organizations in the fields. The programs focus on providing housing, food, infrastructure and education to the people in need. Many of these countries are currently or have recently been in armed conflict with other countries or with groups located within. Thus, the programs have a wide focus and require employees with different backgrounds. Through the programs, NAF seek to give relief, but also to encourage sustainability and self-recovery of the countries where they operate.

Organizational structures

NAF have 3000 employees worldwide, of which 150 are expatriates. Around 10 percent works in the head office administration in Oslo. The ratio between expatriates and national employees is about 6 to 100 in the country offices. NAF's budgets are growing each year, which can be accounted for by the higher degree of international funding, which has resulted in a larger demand for qualified employees. Before, NAF recruited mostly Norwegians, whereas today, they recruit mostly internationals.

All country programs are organized under the International department which is placed in the head office in Oslo. The program counselors in this department are responsible for the country programs and the projects within these countries. They cooperate closely with the country managers, who lead the country offices locally. Usually, the country manager is an expatriate with international background, and so are the other managers, too. The number of expatriates working in the head office is increasing, so the working language in

the organization is now English. The country manager is responsible for hiring all local employees, while the head office deals with employment of expatriates.

The activities in the country programs are managed and administered locally in the country offices. All country programs are headed by a country manager, have a financial manager, and people working and coordinating the program activities on the operational level. The organizational structure varies hugely from country office to country office; it depends on the size of the country programs, which again is contingent on the funding by the donors. The country offices are generally located in the capitals, with some exceptions. Most country programs have several area offices in addition to the country office to get access to the areas where people are in need, but it depends on the size of the country program. It can be difficult to get access to them, because of insecurity and lack of infrastructure.

The number and size of projects depend on the situation and needs within each country. The number of employees and managers are adjusted to the program activities. The expatriates' responsibilities and positions determine who they work with, and whether their work is related to the programs themselves, or to managing the programs. The local projects are usually led by expatriates and the work in the projects is carried out by local employees in the respective countries. The number of employees varies accordingly to the sizes of the projects, and to the access to qualified nationals. This is dependent on the general level of literacy and education in the operating areas, which can vary hugely.

Contracts of employment

All employees in NAF, except in the head office, have 12 months' contracts of employment. But the contracts are often extended while in the field if there is enough funding and if the employees are interested in continuing. One can assume that NAF organize it this way because it gives them a high degree of flexibility according to varying funding and current emergency situations worldwide. The circumstances vary hugely between the country programs, and many expatriates work under difficult conditions. Living and working in a conflict or pre-conflict zone implies that the surroundings in the countries are often challenging, so are the housing and recreational facilities. The expatriates often share accommodations and have to deal with dangerous environments, and low degrees of mobility. This is partially why the contracts have the length of 12 months.

In the head office, the employment contracts are guided by the Norwegian Working Environment Act, so they must operate according to these regulations. This gives the employees higher protection, and more employees are on longer contracts. Here, they also use temporary, project contracts, often with possible extensions.

Courses and follow up

When new in the organization, all expatriates are invited to the head office in Oslo for a two-week introductory course. The course is arranged three times a year, usually. All expatriates should, according to the head office, attend the course before three months of employment. They are taught about systems and structures, procedures, guidelines, the terminology and NAF's values at this course. They also meet with the program counselors, whom the expatriates can cooperate with. They are responsible for their own continents or countries, and the formal connection between the country managers and the head office.

NAF arrange yearly seminars in the head office for country managers and other managers, where they discuss relevant topics. When the expatriates' contracts are finished, they are invited to a debrief session in the head office to discuss their experiences from the field. This session is important for following up the employees, to secure organizational learning, and to discuss further employment. It is mandatory for country managers and expatriates living in a challenging environment or high risk to come to Oslo for the debrief. It is more encouraged for other expatriates, not mandatory. This is usually a two-day gathering where they meet with program counselors, HR and can contact a psycho therapist if needed.

4. Methods and data

The analysis in the thesis is founded on a qualitative method, more precisely a case study based on qualitative interviews with seven expatriates working in NAF. The case study design is characterized by collecting a large quantity of data from few units or cases over shorter or longer periods of time, through detailed and extensive data collection (Johannessen, Christoffersen and Tufte 2011). The case is usually studied within a specific setting, either physically, socially, historically and/or economically. Case studies can apply both qualitative (observations, interviews) and quantitative (surveys) research methods, but the choice of research method should follow the type of research questions being put forward and context of the study (Yin 2003). These research methods follow their own logic, and have advantages and disadvantages.

A simplification of the differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods can be presented as this: While the quantitative research is grounded in analysis of numbers within large samples, qualitative research is more focused on analysis of text derived from smaller samples (Thagaard 2003). In this thesis, the aim is to explore and get a deeper understanding of the phenomena of expatriation and knowledge sharing in a humanitarian organization. Thus, the research questions ask “how” and “why” questions, and seeks to explain a contemporary event. It does not ask questions about how many expatriates who are employed around the world or how much knowledge they are able to share through practice. In that case, a quantitative survey design would be more appropriate, focusing on the numbers and extensiveness of the phenomenon (Yin 2003).

The aim of the study is to develop a deeper understanding of how intrapersonal and organizational factors contribute to knowledge sharing practices among expatriates in a humanitarian organization. Given that this phenomenon has received little attention in previous qualitative studies, the qualitative, semi-structured interview was selected as an appropriate data collection method. Through interviews, the aim is to get a documented, empirical material of the interviewees’ own descriptions or representations of themselves. Research based on this method seeks to uncover and understand the structure and logic of the interviewed, through systematic presentations of their descriptions (Fog 2004). To get a comprehension of the complexity in the expatriates’ experiences and

practices, it is important to enquire how they have experienced being expatriates, how they felt about the process, how they interacted with others and reacted to their experiences and how the organization have dealt with their expatriate knowledge (Filstad and McManus 2011). How the data collection process was accomplished is discussed next.

Data collection

Data was collected during the spring in 2012 in NAF's head office in Oslo. The data material consists of four interviews with employees in the head office and seven interviews with NAF's international employees, who have broad and long experience from humanitarian aid work. The interviews with the employees in the head office were of a preparatory character, to provide insight to the humanitarian sector in general, and to the organizations' structure, focus and challenges.

The process

A personal connection provided contacts in NAF, and through e-mails and meetings with the HR-advisor, we formally established an agreement to collaborate on this project. To get to know the organization and to understand how they organized around the internationals, four preliminary interviews were carried out with key people in the head office. These were loosely structured, and I gave them time to talk about the organization and their role in NAF. Through these interviews, I got insight in how the head office recruits and organizes expatriates. I also learned about the seminars and courses that NAF run. Overall, these interviews lead to a deeper understanding of how they handle knowledge sharing and learning in NAF. It also gave insight around the organizing of the country offices and organizational structures. This understanding made it easier to design the interview guide, as I learnt about their concepts and abbreviations that were unique within this context.

Before the interviews with the expatriates were carried out, I made an information letter that could be sent to possible candidates. This letter included a short biography of me and the goal with the study. It also stated clearly that this was an independent study that had nothing to do with NAF itself, but that I was doing this as a part of my studies at BI. The letter also informed how confidentiality was secured, and that their participation was voluntary.

As most of their international employees are not stationed in Oslo, we had to take advantage of the debrief sessions that all international employees are supposed to come to Oslo for when ending their employment with NAF. The interviewees received the information letter from me when they were invited to the debrief, and could respond either directly to me or to the program coordinators, who book the debrief meetings. It turned out that there were not enough people coming for debriefs during the data collection period, so I had to interview international employees who were visiting Oslo for other purposes as well. These were also sent the information letter, and could respond if they were willing to take part.

The sample

The sample consists of seven international expatriates. All of them had recently finished, or were currently working as expatriate, humanitarian aid workers in NAF. At the time of the interviews, some of them were currently working in a country office, others were leaving the organization and a few were between jobs within the organization.

There are four men and three women in the sample. Their average age is 40. Five are from Europe and two come from Asia. They have been with the organization for over three years in average. Most of them have been working as expatriates for various humanitarian aid organizations before, so their average tenure is about five years within the humanitarian sector. All have higher education; most of them have a master's degree from a university.

Some of the expatriates are managing the program activities, and coordinate their work directly with the country manager; they are head of programs. Others are responsible for an area office, and also report to the country manager. These work as area managers. And some have more administrative, operational and information positions, and report both to the country manager and to staff in the head office in Oslo. These are program and financial managers, and also work as advisers.

As mentioned, the sampling of the interviewees was facilitated for by program coordinators working in the head office. These people book and arrange meetings for debriefing sessions between the head office and the employee. The debrief sessions involve a lot of people and are booked simultaneously, which means that many people in the head office have access to the schedule which

shows who the expatriates are seeing and at what times. The interviews for this thesis were part of this practice, so for this reason, the expatriates' personal features are kept anonymous, to make sure that their confidentiality is kept. Thus, in the analysis, the expatriates are presented as interviewee 1, interviewee 2 and so on.

The interviews

Before the interviews, I made an interview guide as presented in Appendix 1. The guide consisted of central topics, theoretical research questions and interview questions that were to be covered. It was created on the basis of the theoretical framework, and combined with the insight from the preparatory interviews with the head office employees. The interviews were semi-structured which implies that the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is not scripted (Yin 2011). The interview guide serve as a template, but the questions being asked differ according to the setting and the context of the interview. It consists of open-ended questions, so the interview is more a dialogue, but a structured conversation. Because of this the interviewees were able to ask questions if something was unclear. The focus was to get to know the interviewees and their background, to understand how they experienced the overall culture for sharing knowledge and communication, and power relations within the organization.

Coding and interpretations

All interviews with the expatriates were tape-recorded and transcribed. The preparatory interviews with the employees in the people in the head office were not transcribed. The analysis is based on the expatriate interviews. These were coded, based on the content, theoretical concepts and reflections while interviewing, and sorted in a MS Excel sheet. From this sheet, I could make a conceptual map, which showed the relations between topics, and also the level of importance of the different concepts. I focused on the patterns, but also on the variations in the data. Through this sheet, I could focus on the research questions and start on the written analysis.

Assessing the quality of the research: Validity, reliability, generalizability

The selection of research design influences the entire research process and also how the results are analysed and interpreted (Thagaard 2003). The relationship between the researcher and the interviewee can be characterized as a subject-subject relation within qualitative research. Therefore, both parties are able to influence the research process, and the researcher's presence affects the data collection. The knowledge that the interviewee shares, depends upon their relationship, and how the interviewee perceives the researcher. This is also the case the other way around; how the researcher is being influenced by the interviewees. The overall quality of the relationship between the researcher and the interviewees will have an effect on the quality of the data. Hence, it is important that the researcher makes clear the conditions that could affect the research process (Thagaard 2003). Usually, this is done through evaluation of the study's validity, reliability and generalizability (Johannessen, Christoffersen and Tufte 2011; Yin 2003).

Validity

Validity relates to whether the researcher's procedures and conclusions reflect the purpose of the study (Johannessen, Christoffersen and Tufte 2011). The relationship between me and the interviewees can have affected the validity of the thesis. It is also important to look at the context where the interviews took place, because they can have had an impact on the validity.

As mentioned, I did not book the interviews myself, but they were organized by the program coordinators in the head office. Thus, the interviewees could not be entirely sure whether the interview was arranged by the head office, and that they could speak independently, as they did not know me. It is also worth mentioning that the location of the interviews in the head office could have affected the interviewees trust in me as a researcher.

These two factors could have made the interviewees unsure of they could speak independently. This was noticeable in the beginning of some of the interviews. Some of them brought the information letter with them, and asked me to elaborate on the topic of the thesis before we started. And others were more reserved and were careful about controversial statements. In these situations, it

was important for me to show them that my approach to the topic was related to the thesis, and to theoretical concepts, and not to the specific organization. Taking time to introduce myself and the thesis helped them understand that I was not sent out as a scout from NAF's top management. It also helped to let them speak quite freely in the beginning of the interview. The loose, social atmosphere in the beginning was a way to show them that this was a different setting, even though we were in the head office. I think this strategy worked out, as the interviewees spoke openly. Through these strategies, I could take time to establish trust and demonstrate that they could speak freely, without fear of consequences. However, it is not possible to say to what extent these issues may have affected the validity of the data.

Reliability

Reliability is related to the dependability of the research. Giving the readers' insight in the context and the details of the data collection may enhance the reliability (Johannessen, Christoffersen and Tufte 2011). The researcher should argue for reliability through presenting how the data is developed throughout the research process (Thagaard 2003). To be open about how the collection process took place is important; and has been documented in this chapter.

It is worth questioning the use of data sources in the thesis. The analysis of the data material will be based on the theoretical framework that was discussed above, seeing the interview as an opportunity to gain insights on expatriates' practice-based knowledge. Ideally, the research design would also include observations of expatriates when working abroad, in light of the theories about knowledge as participation. Choosing to ground the analysis on one data source is in this case, a question of accessibility of the interviewees. Given the distances and the living conditions of the expatriates' working environments, it would be difficult to get access to these localities. However, their constructions over the topic will still be considered valid accounts of their experiences (Widerberg 2001).

Generalizability

If the results of a study are applicable and transferrable other contexts, is a question about the data's generalizability (Thagaard 2003). This concept has also been termed external validity and relates to the analytical generalization; whether

results can be generalized to a broader theory (Yin 2003). In this thesis, it will be a question of generalizing the findings to the field of knowledge sharing theory. It could also give insight into expatriation research, with regards to which factors that can enhance expatriates' knowledge into a more utilized resource (Antal 2001).

Limitations

The thesis is based on qualitative interviews with 7 expatriates within one organization. The sample's size reflects the scope of the thesis; that is to develop a deeper understanding of expatriates' contribution to organizational learning, and characteristics of their knowledge sharing practices. However, the sample of interviewees was gathered from the head office, and this can have restricted the variance among the expatriates' experiences. If the sampling had been done at another point of time and through other channels, it could have lead to different stories and thoughts.

The thesis is based on qualitative interview data from anonymous expatriates within a humanitarian aid organization. This can be seen as a limitation of the study, as some organizational features that are not mentioned could have contributed to a deeper understanding of the characteristics of expatriates' knowledge sharing practices, but these are to remain confidential.

The topic is presented from the expatriates' point of view. The thesis could include a comparative analysis to what the head office's intensions with the expatriates are, but this is out of the scope of this thesis.

5. Findings and discussion

The focus of the thesis is on expatriates' knowledge sharing practices, and how these contribute to organizational learning in a humanitarian organization. The discussion is divided into five sections, where each examines a characteristic of the expatriates' knowledge sharing practices.

To be able to understand the expatriates' situated knowledge, we start by having a look at where the expatriates work and what they work with. Next, we focus on how the expatriates qualified for this type of job through their education combined with their experiences. This background gives the opportunity to understand the nature of the expatriates' work, and how they initially were qualified through informal learning. Then, we focus on the factors that facilitate for or hinder knowledge sharing in NAF. First, the organizational culture is presented, and then we look more closely at the nature of the knowledge that is shared in NAF, and the impact of the country managers and the organizational structure on knowledge sharing.

Qualifying for humanitarian aid work in NAF

The first chapter discusses how the expatriates got into the humanitarian aid sector and how they qualified to become an expatriate within NAF. The combination of formal education and experience from the field is what makes them qualified, and we see how they develop their knowledge through practice in the field.

Most of the expatriates have used their best endeavors to get a foot in this sector and have worked their way up to arrive at the position they hold today. The competition to get a job is tough; a recruitment officer in the preparatory interviews said they could receive between 8 and 900 international applications for one expatriate position. The high number of applicants could be the result of NAF's favorable terms and conditions that follow an expatriate position. This has an impact on the expectations that NAF have to their employees as well, as interviewee 2 states:

“[NAF] expect that they kind of recruit from the top of the shelf” (Interviewee 2)

The high number of applicants makes it possible for NAF to pick top talents who have a relevant educational background combined with experience from abroad. Getting into the humanitarian aid sector took a long way for many of the expatriates.

“Starting down in the food chain”

Among the expatriates, some have education related to the humanitarian sector, such as economy, law, human rights, and development, and the others have education related to science, finance and social sciences. Most of the expatriates have been working in their home countries before going into humanitarian aid work. Interviewee 4 had been doing part-time community work at home and was encouraged by this work. Interviewee 3 said:

“I wanted to do this job, because I wanted to do something with a purpose.” (Interviewee 3)

Getting a job in this sector involves tough competition, so many of them started “*down in the food chain*”, as interviewee 5 describes it. It was necessary to get experience from the field to get a job for the expatriates who had university degrees within the humanitarian sector. They knew the vocabulary and language from school, but had to gain working experience in order to get qualified for a position abroad. Some of them started their career through an internship with a humanitarian aid organization in their home country and worked voluntarily for a period of time. The network in the humanitarian organization made it possible for them to get a position abroad, which again gave them the opportunity to get more long-term positions with more responsibilities in the future.

For the expatriates who had education from other areas, it was necessary to get introduced to the vocabulary and terminology of the sector before getting a job. Interviewee 7 and 4 said:

“They told me, I don't know the concepts of the NGO-world, like they have [...] all these logical frameworks and other kinds of terminology. So I didn't know that and then [...] I took two courses” (Interviewee 7)

“There's a compulsory two weeks and then depending on what job you take, there is other training. So I was going into a quite a teaching role, so they had (...) two or three weeks training on, a crash course on how to be a teacher (laughs)” (Interviewee 4)

We see how essential it was for the expatriates to learn the concepts before going abroad. Hence, they are expected to know this before they leave. Others who did not have related education or experience applied for a job in humanitarian organizations that employed people without prior experience from abroad. They offered courses and trainings to teach the vocabulary of the sector, both generally and more specifically. Through these courses, we see how the organization stressed formal learning, in addition to the expatriates' previous education before sending them abroad. It was compulsory, because:

“They [the NGO] had obviously learned that people with no overseas experience, sending them to wherever, it would be a disaster.” (Interviewee 4)

The organizations expected the expatriates to know the concepts of humanitarian work, before sending them abroad so that they could get experience from the field. Learning the concepts and language of the humanitarian sector was the way for many of the expatriates to get into an organization and get a position abroad.

Through this, they could get practice which again could lead to jobs with more responsibility. We see how the formal education and training was mandatory for the first position abroad. They need to be prepared for the tough environments that they are working in, and also know the language of the humanitarian field.

Learning in “evolving realities”

The vocabulary and language of humanitarian aid work is not enough to become qualified for a job. Interviewee 1 points out this when stating the following:

“The realities, reality, it changes, it's constantly evolving and [...] you can learn about the theory of politics and world policies and foreign policies, this, that and the other, but the way it actually [...] acts out in the field [...] is very different.” (Interviewee 1)

The interviewee emphasizes that there is a difference between what they learn in school and how the knowledge they acquire in this setting may not be relevant as the world develops. The difference is huge between learning in theory in a classroom and gaining experience from the field, according to interviewee 1:

“In the humanitarian field there is a big difference when it comes to the operational aspect and what you really go through at university or in classrooms and things like that.” (Interviewee 1)

This shows how knowledge is embedded in practice, and that learning takes place when the expatriates share and work together. The expatriates are qualified for a job through a combination of the two, but they learn to do the job through experience. Interviewee 7 got into the humanitarian sector through an internship, and was “lucky” to start right after a corruption case in the office. This made it easier to learn many different tasks within short time:

“So I got everything, all of a sudden I had to work with accounting, take on others' projects and was involved in a lot. So I learned a lot.” (Interviewee 7)

One could argue that the expatriates are qualified through working and practicing together with others, through informal learning. With the emergency based humanitarian aid work taking place in NAF, comes high levels of insecurity. A central feature of the expatriates learning was to deal with this insecurity, through adaptation to different contexts. Learning to handle stealing and dishonest

colleagues took one year to learn: “*I went through a difficult learning curve*”, interviewee 6 says. Living and working in countries with uncertainty and risk is part of why the expatriates have chosen to go into this type of work. The expatriates have learnt to adapt to the changing situations:

“In many of these countries, you might have a job description about what you are supposed to do, but the reality is very different, so you have to adapt to fit this context.” (Interviewee 1)

Learning how to adapt to different contexts was important for the interviewee, and we see how learning is situated within specific contexts. The changing contexts also motivate the expatriates, because they do not know what to expect. This is something that interviewee 7 was motivated by, because it was like working and living in a reality show:

“It's more; it is more variation to work in another country. Different set up and every time it is different countries and different dangers and different, and it is also, you live in these very close, isolated communities like on the Robinson island. (...) And you also have these fights, you have on Robinson, you have all the things so you learn a lot about yourself and how to behave among other people.(...) Here you work together and you live together, you do everything together, so it's like a reality show.” (Interviewee 7)

They are motivated to go into humanitarian work, and for interviewee 7, it seems that the risky environment is what drives the work forward. The dangerous contexts make people come close together; they work and live together like in a reality show on TV. Personal development is what can be derived from this type of work:

“You learn a lot about yourself and of course (...) sometimes it's dangerous and sometimes you (...) have to do a lot different things.” (Interviewee 7)

The expatriates learn about themselves, and learn how to handle insecure situations. The level of insecurity drives them forward and they continuously have to adapt to new situations. Their adventurous approach to live with risky surroundings is highly influenced by their motivation to learn and adjust. They meet new people and live lives in a less mundane way than they otherwise would do in their home countries. It shows how knowledge is continuously adapted and acquired within these settings, and can be termed knowing. The expatriates have to be updated on the shifting conditions, which is characteristic of humanitarian aid work. Therefore, we see how the situated, tacit knowledge is crucial for expatriates to learn through interacting with colleagues in the local contexts where they work. The knowledge is not created in a vacuum, but is rooted within the specific contexts and mediated through artifacts, such as grammar and the terminology of NAF (Gherardi and Nicolini 2000).

“I did not have the knowledge they had”

Program work usually entails responsibility for a team that are taking part in projects, such as building houses, education and training. Most of the expatriates learnt through taking part in such work for some years. Interviewee 6 recounts what she had to learn in the first job as a project manager:

“I had to get to know my colleagues and how we were going to accomplish [the task] together, how to use them, because I did not have the knowledge they had, not at all, I did not have the information about the situations in each of the villages and things like that. And I focused on the fact that we are a team, I don't speak... So I'd let them know that I didn't have a clue, but I (...) went out in the fields and saw everything myself. I was constantly involved (...) It is also about how you approach people and how you talk to them. For me, it was important that we had a team (...) and that we had good communication.” (Interviewee 6)

In this quotation we see that interviewee 6 learns the job by getting to know the team-members and traveling around with them. Through personal relationships, the interviewee learnt how to solve tasks and lead the team by drawing upon the national employees' knowledge and working together with them. We see how the interviewee learnt through reflection, or inquiry of the new situations. Thus, it was a combination of acquiring explicit knowledge from the colleagues, and tacit knowledge through practice in real life situations. A part of this is to understand the context. Situated “program background” is essential to learn and to become qualified for a higher position:

“If you have a program experience, I think it makes it easier, because you understand how it all fits (...). If you had a non-program background, I think it's a little bit more difficult, you don't know how things work and like that.” (Interviewee 1)

To learn the work through practice is necessary to qualify as a manager, and we see how knowledge is embedded in practical work. Interviewee 7 has recently started the job as responsible for an area office, but used to work with programs before. Through these past experiences, she was better prepared for working as a manager.

“I am based in the field, but my responsibilities are not just programs, like right now (...) we are constructing [houses], we are also doing a [program] and (...) training. Previously, I would be responsible for each of these programs. I would be designing the program. Right now I have to see all three of them plus the support; the supporters, logistics, procurement, security, HR, admin, so basically I am head of the office and you got to look at all of that.” (Interviewee 7)

The long-term experiences taught the interviewee to deal with both back office tasks, as well as more operational assignments, which made it possible to learn and know how to be a project manager. They have to deal with a wide range of tasks that they are not necessarily formally qualified for, which shows that they

are appointed to the position based on their experiences from the field. These aspects are not possible to teach the expatriates in a classroom or by reading a book, as they are rooted in experience and context dependent. None of the expatriates bring up the introductory course as a learning arena for their work. Instead, they used the courses as an opportunity to talk with the program counselors and get to know them. Interviewee 4 said:

“Just to meet the [program counselor] changes everything. And for them to say "contact me if you want to" and you have met them face to face and you talk about certain technical issues or even informally.” (Interviewee 4)

Research supports this, as seen in Filstad (2010a): More employees agree that they learn through practicing with colleagues as compared to formal learning. Learning and knowledge through practice entail that knowledge has its value as competence among the employees (Filstad 2010a).

Summary: Characteristics of expatriates' knowledge

In this chapter, we see how expatriates have been able to get qualified for a position within NAF. Through their formal education, they learn the vocabulary. We see how this knowledge is not enough to become a qualified expatriate. What's important is experience from the field, to be able to apply and develop the knowledge in practice. This is crucial within the humanitarian sector, because the knowledge they have acquired in school can quickly become outdated because of the changing environments. This point illustrates that their knowing is situated in practice, through interaction with colleagues. This knowledge is based on inquiry when meeting new, challenging situations.

The expatriates' experiences from schooling as compared to learning through practice in the field highlight that there is a gap between what they are taught at courses and its applicability in the field. One can question the idea that all expatriates are attending the same course, as some of them do not apply what they have learnt when they are working. It also shows the organization's view on knowledge as a possession, in that they send all expatriates on a two-week course to be prepared as an expatriate in NAF, while the organization fails to acknowledge their experiences from the field when arranging learning activities.

From Norwegian to international cultures

In the following, the impact of Norwegian culture on NAF's organizational culture is discussed. It is argued that it culturally imprints the organization and

hinders knowledge sharing, both within country offices and between the head and country offices. The culture exerts influence on the vertical knowledge flow from country offices to the head office, as learning boundaries, but also horizontally, through knowledge boundaries. This causes knowledge to “stick” to the country offices (Brown and Duguid 2001, cited in Scarborough et al. 2004)

NAF have around 80 percent international and 20 percent Norwegian expatriates, referring to employees at the head office as well as expatriates in the country offices. Some years ago, this ratio was reversed. Interviewee 3 describes the change:

“I think the way [NAF] was built and the fact that it's a Norwegian organization that was born out of being mainly Norwegian staff, but for people who would take two or three years out of their jobs and out in the field and come back.” (Interviewee 3)

The interviewee reflects on the organizational culture as previously being Norwegian, with mostly Norwegian staff. The recruitment of Norwegians had a different purpose, which perhaps shows how humanitarian work used to be implemented. With the growing budgets and the need for more, as well as more qualified expatriates, this has contributed to a more diverse organizational culture the past years:

“[Over a period of two years] there were 42 international staff that came and left [the country office] (...) while I was there” (Interviewee 1)

The international blend of expatriates brings in a cultural reorientation within each country office because of the 12 months' contracts, and is now influenced to a larger degree than before by international expatriates. In some country offices, there are non Norwegians working. Opening up for more international people mean that they also opened up for less normative control over the organizational culture. Before this change, NAF's organizational culture was based on sharing and normatively imposing a Norwegian culture that most of the employees identified with. This implied that there was a dominant organizational ideology, including values, beliefs and norms that the employees acknowledged and internalized (Newell et al. 2009).

Having a common national-cultural background, a shared language and similar organizational status strengthen the knowledge flows within the clusters of people who share these characteristics (Mäkelä, Kalla and Piekkari 2007). In this case, it can imply that the shared background, culture and language previously facilitated for sharing of knowledge through open communication and feedback in NAF before. In addition, NAF had fewer employees which facilitated for more

personal, trust-based relationships. Today, when fewer employees in NAF have a shared background, it can hinder knowledge sharing. In other words, it seems to be a shift between the culture on which NAF were founded, and how the culture is acted out today. To use Schein's (1985) definition of culture; the basic cultural assumptions are no longer valid among most of the expatriates, but it seems as if NAF are not aware of this shift.

“Norwegianness”

The Norwegian organizational culture is described as flat structures with open communication channels across positions, and short distances from the bottom to the top, by interviewee 2. Within this structure, employees have easy access to each other, and a high degree of informal opportunities to ask questions and interact (Ipe 2003). The expatriates describe the Norwegian culture with words such as trust, openness, transparent, honesty and treat everybody with respect. Interviewee 4 has experienced that working for a Norwegian organization is a positive thing:

“[NAF] has a very distinct, I believe, reputation and culture, which is not the same as other agencies, which we should, of which the team here [in the head office] should thrive to maintain. And it's a good reputation, people would like to work for, a Norwegian, any Norwegian organization, it is a great country people look up to. And when you are in the field it opens doors, and the donors are good and the governmental and political side is regarded as, you know, respected.” (Interviewee 4)

To work in a Norwegian organization brings with it a certain cultural heritage that is worth taking care of, because it is beneficial to be associated with this culture in the field, the interviewee underlines. It seems as if the internationalization has challenged the cultural foundation that NAF were built on, and that the head office has not taken interest in how the internationalization is transforming the overall organizational culture. They impose a more strict interpretation of NAF's culture within the organization. This is seen in the way the introductory courses are organized. Some of the expatriates feel like this course signals that NAF have not realized the consequences of having mostly international expatriates:

“You should also understand that most of the staff working in the field are internationals, and I don't know anything about Norwegian culture, I don't know anything about Norwegianness, but if you're prepared to hire internationals from different parts of the world and internationals (...) then I think it's very good if you are able to further a more international culture, rather than just a Norwegian culture, because you are not going to have somebody coming from, like me, understand whether this is correct or different, “this is the Norwegian, that is the Norwegian culture”. (...) If it is an international organization, then you should have an international flavor to it.” (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 1 points to the shifting cultures in NAF, and that NAF promote the Norwegian culture to the expatriates. It also shows how the head office passes on a one-way communication of the organizational culture. Through the introductory courses, they attempt to promote a Norwegian culture that the interviewee does not acknowledge. These ideas can come from how the organization used to be organized, with mostly Norwegian employees. They were used to the flat, organizational structure which creates enabling contexts for sharing knowledge. Other cultures may not interpret the culture in the same way, because they might be used to stricter, hierarchical ways of organizing. Hence, there seems to be a gap between what the head office promotes as the organizational culture and the cultural backgrounds and understandings people bring with them.

If some cultures or ideas are more highly valued than others, this may hinder the knowledge flows through knowledge and learning boundaries. An organizational culture influences what knowledge is considered valuable and how this knowledge is shared (Ipe 2003). The multicultural, cross-national contexts in NAF increase the importance of trusting relationships as it adds geographical, cultural and linguistic barriers for knowledge sharing (Mäkelä, Kalla and Piekkari 2007, cited in Mäkelä 2007). One can argue that the internationalization in NAF have not been internalized across the organization, and that this is a factor that may challenge the knowledge flows within NAF on both macro and micro levels, through learning and knowledge boundaries.

“Norwegianness” as learning boundaries

One can argue that the organizational culture, influenced by Norwegian values and norms, increases the learning boundaries in NAF. Learning boundaries work vertically in an organization, and NAF’s organizational culture may reinforce these boundaries. The contexts are different between country offices and the program activities are adjusted according to the situation in the particular areas. If these adjustments are different between the practices within the organization, they may create learning boundaries from a project or country office, and the wider organization (Newell et al. 2009). It appears that NAF’s ability to learn from and exploit knowledge from the country offices is affected by the cultural heritage of the organization. It is not just about specific practices, but also the interpretation of the practices. Interviewee 2 says this:

“We’re growing and as this is turning into a much more international organization, more and more foreigners are also coming to head office, there’s not the kind of Norwegian, shared knowledge about how to do things” (Interviewee 2)

Where there used to be a shared understanding of how to do things, there are now multiple interpretations. When there are several understandings of what is seen as appropriate, it can reinforce the learning boundaries between the projects in the country offices and the head office. Interviewee 1 has experienced that the head office is not able to integrate knowledge and experiences from the internationals:

“One thing I find resistance to in [NAF] is bringing in experience from different organizations, so, I come from two other organizations, I have worked in two different organizations. [NAF] is a new organization, it’s a teenager compared to the other organizations that are there, so you know there are many systems and structures that are not in place or it’s not as sophisticated as the other organizations. So obviously when you bring in expats or you bring in internationals, you are accepting the fact that you are bringing in experience from other organizations, so you also then need to have a certain amount of flexibility in accepting the changes that come in from the experiences that these people bring. But there’s a certain sense of, you know, “no, this is the way we will do it”, you know. Yeah, that, I have found that frustration some times.” (Interviewee 1)

The expatriates do not experience that the organization is interested in opening up for integration of their experiences, and this furthers the learning boundaries. Learning boundaries causes knowledge to “stick” in the country offices and not flow to the head office, and vice versa (Brown and Duguid 2001, cited in Scarborough et al. 2004). The expatriate calls for a dialogue about systems and structures to share experiences and to create new knowledge. Through this dialogue, the differences between the Norwegian head office and the country offices could be adjusted and knowledge could flow more easily. The potential for transferring and sharing knowledge within the organization is high, given the similarity of the projects in all countries. As it is now, the Norwegian culture no longer provides a shared understanding of how things are done in NAF, and the head office seems to resist integrating experiences from the expatriates. This process can be termed a cultural imprinting, as their organizational history and culture prevent the organization from learning from the projects in the country offices.

“Norwegianness” as knowledge boundaries

With the high number of internationals, there are several assumptions and interpretations of how to accomplish the work tasks in NAF. An example is seen from interviewee 7 telling a story about calling another manager who had a different nationality from when facing a problem:

“I saw him as a support, so I called him, a bit stressed and “what do we do if we... and he has not delivered the keys”, and then he says “you cannot come here and complain without a reason”, so he took it as a personal thing, for some reason. But I come from Scandinavia and talk straight from my shoulders. So it took some time before I understood that I have to, it all turned out fine, it’s just me who needs to pull myself together. Or I am the one who needs to feel my way, he would never do it, he is a proud, Asian man. So I could choose between taking the discussion, or take his best sides for what they are and use them and that was what I did, after all” (Interviewee 7).

Through this quotation, we see how the individuals’ cultural backgrounds influence their *sensemaking* in the conversation. Interviewee 7 attributes her Scandinavian way of talking to the way the other man misinterpreted the call, but she does not actively transfer the language to him, which shows that the cultural differences reinforce the *syntactic* knowledge boundaries. Hence, one can say that their different educational backgrounds and experiences form the basis for novelty, and that they do not necessarily share the same “language” and grammar to describe the work in the field. Thus, they have to overcome the syntactic knowledge boundaries to transfer knowledge between them (Carlile 2004). These work horizontally in the organization, and may act out in the country offices on a local level.

One way NAF seek to unify the language and “grammar” within country offices is through guidelines, procedures and policies that all employees in NAF must adhere to. These are written documents on how to handle security matters, financial reporting and other issues, and are sent out from the head office to all country offices. Interviewee 3 describes them like this:

“We have our rules, we have our protocols. Some days we think they are a bit too tight in terms of work in the field, especially, and we’re trying to enlarge those. It’s very much, well, I shouldn’t say that, but it can be quite controlled from Oslo.” (Interviewee 3)

Through these documents, the head office seeks to align the country offices’ practices, and set the standards for how they should do things. It seems that these documents are not working as intended:

“There is a guideline for everything, there is a working paper for everything (...) There is lots, and the internet is full of stuff. Whether we use it then, that is another issue. Whether we can feed into and change [them] from the field, that is another issue.” (Interviewee 3)

The reason why the head office and the expatriates use and apply the guidelines differently may come from different sensemaking practices: The interpretations vary according to the context and their knowledge. We see how the practices vary when it comes to the explicit knowledge; what is written and documented, and how these are applied. The expatriates emphasize how their know-how is much

more applicable, as compared to the explicit documents, as we see in the statement from interviewee 7:

“Of course you don't read them always, because I think the big thing about these guidelines, sometimes it's a process of making the guidelines, so agree how we do this and then you have the books standing on the book shelf, but you know how to do it. And of course if it's something you don't know exactly, then you take it down and "oh, it was like this" and put it up back, but you don't maybe use it in the daily life, but you use the guidelines and if somebody's doing wrong, "this is not how the guidelines is, you can do it like this” (Interviewee 7)

The guidelines are used when the expatriates are uncertain about certain things, but not in their daily life. In other words, one can say that they are doing single loop learning, and take action based on the new information (Argyris and Schön 1978, cited in Filstad 2010a). However, they do not question the underlying systems when they acquire new knowledge, which is characterizes double-loop learning. We see how they rather use their knowing in practice as compared to written guidelines. One can see the written documents as a way for the head office to impose the Norwegian, organizational culture on the country offices. The written documents do not work that way, as we see from interviewee 1:

“The other thing with [NAF] is each country office; completely different procedures. Oh, I tell you, it's just so frustrating to go from [one country to another] and each country, even from starting from your leave application form; it's a different form in each country (...) I open the computer and I know where to go look for this document, this proposal, this report. It's not like that. Each country has a different way of doing it.” (Interviewee 1)

We see how the head office's efforts to integrate procedures are acted out in the country offices. The guidelines and policies are adapted to each country context, and do not create coherence across offices. Instead, they are seen as rigid and inflexible. They might reinforce the knowledge boundaries, because the expatriates have to adjust the guidelines to each context, through creating a common language. The individual learning experiences are high, but the knowledge boundaries prevent knowledge from being integrated. It illustrates what Newell et al. (2009) name “nested” learning, which means that learning takes place at many levels at the same time, even though the learning may not be fully transferred or integrated.

Summary: Characteristics of the organizational culture

NAF was founded within a Norwegian culture, which seems to culturally imprint the organization and hinder the integrating of knowledge from the expatriates both within country offices and between the head and the country offices. The introductory courses are not seen as forum for the expatriates to share their

insights, but is rather understood as a channel for presenting the Norwegian, organizational culture. The organizational cultural heritage becomes a barrier for knowledge sharing, as a learning boundary. This causes knowledge to “stick” to the country offices (Brown and Duguid 2001, cited in Scarborough et al. 2004).

Moreover, the organizational culture can hinder the knowledge integration, because it guides the expatriates in how they are to complete their tasks, and they are not encouraged to integrate their experiences to give feedback. This might be due to different sensemaking in the head office and in the country offices. We also see how the explicit knowledge that is imparted on the expatriates through guidelines and policies are not used in the field. This illustrates the importance of knowing, because the knowledge that the head office teaches expatriates in the introductory courses is not the same as what they use when practicing with colleagues. The cultural heritage becomes a knowledge boundary, because they have to translate and adapt the guidelines to the local contexts. The gap between the instructions from the head office and the international culture reinforce the knowledge boundaries. The greater number of knowledge boundaries on a local level, the greater the learning boundaries that NAF must overcome (Newell et al. 2009).

Knowledge goals

The expatriates learnt to do their job through knowledge sharing in their local contexts by working with and talking to their colleagues. However, for this knowledge to be shared with people outside this context the knowledge must be reflected upon in order for it to be transferred to other contexts. It must also be presented in a way that is useful to others (Newell et al. 2009). The sharing of tacit knowledge in the field is constantly taking place among the expatriates through practicing together. Another issue is related to the sharing of knowledge to the head office.

In this chapter, we see how some knowledge flows more easily than others in NAF. Explicit knowledge that is being followed up on a regular basis is shared, but explicit knowledge that is less goal-oriented is not shared.

“It is controlled by donor deadlines”

The expatriates have experienced that the type of knowledge sharing within the organization that is related to finance and technical issues is more easily shared

compared to “softer issues”. These are typically related to HR, improvement of procedures, management style or just general support. The reason why this is so is elaborated on by interviewee 7:

“With the financing, it is always controlled by deadlines and, by donor deadlines, mostly, where you have to give financial reports, you have to make projects for certain dates, depending on when the project starts and when it ends. So you cannot decide anything there, then you have monthly, circle, when you have to send something to Oslo, when you get something back.” (Interviewee 7)

From this quotation, we see that financial reports are followed up on a regular basis from the head office, and the country offices are obliged to send financial reports to the head office. As this is a funding based organization, NAF must keep up with writing proposals for funding and making sure that they are able to monitor their finances to secure future projects. One can see that finances must be taken care of because of the donor deadlines. Thus, it is more explicit in nature than the “softer issues”. The expatriates find it a bit harder to get support on these issues, and the head office does not follow up on them.

“We have a database, I don’t use it”

NAF have attempted to integrate learning across countries through a project database, which is used for uploading large reports, such as post-project reviews. Despite this effort, it is not used by the expatriates. Interviewee 1 states that the software was too heavy for the computers and the internet connection in the country office:

“It cannot be used (...) I never use this information in the field, I don’t use it, because it is, again, not useful for me” (Interviewee 1)

The interviewee does not find the database useful, because it does not have relevant content for the work in the country offices. This is in line with research, showing that databases with generic information are not suitable for knowledge sharing (Newell et al. 2009). The output of a project review must function as input for the next project for it to be functional (Von Zedtwitz 2002).

Clear goals and sharing of explicit knowledge

Financial statements are by definition more systematic, and easier to communicate and store, as they are presented in numbers (Filstad and Blåka 2007). The findings outlined above are consistent with Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995); stating that sharing knowledge through formal channels is usually of an explicit character. Explicit knowledge is also more easily articulated (Mooradian, Renzl and Matzler

2006). In their study of knowledge sharing between subsidiaries and the head office, similar findings were discovered in Schreiber et al. (2011): Explicit knowledge of a technical character was more easily shared across subsidiaries than tacit knowledge. According to interviewee 5, NAF base knowledge sharing on individuals and it is not something that takes place on the institutional level. For instance, country managers often move from one country to another and bring with them what interviewee 5 names a “cross-country experience”. Lacking structures lead to higher independence on individual knowledge, according to Schreiber et al. (2011). This is seen through interviewee 3’s initiatives to spread their standard operating procedures to other offices:

“It is an initiative that we come out with, nobody asked us to do it. No one here said, "we would like you do that based on your experience". No, we will do it, give it to here [the head office] and say "look, here is the SOPs that we made, what do you think? You can distribute them." (Interviewee 3)

We see that this is an initiative generated from an individual level, but it does not fulfill any goals for NAF. Hence, it seems as if it is not just about the type of knowledge, but also the degree of follow up from the head office that facilitates for knowledge sharing. Because the financial reports are fundamental for the organization’s existence and directed by clear goals, this type of knowledge is more regularly shared. They do not systematically encourage knowledge sharing on topics that are less goal oriented, which results in less knowledge sharing, such as the project database.

In order for an organization to develop knowledge it is necessary to balance the exploitation of current knowledge and exploration for new knowledge (March 1991, cited in Filstad 2010a). To have clear goals is necessary for the organization to systematically share knowledge (Filstad 2010a). The combination of clear goals and explicit knowledge, as compared to unclear goals and less explicit knowledge seems to differentiate what knowledge is systematically shared within NAF.

Summary: Characteristics of NAF’s knowledge goals

In NAF, sharing of financial statements is regularly followed up, because they are inevitable for the organization’s existence, and are easily articulated in numbers. The project database is less followed up, and consists of “useless” information for the expatriates. This type of knowledge is less explicit, and is therefore less goal-oriented for the expatriates in the field. The lack of follow up from the head office

on issues that are harder to express in an explicit way hinders knowledge from being shared between the country offices to the head office.

Learning from others through knowledge sharing

Seeing knowledge sharing as taking place through participation highlights the importance of having access to other colleagues to reflect and share. In NAF, this happens in the country offices through team work. Other knowledge sources may be the country manager and sometimes the program counselors in the head office. Some of the expatriates, who have longer tenure, have more contacts in the organization.

These relationships impact who the expatriates have access to, and whether they are able to establish communities of practice. The lack of communities of practice raises the value of knowledge for the expatriates, and this impedes knowledge sharing.

“I had a contact I could call”

The more experienced expatriates have access to knowledge in the country office and in the head office because of personal contacts. In a case where interviewee 2 had to fire an employee, it was decisive to know people in the head office that could support the process:

“I knew someone; luckily (...) so I trusted her. (...) It took a lot of effort to fix that case, because you need to go through many processes; the performance appraisal, you need to give them a second chance. But I had a very good manager, had a lot of support from the country manager” (Interviewee 2)

Having close, personal relationships with a contact in the head office and with the country manager made it easier to get support to solve the case for the interviewee. Interviewee 3 has an example of how the relationship with his country manager is beneficial for shared knowledge.

“First of all, we know each other from the past. We know each other from outside of [NAF]. We were working in the same area (...) so that already was a basis for this work. So trust was already sort of there. (...) Physically, our offices are opposite each other. That is also contributing to a lot of sharing, because we only have to do five meters maybe. And (...) I have to fill in for her when she is not there and she has to sort of fill in for me when I am not there. So there's a lot, we share a lot. And during the day, the two doors are always open and we can always walk into each other's office and talk and discuss and so on. So we're quite on the same level, we trust each other, we share a lot, we discuss and so on.” (Interviewee 3)

Having a trusting relationship opens up for knowledge sharing among the expatriates. We see that the level of familiarity with people in the head office and the number of social relations facilitates for knowledge sharing. These

relationships can be characterized as communities of practice, as they are built on mutual, trusting relationships. It seems as if NAF to a larger extent could base their knowledge sharing on personal relationships and communities of practice when the organization was smaller and more transparent. The distances between expatriates are now increasing because of the organization's growth, both in terms of cultural distance and geographical distance. This makes personal knowledge sharing a fragile and limited channel, as the expatriates' employment contracts are short.

“There are certain people, I don't know them”

The debrief sessions are NAF's systematic initiative to promote knowledge sharing and learn from the expatriates. Many expatriates refrain from completing the debrief because of practical reasons. It is optional for the expatriates to do it, and they might have started a new job on the other side of the world which makes it inconvenient to do a detour to the head office in Oslo. Moreover, it is not systematically followed up, which can be said to weaken the debriefs' importance.

Some of the expatriates consider the debrief a good arena for sharing knowledge and experiences, while others are of a different opinion. The variation seems to be related to whether they have had contact with the head office while they have been working in the country office. Some of the expatriates have never met with the head office before:

“You recruit people normally by a telephone interview, [expatriates]. They land them in the field operation, when they've never been here [in the head office]. They maybe never had any contact with [NAF] before.” (Interviewee 4)

The lack of contact between the head office and the expatriates makes them feel distant from the head office, as they do not know who are working there. This hinders knowledge from being shared:

“If you are new to [NAF] and you have stayed away from head quarters, you don't really know who's here and what their functions are, so in that sense you are sometimes lost, you don't know. You might lose an opportunity, you might want to do something or meet somebody, but because you don't know (...) you just miss the opportunity.” (Interviewee 1)

We see how the expatriate feels like the distances are long between them and the head office; they cannot establish communities of practice because they have not had an opportunity to work together. The lack of trusting relationships in communities of practice affects knowledge sharing. This feeling can be intensified by fearing that sharing of knowledge can cause repercussions in the country

office, which interviewee 5's quotation shows. Here, he talks about the purposes of having a debrief:

“There are two main purposes: Let the head quarter be aware of the organizational challenges we are facing. Secondly, once you are on the move out, the expectation is that (...) you will be reflecting it free of any kind of fear from consequences, like what will the program or country manager do, so you just share whatever you do and then you have a kind of perspective as well.” (Interviewee 5)

The fear of consequences is a clear barrier for knowledge to be shared. This is a country office representative's view on debriefs, it makes the expatriates uncertain about what they can share. This feeling is reinforced when they feel distant from the head office, as trust is not established. The expatriates fear where the knowledge might end up, and what it is used for:

“You sometimes want somebody to tell, that you can't when you are in the job”. (Interviewee 4)

The expatriates emphasize that the lack of personal relationships makes them uncertain about how direct and honest they can be when reflecting over their previous position in the debrief:

“When I say something, or don't say something, (...) I have to wait and be very careful about what I say and how I say it (...) I know there are certain people I will speak with, because I just know them, and I trust them to be professional, but there are certain other people, I don't know them and I don't know... It should just be by default that, you know, we have a professional relationship and therefore it's, there's trust and I can tell you what I have to tell you.” (Interviewee 1)

The lack of trusting relationships within the country office results in less trust in the head office, especially when the expatriates do not have many contacts there. This, as well as fear of the repercussions of sharing knowledge, makes the expatriates hold back. We see how the context influences the social interaction between the expatriates and the head office's representatives. They have to manage their emotions to adapt to the situation. These processes are reinforced by the lack of trusting relationships. In addition, the short contracts do not contribute to the establishment of trust.

On the other hand, the expatriates who know somebody at the head office that they have met before open up for more knowledge sharing. The expatriates who have had fewer conflicts, more positive experiences from working in the country office, and good communication with the head office share more knowledge when meeting the head office's representatives. Meeting face to face seems to be important for establishing a trusting relationship, which again is beneficial for knowledge sharing:

“I get access too the [program counselor] and various other relevant people.” (Interviewee 4)

The expatriate has established trust through meeting face to face, and one could argue that they have established a community of practice. These open up for more knowledge sharing, and they can display more of their emotions based on the trusting relationships. This may contribute to the expatriates' knowledge sharing, because it helps them cope with the stress and uncertainty that they might have experienced in the country offices (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, cited in Filstad 2010b).

“You can talk more openly and freely when you've finished, for sure”

It seems as if the expatriates value their knowledge highly, because they know something that they believe could affect their future employment. When answering the question if there were topics that this interviewee could not come forward with, the answer from interviewee 4 was:

“If you are interested to stay with an organization (...) you have to be careful to some extent to what you say, or you might play a little bit if you want another job with the same organization in another month or whatever. But the barriers are totally removed, almost totally removed when you finish, because of course, I don't have to go back now and I don't have to, maybe I wouldn't say there would be repercussions from what I say, but you can talk more openly and freely when you've finished, for sure.” (Interviewee 4)

The quotation from the interviewee shows how the lack of trusting relationships between the head office's representatives and himself influences the knowledge being shared during the debrief. The strong competition for getting a job in NAF as an expatriate, taking place in unsafe, changing environments combined with short contracts may cause expatriates to see their knowledge as a source of power. The expatriates choose not to share, because they run the risk of diminishing their value if they share their knowledge, and this risk is higher in times of uncertainty and insecurity (Empson 2001, cited in Ipe 2003).

We see how these factors may function as psychological filters that hinder knowledge from being shared, because it can be beneficial keeping the knowledge to themselves (Andrews and Delahaye 2000, cited in Ipe 2003). Andrews and Delahaye's (2000, cited in Ipe 2003, 345) point out:

“[If one sees knowledge as] a valuable commodity, knowledge sharing becomes a process mediated by decisions about what knowledge to share, when to share, and who to share it with”

Through this filter, the expatriates can use their knowledge as power that can be used to get certain outcomes, such as getting the contract renewed. In other words,

their knowledge can be described as resource power (Hardy 1996). This is in line with Foucault's (1995) ideas, which see power as a relational force that can affect outcomes such as the expatriates' future employment. This means that they can bring out a certain outcome through this power, such as getting the contract renewed. For NAF, the individual knowledge is so valuable that the organization cannot afford to lose the employee. Through keeping knowledge to themselves, they can build unique expertise. However, we see that lack of trust augments the psychological filters that keep the expatriates from sharing knowledge, because they do not have personal relationships to the colleagues in the head office.

Summary: Characteristics of knowledge sharing with others

The relationships between the expatriates and the head office vary. Expatriates who have been working in NAF for a long time have relationships in the head office they can trust and seek support from. For others, who do not have such relationships, they feel more distant from the head office and this is a barrier to knowledge sharing. One reason is that they have not got the opportunity to establish communities of practice.

The value of knowledge among the expatriates is high, and impedes knowledge sharing. It is more beneficial to keep the knowledge, than to share it. Lack of trusting relationships makes knowledge even more valuable, as they are insecure about who to share with. We see the importance of enabling contexts which foster learning and sharing in communities of practice. The 12 months' employment contracts are a central factor why it is difficult to establish such learning communities.

Enabling structures in NAF

In this chapter, we see how decision power and organizational structures influence expatriates' knowledge sharing. The hierarchical structures combined with country managers' high autonomy do not facilitate for knowledge sharing. When knowledge is shared, it can remove the country managers' power base.

Vertical decision making

The head office is above the country offices in the organizational chart. NAF's organizational structure seems bureaucratic, with partially centralized decision-making and a high degree of formalization through guidelines and policies

(Mintzberg 1979, cited in Newell et al. 2009). This is a sign of centralized authority relations “*where coordination is achieved through vertically imposed bureaucratic processes*” (Tsai 2002, 180). This is how interviewee 5 describes the division of responsibilities between the head office and the country offices:

“The country offices work pretty autonomously and the country manager is quite strong in terms of the decision making. The philosophy behind it is that the country manager is somebody [NAF] has interested with a particular responsibility and the person is capable to make the right judgment.” (Interviewee 5)

We see that country managers are free to make decisions, to a certain extent. Interviewee 3 says that “*decision making is very vertical*”. This is how he describes the decision making structure:

“Decisions are made, or are proposed from our level and then have to be ratified here [in the head office].” (Interviewee 3)

NAF’s head office seems to make most decisions. The hierarchical structures have a high impact on the knowledge sharing practices both within the country office and across to the head office. We also see that the expatriates’ descriptions of the organizational structure is different from the Norwegian, flat, informal structures, as we saw before.

“Country managers can be quite a little power of their own”

The country managers’ decision-power makes some of them encourage sharing of ideas, while others prefer to make decisions without conferring with colleagues. This may depend on their relations to the head office:

“We [the country office] make the final choice. And then there is a discussion. And I think you have plenty of people experiencing, head office to understand that decisions should be closer to the problem and not here [in the head office]. No. Could be personality, could be also based on the fact that they have a good relation with the country manager and the country manager is very trusted and in other places maybe the country manager is not trusted.” (Interviewee 3)

Their power to decide is often a result of autonomy, which the country managers have obtained through having trust from the head office. The decision-power is stronger when they are more experienced:

“Country managers can be quite, you know, a little power of their own which, in many cases works very well. Not saying it’s totally negative, but especially if there are country managers who’s experienced with the organization, experienced in the business, knows [NAF], knows our donors” (Interviewee 4)

We see how the country managers influence knowledge sharing. They have a high degree of autonomy to decide, especially when they have long experience from the humanitarian sector. This factor challenges knowledge sharing in NAF. Hierarchical structures impact what employees learn, as well as the depth and

level of their skills (Ashton 2004). While the country managers have access to knowledge and information from both the country and the head office, it is not necessarily the same situation for the expatriates who are not on the top. We see how their position in the country offices affects their learning, and the flow of knowledge depends on the country managers' ability to share the decision power (Filstad 2010a).

“The country manager might not like that I talk with Oslo directly”

Previously, we saw how expatriates hold back knowledge in the debrief, and used knowledge as resource power in relation to the head office. There are also examples of how country managers use their power to either facilitate for, or hinder knowledge sharing. This may reinforce how the expatriates' value their knowledge. In one case, interviewee 4 had to seek advice from the head office, and this challenged the country manager's power base:

“I was doing [a type of] projects. And came back to the country manager to a certain extent, the country manager wasn't a big believer in the [advisers in the head office] being useful. Me as an individual, I wasn't sure if I was even allowed to contact them directly, you know, at that time I was a [project] manager, my boss was the country manager. Am I supposed to directly contact the technical person in Oslo? Not sure, not clear” (Interviewee 4)

The country managers are able to use process and meaning power to prevent the expatriates from taking part in the decision-making, and also to legitimize or delegitimize expatriates' work (Hardy 1996, cited in Swan and Scarbrough 2005). In this case, the country manager did not open up for the flow of knowledge through the process and meaning power between the country offices and the head office. We see how knowledge can lead to change, and that this change may threaten the country manager's power (Mørk et al. 2010). It was not legitimate for the expatriate to seek advice beyond the country manager in the head office, so the country manager tried to delegitimize the expatriate's search for advice.

We see how knowledge is a medium for, but also the object of power relations (Swan, Scarbrough and Robertson 2002). The power of country managers can negatively affect the knowledge sharing, as interviewee 4 expresses it:

“We [the country offices] have a lot of autonomy, I think. (...) I quite often think we have too much. Because, our [projects] can be quite easily personality driven. We have core activities for our work, we have [guidelines], we have this, that and the other. But in the field, there is still lots of room for interpretation. And country managers certainly have an awful lot of power, which in one way is good. But in another way, not so good. And then, our country manager can then pass on that autonomy to his managers or he might not, or she might not. So it's a bit down to an individual to make some courses to how the autonomy managers or the teams have” (Interviewee 4)

“You know, a lot of country managers are quite strong people, some will listen and be influenced, much more than others by their boss, by the [head office]. Sometimes I think a country manager is not controlled very much by head offices, or their head boss. Some country managers take a lot of advice from the [program counselors] here [in the head office]. (...) Some country managers are able to ignore a lot of advice.” (Interviewee 4)

The country managers having a trust-based relationship with the head office means that they have a high degree of freedom to set the agenda of the country program. We see how the organizational structures impact the level of knowledge shared: The country managers have a high status related to their positions in NAF, and thus have access to knowledge (Ashton 2004; Filstad 2010a). In NAF, they can actively use their status to hinder knowledge from flowing, and to disable a structure supportive of knowledge sharing. In this case, we see how leadership is not a factor that facilitates for knowledge sharing in that they do not create an enabling context that facilitates for informal learning. Rather, leadership becomes a central factor that hinders knowledge sharing. A reason they might not want to promote knowledge sharing is that it removes their power base. This might be why they are described as the following:

“The country manager is the king or the queen, really.” (Interviewee 4)

The country manager's process and meaning power affects knowledge sharing in NAF. It seems that most of the time, it leads to less knowledge sharing in NAF, a process that is termed knowledge hoarding (Gupta and Govindarajan 2000, cited in Ipe 2003). If the country managers do not trust their employees, and they also feel that their own power is knowledge-related, it can lead to knowledge hoarding, and not knowledge sharing. Knowledge hoarding causes the country managers to miss out on even more knowledge, because they do not have trusting relationships with the expatriates, which again makes them lose their power base.

Another factor that augments this process is the personal relationships some of the expatriates have with people at the head office. This can further imbalance in the country managers' power base.

“You can talk to the country manager, but you can also talk with Oslo. And that creates a dilemma too, because the country manager might not like that I talk with Oslo directly. [The country manager] told my successor that she shouldn't talk with the [contact person in the head office] so much.” (Interviewee 7)

We see that the country manager attempts to keep the process power, and also to guide which knowledge is shared by whom. The systems of organizing is challenged by the informal knowledge sharing channels, as the country managers' power over decision-making and legitimizing the work in the country offices become weaker. This hinders knowledge sharing, as the expatriates experience more control and less trusting relationships, as interviewee 7 described it:

“Personally, I think it is very difficult to discuss the problems with the country manager in open. And you have to, only if you are asked about it, I talk about them. (...) They don't want to hear about all these problems, I think.” (Interviewee 7)

On the other hand, the expatriates who do not have contacts in Oslo are not able to unbalance the power of the country manager. In their case, it is more dependent on their personal relationship with the country manager. For some of the expatriates who had a good relationship, this meant that they also had high degree of freedom to make decisions and knowledge sharing in their projects. As we saw in the beginning of this chapter, they form communities of practice with them, which facilitates for knowledge sharing.

Summary: Characteristics of decision structures

This chapter has studied organizational structures and how it enables for knowledge sharing. The hierarchical organizational structures combined with high autonomy among the country managers do not facilitating for knowledge sharing. Sharing of knowledge may remove the country managers' power base, and this illustrates how access to learning arenas depends on the organizational structures (Filstad 2010a). In NAF, the unstructured communication lines between the head office and the country offices are not beneficial for knowledge sharing. The country managers stand in the way of the flow of knowledge, and leads to knowledge hoarding. Thus, they are not able to create an enabling context for knowledge sharing, and the hierarchical structures are preventing this to happen. This is reinforced by lack of trusting relationships with the expatriates.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis, the aim has been to understand how expatriates in a humanitarian aid organization contribute to organizational learning, and what the characteristics of their knowledge sharing practices are. The study of these topics was conducted through 7 qualitative interviews with expatriates working in NAF; a Norwegian, humanitarian, individual, non-profit, non-governmental organization.

Five characteristics of the expatriates' knowledge sharing practices were discussed. First, we have looked at how the expatriates have become qualified for working in the humanitarian sector through acquiring explicit and tacit knowledge through formal education and practicing with colleagues, respectively. The level of communicability and context dependence of tacit knowledge makes knowledge sharing challenging, but also crucial in order to understand how they can contribute to organizational learning: Their knowing is situated in practice within the country office' contexts and less based on explicit knowledge acquired in formal courses. The second characteristic was related to the organizational culture in NAF. The Norwegian cultural heritage can be said to impede knowledge sharing, as it influences what knowledge is seen as valuable and how this knowledge is shared (Ipe 2003). Thus, the opportunities for the expatriates to share and integrate their experiences in the organization are small. We see how the organizational culture becomes a learning boundary which causes knowledge to "stick" to the country offices (Brown and Duguid 2001, cited in Scarborough et al. 2004). Different sensemaking practices among the expatriates' and the head office is partly why knowledge sticks, through learning boundaries. Within the country offices, the cultural heritage becomes a knowledge boundary, because they have to translate and adapt the guidelines and policies to the local contexts. Also here, we see how different types of sensemaking reinforce these knowledge boundaries.

Thirdly, we saw how knowledge of an explicit character was more regularly followed up, such as financial reports. Other types of knowledge is less followed up, is less explicit and also less goal-oriented. The lack of knowledge goals hinders knowledge to be shared in NAF. Fourthly, the influence of having social, trusting relationships with others and their impact on knowledge sharing was examined. Some of the expatriates have been with the organization for quite some time, and have established personal connections in this period. These

contacts make knowledge sharing run more smoothly, because these relationships are based on trust. Thus, they can form communities of practice. On the other hand, lack of such relationships hinders knowledge sharing. The social relationships are more challenging to establish because of the short employment contracts, which in turn makes it difficult to establish trust-based relationships between the expatriates. And finally, we saw how characteristics of the decision structures impact knowledge sharing. The hierarchical organizational structures along with the country manager's high autonomy are barriers for knowledge sharing. The expatriates' knowledge can remove the country managers' power base, and causes knowledge to hoard and not to flow.

To conclude, we can say that expatriates' knowledge remains an untapped resource in NAF (Antal 2001). NAF do not take the opportunity to acquire, create and transfer knowledge in the organization (Oddou, Osland and Blakeney 2009; Kamoche 1997). The expatriates in this study contribute to organizational learning to a low extent, and in a way that can be characterized as "ad hoc". The characteristics of knowledge sharing have highlighted many aspects of how expatriates contribute to organizational learning, but also where the challenges lie. Many of them are located at the head office or management level, and how the head office organizes around knowledge sharing. Expatriates share knowledge with their colleagues, as long as they trust them, but to a lesser extent to the country manager and the head office. We see the importance of having clear knowledge goals to support the flow of knowledge. Knowledge goals are also substantial when considering the impact of a multitude of cultures on the organizational culture. These must be embedded in the organization's strategy to make sure that they are continuously followed up.

Communities of practice take time to establish, because they are based on trusting relationships with others. The expatriates' short employment contracts challenge the formation of communities of practice, and might be one reason why the knowledge is not flowing in NAF. Informal learning arenas must be acknowledged by leaders to a larger degree than today and they should aim for less hierarchical organizational structures than today. To provide for an enabling context for informal learning is vital. Thus, the focus should be on expatriates' knowledge in practice.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

Interview guide: Knowledge sharing in NAF

Start with a short introduction of me; the topic and aim with the thesis; confidentiality agreement; anonymity guarantee; recording; reporting plans; time estimates.

Shortly mention the overall research question: *How do expatriates contribute to organizational learning in NAF?*

Contextualize the study: Expatriates are valuable resources that carry expertise and experiences that not necessarily are taken care of. In this organization, this seems to be the function of the debrief that you have taken part in. There exists high turnover rates among expatriates; and there are many challenges when it comes to structure and utilize their knowledge as they are not often seen as a resource to both general and specific knowledge (ways of organizing vs. contextual, local knowledge).

Topic	Research questions	Interview questions
Introduction	<p><i>Getting to know the expatriate</i></p> <p><i>What is peculiar about this expats' land office? (routines, projects, geographical proximity, duration of the LO)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Position – type of function - Country office (CO) – how many projects, geographical closeness, who do you work with - Length of service - Educational background - Experience - Where and when did you first work abroad? (Preparations, courses, education etc.) - Any questions before we start?
Knowledge sharing culture	<p><i>How is the overall culture for knowledge sharing and communication within the organization?</i></p>	<p>What do you think of when I say knowledge sharing or exchange of experiences?</p>

		<p>How are you as an international employee being drawn on when it comes to sharing knowledge?</p> <p>- Do you have an example?</p> <p>Where, when and how did you experience this?</p>
Power relations	<p><i>How is the power balance between Land office (LO) and HO?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Sensegiving (from HO to LO/top down?)</i> - <i>Sensemaking (own interpretations of mandate/projects/budgets/ bottom up)</i> <p><i>Between LO/expats and local employees?</i></p> <p><i>Between HO and expats?</i></p>	<p>What do you think about the way the communications between HO and LO is organized today? Who decides? And how do you implement the decisions made? What is your degree of autonomy?</p> <p>What are your experiences with working with local employees? How do you consider their opportunities of giving feedback to the organization?</p> <p>How do you consider the support from the HO? Are there any obstacles on who you can contact and talk to?</p> <p>How do you give feedback to others around you? How do you get feedback yourself?</p> <p>What do you consider of the HO debrief in terms of knowledge sharing? - Is there room for feedback? Are there topics that you are not being able to come forward with?</p>

		<p>Something you would want to talk more about?</p> <p>Do you have any questions?</p>
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Appendix 2: Preliminary Thesis Report

BI Norwegian Business School

GRA 19002

Preliminary Thesis Report

Master of Science in Leadership and Organizational Psychology

Knowledge sharing and expatriates

Hand-in date:
15.01.2012

Supervisor:
Associate Professor Cathrine Filstad

Student:
Benedicte Hauge

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Abstract

It is crucial to transfer and exploit knowledge across locations and divisions for multinational companies, because knowledge is seen as a critical resource that constitutes an organization's competitive advantage, according to economical theory. Expatriates are often used as a mechanism to transfer knowledge, despite the high costs and often, enough qualified locals. Still, expatriates are to a larger degree than before used as a knowledge transfer strategy.

Research has found that expatriates' role as knowledge transferors often have proved difficult, and they are not able to use what they have learnt abroad. Many quit when they return. A challenge for organizations is hence to utilize the knowledge expatriates have acquired. It appears that previous studies have not been able to identify how to succeed with expatriates as knowledge transferors, and this is the intended contribution of this thesis. It can seem plausible that this is caused by a lack of understanding of the overall learning culture and knowledge development as seen within knowledge management and economics. Theory from organizational learning, based on a practice perspective, is used to get a deeper understanding of the following research questions: Why and how expatriates are applied as a knowledge sharing mechanism, how is their knowledge utilized when they return, and what determines if expatriates choose to share knowledge or not?

This thesis is to be based on qualitative interviews with returned expatriates in one Norwegian multinational company. Hence, it is also a case study. This can contribute to get a deeper understanding of expatriates' as knowledge sharing mechanisms, as well as the overall learning culture within an organization.

INTRODUCTION

The resource-based view sees knowledge as a critical source that constitutes an organization's competitive advantage (Barney 1991). To ensure survival and prosperity makes it vital to balance the exploitation of current knowledge and exploration for new knowledge (March 1991). For multinational corporations (MNCs), the transfer and exploitation of knowledge across locations and divisions is considered to be an important organizational strategy, and is often accomplished by expatriates (Kogut and Zander 1992; Tung 1982; Fang et al. 2010; Bonache and Zárraga-Oberty 2008). Expatriation is understood as employment outside one's native country, and is usually carried out by men (Edström and Galbraith 1977; Lansing and Boonman 2011). Despite the belief that well-qualified local workforces would replace expatriates over time, it seems as if companies rely on expatriate employees to a larger extent than before (Bonache, Brewster, Suutari and Saá 2010). International assignments continue to be an important strategy for MNCs, undeterred by the high costs and investments organizations make when sending employees abroad and a greater focus on cost reduction (Minbaeva and Michailova 2004; Bonache, Brewster and Suutari 2007).

Expatriation has usually entailed staffing positions with a focus on controlling and coordinating foreign subsidiaries from the parent country (Minbaeva and Michailova 2004; Brock, Shenkar, Shoham and Siscovick 2008). This focus has also been prevalent within research, which traditionally have put emphasis on expatriates as knowledge senders, and not knowledge recipients (Lazarova and Tarique 2005; Suutari and Brewster 2003; Mäkelä 2007). Recently, the comprehension of expatriation has changed, and is now more related to implementing knowledge procedures, developing top talents and future leaders, improving the trust of the subsidiary, as well as training of local employees, among others (Minbaeva and Michailova 2004). Consequently, expatriates have been understood as providing for opportunities "to acquire, create and transfer valuable knowledge, both upon expatriation and repatriation" (Oddou, Osland and Blakeney 2009, 182; Kamoche 1997).

Research, often founded on knowledge management theories applying frameworks from economics, have shown that that expatriates' roles as knowledge transferors have proved difficult (Bonache, Brewster and Suutari 2007; Chiva and

Alegre 2005; Bonache et al. 2010; Mayrhofer et al. 2007). Suutari and Brewster (2003) found that 53 per cent of the expatriates agreed that the organization they were returning to had utilized their knowledge and expertise gained in a foreign country, while 23 per cent disagreed. Research has also suggested that few organizations consider expatriate knowledge valuable, or view it as a competitive advantage (Bonache and Brewster 2001; Oddou, Osland and Blakeney 2009). What is more; research have found higher rates of turnover among repatriates as compared to non-expatriates which represents a threat to utilizing repatriates' knowledge as a competitive advantage (Bonache and Brewster 2001; Black and Gregersen 1999; Stahl, Chua, Caligiuri, Cerdin and Taniguchi 2009). Hence, expatriates' knowledge is a vulnerable, untapped resource (Antal 2001). A major challenge for organizations resorting to expatriates as a strategy is therefore to develop processes and policies that can incorporate their knowledge and expertise (Bernhut 2001; Birkinshaw 2001, cited in Taylor and Osland 2011). In addition to knowing what to integrate from expatriates experiences, it is also a question of knowing when and how to incorporate it (Taylor and Osland 2011).

The paradox is that MNCs to a larger degree use expatriates, but seemingly in an unsuccessful manner when it comes to integrate their knowledge in the organization when they return. Considering that most research on expatriates' knowledge transfer (or sharing) apparently have been founded on theories from knowledge management and economics, it seems as the social and processual characters of knowledge and knowledge sharing have not been given due attention in expatriate research (Mäkelä 2007; Chiva and Alegre 2005). This establishes a need for research on expatriation as a strategy founded on a perspective that knowledge is constructed and situated in practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Chiva and Alegre 2005; Gherardi 2000). In addition, studying knowledge sharing as a social phenomenon can bring new insights on how organizations can integrate expatriates' knowledge.

The aim of this thesis is to increase the understanding of why and how expatriates are applied as strategic mechanism for knowledge sharing in a Norwegian MNC. In this matter, it is relevant to studying aspects that might influence expatriates' knowledge sharing when returning from abroad. Research has suggested that there are both individual and contextual factors that may influence employees' level of knowledge sharing: Properties of the knowledge

itself, properties of the management, properties of the environment and properties of the individual themselves (Mooradian, Renzl and Matzler's 2006). All of these aspects are related to the culture within the organization (Ipe 2003). Culture has an impact on the extent that knowledge is valued within the organization; what kind of relationships and rewards that are encouraged among employees; as well as the opportunities that employees have sharing knowledge, both formally and informally (Ipe 2003). These factors are also related to the importance of trust for knowledge sharing as it leads to overall knowledge exchange (Filstad 2010; Levin and Cross 2004). In addition, the degree to which expatriates' assess their knowledge as valuable has an impact on the level of knowledge shared (Filstad 2010), and can serve as a learning boundary in organizations (Newell et al. 2009). In other words, being able to integrate the knowledge from expatriates will depend on many aspects on both an individual and organizational level, and shows how essential it is to focus on learning as participating in practice (Gherardi 2000).

Conceptual clarification

The development of high-speed travel and information and communication technologies has changed the nature of, and expanded the options for organizing international working (Bonache et al. 2010). Whereas expatriation traditionally entailed long-term assignments abroad, there are now a variety of possibilities for shorter jobs which are used to a larger degree than before; such as commuter assignments, frequent traveling and virtual working. The term "expatriate" has been criticized for not covering the range of international assignments (Kamoche 1997). However, this thesis will take an adaptive approach, and include both shorter and longer assignments as subject matters when discussing expatriates. Furthermore, the term "expatriate" and not "repatriate" will be applied. This follows Mäkelä (2007), who argues that expatriation has relevance beyond the immediate repatriation stage. Moreover, it is the phenomenon expatriation that is to be studied and not just the experiences of the repatriates even though the data is collected when they have returned.

Research questions

Through the exploration of both individual and contextual factors that may influence expatriates' knowledge sharing, the following research questions¹ are sought to be answered in this thesis:

- **Why and how is expatriation applied as a mechanism for developing organizational knowledge?**
- **How is knowledge from expatriates applied and utilized in the organization when they return from abroad?**
- **What determines whether expatriates' choose to share knowledge or not?**

These factors are related to the over all learning culture in the organization, and how learning and knowledge is fundamental for knowledge development in organizations (Filstad 2010). Hence, expatriates' knowledge sharing will also be a part of the overall learning culture in the organization. This will also be a subject matter to study in this thesis.

The intention of this thesis is to contribute to the expatriation literature through focusing on both individual and contextual factors that enhance or inhibit knowledge sharing from returned expatriates. It also seeks to contribute to the knowledge management and organizational learning literature. The questions will be sought answered through a qualitative, case study of a Norwegian MNC, which is elaborated on in the final section of the Thesis Report.

EXPATRIATION IN A STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

As mentioned above, expatriation research has typically been founded on the resource-based view, focusing on knowledge as a competitive advantage (Bonache and Zárraga-Oberty 2008). Successful knowledge transfer within multinational corporations has been a major issue in knowledge and strategic management research for a long time (Gupta and Govindarajan 2000; Foss and Pedersen 2004). Macro-perspectives has dominated strategic research on

¹ As the thesis is based on a qualitative methodology and still in a developing phase, suggestions to several research questions are presented and are up for revision.

organizational knowledge in the MNC, while there has been an absence of a sufficient understanding of causal mechanisms and contextual factors that mediate knowledge processes and organizational arrangements (Foss and Pedersen 2004). A major issue has been the conceptualization of the MNC as a knowledge-sharing network, and its capability “to transfer, create, integrate and deploy certain kinds of knowledge more efficiently than markets are capable of” (Kogut and Zander 1993 in Foss and Pedersen 2004, 341). Knowledge flows has been a common concern for much of this research (Wang and Noe 2010), either on what facilitates knowledge transfer (Gupta and Govindarajan 1991; 2000), or what hinders it (Szulanski 1996). Knowledge transfer within a strategic perspective means to replicate “an internal practice that is performed in a superior way in some part of the organization and is to be implemented in another unit” (Bonache and Zárrega-Oberty 2008, 2). Expatriates are hence “knowledge transferors” within this perspective.

HRM practices in relation to enhancing knowledge transfer have been of interest (Lee, Williams and Yin 2006; Foss, Minbaeva, Pedersen and Reinholt 2009). In addition, managing these systems is a concern and has resulted in a wide range of knowledge management systems (KMS) to spread best-practices across locations (Newell et al. 2009). This section seeks to give a brief overview of the field from a macro and micro perspective, as it has dominated the expatriate research. Generally, these studies have been criticized for lacking a theoretical foundation (Bonache et al. 2010). Yet, there is considerable scope for new research, given that there have been few studies analyzing the role of expatriates as knowledge transferors (Riusala and Suutari 2004; Foss and Pedersen 2004). There are few, if not none studies discovered on expatriates from other perspectives but the one founded on economics and strategy.

Expatriation in a macro perspective

Bonache et al. (2010) have identified four reasons for why expatriates are deployed as a strategy of transferring knowledge within MNCs. The first two are related to transaction costs within the organization; i.e. to the level of international expansion and the cultural and institutional distance. The two latter are founded on the resource-based view on the firm, and are linked to the MNCs’ capabilities and the units within MNCs’ interdependence (Bonache et al. 2010).

In relation to Bonache et al.'s (2010) first reason of why expatriates are used as knowledge transferors, managers were initially sent to other countries to coordinate and control subsidiaries when there was a lack of qualified locals, or as a means of developing international managers (Edström and Galbraith 1977). In addition, it was a method of modifying and sustaining organizational structure across locations, and decision making processes. Today, this logic is still valid for companies that apply expatriates as strategic knowledge transferors, for instance within finance and accounting (Riusala and Smale 2007). The authors reason that “complex technical and legal components inherent in modern financial systems require an equally sophisticated transfer mechanism, in this case expatriation, which is capable of teaching and explaining the new knowledge to host employees” (Bonache and Brewster 2001, cited in Riusala and Smale 2007).

Lately, the scope has broadened within research on expatriates as knowledge transferors, as the variety of international assignments is growing bigger and the understanding of knowledge within the resource-based view of the firm is developing (Bonache et al. 2010). Bonache and Zárraga-Oberty (2008) argue that different types of international assignments are used depending on the characteristics of the knowledge that is to be transferred. Particularly significant is the strategic transfer of tacit knowledge, which is a fundamental feature within the literature on expatriates as strategic knowledge transferors.

Within the resourced-based view, expatriate knowledge is regarded as an acquisition that they possess (Antal 2000, 2001; Bresman, Birkinshaw and Nobel 1999; Riusala and Smale 2007; Suutari and Brewster 2003; Wang and Noe 2010). Studies of expatriates as knowledge transferors have often followed Polanyi's (1966) and Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) conceptualizations of tacit and explicit knowledge. While the latter is easily articulated in language, tacit knowledge is “embedded in individual experience” and hence more difficult to express and articulate (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995, viii). Tacit knowledge is understood as the main value to acquire from expatriates in order to sustain an organization's competitive advantage, because it is hard for competitors to imitate, and it is in a non-tradeable form (Lazarova and Tarique 2005; Filstad and Blåka 2007; Gupta and Govindarajan 2000). Thus is it critical to transfer the tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge from expatriates (Newell et al. 2009). Whether one can

transfer tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge has been extensively debated and will be further examined in the theoretical framework section.

Expatriation in a micro perspective

In addition to the macro-studies just mentioned, the strategic perspective has also nurtured studies at a micro level, focusing on knowledge sharing among individuals (Ipe 2003). These studies have often been qualitative approaches where expatriates have been interviewed. Some studies have identified individual reasons for why knowledge transfer is successful or not; focusing on individual ability, motivation and career aspirations (Lazarova and Tarique 2005; Bonache and Zárrega-Oberty 2008). In addition, these studies have focused on what expatriates learn and transfer in a strategic perspective. Given the subject for this thesis, some of these studies will be presented to shed light over what expatriates have learnt when abroad.

Types of expatriate knowledge

Apparently, there are few studies focusing on the actual knowledge that expatriates are thought to transfer either to the subsidiaries or back to the organization. Many focus on the transfer of tacit knowledge from headquarters to subsidiaries (Riusala and Smale 2007). In Riusala and Suutari's (2004) study, there was a significant difference in the knowledge that expatriates transferred to the subsidiary as compared to what they brought back from the subsidiary to the headquarters. The knowledge expatriates transferred to the foreign division related to knowledge on management, culture, technology, sales and marketing, products, HRM and accounting/finance. However, the knowledge they transferred back was less comprehensive and included knowledge about the local environments and knowledge concerning the operations and success of the affiliate itself. These results are perhaps related to another finding in this study, that is: "MNCs did not have systematic knowledge management processes in an international context" and that "the level of systematic integration and standardization was not very high yet", but it is thought that "such issues will increase in the future" (Riusala and Suutari 2004, 764).

These lines of thought seem to follow idea that expatriates' knowledge is context-specific; which implies that the longer they are abroad, the more

knowledge they gain about the local country and its people (Oddou, Osland and Blakeney 2009). Oddou (2002, in Oddou, Osland and Blakeney 2009) pointed out besides the context-dependent knowledge; expatriates also gain cognitive, relational, attitudinal and behavioral knowledge. In a similar manner, Antal (2000; 2001) explored types of knowledge that expatriates from Germany brought back from abroad, and focused on how their knowledge could “serve as a resource for organizational learning”. Five categories of expatriate knowledge emerged, concerning “what”, “how”, “when”, “why” and “who”, and the interrelations among them (Antal 2000). The first category dealt with the factual knowledge about a foreign culture; in addition to first hand knowledge about “local markets, the products, and the needs and wishes of local customers” (Antal 2000, 42). Knowing “how” implied knowledge about how things work. It included general management skills, specialist skills and learning how to learn, and the respondents learnt the importance of communicating effectively which was a skill that could “be transferred to the home context”. Learning how to learn meant that the expatriates had to quickly adjust and learn rapidly, often through making mistakes (Antal 2000). In order to understand the meaning of things within the local culture, they used what can be characterized as “knowledge brokers” who could explain the expatriates how locals thought and reasoned.

Knowing “when” incorporated also the knowing “what” and “how”. Timing was an important dimension that expatriates learnt abroad, and was useful when they returned. Knowing “why” involved a new and deeper understanding of why things are like they are both in and between cultures. It included an apprehension of logics behind actions, decisions and situations in new cultures. In addition, the expatriates returned with overall knowledge on the business as a whole, often because the subsidiary they worked for was similar to small or medium-sized businesses, which made the connections in the business more visible as compared to the more complex systems in the headquarters. With regards to relational knowledge, or knowing “who”, expatriates extended their networks of professionally relevant contacts. Trust was a critical feature of these relationships, which took a long time to establish. The professional contacts were both locals and “key figures” in the company (Antal 2000, 47).

However, research has found that the knowledge that expatriates acquire abroad is often not valued within the organization they work for (Bossard and

Peterson 2005). The insufficient recognition of expatriates' experiences by management may cause turnover intentions. Generally, many companies lack formal repatriation policies, which is a paradox as there seems to be an increasing use of expatriates (Bonache et al. 2010). Following Ipe (2003), there is still much to be learned and understood about how expatriate knowledge is created, shared and used in organizations. What is seemingly missing from these studies is the understanding of knowledge as situated and practice-based. These issues are discussed next.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Organizational learning and knowledge has been dealt with from many perspectives, and faced theoretical confusion (Chiva and Alegre 2005). In this thesis, organizational learning will be understood as within the participation paradigm, based on a social-process perspective (Filstad and Blåka 2007; Chiva and Alegre 2005). This has implications for the definition and application of central concepts when studying expatriation, such as organizational learning and knowledge.

Knowledge can be defined as “the ability to discriminate within and across contexts” (Swan 2008 cited in Newell et al. 2009, 5), which implies that one knows what to do in specific situations, and encompasses both the individual and social aspects of knowledge (Newell et al. 2009). In work settings, knowledge creates value when it is applied in practical work, and being competent implies that one demonstrates that one can solve work tasks in a successful manner (Filstad 2010). The practical work settings provide for the most efficient way to develop knowledge, and learning is the condition for developing and sharing knowledge (Filstad 2010).

Organizational learning

Knowledge sharing involves both learning and knowledge development: Knowledge and learning is founded in social interaction where learning and knowledge is situated (Filstad 2010). Thus, learning and knowledge are indivisible processes (Filstad and Blåka 2007). Organizational learning comprise of continuous processes of knowledge development, knowledge sharing and

change (Filstad 2010). To study organizational learning means that one needs to study the social relations in the work place, and focus on how “individuals interpret, or make sense of their experiences at work” (Chiva and Alegre 2005, 55; Filstad 2010). The approach to organizational learning and knowledge in this thesis is based on the following perspectives, focusing on the situated and practice-based learning.

Situated learning in communities of practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the concept of communities of practice to show how learning is situated in practice and social interaction. They focused on the cognitive processes that are involved in learning and what practices and interactions that are most appropriate for promoting learning (Filstad 2010). Communities of practice are defined as “the building blocks of a social learning system, because they are the social “containers” of the competences that make up such a system” (Wenger 2000, 229). Employees may be a member of several communities of practice, where they develop their capabilities through interaction and sharing of knowledge and experiences. When employees participate in the communities of practice, it constitutes the competence in a given context through combining three elements (Wenger 2000): Members have a collective apprehension of what the community is about, through a sense of joint enterprise. When interacting with each other, the members establish norms and relationships through mutual engagement. Being competent means also that one have access to, and knows how to use the shared repertoire of the community of practice, which entails language, routines and artifacts etc. (Wenger 2000). Communities of practice are indifferent from project teams and formal groups, because the people select themselves who are “informally bound together by shared expertise” (Wenger and Snyder 2000, 139).

However, Lave and Wenger’s perspective has been criticized for focusing too much on the individual cognitive learning aspects and the community itself, instead of emphasizing the practice of the community (Filstad 2010). Therefore, Gherardi (2006) suggests that the term community’s practice is more applicable to underline that it is the community that has an effect on the practice (Filstad 2010).

Elkjær (2004) has also criticized this perspective, and suggests that learning is not only about participation, but also about the development of knowledge through reflective thinking which is discussed next.

The “third way” to organizational learning

Elkjær (2004) states that learning is not only about participation in communities of practice, but also about how learning takes place, and what one learns through this participation. This perspective is termed the “third way” of organizational learning (Elkjær 2004). By combining the perspectives of understanding learning as an acquisition (the “first way”), and learning as participation in communities of practice (“the second way”), Elkjær (2004) acknowledges that learning involves both thinking and acting. Reflection is a prerequisite for learning (Filstad 2010). Elkjær (2004) draws on the American pragmatist and educationalist John Dewey’s concepts of ‘inquiry’ or ‘reflective thinking’ and ‘experience’, to define what happens in participation. Experience happens in the transaction between individuals and the environment, and is both a process and a product; a process termed “transactional meaning-making” by Simpson and Marshall (2010). Intuition, emotions and the body are also part of the experience, and activate the ‘inquiry’ or reflective thinking which makes one be and become knowledgeable (Elkjær 2004). It is through inquiry that humans can acquire new knowledge, such as when being met with uncertain situations, and one has to determine what to do through reflective thinking. Pragmatic inquiry involves both acting and thinking, and is dependent on the context or the situation. To learn means that one is aware of past experiences and reflects upon them when meeting new situations. Hence, it involves mind, body, thinking and action (Elkjær 2004).

Organizational learning as practice-based and situated

The pragmatic learning theory represents a tool to understand how we learn, and what we learn through practice (Filstad 2010). It also entails a comprehension of how humans develop and become competent (Elkjær 2005 cited in Filstad 2010). Following Filstad and McManus (2011), such a perspective requires a more holistic approach, where the focus is on the participation, situations or contexts and practice, to show the complex nature of learning at work. Complexity thinking implies that one considers “individual learners and their differences,

social learning and collective participation, together with how they all relate to each other” (Filstad and McManus 2011, 767). It underscores that learning is characterized as a complex social system, consisting of “a dynamic, complex process, embedded in the ways in which the forces within systems define the conditions of their interactions, as product and processes of a multiplicity of connections” (Antonacopoulou et al. 2006 cited in Filstad and McManus 2011, 768). Baets (2006) claims that learning consists of both external and internal factors, that are either individual or shared. These factors are experiences, individual and shared mental models, emotions, and interactions, which all interrelate. Emotions are identified as central for understanding learning in organizations, and should be acknowledged as a part of the experience, because of its impact on social relations and learning processes (Filstad 2010; Filstad and McManus 2011). In other words, one cannot only study activities or the practice to get an understanding of how learning takes place in an organization, but also needs to take aspects such as how the activities are experienced, how employees feel and why, how they interact and react, and how to facilitate for learning (Filstad and McManus 2011).

Considering the complexity of expatriates’ experiences is hence central to get an understanding of why they are applied as a strategic mechanism, and how they can share their knowledge when they return from abroad.

Knowing and its implications for knowledge sharing

Knowledge is understood as inseparable from practice, which is a process of social construction that takes place within specific material and social contexts (Chiva and Alegre 2005 cited in Filstad 2010). This process has been termed “knowing”, and seeks to shed light over how individuals are able to apply their knowledge in practice, as well as the social and context-dependent nature of knowledge (Cook and Brown 1999; Gherardi and Nicolini 2000; Filstad 2010; Newell et al. 2009). Gherardi and Nicolini (2000, 330) list four characteristics of organizational knowledge to illustrate the contextual and processual character of knowing: It is situated in a system of ongoing practice, it is mediated by artifacts, it is dynamic and relational, and it is rooted in an interaction context, and acquired through participation. Research supports this theory, as seen in Filstad (2010): More employees agree that they learn through practicing with colleagues as

compared to formal learning. This highlights the importance of informal learning in organizations. Learning and knowledge through practice entail that knowledge has its value as competence among the employees (Filstad 2010). However, learning and application of knowledge must lead to change of practice, which takes place through reflection over what we do, how we do it, and so on (Filstad 2010).

The character of knowing is crucial when analyzing expatriates' knowledge sharing, as it emphasizes the importance of social interaction and participation with colleagues for it to happen. Knowledge "flows where practice is shared, and sticks where practice is not shared" (Newell et al. 2009, 15). It shows how learning is situated and context-dependent, and that knowledge from other countries is not readily transferrable to the "home" contexts, but needs to be reflected upon through inquiry in order to be shared through practice. In addition to the necessity of analyzing expatriates' knowledge through a practice perspective, is it important to look at aspects that can hinder knowledge sharing within organizations.

What impedes or facilitates knowledge sharing?

Knowledge sharing is understood as "the act of making knowledge available to others within the organization" (Ipe 2003, 341). To apprehend knowledge sharing in an organization, one must understand knowledge sharing among individuals (Ipe 2003). Knowledge sharing takes place through actions that contribute to exchange of knowledge and can be a demanding and uncertain process (Filstad 2010). It is necessary to assess factors that hinders and facilitates for knowledge sharing within organizations in order to understand expatriates' knowledge sharing.

Mooradian, Renzl and Matzler's (2006) list four characteristics that influence employees' level of knowledge sharing, as mentioned in the introduction of the thesis. These will be expanded on in the following. First of all, the characteristics of the nature of knowledge influence the degree of knowledge sharing. Knowledge is understood as either explicit or tacit, but unlike the strategic interpretation on tacit knowledge as previously described, tacit knowledge cannot be transformed into explicit knowledge, according to Tsoukas (2003). He claims that tacit knowledge can only be captured in what we do, and

cannot be directly translated into explicit knowledge. It is not possible to express tacit knowledge, because “people know more than they can tell” (Polanyi 1966 as cited in Filstad 2010, 99). Tacit knowledge is attached to practice, in the specific action, taking place in a specific context and situation. To overcome this boundary makes it crucial to facilitate for learning through participation, and shows how knowledge is embedded in practice (Filstad 2010).

The next dimension Mooradian, Renzl and Matzler (2006) bring up is related to leadership, and how they facilitate for knowledge sharing. Knowledge is related to certain practices within specific contexts which limit the leader’s opportunities to guide knowledge sharing (Newell et al. 2009). It becomes vital for the leader to overcome this boundary by creating an enabling context which connects social groups, interest and different perspectives (Filstad 2010; Newell et al. 2009). The charismatic, inspirational, stimulating and individually considerate form of leadership known as transformational leadership has proved to promote the overall learning culture in organizations (Nemanich and Vera 2009). However, research has found that leadership practices that build trust in the team are more important than for practices related to trust in the leader themselves (Lee, Gillespie, Mann and Wearing 2010). Sharing of tacit knowledge presumes trusting relationships, because it requires employees to be vulnerable and uncertain (Newell et al. 2009). The informal opportunities for communication and knowledge sharing is hence of importance (Ipe 2003).

Environmental factors in an organization can limit knowledge sharing both on a micro and macro level (Mooradian, Renzl and Matzler 2006). Knowledge is embedded in material and physical objects that people use, which can both hinder and facilitate the practice. Practices are also interconnected in fields of practices, and are usually difficult to change, because it is time consuming and people resist change (Newell et al. 2009).

Mooradian, Renzl and Matzler (2006) mention also individual attributes that can hinder or encourage knowledge sharing. The employees tenure with the firm, their attitudes, motives and factors related to gender are of importance. Also, certain personality traits or enduring characteristics influence the level of knowledge shared (Matzler, Renzl, Mooradian, von Krogh and Mueller 2011). These factors emphasize that it takes more than comprehending the knowledge itself to get a grasp of knowledge sharing within organizations (Filstad 2010).

These perspectives will be further investigated in the analysis of how expatriates' knowledge is utilized, and what determines whether they choose to share knowledge or not in the organization. The procedures of how this information will be collected and analyzed are presented in the next chapter.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis seeks to contribute to get a more comprehensive understanding of why an organization applies expatriates as a knowledge sharing strategy, and how they accomplish it. In addition, it aims at examining how expatriates' knowledge is applied and utilized in the organization, and what impedes or facilitates for knowledge sharing.

To get a comprehension of the complexity in the expatriates' experiences and practice, it is important to enquire how they have experienced their time abroad, how they felt about the process, how they interacted with others and reacted to their experiences and how the organization have dealt with their expatriate knowledge (Filstad and McManus 2011). Thus, expatriates' experiences and reflections on their knowledge will be studied through qualitative methods, more precisely through the use of qualitative interviews. This will also be a case-study, because it is limited to one unity, in this case – one organization (Fog 2004; Locke and Golden-Biddle 2002). Through semi-structured interviews with several people from the same company makes it possible to get insights of the learning culture and knowledge sharing within one organization. The method is the preferred strategy when questions like “how” and “why” are asked and when studying complex phenomena (Yin 2003). It also makes it possible to get a holistic view of a process (Gummesson 2000).

One aim of qualitative interviews as a research method is to capture the expatriates' perspective; or their cognitive and emotional organizations of the world (Fog 2004). Another aim is to get a documented, empirical material of the interviewee's own descriptions or representations of themselves. Research based on this method seeks to uncover and understand the structure and logic of the interviewed, through systematic presentations of their descriptions (Fog 2004). The knowledge that is produced through interviews is constructed, relational, based on conversation, contextual, linguistic, narrative and pragmatic (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The interpretation of the knowledge will be based on the

theoretical points of view that were discussed above, seeing the interview as an opportunity to gain insights on expatriates' situated and practice-based knowledge. Ideally, the research design would include observations of expatriates when abroad, but in this thesis, their constructions over the topic will still be considered valid accounts of their experiences (Widerberg 2001).

Sample

The case to be studied in this thesis is a Norwegian MNC² within manufacturing industry. It has nearly 8000 employees world wide and is represented in 80 countries, but the headquarters is located one hour away from Oslo. They send a substantial number of expatriates abroad each year, as a strategy to develop "global careers", as it says on their home page. To gain a thorough insight into how and why they apply expatriates as a knowledge sharing strategy, the first interviews will be with head of HR and possibly others in the HR division. In addition, 12-15 interviews will be carried out with returned expatriates during the winter of 2012.

THESIS PROGRESSION PLAN

January 2012:

- Establish contact with organization(s)

February – April 2012:

- Decide on the research questions
- Develop interview guide
- Interviews with HR managers and around 15 returned expatriates
- Transcription of interviews (continuously)
- Analysis

May - June 2012:

- Analysis
- Exam period
- Finish 1st draft by 15th June and get feedback before July 1st

July – August 2012:

- Conclude

² I have been in contact with the company, and they are positive to the project, but I still await the confirmation. If I do not get this, I will contact other companies during January 2012.

- Proofread

September 2012:

- Submission of thesis September 1st

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