

**Increasing the effectiveness of  
international assignments:  
aligning them with the goals of the  
organization and assignees**



**Master Thesis Business Administration  
Specialization: International Management**

**by Anke Coorens (0147370)**

**25-10-2013**

*Supervisors:*

prof. dr. Carla Millar (1<sup>st</sup>, University)  
dr. Tanya Bondarouk (2<sup>nd</sup>, University)

**UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.**

## Summary

International assignments are relatively expensive undertakings, and especially in times of economic downturn these assignments should add (additional) value to an organization. An important step towards increasing the value of such assignments is increasing their effectiveness by aligning international assignments with the goals of an organization and the assignees.

According to scientific and professional literature, this alignment can be accomplished by:

- a. Following the 'global assignment cycle', which consists of the following stages:
  1. Defining the assignee profile
  2. Recruiting candidates
  3. Selecting an assignee
  4. Determining the compensation package
  5. Carrying out orientation and training + Determining assignment objectives
  6. Realizing the compensation package
  7. Executing the assignment
  8. Reintegrating the assignee
- b. Strong cooperation between the 'International Mobility' and 'Talent Management' functions.

The keywords that describe this entire process are 'strategic', 'formal' and 'repeatable'.

To determine if this 'ideal theoretical process' is – and if not, can be – used in practice, research is carried out at a multinational company. The process at the company is in general the opposite of the theoretical picture; although the company also follows the global assignment cycle the focus is on tactics rather than strategy, and there is little to no cooperation between International Mobility and Talent Management. Keywords that describe the process at the company are: 'ad hoc' and 'informal', making the process also quite fast and flexible.

Because of the major discrepancy between the theoretical and practical situation, the question became: To what extent can the ideal theoretical alignment process serve as a blue print for aligning the goals of the organization and assignees in this particular practical situation?

Increasing the effectiveness of international assignments by aligning them with the goals of the organization and assignees can at the company best be accomplished by:

- a. Following this modified 'global assignment cycle', which consists of the following stages:

1. *Issuing an international assignment*
  2. Defining the assignee profile
  3. Determining the compensation package + Recruiting candidates +  
Determining assignment objectives (business & organization)
  4. Selecting an assignee
  5. Carrying out orientation and training + Realizing the compensation  
package + Determining assignment objectives assignee
  6. Executing the assignment
  7. Reintegrating the assignee
  8. *Data gathering and analysis*
- b. Strong cooperation between primarily 'Talent Management', 'International Mobility', 'Business' and 'International Assignments'.

The functions that are primarily involved (Talent Management, International Mobility, Business and International Assignments), and the stages of the assignment cycle, are designed in a manner that ensures strategic and formal decision-making.

To maintain speed and flexibility, the basis of the global assignment cycle is shortened by carrying out certain stages simultaneously rather than consecutively, while two stages are added for strategic purposes. Furthermore, in light of speed and flexibility, an overview for several types of assignments is made indicating which stages are important, less important or even unimportant since some assignments need to be arranged very quickly while for others there is enough time to go through the entire cycle.

The loop that is implemented in the company tailored blue print is also a valuable addition to the literature as this allows for even more effective international assignments, and it also makes the global assignment cycle an actual 'cycle'.

## **Acknowledgements**

This master thesis is written to complete my Business Administration study with a specialization in International Management. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to prof. dr. Carla Millar, dr. Tanya Bondarouk (supervisors University of Twente) and my supervisor at the company, who have put time and energy in supporting me throughout this process. Furthermore, I would like to thank everyone at the company who made time to help me conduct my research. I have really enjoyed working on this master thesis with everyone.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction.

## 1. Introduction

Companies have always been moving employees around the world, but never to the extent that they are doing today; the number and variety of international assignments in globally operating companies is increasing rapidly due to globalization of the business environment (Deloitte, 2008). And this poses a challenge for HR professionals: they need to balance the needs of the organization as well as those of the assignees regarding international assignments, and make these assignments as valuable as possible on the short and long term (Caligiuri & Colakoglu, 2007).

Traditionally, international assignments are perceived as an extraordinary event and managed likewise: as a high-touch, low-volume activity. Every step in the process receives special attention and the main focus is on the short term needs, especially those of the assignee: 'how can we make the assignment as carefree and pleasant as possible?' (Deloitte, 2008).

Now that an increasing percentage of employees is involved in these relatively expensive international undertakings – a single long term assignment can easily top 1 million US dollars (Deloitte, 2010) – and companies are being affected by the economic crisis, the traditional approach will just not cut it anymore (Deloitte, 2008). Instead of only considering the short term needs of mainly the assignee, the goals of the company and those of the assignee are necessary to take into account to make sure that such expensive assignments are value adding to the organization on the short as well as the long term – so that an organization is positioned for success (Paauwe & Farndale, 2006; Deloitte, 2011).

An important step towards increasing the value of international assignments is increasing their effectiveness by aligning international assignments with the goals of an organization and its assignees. How this should be achieved is the focus of this thesis.

### 1.1. Research

#### 1.1.1. Research question

The thesis is based on one overarching research question, namely *'how should international assignments be aligned with the goals of the organization and the assignee?'*, which in turn consists of three sub questions:

- What should the alignment process look like?
- How should the stages of this process be filled in?
- Which organizational functions should be involved in every stage?



### **1.1.2. Research purpose and objective**

This study is carried out for a theoretical as well as practical reason. First of all, a clear description of how to align international assignments with the goals of an organization and its assignees does currently not exist. Although scientific and professional literature – often indirectly – describe how this should be done, the information is divided over many different articles and papers. Since every publication only covers a small piece of the puzzle, this thesis will first of all focus on combining and integrating this information to create an overview of the entire alignment process and therewith answer the research question from a theoretical perspective.

Second, it needs to be determined if this ‘ideal theoretical process’ is – and if not, can be – used in practice, which is why research is carried out at a multinational company that employs international assignees. To determine this, the current process at the company is analyzed to check if it matches the ideal theoretical picture as presented in the first part of this thesis; if it does not match, the following question is addressed: To what extent can the theoretical process serve as a blue print for this company? The answer will be in the form of company tailored management advice as to how to align international assignments with the goals of the organization and assignees, to increase the effectiveness of their international assignments.

The thesis will thus consist of two parts: a theoretical part and a practical part, which both answer the research question separately, leading to an ideal theoretical alignment process and possibly a somewhat different ideal practical process, should the theoretical solution not completely fit this specific practical situation.

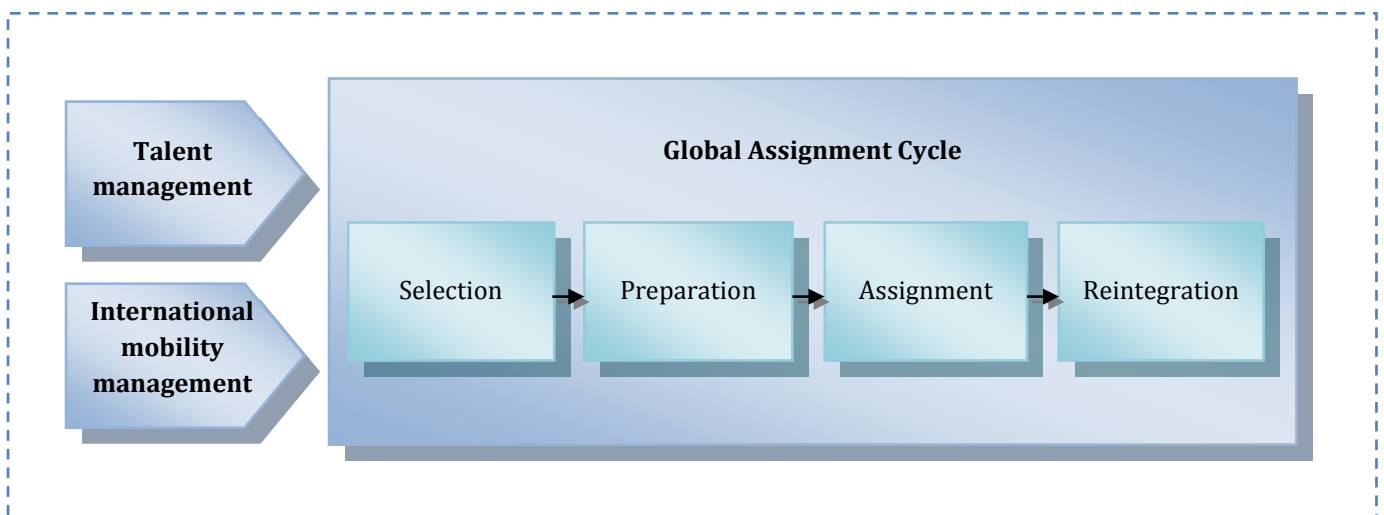
# Chapter 2: Literature Review.

## 2. Literature Review

According to the existing body of literature, international assignments can best be aligned with the goals of the organization and assignees by following the 'global assignment cycle' and by intensive collaboration between the 'Talent Management' and 'International Mobility' functions (see, for example, Caligiuri & Colakoglu, 2007; McKenna & Richardson, 2007; Reiche & Harzing, 2009; Deloitte, 2010).

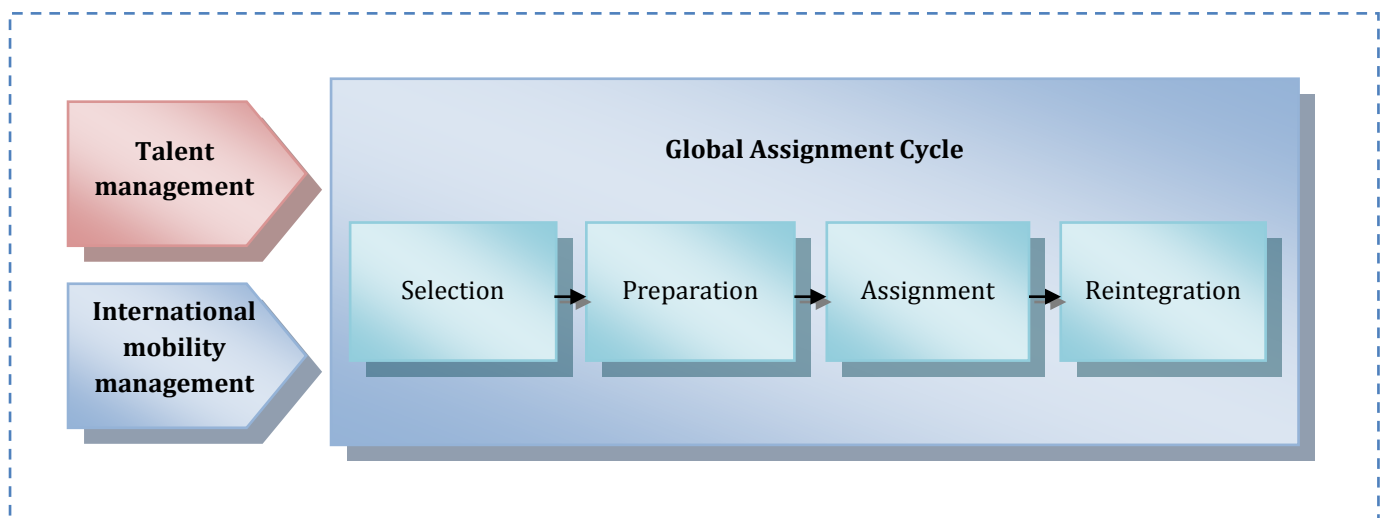
This chapter will therefore provide an overview of the current literature pertaining to these subjects in the context of international assignments, while integrating the different models and concepts in order to create a complete overview that answers the research question from a theoretical point of view.

For clarity, the literature review follows the below specified model that is displayed throughout this chapter indicating the specific stage that is addressed in a certain (sub)paragraph:



The chapter starts out by addressing the two functions that are primarily involved in the process regarding the alignment of international assignments with the goals of the organization and assignees: talent management and international mobility management; and continues with explaining the global assignment cycle, its specific components, and how it relates to the formerly mentioned functions.

## 2.1. Talent Management



### 2.1.1. Concept of Talent Management

Talent management has been a popular concept since McKinsey coined the phrase ‘War for Talent’ in the late 1990’s (McKinsey, 2001). But what is ‘talent’ exactly? Different organizations will have different definitions of talent – if defined at all. Based on several dictionaries, talent is “a natural ability to excel at a duty or action” or “a group of people, such as employees, who have a particular aptitude for certain tasks” (Business Dictionary, 2013; Collins Dictionary, 2013; Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2013a; Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). Talents through the eyes of an organization are thus in essence the individuals – either inside or outside the organization – that, due to their natural ability or aptitude, can carry out certain activities in such a way that they themselves, and consequently the company, excel in those activities, making a positive difference to organizational performance (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2012).

This is in line with why McKinsey (2001) introduced the phrase ‘War for Talent’, namely to emphasize the importance of employees regarding the success of top performing companies (Farndale, Scullion & Sparrow, 2010; Scullion, Collings & Caligiuri, 2010); “having great [...] talent has always been important, but now it is critical. In today’s competitive knowledge-based world, the caliber of a company’s talent increasingly determines success in the marketplace” (McKinsey, 2001).

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (2006), Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) are indeed increasingly realizing the importance of talent management and therefore believe that it cannot be solely left in the hands of the traditional Human Resources (HR) department anymore. Boudreau and Ramstad (2007) endorse this and argue that “HR must reposition itself as a

function and shift the emphasis from the provision of services to supporting key decisions within the business, particularly in relation to talent” (Vaiman, Scullion & Collings, 2012: p. 927).

Although ‘talent management’ has been widely used in organizations and scientific literature, it lacks a consistent definition and clear scope (Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Collings & Mellahi, 2009). In the jungle of definitions, Lewis & Heckman identified three key streams pertaining to talent management: one merely substitutes human resources management with the label talent management, the other focuses on developing ‘talent pools’ and the last one emphasizes the management of talent (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). A fourth stream is identified by Collings & Mellahi (2009); it puts the focus on identifying key positions that potentially have a significant positive effect on the competitive advantage of an organization (Huselid, Beatty & Becker, 2005; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007).

Looking at the variety of definitions, the core of talent management seems to come down to “it is simply a matter of anticipating the need for human capital and then setting out a plan to meet it” (Capelli, 2008: 1). Companies that use talent management are consciously engaged in how people can best be moved through the organization to optimize the value of the company. This process of moving employees ranges from attracting new talent to training, developing, retaining and promoting them throughout their career within the organization, and if necessary letting them go (van der Sluis, 2008).

Due to today’s global business environment MNC’s are now increasingly moving their talent, and therefore the processes related to talent management, across national borders which has led to the term: ‘global talent management’ (Farndale, Scullion & Sparrow, 2010).

### **2.1.2. Global Talent Management**

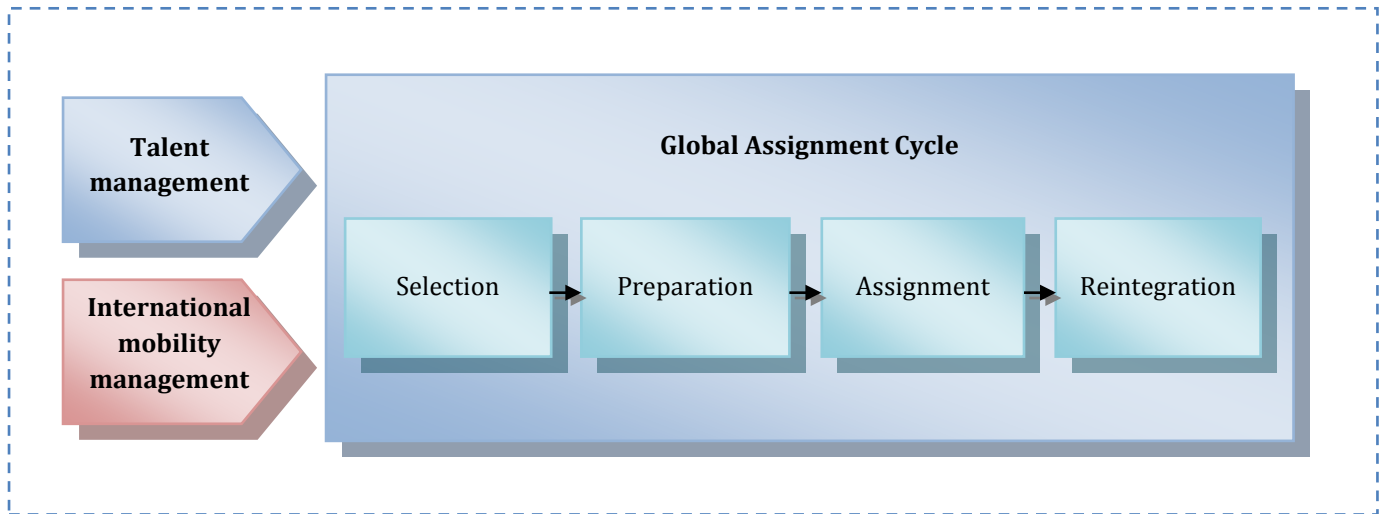
As there is no more a consensus on the term ‘global talent management’ as there is on ‘talent management’, Scullion, Collings & Caligiuri (2010) propose a collective definition of global talent management based on the wide array of definitions that is described in scientific literature: “Global talent management includes all organizational activities for the purpose of attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining the best employees in the most strategic roles (those roles necessary to achieve organizational strategic priorities) on a global scale. Global talent management takes into account the differences in both organizations’ global strategic priorities as well as the differences across national contexts for how talent should be managed in the countries where they operate” (p. 106).

Global talent management is a relatively new multidisciplinary function that has rapidly emerged as a key strategic issue for MNC's due to several factors (Tarique & Schuler, 2010). First of all, according to Bartlett & Ghoshal (1989) scholars and organizations started to recognize the critical role that globally competent managers play in the success of MNC's, "reflecting the intensification of global competition and the greater need for international learning and innovation" (Scullion, Collings & Caligiuri, 2010: p. 106). Second, where competition for talent between organizations primarily used to exist within national boundaries, this has now shifted to a war for talent on a regional and global level as well (Sparrow, Brewster and Harris, 2004) because MNC's are realizing that the talent they require may not necessarily be located nearby (Ready & Conger, 2007). This however means that MNC's are increasingly competing for the same talents, which makes attracting and retaining such employees more difficult than before (Stahl, Bjorkman, Farndale, Morris, Paauwe & Stiles, 2007). Third, although unemployment is increasing due to the financial crisis, MNC's face talent shortages in terms of managers and professionals nonetheless (Scullion & Starkey, 2000; Bjorkman & Lervik, 2007; Schuler, Jackson & Tarique, 2012), which can be explained by the fact that "more people available on the labor market does not necessarily mean that employers are able to find the level of skilled managers and professionals they are seeking" (Farndale, Scullion & Sparrow, 2010: p. 162). This in turn leads to the fourth factor: These talent shortages are forming a constraint on successfully implementing global strategies (Scullion, 1994; Cohn, Khurana & Reeves, 2005) and therefore on the successful execution of global operations (Sparrow, Brewster & Harris, 2004; Stahl et al., 2007). Finally, the rapid growth of emerging markets demands talent that can effectively operate in geographically and culturally distant markets (Scullion, Collings & Gunnigle, 2007).

Although organizations are recognizing the importance of globally managing talent, the extent to which they effectively manage their talent leaves tremendous room for improvement (Cohn, Khurana & Reeves, 2005; Scullion & Collings, 2006). This is endorsed by the Boston Consulting Group (2007) who determined that Talent Management is among the top five key challenges that HR departments are facing, and at the same time it is one of the areas HR is the least competent in. MNC's are for example often unable to identify who the talents are and where they are located (Collings, Scullion & Morley, 2007), which is a critical issue since an asset that is unknown cannot be leveraged (Scullion, Collings & Caligiuri, 2010).

As international assignments are often carried out by talents from either inside or outside the organization that can be of considerable value for the organization, the talent management and international mobility function should engage in intensive cross-functional collaboration (Farndale, Scullion & Sparrow, 2010).

## 2.2. International Mobility Management



### 2.2.1. Global workforces

Globalization of business has led to organization's workforces being increasingly spread across the world (Rosenzweig, 1998) and 'global staffing' becoming an HR practice used by MNC's to control and coordinate their globally dispersed operations (Scullion & Collings, 2006). Global staffing is defined as: "the critical issues faced by multinational corporations with regard to the employment of home, host and third country nationals to fill key positions in their headquarters and subsidiary operations" (Scullion & Collings, 2006: p. 3). The critical issues this definition refers to are primarily related to the process that ranges from selection of employees for international assignments to their reintegration once the assignment is completed.

In addition to the difficulties pertaining to attracting employees for international assignments, international business keeps evolving and ensures that global staffing is becoming increasingly complex (Collings & Scullion, 2012) since, for example, international assignments increase in numbers and change in nature (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl & Kollinger, 2004; Shen, 2004; Shih, Chiang & Kim, 2005); having HR professionals encounter many new and complex challenges as they attempt to master the global environment their company is operating in (Ryan, Wiechmann & Hemingway, 2003).

### 2.2.2. Shift in global mobility programs

One of the most important changes that contributes to the increasing complexity of global staffing is the recent shift in so called 'global mobility programs' that has occurred. When companies first started to compete in global markets, sending employees on foreign assignments

for extended periods of time became a commonality among MNC's (Stahl, Miller & Tung, 2002; Bolino, 2007). The vast majority of those assignments consisted of expatriate assignments (Fenwick, 2004): "professionals sent by their employers to foreign subsidiaries or headquarters" (Expatriate Foundation, 2013). Lately however, there has been a shift in the so called 'global mobility' programs of MNC's; they are slowly moving away from those traditional long term international assignments, towards various types of alternatives that involve frequent international travel, and can range from daily commuting to short term placement abroad (Brewster, Harris & Petrovic, 2001; Welch, Worm & Fenwick, 2003; Mayerhofer et al., 2004; Society for Human Resource Management, 2004; Mayerhofer, Sparrow & Zimmermann, 2008) on any organizational level (Mayerhofer, Hartmann & Herbert, 2004).

There is a broad range of rationales underlying this recent shift towards alternative assignments. One important reason for many companies nowadays is cost containment due to the financial crisis (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2005; Collings, Scullion & Morley, 2007; McKenna & Richardson, 2007); it is estimated that the costs of employing an expatriate are three to five times as high as the employee's 'standard' salary would be (Selmer, 2001). Companies are therefore exploring cheaper alternatives, which they often seem to find in short term and flexible assignments as these are less expensive because the assignments are often shorter and the assignees do not require the same, expensive, organizational support that long term assignees require (Collings, Scullion & Morley, 2007; Friedman, 2010).

Another major reason why alternatives are becoming more popular over the last years is immobility among employees. One rationale behind this is the increase in dual-career couples, especially in developed countries. These couples are often not willing to move abroad as the partner has a career of his or her own and they do not want to leave that behind (Collings, Scullion & Morley, 2007; Welch, Welch & Worm, 2007). In addition, families seem to be less willing to let long term assignments disrupt their lives than they were in the past (Forster, 2000). In both cases alternative assignments that do not 'require' the families to relocate seem to be a solution.

Furthermore, where organizations often utilized expatriates to overcome the non-presence of qualified or easily trainable local individuals in the host country (Edstrom & Galbraith, 1977), there is a "growing availability of skilled local staff" (Bonache, Brewster & Suutari, 2007: p. 5) who can be used to fill the open positions.

Also, there are "new organizational trends such as networking, outsourcing and work in project teams" (Gustafson, 2012: p. 276), which ask for regular contact across borders. Although the communication between the people involved can take place virtually (Bonache et al., 2007), researchers emphasize the importance of physical presence as "more complex forms of



communication require face-to-face interaction, and in external contacts – sales in particular – travel and personal presence are often regarded as an expression of commitment” (Gustafson, 2012: p. 276) (Urry, 2003; Aguilera, 2008; Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, Derudder & Witlox, 2009).

A final reason for this trend towards alternatives is the growing recognition that the problems expatriates face upon re-entry are not dealt with by organizations in a sympathetic manner. Although companies often present long term assignments as ‘a ticket to the top’ (Lublin, 1996; Mendenhall, Kuhlmann, Stahl & Osland, 2002; Stahl, Miller & Tung, 2002; Demel & Mayerhofer, 2010), many former expatriates state that the assignment has actually adversely affected their careers (Bolino, 2007: p. 820) because employers do not value their newly gained skills and experience (Baughn, 1995; Selmer, 1999; Bossard & Peterson, 2005) and due to the ‘out of sight out of mind syndrome’ they have a disadvantage upon re-entry compared to employees in the home country that have maintained close ties with key decision-makers and are therefore more aware of internal career opportunities (Feldman and Thomas, 1992; Makela, 2007; Dickmann & Doherty, 2008). This makes employees reluctant to accept a long term international assignment, which could – depending on the situation – be (partly) solved by offering short term or flexible positions (Scullion, 2001; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005).

Due to a changing environment alternative assignments are thus becoming more popular among MNC’s and are sometimes even substituting long term assignments. The most common international assignments that are currently present in global mobility programs are discussed below.

### **2.2.3. Types of international assignments**

There are six general types of international assignments (Society for Human Resource Management, 2004; Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007; Frase, 2007; Welch, Welch & Worm, 2007; Reiche & Harzing, 2009):

Type of assignment	Description
<b>Long term</b>	One assignment → return to home country after assignment 1+ year Home based contract Accompanied
<b>Short term</b>	One assignment → return to home country after assignment 1 – 12 months Home based contract Unaccompanied
<b>International commuter</b>	One assignment → return to home country after assignment Undefined length of time (often up to 2 years) Home based contract Unaccompanied
<b>International business traveler</b>	Frequent travel for business purposes → return to home country after each business trip Undefined length of time Home based contract Unaccompanied
<b>Localized transfer</b>	One assignment → permanent local status after assignment Indefinite Host based contract with some centrally arranged benefits Accompanied
<b>Global nomad</b>	Consecutive assignments Undefined length of time Host based contract with some centrally arranged benefits Accompanied

[Table 2.1] *Types of international assignments*

Long term international assignments, also known as ‘expatriate assignments’, are the traditional choice when it comes to international assignments: the assignee and his or her family relocate from the home to the host country for the duration of the assignment – which is at least one year – and return home after the assignment has ended. Long term international assignees work on a so called ‘home based’ contract, which means that during the assignment “the employee maintains ties with the home employer via his work contract and a compensation of reference [equivalent to what the employee would have received if he had remained in the home location] that will be used as the basis for the calculation of his expatriation package” (RH Expat, 2010).

Short term assignments are also based on a home based contract but do, in logical contrast to long term assignments, only last for one to twelve months. Due to the short nature of this

assignment and the fact that the assignee will return to the home country again once the assignment is finished, he or she is not accompanied by family.

International commuters are not accompanied either since their assignment is executed by commuting between the home and host country on an often weekly or bi-weekly basis for an undefined period of time (Reiche & Harzing, 2009) – although most companies will not make such assignments last longer than two years because depending on the distance to bridge the commuting may be very demanding. Since the assignee is commuting to the host country and not moving, the corresponding contract is home based.

International business travelers in essence have the same characteristics as international commuters, the difference however is that international commuters travel to the same country on a regular basis, while international business travelers frequently make trips abroad that last from a few days to several weeks, often to different countries; the major difference is thus that commuters have a regular work scheme while business travelers often have an irregular work scheme (Reiche & Harzing, 2009).

Moving on to the assignments on 'host based' contracts – assignments during which the assignee's contractual ties with the home employer are usually suspended for the duration of the assignment (RH Expat, 2010). Localized transfers are assignees that move to the host country with their family and are hired to work there for an indefinite period of time which at a certain point leads to them changing to 'permanent local status'. Although the contract is host based and the assignee is moving permanently, localized transfer assignees receive some centrally arranged benefits such as moving assistance.

The last type is the increasingly popular global nomad (Mercer, 2012); this is an employee that moves from one country to another by executing consecutive international assignments. Although a global nomad may be categorized under one or more of the above mentioned assignments as they occur in the form of a series, this type deserves to be mentioned separately because the conditions in terms of for example rewards differ from the other assignments.

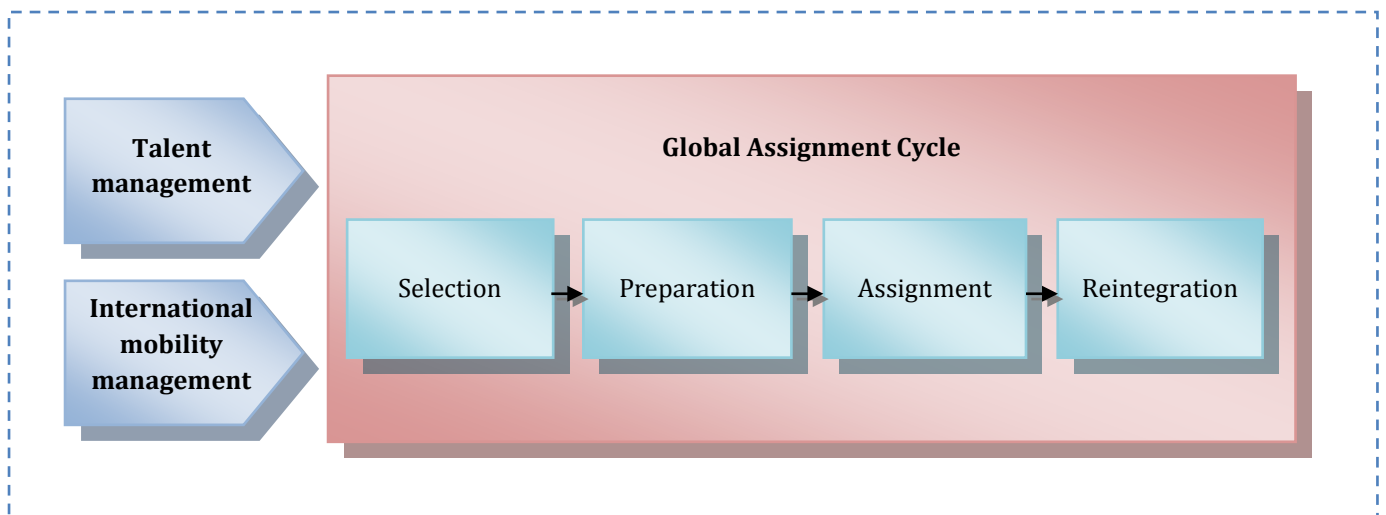
#### **2.2.4. Redesigning International Mobility**

Where the activities surrounding international assignments are traditionally handled in a high-touch, low volume manner by HR departments, and more recently by the specially created International Mobility functions, the complexity of international assignments is increasing in a way that this 'extraordinary event' approach will just not work any longer (Deloitte, 2008). International Mobility functions are therefore being asked to go beyond the operational task of simply filling international positions and making sure that the correct services are delivered; they are asked to take on a more strategic approach towards international assignments to

ensure such undertakings deliver long term business value (Deloitte, 2010; Farndale, Scullion & Sparrow, 2010).

To achieve this, general HR functions should be shaped in a way that they can handle the day-to-day administrative tasks pertaining to international assignments – which are often not that different from the tasks they are already performing – so that the International Mobility function has the time to focus on the strategic side; i.a. aligning international assignments with the goals of the organization and assignees, by closely working together with the Talent Management function and performing an advisory role towards business leaders in charge of those international assignments (Deloitte, 2010).

## 2.3. Global Assignment Cycle

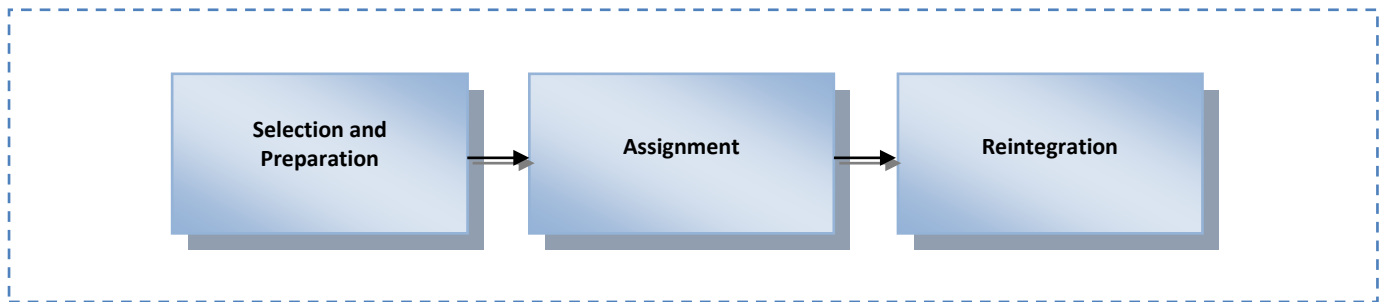


### 2.3.1. Phases global assignment cycle

Although the different types of international assignments have their own specific characteristics, they can all be said to follow the 'global assignment cycle' process. According to Collings, Doherty, Luethy & Osborn (2011) international assignments consist of the three broadly defined phases: 'before', 'during' and 'after' the assignment. The global assignment cycle specifies these phases as 'selection and preparation', 'actual assignment' and 'repatriation' (Bonache, Brewster & Suutari, 2001). As becomes clear by the use of the word 'repatriation', this cycle is normally only used with regards to expatriation. However, by converting 'repatriation' into 'reintegration' it can be used for most of the other types of assignments as well since the majority of the assignees, although it might not always be to the same extent, have to reintegrate after their assignment is completed.

Furthermore, companies often do exactly what ‘repatriation’ is defined as, namely “return [assignees] to the country of origin” (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2013b). While this might be true in theory, since companies do send assignees and possibly their families back to the home country at a certain point in time, it is often not ‘home’ anymore for the individuals involved; the country, the organization, the assignee and the family may have changed during the course of the assignment. According to Mirasol (2012) it is therefore time to start using the word ‘integration’ instead of ‘repatriation’. This also means that ‘reintegration’ would not be the end of the global assignment cycle anymore, but more of a mid-point as Doherty, Brewster, Suutari & Dickmann (2008) point out; which also highlights the importance of (more) organizational support after the assignment.

The (modified) model that is the basis of this paper therefore looks as follows:



[Fig. 2.1] *Global assignment cycle*

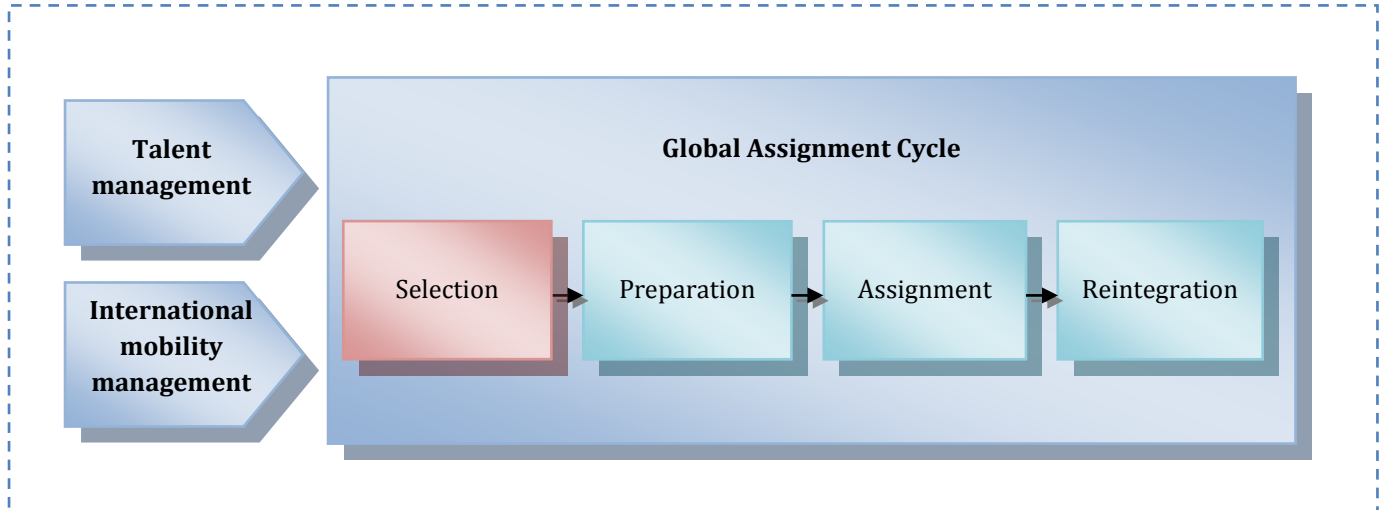
Each phase in the global assignment cycle consists of various aspects; the specific aspects pertaining to this research are mentioned below and will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs:

- Selection:
  - o Defining a suitable<sup>1</sup> assignee profile.
  - o Recruiting candidates.
  - o Selecting the assignee.
- Preparation:
  - o Determining the compensation package.
  - o Determining the assignment objectives.
  - o Orientation and training.
  - o Realizing the compensation package
- Actual assignment:
  - o Executing the assignment.

<sup>1</sup> Suitable: Right or appropriate for a particular purpose or situation (MacMillan Dictionary, 2013).

- Reintegration:
  - o Reintegrating the assignee.

### 2.3.2. Selection



#### 2.3.2.1. Defining the assignee profile

An active strategic approach towards international assignments Harris & Brewster (1999), which is necessary to properly align such assignments with the goals of the organization and assignees, can be adopted by first of all defining a suitable assignee profile that is based on criteria that the organization considers to be important; such as purpose and business drivers of the assignment, its rationale, certain assignee characteristics and possibly the duration of the assignment. The effective determination of the nature and type of assignment and therefore assignee will largely depend on how clear and well defined these criteria are (McKenna & Richardson, 2007). The criteria are to be defined by the International Mobility function, whereas the profile itself is ideally determined through cooperation between International Mobility and the business leader who is in charge of the specific assignment (Deloitte, 2010).

##### *Purpose and business drivers assignment*

To ensure successful and value adding international assignments, the purpose and business drivers of the assignment are important to be identified in relation to the company's business strategy and goals/objectives (McKenna & Richardson, 2007). International assignments can be used for various reasons and PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2006) identified three broad types of purposes which are in turn associated with several primary business drivers:

- Purpose: Control and coordination.
  - o Business drivers: control, transfer of corporate culture, knowledge/process/technology transfer, launch of new initiatives.

- Purpose: Developmental.
  - o Business drivers: planned career development, global leadership.
- Purpose: Short term business needs.
  - o Business drivers: skills shortage, rapid deployment.

Once the general purpose and business drivers of an assignment are clear, the organization can determine its corresponding rationale and therewith set the first step in defining the assignee profile that suits the assignment.

#### *Rationale assignment*

According to Deloitte's (2007) 'Global Mobility Framework' there are four types of rationales that can characterize international assignments:

- Strategic opportunities, or strategic assignments (Stahl, Chua, Caliguiri, Cerdin & Taniguchi, 2007), are a means for employees to gain strategic international experience and they should preferably be executed by the 'superstars' – the future leaders – of the company as these assignments have a "significant and lasting impact on the company" (Deloitte, 2007: p. 11); which is why the focus is not only development and experience, but also on retention of these assignees. These assignment are characterized by a high developmental as well as business value.
  - Purpose: control and coordination.
- Learning experience, or developmental assignments (Stahl et al., 2007), are most suitable to the 'rising stars' of the company; employees with high potential that need investment in terms of gaining competencies and international experience. This sole focus on learning however means that the short term business value of such assignments is relatively low.
  - Purpose: developmental.
- Skilled position, or functional assignments (Stahl et al., 2007), are used to execute a specialized job that cannot be done by a local – either on a management or technical level – as quickly and painless as possible, and are therefore reserved for employees with deeply specialized skills that have demonstrated to be performers. Since the assignees carrying out such assignments are highly specialized, the developmental value is low but the business value is high.
  - Purpose: short term business needs.
- Commodity jobs are relatively simple assignments that are not really beneficial for the company or for the employee involved, but that just need to be done. The assignees selected for these assignments are therefore often 'volunteers' who want to work in a foreign country for personal rather than professional reasons. Such assignments may

produce some developmental or business value, but this is not part of the planned results.

→ Purpose: N/A.

The purpose, business drivers and the rationale behind an assignment thus influence the assignee selection criteria, as it is clear that not every type of employee is suited to carry out a certain assignment.

#### *Assignee characteristics*

In addition to the general type of assignee, such as 'superstar', 'rising star', 'highly specialized' or 'volunteer' it can be beneficial for a company to define several individual and/or situational characteristics that are considered to be important for the assignment. Individual characteristics are for example (technical) competence, years of employment with the company, cross-cultural suitability and family situation, whereas situational characteristics refer to country/cultural requirements, language and so forth.

Naturally, a person's (technical) competence to perform the required tasks is important to consider since assignees are often located at some distance from the company's headquarters and can therefore not always easily consult with peers and/or superiors (Tung, 1981; Dowling, Festing & Engle, 2008). Furthermore, years of employment with the company can be important to take into account because the assignment might ask for someone who is familiar with company affairs and its culture, or just the opposite. Depending on the host country and culture, assignees may require cross-cultural abilities that enable the person to "live and work with people whose value systems, beliefs, customs, manners and ways of conducting business may greatly differ from one's own" (Reiche & Harzing, 2009: p. 27) because the chances of completing the assignment successfully can greatly depend on this ability (Tung, 1981; Dowling, Festing & Engle, 2008). Finally, regarding the personal characteristics, the family situation is important to consider since carrying out an international assignment may impact the assignee and his or her family substantially; they either have to relocate or are frequently separated from each other (Dowling, Festing & Engle, 2008; Reiche & Harzing, 2009).

As for the situational characteristics, the country/cultural requirements are important to take in consideration because not all host governments easily issue entry visas and work permits for a 'parent country national' (PCN) or 'third country national' (TCN). International firms may be required to prove that there is no 'host country national' (HCN) available to carry out the assignment before the necessary documents are issued. It is therefore crucial that a company is aware of relevant legislation regarding the country the assignment will be taking place in (Dowling, Festing & Engle, 2008). To conclude, language skills may be viewed as important for



some assignments; regardless of the level of position it is often considered to be more important for long term than short term or flexible assignments (Dowling, Festing & Engle, 2008).

Although it might not be as easy due to the difficult-to-measure nature of most characteristics, taking the, for the assignment, important characteristics into account during the process of defining a suitable assignee profile is beneficial for both the assignee and the company in terms of performance during the assignment.

#### *Duration*

The duration of an international assignment can fall into three broad categories (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2006):

- Short term assignments.
- Medium term assignments.
- Long term assignments.

The choice of duration primarily depends on the purpose, business drivers and consequently rationale of the assignment. A strategic assignment with the aim of transferring knowledge will for example most often be a medium to long term assignment since transferring knowledge takes time to do; whereas an acute skills shortage will likely result in a short term assignment to either resolve the issue in a short period of time or to bridge the time that it takes to find a (new) suitable HCN.

According to PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2006) it can be stated that short term assignments are related to short term business needs, medium to long term assignments to the purpose of control and coordination and long term assignments to developmental opportunities. This is however only a general guideline as it primarily depends on the specific purpose, business drivers and rationale pertaining to the assignment.

Once the suitable assignee profile is defined, the company can start to recruit candidates.

#### **2.3.2.2. Recruiting candidates**

The recruitment of individuals who might fit the defined assignee profile is preferably done by the business in charge of the particular assignment, in consultation with the International Mobility and Talent Management functions (Deloitte, 2010; Scullion, Collings & Caligiuri, 2010). The process starts out by determining in what manner the pool of possible assignees is created (Newell, 2005). There are various ways to obtain a – preferably broad and diverse – candidate pool; Ullman (1966) groups recruitment sources into two categories: formal and informal.

Formal manners of recruitment include reaching people through public advertisements in newspapers, on the radio or on the internet, and using employment agencies; any person may choose to apply for the position (Werbel & Landau, 1996; Ibicioblu & Keklik, 2008). This method often ensures that the advertisement reaches a large amount of potential candidates, it however also has the risk of obtaining a relatively large amount of un-qualified applicants as the applicants may not exactly know what the job encompasses or may not meet the defined criteria but apply anyway (Worqplace, 2012).

Informal recruitment sources can include employee referrals, self-initiated applications such as walk- and write-ins, word of mouth advertisement, and addressing personal networks. The consequence of this method is that only a relatively small and selective group of people is informed about the vacancy, having the advantage however of minimizing the risk that un-qualified candidates apply as the people who pass the message – such as employees and HR professionals – are often well aware of what the assignment specifications are and can match that to a person (Ibicioblu & Keklik, 2008).

Instead of formal and informal sources, recruitment can also be grouped into the two following categories: external and internal (Chan, 1996; McKenna & Richardson, 2007).

External recruitment takes place outside the organization. External manners of recruitment can include all kinds of public advertisements, using professional recruitment firms and personal networks (Ibicioblu & Keklik, 2008). External recruitment has the advantage of being able to choose between a relatively large amount of potential candidates, but is often also costly in comparison to internal recruitment (Chan, 1996).

Internal recruitment takes place within the organization itself, and includes methods such as performance-based promotion, seniority-based promotion, job enlargement and rotation or internal transfers (Ibicioblu & Keklik, 2008). Searching for candidates internally does not only have a cost advantage, it also ensures that the candidates will have firm specific-knowledge that outsiders do not have. Organizations will therefore rarely choose to recruit externally when they already have employees that are qualified for the job; an external candidate must often “show a significant margin of superiority” (Chan, 1996: p. 556) before they are chosen for a position and an existing employee is therefore passed over. This preference for internal solutions is even present in situations where firm-specific knowledge is rather unimportant for the assignment and reliable information about qualified external candidates is available; especially in large organizations that are structured in a bureaucratic manner and have institutionalized career ladders (Chan, 1996).

International assignments may be carried out by employees that are recruited either way – internally, externally, formally or informally – however depending on the purpose, business drivers and rationale of an assignment, the type of recruitment may already be pre-determined. Developmental assignments that are used for career development for example, will usually only be carried out by the rising stars within the organization, as the objective is to develop those employees and retain them as they are seen as the future leaders of the company. When there is a short term business need due to a temporary skills shortage however, the position may in certain cases be filled with anyone – either from inside or outside the organization – who has the skills to perform the job.

When the method(s) of recruitment suited to the international assignment are determined and the recruitment process is completed, the company can proceed to the process of selecting an assignee.

### **2.3.2.3. Selection of the assignee**

Placing employees abroad “can play a key role in innovation, organizational learning and corporate integration” (Collings, Scullion & Dowling, 2009: p. 1254) but to achieve this, suitable assignees have to be selected for the assignments.

“Selection is the process of measuring differences between [the recruited] candidates to find the person who has the profile which best matches the specification as indicated by the [defined assignee] profile” (Newell, 2005: p. 117). It is about “making a fair and accurate assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of applicants and how to identify the candidate who is most likely to perform well [during the assignment]” (Elearn, 2009: p. 1). This process as well is ideally carried out by collaboration between the business overseeing the assignment, International Mobility and Talent Management (Deloitte, 2010; Scullion, Collings & Caligiuri. 2010).

An organization is best able to optimize its operations and increase its value if it adopts a formal selection system that focuses on long term global talent needs instead of solely reacting to individual situations when they arise (Pulakos, 2005; Deloitte, 2007). Such formal selection systems, which should be developed by ‘organizational decision makers and HR professionals (Pulakos, 2005) – no exact function is mentioned in the literature – make use of clearly defined criteria and measures and have someone who is trained for selecting employees, or assignees in particular, carry out this process.

There are two types of formal assessment methods: Knowledge, skills and ability (KSA) tests, and task-based tests. Both methods can be used for internal and external selection, although KSA tests often seem to be the preferred choice when assessing external candidates (Pulakos, 2005).

KSA tests include:

- Cognitive ability tests: “These assessments measure a variety of mental abilities, such as verbal and mathematical ability, reasoning ability and reading comprehension” (Pulakos, 2005: 6). Such tests have proved to be extremely good predictors regarding job performance and are for that reason often used in the selection-making process of various job types (Gottfredson, 1982; Hunter, 1986; Ree, Earles & Teachout, 1994).
- Job knowledge tests: “These assessments measure critical knowledge areas that are needed to perform a job effectively” (Pulakos, 2005: 7). The knowledge areas that are measured generally represent some sort of technical knowledge and are therefore used in selection processes with candidates that already possess a certain amount of knowledge and do not need to learn that on the job (Pulakos, 2005).
- Personality tests: Personality factors that are typically assessed are conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience and emotional stability (Barrick & Mount, 1999; Costa & McCrae, 1992). Such tests have been proven to be effective predictors of job performance, provided that the measured traits are relevant to the job performance (Tett, Jackson & Rothstein, 1991; Raymark, Schmit & Guion, 1992). Conscientiousness appears to be the most useful predictor across a variety of jobs, however the other traits have also shown to be useful for job types (Hough, 1992).
- Biographical data: Such tests assess candidates based on their background and personal characteristics or interests. The reasoning behind it is that past performance is the best predictor of future performance, which has indeed been shown to be an effective performance predictor (Stokes, Mumford & Owens, 1994; Shoenfeldt, 1999; Pulakos, 2005).
- Integrity tests: Integrity tests are used to measure candidates’ attitudes and experiences pertaining to his or her honesty, trustworthiness and dependability (Goldberg et al., 1991; Ones, Viswesvaran & Schmidt, 1993; Camara & Schneider, 1994; Sackett & Wanek, 1996).
- Structured interviews: These interviews are designed to determine important knowledge, skills and abilities that are required for a certain job, by using a specific set of questions (Campion, Pursell & Brown, 1988; Eder & Ferris, 1989; Judge, Higgins & Cable, 2000) Although structured interviews can be used for the measurement of all sorts of knowledge, skills and abilities, they are most often used to measure a person’s ‘softer skills’ (i.e. interpersonal skills, leadership, planning and adaptability). A structured interview is only effective if it is equipped with standardized rating criteria, so that the interviewer can judge the quality and effectiveness of the received responses (Pulakos, 2005).

- Physical fitness test: These tests require the candidate to perform general physical activities as some jobs require an assessment of a candidate's physical fitness (Pulakos, 2005).

Task-based tests include:

- Situational judgment tests: Such tests assess candidates based on how they would handle the presented situations (Motowidlo, Dunette & Carter, 1990; Chan & Schmitt, 1997; Weichmann, Schmitt & Harvey, 2001). Candidates are typically asked to select the most effective and least affective solutions to a particular issue; which makes the tests rather complicated to develop as it is difficult to develop scenarios with solutions that are all viable and then decide which ones are the most and least effective (Pulakos, 2005).
- Work sample tests: These tests are designed to mirror the tasks that an employee would be required to perform in the job that the candidate is applying for (Asher & Scairring, 1974; Howard, 1983; Hunter & Hunter, 1984). Work sample tests can measure almost any job task, but are often used to measure technical-oriented tasks. As is true for job knowledge tests, this one is also only to be used when the candidates already know how to perform the task prior to job entry (Pulakos, 2005).
- Assessment centers: This is similar to the work sample test however it focuses on the assessing the competencies of higher-level managers and supervisors (Thornton & Byham, 1982; Gaugler et al., 1987; Thornton, 1992). "Candidates are asked to complete a series of exercises that simulate actual situations, problems and tasks that they would face on the job for which they are being considered, and they are asked to handle these as if they were in the real situation" (Pulakos, 2005: 14).
- Physical ability tests: These tests are used to select employees that are applying for physically demanding jobs (Campion, 1983; Hogan, 1991; Blakely et al., 1994) Physical ability tests are like work sample tests in the sense that it is assessed if a candidate can indeed perform the job. This is also why it is different from a physical fitness tests: a physical ability test replicates a job (task) (Pulakos, 2005).

"It is important for HR professionals to understand the implications and tradeoffs involved in using different types of assessment methods. There is no simple, formulaic approach for selecting 'one best' assessment method, because all of them have advantages and disadvantages" (Pulakos, 2005: 17).

It should be noted that the test criteria may be clearly defined, but not all of these tests meet the criteria of validity and allow for objective measurement, which can make the selection process somewhat difficult; work sample tests are for example quite easy to measure, whereas

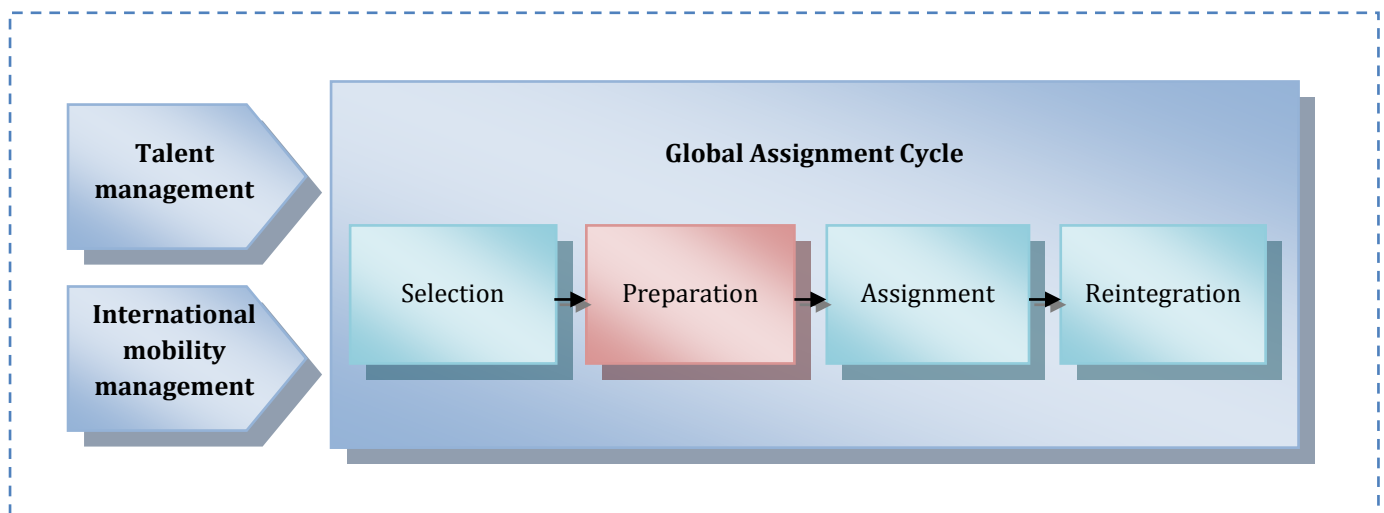
personality tests are more difficult (Pulakos, 2005). However scholars as well as practitioners agree that personal characteristics are important with regards to international assignments (see § 2.3.2.1), so how should this be handled?

Even though a test may have low validity and does not allow for truly objective measurement, it can actually be of value in the sense that it provides some guidelines in the selection process for the person who has to decide whether or not a candidate is suitable for the assignment (Baliga & Baker, 1985). Furthermore it can ensure some consistency in the selection process if used throughout the entire company.

Consistency is very important because no matter how a company decides to assess potential assignees, it is crucial that selection process is perceived as consistent by applicants since that makes them more likely to view the organization as favorable and as a consequence they generally have stronger intentions to accept an assignment (Hausknecht, Day & Thomas, 2004).

Once the most suitable test and candidate for the job is chosen and he or she is still willing to take on the assignment – selection is a two-way process in which the candidate may also decide to reject the international assignment due to personal reasons or situational factors (Reiche & Harzing, 2009) – the preparation stage can be put in motion.

### 2.3.3. Preparation



#### 2.3.3.1. Determination of the compensation package

To avoid the determination of the assignee's compensation package being a time intensive process that is done differently for every single assignment, it can best be determined by using a set of standard cost projections for a variety of assignment types, locations and durations, based on the organization's policies. Such a variety of standard cost projections cannot only help in determining whether or not an assignment is financially viable, it can also lead to the early

discovery of less expensive alternatives (Mercer, 2013). The function that according to Deloitte (2010) should design these projections is International Mobility as they are aware of which (level of) compensation suits particular assignments, durations and locations.

Crucial components in international assignment cost projections are all compensation-related elements (i.e. base salary, expat-premium, mobility premium, cost of living allowance), relocation costs and an estimation of the worldwide tax and social security liability (RH Expat, 2010; Mercer, 2013). The base package – from which the variety of cost projections based on assignment type, location and duration can be derived – is usually based on one of the four following standards: Home-based, host based, local plus or international.

A home-based package means that the base salary is comparable to the base salary that is paid to employees in the assignee's home country. Host-based on the other hand refers to a base salary that is aligned with the base salary of employees in the host country (RelocationProcurement, 2012; Jones, 2013). A local-plus approach means that the base salary is derived from local salary levels, and that it is supplemented by benefits and allowances pertaining to the assignment. The international standard refers to a compensation package that is completely different from home, host or local-plus standards; it is usually determined against 'international standards' which allows for the quick movement of assignees between different countries (RH Expat, 2010).

It should be noted that all packages have their benefits and drawbacks, and that the person who ultimately chooses a certain projection for a specific assignment – ideally the business leader overseeing the assignment assisted by International Mobility (Deloitte, 2010) – should therefore carefully consider the (possible) consequences of each type in that particular situation.

A company may be willing to negotiate the compensation package with the assignee (within the boundaries of the chosen standard cost projection), however this is not stated in current literature as necessary or contributing to the alignment of the assignment with the organization's and assignee's goals.

When there is an agreement on the specific compensation package, the next steps to be carried out – possibly at the same time – are orientation and training, and determining the assignment objectives.

### **2.3.3.2. Orientation and training**

Once the assignment is accepted by the assignee, many things that impact their daily lives, and those of their family members, will change. These changes and the uncertainty that goes along with it can be a great source of concern for all of the individuals involved. It is therefore

important that the specific details of the assignment and the (possible) consequences are explained to the assignee as well as his or her family through an orientation; this process ensures that the disruption that is associated with the new situation is minimized (Stein, 2012) and the company can benefit from this in terms of professional performance from the assignee. Orientation sessions typically last anywhere between a few hours and a few days (Minter, 2008), and can for example include an explanation pertaining to “compensation, allowances, benefits, [possible] relocation issues [...] a security briefing” (Wilson, 2010: p. 78) and financial issues (Stein, 2012).

As taking on an international assignment – especially when it is an assignee’s first one – usually means that working conditions change, training as a preparation to face these challenges is often appropriate. This type of preparation can be done through a variety of (cross-cultural) training programs (Tung, 1981; Harris & Brewster, 1999; Harvey & Miceli, 1999). These pre-departure trainings mostly focus on “soft skills” and cross-cultural competencies as those are required of an assignee to effectively perform during the assignment (Reiche & Harzing, 2009). The content of such training primarily focuses on: The assignee’s cultural background, culture-specific features of the host-country, the assignee’s degree of contact with the host environment, length of the assignment, language skills, tolerance for stress, communication skills, relational skills and the family situation (Parkinson & Morley, 2006; Ehnert & Brewster, 2008; Reiche & Harzing, 2009).

Pre-departure training, and a mentor or coach in specific (Feldman and Thomas, 1992; Mezias and Scandura, 2005), may however also serve the objective of assisting assignees developing accurate expectations regarding the assignment which can enhance their effectiveness even more (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991).

The requirement for appropriate pre-departure training is even amplified because the primary selection criterion regarding international assignees is usually technical competence and this tends to be a poor predictor of effective performance during an international assignment (Kealey & Protheroe, 1996; Bonache et al., 2001).

Who should ideally be responsible for orientation and training is, except for ‘HR’ in general, not specifically mentioned in the scientific or the professional literature on this subject.

### **2.3.3.3. Determining the assignment objectives**

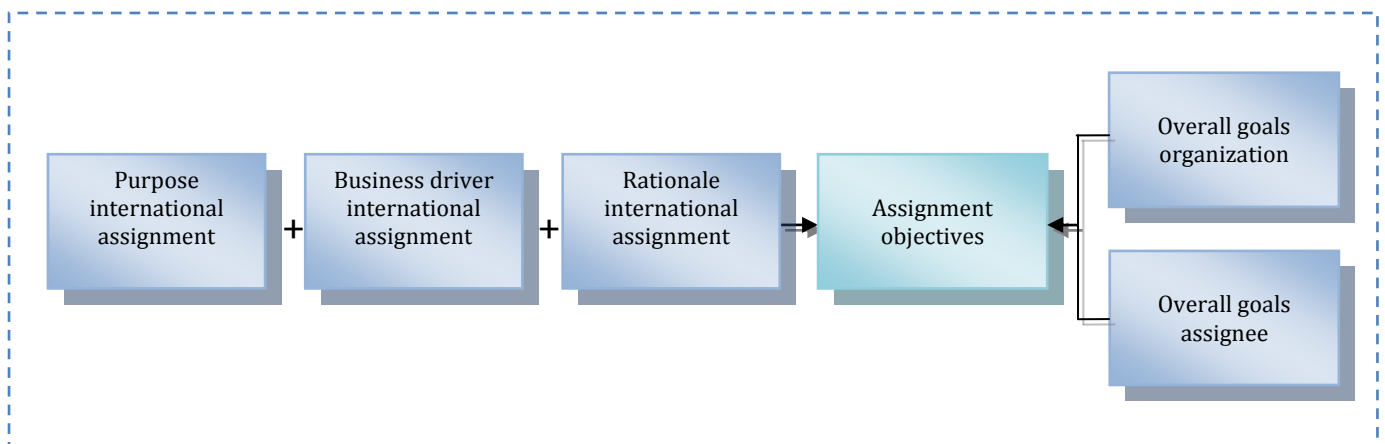
International assignments can be mutually beneficial and value adding; the company can use it to gain competitive advantage and the assignee for individual (career) development (Spreitzer, McCall & Mahoney, 1997; Carpenter, Sanders & Gregersen, 2001; Collings et al., 2011), which



also means that the company as well as the employee may have their own agenda regarding the assignment and its consequences; the company may for example plan for the assignee to implement the abroad gained knowledge in the home country after finishing the assignment, while the assignee is planning on making a career out of successive international assignments. Collings et al. (2011) state that to ensure that an assignment is mutually beneficial and value adding, it is “crucial for the individual, and so by implication for the organization, to ensure that on both sides of the deal there is clarity of medium and long term goals, stretching beyond the assignment [so] the expectations for the assignment can be matched in order to position the deal” (p. 364). When the goals and expectations are not aligned during the preparation stage and the company as well as the assignee start the assignment with their own agenda’s in mind, this can negatively influence the both of them (Collings et al., 2011) in terms of a failed assignment and/or not being able to leverage the newly gained competencies and international experience once the assignment has come to an end.

To ensure a successful international assignment for both the organization and the assignee – thus in terms of competitive advantage and (career) development – performance should be planned by defining it in terms of objectives in advance of the assignment (Cascio, 1996; Cascio, 2006). These performance objectives should be in line with the goals of the organization and the assignee (McKenna & Richardson, 2007) as well as the purpose, business drivers and rationale behind an assignment; the objectives should for example not mainly focus on learning when the purpose is ‘short term business needs’, the business driver is a ‘skills shortage’ and the rationale is therefore ‘functional’. However, based upon the goals of the assignee and what is achievable within the time frame of the assignment a learning objective may be included in the set of objectives as long as ‘learning’ does not become the main focus of the assignment because this would lead to a discrepancy between the purpose, business drivers and rationale, and the objectives, which decreases the value of the assignment.

An overview of the aspects that influence the assignment objectives is displayed below:



[Fig. 2.2] *Aspects that influence assignment objectives*

Since research has shown that unilateral imposition of objectives is not effective in terms of performance because employees like to contribute to decisions that affect their jobs and career path, these objectives can best be set by the business leader in charge of the assignment – who should be assisted or at least be properly instructed about the goals over the organization by the International Mobility function (Deloitte, 2010) – in consultation with the assignee (Bridgespan, 2003).

There are several reasons why objectives can be beneficial for the employee as well as the company, or the business leader overseeing the assignment in specific (Bridgespan, 2003: p. 4):

#### Employee

- “Setting objectives with a supervisor provides the employee with the opportunity to contribute to the way the job is going to be done.
- The process of a collaborative effort to setting objectives increases the employee’s commitment and motivation to those objectives.
- The process also ensures thorough understanding of what is expected.
- Setting objectives achieves a clear and concise understanding of how work will be measured and evaluated, enabling the employee to evaluate their own performance during the appraisal period, and make adjustments as necessary.
- Objectives clarify the employee’s priorities and allow them to allocate their time and resources effectively.
- The process of setting objectives allows employees the opportunity to voice their problems, concerns and ideas about what is to be accomplished.”

#### Business leader in charge of assignment

- “Setting objectives with employees defines how each employee will contribute to the achievement of the team objectives, and those of the supervisor.
- The process of setting objectives ensures that goals are congruent and that assignments and resources are clearly allocated among all employees.
- Setting objectives with employees commands a much greater commitment from employees to specific objectives.
- The process of setting objectives establishes the basis for the next performance appraisal and identifies the employee’s concerns and needs for assistance and support.”

Setting objectives can be done by using the ‘SMART’ principle; the letters broadly refer to words that represent general guidelines in the objective setting process, namely (Doran, 1981; Cothran & Wysocki, 2008):

- Specific: Objectives should be specific, clear, understandable and state exactly what is to be accomplished to avoid ambiguity surrounding the assignment.
- Measurable: To be able to determine the progress regarding attainment of the objectives, they should be quantified and include concrete measuring criteria, as well as targets and benchmarks.
- Attainable: Objectives have to be realistic and attainable in order to be effective, if they are out of reach or below standard assignees will consider them to be meaningless and put them aside.
- Relevant: The objectives of an assignment should be aligned with the goals of the organization and the assignee in order to be relevant; each objective should move the organization and/or the assignee closer toward these goals.
- Time-bound: It is important that a time frame is included because commitment to a deadline, and the sense of urgency that it creates, contribute to the focus on completion.

Although some objectives might include the goals of the organization as well as those of the assignee, there may also be separate objectives; ones that only serve the company and others that solely serve the assignee’s goals. As long as the objectives do not interfere with each other they can be pursued side by side.

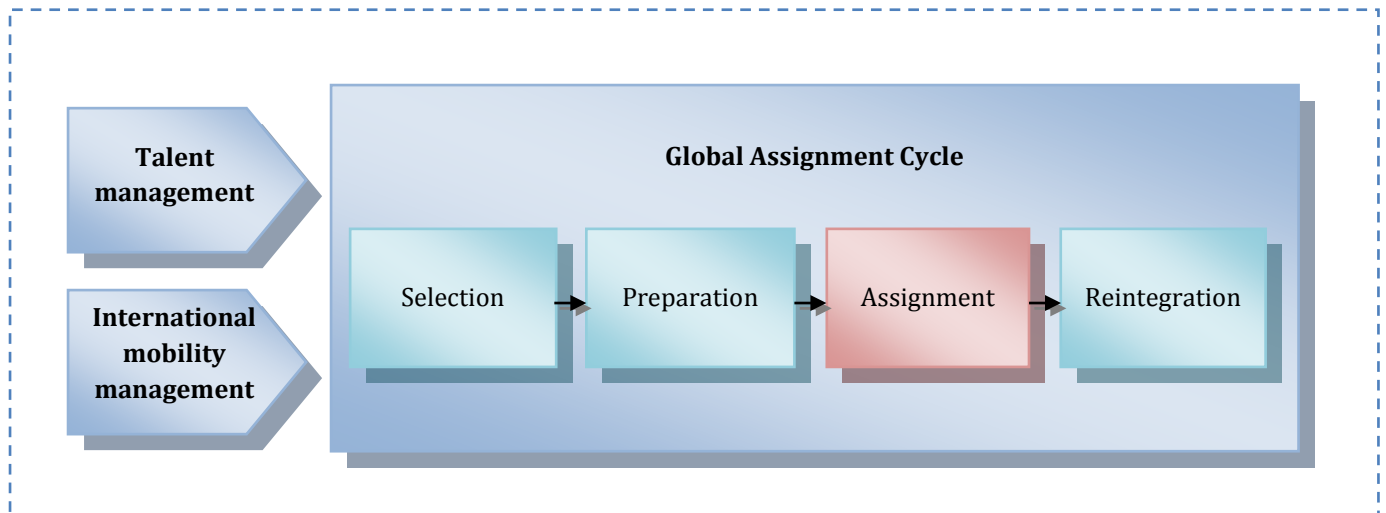
When the performance planning is finished and objectives are clear for both the company and the assignee, the company can start realizing the compensation package.

#### **2.3.3.4. Realizing the compensation package**

Before the assignee actually leaves the country to start the assignment, there are certain issues associated with immigration or travel aspects of an international assignment that have to be taken care of first. The expenses that are associated with this are usually included in the compensation package and often include services such as a relocation service for expatriates, assistance in obtaining visas and/or work permits if required by the host country, vaccinations when relocating or traveling to a destination for which that is mandatory, tax counseling and housing and possibly schooling solutions (Wilson, 2010; Ernst & Young, n.d.). This has traditionally been arranged by the International Mobility team, but can best be integrated with the standard HR infrastructure (Deloitte, 2010).

Once these technical issues have been addressed, the focus shifts to the management and organizational support that is required during the assignment itself to ensure contribution to the goals.

#### 2.3.4. Assignment



##### 2.3.4.1. Execution of the assignment

There are several ways in which a company can facilitate assignees regarding the execution of the assignment and therewith increase the chances of a successful and value adding international assignment; the most important ones in this context being 'performance appraisal' and 'organizational support' (Dowling & Welch, 2004; McKenna & Richardson, 2007).

When managing international assignees it is, as mentioned in the 'objective setting' section, important to appraise their performance in a systematic manner in order to determine the progress regarding the objectives, give feedback to keep assignees on the right track, and revise the objectives if necessary; which can also reduce the risk of expensive mistakes (Plessis & Beaver, 2008).

Due to the globalization of business there is a growing need for MNC's HR policies, such as those pertaining to performance appraisal, to become global as well. However, this idea encounters great resistance because people, laws and labor markets are not all the same (Ryan, Wiechmann & Hemingway, 2003) which leads to the continued use of local or regional solutions. According to Chen (2005) the human resource management policies of MNC's should not solely be global or local, but be a blend of home country policies plus certain important host country and company specific factors to operate on a global level while maintaining some local responsiveness because every situation is different indeed. This is endorsed by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2005) who

state in their research report that many MNC's have policies in place that include performance appraisal based on involvement of the home as well as the host locations.

However, although these companies recognize the importance of global appraisal policies that include some local factors, in most of the MNC's only the host country management seems to be involved in the performance review and on-going objective-setting processes. This is quite risky as it can lead to a discrepancy between the global and local goals of the organization, and in turn to potentially neglecting the medium to long term objectives that are considered to be important by the home country (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2005). A further consequence may be that, due to insufficient interaction with the home country during the assignment, the assignee's newly acquired skills and experience are in the long run not as beneficial to the company and the assignee as they could have been.

This highlights the importance of interaction with the home country during the assignment. What appears to be an effective solution for this issue is organizational support in terms of a dedicated person in the home country – a mentor or coach – that keeps in contact with the assignee for the entire duration of the assignment and is therefore aware of the assignee's (newly acquired) competencies. At the same time, keeping at least one strong tie to the home country ensures that assignees do not feel 'out of sight out of mind' from the headquarters' point of view.

These are however not the only benefits a coach or mentor can offer. According to Feldman & Thomas (1992) and Mezias & Scandura (2005), such a person may also help the assignees developing accurate expectations regarding the assignment, which can enhance the effectiveness of the assignee (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991). Furthermore, Wilson (2010) states that an ongoing mentoring program can greatly improve the efficiency with which the employee adjusts to the new situation; this allows for relatively quick integration and can benefit the assignee as well as the company because it may, among others, lead to faster development of local networks (Collings et al., 2011) and (consequently) to better performance. In addition, when problems arise during the assignment a mentor may be able to assist in adequately solving those problems leading to better performance and new competencies for the assignee.

The organization can however also choose to assign the assignee a home as well as host country mentor, as these persons can both be used as (career) development and psychosocial support functions during, and possibly after, the assignment (Feldman, Folks & Turnley, 1999; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Performance appraisal should thus ideally be carried out by the business leader overseeing the international assignment in the home country and the assignee's supervisor in the host country, but also on a regular basis by the Talent Management function to stay informed about the

assignee during the assignment and to avoid that he or she disappears from the Talent Management radar.

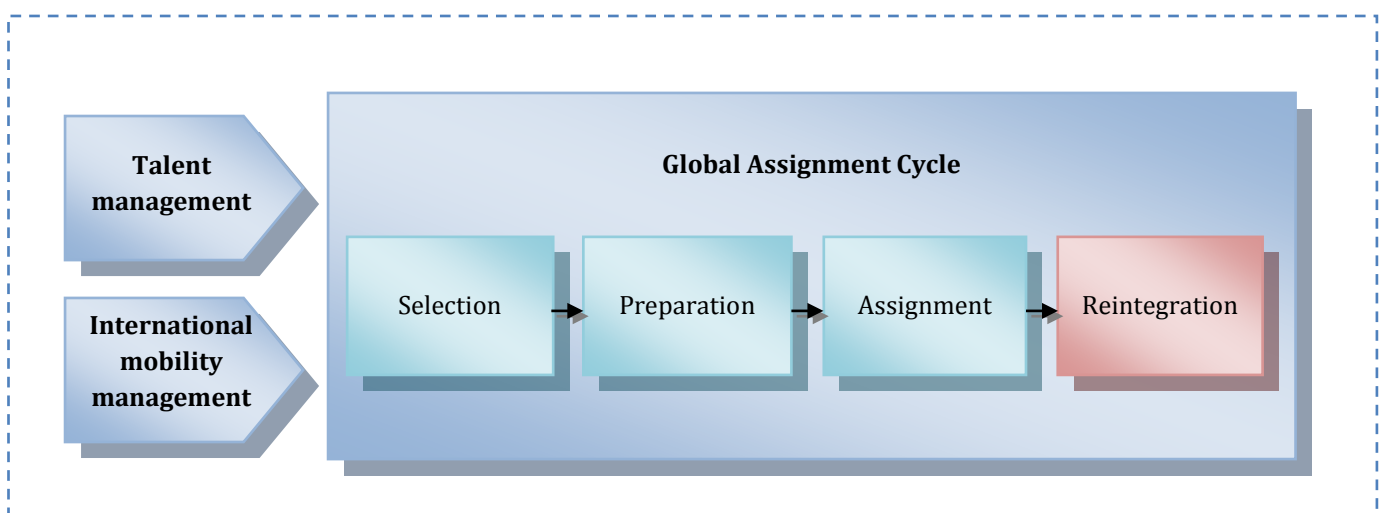
Other types of organizational support that can contribute to adjustment and therefore assignee performance in terms of executing the assignment are for example assistance in settling-in and assistance regarding professional and/or social integration in the host country (Society for Human Resource Management, 2004; Collings et al., 2011). These kinds of services may also apply to the assignee's family if they relocate to the host country; which is important since the family situation can have a significant impact on the assignee's professional performance (Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley & Luk, 2001). Such support should if it is something that cannot be covered by the general HR department, be overseen and delivered by the International Mobility function (Deloitte, 2010).

The specific nature of organizational support logically depends on the type of assignment (long term, short term, commuter etc.), but also on the drivers and rationale behind it; for example, assignees that are deployed based on technical skills may primarily require support for adjusting to a new environment in order to effectively carry out the assignment (Evans, Pucik & Bjorkman, 2011), whereas 'learning experience' assignees may be selected based on personal traits and require more assistance regarding the technical side of the job.

In general every assignment can be linked to certain organizational support services, however these should be adjusted to the specific situation since the nature of such support also depends on the individual assignee; he or she may for example already have work experience in the host country which may make the integration process easier than it would otherwise be.

Once the assignment comes to an end, either after a predetermined period of time or abruptly, the reintegration stage should be set in motion.

### 2.3.5. Reintegration



### **2.3.5.1. Reintegration of the assignee**

It has been described in several studies that readjusting to the non-international assignment life at home once the assignment is completed can be quite difficult because employees may return to a changed work as well as social situation (Black, 1992; Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall, 1992; Gregersen & Stroh, 1997; Stroh, Gregersen & Black, 1998; Osland, 2000; Sussman, 2001). The situation surrounding reintegration is logically not the same for every type of international assignment, but relevant for all but the 'localized transfers' nonetheless. Long term assignees may for example have to rebuild, or at least reinvest, in their professional network and social life at home, because they have not had the time and opportunity to maintain this, whereas assignees that have been carrying out commuter assignments may have to get used their 'stable' life again as they are not travelling (as much) anymore, and short term assignees that have only experienced the novelty of a new socio-cultural and professional life may become unsettled in the home situation (McKenna & Richardson, 2007). In addition, ending the assignment and 'coming back home' is often the choice of the company rather than the assignee which makes the transition even more difficult than it already is (Feldman, 1991). When employees are struggling with such a situation their professional performance may rapidly decrease, which is not beneficial for the company nor for the employee (Adler, 1981; Black et al., 1992).

Furthermore, international assignments are often perceived as having a positive impact on one's career (Miller & Cheng, 1978), so when career enhancement does not occur upon re-entry the employee may become professionally dissatisfied and very unproductive, or decide to seek employment elsewhere; especially when the company has given the assignee the idea that the assignment would result in a step up the corporate ladder (McKenna & Richardson, 2007).

To avoid employees becoming unproductive or leave the company after a substantial investment in the form of an international assignment has been made (Black, Morrison & Gregersen, 1999; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001), many researchers have suggested that companies – and in specific the International Mobility and Talent Management functions (Deloitte, 2010) – provide the assignees assistance in reintegration; assistance that may continue for anywhere between two and five years after the assignment has ended (Doherty, Brewster, Suutari & Dickmann, 2008; Collings et al., 2011). An effective reintegration process includes post-assignment services and "will enable the firm to leverage the most value from the expatriate's experience" (Mirasol, 2012).

These post-assignment services can for example include "training, realistic re-entry previews, re-orientation programs, financial and tax assistance" (Bolino, 2007: p. 828), "development and use of acquired career capital, the alignment of expectations, and career outcomes" (Collings et al., 2011: p. 367). This is where a mentor comes in handy again; not only can this person for

example help in setting and communicating realistic re-entry previews, but because a mentor is aware of the assignee's (newly) acquired skills and experience and often of internal career opportunities in the home country as well, he or she can also assist in the career development of the assignee once the assignment comes to an end.

An assignee can thus by means of careful planning, received organizational support and a mentoring program “make a successful exit from the assignment and return to the home country to provide the skills and experience gained during the assignment; maximizing knowledge and retaining the talent as a key international business leader within the corporation” (HCR, 2012: p. 1).

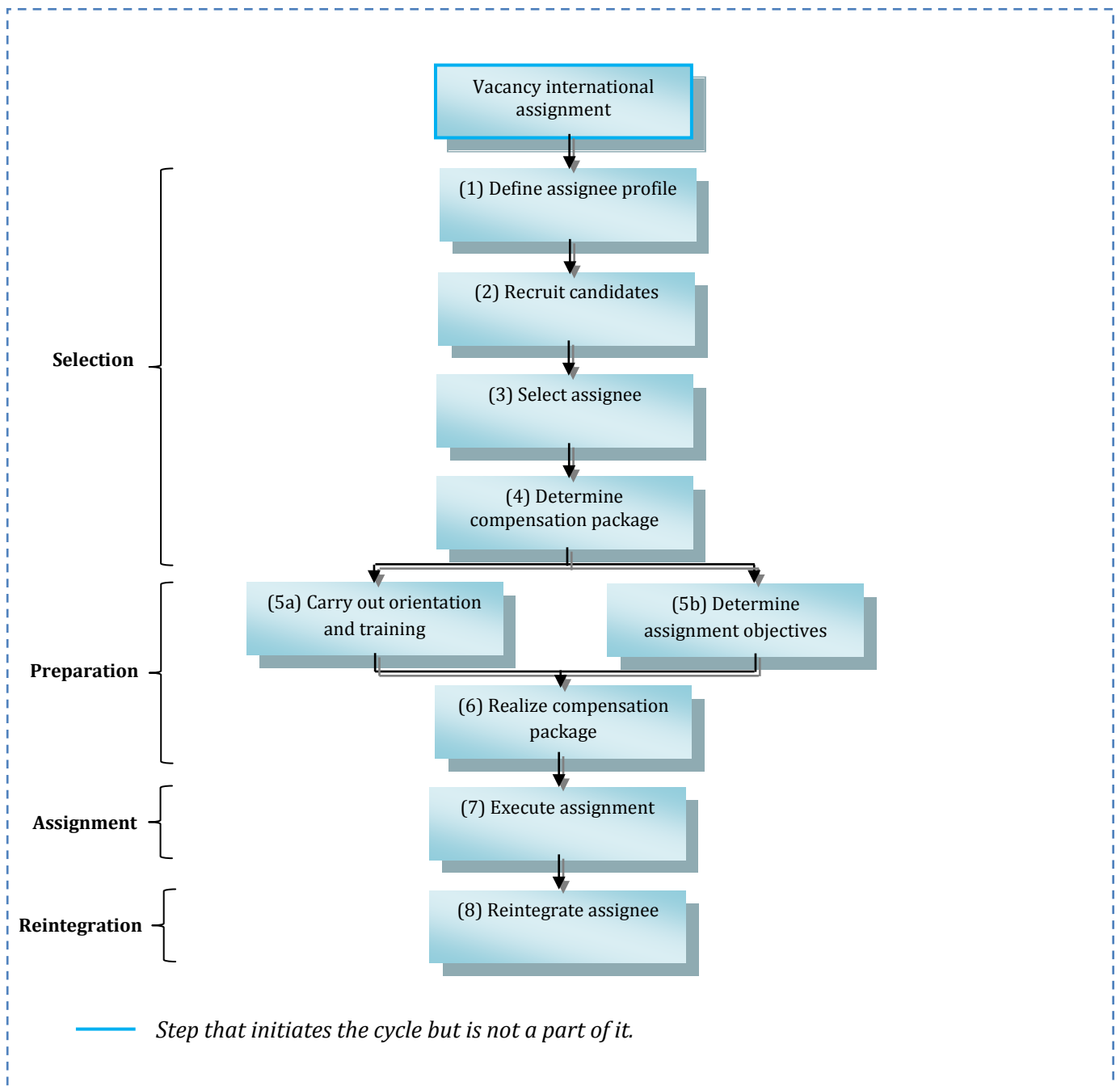
## **2.4. Policy guidelines (theoretical)**

An overview of the, from the theoretical framework derived, policy guidelines for aligning international assignments with the goals of the organization and assignee are displayed and summarized in the figure and table below.

The combination not only gives an overview of the most important guidelines per stage of the global assignment cycle, it also concisely answers the sub questions of this research as described in §1.1.1:

- What should the alignment process look like?
- How should the stages of the process be filled in?
- Which organizational functions should be involved in every stage?





[Fig. 2.3] Global assignment cycle (based on: scientific and professional literature)

<b>Stage of assignment cycle</b>	<b><i>Involved functions</i></b>	<b><i>How the stage is filled in</i></b>
<b>(1) Define assignee profile</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Business</li> <li>* International Mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Determine the purpose, business drivers and rationale of assignment</li> <li>* Determine the duration of the assignment</li> <li>* Determine suitable assignee characteristics</li> </ul>
<b>(2) Recruit candidates</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Business</li> <li>* International Mobility</li> <li>* Talent Management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Create a candidate pool through formal internal/external recruitment</li> </ul>
<b>(3) Select assignee</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Business</li> <li>* International Mobility</li> <li>* Talent Management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Consistently use formal selection methods (i.e. task-based and/or knowledge, skills and abilities tests)</li> </ul>
<b>(4) Determine compensation package</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Business</li> <li>* International Mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Use a set of standard cost projections to determine the (basis of) the compensation package</li> </ul>
<b>(5a) Carry out orientation and training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Unclear</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Explain the specific details of the assignment (i.e. compensation, allowances, relocation issues, financial issues)</li> <li>* Give a (cross-cultural) training applicable to the specific type of assignment and location</li> <li>* Assign a mentor/coach</li> </ul>
<b>(5b) Determine assignment objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Business</li> <li>* International Mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Set assignment objectives based on the goals of the organization and the assignee, and on the purpose, business drivers and rationale of an assignment</li> <li>* Set the objectives based on the 'SMART' principle</li> </ul>
<b>(6) Realize compensation package</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* General HR</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Obtaining the necessary documents (i.a. visa, work permit) to ensure legal compliance</li> <li>* Provide services such as tax counseling, housing (assistance), schooling solutions etc.</li> </ul>
<b>(7) Execute assignment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Business (home)</li> <li>* Business (host)</li> <li>* Talent Management</li> <li>* International Mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Performance appraisal based on home and host location</li> <li>* Appraise performance in systematic manner, give feedback, and revise assignment objectives if necessary</li> <li>* Keep in touch with the assignee (i.e. through a mentor/coach)</li> <li>* Offer professional/personal integration support if necessary</li> </ul>
<b>(8) Reintegrate assignee</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* International Mobility</li> <li>* Talent Management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Plan for return of the assignee in terms of career</li> <li>* Provide a reintegration process if applicable (incl. re-entry previews, re-orientation programs, financial and tax assistance etc.)</li> <li>* Include the mentor/coach in the process</li> </ul>

[Table 2.2] *Content/policies each global assignment cycle stage (based on: scientific and professional literature)*

Increasing the effectiveness of international assignments can thus be achieved by following the global assignment cycle and the guidelines as presented in figure 2.3 and table 2.2, as this displays how, according to the current literature, international assignments should be aligned with the goals of the organization and assignees.

# Chapter 3: Research.

### **3. Research**

To assess if the ideal theoretical process is – and if not, can be – used in practice, a single extended case study that is based on exploratory action research and a qualitative design is carried out at a multinational company. and combined with qualitative and quantitative data on the subject that is provided by PricewaterhouseCoopers. The purpose of this research is to gather detailed information about the current process at the company (what does it look like, how are the stages filled in and which organizational functions are involved?) to be able to determine if the company is using the same process and guidelines to align its international assignments with the goals of the organization and assignees as described in scientific and professional literature. And if not, to what extent can this ideal theoretical process serve as a blue print for the company to increase the effectiveness of their international assignments?

The chapter starts out by describing and explaining the type of research, followed by the research design, the type of study, the data collection, data analysis and ends with a short overview of the company at which the research is carried out.

#### **3.1. Research methodology**

##### **3.1.1. Type of research**

As this research first of all aims at determining if the ideal theoretical process on how to align international assignments with the goals of the organization and assignees is used in this particular practical situation, and why or why not, it can be classified as exploratory research. Exploratory research is observational; its purpose is to gain insight and comprehension of an issue or situation, in this case 'learn about the current process' (Babbie, 2007) as opposed to simply describing it (Given, 2008). This in order to subsequently determine to what extent the theoretical process can serve as a blue print for the company should theory and practice not match; and at the same time possibly solving a “practical real-world problem in the organization” (Lancaster, 2005: 124) – making this action research then as well.

According to Crowther & Lancaster (2008) this type of research often relies on secondary research such as reviewing literature and/or data that has been previously collected by someone else, and qualitative methods which can include informal approaches such as discussions with stakeholders or more formal approaches such as in-depth interviews, focus groups or guided small discussions (Lancaster, 2005; Babbie, 2007).

### 3.1.2. Research design

The exploratory research in this thesis is based on a qualitative design as this is best suited to gather in-depth understanding of processes since it does not just answers the 'what', 'where' and 'when' questions but also 'how' and 'why' (Yin, 2003); which is crucial here as the process cannot be accurately presented, and if necessary re-designed, when it is unclear how the current process works and why in that specific manner.

### 3.1.3. Type of study

The research is carried out at a single company which makes this a single case study: "The in-depth examination of a single instance of some [...] phenomenon" (Babbie, 2007: p. 298). This is in line with the aim of acquiring in-depth knowledge since this is better achieved through small focused samples than large samples (Freagin, Orum and Sjoberg, 1991).

As a case study usually only seeks to understand a certain phenomenon, Buroway (1991) has suggested the 'extended case method'; a method that not only has the purpose of understanding but also of finding gaps or flaws in, and then modifying, a certain process. As the purpose of this part of the thesis is to determine if there is a match between theory and practice, and if not to what extent the theoretical process can serve as a blue print for the company – thus 'closing the gap' – this research can be classified as an extended case study.

### 3.1.4. Data collection

Qualitative data can be acquired in various manners, such as (participant) observation, interviews, focus groups and so forth (Lancaster, 2005). The first part of this research focuses on understanding a certain process, which mainly consists of human actions, in a short amount of time and the method that is best suited to acquire this knowledge is conducting interviews with the people/functions that are involved in the process – which in this case are:

- Rewards: concerning global mobility processes, policies & practices.
- International Assignments: concerning the practical side of international assignments.
- Talent Acquisition: concerning the selection process and link with international assignments in this process.
- Talent Management: concerning the preparation, assignment and reintegration stages.
- Business leaders: concerning the complete process from a business perspective.

- Consultancy company: concerning their practices/knowledge regarding the complete process.

There are two rounds of interviews to acquire the necessary data. The first round is mainly in a structured manner as it serves the purpose of understanding the current process but it also leaves some room for interviewees to freely mention, or talk about, aspects that they find important in the light of the research. The second round of interviews is semi-structured as it is intended to confirm the understanding of the current process and if necessary, due to a discrepancy between the theoretical and practical process, inquire about (specific) thought and ideas concerning the company tailored blue print that will in that case be designed.

Besides the qualitative data that is gathered via interviews, PricewaterhouseCoopers (2012a) has carried out interviews with a selection of executives at the company on the subject of international assignments, and the results from these interviews will be used to shed some additional light on the current situation.

In addition to the qualitative data, the quantitative results of a survey that is conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers among international assignees at the company is used to incorporate the assignee's point of view pertaining to this subject in this research as well.

### **3.1.5. Data analysis**

Data is essential to exploratory research because it can be transformed in to the necessary information during the data analysis stage. Information is "data that has been collected, interpreted and communicated" (Lancaster, 2005: 69) in a form that is suitable for answering the research question.

The interview data pertaining to the current process that results from the first round of interviews are analyzed by reading the transcripts and categorizing the answers based on 'organizational function' and 'process stage' (of the global assignment cycle) to be able to accurately define what the process looks like, how the stages are filled in and which organizational functions are involved. The qualitative and quantitative data regarding the current situation stemming from secondary research at the company are combined with the data from the primary research by categorizing the results based on 'organizational function' and 'process stage' as well. These findings are subsequently be displayed in an overview that allows for a comparison between the theoretical and practical situation, and thus for determining if the theoretical and practical processes match. If they do not, the transcripts are read again but this time with the purpose of determining why the current process works the way it does, since that information is important to consider when designing a company specific blue print.

The data that results from the second round of interviews is analyzed by reading the transcripts and categorizing the answers based on 'process stage'. However, in this case with the goal of creating an overview that displays the array of stakeholder thoughts and ideas regarding every stage of the process as this can provide assistance in designing the blue print.

The qualitative information stemming from scientific literature and consultancy reports on the subject, that are used as a basis for the new process, is analyzed by reading the materials to again apply categorizing based on 'process stage' in order to combine the interview data with this secondary data and obtain a complete overview of the information that is necessary to create a company tailored blue print that allows for increased effectiveness of international assignments by aligning them with the goals of the organization and assignees.



**[Due to confidentiality some  
pages are omitted from this thesis]**

Chapter 6:  
Conclusion,  
recommendations  
& further research.

## 6. Conclusion, recommendations & further research

This chapter will answer the research questions as formulated in §1.1.1, describe the most important recommendations and present some options for further research.

### 6.1. Conclusion

The research question central to this thesis was: *‘how should international assignments be aligned with the goals of the organization and the assignee?’*, as this is an important step towards increasing the effectiveness of international assignments.

The theory pertaining to this alignment process indicated – often indirectly – what it should look like, how the process stages should be filled in and which organizational functions should be involved by describing it in small parts that are divided over many different articles and papers; so first of all, all these small pieces of the puzzle were combined and integrated to create a complete overview of the theoretical alignment process (Chapter 2).

According to the literature, international assignments should be aligned with the goals of the organization and assignee by following the ‘global assignment cycle’ and carrying out all but two of its stages in a consecutive manner; furthermore, strong cooperation between the International Mobility and Talent Management functions is emphasized and mentioned as crucial in the alignment process. The keywords that describe this entire process are: ‘strategic’, ‘formal’ and ‘repeatable’.

To determine if this ideal theoretical process is used in practice, in-depth research was carried out at a multinational company that makes use of international assignments (Chapter 3), to determine how their process was designed and if it was the same as the theoretical one (Chapter 4).

The process at this specific company was in general the opposite of how it was described in theory; although the company also follows the global assignment cycle and its stages in a consecutive manner, the most important step in view of aligning international assignments with the goals of the organization and assignee is skipped: ‘determining assignment objectives’. Furthermore, there is little to no cooperation between International Mobility and Talent Management and in contrast to the theory the business has the most important role in the process. Keywords that describe the process at the company are: ‘ad hoc’ and ‘informal’, making the process also quite ‘fast’ and ‘flexible’.

As is clear there was a major discrepancy between the theoretical and practical situation, so the question became: How should international assignments be aligned with the goals of the organization and assignees in this particular practical situation? With the underlying question being: To what extent can the ideal theoretical alignment process serve as a blue print for this design? (Chapter 5).

The theory is strategic, formal and repeatable, and the company wanted their process to be characterized as such as well, however in contrast to the, what turns out to be, relatively rigid process as described in the literature it also had to be fast and flexible since the company is operating in a fast-paced environment. Thus all of the elements from the literature could be used in the blue print for the company provided that the process, and the involved functions, were designed in such a way that it was still fast and flexible where necessary.

To achieve this, first of all the primarily involved functions (Talent Management, International Mobility, Business and International Assignments) and the stages of the assignment cycle were designed and filled in in a manner that ensures strategic and formal decision-making.

Second, speed and flexibility was mainly created by a solution that is not mentioned in the literature or in practice: shortening the basis of the global assignment cycle. Although the newly designed cycle contains two additional stages and a feedback loop to encourage strategic decision-making, it was modified in such a way that it allows for certain stages to be carried out simultaneously rather than in a consecutive manner which provides some flexibility while also being time-saving. In addition, in light of speed and flexibility, an overview for several types of assignments was made indicating which stages are important, less important or even unimportant since some assignments need to be arranged very quickly while for others there is enough time to go through the entire cycle.

Thus, the effectiveness of international assignments at the company can be increased by aligning them with the goals of the organization and assignees which can best be accomplished by following this company tailored global assignment cycle and its associated guidelines.

The feedback loop that is implemented in the company tailored blue print is also a valuable addition to the literature as this allows for even more effective international assignments, and it also makes the global assignment cycle an actual 'cycle'.

**[Due to confidentiality some  
pages are omitted from this thesis]**

## 6.2. Further research

The most important research to be carried out based on this thesis is research that answers the question: does the modified alignment process work in practice? The newly designed process is ideal for the company on paper, but does not determine if it does in fact work in practice.

Furthermore, the company would benefit from a decision tree pertaining to international assignments, one that passes through each stage and takes the fact that not every type of assignment and assignee have to pass through each step into account; for example a strategic assignment will probably never last for less than a year which rules out the choice of a short term assignment, while in the case of a localized transfer the reintegration stage can be skipped in its entirety, and someone who is on a short term specialized skills assignment does not need a mentor.

This decision tree can then be transformed into a computer program that allows for even faster, more flexible and more easily repeatable decision-making as the people making the decisions are guided through the necessary steps and made aware of when cooperation with a certain function is necessary or advised, while all the functions/employees that are involved in the assignment can keep track of the process.

Regarding scientific literature, the global assignment cycle should be examined as it is in fact not a cycle at this moment because there is no loop back to the beginning of the process. This loop can also ensure even better alignment of international assignments with the goals of the organization and assignees.

In general there is a lot of scientific research to be done regarding international assignments as there is only a limited amount of research on the subject; in addition it primarily focuses on expatriates (or long term assignments) while nowadays the global mobility program of organization consists of many different types of international assignments that all have their own characteristics, needs and consequences.

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