Vectors for Change or the New Old Guard?

Repatriation and Japanese HRM in the Twenty-First Century

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ABSTRACT

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“Vectors for Change or the New Old Guard?”

In the wake of the recent and prolonged economic crisis, corporate governance in large corporations has come under increasing scrutiny. Employment is said to be precarious, and some commentators talk of how the social contract is being shredded. Against this backdrop, more nurturing approaches to employment and human resource management have an intrinsic appeal. With its stakeholder capitalism, Japan provides one such model. This thesis examines that model through the prism of a qualitative study of business repatriates and their careers. Using six career stories, it gives us a window on to contemporary Japanese HRM practices as they impact ‘core’ employees working with the assumption of lifetime employment at large Japanese companies. As a result, we learn about the ongoing strengths and weaknesses of Japanese HRM, and see how practices may change.

The study’s longitudinal research design allows these career stories to unfold dynamically as the participants reflect reiteratively on their experiences and hopes, while interviews with two other repatriates, four HR managers, one mid-career job-changer, and a European administrator with long experience in multinationals add further depth and perspective. The repatriates express support for the HR systems in their companies, while also reporting frustration related to issues such as the opacity of the job assignment system. Their time abroad has changed how they think about their work and their employers, yet they are less vectors for change and more an internationalised old guard.

Overall, this study gives us a detailed and nuanced picture of how Japanese repatriates experience their careers and think about their futures. It shows the value of an in-depth grounded approach to understanding contemporary attitudes in Japan related to the ongoing debate about HRM practices. The narratives of these Japanese business people, who have been exposed to what is alleged to be better practice overseas, demonstrate the importance of the continuity and stability of the Japanese employment model. Moreover, the traditional model emerges as logical and effective, suggesting that the considerable criticism of that model over the past two decades is misplaced. In addition, interpretation of the data suggests future avenues of research into how we understand change and continuity in Japanese HRM practices.
DECLARATION

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DEDICATION

I am very grateful for the five years of my doctoral quest and for the support of so many people who have made it hugely enjoyable. Rika was always sympathetic, even while she lost her husband for large chunks of time in the evenings and at the weekend. Kate worked wonders again and again with proofreading and transcribing and constant encouragement. Aoshima-san patiently provided salient advice and comments. Meanwhile, my classmates were ever an inspiration (Anja, Simon, Ricardo, Stephen, and Antonio, just for starters). The people who agreed to be interviewed for this study were longsuffering and generous, particularly those who allowed me to come back so many times to invade their privacy. Arjan and Damian offered thoughtful guidance at key times, and through it all, Leo opened up a world of possibilities for me. Thank you all.
1. INTRODUCTION

“The job security you think you might enjoy as an employee actually doesn’t exist, and has never existed.”

(Kaufman, 2014)

This thesis is about Japanese business repatriates, their careers, and the pressures being exerted on key Japanese human resource management practices such as lifetime employment and seniority. It looks at changes and continuities, finding fewer of the former and more of the latter than might be expected. Because the study is based on interview data, it is also about me, the researcher. To some extent, the researcher’s perspective will influence any study, whether quantitative or qualitative. That is clearly the situation here, as my study design entails telling six repatriate career stories using both their own words and mine. Therefore, in the interests of reflexivity (Finlay, 2002), I should explicitly acknowledge my own role and biases by beginning with a brief self-introduction. After that, I will move on to explain my reasons for spending three years conducting fieldwork in this area.

As of 1 September, 2015, I am forty-six years old. I live and work in Japan, where I have been resident since 1991. My only extended stay outside Japan during that period was for the year I spent doing an MBA at the Judge Institute of Management Studies in Cambridge. My wife is Japanese; I own a townhouse forty minutes’ commute door-to-door from my office in Tokyo; I have worked for the same training and consulting company since 1994. Japan is my home. This is significant for my thesis because my feelings about the country, its culture, its companies, and its people quite clearly colour everything that follows in these pages. Almost everyone I interviewed for this study was somebody I had met through teaching intercultural communication workshops and
providing HR-related consulting services in Japan. I wanted, and still do want, to see them in a positive light.

In addition, I have a general sense of admiration for Japan-based organisations, including the three at which I have worked. For instance, I find much to celebrate in what I understand to be the main characteristics of Japanese human resource management. The focus on stakeholders, rather than merely shareholders, is one important example. In sharp contrast to the Kaufman quotation with which this chapter began, principal amongst those stakeholders are regular employees. However, I acknowledge that my thesis will not fully examine the costs of this HRM approach. Although gender and gaishikei (companies with their headquarters outside Japan) are part of the story, for instance, this is not a study of gendered or non-regular forms of employment in Japan. Neither does it examine the potential role of gaishikei companies as pressure valves that allow indigenous systemic problems to persist.

It is certainly possible to find damning indictments of employee treatment and welfare in Japanese companies, including Mehri (2005) and the Asahi Shimbun (2014). Issues related to work-life balance and karoushi (death from overwork) are rightly raised as serious problems. Nonetheless, my esteem for the Japanese approach remains largely undiminished. In addition to that admiration, there is also hope that Japanese companies will find a way of protecting their better qualities, despite the pressures of increasingly global markets for labour and goods, demands for greater equality of opportunity in companies for women and men, attempts at the simultaneous localisation and globalisation of management (Liang, Marler, and Cui, 2012), shorter product life cycles (Aytac and Wu, 2013), and an ageing population. All of these have considerable impact on companies that compete across
national borders. In the background, too, English is becoming the world’s lingua franca for science, medicine, technology, and business (House, 2003).

Related to the above, there is the question of whether or not we are converging on certain business practices that promise stronger results across the world (Wren, 2001). Even given Japan’s famed insularity (Caron, 2014), how can its companies expect to survive without root and branch changes, then? A simplistic answer to that is suggested by Japanese history: when it has been necessary, Japan has successfully adapted in its own way. We saw this in the eighth and ninth centuries when Tang Dynasty China projected its power throughout East Asia; it happened when Japan was faced with Western pressure to open its borders in the second half of the nineteenth century; reconstruction in the wake of World War Two is a third example. I am confident that history will repeat itself and that Japanese companies will continue to adjust to the pressures listed above without losing their sense of self. Certainly, then, my biases will reverberate throughout this thesis. When Dore (2000: 222) says of Japan and Germany, “Japan is the one which has the greater chance of resisting incorporation into American-led global capitalism and preserving its own distinctiveness,” my reaction is to hope that both countries manage to escape the worst of “the processes of marketization and financialization” (ibidem: 219).

How, though, does a study of Japanese repatriation help us to understand Japanese HRM’s likely fate? I did not start out by seeking to answer that question. Indeed, when I first applied for the DBA programme at Manchester Business School, I intended to analyse how certain Japanese companies used global project teams, and then suggest how they could do it more effectively. At that time, I was working with a pharmaceuticals client that used a lot of
teams such as these, and I hoped to do a better job of advising them based on insights gained through my DBA studies. Under counsel, though, I shifted my research focus to Japanese business expatriates – how might they be helped to perform more successfully overseas, for instance? Even today, I regularly work with different groups of potential expatriates, so this, too, had direct relevance for my job. That, however, morphed into an interest in Japanese repatriates. One reason was very practical: I felt that it would be easier to follow up with people who were in the same country as I, rather than scattered around the world. Another was professional – it seemed to be a possible new area of consultancy for me and for my company. The third was academic, because as we will see, there has been only limited research on Japanese repatriates and their careers. The impact of repatriates on their organisations after coming back is worth investigating, since they have been exposed to new business practices and different values while abroad. Therefore, here was an opportunity for me to make a contribution to knowledge.

At the start of the doctoral course in 2010, I had little formal knowledge of repatriation, although I had experienced it myself as both a child (from South Africa to the U.K.) and as an adult (from Japan to the U.K.). As we will see later, the literature on repatriation suggests that it is problematic to come back to your home country and home office. Many business people doing that leave their companies. Estimates vary, but the consensus is certainly that repatriates are more likely to quit than their peers who remained at home (Doherty and Dickmann, 2012). For instance, repatriates in one study (Bonache, 2005) reported lower overall job satisfaction than both expatriates overseas and domestic compatriots. Meanwhile, expatriates may be concerned that there will not be jobs for them when they return (Krainer,
Shaffer, and Bolino, 2009), which makes going back potentially more difficult. Given prevailing HRM practices, though, does this apply in Japan? If they have expectations of lifetime employment, do Japanese repatriates really quit their companies? And assuming that they stay, do their careers flounder, plateau, or flourish within those companies? Furthermore, as a result of their experience abroad with non-Japanese people and different business practices, do they become vectors for change within their organisations? Because questions such as these can help us to better understand how companies in Japan may be adapting to the pressures mentioned earlier, repatriation has been the focus of my study.

Despite some disagreement (Beamish and Inkpen, 1998), it is clear that the number of Japanese expatriates has increased in recent years (Oki, 2013), and along with it, the population of business repatriates. Expatriation and repatriation are key life events for those who experience them (Collings, Doherty, Luethy, and Osborn, 2011), potentially leading to people seeing business and their own lives in a different light. These life events are also significant for the companies deciding the assignments. Employees who have spent time abroad will have been shaped in various ways by their experiences, and this may lead to their becoming agents for change within their companies, whether or not their employers desire or intend that to happen. Despite this possible outcome, however, to date there has been more research on expatriation and its outcomes than on repatriation (Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007), and while that balance is now being addressed, there is still a paucity of English-language studies about Japanese repatriates (with the exception of Black, 1994; Gregersen and Black, 1996; Stevens, Oddou, Furuya, Bird, and Mendenhall, 2006; Furuya, Stevens, Oddou, Bird, and Mendenhall, 2007; Furuya, Stevens, Bird, Oddou, and Mendenhall, 2009). In particular, there is a lack of
longitudinal studies of repatriates’ careers – all of the studies just cited use cross-sectional surveys. I will examine this gap in our knowledge when I review the literature later.

1.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This thesis aims to address the gap that I have just indicated. By following what happens to specific repatriates and their careers after they have returned to Japan, we can indirectly discover more about how Japanese human resource management may be adapting to social and economic forces such as diversity of gender and nationality in the workplace, a growing role for English as the language for business, and most obviously of all, globalisation. There is a controversial argument (Levitt, 1983; Fatehi and Sanchez, 2015) that as people move across corporate and national boundaries more frequently, and as business operations become more globalised, systems will converge. The implication is often that they will converge on Anglo-American best practices. This study gives us a glimpse into that. It allows us to see how a group of Japanese repatriates, who are full-time workers employed with the assumption of having a job for life (i.e., ‘core’ employees), feel their careers and their organisations are changing.

Based on all of the above, I have four related research questions that I will answer in this thesis:

1. How do the careers of Japanese business repatriates develop after their return to Japan?

2. Do those repatriates become vectors for change with respect to characteristic Japanese HRM practices?

3. Are Japanese companies abandoning lifetime employment, or are they continuing to protect core employees (e.g., repatriates) who were hired under the assumptions of that practice?
4. Assuming that lifetime employment does still exist in Japan, is it in the interests of Japanese repatriates to support it?

In order to better understand the background to these questions, this thesis includes a review of three relevant bodies of literature (career studies, repatriation, and Japan studies) and shows how the assumptions of the first two (career studies and repatriation) are often strongly challenged by those of the last one (Japan studies). The results of my fieldwork are then introduced in the six longitudinal case studies and the discussions chapter. These add to what we know about repatriate careers in Japan, as well as contemporary Japanese HRM practices in general. Although the focus is Japan, comparisons with characteristic Anglo-American practices will suggest broader interpretations of the data. Because of this, the study is relevant for both academics and practitioners who are concerned with human resource management in the early twenty-first century.

1.2 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

It has often been remarked that there is now an increased movement of people, goods, and services across national boundaries (e.g., Magretta, 2002). Hand in hand with that movement, an “organizational transformation is taking place on a global scale” (Hall and Moss, 1998: 22), and as companies become more global, they need employees with the requisite skills for that transformation (Pattie, White, and Tansky, 2010). One way to give business people those skills is to send them on overseas assignments and then to bring them back to the home organisation to use what they have learned. Companies are explicitly urged to leverage the knowledge, experience, and skills of repatriates in order to better compete globally (Dickmann and Harris, 2005).
Large Japanese companies are certainly keenly aware of this growing global imperative. For instance, a front-page headline of the *Nikkei Weekly* business newspaper declared, “For Japan, to globalize is to grow” (*Nikkei Weekly*, 2012a). Similarly, a look at the home page of many of Japan’s blue chip companies demonstrates the attention being paid to overseas business. The top page of Panasonic’s site states, “[Panasonic] manufactures and markets a wide range of products under the Panasonic brand to enhance and enrich lifestyles all around the globe.”¹ Sekisui Chemical’s site talks about the company “contributing to people’s lives around the world and the global environment,” ² and “Hitachi delivers innovations that answer society’s challenges. With our talented team and proven experience in global markets, we can inspire the world.”³ As we can see, the rhetoric is far from insular. Can Japanese companies achieve such lofty ambitions with their current HRM practices, though?

It is now strange to think that in the recent past companies around the world were being admonished to learn from Japan (Pascale and Athos, 1986). Ezra Vogel (1979 and 2001) memorably entitled one book, “Japan as Number One: Lessons for America.” When the Japanese economy was booming, Japanese human resource management systems were put under the microscope so that organisations in North America and Europe could learn from Japanese rivals. Between 1955 and 1973, Japan’s economy grew at the (then) startling annualised pace of nine percent. In the wake of the oil shocks of the 1970s, growth halved (Takahashi, Mashiyama, and Akagami, 2008), but this still represented healthy increases in GDP. However, when the economy entered a sustained period of

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low, or sometimes negative, growth from the 1990s, the focus switched more to what Japan should now learn from outside (Matanle, McCann, and Ashmore, 2008). Wilson (2015) is amongst those who have since prevailed upon Japan’s government and corporations to undertake major reforms. The so-called “three pillars” of Japanese human resource management, namely company-specific unions, seniority in pay and promotion, and lifetime employment have been pronounced a drag on companies and the economy, and it has been argued that much needed reform is already under way to bring Japan in line with the United States: “American HRM practices are seen by the Japanese HRM experts as their chief source of inspiration ... [T]he common feature of those HRM practices that Japanese HR managers perceive as worth adopting from the American model is a move toward increased individualization of HRM ... [T]his goal runs counter to traditional Japanese approaches, thus justifying the notion of a paradigm shift” (Pudelko and Harzing, 2009: 24).

Clearly, then, there is pressure on Japanese companies to recognise the alleged limitations of their traditional ways and give up their famed focus on stakeholders (Ely and Pownall, 2002; Ahmadjian and Robbins, 2005). Amongst those stakeholders, employees have been shown to hold a privileged position (Dore, 2000). But can Japan’s distinctive brand of stakeholder capitalism survive in this new environment (Deakin and Whittaker, 2009)? For example, Allen, Carletti, Marquez (2007) conclude that the shareholder orientation tends to win out over the stakeholder one, and the implication of this is that employment systems will change to reflect a different emphasis on the strict control of fixed costs such as labour and the boosting of dividend payments. In that case, so the argument goes, conventional Japanese HRM will no longer be tenable. Added to this, Hattori and Arai (2009) opine that the
Restructuring of Japanese companies in response to globalisation has already led to momentous changes in the way in which Japanese employees view their employers, with previously relational bonds becoming transactional. Meanwhile, scandals such as Olympus’s concealment of approximately $1.5 billion of losses over two decades (Smart, 2012) are said to show the dangers of traditionally insular management practices that give priority to internal labour markets and self-regulation. Implied in the Olympus story, as well as in the more recent accounting irregularities scandal at Toshiba (BBC News, 2015), is a lack of substantive amendment to those enduring practices. Japanese Prime Minister Abe set out to address some of these corporate governance issues with legislation in 2015, leading to more predictions of major change (Economist, 2015d).

Obviously, answers to the question of how Japanese companies can, or whether they even should, protect the existing system have clear ramifications for how they approach business domestically and overseas. This in turn has a direct impact on their use of expatriates, inpatriates, and repatriates. Of these groups, Japanese expatriates and repatriates likely expect to be subject to lifetime employment. For some commentators, though, the persistent focus on the interests of full-time employees, rather than on investors, is at best old-fashioned, and at worst irresponsible. Stout (2012: 3) is certainly not one of those commentators, but she neatly encapsulates how radically attitudes have changed in the United States: “Fifty years ago, if you had asked the directors or CEO of a large public company what the company’s purpose was, you might have been told the corporation had many purposes: to provide equity investors with solid returns, but also to build great products, to provide decent livelihoods for employees, and to contribute to the community and the nation.” At that time, internal labour
markets were more common in the United States; with some exceptions (e.g., Groshen and Levine, 1998), most commentators agree that the nature of employment there has changed drastically (Hassard, Morris, and McCann, 2012; Nucci and Riggi, 2013), as many employers feel that those internal labour markets do not offer them sufficient management flexibility.

So what are the attractions of an internal labour market? Osterman (2011: 641) explains its logic as follows. Staff turnover directly entails costs in terms of lost human capital, and indirectly because of diminished incentives to train and develop personnel: “In order to reduce turnover, compensation is back-loaded, which leads to a system in which people spend long periods of time with the same employer. This effect is intensified by the nature of human capital acquisition. The early investments in training need to be rewarded over time, from the perspective of both the employees and the firm, again implying long careers.” The repatriates in this study had between eleven and twenty-four years with their companies. The average tenure was nineteen years, with a median of twenty years and a standard deviation of only five years. Their length of service and the implied investment strongly suggest that they had a rational incentive to remain with their employers to collect their back-loaded rewards. At the same time, their employers had invested heavily by training them and giving them overseas assignments. It may be more than mere economic rationalism that sustains the Japanese approach, however. After all, Japanese companies continue to take their responsibility to customers, employees, and society very seriously. Nonetheless, Jacoby (2005) and Dore (2009) speculate that the time will come when senior managers will have to choose between prioritising either shareholders or lifetime employees. If lifetime employment is abandoned, then careers in Japan will necessarily change. Some
argue that this process is already well under way, although the
results of this study lead me to disagree.

Regardless, to whose benefit would it be to transform Japanese
HRM practices, including corporate careers? There are certainly
many interested parties. It has been argued, for instance, that
analysts and consultants, as well as corporate managers, may
shape the narrative of change to further their own agendas (Grey,
2012). When Lucas and Kwong (2014) bemoan the financial cost of
trying to lay off workers in Japan, they are appealing to readers
who believe that senior managers should have the freedom to hire
and fire employees with a view to improving short-range
shareholder returns. Rudlin (2014) reports on Hitachi’s decision to
abolish its seniority system for pay and promotion, noting that it
will “impact other sacred cows of the traditional Japanese system.”
Those sacred cows include company-specific unions, uniform
salary base increases, and lifetime employment. According to
Rudlin (2014), “Lifetime employment will become even more thinly
upheld, as people are more able to move from company to company
without worrying about losing seniority based entitlements and it
will be easier then for companies to get rid of people.” The
implication is that making employment more precarious will be a
positive step.

In a similar vein, Tabuchi (2009) states that in Japan, “secure jobs
have a cost,” by which he means an unacceptable cost. He reasons
that employers currently need to cut wages to protect their full-
time employees, which means that consumers have less to spend,
which then stunts economic growth and corporate profits, so that
companies cannot recruit new employees. Even if this were true,
and fewer jobs were being created because of the protection being
afforded to certain fortunate employees, it could be argued that the
dignity and assurances which lifetime employment affords its beneficiaries generates more social utility than insecure employment for more people would do. There is something chilling for me about the declaration that “[t]he freedom to hire workers under flexible contracts is the best way to keep people out of unemployment” (Economist, 2015e).

Has Japan’s economic performance really been so poor since the bubble burst, though? Gros (2011) argues that while Japan’s GDP grew at only 0.6 percent in the first decade of this new century, its shrinking population and low unemployment levels mean that this was actually an impressive achievement. So why should we accept that the finance-driven, shareholder-centric agenda is in our best interests? Stout (2012) is amongst those who contend that a short-term fixation on shareholder value is actually detrimental for the majority of shareholders. Meanwhile, the Bank of England’s chief economist has connected shareholder power with lowered economic growth (Weldon, 2015), and echoing Sennett (1998), Grey (2012: 127) writes of the “endless deracination enacted by the new capitalism.” Underlying this is the reasonable assumption that it is problematic if companies are uprooted from their communities and ownership becomes divorced from location. The finance-centric agenda is certainly not being driven by the people who generate value, namely the human capital in corporations. However, Japan has become a highly developed economy without fully mimicking the predominant Anglo-American approach, and although economic performance since the early 1990s has disappointed many, there has still been growth. On the one hand, then, we have the traditional style of many Japanese employers, typified by a focus on stable employment for their regular employees; on the other hand, there are normative arguments put forward by articles in newspapers such as the Financial Times and the Economist (see
that advocate churn, with financial capital being put to the best assumed economic use in the short-term interests of shareholders. Significantly, this is now a group that commonly includes senior executives with stock options.

Churn generates financial value in capital and labour markets, not least for those who broker the changes. Entrepreneurs are strongly encouraged to have an exit strategy (Robbins, 2014) so that they can more quickly reap big financial rewards. Headhunters contact people uninvited with offers of other jobs. And yet at the same time, the rhetoric of human resource management is that employees are a company’s most valuable assets and that the right people should be selected, trained, and retained. My own Internet search on 18 January, 2015, found over eight million results for “employees most valuable asset” (see figure 1 below).

![Figure 1: Rhetoric of HRM](image-url)
Goldman Sachs, for instance, proclaim on their home page, “Our people are our greatest asset – we say it often and with good reason.” However, when their fixed income trading business looked weak in 2014, they were reported to be looking at how many people to cut, rather than at how (else) to improve the situation or where to transfer those staff (Ro, 2014; VerHage and Gasparino, 2014). In 2012, Malone (2012) reported on Goldman Sachs’s “quiet laying-off” of staff. The rhetoric doesn’t match the reality in cases such as these, then. Despite the misgivings of Jacoby (2005) and Dore (2009), this is still not the situation in Japanese companies, however: they continue to take their commitment to full-time staff seriously.

The emergent on-demand economy is an integral part of this story of change and churn. “The on-demand economy will inevitably exacerbate the trend towards enforced self-reliance that has been gathering pace since the 1970s. Workers who want to progress will have to keep their formal skills up to date, rather than relying on the firm to train them (or to push them up the ladder regardless)” (Economist, 2015b: 16). As a result, “everybody will need to learn how to manage You Inc” (Economist, 2015a: 3). Smartphones, tablets, and (other) personal computers have lowered the transaction costs of looking for someone with the skills to provide specific services, and so companies are less useful as intermediates. This means that “[u]sing the now ubiquitous platform of the smartphone to deliver labour and services in a variety of new ways will challenge many of the fundamental assumptions of 20th-century capitalism, from the nature of the firm to the structure of careers” (Economist, 2015b: 13).

Based on the above, it is not surprising that there has been strong pressure for structural and management changes in Japan. At the
same time, though, there have also been calls for a more far-sighted approach in the United States and the United Kingdom. Goedhart, Koller, and Wessels (2015) passionately defend shareholder orientation, but urge companies to consider both present and future shareholders when making decisions, while Barton and Wiseman (2014: 47) decry the short-termism that has become more common in public companies: “Simply put, short-termism is undermining the ability of companies to invest and grow, and those missed investments, in turn, have far-reaching consequences, including slower GDP growth, higher unemployment, and lower return on investment for savers.” It has been noted, too, that “[t]he on-demand economy is unlikely to be a happy experience for people who value stability more than flexibility: middle-aged professionals with children to educate and mortgages to pay” (Economist, 2015b: 16). This should raise a red flag, and not just for middle-aged professionals with mortgages such as I.

To my mind, companies have legal and moral responsibility for the welfare of their employees. The norms of the societies in which they operate will go a long way towards dictating the extent of that responsibility. Nonetheless, not all companies behave in the same way, not even those that share a legal system and cultural mores. What I have characterised as the Anglo-American model is not monolithic or internally consistent, for instance. Employees, managers, companies, and industries may show different characteristics. As an example of this, even celebrated former General Electric CEO and chairman, Jack Welch,⁴ has criticised the predominant focus in financial markets and publicly traded companies on shareholder value. In an interview with the Financial

⁴ A search for “Jack Welch” on amazon.com produced 2,241 results (20 June, 2015).
Times, Welch is reported to have labelled shareholder value, “the dumbest idea in the world,” and to have gone on to say something that would surely resonate with many Japanese business people: “Shareholder value is a result, not a strategy ... Your main constituencies are your employees, your customers and your products” (Guerrara, 2009). Despite that, though, Welch oversaw a twelve-year period in which General Electric met its forecasts in forty-six quarters, thereby consistently pleasing market analysts and boosting the share price. During his twenty-year tenure as CEO, GE’s U.S. dollar market valuation rose 3,357 percent from $14 billion to $484 billion, and this had a lot to do with the company’s uncanny ability to match forecasts almost to the penny (Denning, 2011). If GE really were massaging numbers to match market expectations, then it appears that despite the stirring rhetoric, shareholder value was the tail wagging the dog during Welch’s time at its helm.

There are other critics of the short-term, financial results driven, approach that is seen to be espoused by many companies in the United States and the United Kingdom. Echoing the quotation about deracination above, Pabst (2013) has identified the dangers of “disembodied finance, seeking returns anywhere, uncommitted to any particular place or industry, and subjecting anything and everything to commodification.” He goes on to say, “That’s why an alternative political economy must reconnect finance to the real economy.” In addition, the controversy over zero-hours contracts in the U.K. suggests that companies have a duty to employees and society as a whole, rather than just to shareholders and their financial targets (Roberts, 2014; Kowalski, Loretto, and Redman, 2015). Those contracts casualise work, render employees’ positions precarious, and make it difficult for people to plan their futures because their working hours are not guaranteed. From that point
of view, these contracts in the U.K. embody Sennett’s (1998) dystopian vision of an increasingly rootless society built on shifting sands.

The literature review that comes after this introduction will show that in aggregate, employment in Japan has also become more uncertain, and yet at the same time, lifetime employment endures as a key feature of Japanese HRM. Doing business is not just about extracting profits for owners, although profits are certainly necessary for sustainability. However, this stakeholder approach appears to puzzle, and perhaps even offend, some observers. Clenfield (2015: 45), for instance, reports on a Japanese company that has produced the world’s most efficient bicycle wheel, which has potential ramifications for the future. Yet, the company has sold only thirty sets because it is not sufficiently interested in marketing: “In Japan compulsive overengineering is producing beautiful industrial components and few consumer hits.” Pride in products and quality, and a focus on employee training, all serve as examples of the long-term view of many Japanese companies, though. Should this really be changed? And as Pilling (2014: xxxi) describes, altering only one aspect of how things are done is no simple matter: “Social systems ... are not always easy to disentangle. Their strengths are often their weaknesses and vice versa. Cultures are not menus from which one can order a la carte.” This study will give us a window on to Japan’s present-day employment culture by looking at aspects of contemporary HRM practices. In doing this, it will test the concepts that are commonly used to frame our understanding of careers and work itself.

1.3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

So far, I have explained my reasons for undertaking this research and laid out my biases with respect to characteristic Japanese
approaches to human resource management. Hereafter, I will explore the concepts that have informed this study of Japanese repatriate careers, and as a consequence of that, Japanese HRM. As mentioned above, I have reviewed three bodies of literature: career studies, repatriation, and Japan studies. The concepts that emerge most strongly from the career studies literature relate to individual agency, with career actors being admonished to take personal responsibility for their own futures, rather than relying on their employers. This provides a stark contrast with the work on internal labour markets, which describes how companies allocate labour internally for their economic benefit. That may involve high productivity workers subsidising the wages of low productivity colleagues (Miyazaki, 1977), but overall, “[i]nternal labor markets establish incentives which reduce both the need for monitoring and the gain from personally advantageous but globally inefficient behavior” (Osterman, 1987: 46). However, as the Kaufman (2014) quotation at the start of this chapter suggests, the focus of contemporary career studies is not on these internal labour markets, since they are assumed to be dead or dying.

Two examples of the individual agency view are “protean” (Hall, 1996) and “boundaryless” (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) careers. The protean career is the sum total of changing career choices based on an individual’s orientation towards self-fulfillment. In a similar vein, the boundaryless career is characterised by the crossing of borders between various types of employment at the rational will of the career actor. Although their validity even in the United States and United Kingdom has been challenged, they have still been identified as key concepts in career studies (Baruch, Szűcs, and Gunz, 2015). As we will see, they are far more likely to apply to those Anglo-American labour markets and cultural contexts than to Japan’s. Zeitz, Blau, and Fertig (2009: 373), for
instance, point out that the concepts have particular currency in the United States because of the flexibility of its labour market and its traditional emphasis on individual independence. As we will see, the standard model of careers is highly problematic in Japan. Due to the complex relationship between structure and individual agency (Grey, 2012), the labour market and corporate contexts in specific countries need to be understood. So, too, do the expectations of employees. For this thesis, that means looking closely at prevalent Japanese tendencies by talking to repatriates.

Moving on to repatriation, much of the literature examines the challenges of returning to the home country and organisation. From a corporate point of view, the fundamental line of reasoning is that companies should retain repatriates because of the competitive advantage they can provide as they transfer their knowledge and leverage their social capital (Fink, Meierewert, and Rohr, 2005; Reiche, 2012). Despite this, too many repatriates are reported to feel that their skills are not used properly, and so they resign in order to pursue their protean or boundaryless careers (Stahl and Cerdin, 2004). This entails a damaging loss for their employers.

Finally, with respect to the Japan studies literature, the key concepts relate to “embeddedness” (Jacoby, 2005), the “enterprise community” (Dore, 1983 and 2000), and to the internal labour market. The first of these is used by Jacoby to show that organisations and their management are socially embedded, which means that there is a heavy influence from the country in which companies are headquartered and the industry in which they operate. The second characterises companies as organisations to which employees belong for life, even to the extent of having their own restaurants and clubs, which retirees also may use. The third
examines the economic rationale for companies focusing on internal human resources, rather than regularly hiring mid-career talent from outside.

Predictably, there are differences of opinion in all three bodies of literature that are directly relevant to this thesis. One such disagreement is about the alleged collapse of organisational careers, although the dominant narrative is one in which people are urged to change the way they think about work in order to protect themselves, since employment risks have been shifted from organisations to individuals. Individuals cannot hope to stay with one employer to build a career – job security, it is said, has now gone. In simple terms, “big companies have abandoned lifetime employment” (Economist, 2015a: 3). During the industrial age, companies wanted predictable labour supply. There were clear job roles and career paths for employees. “For a while after the second world war everybody seemed to benefit from this model: workers got security, benefits and steady wage rises; companies got a stable workforce in which they could invest with a fair expectation of returns” (Economist, 2015b: 14). However, poor industrial relations in Western countries in the 1970s, followed by the accelerated use of computers, together with high speed communication and globalisation, changed things irrevocably: “This all resulted in a more rootless and flexible labour force” (ibidem). Hecksher (1995: 145-6) claims to see the genesis of a new ideal working relationship, which is “a voluntary coming together of individuals with commitments and an organization with a mission ... The relationship lasts as long as the organizational vision and the individual commitments are close enough to lead to a sense of mutual contribution” (italics in the original). And while Bialik (2010) questions the contention that a typical U.S. worker will have many careers over his lifetime, he does support the idea that
people often change employers, citing U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data that show average tenure as being 3.8 years in 1996, 3.5 years in 2000, and 4.1 years in 2008.

By contrast, tenure at large Japanese companies is longer. Kawaguchi and Ueno (2013: 24), for instance, report that “Japanese workers apparently enjoy about 50% longer job tenure than US workers for all age ranges.” Is this a good thing, though, and are the Japanese who are still subject to lifetime employment rational to support it? Beck and Beck (1994: 27) argue that Western writers tend to romanticise the kind of loyalty that some Japanese employees show to their employers, as if Japanese people ignore their own interests: “This omission of the factor of personal gain from the ethic of loyalty is a recurrent theme in Western assessments of Japanese behavior, not least in the literature on permanent employment.” However, “the actual behavior of Japanese employees over time responds much more closely to a personal rational calculus than one might expect ... [T]he data show that the Japanese elites have historically clung most rigidly to the practice of lifetime employment when economic conditions made it advantageous to do so ... Is the Japanese employee really as devoted to the company as he seems, or is he merely playing the role of idealist, using it as a façade to hide a cool assessment of his own advantage?” (ibidem). The authors come down on the side of cool assessment. This thesis will provide some qualified support for that view.

We have already seen that there are differences of opinion about the need for transformation in Japanese HRM approaches and the degree of change that has occurred to date. New systems bring their own challenges. For example, the switch from a focus on people to one on task performance is problematic (Kishita, 2006).
How should back office staff be rewarded when their results do not directly create monetary value? Can there be consistency between performance review raters, as well as consistency over time with the same raters? Will experienced employees be willing to offer on-the-job training to younger colleagues if they fear that they may be making themselves expendable as a result? And perhaps most critically, does such an individual-oriented approach fit with the teamwork of many Japanese companies and people? Breaden (2014), for instance, highlights the challenges faced by employers such as Fast Retailing\(^5\), which have struggled to fit in-patriated overseas university graduates into their Japanese HRM systems. I will explore issues such as these in the literature review, and reflect on them in the repatriate case studies and discussion chapter. They are important, as reports persist that Japanese companies are instituting radical and fundamental changes. Inagaki (2015), for instance, claims that, “Japan Inc shuns seniority in favour of merit-based pay.”

In the background for me have been my own convictions about the inherent problems of career planning. These have been brought into sharper focus by concepts such as the law of unintended consequences (Merton, 1936; Grey, 2012), fuzzy logic as it applies to management (Grint, 1997), and planned happenstance (Krumboltz, 2009). All of these point to possible advantages for an ad hoc system based on broad-brushstroke strategic planning and tactical responses. If the future is unknowable and initiatives have unexpected knock-on effects, flexibility must be valuable for organisations. Of course, an organisation may gain flexibility by hiring specialists from the external labour market according to its short-term needs, and then laying them off as necessary. Another

\(^5\) **Owner of clothing brand Uniqlo, which recorded global sales of over $11 billion in fiscal 2015** (http://www.fastretailing.com/eng/ir/financial/summary.html)
choice, though, is to expect elasticity in the roles of its staff, while also providing them with long-term stability within an internal labour market. This echoes Dore’s (1986) discussion of functional flexibility in Japanese companies, and as I will explain, it seems to me to have fairer and more dignified ramifications for employees.

1.4 THESIS STRUCTURE AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

At the heart of this thesis are six individual narrative case studies. The repatriate participants met with me repeatedly over a period of between thirty and forty-six months, and each case has been written using many quotations to capture that person’s perceptions and voice. Preceding the case studies are this introduction, a literature review, and a method chapter. After the case studies come an extensive discussion of the data, a conclusion chapter, the appendix, and then finally, a list of the references. Before moving on to those, there are some key terms used in this thesis that first need to be defined, so I will now confirm what I mean in these pages by “globalisation,” “lifetime employment,” “core employee,” “Japanese HRM,” and “longitudinal research.”

First of all, globalisation with respect to companies and their employees is taken here to mean that those companies operate in more than one country, and as a result, have linkages that cross national borders. We can see globalisation in terms of products, markets, and the workforce, for instance. Products may need to be developed with various kinds of users in mind. The market entry strategy and marketing message may have to be nuanced in different ways. HRM systems, too, may require revision to encourage the sharing of values, practices, and processes. With respect to HRM, seniority, company-specific unions, and lifetime employment all become problematic as Japanese companies try to expand globally and integrate their operations. In comparison with
business environments which reward people based on performance measured against quantitative goals, seniority for pay and promotion might appear to encourage mediocrity; for relatively adversarial systems, company-specific unions may seem to be altogether too cosy with management; when workforce flexibility and an active mid-career labour market are the norm, lifetime employment may look stagnant and stultifying. However, I will argue against this perception, particularly when it comes to lifetime employment.

Lifetime employment itself is “better understood as a long-term commitment between workers and employers rather than as a permanent employment contract” (Ono, 2010: 2). As already noted, it has the benefit of stable employment relationships that allow company-specific training and flexibility in job assignments over the long run. At the same time, it also has the potential drawback of efficiency losses due to rigidity. The practice is not standard across all Japanese companies and for all employees, and “the lifetime employment rate varies considerably by gender, firm size, and education level” (ibidem: 22). The participants in this study, then, are not intended to be representative of the majority of Japanese employees. They are core employees at major companies, which means that unlike workers on the periphery, their contract periods are unlimited and they are confident that their employers will try to look after their long-term interests. Furthermore, the repatriates are part of an elite within that core. One estimate puts the number of people working at large companies at fourteen million (Hagiwara and McCombs, 2014), which equates to around twenty-two percent of the total employed population of just under sixty-four million (Statistics Bureau, third quarter of 2014). Ono (2010) uses various sets of data to arrive at an estimate of twenty percent of the Japanese labour force having access to, and
choosing to benefit from, lifetime employment. However, even if the majority of Japanese are not beneficiaries of lifetime employment, Matanle and Lunsing (2006: 1) have noted “the existence of lifetime employment as the dominant normative pattern for living and working.”

The fourth of the terms is Japanese HRM. The national label evokes a stereotype, and stereotypes can be dangerous, unless they are conscious descriptions of up-to-date tendencies that don’t include value judgements. In that case, they become an expedient and valuable heuristic tool, and that is how I have set out to use them in this thesis. Human resource management itself can be understood in terms of employment, working conditions, rewards, and evaluation. Therefore, Japanese HRM refers to distinctive patterns in Japanese employment, working conditions, remuneration, and evaluation systems (Kishita, 2006). As already outlined, there is a clear orientation towards core employees, with emphasis on long-term education and training. Promotion and other rewards are based on seniority, as well as ability; unions are company-based, with the result that today’s union member may well be tomorrow’s manager; and there is the assumption of lifetime employment. While there has been much talk of performance orientation since the 1990s (including Inagaki, 2015), there is disagreement about the extent of meaningful change to the traditional model. I will talk about that extensively in this thesis.

The final term that I will define here is longitudinal research. This is usually contrasted with cross-sectional research, in that the former is an iterative process over an extended period, while the latter is conducted at one point in time. A longitudinal design is useful when trying to establish causal relationships, and also for looking at developments and changes over time (Menard, 2002).
this study, I have done the latter of these two. There may be issues with consistency, since the participants and the researcher will typically view the same events in diverse ways at different times. There may also be problems with participants quitting a study before sufficient data have been collected. In addition, because the longitudinal approach is comparatively time and labour intensive, the researcher often has to limit herself to a small number of study participants, which may then damage the credibility of her interpretation of the data and any conclusions that she draws. I will address issues such as these in the method chapter, and show how they have not been problematic for my research design. Before that, though, I will review the three bodies of literature introduced above: career studies, repatriation, and Japan studies.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The above quotation makes a bold claim that is highly problematic in the context of Japanese repatriates. To understand why this is so, we need to first look at the career studies literature, paying particular attention to the debate about the extent to which modern careers have changed. Is the career job really extinct, for instance? Do employees, including expatriates and repatriates, truly act as if they are “career capitalists” (see Dickmann and Doherty above)? We then need to understand the potential influence that returning from international assignments has on the careers of business people, including the decision to stay or resign, and so I will review the repatriation literature. Finally, in order to address the question of how returning Japanese business people likely view and progress in their careers, I will turn to the Japan studies literature. Overall, this review will show that there is insufficient research on the career expectations, attitudes, and behaviour of Japanese repatriates. Furthermore, the existing literature is U.S.-centric and is fundamentally flawed when applied to the Japanese setting.

2.1 CAREER STUDIES LITERATURE

It was not so long ago that we were presented with a picture of self-perpetuating organisational patterns and long-term career jobs. For instance, Kanter (1977: 47-8) informed us of “ample evidence from organizational studies that leaders in a variety of situations are likely to show preference for socially similar subordinates and help them get ahead.” Later, Jackall (2010) enriched Kanter’s (1977: 3) characterisation of business corporations as “the
quintessential contemporary people-producer” by exploring the rules that governed and sustained corporate bureaucracies in the United States. However, we are now told that the career landscape has changed as business has become increasingly fast paced, global, and competitive (Pate and Scullion, 2010). Market forces, outsourcing, and restructuring have all had a profound impact (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). As a result, lifetime employment has become untenable, and “[t]he career contract is dead” (Hall and Moss, 1998: 22). Life is less stable, since “[t]he new masters have rejected careers in the old English sense of the word, as pathways along which people can travel; durable and sustained paths of action are foreign territories” (Sennett, 1998: 147).

Portable skills and employability have become important for individuals as they seek to survive and thrive in this environment. Schein (1996: 81) claims, “the only thing the career occupant can really expect of an organization is the opportunity to learn and gain experience, which presumably makes him or her more employable in some other organization,” although this seems to miss the point that he is also likely more employable in his current organization. For Johnson (2013), “[t]he only solution is to embrace the concept of life-long learning and a slasher [portfolio] existence of combined careers almost from the beginning.” It is in this context of increasing self-reliance that Schein (1996) differentiates between the “external” and “internal” career. The former is “the formal stages and roles defined by organizational policies and societal concepts of what an individual can expect in the occupational structure” (Schein, 1996: 80). On the other hand, the internal career “involves a subjective sense of where one is going in one’s work life” (ibidem). Career anchors are the logic underlying the internal career. They are an individual’s fundamental values and motives with regard to work, and they include security/stability
and entrepreneurial creativity (Schein, 1996). Big changes such as redundancy and geographical moves are triggers for people to reevaluate their relationships with their employers (cf. Angle and Lawson, 1993) and to think carefully about their career anchors. Given that repatriation is one such major event, Schein’s theory implies that repatriates will pay close attention to the consistency of their career anchors with their new roles back ‘home.’ Inconsistency will presumably motivate them to look for new employment opportunities.

Similar to Schein, Hall (2004) contrasts two types of career: the “traditional” career and the “protean” career. In the former (as with the external career), the organisation is in control. Commitment to, and progression within, the organisation are core values for those subscribing to the traditional career, with promotion and salary serving as objective measures of success. Mobility is low. On the other hand, for the protean career, the person himself is the focus (as with the internal career). He values freedom, growth, work satisfaction, and professional commitment. His degree of mobility is high, and he measures success in terms of his subjective psychological welfare. Mobility, though, is not necessarily between companies, but sometimes within them. For example, Hall (ibidem) describes a woman, Jane, who has been with the same organisation for sixteen years. On her own initiative, she has moved position within that organisation every few years. Hall (ibidem: 10) refers to her as “positively brimming with motivation, confidence and enthusiasm and an absolute belief that she will be supported by the organization with any future changes that she undertakes.” Along these lines, Hall and Moss (1998: 31) state, “the most effective organizations will take a relational approach to the development of employees’ careers and thus promote continuous learning.” However, are the repatriates described in the
literature confident that the opportunities provided by their companies will give them the right environment for progress in both their internal and external careers? What do the organisation and the individual expect?

People’s perceptions of what they owe and are owed with respect to their employers will likely change with major life events such as repatriation. In other words, the “psychological contract” (Rousseau, 1989; Robinson, 1996) between employer and employee is renegotiated from time to time (Woodd, 1999). The psychological contract is defined by Rousseau (1989: 123) as “an individual’s beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party.” Organisations should help employees to be proactive, and not just reactive, so that there is an on-going good fit between the individual and his organisation (Woodd, 1999), and so that there is no breakdown in the psychological contract. However, if employees perceive a breach in the contract, then “people may shift from relational to transactional patterns to maintain consistent self-concepts” (Thomas, Au, and Ravlin, 2010: 1453). This will impact how they view their careers, including their satisfaction with their new roles. For example, repatriates who enjoyed generous living allowances and a high degree of autonomy overseas may become disillusioned if conditions back in their home organisations are less attractive. If they feel that the psychological contract has been broken, then they will be motivated to look outside their companies for more equitable opportunities.

Before going any further, I used the term “commitment” above, and it needs to be explained in the context of employer-employee relationships. Organisational commitment has three components. The first is affective commitment, which is a sense of involvement,
emotional attachment, and identification with the company. The second is continuance commitment, which is a calculated recognition of the costs and benefits involved in leaving an employer. This is influenced by the availability and attractiveness of alternative employment. The third is normative commitment, which is the feeling of obligation due to an incurred debt (Meyer, Stanley, Jackson, McInnis, Maltin, and Sheppard, 2012). Normative commitment will almost certainly be strong for repatriates who enjoyed their overseas assignments, are grateful for the opportunity, and feel that they owe something to their employers.

The TCM (three-component model) of organisational commitment was developed and tested in the United States. Assuming that it is valid as a construct, is it helpful in analysing perceptions and behaviour in other cultures? Lee, Allen, Meyer, and Rhee (2001) investigate the fit of the model for Korean company employees and find that the TCM is generalisable. They suggest that “normative commitment might matter more in making turnover decisions in collectivist cultures than it does in individualist cultures” (ibidem: 611). If that is the case, then it has implications for Japan, which is also reckoned to be collectivist (Huff and Kelley, 2003). Meanwhile, Liu (2009) finds the TCM to be relevant for Taiwanese and Hong Kong Chinese, and Meyer, Stanley, Jackson, McInnis, Maltin, and Sheppard (2012) suggest that normative commitment is more important than affective commitment in Japan in explaining high retention and productivity rates. However, given that the internal labour market remains dominant in Japan (Keizer, 2011) and the external labour market for full-time employees is still relatively illiquid, the role of continuance commitment may have been underestimated by those authors. The repatriates’ stories will give us more insight into this.
The career studies literature reviewed thus far has painted a picture of fundamentally rational career actors who navigate a new career reality in an unstable environment. In that environment, “firms are relying on the outside labor market to restructure, dropping skills that are no longer needed and bringing in new ones” (Cappelli, 1999: 157). Workers with valuable portable skills in a developed labour market may be open to changing companies in order to further their internal careers by finding jobs that more closely match their self-perceived developmental needs and interests. These rational career capitalists may also be looking to boost their external careers by moving to more attractive positions. For such people, “[t]he belief that even large companies will be able to offer employees better opportunities than the vast sea of possibilities in the outside market can offer up is a chimera” (Cappelli, 1999: 162). In Japan, Hamaaki, Hori, Maeda, and Murata (2012) note a trend towards younger people rejecting lifetime employment because of a perceived weakening of the seniority system. If length of service is no longer going to be rewarded, then seizing career opportunities is a rational response.

There are at least two key assumptions operating here, though, both of which are questionable. One is that the external labour market is fluid and efficient, and so continuance commitment is low. In reality, this will depend on institutional, social, legal, and economic factors. The second is that employees have embraced external mobility, suggesting that normative and affective commitment are low. It is claimed that overall, “a good, lifetime match between an employee and a single employer is becoming less important in determining an employee’s long-term success” (Cappelli, 1999: 158). However, even in North America, Europe, and Oceania, these assumptions have been challenged from individual, organisational, and institutional points of view.
Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, and Roper (2012: 325), for instance, query the boundaryless career concept that casts agentic individuals as the “proactive creators of their own careers.” We are told that in a boundaryless career, “[o]rganizational commitment has been replaced by a business transaction” (Banai and Harry, 2004: 98). Employees are in control: “They make sure that they are regularly trained and developed at work so that their skills are transferable, and they are not shy of working for a series of organizations” (ibidem). This overstates the case, however. After all, organisations exercise power over individual careers, and broader societal forces such as education and gender also have an impact on them. As Tams and Arthur (2010: 635) point out, “boundaryless careers cannot be constructed independently of institutional and cultural contexts.” For Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, and Roper (2012), career boundaries are socially constructed because they are understood and classified by people, constraining because careers are defined and protected by their members, enabling as members recognise and support one another, and punctuating because they develop across time. Dany (2003: 835) concurs with this: “Career boundaries still exist and firms’ career management practices still mark individuals’ careers; they serve as benchmarks for making sense of career; they also limit individuals’ career strategies.” The extent and role of individual agency has been overestimated.

Jacoby (1999a: 124), meanwhile, acknowledges a transfer of risk from employers to employees in the U.S.A., particularly with regard to managerial staff, but argues, “these are changes of degree, not of kind.” Indeed, “the majority of displaced workers are finding reemployment in career-type positions” (ibidem: 134), and employers face pressure to retain staff as the key population of employees aged between thirty-five and forty-four shrinks. Overall, “[m]ost adults continue to be employed in long-term jobs situated
in internal labor markets, although they are more exposed to market forces than thirty years ago” (Jacoby, 1999b: 176). He (1999a) identifies two biases that encourage the mistaken belief in a fundamental change in the nature of employment relationships. One is an imbalance between perceptions of gain and loss – in relative terms, we tend to forget the former and exaggerate the latter. The other is the common misunderstanding that the present is essentially different from the past. Academics and consultants, he points out, are prone to play on this belief in order to make their frameworks more attractive. To these might be added a third: the feeling that not only is the present different, but also that things were in fact fundamentally better in some fondly constructed golden past. In conclusion, Jacoby (1999a: 135) states that in the United States, the “reallocating of risk—not the decline of career-type jobs—is the central dynamic driving today’s internal labor markets.” Nonetheless, the shifting of risk appears to involve weakening the role of career jobs.

Doogan’s (2001) assessment of the new career narrative also focusses on the institutional context for careers. He is highly critical of the view that “technological, social and institutional developments have profoundly altered the demand for labour, eradicated traditional work patterns based on stable employment and emasculated the bargaining systems that govern the recruitment, retention and remuneration of labour” (420). Indeed, he finds evidence of increased long-term employment in the U.K. during the 1990s. The change for women, managers, professionals, and clerks is particularly marked. Overall, “[a] long-term core has not been replaced by a long-term periphery” (ibidem: 435). In common with Jacoby (1999b), Doogan (2001) attributes the rhetoric of insecurity to commentators’ desire to “provide epoch-defining theories of social development” (ibidem: 419).
In a similar vein, Fevre (2007: 518) argues that the evidence for “an age of insecure employment” in the U.K. and the U.S.A. is at best flimsy, and cautions that “misapprehension about insecure work still thrives” (ibidem: 519). According to his comparative data, “[t]he most spectacular growth in temporary work among OECD countries has taken place in Spain, Portugal and Poland but it is unlikely that this is what Beck, Giddens, Sennett and others had in mind when they elaborated their theories of an age of insecurity” (ibidem: 524). He concludes that social theorists such as these have played a part in “shaping the zeitgeist” (ibidem: 531), but they have not critically examined that zeitgeist based on compelling and credible evidence.

It is clear, then, that there is disagreement over the true extent of precarious employment, the breakdown of the organisational career, and transactional behaviour. In my opinion, it has been overstated even in North America and Europe, with provocative rhetoric being used to try to make the case. Tweedie’s (2013) defence of Sennett’s sociology of work provides a good example of this. With respect to Japan, it is important to realise that a significant core of workers still has the choice of lifetime employment, even though no formal legal requirement exists to support it (Matanle and Matsui, 2011). This certainly applies to Japanese business expatriates and repatriates. However, in the review of the repatriation literature that follows, we will see that unhelpful assumptions of short-term market-based rationality persist. To get a more nuanced understanding of repatriate careers, concepts such as perceived organisational support (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002) and perceived organisational career support (Van der Heijden, Van Engen, and Paauwe, 2009) may offer a useful perspective for understanding repatriate attitudes.
Perceived organisational career support (PCS) with respect to international assignees “is defined as the extent to which the in/expatriate believes that the parent organization cares about his or her career needs” (Van der Heijden, Van Engen, and Paauwe, 2009: 833). It is closely related to the more familiar theory of perceived organisational support, or POS (e.g., Kraimer, Seibert, Wayne, Liden, and Bravo, 2011). In their study at a Dutch MNC, Van der Heijden, Van Engen, and Paauwe (2009: 840) found that “the more career support is experienced by an expatriate, the less likely he or she will be to want to leave the home organization.” Interestingly, perceptions of career opportunities outside the organisation did not have an impact in their study on reported intention to leave. In terms of the TCM, continuance commitment was not an issue, then. While expatriation differs from repatriation, PCS is potentially a useful lens for looking at the career decisions of repatriates, too. I will draw on it later in my discussion of one of the cases (see chapter nine).

2.2 REPATRIATION LITERATURE
Given the size of the U.S. economy, the number of multinational companies from that country, and the influence of its universities, it is no surprise that repatriation research has a strong American bias (Newton, Hutchings, and Kabanoff, 2007; Shen and Hall, 2009). The research is often based on cross-sectional surveys and statistical analyses (Cox, 2004; Stahl, Chua, Caligiuri, Cerdin, and Taniguchi, 2009). At the same time, more attention has been paid in management studies to expatriation than repatriation (Furuya, Stevens, Oddou, Bird, and Mendenhall, 2007; Hyder and Lövblad, 2007), and the existing work on repatriation has tended to look at readjustment (Suutari and Välimaa, 2002), rather than at careers. Clearly, we do not currently have a good understanding of Japanese repatriate careers.
Five themes emerged from my reading of the existing repatriation literature. Firstly, it is claimed that repatriation can be more difficult than expatriation. Next, there is a gap between the expectations of organisations and their repatriates, and as a result, repatriates’ career and specific job expectations often remain unmet. Thirdly, repatriates are increasingly likely to see overseas assignments as a stepping stone in their overall careers, rather than as a step up within any one given organisation. In other words, a repatriate may use his overseas experience to get another job with a different employer. This fits neatly with the boundaryless career discussion above. Fourthly, many companies still do not have a formal repatriation strategy in place for returning personnel, and in general, the process is being mismanaged. Finally, intention to leave and actual turnover rates are both relatively high amongst repatriates.

Turning to the first of these, there is consensus in the literature that repatriation is very challenging for the individuals involved (Sussman, 2000; Furuya, Stevens, Oddou, Bird, and Mendenhall, 2007), and may actually be harder than expatriation (Adler, 1981; Pate and Scullion, 2010). While this is initially surprising, if we think about people’s expectations, it makes sense. After all, when expatriates go overseas, they often imagine that there will be puzzling differences and difficulties, but by way of contrast, when they return home, they think they will be able to fit back in without much effort, despite the fact that their home organisations, their home cultures, and they themselves may all have changed (Black, Gregersen, and Mendenhall, 1992; Suutari and Brewster, 2003). Furthermore, being selected for an overseas assignment in the first place gives employees a strong sense of worth, and their preferential treatment while overseas reinforces that feeling. Organisations tend to provide better support for expatriates than
for repatriates, as suggested by the amount of money that is spent on the two processes (Bolino, 2007; Jassawalla and Sashittal, 2009). The gap between expatriation and repatriation, then, may cause dissatisfaction (Stahl, Miller, and Tung, 2002; Bonache, 2005) as repatriates struggle to deal with the fact that they are no longer being treated in a special way.

As noted, research has tended to focus on expatriation, rather than on repatriation. This means that the managers who bring employees ‘home,’ and the repatriates who go through that process, have insufficient research to give them perspective. It is no surprise, then, that companies often do not understand how overseas assignments change the attitudes and skills of employees (Shen and Hall, 2009), and they tend to prioritise quick reintegration into the home office. Repatriates themselves, though, place more weight on fitting back into the home culture (Andreason and Kinneer, 2005) than on readjusting to the home organisation. This gap is complicated by the fact that all of the people involved in repatriation underestimate – as we have seen above – just how hard it can be. Overall, then, expatriation goes more smoothly, and repatriation is more problematic, than many people anticipate (Jassawalla and Sashittal, 2009).

If this is the case, why do people (assuming that they are rational and that they have full information) accept overseas assignments? It seems that while some employees agree to expatriation because of the interesting personal challenge involved, others think it will give them a career boost within their organisations (Bolino, 2007). It is in employers’ interests to encourage this latter perception. If they are not given interesting roles and promotions by their companies after repatriating, though, people may consider quitting. In fact, Stahl and Cerdin (2004) show that repatriates often feel
that the jobs to which they return are unsatisfying, that their rare experience is undervalued, that they have little chance to use their new skills and knowledge, and furthermore, that overseas assignments actually have a negative influence on their subsequent careers with the companies that sent them abroad. Assuming refusal is a viable option, it is still unclear why employees would agree to go overseas, then.

The concept of the “intelligent career” (Parker, Khapova, and Arthur, 2009) offers another possible answer to this conundrum of why people agree to go abroad. The theory posits that people invest in their careers in terms of “knowing-why,” “knowing-whom,” and “knowing-how.” Knowing-why is the sense of purpose connected to understanding the value of particular work, knowing-whom represents the social networks arising from that work, and knowing-how means the skills and knowledge related to performance (Dickmann and Doherty, 2010). In terms of the intelligent career, it could be that rational individuals accept international assignments for their own developmental reasons related to all three of these. To use Schein’s (1996) terms from the career studies literature, this may mean that they go overseas more for the sake of their internal careers than for their external careers within their current companies. In a similar vein, Tung (1998) has posited the boundaryless career as an alternative answer to this question. Just as in the intelligent career scenario, expatriates are interested in developing not only their external careers, but also their internal careers. Overseas experience is an important way of achieving this goal, since employees can develop valuable skills during their international assignments, and then if they deem it advantageous, use those skills in a different role or with a new employer after they have repatriated.
This same argument could be made in reference to the protean career. While there is a difference between boundaryless and protean careers, such as a greater probability of staying with one employer for boundaryless careers, there are also strong similarities (Briscoe and Hall, 2006). For instance, just like protean careers, boundaryless careers are managed more by the individual than by the organisation (McNulty, De Cieri, and Hutchings, 2009). Indeed, “those with protean and boundaryless career attitudes are in fact agentic in their career posture, not willing to wait for events to control them” (Briscoe and Hall, 2006: 43). Unsurprisingly, boundaryless careers are now said to involve greater mobility between organisations.

Because of this, Hall and Moss (1998) caution companies to be relational in their dealings with employees so that there is sustained alignment of mutual interests. The protean career itself appears to be more consistent with short-term transactional contracts than with long-term relational ones (Yan, Zhu, and Hall, 2002), though. In the former, financial self-interest over the short-run is paramount, while in the latter, both emotional and financial interests are important over a longer timespan (Pate and Scullion, 2010). The benefits from repatriation for both the organisation and individual overlap in terms of the use of new expertise (Yan, Zhu, and Hall, 2002), and this gives a more nuanced picture of what may be happening. If the assignment is strategically important, for instance, organisations will want ongoing relationships with their repatriates. Individuals will seek more permanent and relational arrangements when they judge the organisation will give them good opportunities going forward (ibidem). However, the authors speculate that growing experience of globalisation may be encouraging companies to become more transactional towards their assignees. As exposure to overseas markets increases,
organisations learn and retain knowledge of how to handle global operations – they encode it in their routines and processes. Companies gain more people with the necessary global skills, and as a result, they determine that the marginal value of each new repatriate is smaller. As a result, individual turnover is less damaging and the relationship becomes more transactional. The psychological contract between large Japanese companies and their full-time employees is typically relational, however, and so it is highly likely that different calculations are being made. We will explore this idea in the Japan studies review below.

Meanwhile, the repatriation literature reveals other disparities between the expectations of organisations and their repatriates (Paik, Segaud, and Malinowski, 2002; Arman, 2009). If employees are sent for the express purpose of personal development, they are likely to be sensitive to any perceived lack of career opportunities when they return (Suutari and Brewster, 2003), and so work expectations should be consistent between employees and their organisations (Hyder and Lövblad, 2007). In practice, however, Spanish repatriates have reported lower levels of satisfaction than expatriate and domestic peers with the following: task clarity, autonomy, chances to apply knowledge, responsibility, remuneration, promotion, and general job satisfaction (Bonache, 2005). Lee and Liu (2006) report a similar situation with repatriates in Taiwan, while Cave, Chung, and Choi’s (2013) research leads them to advise companies to focus on repatriates’ levels of organisational commitment.

On a related note, Haslberger and Brewster (2009) talk in terms of a common breach of the psychological contract between employer and international assignee, with the latter having made “career capital gains” while overseas that can be leveraged elsewhere by
moving to a new company. Similarly, Pate and Scullion (2010) report a perceived sense of injustice on the part of the repatriate that is dangerous for the employer. Of course, companies also send people abroad because they wish to fill an organisational skill gap or exert control over affiliates (Bolino, 2007), and not just because they are interested in the career development of their employees. What kind of impact might this distinction have on repatriates’ prospects and feelings about their unfolding careers?

In answer to this, Newton, Hutchings, and Kabanoff (2007) show that employees sent overseas for career development are more likely to have jobs prepared for them than those sent to fill specific positions. Kraimer, Shaffer, and Bolino’s (2009) cross-sectional study of repatriates provides evidence of a significant correlation between developmental assignments and career advancement. The same study also shows a significant inverse correlation between turnover intentions and career advancement. In contrast, however, Stahl, Chua, Caligiuri, Cerdin, and Taniguchi (2009) find that employees who are sent overseas for developmental reasons have significantly higher turnover intentions than those sent for functional reasons, such as position filling and control. Of course, it is problematic to categorise assignment purpose and actual outcomes in purely black and white terms, since expatriates simultaneously fulfill many roles, including using their growing skills overseas, as well as reporting back to the HQ and exerting some influence over local colleagues. The picture, then, is mixed, but it suggests that repatriates often move between employers. Once again, though, we need to remember that there is a North American bias in the data.

Changing the focus from employee to employer, Baruch and Altman (2002) see an important connection between unsuccessful
repatriation and the category of organisation sending employees overseas. They identify five types of company using expatriates: global (those with established expatriation needs and procedures), emissary (HQ-centric organisations that require people to control overseas operations), peripheral (organisations in small or remote markets, for whom expatriation is an incentive and perquisite), professional (with expatriation outsourced to outsiders, such as third country nationals), and finally, expedient, which is typified by an ad hoc approach. The authors (2002) contend that the repatriation issues faced by organisations in the expedient category are the greatest. People working for companies without established expatriation and repatriation practices are the most discontented, and so they are the most likely to leave, taking their skills with them. On the other hand, turnover is lower for repatriates sent by emissary, global, and peripheral organisations (as opposed to professional and expedient). Large Japanese companies likely fit the emissary and global categories, since HQ control is often a motivation (Amann, Futagami, Jaussaud, Mizoguchi, Nakamura, and Schaaper, 2014) and practices are increasingly established. If so, this suggests relatively low repatriate turnover rates for Japanese companies, which is a finding that my study will support.

Regardless of the purpose and category, many firms fail to plan properly for the reintegration and further development of repatriates (Jassawalla and Sashittal, 2009). This is despite repeated experience of the expatriation-repatriation cycle (Vermond, 2001). A commercial survey (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2011) finds that only fourteen percent of companies have a formal repatriation strategy. People at headquarters don’t really know what repatriates have achieved while overseas, nor do they know how to use these repatriates’ skills and knowledge effectively (Andreason and Kinneer, 2005). As we have already seen, at the
same time that repatriates are concerned with fitting back in with the home culture, companies are worried about reintegrating their employees into the home office corporate culture (ibidem). However, reintegration could be facilitated by better use of the repatriates’ skills and know-how.

It is not surprising, then, that the repatriate turnover rate in North America and Europe has been found by many researchers to be high (see table 1 below). For example, Brookfield’s 2011 Global Relocation Trends Survey (cited above) reports thirty-eight percent turnover in the first year after returning. Within two years of repatriation, Baruch and Altman (2002) find levels of between thirty and forty percent, while Bossard and Peterson (2005) put the number for the first two years between one third and one half in the United States. Table 1 summarises research findings to date.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post Return</th>
<th>Study (Country or Region)</th>
<th>Turnover Rate</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One year</td>
<td>● Jassawalla and Sashittal, 2009 (USA)</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● 2011 Global Relocation Trends Survey (59% North America / 37% Europe, Middle East, and Africa / 4% Asia)</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Nery-Kjerfve and McLean, 2012 (North America, Europe, Asia)</td>
<td>25%-50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>● Baruch and Altman, 2002 (USA and Europe)</td>
<td>30%-40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Bossard and Peterson, 2005 (USA)</td>
<td>33%-50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three years</td>
<td>● Suutari and Brewster, 2003 (Finland)</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Repatriation Turnover Rates**

It is true, however, that there are dissenting voices which dispute these claims. In one study in the United States, Jassawalla and Sashittal (2009) reported that only three of fifty repatriates, or six percent, quit within a year of repatriation. Harzing (1995), too, has also been highly sceptical of the reported data. In general, though,
rates are agreed to be high, at least in North America and Europe. Finally, the turnover of repatriates entails significant losses for companies. There are direct costs that come with having to recruit people to replace those leaving. There are also indirect costs related to the market knowledge, host-country relationships, and global skills that people can take to competitors (Gregersen and Black, 1996). While the general nature of these costs may be apparent, the value of expatriation and the return on investment are very difficult to measure (Schmidt and Minssen, 2007). For one thing, the purpose of the assignment and the length of time over which benefits may appear complicate such calculations (McNulty, De Cieri, and Hutchings, 2009). How should we account for knowledge, which is an intangible asset? At what time span should we look? In practical terms, cost-benefit analyses for expatriation and repatriation ROI are imprecise, and therefore problematic for the measure-it-to-manage-it MBA-style approach that tends to dominate corporations in North America (Foroohar, 2011). This may mean that insufficient resources are being directed at reducing repatriate turnover, since costs are not properly quantified and understood. However, turnover rates for Japanese companies are very likely lower than for their North American and European counterparts (Fischer and Mansell, 2009), reducing the urgency of the discussion itself in that country.

As my research is focused on Japanese repatriates, the repatriation literature now needs to be put into a Japanese context. There are likely national differences to be found in companies’ and individuals’ approaches to repatriation, as well as in the actual outcomes. Shen and Hall (2009) speculate that turnover rates are higher for Americans than for most other nationalities, for instance. Japanese repatriates are said to return to their organisations in greater numbers than their German, British, and North American
counterparts (Bossard and Peterson, 2005). They then stay. Tung (1998: 242) states that in comparison with American MNCs, “given their smaller domestic markets, European, Japanese, and Australian multinationals generally place a heavy premium on the experience and skills acquired overseas,” and this implies lower turnover. Amongst other things, my study will investigate the extent to which Japanese repatriates agree that their experience and skills are actually valued.

In summary, we have seen that repatriation places stresses on employees, both at home and in the workplace. In terms of their careers, they may find that their skills are not used and their new jobs are unfulfilling. The literature suggests that there is a move towards boundaryless and protean careers that is generally consistent with increasing levels of job mobility. In other words, companies struggle to retain and gain value from their repatriates. However, does this apply in Japan? As I will argue from now based on a review of the Japanese studies literature, the answer to that is a qualified ‘no.’

2.3 JAPAN STUDIES (HRM) LITERATURE
Japanese repatriates are unlikely to behave as the agentic career capitalists described by Dickmann and Doherty (2010), particularly if they work at large indigenous companies. Therefore, it is doubtful that they will move to other companies within three years of their return. After all, repatriates are typically core employees in long-term employment relationships. As such, they enjoy relatively high earnings and stable employment, and as a feature of the internal labour market, they can look forward to increasing salary levels in the future (Koike, 1999). Long-term security is a key feature of what Keizer (2009: 1523) identifies as “seniority wages.” There will be only small salary gaps between peers, and late career
promotion differences (Storey, Edwards, and Sisson, 1997). By way of contrast, non-regular employees at the periphery have a more precarious existence, as they are subject to lower earnings and less stable employment (Shimizutani and Yokoyama, 2009). In his critique of the system, Waldenberger (2006: 27) attributes relatively high levels of long-term unemployment in Japan to low turnover of core employees such as the repatriates in this study: “It is the price that the unemployed have to pay for the job protection given to the employed.”

While there is disagreement about the historical extent of lifetime employment in Japan, with Hall and Moss (1998: 23) claiming, “employment security in Japan has existed only in certain large corporations during the post-World War II period,” there is little doubt that “it dominates the employment horizon” (Matanle, 2006: 58). Commentators agree that there are still differences between the Japanese and North American approaches to employment, then. On the other hand, they differ as to the extent of these differences and the probability of convergence. We will see throughout this thesis the strong impact that the structure of the Japanese employment system has on individual expectations of careers. As evidence of this, Storey, Edwards, and Sisson (1997: 92) find in their study of Japanese core workers that “although there was career planning, it emerges that these managers did not feel involved in this planning; in other words, it was the organization that ‘owned’ their career.” This resonates powerfully with the comments made by the repatriates in my study almost two decades later, and supports the argument that the organisational career persists.

Structural and cultural differences between countries almost certainly engender distinct characteristics. In framing the debate
about varieties of capitalism and different approaches to both corporate governance and employment relations, Jacoby (2005: XV) asks three fundamental questions. First of all, should employees be managed by their employers as if they were short-term costs or long-term assets? Next, what is the balance of power between the shareholders who have provided share capital and the company employees who use that capital day-to-day? Finally, has globalisation had an impact on how companies are managed in different countries?

Large Anglo-American and Japanese companies have often provided different answers to these questions (Morris, Hassard, and McCann, 2006), particularly since the late 1970s. Dore (2000), for instance, characterises the modern Anglo-Saxon (or “Anglo-American”) approach of companies as favouring shareholders, while their Japanese counterparts tend to treat employees preferentially. In the former, many employees see their workplace as being a temporary and convenient place to earn a living, while their employers commit to keeping people only as long as they are useful. Contracts are time-bound, for instance, and relatively easy to terminate. In the latter, the workplace is a more stable community, and promotion depends on internal posting. In a recession, the former will cut costs, including labour, in order to maintain profitability, share prices, and dividends, while the latter will allow profitability to suffer in order to protect people’s employment. Abe and Shimizutani (2007) argue that the structure of corporate boards in Japan still supports a general commitment to the stakeholder model. Employees, customers, and society in general are prioritised. In contrast, North American and European companies are caught between boosting short-term shareholder value and acting in accordance with their espoused values. As a recent example of this, the commitment of certain technology
companies to freedom of information has been challenged by the market opportunity in China: “Yet what publicly company is doing right by shareholders if it ignores the largest tech consumer market on earth?” (Beech, 2015: 27). Money appears to trump principle in the modern-day Anglo-American model.

Enabling the employee focus in Japan, there are still large cross-shareholdings and stable share ownership (Shuto and Iwasaki, 2014). As we have seen, Japanese unions are usually enterprise-based. Promotion to the board of directors is typically from within, and HR departments are at the heart of how companies organise and manage themselves. Stability is valued. Japanese core employees at large and medium-sized companies have traditionally been offered lifetime employment in return for their loyalty, while in the Anglo-American model, they have been rewarded when strong individual results have merited it, or asked to move on when things have not gone well. The Japanese archetypal core employee, it seems, differs from the consciously self-oriented, mobile, calculating career actor described by commentators such as Schein (1996) and Hall and Moss (1998).

As we have seen in the career studies review above, though, there is some criticism of this characterisation of labour practices in the U.K. and the United States. Jacoby (1999b: 170), for instance, identifies “a core-periphery model [in the U.S.A.], in which secondary jobs—temporary, part-time, and others—are used as a buffer to stabilize core jobs and as a screening device to select future core employees.” He (ibidem: 171-2) goes on to identify a central paradox in American companies, which is “the coexistence of job loss and long-term employment [for those in the core], sometimes within the same organization ... This causes job losses to have a ripple effect, making survivors work harder and worry
more.” Managers in large U.S. companies once “had Japanese-style lifetime employment, generous perquisites, and insulation from market forces” (ibidem). In return for the potential of higher wages, however, they now have less job security and fewer benefits.

Another common difference between the two models, and an important feature of the standard Japanese approach, is job rotation (Whittington, Goodwin, and Murray, 2004). This refers to the practice of assigning employees to different teams, departments, and functions so that they can round out their on-the-job business education and build personal networks throughout the organisation. This practice has been shown to have a positive impact on employees’ motivation (e.g., Huang, 1999). Kaymaz (2010: 74) claims that “[r]otation [positively] influences motivation and the direction of career development.” As environments change, which they also do with expatriation and repatriation, so the opportunities for personal growth and development increase. This then provides flexibility for companies, because through an iterative process of trial and error that I will later relate to so-called “fuzzy logic” (Kosko, 1994), they are better able to match personnel and skills to emerging business problems. That flexibility is characteristic of the Japanese approach to assigning repatriates.

Having said that, not all commentators agree that Japanese companies offer rotation. In fact, Fernández-Aráoz (2014: 56) criticises standard Japanese HRM practice: “Although the country’s educational institutions and the strong work ethic that is part of Japanese culture give managers a jump-start in their careers, their growth is stymied when they actually start working. A leader in Japan traditionally rises through the ranks of one division, in one company, waiting respectfully for promotions ...” This one-division story did not ring true for me, and to provide
some evidence either way, I asked nine Japanese researchers at an Osaka-based chemicals company (9,000 employees, around $5 billion U.S. dollars in annual sales, operations in fourteen countries around the world) about their own experience of rotation (8 July, 2014). One man’s (K-san) response was representative of the group as a whole: he had started his twelve-year (at that time) company career in electronics (four years), then moved to medical devices (another four years), and was now working in process design at a third division. This variety excited him, and he brought a new perspective to each assignment, with the result that he felt that innovation was more likely than if he had stayed focussed on one area.

In contrast, flexibility is a key feature of the external (rather than internal) labour market in the U.S.A.’s shareholder-centric model. Risk is shifted from shareholders to employees, and those employees are offered new opportunities in return. Adjustment risks are shared more evenly under the Japanese stakeholder model (Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi, 2005a), though. In the Japanese stakeholder model, employees are assets, rather than the commodities they become for companies not using an “efficiency wage” approach (ibidem) that rewards long service. Companies in the U.S. are more likely to try to gain a short-term competitive edge from other factors such as price, technology, supply chain, or first-mover advantage, as well as the hiring and firing of human resources when necessary. In the Japanese system, though, efficiency wages effectively bind employees to their companies, thereby reducing turnover and making investment in human capital feasible. Flexibility comes from internal posting. One ramification of the different emphasis on shareholders and employees can be seen with boards of directors: there will often be more finance experts than engineers and HR professionals at very
senior levels in the United States (Dore, 2000; Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi, 2005a).

Despite a core-periphery distinction, then, “there has been little doubt that employees come a clear first” (Dore, 2000: 10) in established Japanese companies. As argued above, a characteristic of the so-called “J-firm” is highly trained employees who are rotated through the company, and group companies, at the discretion of senior management and the HR department (Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi, 2005a). Clearly, they may also be rotated through the global group as expatriates, and then back in Japan as repatriates. As a result of their time in-company and their exposure to different people and roles, lifetime employees are heavily socialised as they work their way up through the company hierarchy (Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi, 2005a).

We have already seen that Beck and Beck (1994: 27) view the choice to support lifetime employment as being rational. In their words, “Japanese employment decisions appear to be based on criteria that are both rational and emotional, both economic and ideological.” Taplin (1995: 9) elucidates the issue using a cultural framework: “Ideas that the safety of the individual can only be guaranteed by belonging to a group, that the group allows the individual to be safe and secure beginning with a family and then with the corporation, are normative to Japan. The corporation offers job security ... There exists an understood assumption that the employees in a big corporation will be cared for and therefore will be safe as long as they work hard in harmony with the rest of the group and try not to disrupt the stability of the organization.” Lincoln and Kalleberg (1990: 21) summarise the benefit to individuals when they discuss Dore’s (1973, 1986) depiction of Japanese welfare capitalism: “The bureaucratization, internal labor
markets, welfare services, participatory decision-making, strong culture, job guarantees, need-based compensation, and other components of 'Japanese-style' employment are the trappings of a modern corporate form which is becoming dominant among Western companies as well. Dore’s theory, then, has the rest of the Western industrial world converging toward the model of Japan.” And yet, significant convergence has not yet happened in either direction.

There are clearly positive aspects to the Japanese system, but given “the growing complexities and interconnections of contemporary capitalism” (McCann, Hassard, and Morris, 2010: 347), can Japanese companies sustain this approach? After all, there appear to be very strong pressures for convergence on Anglo-American norms. The Nikkei Weekly (2012c), for example, claimed, “Japan’s old employment model is little more than a museum piece these days.” Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi disagree, arguing that there has not been fundamental convergence to date. They criticise the “speculative” nature of the extant literature on the subject, and point out inconsistencies in how the term “convergence” itself is used (2005a: 43-4). Does the term refer to a movement towards the adoption of widely discussed Anglo-American practices, does it merely show acceptance of the perceived optimal nature of the Anglo-American model, or does it mean a combination of the two?

With regard to companies, the convergence debate has focussed on corporate governance and employment relations. The two are connected, of course. Pressure to move towards governance that is more shareholder-oriented has come from both inside and outside Japan (Olcott, 2009; Ando, 2015). There is now said to be greater flexibility in the Japanese system based on the use of non-regular employees such as temporary and part-time workers (Keizer,
Umemura, Delbridge, and Morgan, 2012). Certain *keiretsu* (interlocking company) relationships have been severed (Morris, Hassard, and McCann, 2006), although there is also evidence that others have survived in certain large business groups. Aoki and Lennerfors (2013: 109), for instance, found that several “Japanese automakers have revived and reinvented keiretsu,” while also displaying greater cost consciousness. For example, Toyota has worked with suppliers to help them increase their efficiency and quality. The authors point to similar initiatives by Honda, and even Nissan (famous for its rescue by French automaker Renault in 1999), to work closely with established suppliers. It could be argued that stable *keiretsu* relationships are making a comeback, then, at least in the automotive industry.

At the same time, though, ownership of Japanese shares by non-Japanese has increased (Araki, 2009; Kachi and Lam, 2011), with Renault’s stake in Nissan and Ripplewood’s acquisition of the Long-Term Credit Bank of Japan as perhaps the most obvious examples. What is more, an apparent shift towards stock market capitalism and capital accountability in Japan has come at the expense of employees. There has been downsizing and delayering, along with increased hiring of mid-career employees (Keizer, 2010). Manufacturing jobs have been transferred to other Asian countries, there have been voluntary redundancies and pay cuts, and there is a heavier reliance on temporary and part-time employees (Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi, 2005a). Meanwhile, Watanabe (2003: 112) reports “large-scale fluidity in the [Japanese] labour market through the processes of information technology and internationalization,” although more than ten years later, it is hard to see much evidence of this “large-scale fluidity.” In 2014, for example, Lucas and Kwong (2014) were still reporting “three obstacles to effective restructuring in Japan: cultural resistance,
rigid labour laws, and a reluctance to prune sprawling portfolios of businesses,” concluding that “the slow pace of Japanese restructuring will continue to frustrate domestic and foreign investors.” This begs the question of whether or not Japanese companies should be doing business primarily for domestic and foreign investors, or whether it is better to have a broader stakeholder approach to corporate governance.

In support of the argument for convergence on Anglo-American practices, Ahmadjian and Robinson (2001) provide evidence that permanent employment has been deinstitutionalised in Japan. According to their data, twenty-four percent of firms reduced their number of permanent employees by five percent or more in 1997 as a result of the “increasing globalization of capital, products, and management ideas” (2001: 651). They argue that Japanese companies realised cutting labour costs was a necessary step, and so discontinued the practice of permanent employment: “While foreign investors and journalists have criticized Japanese firms for not responding quickly enough to economic pressure for change, our analyses suggest that Japanese firms responded to declining profits by reducing their permanent labor forces and that these cuts increased throughout the 1990s” (ibidem: 644). They go on to predict that there will be no return to the permanent employment system of the 1980s, citing mid-career hiring as one reason for this. It is important to note that 1997 was the year that a consumption tax hike and the Asian financial crisis pummelled the Japanese economy. Nonetheless, the use of non-regular employees has certainly grown (Waldenberger, 2006), particularly in retail and restaurants, with the result that for some Japanese employers, “the advantages of costs have grown to outweigh those of flexibility” (Keizer, 2008: 408).
Kato and Suzuki (2006), too, argue that lifetime employment is being abandoned and that Japanese employees are taking more control of their careers. They employ the metaphor of “career mist” to describe the degree to which people can anticipate their career outcomes. They also use Kanai’s (1999) “career drift” to provide contrast with career design. When lifetime employment was the norm, they say, people experienced high career drift, which meant that they had little interest in taking control of their careers and making decisions for themselves. In contrast, they conclude that modern-day Japanese employees are assuming more control. In addition to the career mist and career drift just mentioned, Kato and Suzuki (2006) also posit the concept of career hope: “Career hope can be defined as the understanding that at a certain point of time, the possibility of reaching a better state still exists among the countless possibilities of one’s future” (ibidem: 269). Uncertainty (to which mist and drift can both be contributory factors) may sustain hope, while certainty may result in people leaving their employers: “[T]he mist has blown away, but it has taken away the hope as well” (ibidem: 270). We will come back to this idea of career hope in the analysis of the case studies and see how vital its absence proves for one repatriate (chapter nine).

Kato and Suzuki (2006), then, claim that lifetime employment is being phased out. Similarly, Watanabe (2003: 111-2) proclaims that the characterisation of Japanese management as being collective, and featuring both lifetime employment and company-specific labour unions, must now “be fundamentally re-examined.” This normative tone is telling, as convergence commentators appear to be better at suggesting how Japan Inc should change than describing how it actually is changing. There is ample evidence that business is continuing as usual, which is not surprising if we accept Hammerich and Lewis’s (2013: 84-5) claim
of Japan’s distinctiveness: “The country whose corporate behaviour is most closely tied to nation-state traits is unquestionably Japan. Japanese people are culturally very different from all others – in fact, they are unique.” As an example of Japan’s ability to sustain the status quo, the Nikkei Shimbun reported on its front page on 25 March, 2015 that the Japan Post Group would hire 6,500 fresh graduates as full-time workers from 1 April, 2016 (Nikkei Shimbun, 2015). In other words, there will be another 6,500 people entering the company as lifetime employees and working their way up the ladder together.

There is evidence, then, to contradict commentators who assert that significant changes to Japan’s employment practices are under way or have already taken place. This thesis will provide more. There are also writers who appear frustrated that there has not yet been meaningful convergence. I have already referred to Lucas and Kwong’s (2014) disapproving assessment of the deep-rooted resistance to change in Japan, for instance. Kato, Karube, and Numagami (2010: 125) criticise the inefficiency of Japanese management that means “valuable resources are uselessly dissipated.” Hammerich and Lewis (2013), while describing the uniqueness of the Japanese corporate system, also insist that it needs to change. Boxwell (2013) laments, “There’s little that westerners find normal about Japan’s business culture, and little that outside pressure can do to change it.” Commentators point to Olympus’s concealment of investment losses over a period of thirty or more years (a scandal that first made headlines in 2011), or at Toshiba’s accounting scandal that hit the news more recently (Mochizuki, 2015), and find further justification for their view that Japan must change. The Nikkei Weekly newspaper, for example, ran a front-page headline declaring, “Olympus’ malady also Japan’s” (Mori, 2011). If boards of directors had truly independent
members, then surely such scandals would never happen, these commentators decry. Mori tells us that the Olympus example “illustrates the dark side of Japan’s communal corporate environment, built on lifetime employment” (ibidem: 1), alleges that former president Kikukawa had compliant ‘yes’ men on his board of directors, and labels the three outside directors on the board of fifteen “mere tokens” (ibidem: 4). The clear implication of this strong call for improvement is that any change to date has been insufficient.

The *Economist* has certainly tended to take this critical tack. In reporting on the apparent support of Prime Minister Abe for shareholder capitalism, the publication opines that “[i]ntroducing pay for performance would add entrepreneurial vim to Japan’s formidable strengths in technology and team spirit” (2015c: 11). However, this misses the likely connection between the existing system on the one hand, and that excellent technology and team spirit on the other. In Japan, advances in technology are arguably built upon incremental *kaizen* (often translated as “continuous improvement”) and long-term investments in people and research, while team spirit is very likely connected to the expectation that people will be in the same company for their entire careers, which then leads to a premium being put on human relationships and collective effort. As Pilling (2014) said, change one part of that jigsaw, and who knows what might happen? Furthermore, if Japan becomes a pale imitation of the U.S.A. or U.K., how can it hope to compete? Seen in these terms, the debate about how and why Japan’s economy and companies are apparently failing can be characterised as being overly simplistic and patronising.

It is apparent from a critical review of the literature that a core of lifetime employees in Japanese companies is being protected, with
temporary workers and part-time staff absorbing more of the risk of economic vicissitudes (Song, 2012). Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi (2005a: 53) summarise this situation: “[C]ompanies pursuing a resource-based HR strategy may achieve an efficiency-wage effect by internally segmenting their workforce and treating some workers (‘core’ employees) as assets and other workers (temporary, part-time, outsourced) as commodities.” Interestingly, Keizer (2009: 1527) also points to “the quantitatively dominant group of part-time employees with rather stable employment.” As already noted, these workers at the periphery receive lower wages and benefits than their regular employee colleagues, but nonetheless, Keizer (ibidem) shows that stability is a feature of their employment, too. All in all, lifetime employment and seniority-based pay systems have proven remarkably resistant to huge pressure to change (Matanle, 2006; Yashiro, 2013). Convergence has been limited, as Ahmadjian (2012) noted eleven years after claiming that there would be no return to a system of permanent employment (Ahmadjian and Robinson, 2001). “The overall trend, then, seems to be toward a (shrinking) core of (mostly skilled) workers, within individual firms, who continue to enjoy lifetime employment guarantees” (Thelen and Kume, 1999: 497).

Therefore, while there may be increasing levels of shareholder orientation in Japan, “the US model is not strongly identified in Japan” (Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi, 2005a: 46). The Japanese employment system, famous for giving employers flexibility as a result of the high skill levels of personnel within companies (Thelen and Kume, 1999), retains unique features. This is in spite of pressure for convergence (Lehmberg, Dhanaraj, and Funai, 2013). Overall, Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi (2005a: 61) conclude, “the postwar J-model continues to exist.” Downsizing and delayering in Japanese companies have been achieved not through mass
compulsory redundancies (Morris, Hassard, and McCann, 2006), but rather through limited hiring of new graduates, early retirement programmes (as we will see mentioned in the first of the case studies), and also transfer to related companies. At the same time, some large U.S. companies have been seen to edge closer towards a Japanese HR-centric model, with greater emphasis on intellectual capital and commitment from employees (Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi, 2005a).

Japanese career development systems, then, remain differentiated from those of their Anglo-Saxon counterparts (McCann, Hassard, and Morris, 2010). And while it is true that cost control is becoming increasingly important in large Japanese companies, I agree with Inagami (2009: 181) that in the early years of the twenty-first century, “in order to save the community firm, of which shareholders and non-regular employees are not full members, shareholders were emphasized and employees de-emphasized.” Limited changes have been necessary to protect the core stakeholders. This is the world to which Japanese repatriates, such as those in my study, return. It is qualitatively different from the agentic, individualistic picture that emerged from the career studies and repatriation literature.

2.4 SUMMARY
Repatriation is an increasingly important phenomenon in Japan, as the population of Japanese expatriates, and by extension, of repatriates, is increasing. Suzuki (2011), using Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs data, estimates that the number of Japanese expatriates increased twenty-nine percent from 586,836 in 2002 to 758,248 in 2010. The social phenomenon and its impact on employment should be studied and understood within its own structural context, so while existing concepts such as
“boundaryless,” “protean,” and “intelligent” careers are helpful by way of contrast, they do not throw much direct light on to how Japanese repatriates experience their careers. After all, Japanese repatriates are core employees and they are unlikely to behave as the career capitalists we read about earlier. Indeed, they are strongly vested in the system. “Preserving the system may become increasingly difficult and a tipping point may be reached because preserving the system becomes self-defeating for key stakeholders. But the Japanese economy seems somehow engineered to avoid such paradigmatic shifts” (Yorozu, McCann, Hassard, and Morris, 2013: 213).

The literature review, then, has suggested that the ‘J-firm’ and the Japanese employment model are far from moribund. My study will clearly support this contention. The vision of dystopian job insecurity and the promise of empowering agentic career behaviour that we saw in the literature have both been exaggerated, at least with respect to the Japanese companies and repatriates described later in these pages. That conclusion is drawn from a dynamic picture of six Japanese repatriate careers, which in turn is based on the qualitative longitudinal interview-based study design that I will detail in the method chapter that follows next.
3. METHOD

“The advantage of large samples is breadth, whereas their problem is one of depth. For the case study, the situation is the reverse.”
Flyvbjerg, 2006: 241

In this chapter, I will begin by briefly reviewing the conclusions from the literature review in order to confirm the gap my study aims to fill. Next, I will explain why I have chosen a longitudinal case study approach as the best way to achieve that, and also how the method itself represents a contribution to scholarship. In doing so, I will address Flyvberg’s (2006) comment above. I will then provide details of the participants, as well as explaining the data collection, coding, and analysis used in this study, before moving on to look at the ethical considerations that have shaped the study design and its execution. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by reconfirming the empirical value of this research and its critical evaluation of the theoretical frameworks that might help us to conceptualise repatriate careers in Japan and their place in contemporary Japanese companies.

3.1 A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE FIELD AND THE GAP

This research sits at the intersection between career theory, repatriation, and Japan studies. I have already argued that the existing English-language literature on both careers and repatriation has a strong American focus. Universities in the U.S. are still dominant in many research fields, of course, which can be explained by their financial wealth, as well as by the sheer number of institutions, academics, and journals in that country. In addition, the dominant size of the U.S. economy, and the post-World War Two history of American companies sending expatriates overseas, means that academics there have been encouraged to
investigate the phenomenon of expatriation in an effort to understand how to make the process more effective for companies sensitive to return on investment. While the research emphasis was initially on expatriation, more recently there has been increasing interest in repatriation. The American bias in both research areas remains strong, and so there has been a call for studies with other nationalities and in other contexts. Meyer (2006: 120), for example, asks for “more self-confidence in pursuing indigenous research agendas, and developing theoretical frameworks that address challenges faced by businesses in a researcher’s own community.” My research with repatriates in Japan answers that call.

We have also seen that there are some characteristic features of careers and employment in Japan. However, Kato and Suzuki (2006: 266) note that, “existing career theory in Japan is inadequate,” and this means that my work has the potential to make a contribution to our understanding in this particular field. Those same two Japanese academics advocate longitudinal studies to “obtain a clear pattern of how the subjective aspect of a career changes in the course of time” (ibidem: 273). My review of the literature showed that existing studies on repatriation are typically cross-sectional in design, and so various researchers have also called for longitudinal studies (for instance, Bonache, Brewster, and Suutari, 2001). Similarly, Shen and Hall (2009) argue that future qualitative research should include in-depth interviews to investigate what changes occur in a person as a result of an international assignment, including changes in career orientation. They also advocate research with MNCs based outside the U.S.A., suggesting that turnover rates are likely higher there than elsewhere. Finally, most of the literature focusses on employers rather than employees as the unit of analysis (Bossard and
Peterson, 2005; MacDonald and Arthur, 2005), and as my research concentrates on individual repatriates, it will provide an important perspective that has so far been missing.

In summary, my study shines a light on to careers in contemporary Japan by looking at repatriates to understand how they feel about their work and why they choose to either stay with their employers or quit. How much agency do they presume and display, for instance? Is the structure provided by organisational careers really being dismantled? The study addresses questions such as these by using a longitudinal design that has the repatriates themselves as the unit of analysis. For these reasons, it will be of interest to both academics and practitioners, building on work that shows there are (still) important differences between employment and careers in Japan on the one hand, and those in North America and Europe on the other (e.g., Hattori and Arai, 2009; Hattori and Morinaga, 2011). For managers who take the decision to expatriate their staff, the research provides insight into how repatriates view their careers and think about the future in their companies, which has obvious implications for retention and career management. In addition, repatriates themselves will find the study useful as a way of reflecting on their experiences and creating their own sensemaking narratives (Brown, Stacey, and Nandhakumar, 2008).

The contribution is not only empirical, however. As we will see in the discussion of the case studies later in this thesis, the data show that individual repatriate careers in Japan are subject to a tactical ad hoc approach and a fuzzy logic that is based on prevailing expectations of stable lifetime employment relationships. The career job is not dead in Japan, and as we saw earlier (Doogan, 2001; Fevre, 2007), claims of its passing have almost certainly
been exaggerated in the U.K. and the United States, too. Furthermore, the study illustrates the role of hope (as defined by Kato and Suzuki, 2006) in Japanese repatriate careers.

3.2 JUSTIFICATION OF THE METHOD
To the best of my knowledge, this research is the first case-study-based English-language longitudinal examination of Japanese repatriates and their career perceptions. In this section, I will outline the reasons for selecting this research design, and I will begin by addressing several key points:

1. The rationale for limiting the initial number of core participants to eight, and the number of final written cases to six
2. My epistemic convictions and what they mean for the study
3. The decision to interview participants repeatedly using a semi-structured interview protocol, and to code the resulting transcript data using pattern coding derived from first cycle and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009)
4. The advantages and disadvantages of a case-study approach for this particular research

Having addressed these points above, I will finish this section by describing how I conducted my fieldwork.

3.2.1 RATIONALE FOR THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Turning to the first item above, I limited the initial number of study participants to eight. I also conducted interviews with six other people to gather contextual information. The total number of interviews came to fifty-eight. As my goal from the start was to write in-depth case studies that described Japanese repatriates’
career perceptions and experiences over an extended period, I needed sufficient data from each repatriate to ensure that the resulting cases would be authentic, interesting, and informative. I initially felt that four participants would provide me with the data I needed. However, my supervisors and review committee members at Manchester Business School advised me to find more people. For one thing, they pointed out that some of the participants might drop out. They were correct: two of the eight repatriates who had originally joined the study were sent overseas again by their companies before I had finished collecting data. For another thing, my advisors were concerned that a very small sample might provide uninteresting results. Adding participants threw up a big challenge, though: the time required to prepare, conduct, transcribe, check, analyse, and write up the interviews with each person. In the end, I found that gathering data from six people at regular intervals, and from others more intermittently, was still feasible. Consequently, my thesis includes six longitudinal case studies, with the data from other participants being used to give more contextual depth, particularly in the discussion chapter.

In contrast, other researchers into repatriation have conducted surveys (e.g., Black, 1992; Stevens, Oddou, Furuya, Bird, and Mendenhall, 2006) and large-scale cross-sectional interview studies (for instance, McNulty, De Cieri, and Hutchings, 2009; Thomas, Fitzsimmons, Ravlin, Au, Ekeland, and Barzantny, 2010). Researchers often find that cross-sectional surveys and questionnaires are convenient, as they are relatively easy to administer (for instance, by e-mail, fax, or in person) and analyse (Silvester, 2004), especially if a fixed multiple-choice format is used. Furthermore, the prompts themselves are consistent, although how each respondent interprets the prompts is in some way unique. Researchers emerge from surveys with data points that can be
analysed statistically, often with a view to generalisation to a larger population, such as repatriates as a whole. Meanwhile, a large-scale interview study allows several factors to be explored at the same time, with conclusions being drawn about underlying relationships. If there are enough of them for statistical relevance, the resultant data can be used to test theories and support conclusions (Field, 2009). As can be inferred from this, survey and cross-sectional interview studies often fit into a positivist paradigm of hypothesis testing, or match a relativist exploration of multiple factors (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2008).

However, I do not believe that “the nature of the world can be revealed by observation, and that what exists is what we perceive to exist” (Burr, 2003: 3). Put more simply, we cannot access an objective truth that is consistent across observers. The best we can do is to try to understand and share the specific context for perceptions. For this reason, my epistemic position is social constructionist, rather than positivist. I have chosen a research approach that focusses on the subjective experience of repatriation, writing in-depth case studies based on qualitative data from repeated interviews with selected participants. After all, while the analysis of quantitative data may promise generalisable results, context and perspective mean that all data and analyses are open to interpretation. For this reason, the richness and granularity of case study data become instrumental in allowing readers to make their own informed interpretations about data that already have been edited and interpreted by the researcher.

Nonetheless, my design involved fourteen people and fifty-eight interviews. When the sample size is larger than one, readers will expect patterns to be identified, so we need to be careful. Kahneman (2011: 114) shows how small samples can throw up
compelling and yet random results: “The exaggerated faith of researchers in what can be learned from a few observations is closely related to the halo effect, the sense we often get that we know and understand a person about whom we actually know very little.” Kahneman thereby warns researchers against the “law of small numbers” which results in “a representation of reality that makes too much sense” (ibidem). This is an important admonishment and has tempered my discussion of the data results later in this thesis.

Related to this, my sampling strategy was based on pragmatic convenience, since I needed to find people who would allow me to meet with them repeatedly over the course of approximately three years, and who would answer probing personal questions. This runs somewhat contrary to Stake (2006: 24): “For qualitative fieldwork, we will usually draw a purposive sample of cases, a sample tailored to our study; this will build in variety and create opportunities for intensive study.” Stake argues that the variety demanded above brings with it the chance to examine complexity. Meanwhile, Rousseau and Fried (2001: 4) insist that the theoretical or known range of variation should be part of the research design, noting that “range restriction is the likely culprit for many inconsistent findings across studies.” I have already said that my choice of participants relied on convenience: these people are not representative of the entire population of Japanese repatriates in terms of factors such as gender, age, function, assignment, and seniority. Therefore, my research findings should not be used to make definitive statements about Japanese business repatriates. Nonetheless, this does not preclude academics and practitioners from relating the material to their own data and experiences, and I will make some suggestions at the end of this thesis about how they might do that.
3.2.2 CONFIRMATION OF EPISTEMIC CONVICTIONS

As we have seen so far, my research method is consistent with a social constructionist epistemology. Burr (2003: 3-5) presents four characteristics of social constructionism:

1. Suspicion of our assumptions
   “It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us.”

2. Dependence on a particular social, economic, and cultural context
   “The ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific.”

3. Construction of reality through communication
   “It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated.”

4. Interplay between shared constructions and action
   “Descriptions or constructions of the world therefore sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others.”

Consistent with this epistemic standpoint, I have not set out to discover the objective truth about Japanese repatriate careers, but rather to construct together with the participants a narrative that makes sense of their self-reported experiences, and then to question it (point one above). In writing case studies, I have situated the overall story in the specific context of Japanese repatriates at large companies between the years 2011 and 2015 (point two). The case study approach has allowed me to explore how the study participants perceive their careers and the choices
they have (or have not) made against a backdrop of identified Japanese social norms (points three and four).

The focus of this thesis, then, is storytelling, which has a rich tradition in knowledge sharing (Remenyi, 2005), as well as in participant-observation (e.g., Boje, 1991; McCann, Granter, Hyde, and Hassard, 2013) and occupational studies (e.g., Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). The approach requires the presentation of my research to be both convincing and compelling. With respect to this, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2008) argue persuasively for transparency of methods and believability of results when creating cases. I am addressing the former in this chapter by outlining how I conducted the research and why I chose to use that approach. As for the research’s credibility, I will rely on the narrative and exploration of each case study to persuade the reader with its “authenticity” and “plausibility” (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993).

Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) write that with interpretive work, it is important to provide authenticity (so that the reader can place the researcher at the scene), plausibility (to connect the reader’s world with that represented in the research), and criticality (which encourages the reader to reexamine her assumptions surrounding a topic). The authenticity of my study emerges most strongly from the data chapters, which I have written with the express aim of capturing the individual voice and representing the unique perspective of each participant. For this reason, I have used a lot of quotations and narrative detail. Plausibility comes from giving readers a picture of repatriate careers that resonates in their imaginations and draws upon their own career experiences, for instance, by indirectly encouraging them to think about how they themselves have handled a new work role. The criticality will come
most strongly from the discussion towards the end of this thesis, in which I will argue that the perceptions and responses of the Japanese repatriates in this study are very different from what we would expect based on a reading of the literature, as those repatriates have proven willing, with one exception, to allow their careers to be controlled by their employers after returning from overseas.

Now that I have discussed my rationale for choosing this research design and selecting the various informants, I will move on to describe the research method in more detail so that readers can draw their own informed conclusions about the believability of the data chapters.

3.2.3 DATA COLLECTION, CODING, AND ANALYSIS

Turning to data collection, why have I chosen to interview eight people repeatedly over a period of up to forty-four months, and in so doing, to collect data from each participant between four and nine times? My main motivation for using this reiterative, qualitative approach is summarised neatly by Rubin and Rubin (2005: 2), who note that “boiling down answers into numbers strips away the context, losing much of the richness and complexity that make research realistic.” The use of individual case studies provides depth and granularity. In addition, the semi-structured interview approach gives participants and researchers freedom to explore areas together in a dynamic way. Certainly, interviews have the advantage of being both planned (interview protocols) and fluid (in response to what is, or is not, said). I found that my interviewees benefitted from having some structure in the interviews, perhaps because they were unaccustomed to recounting their career stories in either English or Japanese. Furthermore, as the interviewer, I needed to confirm unfamiliar
contextual details, as well as to prompt the interviewees to provide more explicit explanations. Therefore, flexibility was important. Hall (1976) has theorised that Japanese have a tendency towards high context communication, which means that the listener is expected to fill in gaps in the verbal text. I wanted to be confident that any time I did so, the interviewee was comfortable with the result.

A good example of this came when one of the participants, Hirata-san, and I were talking about the challenges of a non-Japanese becoming the global function head at a Japan-based company. Hirata-san commented (30 November, 2013), “If he wants to stay his country or his home always … it will be a difficult. It may be difficult.” Partly because of the repetition of “difficult,” I responded with, “Impossible?” to clarify his meaning, to which he replied, “Absolutely impossible.” “It will be difficult” had meant, “absolutely impossible.” The use of “yes” and “no” provides another example of the need for understanding Japanese-style communication. In an interview on 3 December, 2014, I asked Okayama-san, “This is the first time you’ve not enjoyed what you’re doing?” He answered, “No.” I interpreted this to mean, “No, I don’t enjoy what I am doing now,” rather than, “No, it’s not the first time,” and the remainder of our discussion showed that my understanding was correct.

Over time, the interviews provided insights and created a narrative within and between the cases. Yin (2009: 108-9) cautions that “interviewees’ responses are subject to the common problems of bias, poor recall, and poor or inaccurate information,” and in the search for objective truth, this presents a problem. It is far less problematic when we try to understand how interviewees make, and continue to make, sense of their career stories. Nonetheless, follow-up is important in giving people a chance to review their
accounts, as an interview is “an arena where both interviewer and
interviewee are actively constructing and interpreting the process”
(Cassell, 2005: 168). This is why I corresponded with my
informants by e-mail and sent them interview transcripts for
comment so that they could continue that process. This step is
particularly important for non-native speaker participants, since it
gives them time to confirm by themselves what they said and how
they phrased their ideas in a foreign language. It allows them to
verify low context (Hall, 1976) representations of their stories. What
is more, any bias, poor recall, inaccurate information, and
inconsistent interpretation may actually add to a longitudinal
study’s authenticity. If participants’ opinions and recollections
change, for instance, when does it happen? What is the context?
Through exploring such instances, I was able to build up a
nuanced picture and to approach a better understanding of my
research participants’ points of view.

To facilitate this, I read previous transcripts before conducting
subsequent interviews with the same person. Many of the
questions that I asked in the interviews arose from this preparatory
work. The preparation allowed a narrative thread, as I could follow
up on what had been said previously. The responses that
Kinoshita-san gave me in her pre-repatriation interview, for
instance, suggested lines of inquiry for our first meeting post-
repatriation (such as whether or not it had been hard to adapt to
the style of work back at her Japanese company). Reading
interviews with other participants from a similar stage was helpful,
too. For example, before interviewing Takeda-san for the first time
after his repatriation (15 August, 2012), I read through the first
post-repatriation interviews transcripts for Ozaki-san, Kinoshita-
san, Okayama-san, and Uchiyama-san. This indicated some areas
to explore, such as Takeda-san’s feelings about his new role back
in Japan and his levels of stress in the job. An advantage of this approach was the identification of emergent themes, but at the same time, it presented a danger: was I then looking for data to confirm my own constructed image of the experience of a Japanese business repatriate? Was I ignoring other data by not asking certain questions, and was I missing both spoken and unspoken answers that could have taken me in other directions?

My response was to try to be reflexive (Hsiung, 2008; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009) throughout the study. Gertsen and Söderberg (2011: 791) neatly summarise the reflexive imperative: “As researchers, we need to be aware of the active roles we play, both in the production of the narrative interviews and in the subsequent analysis of them.” From the recruitment of participants to the analysis and writing up of the data, I reflected in a research diary on how my attitudes, approach, responses, and analysis might all impact on the research project. Takeda (2012: 285-6) notes, “Reflexivity allows us to observe our feelings and positionality and the analysis of this dynamic becomes an important source of data.” In similar fashion, Matanle (2003: xviii) stresses the need for the researcher to acknowledge himself in his research and analysis, because “all social research is as much an expression of the consciousness of the researcher as it is of the research subjects.” As a long-term resident of Japan with pre-existing relationships with the majority of the participants, I had pre-conceived ideas about how they might experience repatriation. For example, I made assumptions about loyalty that I explored with them during the interviews. I was taken aback to discover that several of them had considered switching companies after their return to Japan, and I was surprised when one of them actually did move to another employer. I had to try to welcome this development with open interest, rather than unconsciously demonising it.
I also needed to be aware of the impact of the interviews on the participants. For instance, one of them, commented that since “you ask me some question, this is good chance to reconsider my career” (interview with Okayama-san on 25 November, 2013). He was still reconsidering his career when the study finished in May, 2015. Another was curious about the other repatriates, and asked, “How do you think compared to the other seven persons’ situation, how do you think about our current, my current situation? Something special, or it’s similar to some other cases, or ...?” (interview with Hirata-san on 19 April, 2014). While it is hard to imagine that I had much influence over the participants’ decisions to stay or leave their organisations, the very act of asking questions, expecting clear answers, and then writing case studies meant that there was some impact. I took this to be a positive thing, though, as I was helping them to make sense of their experiences as part of what Clandinin and Connelly (1989: 13) term a “shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry.”

Despite concerns over bias, there is no doubt that interviews are a rich source of qualitative data for the case study approach. As a means of gathering those data, the process of interviewing has the big advantage of being familiar to research participants. What is more, people often enjoy the opportunity to talk about their work (King, 2004a). This allows them to reflect meaningfully on their experiences and modify their identity (Bujold, 2004). This was particularly significant for the repatriates in my study, as they were looking back on two major life events, namely expatriation and repatriation. To confirm details and involve the participants even more in the research process, I supplemented the meetings with questions by e-mail. Researchers and participants can benefit from “the asynchronous, time-delay nature of e-mail to facilitate reflexivity in communication, enabling reflection and consideration”
(Morgan and Symon, 2004: 23). It was certainly helpful in my own research.

We have seen that interviewing is an effective approach. On the other hand, it is time-intensive. This is true for the interviewee, who must take time out of his busy day. It is even truer for the researcher. Logistical details must be agreed, questions prepared and reviewed, transcripts written and verified, dialogues analysed, and results written up. The researcher may then end up feeling swamped by the pure volume of rich contextual data (King, 2004a).

In my case, and as noted above, my study participants were kind enough to check interview transcripts and notes, which encouraged further discussion and analysis, leading to momentum and interest being sustained over a protracted period. Like Clandinin and Connelly (1989), Gertsen and Søderberg (2011: 791) view interviewers as “co-authors of the narratives told to them,” and this sense of partnership was strongly felt by interviewees and interviewer throughout the research period.

On the other hand, there is fundamental criticism of the utility of interview data. For instance, Watson (2011: 211) writes, “I have come to doubt whether there is much point at all, most of the time, in our going out into organizations, and especially in managers’ offices, to interview people that we only really encounter in that interview event.” In interviews, people might feel that they represent their organisations, particularly if they are on company time. They may also feel that they have an identity to perpetuate, so they may rationalise and nuance their accounts in an attempt to minimise their own cognitive dissonance (i.e., discomfort arising from any gap between what they already believe and how they try to make sense of what they perceive – see Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter, 2008). They may wish to be helpful by giving the
interviewer what they think she wants to hear. Their use of language may be imprecise or confused, especially if they are speaking a foreign language. Nonetheless, Watson (2011) admits that the data from audio files, notes, and transcripts which result from interviews have the virtue of being available for reexamination and reinterpretation by both the researcher and the study participant. In addition to having audio recordings and transcripts, I interviewed the same people repeatedly, and this gave me the chance to create a privileged relationship in which the participants explained their perceptions in what I felt was a frank way. As a result, I was able to see whether people’s stories changed over time and how they dealt with contradictions and dilemmas. In this way, I addressed Watson’s concerns.

In order to analyse, reexamine, and reinterpret the rich data from all of the interviews, I used a variation on template analysis, which is well known as an iterative and flexible approach to analysing complex qualitative data (King, 2004b). It has the advantage of allowing the researcher to derive codes inductively (Cassell, Bishop, Symon, Johnson, and Buehring, 2009), while also using the codes that are implicit in the interview questions themselves. In other words, it is a hybrid approach, in that there are both inductive and deductive elements. There were other options, of course, but since the focus was not on how my Japanese informants used language to make sense of their experiences, discourse analysis did not fit my project. As my epistemic foundation is social constructionist rather than realist or positivist, content analysis was not suitable. Because I used some a priori coding, interpretative phenomenological analysis did not fit. Grounded theory was too prescriptive to be practical for my purposes, and furthermore, I was unable to use it as the study was informed by existing theories, such as the boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994) and Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh,
and Roper’s (2012) contrasting interpretation of boundary theory (see the literature review).

Table 2 below gives an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of template analysis as a technique. The relative simplicity of template analysis is both a strength and a weakness, although for my study, the pros far outweighed the cons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Drawbacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Easily grasped as a technique (few normative prescriptions and procedures)</td>
<td>A. Lack of strong guidance in the literature (as opposed to grounded theory, discourse analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Highly flexible, and yet well structured (organised account)</td>
<td>B. Potential for being either too simplistic or too complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Good for different perspectives in a common context</td>
<td>C. Difficulty of maintaining awareness of own biases and filters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Suitable for a phenomenological and experiential approach</td>
<td>D. Open to accusations of lack of rigour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Advantages and Drawbacks of Template Analysis (Adapted from King, 2004b)

While template analysis does not demand initial expertise from the researcher, it still provides structure that should result in an organised account (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2008). The researcher can remain open to the data, while also imposing order on them (King, 2004b). However, if templates are too simple, the analysis will lack depth, while if they are too complex, they become impractical (King, 2004b). I found that I got better with practice at using and refining my template. This was an ongoing, iterative process of what can be called “pattern coding” (Saldaña, 2009: 152).

Pattern coding aims to identify an emergent theme by acting as “a sort of meta-code” (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 69) that
summarises segments of interview data in a more parsimonious way. It is an example of what Saldaña (2009) calls “Second Cycle Coding,” in that pattern coding follows the initial coding of data (“First Cycle Coding”). The approach “lays the groundwork for cross-case analysis by surfacing common themes and directional processes” (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 69). This has been important for my multi-case approach. As an example, I identified “job promotion” as one code in my first cycle coding, and drew together data from my participants related to whether or not they had been promoted post-repatriation and how they felt about it. This led me to the second cycle realisation that the repatriates in my study did not talk about expatriation as a short-term step in their external careers (Schein, 1996), but rather as another ad hoc episode in their stories. As a result, I refined my coding.

While this focus on codes had many advantages, my initial approach proved overly reliant on the codes themselves, rather than on the data underlying them, and so I revised the method to allow the narrative to emerge more easily. More specifically, when writing up the cases, I printed and read through the transcripts as a story. I made comments in the margins, and also on separate sheets of paper, one for each interview transcript. I was then able to map out connections between codes over time, and this helped me to notice patterns and changes between the interviews. It allowed me to see each interview as one cohesive unit, while also making comparisons between same-participant and different-participant interviews. Cross-referencing became easier, and the notes proved invaluable aids to writing up and amending the case studies.

In addition to its practical advantages, template analysis using codes is consistent with various epistemic standpoints (King,
2004b), including social constructionism. It lends itself to reflexivity, since the researcher can track how the codes change. I kept a research diary to record such changes, to note my observations, and to give myself the chance to create an episodic narrative of my concerns, frustrations, insights, and progress. As an example, I reacted emotionally to articles about Japan’s need to change: “Stop telling Japan what to do! It’s not a basket case!” (research diary, 1 July, 2013). I read through the diary at various intervals to remind myself of the research journey to date, and this encouraged me to persist in giving priority to the richness of the data. At the outset of this project, I was not sure which theories from the literature would be useful and which issues would emerge most strongly (see Stake, 2005). Of course, there is a tension between allowing themes to emerge and starting with some already in mind. Researchers are always limited by time, the questions they choose to ask, the data they find and are given, and the constant filtering of everyone involved, so it is vital to strike a good balance between rigour and openness. Finally, as Stake (2005: 456) admits, “[T]he whole story exceeds anyone’s knowing and anyone’s telling.” Nonetheless, the case study approach based on interviews provides the best means for a rich, if selective, account of that story.

3.2.4 REASONS FOR USING CASE STUDIES
The third question raised above was about my decision to use individual case studies to present the data and frame the analysis. I made this choice with a view to exploring what Yin (2009) terms the “how” and “why” of a phenomenon. How did the Japanese repatriates in this study conceptualise their careers? Why did they stay with their companies or quit? Did they feel stimulated or trapped by their new roles? Did they have clear career plans? Most importantly for many readers, what did their experiences and
perceptions tell us about repatriation itself in career terms? Based on the above, what might we learn from these cases that could contribute to how we understand and handle repatriation? A case study approach provided the framework for examining these questions in a compelling manner, to exploring specific examples in depth (as suggested by Flyvberg, 2006), and to finding new lines of inquiry to illuminate repatriate career issues in Japan.

I have already noted that case studies are said by some commentators to provide a limited picture that fails to be representative of the social phenomenon being studied. There are also accusations of a lack of rigour in the collection and analysis of data (see Patton and Appelbaum, 2003, for a summary of this view). On the other hand, Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg (1991: 7) point to quantitative research, in which “the flesh and bones of the everyday life world is removed from the substance of the research itself, thereby diminishing the usefulness of the research for subsequent investigations.” Patton and Appelbaum (2003: 62) also highlight the possibility in quantitative research that “substance gives way to form.” Case studies are at the centre of my work because they fit with social constructionism, they provide the opportunity to capture some of the depth and nuances of my study participants’ perceptions, and because they allow for compelling narratives. In this way, they are not limited. Indeed, the importance of providing sufficient context for research has been highlighted by writers such as Rousseau and Fried (2001: 1): “The need to contextualize is reinforced by the emergence of a worldwide community of organizational scholars adding ever-greater diversity in settings as well as perspectives.” As my study is about Japanese business people, a multiple case study approach allows for just such contextualisation. This is how I have addressed Flyvberg’s (2006) comment from the start of this chapter.
At the same time, an important challenge in creating the narratives is to summarise the complexity of each case, and yet also to “describe the case in sufficient descriptive narrative so that readers can experience these happenings vicariously and draw their own conclusions” (Stake, 2005: 450). In order to prioritise the narrative flow of the case studies, I did not include sub-sections when writing them, although such sub-sections were certainly implicit because of the themes that emerged. My goal was to capture the contextual richness of how Japanese business people experienced repatriation to their home organisations, and then to suggest what this might mean for both practitioners and academics. While I agree with Stake (2005: 460) that a case is not intended to “represent the world, but to represent the case,” different interpretations of cases can certainly throw new light on to business management phenomena. The study participants, the researcher, and the readers all bring their own perspectives. After all, “there are always multiple interpretations to be made of any phenomenon, which depend upon the position of the researcher and the context of the research” (King, 2004b: 256). The key is to make that position and context clear to the reader.

3.3 STUDY PARTICIPANT DETAILS

My study participants were all people whom I either knew directly before the start of the research, or who were introduced to me by Japanese business friends. As Chen (2010: 1096) notes, “In Asian countries, personal relationships are very helpful in collecting research data.” Of course, it could be argued that this is the case in any country; however, Asian companies and their employees often have less experience of taking part in academic studies than their North American and European peers, which makes personal introductions important, particularly when proposing participation in a longitudinal study and asking people to speak in English. As I
already had a degree of direct or indirect trust established with the participants, I was able to ask personal questions and to get genuine answers. As already discussed, it also meant that I had pre-conceived ideas about the people with whom I was talking and what they told me, though. Therefore, I had to be careful to be reflexive in collecting and analysing the data (King, 2007).

There are four categories of participant in this study. Firstly, there are eight people whom I interviewed repeatedly to talk about their careers after repatriation (see table 3 below). The case studies in this thesis relate the stories of six of these people. (The practical reasons for not writing cases for the other two are explained below.) Secondly, there are four HR professionals from three different companies in the automotive, medical instruments, and specialty chemicals sectors, who gave me information about repatriate careers in their organisations. Thirdly, there is a non-repatriate Japanese male participant who successfully moved mid-career in Japan from one large established company to another, thereby trading lifetime employment in the first organisation for lifetime employment in the second. Finally, I got the outside perspective of a European with many years of experience working as an administrator in various multinationals. Data from all of these people are used in the discussion chapter.

Looking in more detail, fifty-three of the fifty-eight interviews were with the first group of people mentioned above, which is why I have provided some simple information about them in table 3 below. These eight participants were all repatriates. They came from six different companies. Two were women. Six of them were sent to the U.S.A., and the other two went to European countries, namely the Republic of Ireland and Germany. However, two of the repatriates who were in the U.S.A. do not have their own cases because they
left the study in order to move overseas again as expatriates for their companies. Therefore, I have italicised their information in the table. (A brief profile of all fourteen interviewees can be found in the appendix at the very end of this thesis.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym (Age, Sex, Country)</th>
<th>Chapter Number</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Months to May, 2015</th>
<th>Case Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Okazi (48, M, U.S.A.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pharmaceuticals</td>
<td>August, 2011</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hirata (46, M, U.S.A.)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Chemicals</td>
<td>July, 2012</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiroshima (38, M, U.S.A.)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Chemicals</td>
<td>December, 2012</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takeda (38, M, Ireland)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Medical Instruments</td>
<td>August, 2012</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okayama (46, M, Germany)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Industrial Materials</td>
<td>April, 2012</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinoshita (46, F, U.S.A.)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Pharmaceuticals</td>
<td>January, 2012</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Main Study Participants (Interview Overview)

The table shows the pseudonyms used for the study, the age (as of 1 May, 2015) and country of expatriation, the case study chapter number, the industry, the month and year of each person’s first interview, and the total number of months of participation.
Takeichi-san left the study after fifteen months when he was expatriated to Southeast Asia, and my contact with Uchiyama-san was sporadic for the final two years, as she moved to the United States during that period. That is why I chose not to write case studies for those two participants. Graph 1 below shows the number of interviews with each interviewee, while graph 2 depicts the number of interviews carried out in each quarter.

**Graph 1: Interviews per Participant**
3.4 ETHICS

As implied by the use of pseudonyms, the most important ethical consideration for this research has been the sensitivity of the personal information provided by the participants. In repeatedly revealing their hopes and frustrations to me, they made themselves vulnerable. They might wish to distance themselves in the future from what they were reported to have said and felt in the past, for instance, as knowledge of this could perhaps have an impact on promotions or transfers. Furthermore, if they were to apply for jobs with other companies, there would be implications for their chances of being hired if they were to be identified with comments that appeared to be unfavourable. These scenarios involve their managers and prospective employers both reading this thesis and then being able to recognise specific individuals, of course, which is highly improbable. Nonetheless, I have worked to ensure anonymity and confirm continued consent to my use of the data.
With this in mind, I handled the interview data with care. Although I knew most of the participants personally before the start of the study, I sent each person an information sheet and consent form before the first interview. All of the participants duly signed their forms, and I followed up by ensuring that they were aware that they could leave the study at any time. Similarly, all agreed to my recording and transcribing the interviews. I reconfirmed this at the start of each session, too. After each interview, I then sent the transcript for checking and comment. No one ever asked me to remove information, but two of the participants did suggest ways in which I could better disguise the names of their companies and workplaces.

For example, one participant expressed concerns by e-mail (Ozaki-san on 16 December, 2013) after reading the transcript of our seventh interview: “I was wondering if the description can tell this story is about GPI [company pseudonym] by seeing a lot of unique names in GPI RD [Research and Development]. I changed them to pseudonym but I am bit concerned if GPI colleagues read this and easily know this story is about GPI. Is this going out in public?” In order to address his question, we discussed by e-mail that same day how better to camouflage the identity of people in his organisation: “Hi, Hiroaki [pseudonym]. Thanks for going through the [latest] transcript. The transcripts will not be made public, but the thesis itself will be available in the Manchester Business School library. I will ask you to approve the case study that I write based on your story. In the meantime, we can omit specific names if you like. What makes you feel comfortable? Let me know.” The upshot was that we made a few changes: “Hi, Gaz, thank you for your reply and understanding. Yes, I feel comfortable. Please enjoy year-end season.”
This constant validation has been important, as my thesis will be in the public domain. As a result, the data reported in these pages will be available to a broader audience. Therefore, I have used pseudonyms for each participant and every company. Someone with knowledge of the relevant industries in Japan might be able to hazard an educated guess as to the identity of the companies, and perhaps then to investigate potential employees represented in the thesis, but I have also worked on the assumption that no one would be motivated to go to those extremes. I also refrained from asking HR managers at the companies represented in this study for their comments about the performance and future career prospects of specific repatriates, as I did not want to draw attention to the participants.

Another ethical consideration was the danger that I might have inadvertently misrepresented what the participants actually said, as well as their motivations. That was one important reason for sending transcripts to the participants and asking specific questions by e-mail to follow up. Another was language. Relative to their Japanese peers, the participants all had high levels of English. However, none of them was a native speaker. This had an impact on their ability to convey their feelings and thoughts. Some concepts may not have translated adequately between Japanese and English, for instance. Of course, subtle misunderstandings occur even with native speakers of the same language, but there is no doubt that the lack of a common native language for interviewees and interviewer is a complicating factor. There was no way around this for my study design, though. If I had conducted the interviews in Japanese, I would have been faced with the limitations imposed by the fact that I started to learn Japanese as an adult, and while I have a high level of fluency, I am not a native speaker. Given that I was the common denominator for all of the
interviews, it seemed more sensible that I should operate in my native language, rather than having the participants operate in theirs. Additionally, the interviewees all appeared happy to have the chance to use their English.

3.5 SUMMARY

In this chapter, I started by briefly reviewing the relevant literature and confirming the existing research gap. As we have seen, this study provides a nuanced picture of contemporary Japanese careers in the specific context of repatriation. This is valuable because the existing careers literature is inadequate for gaining a good understanding of the area. In addition, the unit of analysis is most often employers rather than employees (Bossard and Peterson, 2005), so research that concentrates on individual repatriates, as mine does, provides a valuable perspective for both academics and practitioners. There is a potential irony here, however. Lazarova, Dany, and Mayrhofer (2012: 298) note from the U.S.-centric literature that “careers have been increasingly viewed as belonging to individuals.” Does it make sense to examine Japanese careers from an individual point of view when the context is so strongly related to the “community firm” (Dore, 2013), internal labour markets and lifetime employment? Furthermore, what do the individuals themselves understand by the idea of a “career”? These are questions I will examine further in my analysis of the case studies.

Next, I described the research design, which is not focussed on testing a priori hypotheses, but rather on exploring perceptions through a narrative. I explained how the approach makes a virtue of the inescapable inconsistencies and biases that emerge from a detailed qualitative research study. The interviews for this study generated thick data, and making sense of those data required
critical examination of existing theories. By working extensively with selected participants, and then using narratives in the form of detailed case studies, the research method was intended “to transcend the theoretical reductionism which in many cases has limited the depth and breadth of career research” (Cohen, Duberley, and Mallon, 2004: 413). In addition, I pointed out that the research makes a contribution to scholarship in terms of study design. The repatriation literature is typically based on North American and European cross-sectional survey research designs, and researchers such as MacDonald and Arthur (2005) have called for more longitudinal studies. Clearly, then, up to now there has been a lack of qualitative, longitudinal, interview-based research into Japanese repatriates’ careers. I then gave details of the core study participants and additional informants. Finally, I discussed how I dealt with ethical considerations by communicating regularly with the participants and by disguising their identities.

We will look next at six detailed individual case studies drawn from my fieldwork, and see how they demonstrate that Japanese employers continue to absorb risk for regular employees such as these repatriates. In return for taking this long-term view of the employment relationship, the companies expect their staff to accept assignments that often appear to be more tactical and short-term than strategic and long-term. There are no explicit and extensive job descriptions or career plans, for instance. At the same time, though, there is still purposive management. From all of this, we will see that the organisational career is far from dead. As Jacoby (1999b) noted, reports of its demise are premature.
4. CASE STUDY NO. 1 (OZAKI, HIROAKI)

Ozaki (family name), Hiroaki (given name) was a middle manager in the research and development function at Global Pharmaceuticals Incorporated in Japan. (In common with all of the names of the participants and their organisations in this thesis, these are pseudonyms.) As of 1 May, 2015, he was forty-eight years old, and he had two children in their early teens. His wife and children had lived with him on the east coast of the United States from 2005 to 2011, while he was an expatriate there for GPI. Ozaki-san’s career was progressing at impressive speed for someone in a major old-economy Japanese company, and his skills were being used to support the entire organisation. His time overseas had been an acknowledged success, which raises the interesting question of the extent to which repatriation outcomes are shaped by expatriate assignments. Ozaki-san certainly felt both valued and valuable in the organisation. GPI needed to become more efficient in its mission to produce life-changing drugs for patients around the world, and he was involved in facilitating this. He told me that “business as usual is not working any more” (21 May, 2014). As we will see, Ozaki-san knew that he had a key role to play, and despite the siren call of headhunters, the temptation of a generous company-wide voluntary redundancy package, and his own concerns about the lack of clarity around his career path, he remained committed to his company.

Ozaki-san was recruited from a prestigious Japanese university in 1992 by GPI, one of Japan’s largest pharmaceutical companies. The GPI Group had over 30,000 employees and various affiliates in the Americas, Europe, and Asia (1 May, 2015). Overseas subsidiaries had first been established half a century earlier in North America and Europe, and since the turn of the twenty-first
century, the company had shown even greater global ambition. To better handle recent acquisitions and organic growth, it had created a global management system for its various functions, such as quality, information technology, and human resources. In several instances, the global head was a non-Japanese based outside Japan. This was true of research and development, where Ozaki-san had been employed in various departments throughout his career. As we will see, the global head plays an important part in Ozaki-san’s repatriate story.

I started to work with GPI as an external trainer in 2000 when the HR department in Tokyo set up a training programme to create a cadre of forty employees in their thirties who would be willing and able to support the company’s global growth at an operational level. Ozaki-san was one of those people. He and I became friends, and that connection continued even after his transfer to the United States in 2005. In fact, he supported the decision to have my company deliver training and consulting services to the U.S. subsidiary during his assignment there. This strong personal relationship made it easier for me to ask probing questions and for Ozaki-san to answer them frankly. Obviously, it was also a factor in his agreement to be interviewed for this study at regular intervals over almost four years.

The interviews started in August, 2011, five months after his return from the United States. We began by looking back at his expatriation. His initial goal for his overseas assignment had been to learn to do business on a bigger stage: “I wanted to become real global project manager for global project. In order to make it happen, I felt I needed some skill set like global communication and also hands-on experience in a West organisation” (29 August, 2011). It was typical for GPI to send expatriates for two or three
years, but around the time that he expected to be sent back to Japan, he was unexpectedly given an important new challenge in the U.S. organisation: “[Between 2008 and 2011,] I was a global project manager for the biggest project the company has ever experienced before.” He had already worked in the project management function in Japan, but this particular project was far bigger, and at the time more dysfunctional, than anything he had previously experienced. Ozaki-san successfully got the project back on track, and having handed it over to someone else, he arrived in Japan with greater confidence in his abilities and a lot more experience. His personal stock had clearly risen within the GPI Group.

Ozaki-san had very mixed feelings when he was told in 2011 to return, though. On a selfish level, he had wanted to see his project through to the drug approval submission stage in the U.S.A., as this would have represented an important personal career achievement. He had even explored the possibility of quitting the parent organisation and applying locally for his job in the U.S. subsidiary, but had finally decided against it because of concerns about his family. His wife wanted the children to be in Japan for their elementary and junior high school education, since that would give them many more options for senior high school and university. Ozaki-san was also worried about his ageing parents. To add to this, his HQ supervisor pushed him to repatriate: “[H]e said, ‘You developed the, many, many skill during my [Ozaki-san’s] staying in the U.S., and then you became a very good global leader for West organisation.’ And he said to me, ‘Next is very helpful for me [Ozaki-san] to develop the leadership for Japanese organisation.’ That is the bottom line from my previous manager” (29 August, 2011). Ozaki-san set himself a deadline for this new mission: “I understood, and then in a short-term, how to get the
Tokyo function, PM [project management] function becoming more global one, more effective one, or very good one. That is objectives for our organisation, as well as my personal goals. But I set a time line until I have to achieve that goal: five years.” He was targeting 2016.

While disappointed to be leaving the U.S.A., Ozaki-san was also excited to be trusted with a new undertaking in Japan. He perceived strong organisational support for his career, but he was aware that he had little control over its direction. As we have seen, when he talked to a senior Japanese HR manager in 2011 about the possibility of staying in the United States as a local hire so that he could continue to work on the big project described above, he was told, “It might be good for you, but not good for the company.” His reaction? “It is very, very unfortunate for me” (29 August, 2011). This conflict between his own wishes and those of his Japanese management came through strongly in our first two interviews, and even in 2015, Ozaki-san still had the dream of seeing a clinical development project all the way through to regulatory approval, a process that takes many years. Nonetheless, he was willing to put his company’s interests above his own desires, and then to frame the result by invoking the needs of his family and pinpointing career benefits. It is easiest to understand just how great a power his company exerted when we consider the context of lifetime employment – Ozaki-san was highly likely to work for GPI for a further twenty years. The company afforded him security, a comfortable standard of living, and the hope of interesting new challenges. In return, he was flexible about accepting decisions related to his career.

In other words, Ozaki-san had a long-term relationship with his employer that was relational, rather than transactional (Thomas,
Fitzsimmons, Ravlin, Au, Ekelund, and Barzantny, 2010). As we have seen from the literature review, the former describes ties between a company and an employee that are personal in nature, while the latter refers to a shorter-term cost-benefit approach. The contention that relationships between international assignees and their companies are becoming transactional (Pate and Scullion, 2010) is challenged by Ozaki-san’s case, then. There was also a financial incentive to remain with his company: “When I talk to a HR [person in Japan] before, he told me, ‘You lose money as a pension package if you leave.’ It’s very clear” (12 December, 2011). The relational nature of his relationship with the company was more significant than the financial disadvantages of leaving, however. As noted at the start, not only did he turn down lucrative offers from recruitment consultants, he also rejected the chance to take an attractive voluntary redundancy package when it was offered to all employees in 2014 as part of a restructuring process. We will return to this later. For now, though, the point is that Ozaki-san displayed strong affective commitment to GPI throughout our interviews, even while he offered suggestions for how things might be improved. In simple terms, he liked and respected his colleagues, and he wanted to contribute to the company’s future success.

During his overseas assignment, Ozaki-san had built a good personal network, both within the U.S. and with upper management at the HQ: “I have a human, good human relationship with American [location disguised] staff, of course. That is very valuable for me ... Because I worked for a big project, I had many chance to talk to Tokyo senior management. I got some credibility or credit from that experience” (29 August, 2011). This is consistent with Reiche (2012), who details the personal and organisational benefits of the social capital that business people
can build up while they are abroad. Principal amongst these is the sharing of knowledge across organisational boundaries (in this case, between the R&D organisation in Japan and the clinical development function in the United States). Critically, Reiche (ibidem: 1071) points out “that trusting relationships developed during the assignment are a necessary condition for future knowledge benefits to occur” (italics in the original). These benefits accrue principally to the employer, but as we can see from my fieldwork, they also have an impact on the employee.

Ozaki-san was able to further expand his network and to put his various skills and knowledge to use, as he was given three different positions in the first three years after repatriating. Each job was bigger than the last, and each gave him ample scope to apply and build upon what he had learned. In fact, he was acquiring management and functional skills at almost breakneck speed. His first job after repatriation was to supervise project managers: “I am still working for project management function in Tokyo office, but it is different position compared to assignment before I went to the U.S. Now I am work as management level to especially to take leadership for particular therapeutic area” (29 August, 2011). In this role, he coordinated the work of ten project managers, which represented a “big promotion” from his pre-expatriation position in Japan. This contrasts with the findings of Olds and Howe-Walsh (2014: 24), whose survey of repatriates concludes, “Some [repatriates] felt their career path would have been better if they had not gone abroad, noting that their return was tantamount to a lateral move with no career progression. In some cases repatriates perceived their return position as a demotion.” That was not true for Ozaki-san, who was now able to lead and support Japanese project management colleagues using both the connections and the specific knowledge that he had gained while overseas. He
compared himself to Rocky, the fictional boxer made famous by movie actor Sylvester Stallone: “You were a champion but you retired. Now you are a coach for younger generation, but the goal itself is to win” (29 August, 2011). Four months later, Ozaki-san talked about the challenges of this role and how he was being stretched by it: “I know my current objective is to lead the Tokyo organisation, especially in Tokyo project management function. However, that is a totally different objective for me because it is not a project itself. We don’t have, or we are not clear about future goal of the department yet, so I am struggling how we can set the goal or objectives from organisation point of view and from my personal view” (12 December, 2011). As his influence and role within the company expanded, he necessarily had to take more of a big-picture, “helicopter view” (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997) of the organisation.

While he may have felt that he struggled, it appeared that his company was impressed with his achievements, because after only one year, Ozaki-san was moved to another position that gave him yet greater responsibilities. As a manager in the planning group, he was put in charge of areas such as IT, finance, and training and education for the entire project management function in Japan. He also took over control of the support function for the global research and development decision-making committee, and in this capacity, he started to work closely with the head of the global research and development function, a North American called Mike Manley [pseudonym]. Ozaki-san was very busy in this job, and also very stimulated: “[M]y current responsibility is fitted very well to my past experience because I have a lot of experience in the U.S. and I have a lot of contact or friends in the U.S., and including Mike, many senior management in GPICD [pseudonym for the U.S. clinical development subsidiary] know me very well, so that I can
communicate very frankly with them. Maybe that is an advantage for me” (22 May, 2012). He pointed out that while some of his Japanese colleagues had the technical skills to do the job, they did not have the strong personal network that his stay in the United States had afforded him.

Three months later, though, and a year and a half after repatriating, Ozaki-sans was missing the excitement of living overseas: “I’m getting used to Japanese life, including business and personal life, and I’m feeling it’s somewhat comfortable in some cases, but sometimes I’m feeling it’s boring in daily life, or including business” (24 August, 2012). Nonetheless, he conceded in the same interview, “[This] company is using my skill set appropriately.” In December of 2012, he was thinking about his next career step within the company: “I started career development by working for clinical development. That was ten years. And after that, I moved to project management function, and I spent almost ten years. Maybe next one I need to think about … In other words, do I continue to work for R&D organisation, or do I like to move to, as a more business-oriented function like corporate planning or corporate management and so on? That’s my thinking right now” (28 December, 2012).

Ozaki-sans was thinking of his own career, but GPI itself was not giving him explicit information about the future: “[C]ompany doesn’t tell the person, ‘This is your career path until retirement age.’ Right? Even though it’s a very, very outstanding performer in organisation, company doesn’t tell anything” (28 December, 2012). Should the company be more explicit? “From employee perspective, that help a lot.” This lack of transparency is apparent in the cases of all of the other participants who joined this study. It requires employees to put their faith in the HRM system, and at the same
time, the system requires that faith in order to sustain. Ozaki-san certainly displayed this faith during the forty-six months of our interviews, and he felt that overall, his company was looking after his interests: “[T]he company is giving me a very encouraging assignment ... and also giving me a very important role in the organisation. That’s what I felt: company is treating me well. In terms of the reward or salary, [though,] it doesn’t change much.” As Kishita (2006) has pointed out, “[M]any Japanese people work to get an intrinsic value of work as well as money. Such people are very happy to work enthusiastically if they can make themselves fulfilled through working even if their remuneration is small.” Ozaki-san perceived strong intrinsic value in what he was doing, despite having felt bored for a short period. He saw himself as being part of an elite within the company, as suggested by his Rocky analogy and other comments in our nine interviews.

As described above, Ozaki-san was confident that he was contributing to his company, and that his work was highly evaluated by more senior managers. He consistently felt little control over his situation, though. Soon after his return, for instance, he heard a rumour that GPI was creating a pool of employees who would function as the organisation’s global leaders in the future: “I know the human resource people are working very seriously, so one of the topics for them may be how to utilise the expats in the future” (29 August, 2011). When I asked him if he felt it strange that no one had talked to him and other repatriates about the new system and how best to benefit from the experience and skills of employees with overseas experience, he shrugged. Similarly, in our 28 December, 2012 interview, Ozaki-san mentioned his lack of control over his external career: “Assignment is given me suddenly ... without any signal.” This referred to what had happened to him so far. It was also prophetic, as when we met
six months later, he had once more been moved to a new position: “I didn’t know what the next job will be, and then suddenly the assignment is coming in. In other words, I cannot consider my future career” (20 May, 2013). As before, the latest role gave him greater responsibility, since he was now reporting to the head of the planning department for the entire global research and development function. His role was more strategic, too: “[M]y current assignment is to work on, for example, is how R&D organisation is improving, how we can utilise Mike’s leadership to enhance R&D capability.” He had even more need of a helicopter view.

Ozaki-san had been selected for this job by Mike Manley himself, and he once again had mixed feelings about his new opportunity. On the one hand, he felt that there was more he would have been able to do to improve the project management function of his company, and so he wanted to stay there. Furthermore, he had to say goodbye to his direct reports: “Every time I have to tell my group members I have to move, that’s a very, very painful part” (20 May, 2013). On the other hand, “Many people is seen what happened to me is a very, very positive sign that I’m climbing up a corporate ladder because my position is a kind of the mainstream to [becoming] head of the R&D.” His organisational career was progressing at pace. Two years later, he mentioned, “It is too much to say mainstream to the global R&D head” (e-mail on 15 May, 2015), but he could still see himself working as part of the global leadership team. Perhaps his exposure to other functions in the company had opened his eyes to the possibility of a senior management role outside of R&D.

Meanwhile, in his new role, Ozaki-san was faced with the challenge of improving sour relations between the planning department and
other parts of the R&D organisation. To do this, he would need to use his strong personal network. He wanted to stay put for the next five years so that he could see through the changes that he was initiating: “Current assignment is to think from a broad view, not only the R&D perspective, but also the company itself, how to survive in this kind of competitive situation in our industry. In that sense, it’s very, very exciting, but it’s very, very challenging” (22 November, 2013). The boredom that he reported in August of 2012 had been replaced with this excitement and sense of challenge. Half a year later, he was still stimulated: “I’m working in many, many areas to learn R&D organisation activities” (21 May, 2014). In April, 2015, his boss was promoted to the head of R&D in Japan, and Ozaki-san continued to report directly to him, giving him even more formal authority and access to decision-making. He remained committed to the organisation: “I have no interest or no intention to go outside of my company.” This was despite direct approaches from headhunters.

However, two other repatriate colleagues had quit: “[G]oing back to Japan, due to some reasons, they decided to go for another opportunity” (12 December, 2011). He estimated that a total of thirty people had been repatriated between 2001 and 2011, so the implied turnover rate over that ten-year period was six percent. He also mentioned another repatriate who had worked in the U.S.A. and who had struggled on his return because his function in Japan was very domestic: there were no global projects on which he could work. In his case, GPI had resolved the problem by sending him back to the U.S. for another expatriate assignment. Turnover had rocketed by 2015, though: “Past two years, for example, twenty people were coming back to Japan ... Six people left” (15 April, 2015). This meant thirty percent of repatriates had left between 2013 and 2015. However, this needs to be understood
in the context of a redundancy package that the company had offered full-time employees in 2014. People were being incentivised to leave, and given their experience and skills, it is easy to speculate that these repatriates felt confident of finding another position, possibly with a gaishikei (i.e., a company headquartered overseas and doing business in Japan). It was almost certainly not indicative of a broader trend, then. Furthermore, Ozaki-san revised his estimate downwards a month later: “More conservative number may be fair like 20%” (e-mail on 15 May, 2015). In Ozaki-san’s case, the variety of roles given to him, the implied high evaluation of his developing role in the company, and the chance to work with senior people in Japan and globally all appeared to keep him satisfied and fulfilled. The HRM system was working for him.

When I asked Ozaki-san to explain how that system actually functioned in his company, he talked about the apparently ad hoc nature of job assignments, with one person’s move having a domino effect on others. This made it problematic to try to predict career steps. He then commented, “I don’t know in detail in a discussion behind the scene. I believe HR is coordinating the change of the assignment, talking to the concerned function head, that’s the usual way. But I don’t know if the HR group has a strategic view: in the long run, who should be in the position in five years or so?” (22 November, 2013). He had refined this view by the following year: “I am thinking why my management gave me new assignment every year is management gave me a lot of challenges so that I have experience and they hope I will be getting a more high level management skill by experience, such a different job. That’s the way our company or organisation training or educating the people to be a global leader. I realise that [now]” (21 May, 2014). This is a clear example of the iterative, ad hoc approach that I will discuss in the next data chapter. Ozaki-san expanded on this later
in the same interview: “I got a chance and I perhaps achieved some expected performance from senior view, and then I got another chance, which is a more big one, and then management trust me more, so a kind of good circle.” A year later, he made similar comments, adding, “[T]here’s no big reason for me to take another opportunity outside. For example, if I am told by company, ‘You should go to India,’ maybe I am tempted to get outside job, or ‘You should go to totally different function, like supply chain,’ maybe I am thinking about another opportunity, or very big demotion, ‘You should be reporting to a manager.’ Why?! And so on” (15 April, 2015). These doomsday scenarios were highly unlikely, but “[n]othing is guaranteed” (e-mail on 15 May, 2015).

As for future changes in HRM, Ozaki-san advocated giving greater opportunities to people with high ability much earlier in their careers: “I see the many, many young talented members in R&D very frustrated to see the middle age or senior age people are not working well ... [There is] very drastic external environment change, and also our industry, pharmaceutical industry, is facing a lot of challenge in terms of R&D productivity” (21 May, 2014). In his opinion, involving relatively young and promising colleagues would energise the organisation and boost productivity. Similarly, Ozaki-san recognised the energising role of repatriates. For him, one of the drivers behind the decision to send employees from Japan to overseas affiliates was the need to globalise the Japanese headquarters itself and stimulate productivity gains from improvements in knowledge and skills: “The management expected ... they [repatriates] influence the Tokyo staff member by interacting, in many cases talk about what happened in the U.S., what happened in the global environment, in the working place, something like that” (29 August, 2011). I have already noted Reiche’s (2012: 1054) research on the knowledge benefits brought
by repatriates, chief amongst which is “ongoing access to host-unit knowledge that may benefit the individual repatriate,” together with “transfer of host-unit knowledge to colleagues in the repatriate’s new position.” Ozaki-san felt something similar.

Indeed, Ozaki-san saw a clear difference between colleagues who had worked overseas and those who had not. On 24 August, 2012, for example, he talked about fellow repatriates as feeling “some gap between themselves and [other] Japanese.” He also alluded several times over the years to the lack of people in Japan with the necessary skills for operating in a global organisation. For instance, in an interview on 22 May, 2012, he told me, “[M]y group members do not have global experience and they don’t have a good command of English, so when it comes to business with non-Japanese, I have to step in, so that I cannot delegate responsibilities to the other members.” His enhanced skills and experience brought greater opportunity and also greater responsibility.

Unsurprisingly, this shortage of people with the proficiency to do non-domestic work contributed to Ozaki-san being extremely busy. In addition, by working with senior managers, he was tipping the balance further towards his job and away from spending time with his family. He was clearly very excited to work closely with the head of global R&D, for instance: “Mike’s leadership style or way of thinking, or how to manage people ... That’s a really great opportunity to me” (20 May, 2013). At the same time, though, Mike Manley made heavy demands on Ozaki-san’s time: [E]ven on the plane, he can e-mail to me!” His wife and daughter noticed this and commented explicitly on it. While his son was busy with his school life, his daughter was jealous of his job: “[Y]esterday, my daughter called me, my cell phone, and I said, ‘What’s up?’ and ‘When are you coming back?’ she said. ‘Around 10pm.’ ‘Well, I have to go to
bed before 10pm and I just wanted to hear your voice” (22 May, 2012). He consulted his supervisor, and was told that the organisation would find a way to reduce his workload. However, Ozaki-san confided in me several months later that his daughter was still “asking me every Sunday, ‘What your schedule this week?’ When can she see me, evening, morning, at night?” (24 August, 2012).

The following year, Ozaki-san discussed this further with his new boss, the head of the planning department, who “told me interesting story. The great leader in the West, like Mike, like top management in mega pharma companies ... is not caring about direct report, direct report’s family, so that he or she is e-mailing to any time, regardless weekend. And once he or she start caring about direct report’s family, and then he or she cannot ask anything” (20 May, 2013). Despite the long hours and the pressure, though, Ozaki-san remained committed to his company. He also found ways to reserve time for his family, such as deciding (e-mail on 5 January, 2015) not to accept any invitations for “social events” after work while his daughter prepared for, and sat, junior high school entrance examinations in the first two months of 2015.

Meanwhile, it wasn’t just his long working hours that unsettled Ozaki-san’s family. His wife, and to a greater degree, his daughter, had developed a taste for life overseas. One reason that Ozaki-san had been willing to move back to Japan in 2011 was that he wanted his son to go to junior high school in Japan. However, his daughter missed being abroad. More than a year after their return to Japan, “[S]he said to me she will bring my wife and me to the U.S. when she worked for some companies overseas” (24 August, 2012). Ozaki-san, too, was interested in working outside Japan again: “I’m very excited about U.K. opportunity in the future
because U.K. office is growing, growing, just like the ... American [location disguised] office back in, five or seven years ago” (24 August, 2012). Over a year later, he was still talking about going to the U.K.: “I would like to contribute to growing the organisation ... It’s very exciting” (22 November, 2013). However, GPI now seemed to have greater need of his skills and energy in Japan.

Overall, Ozaki-san talked about himself and his career to date as being very unusual. We have seen that his six-year term in the U.S.A. was longer than normal, and during that time, he had two different roles, including a key operational one. He was promoted on his return, which marked him out: “Many, many Japanese expats were going to come back here, but most of the case, no promotion” (29 August, 2011). In the same interview, he told me that he was lucky: “So even if you have a really talented performance or capability, you need luck also.” He exuded a quiet confidence that he would find a way to deal with the various challenges that were given to him. He also had a clear sense of an upward trajectory to his organisational career, and his experience in the U.S.A. as an expatriate appeared to be a contributing factor to that success.

It was apparent, too, that Ozaki-san’s organisation was making good use of his abilities, while stretching him further. As he became increasingly involved in general management, though, he found himself missing his previous role in clinical development: “[A]ctually, sometimes I'm very frustrated because some project not doing well, like very slow development and not smart way to design the clinical study and such, but my current responsibility is to do another, another one, like managing people, or organisation, or thinking about entire R&D strategy, which means our current asset will be allocated in a profitable way, given the limited
resources here, and then in the end we need to show the very high productivity to Corporate” (15 April, 2015). He felt strong responsibility to achieve this goal, and he imagined himself working in that capacity for a further two years. After that, he wanted to move on: “One possibility is I may be promoted to the next level, and another possibility is I’m going to the U.S. again to support Mike more closely.” To accommodate the needs of the company, he had twice adjusted his own timeline for looking for a new challenge within GPI. He was not looking outside the organisation.

Ozaki-san’s ongoing commitment to GPI makes sense in the light of the opportunities he had already been given to develop his skills, test his abilities, and experience new positions. He was motivated, too, by the implied challenges and his likely contribution as his company became ever more global. His external career was progressing well, as evidenced by his promotions and bigger roles. “And also not only the senior leaders, or senior management guy, junior or middle management people sometimes said to me, ‘You should be a senior leader, I support you.’ Such kind of information, conversation, navigating me to do which direction I need to go” (15 April, 2015). On the other hand, he appeared more conflicted about his internal career, because despite the stimulation of learning how to manage people and shape an organisation, he felt himself getting further and further away from the hands-on clinical project management work that he had enjoyed so much.

To be able to experience that conflict, though, was something of a privilege. After all, Ozaki-san was not worried about losing his job, although he did show some concern about global pressures on lifetime employment at GPI: “[L]ast year, our company announced R&D retirement package to actually release people and I think the
people at age 35 years old and older are eligible to that early retirement package and many people left the company” (15 April, 2015). At the same time, “Last year’s announcement is one-off approach. We believe at least company will not do again in the next five or six years, but after that, nobody knows.” He also pointed to a difference in the way that he had seen employees in Japan and their peers in the United States being treated: “I don’t think way of doing, to let them go, it’s getting the same way in the U.S. or Western style, like just pick up phone, with you be fired and pack your personal belongings and just go. No, not the case here.” There was more dignity in Japan.

Critically, and I keep coming back to this point, Ozaki-san knew that he was a valuable part of his company. Although he had felt some temptation to take the severance package mentioned above, “Actually, Mike told me, ‘You are not a case to take early package!’ But that is really good for me because Mike trust me a lot and someone else [also trusts me a lot]. Still, I need to learn more about many aspect that I have not learned yet, like how to run organisation or more broad way, how our company can be survival or can survive in those competitive situations” (15 April, 2015). Once again, he was showing his affective commitment. Additionally, “I was deeply involved in the new organisation design, and even though very tough job, I personally need to stay here to stabilise our organisation.” He took this responsibility seriously.

Based on the above, Ozaki-san perceived high levels of organisational support for his career, and according to Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002: 712), the consequences of perceived organisational support “include increased affective commitment to the organization, increased performance, and reduced withdrawal
behaviors.” This conceptual analysis matches Ozaki-san’s situation. His case certainly stands in strong contrast to the negative picture of repatriate careers (in particular, sideways career moves, a lack of suitable positions, and high turnover) painted in the English-language repatriation literature. In his own words, “[E]xpatriate experience is really valuable in my career development” (15 April, 2015). He meant this in terms of learning and development, rather than promotion and preferential treatment: “I don’t see any difference in terms of promotion or giving the really attractive assignment, depending on whether you have experience in overseas assignment or not.” Having said that, though, he himself certainly got preferential treatment, but he attributed this to luck, as well as to his track record of achievement after being fortunate enough to be put in challenging positions.

It will be instructive to see what Ozaki-san’s case has in common with those of the other repatriates who chose to stay with their employers. Did they also feel that their organisations were looking after their interests? Did they anticipate exciting career opportunities in the future? Had they been given chances to build on their skills? It will also be illuminating to compare his story to that of Kinoshita-san (see chapter nine), who worked for the same company, but who decided to quit because of what appeared to be an absence of career hope. Before her case, though, we will look at the cases of four more repatriates. Next comes Hirata-san, another middle manager making good career progress in his organisational company.
5. CASE STUDY NO. 2 (HIRATA, KAZUO)

When I look back over my six interviews with Hirata-san between July of 2012 and April of 2015, his drawled exclamation, “No one ever knows!” leaps to mind. I came to think of it as his signature turn of phrase, or what the Japanese would call his “kuchiguse” (literally, “mouth habit”). His story is a striking example of the fuzziness and unpredictability underlying careers for Japanese at large indigenous companies, taking a turn from the sales of film products in Japan, Southeast Asia, and North America to a global management accounting role at head office. This last one was a position for which he had some hands-on experience incidental to his previous work, but no formal classroom training at all: “I have the general knowledge of the accounting or the numbers, but I don’t have the professional background” (15 December, 2012). He could not have foreseen that he would be placed in that position. It is highly unlikely that senior managers in his division or in the HR department could have predicted it much in advance of it happening, either. It is an example of the ad hoc HRM decisions that crop up throughout this study.

Hirata-san was forty-six years old (1 May, 2015), an age at which he could reasonably expect to be in middle management. He had been with the Mizutama Group for twenty-four years. Mizutama had more than 23,000 employees in almost 100 companies across the world. While over seventy percent of its annual sales still came from its home market of Japan, Hirata-san’s division had the opposite profile: only thirty percent of its sales came from Japan. The company itself had been founded after World War Two, but its roots lay in a pioneering chemicals manufacturer that had been established soon after Japan had opened its doors following the
Sakoku period of self-imposed isolation from most of the outside world that ended in the second half of the nineteenth century. As a result, Mizutama was a well established and respected public company in Japan. Due in part to the acquisition of companies abroad, consolidated sales had grown approximately thirty percent over the previous decade, although sales per employee had fallen four percent over the same period. Hirata-san had spent five years (2007 to 2012) at a subsidiary in the United States as the director of sales and logistics, during which posting he had been accompanied by his wife. They had no children. While still single, he had also worked in sales in Thailand and Singapore from 2000 to 2004. He had not set out to work overseas, but as we will see, he had an abiding trust in the choices that his company made for him and his colleagues, even if those choices did not always make sense to him.

My first interview with Hirata-san was by telephone on 27 July, 2012. That was two months before his repatriation. He had been introduced to me by an HR contact at Mizutama, a man who was also an expatriate in the United States. None of this was done through official channels, though, as we all agreed that it would make things complicated to apply for official permission to conduct the research. We soon realised that I had taught Hirata-san six years earlier on a training programme run by my employer for his. This past relationship, along with the introduction from my friend in HR, helped to establish a good rapport. One of the first questions that I asked Hirata-san during our telephone interview was about his upcoming role back in Japan: “I heard I will handle, like, allocation of the finished goods of our raw material globally” (27 July, 2012). He continued, “[M]y next job is that I wanted it to be, so it’s good, it’s good change for me.” In that same interview, he rated his level of control over his own career at four out of five, and
said that he felt he would be able to contribute to the company’s overseas expansion: “I would like to engage in such an overseas business at Mizutama, and our company also operating the same direction. They, we try to expand the, our overseas business, so I believe I can contribute to the, such, such company’s direction.” However, when he started three months later in his new position at the Japanese headquarters, he found that his actual job was rather different.

A colleague had just been sent to China, and now someone was needed to take over that person’s duties, which entailed making financial reports for the division and its global affiliates. That someone became Hirata-san. What did he make of this unexpected situation? “It was OK for me, but now I mainly handle the, making the budget or making the report, monthly report of the consolidated sales, or operating income, or something” (15 December, 2012). I pushed Hirata-san to explore his feelings a little more, asking if he thought it were strange that he had not been given the global planning and logistics role that he had been expecting, but rather had been put in a position for which he had no formal training. His reply was characteristically positive and resigned, a description that looks contradictory on the printed page, but which was often to characterise his responses to my questions: “It’s not strange, not strange. Anyway, I have to accept, I have to, I think I can try or it’s a challenge, new field for me so ... It takes time, of course, I cannot do the best, maybe I cannot make the best result or best performance first month or second month, but in the future it will be also good for me.” It seemed to me that counteracting any cognitive dissonance he might have had was the belief, or the need to believe, that he would benefit from the situation, and that it somehow made sense. That notwithstanding, I am struck once again as I write this by the gap between his
confidence just before returning that he was in control of his career, and the outcome when he actually came back.

The same attitude of positive resignation came out again later in that interview. Hirata-san gave the example of making a report for senior management: “[W]e have to spend so long time to make the one report, but this report is just for the one meeting, that’s it. Yes, sometimes I feel, ‘What is our job?’ or something like that” (15 December, 2012). Yet, access to data used in those reports, and their global scope, meant that he now had an overview of how his division was performing across the world. This, he felt, was a good chance to learn more deeply about the business. Watching from the sidelines, it seemed to me that this experience would stand him in good stead for his organisational career at Mizutama.

Hirata-san saw the skills that he would gain from working in the HQ as being company-specific, rather than portable. This is certainly a feature of Japanese HRM (Keizer, 2010). However, leaving Mizutama was not in Hirata-san’s mind, anyway: “I don’t think I would like to change the company” (27 July, 2012). He repeated similar sentiments two years later, saying that although he had mentioned the possibility of quitting to his boss when out drinking, “[I]t’s not serious … [M]aybe I was frustrated with something” (14 April, 2014). Hirata-san had clearly embraced lifetime employment in one company. This is not to deny that he had some qualms about the HRM system and the personnel decisions that came with it. We will hear more about this later. However, he had taken the view twenty-four years earlier that his interests would be well served by pledging his future to Mizutama, and nothing had happened to change his mind – not even working overseas in a very different system and then repatriating.
How were his company’s interests served, though, by putting someone with little direct experience into a key management accounting position? After all, it might sound as if Mizutama had made a poorly planned response to a skills gap in its workforce when placing him in that job. Another way to look at the situation, though, is to imagine that it was all part of a bigger pre-ordained plan to give candidates for senior management experience in various formative roles. A third interpretation sits between the two extremes described above: a chain of events led to an opportunity to give valuable experience to a promising employee, and so the organisation acted both tactically (to fill the position) and strategically (to further someone’s development for the long-term good of both the company and the individual). This third interpretation is certainly the closest to my own. The company used an iterative and flexible approach that depended on the context and which led to useful outcomes. In that sense, it resembled a kind of “fuzzy logic” (Zadeh, 1997 and 2009).

So-called “fuzzy thinking” and “fuzzy logic” have their roots in work done on multivalue logic by Jan Lukasiewicz in the 1920s and fuzzy sets by Lofti Zadeh since the 1960s (Phuong and Kreinovich, 2001; Akhter, Hobbs, and Maamar, 2005). The terms have been used in mathematics, computer science, control engineering, and system analysis, as well as decision-making and risk assessment (Shaout and Al-Shammar, 1998). The main contention of fuzzy logic is that an is-or-is-not, black-or-white bivalent perspective grossly oversimplifies what it attempts to define and explain. While the world around us is always in flux, “in much of our science, math, logic, and culture we have assumed a world of blacks and whites that does not change” (Kosko, 1994: 5). Because this is sometimes too simplistic to be useful, we also need a multivalent (rather than just a bivalent) understanding.
A company is likely to be neither completely domestic nor totally global, for instance. Because of its supply chain or customers or employees, it will probably be somewhere in between those two valences. Human resources are unlikely to perfectly match, or fail to match, the demands of any given business opportunity, and we will not perfectly understand, nor misunderstand, the true nature of that business opportunity. Our world is grey and fuzzy, but our most common models force us to deal in crisp blacks and whites, such as differentiating between strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats. As Grint (1997: 9) writes, “we tend to imagine away this fuzzy world and displace its occluded nature with clarity of vision and control that becalms us.” Business schools, practitioner articles, business advice books, and consultants have an interest in providing lucidity around issues, since that is typically what their audiences desire. As Rousseau and Fried (2001: 3) comment in a Journal of Organizational Behavior editorial, for instance, “the common demands for clean (read: simple) models do not always fit with the messy reality of contemporary work and organizational life.” This is despite the fact that “[e]very significant choice we make in life comes with some uncertainty” (Kahneman, 2011: 270). Blake (2010: 20) contends that schooling prepares us “to manage with certainty when what is needed is to manage with uncertainty.” This is often because lessons are learned from events, decisions, and actions that are understood in hindsight, when it is relatively easy to construct a rational explanation.

How does this apply to Japanese repatriation? One bivalent view of HRM has rigorous, explicit planning on the one hand, and chaotic responses to events on the other. From this perspective, good management requires sharp tools and exact preparation. However, we can also imagine a multivalent scale with points in between the
perfectly planned order and utter chaos described above. Japanese HRM sits somewhere between these two extremes, as we will see in each of the case studies. Career decisions are made iteratively and flexibly based on changing circumstances. Hirata-san himself made sense of the fuzziness of his situation by saying it was probable he was being given an opportunity to develop his skills so that he would be able to assume yet bigger responsibilities in the future. The details, of course, were not planned: “I feel like my assignment, for example, going to U.S. is decided by the personal, personnel situation at that time. Not decided by, like a planned, like a career plan by, for each person, but decided by like, just the situation at that time” (15 December, 2012). It would be better to be able to plan careers, perhaps, and an attempt to do this was built into the company’s goal setting and performance appraisal system, within which employees were encouraged to say how they would ideally like their careers to progress. At the same time, though, changes in the economy, in the market, or within the company made it impractical to fully implement plans: “We can say what we want to do next, but sometimes it’s realised, sometimes no. We cannot decide it … Anyway, we accept it.” The bottom line was that Hirata-san had made the long-range decision to trust the system, and he was confident that he would not be put into an “impossible or unrealistic situation” by his company. This seemed to get to the heart of his positive, if resigned attitude. He accepted the fuzzy logic of the situation, even if he couldn’t fully understand or explain it to me.

This analysis brings to mind Happenstance Learning Theory (Krumboltz, 2009: 135): “[T]he HLT posits that human behavior is the product of countless numbers of learning experiences made available by both planned and unplanned situations in which individuals find themselves.” However, there is one important
difference: while Krumboltz (1992; 2009) focusses on individual career actors and their choices, in Hirata-san’s case, it makes better sense to first think of the pragmatic response to circumstances in terms of the company (i.e., the HR department, and more importantly, the division and company level management). If there is a need, they adapt by using the resources available to them. That response appears tactical and short-term, but it has a strategic, long-term implication. The individual, in this case Hirata-san, can then benefit from the resulting opportunities to learn and develop, which then translates into knowledge and network gains for the company.

Hirata-san explored his ideas related to this more fully in our next interview. When I outlined to him the main argument of Kato and Suzuki’s 2006 paper on career mist, drift, and hope, he commented, “For me, if everything is set for the next target or next position or next thing in the future, it’s, I feel like it’s too much. It’s like I feel too strong obligation or, it’s difficult to say, but unclear future is, like, I feel it’s also good” (14 April, 2013). For Kato and Suzuki (2006), Hirata-san’s stated preference for a lack of clarity might look like a desire to maintain career hope. If he couldn’t see into the future, then assuming that he trusted his company to make good decisions on his behalf, he could anticipate enticing opportunities. With the next transfer somewhere on the horizon, that hope could sustain him throughout his career with Mizutama.

Hirata-san was certainly making assumptions of lifetime employment: “Maybe I can think like that because I, maybe other people also feel, company will continue to employ us” (14 April, 2013). He expanded on this point seven months later: “I believe that like, punish, like a personnel change, like a punishment will not be made, so if someone, for example, someone else not division
manager, not general manager, other board members thinks I should move there, maybe he has some idea. If he says, he makes such order to me, he thinks something, then he, of course, he think I am the best person to work there, so in that case, of course, I will not, I would not resent. And I, but I want to talk with this, the person who make the decision, what’s my mission or my, what he want me to do there. Basically, I go, follow decision, and I believe, I believe such terrible order will not come to me” (30 November, 2013).

As we have seen, there was an unexpected new role for Hirata-san when he came back to Japan, and though a little taken aback by it, he was willing to adjust. And while there was no promotion soon after his return, this was about to change a year and a half later. In April, 2014, he told me that he had attended a three-day training and assessment session for promotion to general manager level, and had passed the first stage. As a result, he was preparing for the next interview. The fact that he was a smoker seemed to afford him a small advantage, as it gave him the chance to share a confined space at headquarters with one of the interviewers: “Yes, one of them is a smoker” (19 April, 2014). In addition, “[O]ne of them is newly promoted to the executive officer, and he was my, like my boss in fifteen, fifteen, sixteen years ago. I know him well, he knows me well. So it’s good.” It was not just smoking that had given Hirata-san access to senior people; his longevity within the company was helpful, too: “[F]rom this March our company’s top management changed and ... I’m lucky, I know, he was, he was the general manager of our division in the past and I know him very well because he was in U.S. when I joined current company and he
was in technical service in U.S. and I was in international headquarters, and every day I communicate with him, we wrote fax, fax every day in 1992.” His overseas assignments in Thailand, Singapore, and the U.S.A. had undoubtedly given him good exposure to senior people, but this wasn’t the whole story. With twenty-four years in the company, he had a wide network. His willingness to socialise was also a contributory factor: in the same interview, Hirata-san mentioned that he had played *mah jongg* with his division manager until 05:00 that morning before coming to meet me.

While Hirata-san’s own prospects for further promotion were strong, one of his *douki* (literally, “same period,” i.e., someone who joined the company with him as a fellow fresh graduate on 1 April of the same year) was being sent overseas as the president of a subsidiary. In Japan, there is a strong personal connection between *douki* (which I have spelled in this thesis with a ‘u’ to represent the long vowel sound). This is understandable when you consider that they undergo intensive new employee training together when they first join their company. In fact, there is usually training even before they have officially become employees. This is while they are still so-called “*naiteisha,*” i.e., people who have been offered a position starting in the future. After the training as *naiteisha* (prior to joining officially) and *shin-nyuu shain* (as new employees), there is periodic follow-up training. Such training is almost always followed by receptions and parties. Therefore, if lifetime employment is your working assumption, you have the opportunity to get to know your *douki* very well over the span of your mutual careers. Yoshimura and Anderson (1997: 197) neatly summarise the implication of this relationship: “Because age and seniority count so heavily in a *kaisha* [company], genuine equality can only exist within a salaryman’s year group (*doki*), and
it is within a person’s *doki* that competition is most intense.” Yet, Hirata-san himself told me that he wasn’t too worried about what his *douki* were doing: “[S]ome people have such feeling, but I don’t have so much” (19 April, 2014). He claimed not to care that someone his age had been sent abroad in a senior management role, then. He also rejected my suggestion that he was ambitious. The main thing, he said, was to make a success of what he was currently doing. Advancement would follow when the opportunity arose: “I think I should make some result or something, in current position. It’s, as I said, it depends on demand or, demand or timing, when company require the person who has such experience or knowledge.” This brings us back to the notion that there is a functional fuzzy logic to the ad hoc HRM approach.

The real attraction of a promotion, Hirata-san said, was the challenge and the learning that it would likely entail. In Schein’s (1996) terms, as Hirata-san’s external career progressed, so would his internal one. I pressed him further, asking what were motivating factors in his career: “For growth for myself or new knowledge or, new knowledge also makes growth, new experience and new knowledge. When, after we work hard and when we make the good result, we can feel happy. Not only myself, but working with the, our, as a team” (19 April, 2014). Did he want a very senior position within the organisation? “Not very much, but yes.” Again, it was the challenge of doing something new that appealed to him, he told me. And yet, the hesitation and contradiction of “Not very much, but yes” hinted at a rawer underlying ambition for a higher position in the company.

This is not to deny Hirata-san’s strength of feeling about the importance of having fresh challenges. He was excited about his new opportunity when he first came back to the HQ, for instance.
To explore this a little more, I asked him what he missed most about working in the U.S.A., and he mentioned firstly the comfortable commute by car, rather than by crowded train as in Japan. He then talked being closer to the business in the United States, as “people working at the direct operation can feel more stronger satisfaction” (30 November, 2013). Their efforts translated into sales, and sales had a direct impact on the top line. As was typical for Hirata-san, though, he tried to put a positive spin on things, while still acknowledging his conflicted feelings: “I don’t say that I want to change my current job, but sometimes I miss the sales side.” There was one more thing: he had enjoyed more latitude to influence decisions when overseas: “[N]ow, of course, I have less such power” (14 April, 2013). In other words, his new role at the headquarters was stimulating and challenging, but he missed the freedom of working in a subsidiary thousands of miles away.

Hirata-san also now felt keenly that company hours were very long in Japan. He was going to dinner with colleagues three or four times a week, arriving home after midnight and waking up again at around 06:00. As he succinctly said, “Tired: too much drinking” (15 December, 2012). Four months later, he was working and then socialising with coworkers for between twelve and sixteen hours a day. As already mentioned, he played mah jongg with his boss and colleagues: “One day, sometimes we go and start the mah jongg from like 6.30 or 7 o’clock, which we stay till 12 or 1 o’clock” (14 April, 2013). In an apparent contradiction, he claimed not to see this as an obligation, though: “Just for enjoy ... If someone ask me if I go, then if I’m available, I go, always.” Another reflection of his long hours was that our interviews in Japan were always on a Saturday, Sunday, or public holiday, and Hirata-san would typically go to his office afterwards. The busiest period for him was
at the end of the fiscal year (February and March), when he had to produce a report for an executive review and approval session. In 2013, this saw him working in the office until midnight every weekday for several weeks, and he was required to make three major reports each half year: one at the start of the period, one in the middle, and one before the start of the next period. He viewed this as being too labour intensive: “I don’t say no meaning, but it’s too much. Too much burden.”

Hirata-san, then, was nostalgic about certain aspects of his American life. His wife, too, missed living in the U.S.A. Shortly after their return to Japan, Hirata-san commented, “[M]y wife said U.S. is better to live” (15 December, 2012). However, she tried hard to recreate an interesting environment for herself in Japan. She went to English classes, and also made friends with other wives in the company apartment block where they lived. This must have been challenging for her, although he never talked about it in those terms. For one thing, she had no children, which meant that she had less in common with those wives who were concerned with the minutiae of their offspring’s lives. For another, she had likely picked up some strange (to those who had never lived abroad) habits while in the United States. Nonetheless, “now she has friends to talk, or to have tea or things ... She’s hopefully enjoying in Japan” (14 April, 2013). His wife’s tacit acceptance of his long working hours and their new lifestyle must have helped him to readjust to company life in Japan.

His company’s support was also important, as Mizutama gave him financial and logistical support. The fact that the company provided him with somewhere convenient and comfortable to live was significant for Hirata-san. “[T]here are thirty to thirty-three units and all people working in Mizutama Chemicals or Mizutama
subsidiary ... and it’s very near Shin Kawasaki [location disguised] and the rooms are big, like ninety, ninety-two square metres ... I was very lucky to live there. Many people wanted to live there, but always full. So for my case, it was lucky to live there,” he told me (15 December, 2012). Furthermore, the company paid for a moving company to first pack, and then ship, his possessions from the U.S. back to Japan. From the outside, then, it certainly looked as if there were rational reasons for his decision to stay with the company. For Hirata-san, the three dimensions of “POS” (perceived organisational support: Kawai and Strange, 2014) were apparently high: financial, adjustment, and career. In their quantitative work with Japanese expatriates in Germany, Kawai and Strange (2014) demonstrate that career POS is significantly correlated with affective commitment, and that certainly seemed to be the case for Hirata-san.

As we have seen already from the literature review, “affective commitment” is one element of Meyer and Allen’s (1991) three-component model, or “TCM.” In fact, it is the most commonly used of the three. The other two elements are continuance and normative commitment. To recap, the first of these, affective commitment, refers to the emotional attachment that an employee has for his company, as well as his identification and involvement with it. Continuance commitment is born out of a need to work for the company because of a perceived lack of viable options. Finally, if someone experiences normative commitment, then he feels that he ought to remain with his company because he owes it some kind of debt.

Hirata-san clearly experienced affective commitment to his company. He talked about how he enjoyed socialising with his colleagues over dinner, drinks, and games of mah jongg, for
instance, even if he also felt that there was sometimes too much of this. When he spoke of Mizutama and his colleagues, it was usually with apparent pride and affection. There was no evidence of continuance commitment in our discussions together, as he never mentioned a lack of outside options. Nor did he allude to any negative financial ramifications of leaving his company. On the other hand, he did appear to experience normative commitment, in that he was grateful for the unexpected opportunities to work overseas, as well as for the company’s provision of relocation assistance and housing. He was keen to contribute to the company’s ongoing expansion overseas, and this gave him the opportunity to learn, as well as to do something meaningful.

Indeed, when we spoke thirteen months after his return, Hirata-san was talking about how management of overseas affiliates and his division’s global supply chain needed to be improved. Colleagues were consulting him on this, as they relied on his experience abroad. In the near future, he wanted to oversee the allocation of raw materials and finished goods throughout the global group of companies by using an effective enterprise resource planning (ERP) system: “Now, of course, we are now operating based on the estimation that this operation should make the most operating income, but no one knows, no one can, can agree, so after restoring [installing] such a global ERP system, maybe we will be able to calculate, we will see clearly what’s the best way. So then I want to, what the choice, what my choices are, I also want to be involved such operation” (30 November, 2013). This was the job he had expected to be given when he first returned to Japan.

Six months later, Hirata-san was able to describe this role more smoothly, as he was preparing for a promotion interview: “I would like to make a new organisation handling the supply, all kinds of
supply chain for our goods, so starting from the raw material, final goods, so everything. Then make the best supply chain to make the maximum profit” (19 April, 2014). He was interested in being an expatriate again, too. Just after his return, he mentioned that he would be happy to go abroad again, perhaps in two or three years, either with his present division, or with a different part of the business. In his own words, “[I]f someone ask me to go overseas, I will accept. It’s good” (15 December, 2012). Four months later, he expected to be in his current HQ position for between three and five years, although he opined, “No one knows, but at least two-and-half years longer, in total three years to five years” (14 April, 2013). Seven months later, he once again revised this estimate after learning that a colleague had suddenly been transferred. He also told me, “I can easily imagine that someone ask me to go overseas, sales company, not current ... division” (30 November, 2013). He could envisage himself working as the managing director of an overseas subsidiary, and mentioned that his previous experience would stand him in good stead for any subsequent expatriation. Furthermore, such a role would bring new challenges and experiences, and as we know, this was very important for him: “For example, in Thailand one associate was arrested by car accident or by robbery; I felt such top management position has the, will have to have the many, many experience, not only business but for employee, or such ... I felt such experience is good” (19 April, 2014).

By the time of our final interview, Hirata-san had been in his management accounting position at the HQ for thirty months. He had grown into the role, and was now thinking about implementing changes so that when he was rotated to his next position, his successor would be able to pick up the job more quickly: “[A]lmost two-and-a-half years have passed since returning to Japan, so I, I
understood well about the current procedure ... I want current job easier or more simple. It’s very complicated or more, we want make current job more systematic, that everyone can do that ... [W]hen, if I leave current position and I have to take, I have to forward my current job to others, my successor, maybe it takes time. So I want to make current, my job easier, more simple” (29 April, 2015). As before, he was thinking of his next move, although he was not sure what it might be: “This year, I thought I might be moved to other division, but also we didn’t know our general manager would be moved or not, so anyway, first the company president decide if, if they change our general manager or not. Then after that, new, former, anyway, general manager would decide change the, about my transfer to other division or ... Anyway, in April the, our general manager has been changed, so I don’t know, I would be, I will be transferred to other division or what’s he want ... No one knows when and where we will be sent, so it’s normal.” And there it was: no one knows ...

Hirata-san and I often talked about career planning. On one such occasion, he commented that his division manager did not mention what might be in store for him: “I don’t know he says to someone else, I don’t know, just he keeps in his mind or he consult with someone or ... I don’t know” (30 November, 2013). Hirata-san wasn’t even sure if his general manager was reporting career hopes up the hierarchy to that division manager. Furthermore, “there are some cases that even the division manager cannot decide his associates, personnel change. More higher level people, when more higher level people decide this, another, for example, I should go completely other company, overseas company, or something, division manager must follow that, must follow it, so like even division manager, sometimes he is also out of control to, for the personnel change about associate.” From Hirata-san’s point of view,
then, the system was hierarchical, opaque, and unpredictable: “We can say what we want to do next, but sometimes it’s realised, sometimes no. We cannot decide it” (15 December, 2012). However, as noted repeatedly, he trusted the system to look after him and his career.

There were several factors that contributed to this opacity in decision-making and lack of predictability, he said. One was the haphazard nature of the macro environment, for instance, the economy, the industry, and customers. Another was a lack of resources within the organisation’s HR function: “[T]hey, our HR people, don’t have enough manpower to make such a detailed plan” (30 November, 2013). More damningly, due to a lack of direct experience of business outside Japan, “they don’t know how, how to make such a plan.” This was not ideal for Hirata-san: “They should make such a plan for core area, but of course, we don’t know what happen in the future, like Lehman Shock or earthquake, I don’t know.” To be honest, “I think, yes, it’s better to have such plan in, for core business or core, how can I say, core portion,” but that was not the case. When I suggested that there might be a hidden HR master plan after all, and that he might be a key part of it, his response was to laugh and say, “I don’t know.”

I occasionally got the feeling from the subtext of our conversations that Hirata-san did not hold his HR colleagues in the highest esteem. As we have seen, he pointed out their lack of resources and experience in supporting the global expansion of the business. They also did not have a grip on what employees wanted from their careers, but instead prioritised the demands of division managers or directors: “HR, when someone needs the person who has such experience or such knowledge or, then HR says, ‘Oh, oh, he is good,’ like that but basically I don’t think HR department, HR
department understands what he want to be or what he wants to work for” (19 April, 2014). In contrast with Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi (2005b), the HR department was not a career advisor or employee advocate in these situations, then. Hirata-san talked about how decisions were sometimes made at the top of the organisation, beyond the reach of HR’s influence: “HR department cannot refuse it” (19 April, 2014). In theory, the biannual performance review process provided a chance for Hirata-san to influence the career choices that were, or were not, being made on his behalf. In reality, though, “it’s just discussion, or it’s just talk” (14 April, 2013).

Nonetheless, Hirata-san’s loyalty to Mizutama did not waver. He tried to justify specific HR decisions, such as promotions, even if he could not understand them: “Of course, there are some people who promoted before me even they are younger than me, but I think, I can think they worked harder than me and they are necessary people for this business, so that means I can say ‘Yes,’ but if we think a specific case, why he promoted to this position?” (19 April, 2014). He continued, “I don’t think it’s fair, but of course, top management person has some idea or something, when this organisation or this company needs to be changed, this person is suitable for such change or something. Personnel rotation or change of the job this way, I feel, change some aim or something of the job, some background is there for that change. Then I don’t know who decide it, but recently I feel for such change there is some background.” It wasn’t necessary for him to understand or even like the decisions that were made; he was seemingly content to respect those decisions, because the company and its systems would continue to look after him and his colleagues. Further evidence of that came when he was promoted in July, 2014. With typical modesty, he did not contact me with this news, and when I
finally risked asking him, his response was low-key: “Very fortunately, I could promote to senior manager position, though there is no change on current job so far” (e-mail on 6 January, 2015).

Hirata-san supported the existing HRM system, then, and perceived limited changes to date. For instance, he told me that there was now more emphasis on individual results for bonuses, and also for promotion: “I heard HR now trying to make the forty-years-old general manager” (29 April, 2015). Despite exposure to different systems during his nine years in Thailand, Singapore, and the United States, he himself didn’t advocate radical initiatives: “There is not so big change … [W]e experienced the different, differences with the, from Japan but coming, then coming back to Japan, of course, we have the experience in Japan, then, of course, there are some portion that we change by the experience in overseas, but finally we follow the Japanese way, of course, so I don’t think there, there is not so big influence by working in overseas … I want to do the better way, if the ways, the way we studied in overseas is better in Japan, of course we do, we apply such an overseas way, but other than that, we follow the current Japanese way. Basically, if I, when I think it’s better to change by following overseas way or I don’t know, we propose that … but we cannot apply overseas way everything in Japan, I think, even there are many people experienced in overseas, I don’t think they are big influence by that different culture.”

Was it a good thing that the HRM system would persist? “Yes. And the bad thing is, of course, since everyone has something like a guarantee to be employed so, of course, some people don’t work hard. Of course, there are good points and bad points” (19 April, 2014). Lifetime employment would continue, and this was a
positive thing: “Lifetime employment will make employees to be believed that, so, if we can work without thinking about some restructuring or fire, firing. And also for managers, managers can train employee without thinking about the, ah, sudden leaving the company of this person.” He contrasted this with the United States, where people often changed companies, thereby making it difficult for companies to invest in long-range training and development for them. He had also contrasted the United States with Thailand and Singapore two years earlier: “[The Thais and Singaporeans] respect like Japanese people, or Japanese product, or they feel comfortable to work in a Japanese company, so good, many good people came to our company. But in the case of U.S., completely different” (27 July, 2012). The system at his company in Japan would endure, and the U.S. model did not provide an appealing alternative. He reiterated this in 2015 when I asked him if lifetime employment was a positive practice: “Ah, basically, yes, yes. With the stable background or from a, salary or something, economical, with such a stability we can enjoy the life. We can enjoy the life so we can work hard. I think it’s a, it’s generally said it’s a, the work/life balance. Actually, I don’t care, I don’t care such word, but with good life I can work hard, so lifetime employment is, is good thing to work without any, without worrying about the salary or economical situation of myself” (29 April, 2015).

Clearly, Hirata-san showed steadfast confidence in his employer and its HRM system. At the same time, he was consistently interested in getting feedback from me on his views. He was keen to hear about the other participants in the study, for instance: “How do you think compared to the other seven persons’ situation, how do you think about our current, my current situation? Something special, or it’s similar to some other cases ...?” (19 April, 2014). When I asked him if he had a mentor or someone other than
me with whom he could discuss his expatriation and repatriation experiences, the answer was negative, which suggests that companies such as his could do more to support repatriates. They could be connected to one another, as well as to people who have not (yet) had the chance to work overseas, but who are curious about the pros and cons. Hirata-san needed an opportunity to make sense of what he had experienced. That may have been one reason for his participation in this study.

What else does Hirata-san’s story tell us? We have seen that in this particular instance, the HRM system functioned effectively, and it had internal backing. Hirata-san was committed to his company, and at the same time, perceived there to be organisational support for his career and his lifestyle. He had faith that he would continue to enjoy a challenging and interesting career within Mizutama, and he appreciated the sense of belonging, as his weekend visits to the office, his drinking parties, and his mah jongg games with colleagues demonstrated. Furthermore, Hirata-san had taken another important career step in July, 2014, and he could see two paths in front of him, one in Japan and the other abroad. Both were attractive, and both were with his company. He was confident that either would benefit him, and moreover, that he would have a chance to further contribute to his company’s global story. From his point of view, his decision to stay loyal to his company and to the ideal of lifetime employment within that company was rational and vindicated. In addition, his case shows how an employer’s ad hoc personnel decisions can be both short-term and long-term, tactical and strategic. After all, while meeting its staffing needs in the short run, Mizutama seemed able to develop Hirata-san for the future. In this sense, his story is similar to Ozaki-san’s, and so it is tempting to identify a pattern. The next four cases will give us a fuller picture.
6. CASE STUDY NO. 3 (HIROSHIMA, TAKAHIRO)

This third case provides another good example of a Japanese repatriate embracing what might be termed the “functional fuzziness” of his career path. By this I mean that because of what Ozaki-san thought of as the domino effect of one person’s transfer leading to another person’s new opportunity (see chapter 4), Hiroshima-san’s company was able to find challenges for him that suited its purposes. And while the details of his future were hidden in the mist, his progress and contribution to the company were still apparent to him. As of 1 May, 2015, the study participant, Hiroshima (family name) Takahiro (given name) was thirty-seven years old and had been with his company for fifteen years. During that time, he had worked in the central research and development function, spent time in the United States tasked with finding new technologies, returned to Japan to develop one of those technologies, and then been unexpectedly sent to the pharmaceuticals business to work as a manager in business development. As will emerge in the case, he was grateful for the opportunity to try new things in his career, but he was unable to identify either the logic behind his assignments or the prime mover guiding them. Nonetheless, throughout our interviews and in his e-mails, he was unfailingly laconic and phlegmatic about his career past, present, and future. In this, he strongly resembled Hirata-san from the previous case (chapter 5).

Hiroshima-san was the only kikokushijo amongst my study participants. The term refers to ethnic Japanese who have spent time overseas as children (shijo) and then returned (kikoku) to Japan. Their numbers are now said to be three times the levels of 1977 (Clavel, 2014), and in 2011, it is estimated that almost
10,000 *kikokushijo* returned to Japan. Given the overall increase in business expatriation (Oki, 2013), this is not surprising. As someone who had been exposed to life outside Japan, however, it is perhaps surprising that Hiroshima-san accepted the apparent vagaries of the Japanese HRM system at his company so willingly. On the other hand, his background may be precisely the reason for this, as he had to work harder than his peers to fit into Japanese life. Regardless, he was broadly supportive of the HRM practices to which he was subject.

Hiroshima-san spent seven years in the United States as a child, and his English fluency was high as a result, although his lexical choices were sometimes those of a teenager. In 2012, his organisation, Nishimura Holdings, sent him to the United States. His wife, however, stayed in Japan: “I was expecting to have lots of business trips, so we thought it would be tough for my wife to be alone in a foreign country” (e-mail on 2 July, 2014). His goal while overseas was “to find some new technologies that would potentially have some fit with our company” (interview on 5 December, 2012). His organisation had not yet been able to find anyone locally to fulfill that role, and furthermore, “in order to find right technology fit with our company, there are certain level of knowledge that would be needed to find out if that technology really fits our company or not, so it’s difficult for the local employees to know, especially company like us where lots of different business going on and very hard to, like, know all the business we are doing.” Using Hocking, Brown, and Harzing’s (2004) well known classification, Hiroshima-san saw the primary purpose of his expatriation as being position-filling (business application), rather than development of the local company (organisation application) or personal skill development (expatriate learning). Nevertheless, the last of these was certainly a by-product. As we will see from
what follows, for instance, Hiroshima-san felt that he had learned a lot from his time in the United States.

Hiroshima-san’s employer, Nishimura Holdings, was one of Japan’s largest chemical conglomerates. Established in the first half of the twentieth century, it had close to 30,000 employees and was incorporated in almost twenty countries (26 August, 2014). Its products ranged from construction materials, through electronic components and medical devices, to specialty chemicals. In the U.S.A., where Hiroshima-san was sent, there were offices and plants in nine states. However, while Nishimura had long been a household name in Japan, it was relatively unknown in North America. Rather than being global, Hiroshima-san viewed Nishimura as still being “a traditional style Japanese company” (5 December, 2012).

A key part of its traditional approach related to human resource management. Hiroshima-san gave the example of job assignments: “There are no such detailed job description, just very, how to say, very traditional Japanese style” (5 December, 2012). Connected to this, career planning was ad hoc, which is common to all of the case studies in this thesis. For Hiroshima-san, this approach was not an issue: “[Y]ou sometimes don’t have full control of what you will do in future, so ... especially in Japanese company, I don’t think it’s very realistic to think about some very precise career plan, because you never know what could, would happen along your way” (14 June, 2013). He expanded on this comment two years later after his surprising move to the pharmaceuticals business: “[S]ometimes you may not want to know exactly how your career is going to be because ... if you happen to know that your career is going to be in certain way, then you may lose interest in that career. Of course, there could be some cases where HR department
may want to intentionally, sort of, how to say, hide their, their intention ... And of course, being not clear is sometimes maybe stressful for people who are waiting for certain career and actually going to different career, which is quite common in Japanese companies, so ... might be dependent, depend on the person’s current will for the career and the actual situation” (28 April, 2015). His analysis brings to mind Kato and Suzuki’s (2006) career mist and career hope. I will touch on this later.

In keeping with this career path fuzziness, feedback on Hiroshima-san’s business performance was characteristically implicit. He was confident that his work in the United States had been positively evaluated, but not because of any explicit comments: “[I]f I was not successful, I would probably be doing something that is completely different from what I was doing in the United States. So [the fact that] I am able to do something that relates with my research means I had positive feedback on my research in United States” (5 December, 2012). He interpreted signals in the environment, then, to make sense of his situation. His company did not give him a clear indication of when he could expect promotion, nor of what he would need to achieve in order to be offered the step up into management. As he told me in our third interview, “[W]hat’s more important is to concentrate on what you’re doing right now rather than think about something, especially if you think what you’re doing right now would be important for your future work. For my career, then, I think focussing on now is a lot more important than think about what could do in future” (3 June, 2014). All of this, then, provides evidence of something that emerges strongly from this research project, namely that Japanese repatriates in this study perceived ambiguity and fuzziness in their careers. Most were comfortable with it.
How can we understand this theoretically? The career studies field in Japan is a young one; Ookubo (2013), for instance, traces use of the word “career” itself (translated as kyaria in Japanese) to the 1990s and argues that it did not become popularised until the 2000s. In conceptualising careers in Japan, he uses the analogies of riding on a raft down a river and climbing a mountain. The first is what Japanese typically do when they join a company – they go where the raft takes them. At some stage, though, Ookubo suggests that employees get off the raft and decide not only that they are going to take more control and climb a mountain instead, but also chose a particular mountain. In other words, they have a clearer image of what they want to do, and they then attempt to find a way to do it with their present employers. (If that is not possible, they may want to choose a sekando kyaria, or second career, by resigning and finding another job.) In Ookubo’s opinion, this typically happens somewhere between ten and twenty years into a Japanese salaried worker’s career with a company; he suggests that as a tendency, employees in North America and Europe choose a specialty and a career path more quickly.

The image of a river current and a (rudderless) raft certainly fits with Hiroshima-san’s story. He himself made the following comment after reading a draft of this case: “I agree with the points you made, especially the image of a raft floating down a river. Add to that the skill to survive that journey, particularly the skill to adapt to changes in the ‘river condition’ ... I have been working under different bosses through my career, and each boss had his/her way of working or demand toward subordinates, which would correspond to a change in the condition of a ‘river.’ My overseas experience would be a large change in such condition and may helped me developing the skill to adapt to smaller changes” (e-mail on 29 May, 2015). However, the model suggests that
Hiroshima-san was likely on the verge of choosing a mountain to climb, since he had been with his company for fifteen years. It seems to me that this is not the case. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Ookubo’s model applies in its entirety to the participants in this study, with the possible exception of Kinoshita-san, whose case comes later. While a number of the repatriates showed interest in specific fields and roles (to use the analogy, set their sights on one mountain or another), they were still willing to allow the company (the river) to guide the course of their careers. If we are going to use the mountain analogy, then, it might be more useful to imagine a group (e.g., _douki_, or same-cohort colleagues) climbing a mountain together from the start, with sub-groups breaking off and recombining to follow alternative paths up, or around, the mountain.

I have already indicated above that another way of trying to understand Hiroshima-san’s situation is to apply the work of Kato and Suzuki (2006). As we have seen from the literature review, they discuss Japanese careers in terms of drift, mist, and hope. However, Hiroshima-san’s situation is not a good example of Kato and Suzuki’s career drift, which they define as “a career situation in which employees who need to determine their own career orientation have little interest in their careers” (2006: 271). After all, Hiroshima-san was certainly interested (both in terms of having a stake in it, and in terms of showing curiosity) in his own career. However, to use the analogy of someone on a raft floating down a river, which is very close to Ookubo’s metaphor above, he had little control over the course of that river. There was organisational fatalism evident in his attitude, since he acknowledged Nishimura’s right to assign him according to its needs. We will see later that Hiroshima-san felt he was unable to refuse either his assignment
in the U.S.A. or the transfer to the pharmaceutical business. Nonetheless, he appeared to have only slight reservations about this situation. Hiroshima-san displayed interest but had little control, then.

In their work, Kato and Suzuki also talk about career mist, which is used to “refer to a certain state in which individuals experience difficulties in anticipating the future outcome of their own career actions and choices” (2006: 268). Hiroshima-san told me, “[I]n companies like our company, there could be lots of surprises in your career plans. For example, maybe I’m working on labs right now, but maybe next year I could be doing some marketing or some other work” (14 July, 2013). He contrasted this with the United States and Europe, where “that kind of change would be little bit less likely.” When I asked him who would know about the possible strategy underlying his different assignments to date, he told me, “probably someone in human resources department, but probably they wouldn’t let me know.” Not only did he not have control over the direction of his career (drift), but he was also unsure of what might be ahead of him (mist).

Having said that, Hiroshima-san was apparently able to divine approximate shapes in that mist, since he was reassigned within one year to business development. This gave him the chance to use some of the experience that he had gained in the United States looking for technology partners and ideas. He told me, “I was working in central R&D until last March. Then from this April, I just moved to our pharmaceuticals division. I’m not sure exact, what exact reason is, but I was told that from now on, ‘You’re pharmaceutical guy,’ so I just moved” (3 June, 2014). When I asked him for the rationale behind that move, he said, “I want to know, too!” He then went on to explain it in terms of his English
proficiency and project management skills being useful in his new role. Had he requested his move? “I never said about going outside [central research and development], so nobody knows what happens.” The lack of choice, control, and transparency was clear in Hiroshima-san’s perception of his own career, and was shared with other participants in my study. So, too, was broad acceptance of the situation. Such acceptance is not blind or irrational, though. There is undoubtedly a strong element of self-interest in it. Like all of the other study participants, Hiroshima-san prioritised having the chance to develop and learn in his career, so “if I have to stay in the same position for many years, I might deserve some changes” (e-mail on 6 January, 2015). He wanted variety in his organisational career.

The third term that Kato and Suzuki (2006) use is career hope, which is the feeling that regardless of how someone feels about his job at the moment, at some stage in the future, he will be happy with his role. Hiroshima-san consistently displayed optimism and trust when it came to his career within Nishimura. He had hope for the future. Kato and Suzuki found that when some of their study participants achieved their specific career goals, such as moving to a desired department, then they felt as if the mist had cleared and the hope had gone. This led to them quitting. While Hiroshima-san speculated that people might indeed lose interest if their career paths became clear, his own future was uncertain. The focus of his hope remained nebulous, and he was comfortable with this situation. In this, his case is very reminiscent of Hirata-san’s and Ozaki-san’s above.

Based on the empirical evidence from the three cases so far, Kato and Suzuki (2006) have made an important contribution by creating a framework that fits the Japanese context better than the
dominant Western theories, which typically assume that employees act as self-interested career agents who demand clarity. I have already noted Hiroshima-san’s feeling that there are differences between a traditional Japanese approach to HRM (as represented by his own company’s) and a North American or European approach. He experienced the latter firsthand when on secondment to a venture capital firm in the U.S.A., and secondhand from observing other companies and reading business articles and books. When we discussed disparities between his images of the two systems, he speculated that Japanese companies such as his likely benefitted from having a different approach, because if “everyone is going by one approach and there’s an opening there, so if Japanese company was taking other approach, then they could get that chance … [I]f everyone’s focussing the same point, then you would be probably missing something around it” (14 June, 2013). This implication of competitive advantage presented a fresh point of view. In the same interview, he said, “I understand that the system is totally different in Japanese style and Western style, but I think difference is difference. But that doesn’t mean one way is better than other way.” A year later, he alluded to the impact on HRM of expanding production and sales overseas: “I think the situation is, of the company, is changing, HR, so doing business with overseas as well, and the system within Japan is also changing … [M]y company is one of the companies who is trying to find … the balance” (3 June, 2014).

Hiroshima-san followed up on this point seven months later: “As many Japanese companies seeking their way to globalize, it would be inevitable for such companies to adopt the Western style. However, the degree of the change in HRM systems would vary among companies … Another side of this change would be the reduction of labor costs as ‘free-riders’ are said to be one of the
major cons of a traditional Japanese style HRM. For the companies willing to solve such a problem, ‘globalization’ would be a very good tatemae [i.e., a statement for public consumption, rather than an expression of an actual feeling; a ‘polite fiction’]” (e-mail on 9 January, 2015). In his view, globalization provided a convenient reason for corporate managers to reform the HRM system. Several months later, he told me that there was also pressure for reform from employees inside and outside Japan: “It’s changing more from traditional Japanese style to somewhat, how can I say, Western style, in some degrees, but not completely yet. For example, we have acquired some company in United States, so we have to implement some of the Western style human resources system ... [T]here are some differences and degrees how much they [HR departments and employees inside and outside Japan] want, but it’s looking for more, looking for more Western style, more, how to say, the more straightforward evaluation system. So I think it’s not changing that fast, but I think it is changing, it’s moving” (28 April, 2015).

While Hiroshima-san perceived some adjustment, though, he was consistently mindful of the need to find a way forward that worked in specific contexts, rather than merely blindly mimicking American and European management practices: “[W]hen you made a plan in the beginning of the year, then when you look back by, at the end of the year then you might be doing very different ... And usually, our company review that criteria every half year or so, so even within that period the situation could change quite rapidly, so I’m not sure how effective it could be in some, in some positions but, however, for example, in job like my former job which was R&D, we, it is quite clear that what you should do in certain position in certain period of time, so that’s something it could easily implement that ... Western type evaluation system.”
Regular formal performance evaluation meetings are one typical feature of HRM in many North American and European companies (Tannenbaum and Cerasoli, 2013). Like all of the other participants in my study, Hiroshima-san had annual performance reviews in Japan, and in those sessions, he was always given the opportunity to request new assignments. When I asked Hiroshima-san if this had any bearing on actual assignments, though, he commented drily, “I doubt it” (3 June, 2014). In the future, who would make a decision about possibly moving him to another part of the group or to a new role? “One of the big bosses. I'm not sure who.” As I have already mentioned, he perceived a lack of control over his own career, but he never described this to me in negative terms. As far as he was concerned, there was a black box inside which decisions about careers were made, and that was just the way it was. After all, the practicalities of making specific career plans were complex: “If it’s short-term, then the business department could be doing some of such plans, but especially with business companies like, for example, our pharmaceutical company, it might be difficult to consider long term plans ... within just business departments, because the situations could change quite rapidly” (28 April, 2015). In summary, “I think there are some large picture for terms of what type of people needed in certain [roles], or a certain number of people needed with certain type of skills.” However, that was probably within departments, and not at a company-wide level.

The decision to send him overseas again, if it were ever made, would be one such decision. Hiroshima-san said he would be willing to go. As stated above, his first overseas assignment had certainly given him a chance to develop his abilities and network. When we first talked, he also mentioned that his stay had helped him to improve his business English, including helping him to
learn how to write concise English e-mails: “I had some English background ... I was in United States for seven years from elementary school to graduating high school, but using English in business is really different, so I think there was improvement there” (5 December, 2012). In a follow-up e-mail, he wrote, “I had to think more about the strategic side of R&D ... Some of my colleagues who are working in the strategic department mentioned that my understanding in their ways of thinking help them a lot in working together [with them]” (17 December, 2012). Six months later, he talked about having learned new approaches to technology development from U.S. counterparts, and in general, a different style of business: “[A]ctually, meeting and talking with those business people in United States I just had, I would say have more sort of like clearer image of work, working ways or business style of United States ... [M]aybe I can use them in Japan” (14 June, 2013).

It was not just knowledge and skills gained in the U.S.A. that Hiroshima-san thought he might be able to use in Japan. As with other repatriates in this study, he was able to make connections with senior managers from the Japanese head office during his stay abroad. In his case, though, he explained that it was not only senior people: “[W]ell, actually, when I was working in the United States I have more chance of working with people in Japan or contact people who is not familiar with me, so I can talk to those people there. So actually, the network has got stronger than before I am going to United States ... Some people are younger than me” (5 December, 2012). Nonetheless, “I had the chance to introduce some technologies to senior people in some of our companies, and another reason is that since we had office in United States, we had the chance to have some visitors from Japan, which is usually senior people.”
At that time, I speculated that such connections might help to advance Hiroshima-san’s career, and as it turns out, Hiroshima-san was promoted to manager in April, 2014. This was eighteen months after his return from the United States. A year earlier, he had also suggested that promotion might happen “by next year or so. I hope so, but you never know ...” (14 June, 2013). He was only thirty-six when he was promoted, which was young, although in his opinion, not remarkably so: “I probably belong to faster promoted groups, but there are other people who are of same age as myself and got promoted as well, so it’s not that way too fast ... Just faster maybe than average” (3 June, 2014). Overall, promotion was an area in which he saw evidence of change in Nishimura’s HR approach, though: “I think the promotion is not always based on their ages now. I think sometimes some people stays without promotion a little bit longer than was before so, and if you look at our top management, there are some younger people in such positions right now than it was like a decade ago” (28 April, 2015). This brings to mind Hirata-san’s comment (chapter 5) about his company looking to create forty-year-old general managers.

Promotion at Nishimura had traditionally been expected to follow the logic of the seniority system for which Japan’s companies are well known (Ornatowski, 1998; Debroux, 2014): “[M]aybe a decade ago, when people reached certain age then all of them got promoted, but now like maybe a third, third of the employees got promoted but other two thirds may be, may not be promoted for next several years or maybe not at all, so I think it’s been changing recently for this maybe two or three years and it might keep changing for a while, but I’m not sure.” While he felt the changes were necessary for his company, Hiroshima-san acknowledged that “the people who are not promoted in current system may feel some unfairness, but if, but if this system continues for like maybe five,
ten years then the people, all the people also goes through that system, so might, might change” (3 June, 2014).

Another area that Hiroshima-san intimated should be revamped related to job assignments. Decisions were made “because of certain skills that is needed, or maybe simply like or dislike reason ... I’m not sure how much job portion is, is strong. Some people say the latter half: like/dislike is more important. I think it’s also up to who is making decision. So I think there’s, sometimes some people themselves may be trying to do more fair evaluation, but I think there are also possibility that person in that type of positions decide simply by their, like, I would say, instinct” (3 June, 2014).

This showed a very human and arbitrary face of the HRM process within Nishimura. Most menacing was Hiroshima-san’s perception that there would be unofficial sanctions for turning down an offered transfer: “[l]f you do that you probably have some difficulties. For example, maybe you may not have enough budget as you did before, or maybe you might not have chance to purchase certain equipment, also, so I don’t think that is smart choice.”

The timing of his transfer to the head office of the pharmaceuticals business in Tokyo must have given Hiroshima-san pause, as he had just started to build a house in rural Japan near the laboratory where he then worked. He speculated, “I haven’t told many people about building house, so I think it was just a coincidence, but who knows?” (3 June, 2014). As he wanted to live in the house that he was building, Hiroshima-san now had to commute by bullet train (the shinkansen), which meant a ninety-minute journey each way every day. This then entailed getting up at five o’clock each morning, and as he had not previously been an early riser, “I had to change.” While Hiroshima-san had benefitted
so far from accepting how things were done, then, there was also a cost. He felt strongly that it was a price worth paying.

Perhaps in an attempt to deal with any cognitive dissonance, Hiroshima-san represented the HRM system as being fair overall: “If you look at the people who are not promoted for quite long time, there are certain reasons that are pretty much agreeable that is happening sort of thing, so that sense I think if you go to very detail, maybe there are maybe some arguments there, but in total, I think is very fair” (3 June, 2014). He readily acknowledged, “it’s not always easy to fit exactly the person who needed in that position, so there are some chances that sometimes the position may not be the perfect match for that person, so I’m not sure how much of that is responsible, or how much of that way could be said that is responsible for HR department, but overall I think our HR department is not doing that, is not doing that bad.” What is more, Hiroshima-san found the variety of work opportunities past, present, and future appealing: “I think that’s sort of fun part of working in company like Nishimura, but if you’re in some company that is in specific business, then you never have chance to experience such different fields, so I think that’s, I've said that’s fun part of the working” (28 April, 2015). Also, his company paid for him to commute by shinkansen each day, at an annual season ticket cost of around ¥1,360,000 (equivalent to approximately £7,900 on the day of the interview). In other words, the company made demands on him and also treated him reasonably.

As of April, 2014, then, Hiroshima-san was a manager in a different function and industry: business development within Nishimura’s pharmaceuticals business. When I asked him what had contributed to his quick advancement, he identified two likely factors: “[W]ell, one thing would be the, my experience overseas
would something different from other employees of same age or ages close to me. And also I do have some experience in, involving in some large R&D project within central R&D, so that might also have some count on it” (3 June, 2014). He modestly suggested that the initial opportunity to work on a large research and development project had been down to chance, “because some people end up doing small projects all the time,” but the fact that he had been chosen to work on something large in first place suggests that he had been marked out for possible advancement at an early age. His move to the pharmaceuticals business was also unusual: “It’s a little bit closed, closed environment within the whole group ... so case like myself is sort of, like, very rare.” His responses echo Ozaki-san’s comments about the role of luck and opportunity in his own organisational career.

If Hiroshima-san was correct in thinking that his overseas assignment had been a factor in his promotion, then he had clearly benefitted from that chance. His company, too, had gained from his actual work while abroad, as well as from the impact that he now had on his colleagues back in Japan: “[M]y colleagues in Japan, [I] have some chances of telling those colleagues how they should, for example, write e-mails to people or the company in the United States” (14 June, 2013). This was necessary because “our company has some tendency of assigning employee that is not very well skilled in language ... I don’t know why, but that is, that happens quite often.” He himself recognised this as being a positive contribution that he made to his company and coworkers: “[A]s I said, I could give advice to my colleagues, then that would be probably profitable to my company.” It took him time to settle in to his new role, though, because “unlike when I was working in central R&D which basically was work done by myself, my current job involve more people in different departments, so sometimes,
you know, the opinions of one department maybe conflict with the other departments and so forth, so that’s maybe a little bit stressful sometimes” (28 April, 2015). This illustrates one potential drawback of job rotation, which is that people may end up in roles for which they are not ready, or even suited. Nonetheless, Hiroshima-san appeared confident and capable, and this was due in part to the experience he had gained overseas. He was learning on the job, and there was no hint that he was out of his depth.

In common with several of his peers in this study, Hiroshima-san reported sharing a worldview with other repatriates: “[T]here are a number of colleagues that are working with [Nishimura] companies outside Japan, so when I talk with those colleagues, I think there, I think it is easier for me to communicate with those colleagues” (14 June, 2013). He was part of an informal group within the organisation who had a common bond and who could help Nishimura deal with the challenges of globalising its businesses. Happily, it was rare for Nishimura’s repatriates to quit: “I think that is very rare case in our company; if that happens, it’s like almost big news. I think most people are still staying our company after coming back to Japan ... Might be the ratio of people quitting after returning to Japan may be lower than the other employees ... I think the company, how to say, somewhat respect the skill for, of those repatriates after they return to Japan ... I think it is the chance of getting some relatively important position within the company could be higher for those people and actually going overseas, is a part of such, how to say, high evaluation by the, either HR department or the divisional department where they work” (28 April, 2015). This group was growing, then. Other participants in this study, such as Okayama-san, Kinoshita-san, and Ozaki-san, spoke in similar terms of the bonds of understanding between repatriates. The extent to which companies
successfully encourage and leverage these informal groups is a potentially interesting area of future enquiry.

At every interview, I asked Hiroshima-san if he was intending to stay with his company. Intention to quit is said to be a good predictor of leaving, at least in the U.S.A. and Europe: “Intentions are, according to researchers ... the most immediate determinants of actual behaviour” (Firth, Mellor, Moore, and Loquet, 2004: 171). This is based on sources such as Igbaria and Greenhaus (1992: 36), who claim that both “[c]onceptual and empirical models of turnover provide strong support for the proposition that behavioral intentions constitute the most immediate determinant of actual behavior, in this case turnover,” as well as Azjen and Fishbein (1980: 110), who provide the more nuanced view that “a measure of intention is likely to predict performance of a behavior or goal attainment only to the extent that these criteria are under volitional control.” The act of leaving his job was certainly under Hiroshima-san’s volitional control, but he had such no intention.

During our first interview, for instance, he told me, “I am being allowed to do what I wanted to do as a result of my research in United States, so I am quite happy with my job right now. At the same time, I have been happy with my company, as well as being with this company for more than ten years, so although I have never worked in other companies, but I feel my company is pretty comfortable judged on working conditions and so forth, so in terms of ... I feel that the current situation is nothing pretty bad, but at the same time it is not that bad as well, so I have, I don’t have that much motivation for thinking, for going to some other companies” (5 December, 2012). When I asked him in a follow-up e-mail about whether or not he felt loyalty to his company, he replied, “Some of my bosses (including former ones) deserve a certain degree of
respect, and there are friendly colleagues” (e-mail on 17 December, 2012). In describing the importance to him of other people in Nishimura, he appeared to display a high degree of affective commitment. Six months later, Hiroshima-san told me, “I haven’t any reason to quit at this moment ... I never thought about, actually, I never thought about quitting my job until [and even] now” (14 June, 2013). A year after that, he said, “I’m very satisfied with my current situation, so I don’t have any reason to change that” (3 June, 2014). This last statement of job satisfaction was after his surprise move to the pharmaceuticals business.

Just like all but one of the other repatriates in this thesis, Hiroshima-san did not quit his company after his return. Furthermore, he showed no sign of even considering a change. He acknowledged that his company had greater control over his career than he did, and he also admitted to not understanding how specific decisions concerning his career were made, but in his characteristically laconic manner, he consistently told me that he was content. In Kato and Suzuki’s (2006) terms, he was subject to a lot of career drift and mist, and this was apparently no problem for him. He was satisfied that his interests in the medium- and long-term were well served by staying with his company, and given his comments above about other repatriates in the Nishimura organisation, he was not alone in feeling that way.

It is easy to argue that all of this is consistent with Beck and Beck (1994: 27), who claim, “the actual behavior of Japanese employees over time responds much more closely to a personal rational calculus than one might expect, given this image of the Japanese as the epitome of Western-style loyalty.” From this standpoint, it is sensible for repatriates such as Hiroshima-san to put their trust in their companies as they make their way down career paths that are
often best charted with the benefit of hindsight. The way forward is not clear, and the logic of their career progression appears fuzzy, but the results appear to have been acceptable to Hiroshima-san and all but one of his repatriate peers in this study. In common with those people, he had hope for a future that he could not clearly discern through the mist. This also applies to the next repatriate case, that of Takeda, Katsunori.
7. CASE STUDY NO. 4 (TAKEDA, KATSUNORI)

Takeda-san was one of the two repatriates in this study who worked in Europe. His employer was the Japanese subsidiary of a well known U.S. multinational medical devices group, disguised here as Brookline Technologies. He had worked after graduating from university at a traditional Japanese company for three years before moving to Brookline in 2004, which meant that he was the only one of the repatriates to have changed employers before we met. The BT Group had more than 20,000 employees around the world, did business in over 100 countries, and boasted annual sales in excess of $7 billion (4 February, 2014). Japan was its second largest market, although it did no manufacturing there. Takeda-san worked in Tokyo as a manager in Brookline Technologies Japan’s quality assurance department.

As of 1 May, 2015, Takeda-san was thirty-eight years old. We originally met in 2011 when he came to my company for pre-departure training. During his time overseas, we exchanged several e-mails, and as a result of that, I asked him to join this study just prior to his repatriation. He generously accepted. As we will see from his story, Takeda-san is a good example of a repatriate for whom the opportunity to take on fresh challenges and to learn new skills were of paramount importance. He was certainly not alone in this, neither in this study, nor in the broader literature. Yan, Zhu, and Hall (2002: 378) point to potential benefits of having completed an overseas assignment, including promotion, new challenges, and greater responsibility: “From the individual’s perspective, success in repatriation can be measured in terms of his or her longer-term career growth and continued development opportunities, such as challenging job assignments, promotions, or enlargement of
responsibilities.” Since his return, Takeda-san had experienced two of these three development opportunities, and he had been consistently explicit about the importance of this for him.

Takeda-san spent twelve months from July, 2011 as an expatriate at one of BT’s key manufacturing sites, which was in Ireland. His wife and infant son remained in Japan during that year. Unaccompanied assignments are not uncommon for Japanese business people; it was the choice that another of my study participants, Hiroshima-san, also made. The term for this in the Japanese language is “tanshin funin,” with “tanshin” meaning “single body” and “funin” meaning “go on assignment.” Takeda-san was excited to live and work overseas, even if he was tanshin funin: “[T]his assignment is very big change for me, and there are many challenges to stay in foreign country and to work with non-Japanese people. Yeah. It was very exciting for me” (15 August, 2012). Short-term financial gain and promotion were not used as incentives for him. This brings into question Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, and Bolino’s (2012: 1291) contention that “both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are important factors that motivate employees to choose global work experiences.” In Takeda-san’s case, his motivation appears to have been overwhelmingly intrinsic, and so related to his internal career.

For example, Takeda-san acquired specific knowledge about manufacturing while he was overseas. This was why managers in BT Japan had taken the decision to send him to Ireland in the first place. After all, they were investing in his technical skills and knowledge. The Japanese subsidiary had no manufacturing itself, and so few of its employees understood that side of the business. Senior managers were also looking to improve communication between the Japanese operation and other group companies. As a
result, Takeda-san had gained a potential career advantage from his assignment. Until his year abroad, Takeda-san had had no chance to learn details of Brookline’s manufacturing, but as a quality assurance manager, it certainly made sense for him to see firsthand how the products his company sold were produced. The BT Group as a whole, as well as BT Japan and Takeda-san himself, were all making an investment for the future. It appeared to pay off, as after his repatriation, Takeda-san felt better equipped to deal with the demands of working in a global organisation. He also had more opportunities to work with non-Japanese peers: “Before I return to Japan, the situation that works with colleagues in other countries is very limited, but currently I need to work with other, I need to work with colleagues, non-Japanese colleagues” (9 December, 2013). Overall, he was more confident in his abilities and knowledge as a result of his overseas assignment.

Even before getting the chance to go to Ireland, Takeda-san had wanted to work with people in other countries. Consequently, his career hopes and his company’s needs were neatly aligned when he was expatriated, which is strategically important (Dickmann, Doherty, Mills, and Brewster, 2008). For one thing, Takeda-san had been determined to improve his English while abroad, since it was the common language throughout the BT Group: “[C]ompany method is to develop talent for employee, I heard ... [M]y purpose to learn a lot of things in foreign country: again, manufacturing practice, and language in English” (14 December, 2012). As he saw it, “English communication is essential part to, to work continuously, to work effectively, especially in global context such as my current company” (9 December, 2013). He went on to say that English skills would be increasingly necessary in Japan-based companies, too, making a good command of English an important and portable asset. This emphasis on improving his English was
something that Takeda-san talked about throughout this research project. He would record each of our interviews, for instance, so that he could listen to what he had said to me in English. When we came to the end of each interview, Takeda-san would often ask me questions – he appeared to be seizing the chance to use what I had already asked to now interview me, and so boost his English fluency. He also reported using the transcripts that I sent him after each interview as a self-study tool.

Despite his high levels of motivation, however, Takeda-san found it very hard to maintain and improve his level of English after repatriating: “The situation to communicate in English is less than last year, so gradually my English skill is, how can I say, lower in my opinion, but, so I need to keep, not keep, I need to improve here in Japan. But the current situation, my English is gradually lower and lower” (14 December, 2012). Almost two years after returning from Ireland, he reported that his standardised test score for English had fallen, and he was frustrated: “In my opinion, honestly, I don’t have enough time to learn English by myself. So to improve my English score, I need to, I need to have enough time to learn English by myself. Of course, I need to continue to learn English during work, to attend the company’s course and to try to discuss in conference, in meeting, and so on. Sometimes it is difficult for me to hear English discussion, especially to the, especially other, how can I say, not English speaker discussion, especially to the APAC [Asia Pacific] region” (28 April, 2014). He looked back fondly on his assignment in Ireland as a time when his English had been the most polished and his comprehension level highest.

Like his peers in this study, Takeda-san had enjoyed the lifestyle overseas. For him, this included the beer, the music, and the comfortable commute by car. We will see later that the shorter
working hours compared to those in Japan were a big part of this. He also appreciated being able to take vacations while he was abroad, because “Japanese people don’t have vacation, so I cannot have vacations for, after I go back to Japan” (9 December, 2013). Not everything had been better in Ireland, however. The patchy customer service baffled him: “I saw opening time of this shop is, for example, 10am to 5pm, but I went to dry cleaning shop, when I went to dry cleaning shop 1pm, around noon, this is a working, opening time, but dry cleaning staff stick to the memo, ‘Now is lunch,’ so it is closed. Close the shop – why is this?” (14 December, 2012). This was in stark contrast to his pride in what he characterised as Japanese diligence and excellence: “I proud Japanese people work hard. So yes, first thing is Japanese people work hard and Japanese people, how can I say, the quality of Japanese working people is high.”

There were reasons to be happy to be back in Japan, then, and they included his job. Takeda-san had no real intention of leaving his company after his repatriation, but at the same time, he still told me that he was not completely closed to the possibility: “[I]f I have chance or challenge, this challenge is more interested than current company, I will move to other company. But at this point is no, and I don’t have clear point” (15 August, 2012). One year later, he explored this a little more: “I want to stay in current company, but if I can’t get other position, for example, promoted position, and I can get more salary, and so on, there are some reasons to move company … But now is, now I want to do my best in current company, and so I am not interested in other opportunities or other companies” (20 May, 2013). He made similar comments every time we met about how he felt he was learning and growing at BTJ, and how he had no plan to quit. In addition, he felt an obligation to the company as a result of having been chosen to go overseas.
Takeda-san’s sense of normative commitment, his intention to stay with his company, and his interest in working overseas again were echoed by many of the other study participants. At the same time, though, there are some interesting differences between his case and those of the other repatriates. One obvious point is that he worked for a foreign multinational. In his opinion, that meant he had few job rotation opportunities within his company, and so he needed to engage with his supervisor and the HR department quite assertively if he wanted (as he did) to be offered other positions in the future: “Yes, it’s a little different from Japanese company and the U.S. company. So Japanese company, in case of Japanese company, they have, how can I say, they have some role models, for example, to rotate the position, but of course we have, current company has a rotation to the job, job rotation and position rotation, but not frequently” (9 December, 2013). Furthermore, unlike others in the study, Takeda-san had joined his present company mid-career. He claimed that this was not unusual in Japan, telling me about his friends from university: “Almost all people have changed company … Yes, just was very limited friends works same companies … Ten percent stays one company” (20 May, 2013). This surprised me, as it was at odds with the assumptions of lifetime employment in one company that were apparent in the interviews with the other study participants. It also did not match my own observations of Japanese in blue chip indigenous companies. However, it is broadly supported by Kobayashi, Kagawa, and Sato (2015), who report that 81.7% of Japanese men and women aged between twenty and sixty-nine have left their first employer.

Takeda-san’s own career move in 2004 seemed to have worked out well. He was the first person from his function in BTJ to be sent overseas, for instance, and he saw the assignment as an important
career step. After his return, he was moved into a bigger role: “Not promoted, but job area is expanding ... So I need to do my best to success my new position” (15 August, 2012). Previously, he had managed post-market quality, which meant dealing with safety issues and adverse events after distribution. He had one team. In his new position after returning, he became the manager of two pre-distribution quality teams. These teams were at separate locations, each with its own manager on site, which meant that Takeda-san had the chance for the first time in his career to manage other managers. This required learning new skills: “[I]t is important to, how can I say, create that direction at high level, not details, at high level direction, to manage managers” (20 May, 2013). With this additional experience, he was well positioned for promotion to the head of quality assurance in the future. He explained, “[Now I work at the] same level but bigger job. I need to, how can I say, I need to do bigger job in order to promote” (14 December, 2012). While the specific details of his future career were fuzzy, Takeda-san expressed a strong interest in a top management job, and he was sure that success in this post-repatriation role would help him to move closer to this goal. He also perceived that his company was giving him support for his career aspirations.

Takeda-san later became involved in a project with the U.S. headquarters that was challenging for him in terms of both personnel and technical issues: “I need to focus to ... not only people management but also project management itself ... [T]here are many challenging situations for me, so it is, I am interested in the new, how can I say, new role, new work which I have not been experienced” (28 April, 2014). Because of his additional project responsibilities, one of his two quality teams was handed over to another manager in 2014. He did not see this as a career setback,
as he was grateful to be able to focus on running the project with the U.S. headquarters, while at the same time managing one team at the Japanese HQ. Concurrently with all of this, he was still involved in APAC meetings, too. His evolving role was evidence for him of his career progression. This is in happy contrast to the picture painted in the literature of career issues post-repatriation: “[M]any returning employees find themselves placed in positions below their level of aptitude and experience. Consequently, decreased performance and lack of commitment towards the organization may occur” (Nery-Kjerfve and McLean, 2012: 614-5).

In the discussion chapter of this thesis, I will argue that all of the repatriates in this study were given (and in some cases, also made for themselves) fresh challenges after returning to Japan, which suggests that at least one aspect of repatriate management in their companies was functioning well. This was surely enabled by the continuity of employment.

Despite his career opportunities, however, Takeda-san was critical of the lack of an explicit career path in his company, which is consistent with Nery-Kjerfve and McLean’s (2012: 614) research: “Career pathing and guidance for repatriates are not always available at corporations.” Takeda-san explained, “I didn’t receive clear, how can I say, clear development programme from company, so I need to my developing plan by myself. Of course, I can ask, I can communicate, I can hear opinion from my manager, but the company doesn’t have, how can I say, development plan for assignment people, international assignment people … Need to improve” (14 December, 2012). I had assumed that a U.S.-based multinational would have more explicit HR processes in place. After all, the Japanese subsidiary itself had been operating with support from head office expatriates for more than twenty-five years. Takeda-san himself saw this lack of formal structure as
being a failure on the part of the entire organisation. Furthermore, he had been given no written job description for his post-repatriation role, and he was critical of this, too: “Japanese style is strange. Yeah. So I don’t have a clear job description” (15 August, 2012). And yet despite not having enough explicit guidance, Takeda-san was able to articulate his own medium-term career plan to me: “I want to manage my team very well and I want to provide a clear message based on the direction, and based on the, yes, based on direction of the company, the company, and then I want to make my successor for my team. Yes, two years” (20 May, 2013).

Takeda-san described his hopes for both his external (e.g., higher position) and his internal (for instance, stimulating work) careers. His next promotion would be three years after his return from Ireland, he hoped, although he would also be happy to move at the same level to a new function so that he could learn about a different part of the business, which (as we will see) is what happened. As he put it, “It is important to have, have learning opportunity during work every day” (9 December, 2013). However, his priorities seemed different the following year when we discussed what might entice him to move to another organisation: “From first is, first scenario, salary is better but same position. Second one is salary is same but position is promoted. Third one is salary is same and, but other function” (28 April, 2014). Almost two years after his return, then, he was also thinking about the importance of a good salary for his future. This may have been because his company offered no company pension, meaning that he would need to rely on savings to supplement the basic national pension in the future. The company also offered no housing or marriage allowance, which had been perquisites in his previous company, and indeed in many Japanese companies. That said,
while he was receiving calls from headhunters, there was “no interesting position at this point” (28 April, 2014). More crucially, and as already noted, he seemed content: “Currently, I need to, I need to do, just facing work and to work in current position, but it is important to consider how to, how to improve my career, for example, three years or five years later, I need to consider, but currently, I have motivation to work in current position.”

Part of this motivation came from the fact that he was expected to show leadership in the Asia Pacific region for quality-related issues: “I need to learn Japanese regulation, but also I need to learn regulation for, regulation of other countries, especially Asia, Asian countries. So company said, as company message we need to collaborate other countries to work effectively as worldwide, so I need to know our situation each other. Of course, Japan and other countries in Asia. This is my challenge to develop my career” (20 May, 2013). While the Japanese market was mature, “China and India is, growth is very dramatically, is dramatically growing, growing every year, so in that case for their countries, experience in Japan is good influence to during growth” (9 December, 2013). He was palpably stimulated by the opportunities his organisation continued to give him and by the chance to contribute to the group’s global growth.

His expanding role was one reason that Takeda-san’s working hours were longer in Japan than they had been overseas. A typical day in Ireland had been 07:00-17:00. In Japan, it was now 08:00-21:00. He started his working day one hour later in Japan, but he still woke up at the same time, because his commute in Ireland had been five minutes by car, as opposed to one hour by train. In common with some of the other study participants (Hirata-san and Okayama-san, for instance), he found the commute stressful in
Japan, both because of the longer time required, and also because it meant travelling in a crowded train. In addition, his busy role entailed a high volume of e-mails, and while his overseas peers might have been able to work from their comparatively large homes in the evenings, “it is difficult for me to work at home because my son is, my son is young, so I have no space to work” (14 December, 2012). The result was that he stayed at the office, and this led to a cycle of people coming to consult with him because he was physically available to them, which then meant that he needed to stay later to complete his other tasks, which resulted in people consulting with him further, and also to their expecting him to stay late. He commented somewhat longingly, “I think we need to improve working style. It is very important to have balance, working and private, working … [P]eople should not, should not be in office late time.” He then pointed out his own dilemma: “I have to go home. But I need to work.”

The Japanese preference for face-to-face communication made change problematic, though. E-mail was typically being used to lay the groundwork for upcoming discussions, as well as to summarise and confirm: “Face-to-face, gesture is good … but in the case of, we have to make sure a conversation, in that case e-mail is very useful to make sure” (14 December, 2012). He was better able to rationalise staying late in the office when we met one year later: “If possible, it is better to join teleconference from office because we have, I have, I can use the, I can use telephone, and hands free, and I have meeting room in the office. But it is difficult for me to join teleconference from, from my house because I need to use the cell phone to join teleconference, so sometimes that’s, sometime is, I have some noise and it difficult for me to hear voice correctly, and so on” (9 December, 2013). He had readjusted to the rhythm of working life in Japan, rather than agitating against it.
Perhaps in a conscious effort to help him to readjust, Takeda-san’s boss gave him opportunities to share the experiences and knowledge that he had gained overseas with his colleagues. He saw this as an important, if unwritten, aspect of his role: “[S]o people who work in foreign country, the number of people who worked in foreign country is limited in Japan. So not so many, so I think it is, I think my experience is very, how can I say, useful for my colleagues ... I have communication process, I know manufacturing site people, so I can share organisation at manufacturing site. So it is easier to get a correct contact person. Yeah, it is easier to get correct contact person, and I can share with my colleagues, even though the item is not related to my job directly” (14 December, 2012). He knew where to find specific technical information, and he helped Japanese colleagues who needed to consult with production and logistics people overseas. In common with the other repatriates in this study, he was sharing knowledge and networks, but not trying to get HRM policies changed or overhaul the ways in which people worked. He was not a change agent. One clear example of his support for the Japanese HRM status quo was his positive regard for the practice of lifetime employment. This was despite the fact that he had chosen to work for a company with its parent organisation in the United States, where the approach was somewhat different. He described the benefit for companies in Japan of lifetime employment as the guarantee of trained labour, and for the workforce as “stable employment for people and keep, keep the minimum motivation to work the company” (7 May, 2015). His comments were reminiscent of those made by Hirata-san (chapter 5).

Perhaps because of his low-key approach, Takeda-san reported no hostility or suspicion from his colleagues in Japan after his return, even though he had been given an opportunity ahead of them. In
fact, he felt that they welcomed him and his expertise: regardless of his overseas assignment and twelve-month absence, he was still treated by coworkers as one of the in-group. This is significant for successful knowledge transfer: “Clearly, an in-group member is more trusted and therefore has a higher probability of being able to transfer what he/she knows” (Oddou, Osland, and Blakeney, 2009: 187). As we have seen elsewhere, the information and knowhow that repatriates have and are able to share represents a strategic resource for their companies, so the transfer of that knowledge is of interest to practitioners and academics alike. Oddou, Osland, and Blakeney (2009) report that repatriates often face problems with resocialisation at work, which leads to insufficient knowledge transfer, yet Takeda-san never mentioned any such issue. For instance, he told me, “I ... share some documents, some technical documents with colleagues, to make a process, to make a local process” (28 April, 2014). His colleagues were happy to learn from him. We can find similar evidence in the other case studies, too.

In December, 2014, Takeda-san’s job was changed again, and he was tasked with managing a different part of the quality function: “Now it’s like another experience in quality organisation” (7 May, 2015). We saw earlier that he was willing to take another job at the same level if it meant his learning more about the business as a whole. He was also working on three overseas projects, and he was upbeat about his future: “[B]asically, company decide to move [me] to another team, other team, to have experience for other activities in quality team in order to work all thing of quality. This is, I suppose company is, how can I say, company is thinking for my career ... I need to work several areas of quality in order to go to next step. This is my understanding.” He went on to explain, “I have new, new opportunity to work at a new area. This is the first point. And the second is to expand my knowledge and my
experience.” Clearly, his drive to acquire fresh skills and experience was as powerful as ever. He envisaged, or at least aspired to, becoming the head of quality within three more years, believing that he would be able to perform at a high level in his latest role, and that this would lead to his promotion. If it did not, he would willingly take another job in quality to fill in any remaining gaps in his experience and skill set, perform well, and then get promoted. His career hope – the belief that a desirable position was still in the works – was very much alive, then. As with Ozaki-san, Hirata-san, and Hiroshima-san, his trust in the organisation was strong, too.

One final note: like the other study participants, Takeda-san invested a lot of hours in this study project, including the time spent in the interviews themselves, the time taken to review the transcripts, the time needed to answer my e-mails, and in Takeda-san’s case, the time required to travel to and from our sessions (since we never met at his office, but instead at my workplace or house). In common with the others, he seemed happy to have someone to whom to tell his story: “I am interested in me, my story” (14 December, 2012). A year later he told me, “[H]onestly, it is interesting because I don’t have this type of opportunity to talk each other, my career development and my personal thinking, so it is good opportunity and very interesting to talk with you about this type of issue” (9 December, 2013). There was a lack of post-repatriation mentoring, then, and this is an issue that commentators say should be addressed if companies want to do a better job of retaining their repatriates (e.g., Tyler, 2006).

In summary, Takeda-san successfully readjusted to his home organisation, and he continued to develop his skills with Brookline Technologies Japan. While it could have done more with repatriate mentoring, his company continued to stretch him with challenging
roles, and also to encourage him to share what he had learned while overseas, thereby avoiding the danger that “[r]eturning expatriates are likely to leave their organization when they perceive that it fails to develop mechanisms and practices to reward, utilize and circulate their newly acquired knowledge and skills” (Nery-Kjerfve and McLean, 2012: 626). He perceived his evolving role as evidence of organisational support, and he had hope of future career progression, either upwards within his current function, or sideways in a different one. Close to three years after repatriating, Takeda-san was still with his company, and although he did not reject the possibility of finding work with another organisation, he did nothing to act on that possibility. His continued employment with BTJ was noteworthy, as Takeda-san had already once changed companies, and furthermore, he now worked for a *gaishikei* (a foreign-capital business enterprise) that did not necessarily have the same assumptions of a job-for-life as its Japanese peers. Even so, he talked about his future within the BT Group, rather than focusing on possible opportunities elsewhere.

I am curious about how Takeda-san's career will evolve in the future, though. Will he actually be offered the chance to head up the quality assurance department? Will he be rotated to another function? Will he find a better opportunity elsewhere that gives him a higher position and salary? I suspect that he will still be with the company in ten years, and will still perceive development chances and organisational support, but for now, his story pauses here.
8. CASE STUDY NO. 5 (OKAYAMA, TAROU)

Of the repatriates whom I interviewed for this project, Okayama-san was the only one to express serious doubts about the future security of employment itself in Japan. He also had doubts about his own future, because while he was happy in his first role after returning to Japan, his second assignment left him feeling initially dispirited and disgruntled, and later fatalistic. In his opinion, his new skills were not being used in that role, and although he understood it was logistically challenging for a large organisation to give every person an interesting job, he was still hugely disappointed that his aspirations had been ignored. This is closer to the negative picture painted in much of the English-language literature about repatriates struggling to find suitable roles for themselves (as reviewed earlier). Despite this, he did not act as an internal vector for change. He did not try to pressure his boss and HR to cut working hours or to revamp the way that they decided job assignments, for instance. Instead, Okayama-san was still with his company in April of 2015, wistfully day-dreaming about finding a sustainable way of doing what he so memorably referred to as his “favourite thing,” namely, connecting people and giving them new opportunities.

We were introduced in 2012 by one of my colleagues, who had known Okayama-san prior to his being sent to Germany. Okayama-san had spent three years and four months working in the business development function for the German subsidiary of a company I will call “Japan Conductors.” JC started out in the early 1900s as an organisation dedicated to the production of power insulation materials. While continuing in this field, it had gone on to expand its line-up to include products for the automotive and
electronics industries. According to its own Internet site (accessed on 26 November, 2014), Japan Conductors had close to 4,000 employees in its home country, with a further 8,000 non-Japanese employees in more than fifty group companies in sixteen countries across five continents. The number of Japanese working overseas had increased 115 percent between 2004 and 2013, from ninety-four expatriates to 202. As of 1 May, 2015, Okayama-san had been with the company for sixteen years. He was forty-five years old.

Our first interview took place by telephone in April, 2012, one month before his return from Germany to Japan. From the very start, Okayama-san was frank and forthcoming. His assignment in Europe had been to find potential new business partners and applications for certain industrial materials. As with most of the people in this study, “I just received the oral explanation for my new assignment. There are no document about, for job description” (25 April, 2012). As a result of his time as an expatriate, Okayama-san felt that he gained a more objective view of his organisation in Japan: “I saw the JC Japan from outside. This is also good opportunity to understand our culture, company culture, and company behaviour, and company thinking … I found many, many issues.” One of these was the slow speed of decision-making compared to Germany. Before his return, Okayama-san told me that he wanted to speed things up in Japan, and he felt that he could contribute to JC’s future by instigating change at the HQ: “I think this is impossible to change completely, but I put some basis to, for such an environment, so three, just three years, this is quite difficult to change completely, but I could some … kick-off of the change.” While still an expatriate, he saw himself as being a potential agent for organisational transformation. That changed somewhat when he was a repatriate, however.
Okayama-san initially set a three-year deadline for staying with JC because he wanted to set up his own business: “If I find new thing, so I will establish my own company ... It is my dream” (25 April, 2012). Before that, though, he wanted to repay what he felt was his debt to Japan Conductors for having sent him to work overseas: “I had very good experience in Germany so I would like to show my thanks to my company. So from now to, for three years from now I would like to concentrate on new assignment.” This is in line with Meyer, Stanley, Jackson, McInnis, Maltin, and Sheppard (2012), whose study concludes that normative commitment is stronger in collectivist and high uncertainty avoidance cultures such as Japan (Hofstede, 1983 and 2012). Three months later, this commitment was, if anything, stronger: “I want to stay in company and to contribute something to my company. But then, such kind of experience, based on this experience, I want to do business by myself. This is one option. And if I make some new business, I want to stay current company if I enjoy such field” (19 July, 2012).

For the first two years, Okayama-san was remarkably consistent with his gratitude and his sense of enjoyment. The three-year timeline became more flexible, too. In June, 2013, he told me again, “Two, three years I want to contribute our company, thanks, to express my thanks to my company for staying Germany. Then if my good point can become contributed to our company, I still remain the company, but if not, maybe I change the company. I want to contribute the society and basically I think if people saying ‘thank you’ to me, this is my pleasure or good point” (4 June, 2013). If and when he did quit, Okayama-san imagined that he would be far more likely to set up his own company than to move to another existing one, since if he did the latter, there was the danger of feeling disconnected. In the meantime, he revelled in his HQ role in business development.
Like several of his peers in this study, Okayama-san anticipated that the most difficult thing about working in Japan again would be his commute. In Germany, he had driven less than thirty minutes to get to his office. In Japan, however, he would commute from his wife’s family house. It would take him two hours by train each way. As it turned out, he was able to use this time to his advantage each day by reading widely on a variety of business topics. Meanwhile, although his housing costs would be lower in Japan, his overall income would drop because of the overseas allowances that he had received in Germany. He was not too concerned about this, though, because “new assignment is quite, quite attractive for me” (25 April, 2012). His working hours would likely increase, as in “JC Japan, so many employee takes long time to work. Basically, twelve hours. The length of working hour is about ten to twelve or fourteen hours.” Given the above, it is not surprising that before his return, Okayama-san was already imagining the possibility of going overseas again as an expatriate, either to Europe or to the USA.

One problem that Okayama-san did not anticipate was the three-month time lag between shipping his belongings from Germany and receiving them in Japan. Several months after his return, “Still I have [only] three jackets ... Very, very inconvenient” (19 July, 2012). At this stage, he felt strongly that his lifestyle had been better in Germany, and this is consistent with the literature describing the unexpected challenges of returning ‘home.’ He told me, for instance, “I think the quality of life in Germany is superior. Much better than Japan ... Air is clean and so, in front of my house, wheat farm is very, very beautiful, nice atmosphere. So it is a pity to leave Germany.” Additionally, “there is much, much freedom in Germany, but on the other hand in Japan, many people look at our department to check our activity, so there is less
freedom. I have stress.” His role back in Japan was outlined to him orally during a meeting and follow-up discussions in the month before his return. There was no written job description: “It is quite difficult to do that in JC Japan because our company is domestic Japanese company and it is quite, not good to show such assignment clearly, I think. On the other hand, European company, European company show the quite, quite clear job description to each employee” (25 April, 2012). In his opinion, it would have been better to document roles and expectations in Japan, too. On the other hand, he worked in a new department that sat directly underneath the CEO and which was charged with finding business opportunities. Okayama-san was energised by the possibilities: “This very, very good opportunity to change my company, to change company behaviour, company culture, so I feel very, very good and I bet, this new assignment is very, very attractive for me” (19 July, 2012).

As already noted, his enjoyment of his initial role after returning from Germany was a constant theme between 2012 and 2014. At the start of 2013, Okayama-san told me, “I feel fun because my assignment is to have an opportunity to meet people among different industries, so very, very excited, exciting. That’s why very busy, but fun” (15 January, 2013). He was being allowed to build on the knowledge that he had gained in Germany, where he had been tasked with finding potential applications and partners in one of the company’s three strategic business sectors. Back in Japan, he was told to consider all three of these sectors. In his role, he “prepared some catalogue, pamphlet for new idea, then we shows, will show that to the potential customer, and then we get the feedback from the customer. Then we refine or reconsider the concept to succeed the business” (25 November, 2013). Although the specific ideas that he had brought back with him from
Germany were yet to translate directly into new business, his enthusiasm remained undiminished: “I’m happy to get this job because I can learn every people everywhere outside company.”

In addition to giving Okayama-san the opportunity to increase his knowledge of new product applications and possible business partners by meeting with people outside JC, his company also paid for him to join an executive education course in the autumn of 2012. He enjoyed it so much that when it finished, he signed up at his own expense for a new programme about marketing. He was using his long commute as a chance to study the material, and most days, he paid out of his own pocket for a reserved seat on an express train so that he could concentrate on his studies. He was enthusiastic about acquiring new business frameworks, and felt that it was reasonable there would be limits on the company’s financial and temporal support for his studies. When we met in January, 2013, he had used a national holiday earlier that week to go to a conference in a city 160 miles away.

As we have seen, Okayama-san was highly stimulated by his initial job and his studies. In addition, there was another repatriate in his department who had worked in the U.S., and Okayama-san enjoyed sharing ideas with him: “So we talk that we have to do the movements [towards the] Western way or ... I think that Japanese is isolated culture. They don’t know other country culture, so role of us is to transfer that way ... For example, meeting, basically Japanese people have no agenda, but in Germany, local staff set the agenda to specify what we talk in that meeting. Time management is very, very good in Germany. On the other hand, Japanese is no good, no agenda ... Time consuming. I, and this is the point to improve for me: what is the issue to discuss, so what is framework to discuss?” (15 January, 2013). He had experienced
a work environment in Germany that matched his get-things-done approach: “I felt the importance of the action from before moving to Frankfurt, then during stay in Germany I felt more and more the, such importance” (4 June, 2013). He wanted to use this approach back in Japan (as he said, “role of us is to transfer that way”). Japan has a reputation for relatively informal consensus building and painstaking decision-making (e.g., Witt, 2012), and this was a source of frustration for him. Clearly, he began with hopes of initiating changes in the way people worked in Japan.

In addition, Okayama-san wanted to contribute to those around him by sharing the fruits of his overseas experience. This is in line with what I was told by other study participants such as Takeda-san and Hirata-san, and it resonates with the work done on the knowledge benefits accruing to companies from their repatriates, who bring back new knowledge, awareness, and networks (Crowne, 2009). While he was careful not to bore colleagues with excessive tales of his adventures in foreign lands, he found that “our member[s] have some interest for such different culture people, communication” (15 January, 2013). He wanted to teach colleagues about the practices and views of people in other countries and companies. When I asked if he had been able to influence German staff by working with them in Europe, though, he commented drily, “German people still keep their thinking, so we, Japanese staff in Europe, is like ... coordinator among both country.” At the same time as implying a certain intransigence, or perhaps an underlying sense of superiority, on the part of his German colleagues, he was full of admiration for what he thought of as being the German way of doing things. In particular, we have seen that he compared time management and explicit job design in Germany and Japan: “Because based on my experience in Europe, there are big loss, I feel there are big loss ... Not only time
management, but also human management, or all management, I think, so how to set assignment for each people” (4 June, 2013).

Would his experience enhance his external career within the company? “I hope so, because my awareness from Germany or overseas stay is quite, quite good experience, so many people cannot experience that, so if I activate such experience so, many people want my experience, so maybe, so my career, this point is, this is good point for my career” (19 July, 2012). During his stay in Germany, Okayama-san was promoted, and he was hopeful of another promotion one or two years after his return to Japan: “[M]aybe this experience would be good for my career, maybe one year, two years later I will be promoted. Maybe” (25 April, 2012). That was not his main priority, though: “I want to be innovator. So I am not interesting in promotion positively. Now I’m interested in, ‘Be a innovator’ ... I prefer to be a innovator than, more than, senior management.” This came from a conviction that he would be able to make a positive “contribution to society” in his present company with its materials and technologies. Meanwhile, he was unaware of any career plan that his company might have for him: “I have no chance to see the, some career plan for me. That’s why I don’t know.” The following year, he still had hope of another promotion: “Maybe one or two years later, I promote one upper layer” (15 January, 2013).

The use of the word “maybe” in connection with promotion pointed to uncertainty that sprang from a lack of clarity about his career path. He shared this with the other repatriates in this study: all experienced Kato and Suzuki’s (2006) career mist. For Okayama-san, this was also related to doubt about how highly he was evaluated and how strongly he was supported by senior managers. In the end, “I don’t know ... Because for my job, it is difficult to
judge, it difficult to evaluate the effort for my job because there are no result for making new business at this moment. I try to make new business, but at this moment no result” (15 January, 2013). He talked more about this uncertainty: “I think the current my assignment is good for me because, so my experience in Europe is good for my job now, but I don’t know the, how to, how is there good effect for my experience in current job. Maybe my boss understand such situation, but still unclear for me … So maybe management level people, ah, for management level people it is difficult to evaluate our activity.” Without a positive evaluation, he would be unlikely to move to the next step on the management ladder, and even if he did, that would take some time: “If I achieved the target or got the good result, I get the new job, new layer, but basically our company is conservative company and I don’t know the speed of the career development, but it takes time to get upper grade, I think” (4 June, 2013). It transpired that he was correct in that final assessment, because as of 16 April, 2015, he had not yet been promoted since his return in 2012.

We have already seen that advancement within Japan Conductors was based on a conventional seniority system, and Okayama-san acknowledged that approach might still suit the main part of JC's business that dealt with electricity generators and distributors. However, he also felt JC’s HRM system was increasingly outdated: “[W]e have to learn outside company, different industry or company, to learn company system or human resources system because software IT-related company has very young executive and completely, they have completely different work style, so my concern is our company is very, very old fashioned style and this style is not suit for current situation” (4 June, 2013). He was critical of the lack of explicit career planning: “In case of Japan, I think the, I don’t know the other company, but in case of my
company, I, my company have no clear career description for each person, I think. Maybe each person consider their will or personality, to show such personality to induce such good way. Maybe I show, I showed my personality, then my interest assignment will come, ah came now. Maybe” (4 June, 2013). At the same time that he advocated more explicit planning and a highly rational approach to fitting individuals’ specific skills to particular jobs, though, he recognised that “human is very, very complex, and it is difficult to define which way is the best for employee ... It is impossible to match between the company and the employee, I think” (25 November, 2013). His implication was that it would be up to the employee himself to decide whether or not staying with his company would be in his own best interests over the long run.

As will emerge later, Okayama-san himself was faced with this situation the following year.

In the meantime, while he wanted clearer communication and more transparent HRM processes, Okayama-san had reservations about the desirability of a dynamic labour market: “China it is easy to change company. Unbelievable. So we had, we have factory in China ... I heard from my friend it is difficult to set employee in factory in China, because Chinese person ... [i]f they get, got some information or know-how, they retire company and to change company or they build up the company, so mindset is completely different from Japanese, I think” (4 June, 2013). For his company, it took a long time to train people to handle their key material, and this incentivised the company to retain staff and maintain a stable, well trained workforce. In other words, lifetime employment continued to make sense for Japan Conductors. He could understand the logic of this situation, then, and see the impact that it had on how people worked and how the company was structured.
Having said that, Okayama-san felt a little restless. He said he would have been interested in a secondment to another company or to a government position, for instance, but unfortunately, JC did not offer this possibility. His initial business development job did allow him to meet people from a variety of companies and industries, though. This aspect of his job was unusual within JC: “[O]ur employee have less chance to meet other companies’ people or something like that, so many employee have completely rigid way of thinking to suit our company, but if we, if I, if we look at many people, then we learn another way to thinking. Our company’s [way is] not only way” (25 November, 2013). One possible way of encouraging flexibility, in his opinion, was to transfer people more often within and between group companies, divisions, and departments.

When we first talked about job rotation, Okayama-san’s perception was that job rotation was unusual at Japan Conductors. He told me that his company had not used it much in the past as specialists were necessary for its core processes and technologies. After all, “technology transfer need time” (22 November, 2014). Despite this, however, he himself had had four roles within the company in his first thirteen years. In addition, he noted in 2015 that there had recently been a deliberate HR push towards more actively transferring people: “[T]he rotation system is recently enforced for young executive candidates. The purpose of the rotation system is to have an experience in many workplaces and to develop career as global human resources” (16 April, 2015). In another example of rotation within JC, Okayama-san got a new boss a year after returning from Germany. That manager brought with him a different style of supervision: “[M]y work is still the same. My assignment is to connect outside people and to communicate with them and ... then to connect new business and
connect the collaborate work with outside company. This is my job, so I learn people, I learn to communicate people, so it’s OK, basically, but my new boss like micro management. I don’t like it” (4 June, 2013). This meant he again felt that he had less freedom in Japan than he had had in Germany, something which he said was both a feature of the organisation, and also of the boss’s personality. Five months later, he was more equivocal about working with his new boss: “Sometimes good, sometimes bad, because of personality is quite, quite strong. Sometimes my philosophy for new business is suit for his philosophy, but sometimes not” (25 November, 2013).

The threat of another transfer hung over Okayama-san himself: “Current assignment is maybe very suitable for me, but in most cases, employee have to change assignment in the same company. This is bad thing for me. I want to do my favourite thing. This is a point to consider” (25 November, 2013). It was curious that he initially thought job rotation was uncommon, and yet he was very sensitive to the likelihood of being transferred himself. And while he was not happy with the possibility of being moved to another job, he did recognise the overall benefits of the system. In this way, Okayama-san once more revealed his ambivalence towards the status quo in his company: “People rotation is very, very important to activate the way of thinking. For our group, for our group it is important to consider, to generate new idea, and company considered some rotation is very, very important or necessary” (16 April, 2015). The danger was, though, that even if you were in a job you liked, “almost all company change the job or the rotation system, and it is difficult, it might be difficult, to stay same position, same job.” When I asked him how much input he would have into the choice of his next role, his response was unequivocal: none. He had no idea how that decision would be made, either:
“completely black box” (25 November, 2013). We have already seen that he was critical of this HRM approach, and his picture of a better system was simple: “I want to discuss my assignment or my career. Then my boss or upper boss will decide such new assignment. But at least we should have a meeting several time to discuss such important assignment, thing. But at this moment there are no, or just one meeting, to discuss such future career ... I have no authority to decide my career.”

This turned out to be prophetic, as Okayama-san was moved to another position in April, 2014. It was the fifth job of his JC career to date: “First computer simulation, development, research work but Frankfurt, back to Japan, corporate level research, then current job” (22 May, 2014). His new role did not match his interests: “[M]y work is to analysis the product by using computer simulation to estimate the timing of the break point of the product.” This entailed him sitting at a desk and working long hours at a computer: “I like the, to meet people outside and to exchange information and to get very useful information for company; this is the previous job. My characteristic is suit to such work, work, I think. But now quite, quite domestic, in-house work. I have no chance to go outside at this moment.” Understandably, he was unsettled and frustrated, and he argued that it would have taken between three and five years in his favoured previous role to build the necessary business network and get tangible results. In hindsight, given that he had initially set himself a three-year limit on staying with the company after repatriation, he would have been hard-pressed to see clear results, then. As it was, he was moved on within only two years. Regardless, he could see some rationale for the move: “I think my work, previous work need more time to establish network, but my boss couldn’t evaluate my job. This is the, one of the factor to change, to move job.” Furthermore,
in his new computer simulation role, he was reprising work that he had done upon joining Japan Conductors after university, so from a dry resource management point of view, the decision made some sense. The result was that although he could understand the reasoning behind the decision to move him, “[M]y motivation for work dramatically decrease … I don’t want to bear the current situation … If I, if I continued previous job I want to [do], I don’t think to quit the company.” A year later, he was still considering leaving, but he still did not condemn the HRM practice of rotation: “Japanese employee have to accept that situation, but for me, I try to chase my favourite things, my favourite job. This is a relatively strange point for normal, compared to normal Japanese employee” (16 April, 2015).

In his computer simulation job, the working hours were longer, which was what he had worried about in 2012 before returning from Germany. In addition, “people doesn’t communicate each other, not good atmosphere in the floor. In previous job, the one group is very, very small, therefore, they communicate frequently and I think better” (3 December, 2014). There was not even any chance for him to manage people in the new job. Rather than succumbing to self-pity, though, he had found an interesting way to compensate for the lack of stimulation at work by becoming the manager of his local softball team: “I have to consider that starting member. This is very difficult because our team have many people from age seventy-one to twenty-five or -six, so I have to considered to win, but I have to considered, all member have to enjoy to play softball. This is very, very difficult to balance … I have to activate my knowledge.” Nonetheless, while he had found a way to stretch himself in his leisure time, he was considering leaving Japan Conductors. The context was bigger than just discontent with his new job: “I think my life divide two stage: one is company life,
second is my favourite life. I want to move to second stage, so from company age. I understand my characteristic, what is my favourite thing. Then I change life, work ... This is a good timing, I think. So just half of the life, my life, so after now I want to concentrate my favourite thing.” His wife was supportive on the condition that he could find a way of maintaining his income level. In the meantime, “I can’t do anything at this moment, so I try to look for something to contribute, the member or company ... I want to contribute my company and at least my work will, or contribute the profit of my company, so my work is still small, but I try to look for the contribution point for my company.” He wanted to protect and help Japan Conductors. However, “I’m now looking for the, any opportunity to do my favourite thing.”

In my understanding, Okayama-san’s “favourite thing” remained connecting people, although he later corrected me: “My basis of ‘favorite thing’ is to make someone happy. One of method for it is to connect people” (e-mail on 8 May, 2015). In addition to his work with the softball team, he found another way of making people happy that was more closely connected to his company: he started to organise so-called “konkatsu” (literally, “matrimonial activity”) events at which single colleagues could meet people from other companies with a view to marriage: “Member is from my company, but partner or lady ... from outside the company and I arrange the place to meet them. So I don’t know after the party they connect or not, but I consider the such opportunity is very, very important and I want to give such opportunity to meet people, so I held such party for several times, four or five times. This is just hobby, but people is very praise to me” (22 May, 2014). He had creatively found ways of doing his favourite thing. Later, we will see that another participant in this study, Kinoshita-san, also took the initiative to compensate for frustration with her company-
appointed role by finding additional stimulation and meaning. The first response of neither of these people was to look for a new job with a different employer. Rather, they sought ways of keeping themselves engaged. The difference as of 1 May, 2015, however, was that Kinoshita-san had lost hope in her first organisational career, and so had found another job. Okayama-san was still with his initial employer. This may have been because of the daunting hurdle of starting his own company and supporting his family, which could be seen as continuance commitment. It was also likely due to his positive feelings for his company (affective commitment).

Repatriates very rarely quit JC: Okayama-san estimated that only three percent of returning employees had ever left the company before retirement. He personally knew only one person who had done it.

We have seen that Okayama-san had strongly contradictory feelings about his post-repatriation career with Japan Conductors. Previously, he had been given exciting and interesting roles, such as his expatriate assignment in Germany and his business development challenge after first coming back to Japan, but he had also most recently been assigned to a job that was far less stimulating for him. He was able to rationalise what had happened by pointing out that he had little control over his career and limited understanding about how decisions were made on his behalf. In Kato and Suzuki’s (2006) terms, he was experiencing both career drift and career mist. He could see why his manager might have failed to properly evaluate his business development work post-repatriation. He could also appreciate that it was very hard for any company to match employees’ wishes and abilities with actual positions: “[It’s] quite difficult to satisfied all desire for each employees” (16 April, 2015). By the end of the study, he was torn between wanting to leave his company to do something more
enjoyable on the one hand, and feeling continuance, affective, and normative commitment on the other. As we are about to see, this was further complicated by his concern that many Japanese companies would struggle to offer stable employment in the future.

In fact, Okayama-san predicted major changes in Japanese employment patterns, including a phasing out of lifetime employment in some companies: “I think ten, maybe ten or twenty years, dramatic, I guess the situation, social situation, company situation will dramatically change ... Japanese company consider only efficiency for work or cash flow or something like that. They consider efficiency only, I think, so company consider to cut extra or additional cost, for example, benefit or something like that. As a result, employee cannot have some loyalty” (3 December, 2014). This did not necessarily mean convergence with Western practices, though, as he contrasted this putative future situation in Japan with what he said were emerging trends in large North American and European companies: “I heard Google or something new company ... considered the lifetime job and they considered to keep the employee longer, to have a free canteen or something like that, but many Japanese reject or cut such thing at this moment.” However, not all Japanese organisations had followed this pattern. He singled out certain companies with long histories: “[T]heir top management have a policy to considered employees most important, then many kind of benefit still survive and they don’t chase the efficiency or growth, and they considered sustainability is the best, so they don’t chase rapid growth. Such kind of company is ideal.”

Okayama-san continued to express somewhat contradictory opinions on the topic of lifetime employment: “Of course, to promote the mobilisation of the human resources [between
companies], I think the lifetime employment should be abolished” (16 April, 2015). When we talked about this some more, he explained his deep concerns about the ability of Japanese companies to compete with overseas rivals, as well as to survive the vicissitudes of rapidly moving markets. He used the extreme example of electronic manufacturer Sharp’s recent travails to make his point: “Sharp, twenty years, ten years, fifteen years ... ago, liquid display very, very famous and Sharp can get the big money but now no cash, less cash from the liquid display. This is one example. So basically, big company can survive easily because big, because they can trade, get big money, but if they have misjudge like Sharp, suddenly dangerous situation.” He also mentioned the social issue of lack of access to stable employment (see Keizer, 2010; Kuroki, 2012): “I think it is important to have a chance to get a job, every person who want to work, but currently there are less chance to get a job, also impact to the young people. That why I think the lifetime employment should be abolished, but, but in case of Japan it is quite, quite difficult to do that.”

What does this mean in the context of my study? Most obviously, despite his dissonance and dreams of independence, Okayama-san had not quit his company three years after returning, which argues for a strong level of commitment. Using Meyer and Allen’s (1991) framework, that commitment was certainly normative, as he spoke of the debt he owed to Japan Conductors for sending him overseas. It appeared to have elements of continuance commitment as well, since he had not yet hit upon a way of making his “favourite thing” financially viable for him and his family. There was evidence of affective commitment, too, as he had arranged the konkatsu parties for unmarried colleagues, and he had willingly shared his knowledge about working overseas with coworkers after his repatriation. He felt a broad need to contribute to those around
him. His involvement with the local softball team was one example, and in April, 2015, Okayama-san became the chairman of the PTA committee at his son’s school.

Despite having been rotated into a position at Japan Conductors that did not excite him, Okayama-san’s long-term interests were arguably best served by staying with the company and supporting the status quo, since he would likely be given a different assignment in a few years, and would benefit from having a stable income in the meantime. Given his length of service with the company, he was likely to be promoted, too. He himself disagreed with this assessment, however: “My opinion is that my long-term interests is to get financial freedom and to enjoy my favorite things and finally to make someone happy. I don’t intend to stay my company longer because I already judged that employees and employers can not realize my long-term interests” (e-mail on 8 May, 2015). In that case, he had lost hope, which implied that he would move. However, I am not convinced that was the actual situation, because there seemed to me to be residual optimism implied by what he said during our eight interviews. He was conflicted.

Either way, as Okayama-san waited to be given a better position or to take the bold move of leaving, he found ways of keeping himself stimulated (i.e., organising those konkatsu parties, managing the softball team, running the PTA committee, and paying out of his own pocket to take a business management course). He perceived an imperfect degree of career support from the organisation, and cast a critical eye over the shortcomings of the current HRM system. Indeed, he went so far as to predict its death due to competitive pressures. Nevertheless, his case suggests that despite the influence of business norms outside the country, and regardless of the perceived need for change felt by him and his
repatriate colleague who had worked in the United States, the status quo was being sustained at Japan Conductors. Okayama-san was not really acting as a change agent, although he felt that he had tried to make a difference in his new business development role after repatriation: “I think I am a part of vector for change because I tried to change my company” (e-mail on 8 May, 2015). Rather, it seemed to me that he was a reluctant member of the old guard with both hopes and concerns for the coming years. The future of the HRM system at companies such as his may be somewhat uncertain, but it is highly unlikely to yet include sweeping reforms such as abandonment of lifetime employment.
9. CASE STUDY NO. 6 (KINOSHITA, YASUKO)

The exception that proves the rule: that is how I came to think of Kinoshita, Yasuko. She had repatriated from the United States in early 2012, and two-and-a-half years after our first meeting, I got the following unexpected e-mail (10 September, 2014):

Dear Gaz,

Hope you are doing well.  
I need to tell you my decision: I will be leaving the company and my last day will be Sep 30.

I do hope my decision will not make your research more difficult... You can reach me at [pseudonym]@gmail.com.

Best regards,

Yasuko

Her decision to leave her employer challenged my conviction that Japanese repatriates are unlikely to quit. However, Kinoshita-san had struggled to settle back into her Japanese organisation, and she felt that she had no hope of promotion there. She wanted to formally manage a team, but she no longer trusted that she would be given that opportunity unless she moved. Therefore, she had consulted with a headhunter to find a growing pharmaceutical company that was willing to give her a suitable position, and that had finally paid off. Her story shows that there are Japanese employees working for large companies who seriously consider mid-career changes, and also that some of them follow through on those thoughts. It is not surprising, though, that the opportunity she found was with a non-Japanese company (gaishikei), since such companies are accustomed to hiring staff from competitors.
As we have already seen from the literature review, repatriates as a whole are said to more commonly leave their employers than their domestic colleagues. For example, “Employee attrition after an international assignment is a known problem in the global mobility field ... [M]any employers fail to understand or use the new skills and global perspective employees gained while they lived and worked overseas” (Gulati, 2014). While the percentage of Japanese repatriates who leave their companies may still be relatively small, Zhou (2014) claims that it has been increasing since the turn of the century, and that the likely reason is a breakdown in the psychological contract between employee and employer. Kinoshita-san’s case, then, gives us an opportunity to explore some of the possible underlying causes of a Japanese repatriate’s decision to move, and it provides an interesting contrast with the stories of the other repatriates in this study. Given her dissatisfaction with the external career opportunities at her company, it suggests that perceived organisational support for careers could be important for repatriates, just as Kawai and Strange (2014) claim. In addition, it speaks to the usefulness of career hope (Kato and Suzuki, 2006) as a concept in Japan.

Also significant for me are the lengths to which Kinoshita-san went to try to make the most of what she felt was a poor situation at work before she actually quit. As we will see from what follows, when her assigned role failed to meet her expectations, she took the initiative to study a new field (oncology), to help former colleagues in the United States connect with peers in Japan, and to mentor younger people in her workplace. To a large degree, all of this was discretionary, since she was not invited by her boss or the HR department to study, nor was she given an official liaison or management position. While the type and degree may be different, these efforts to find meaning and dignity echo what we saw earlier.
from Okayama-san. Like him, Kinoshita-san did not react to her unsatisfactory work situation by complaining and looking for a quick exit. Rather, she first tried to discover a way to make it more comfortable, interesting, and consequential for herself.

Kinoshita-san was introduced to me by a mutual business acquaintance in late 2011 – she and he had worked together as expatriates in the United States. Our initial conversation took place over the telephone on 18 January, 2012. It was 21:30 in Japan, where I was, and 07:30 on the east coast of the United States, where Kinoshita-san was then based. She was preparing to return to Japan the following week after two years and seven months in the North American clinical development subsidiary of her Japan-based pharmaceutical company. The early time for the call had been her suggestion. White-collar workers in Japan typically begin around 09:00, but it seemed that Kinoshita-san had developed the stereotypical North American habit of starting her working day early.

Just like Ozaki-san (see chapter 4), Kinoshita-san worked for Global Pharmaceuticals Inc., which was one of Japan’s top five pharmaceutical companies, producing proprietary and generic medicines, as well as vaccines. It had grown overseas both through acquisitions and also by building local subsidiaries from scratch. Its strategic vision was global, in that it had set its sights on expanding sales abroad and including more non-Japanese at all levels of its operations and management. The GPI home page (accessed on 1 May, 2015) claimed that its more than 30,000 employees already did business in over fifty countries. It had a need, then, for Japanese employees who were able to work effectively with non-Japanese colleagues and business partners. Despite all of this, it was still a fairly traditional Japanese
organisation, however. It supported the practice of lifetime employment in Japan, for instance: “[T]he company was very typical Japanese domestic company, so they hire a lot of people, a lot of graduates, and the graduates are usually staying in the same company for all their life” (13 April, 2015).

Kinoshita-san herself was uncertain of GPI’s rationale for sending her abroad in 2009 for her assignment. Regardless, she had her own reasons for being happy to go to work in the United States: “From the viewpoint of the company, I am not sure about that [the reasons for being expatriated], but I wanted to do this because I wanted to do something different and something new and I wanted that experience” (18 January, 2012). While she was in the U.S.A., Kinoshita-san saw her main role as being to provide specific technical skills. For her, reporting information back to Japan was a smaller part of the job: “Ninety percent of my job is very local, so I am just working here as one of the staff here, and about ten percent, I have some work as a liaison between East and West. And besides that, sometimes I have to transfer or I have to make things clear to Japan colleagues.” Along the way, of course, she learned new skills and knowledge that would likely benefit her organisation.

Shortly after getting the official news that she would be repatriated to Japan, Kinoshita-san was given a brief job description (“like three or four sentences”) for her revised role in Japan, which was back in her previous department. She had mixed feelings about returning to Japan: “I am happy, but also I am sad, too, because I enjoy working here and I enjoy the relationship with my boss here. It is very pleasant to work here, but also maybe it is a good time to change to new things or other expat.” She was also uncertain about the degree to which she would be able to build on her overseas experience: “I hope I can use my experience and my
knowledge I got here, but at this time point I am not sure.” As we will see shortly, she was right to be cautious. Regardless, Kinoshita-san was confident that it would be easy to slot back into life in her home country. It would surely be easier than it had been to move overseas: “I think returning to Japan is much easier because I know the department very well, and I know the Tokyo colleagues” (18 January, 2012).

However, as Schütz (1945: 376) so eloquently cautions, going ‘home’ is harder than it might seem: “In the beginning it is not only the homeland that shows to the homecomer an unaccustomed face. The homecomer appears equally strange to those who expect him, and the thick air about him will keep him unknown.” This is in line with research detailing the challenges faced by business repatriates (for instance, Liu, 2005). Kinoshita-san told me soon after her return, “[I]t is already more than two months I have spent here, but it is not clear about my role and responsibility” (6 April, 2012). Her brief job description was not particularly helpful, then. She went on to say, “Probably in Japan it is very common situation, but after I came back from U.S., it is very difficult to handle ... I am very uncomfortable because someone [else] did something which is my role.” In addition to struggling with the intangible fuzziness of boundaries between colleagues’ roles, Kinoshita-san also found it difficult to re-adapt to the physical workspace in Japan: “I don’t have any office here – that’s very open space – and I already have a desk, and it is not surprising for me, but now it is pretty hard to work ... [It’s] more harder for me to concentrate [on] something [than] before I experienced the work in U.S.”

Overall, Kinoshita-san found it difficult to re-adapt in the first six months after repatriation. In June, she wrote, “I do not enjoy current position/job” (12 June, 2012), and two months later, she
told me, “Still I want to go back to U.S.” (2 August, 2012). She had been assigned to a new global project, but there were delays in its actual start date. The leader was based in the United States, and Kinoshita-san felt that she would have been able to get the project moving forward if she had also been there. In an attempt to improve the situation from Japan, she spoke to her former boss in the U.S. to ask for her help. In the meantime, as she waited for the project to kick off, Kinoshita-san found a useful way to keep herself busy: she started to study clinical development for oncology, since “I think it’s a big trend in all the pharmaceutical industry” (2 August, 2012). She had previously written to me, “I know what I need to learn, and [I] have time and chance to do it now” (12 June, 2012). She also worked informally to connect peers in North America and Japan. For instance, U.S.-based colleagues on a different project team had asked for her help in putting them in touch with certain people in Japan, so she continued to function as a bridge between the Japanese and U.S. organisations. By contrast, though, only one Japanese had so far asked for help, occasioning Kinoshita-san to remark, “I feel U.S. colleagues know how to use me.” In fact, “[W]hen people from U.S. … come to our office, they always say hello to me, so they always come to my desk, so I always think I am an expat now” (2 August, 2012). This last statement is striking. Kinoshita-san felt like an expatriate in what was supposed to be her ‘home’ organisation. In Schütz’s terms, perhaps, a thick air was keeping her unknown to local colleagues.

This sense of alienation was often in the background during our discussions, and exacerbating the situation was Kinoshita-san’s feeling that she was not being given enough opportunity to use what she had learned in the United States. There was an apparent lack of structured career management for repatriates within her company, she said, or at least within her department. According to
commercial research into repatriation, this is not uncommon in multinational corporations. Eighty-six percent of HR and global mobility professionals in a 2015 survey of 143 MNCs said that there was no link between formal repatriation strategy on the one hand and career management and retention on the other (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2015). Despite the challenges, though, Kinoshita-san was determined to carve out a role for herself. While she said that she had no idea where her career in the company would take her, she still made an effort to use her time to satisfy her interests and meet her company’s future needs. Ten months after her return, the organisation had changed because of staff turnover in the U.S.A., and so she was getting busier: “I got three new assignments for new projects and situation is changing ... So people got new assignment or change assignments, but we don’t know what will happen or is that a good thing to change assignments to people. So it is just beginning” (28 November, 2012).

Almost a year after her return, Kinoshita-san was busier and apparently more content than she had been in the early months of her repatriation, then. She had found ways of applying her skills: “I and three other people formed small teams and we have several projects and several things to do together, and my previous projects still belongs to me, so I am responsible for them” (28 November, 2012). The big global project that had been stalled since her return to Japan had finally picked up some momentum, too. She went to the United States in March, 2013, and was due to go again later in May. The projects required her to take part in one or two teleconferences a week late at night with overseas counterparts, and she dialled in from home. On the whole, she told me that she felt more engaged in her work, in particular because of the global projects. She was happy to be able to apply some of the skills that
she had gained while on assignment in the U.S.A., such as those related to project design. She was also benefitting from her network of colleagues in the United States: “In November, I was just study to be involved in that [major] project, so I didn’t know what will happen, but in January or February we, the team, had a face-to-face meeting in Japan, so I attended that meeting and I became to know the people there and, of course, the people knows me, and there are a lot of people from the U.S. [location disguised] office, so I know their culture and they understand, I understand their culture, so it’s easier for me ... So it’s also easier for them to communicate with me because I know their cultures. So after that, my involvement is more active, became more active, and they, sometimes it’s too many, but they send me other meaning, and they involve me in a lot of activities, so now I can enjoy such situation in that project also” (8 May, 2013).

Was this positive change because managers at her company had carefully planned her participation in those projects? She felt not: “I think now we can say it’s logical, but it was not well designed when I came back here” (8 May, 2013). Those managers, it seems, had used the human resources at their disposal in an ad hoc manner, which is what we have seen in the other cases in this study: “[W]e don’t have job description for each position in this company, and I think when my previous boss assigned that new task for me, I think, at that time I was an expat and just came back here, so it was easy for him to assign me because I didn’t have exact job, fixed job at that time ... I think it’s very Japanese way.” This analysis is interesting, as it suggests that GPI’s human resource management improvisation was effective in some ways, even if it did contribute to Kinoshita-san’s sense of unease. While she had defined an own unofficial role for herself, she was unhappy that others did not always acknowledge it: “I think to
keep my motivation here, I think I need something, and I created that job description, not written, but in my mind I made one, but because it’s, because it’s not official or not endorsed, sometimes it is very hard because it is not written and not defined, so when I talked, when I talk with other people, it is difficult to make them understand” (17 April, 2014). This lack of official recognition appears to have been the main reason for her discontent. In retrospect, she was losing hope of advancement, although I didn’t frame it in those terms at the time.

To summarise the case so far, Kinoshita-san perceived a lack of organisational support for both her role and for her career from GPI, although she felt that her colleagues in the United States were helping her as much as they could. In my research diary, I speculated that perhaps the attitude of her peers in the U.S.A. compensated for the poverty of overt support in Japan, with the result that she had made some sort of functional peace with her unsatisfactory role and so had stayed with GPI. Or was it that she felt she had no viable option other than to remain because of a lack of options outside her company (resulting in continuance commitment)? Perhaps the apparent lack of support in Japan was actually just a lack of explicit explanation from her supervisor and other managers, and at some level, she knew this.

Although her feeling of unease hadn’t gone away, Kinoshita-san gave the impression of being less unsettled. This was in keeping with a study done by Olds and Howe-Walsh (2014: 16): “It would seem that there may be some evidence that if repatriates have patience, their international experience might be rewarded.” As evidence of this, we have already seen that by November, 2012, Kinoshita-san was involved in three new projects, all of which were oncology related. When I asked her if this had been good fortune or
good planning on her behalf, since she had taken it upon herself to study about tumours and their treatment, she explained it was the latter: “[It’s] good planning because the other project ... didn’t work well. Still it doesn’t. It doesn’t show any progress ... So I said to my boss, ‘Probably I should be involved more oncology project, to support that project’” (28 November, 2012). She had demonstrably exercised some control over her work by anticipating the organisation’s potential needs, and her fuller contribution within the company had had a predictably positive influence on her feelings towards her company and her job: “I can prepare agenda or meetings so ... It’s a kind of, I can control the team for some part so it’s more exciting for me and I know, now I know U.S. culture and Japanese culture, so probably I judged what is a good way to go” (8 May, 2013).

In late 2013, Kinoshita-san was also mentoring three younger colleagues, an increase from two people earlier in the year, in order to help them function effectively in project teams. She was particularly enjoying working with one of the three, a woman who was involved in a global project for the first time: “I feel I can use my experience, or experience in U.S., and I know those people who are working with her in that project, so I can help her very easily. And also I think she needs to, she needs to expand her view, not only from Japan but also think about U.S. or think about E.U., and I’m enjoying to think together with her about those projects” (19 November, 2013). However, the lack of formal recognition for what she was doing was the sticking point. Kinoshita-san was concerned, for instance, that although she was supporting these younger people with advice, she was not writing their performance reviews. As she said, “I’m not their manager and I, my role, my role is not defined as a manager, but still my boss requests me to oversee those people or develop those people, so it is not fair to me
and for them. The formal report line is to my boss, but they need to discuss with me before, and I think they are OK, or sometimes they enjoy it, so I’m relieved, but it is not fair to them.”

She conceded that her own boss was likely giving her on-the-job management experience to stretch and develop her skills, but even so, Kinoshita-san felt it was unreasonable. For one thing, she had not been given any management training, so it was not clear to her what the organisation expected of her in that respect. Nonetheless, she was gaining knowledge, skills, and experience from her job: “I’m learning a lot of things and also I’m learning a lot of also regulatory things, or cultural difference, as I said, or the technology things … I can improve myself from those activities and I’m trying to find those things and I’m trying to get those opportunities for myself” (19 November, 2013). This helped her to deal with the dissonance that came from the lack of clarity about her role: “I still feel uncertainty being in this company, or company itself, and so still, to think, when I think about to change my job or change the companies, what should I do? What is, what still should I improve to get better position or more, better position for myself? It’s just for, from my viewpoint, not everyone’s, but what I want do and what, if I want to do something or if I want to take such a role, what still needs to be involved? And those, the things what I can learn from these kind of job and what should I improve, and to be stay healthy, mentally healthy, I think I need to think those things, otherwise it’s just busy and just not clear job description and just not, just not clear role in this company, because I am taking a kind of manager’s role but that’s not job description and I’m not a manager. So I, I need to be positive, I need to think those two things.” If she couldn’t further her external career with GPI, then she could at least improve her internal career. Watching from the sidelines, I felt that she was successfully
making her peace with the situation. We already know that I was wrong, and that her lack of hope, coupled with an attractive outside opportunity, triggered her move at the end of 2014.

In the meantime, though, Kinoshita-san reported that she had a fourth person to mentor. She talked about this group as being her own team: “I have four people working with me, so we can do much better things and much more things just doing by myself, so it’s a little good thing. So in that sense, I like to take a management position to do something I want” (17 April, 2014). When I asked if she felt the company had given her support to create this situation, she differentiated between freedom (which she had) and support (which she did not have): “[T]he vice president thought about the team structure, so he made a lot of small teams, but some teams doesn’t work very well because there are not real team leaders there, so it’s just a group of people who are doing the same job or something like that. But, as you know, I like working with a team, so I structure that team, I think, so it’s, it’s not official, but I think the team, now as a team is recognised by the people in other department, I think ... I don’t think I got support but I feel I got some freedom to do that.” Because of job rotation amongst managers, her boss had changed, and her new manager had no expertise in her area. She did not see this as a problem, as it protected her freedom of action. When she needed to get specialist input, she used her informal network in Japan and overseas: “I talked with my colleagues here and some people have some different skills and they, they knew, they know something better than myself, so I can get some advice from them. And also I talked with colleagues in U.S., and of course they are very expert in this area, so it’s much easier to get some knowledge or support about my job.” Her next goal, she said, was to use the freedom afforded to her to try to form a collaborative relationship between colleagues in
Japan and people in the U.S.A. whom she knew from her time over there.

Kinoshita-san also took comfort from the number of people in her department in Japan who had overseas experience, as she felt that she could relate to them: “[T]he number of ex-expats like me is growing in my department. So there are probably five, five people or ex-expats and two new people are now participating in U.S., so the communication become easier because we knew each other in person” (28 November, 2012). Out of a total of twenty-five people, five already had experience as expatriates, two more were currently in the U.S. as expatriates, and “there is some other people who studied in the U.S. as a researcher, so probably three or four people experienced that.” Nonetheless, “our department is better than other departments, but still there is no managers, female managers.” In her opinion, this lack of women in management positions ran throughout the company: “Recently, I saw some figures about female positions in this company and that figures say that about associate director [line manager] or more, at that level ... about four or five percent is women, so it means ninety-five percent men. And about management position, there is only one point four percent and the average [of the total number of employees] of this company is like forty percent is women.” GPI needed more women in management because “it could make some diversity or variety of thought. And also I think ... for younger generation we need some model that women can create her career and step up the ladder in this company.”

This concern about a gender bias had surfaced in our very first face-to-face interview, when Kinoshita-san told me that she felt no normative commitment to GPI. This was despite her acknowledging the value of her overseas assignment: “[L]ooking back, it was a
great opportunity and more than I expected” (6 April, 2012). She summarised her feeling in stark terms: “I cannot fully trust this company.” In her eyes, there was a clear gender gap that entailed a lack of career opportunities: “I think there are still differences between men and women, how to treat them. The company says ‘No, there is no difference,’ but still I think there are and the board members are already male and also I am not sure, is there, are [there] any female vice presidents. Probably no ... [I]t is hard for me to imagine like a career ladder in this company.” This is certainly consistent with studies on gender inequality in the Japanese workplace. Matanle, Ishiguro, and McCann (2014: 473), for instance, note that female “advancement into core and senior positions has hardly progressed,” while Estévez-Abe (2013: 97) claims that the Japanese government “has never whole-heartedly endorsed gender equality.” However, we will see in the discussion chapter that another female repatriate, Uchiyama-san, told me that her gender had not adversely affected her career at all.

While Kinoshita-san held out little hope of being promoted, she nevertheless tried to put a positive spin on things: “I am not at manager’s position, but still I can lead small team” (28 November, 2012). After all, she had been in charge of a team while in the U.S.A., and she wanted now to build on that experience. She told her boss and the department head about her desire: “They don’t refuse and they said they understood, but nothing happened: means they didn’t listen to me.” Despite the contrast with the official opportunities afforded to her male GPI colleague, Ozaki-san (chapter 4), Kinoshita-san’s treatment was not only attributable to her gender, though. It likely had a strong connection with the unfavourable ratio of potential team leaders to projects back in the parent organisation in Japan. Not everyone could advance. As she herself later said, “Japanese organisation, probably I said it before,
but it’s very flat, so there’s one group leader and there’re 20 people under, reporting to him, so it’s very flat organisation, but working in the U.S. is very different, so I had one direct reports and reporting other person ... I felt I learned more about managing people or reporting to people and make connections and how to develop myself, so I prefer, I preferred such style. So I experienced that and after returning back to Japan, I feel a little bit uncomfortable with that. Even I was a team leader and I worked with four people but I, I tried to help like people’s development, but it’s not official and I, I don’t have enough power to do those things, so, so experiencing the U.S. somehow made me decide to move” (14 November, 2014). Kinoshita-san felt that her interests were not being properly represented and served by her managers. As we saw in the literature review, this feeling of being looked after has been operationalised as perceived organisational career support, or PCS (Van der Heijden, Van Engen, and Paauwe: 2009). Kinoshita-san admitted to talking to headhunters to find out what her options might be.

Indeed, Kinoshita-san had been open to offers from other employers even before repatriating, as long as any potential new job would allow her to use what she had learned from being overseas: “I think I got a really good experience here, so I will do the different things, my assignment will be different, so I am now, I am not sure I can use my skill set, so if there is any other way that I can use my skill set, I will definitely do that” (18 January, 2012). In April of the same year, she explained that she had discussed her interest in working in a different company with a fellow repatriate, but had not yet followed up on that interest. By August, she had been more active, but “I found for my area it’s more difficult to find ... Actually, I got some job description from other companies but it’s mainly, it’s like a global company, not Japanese company, so
they are looking for Japanese people that could do hands-on the like clinical monitoring or marketing ... I found for my area it’s more difficult [to] find a job” (2 August, 2012). Because Kinoshita-san wanted to stay in the same technical field, she saw limited opportunities outside GPI, then. This did not mean that she had stopped looking, though. If there were a position in her field with what she called a “global company,” she said she would certainly consider it.

Kinoshita-san mentioned again in April, 2014, that she had recently met with recruitment consultants. She said that she was not alone amongst her repatriate colleagues in considering an outside career move: “I think the number is increasing because, like ten years ago or more than that, like ten, fifteen years ago, the expats are more senior people because we need to develop the structure, structure or organisation there, so senior people went there. So they moved and they came back to Japan, they got some higher position and keep working here. But recently, like including me, the expat is more younger generation, so it is easier for us to seek other new opportunities. And we tend to think about that because it’s like a, the system is very different and had to get accustomed to Japan system again. So I’m not sure about the percentage, but recently, probably at least one out of ten, no, more than that, two out of ten did left the company” (17 April, 2014). This had been over a period of five years after repatriation, she said. If correct, twenty percent over five years is not a high level of turnover by Western standards (see the literature review), but it still surprised me. She later explained, “[Expats] experience the life in the U.S. or in the E.U. Somehow we changed, and we are very, we became very open to other opportunities and think about, think about my, our career” (14 November, 2014). Of the repatriates introduced in this study, perhaps she had changed the most.
We have seen that the absence of clarity about the scope of Kinoshita-san’s work and her responsibility towards her younger colleagues was a constant theme in the interviews. She wanted far more structure in the Japanese organisation, saying, “[I]t is very hard to just being in mixed, very mixed condition” (19 November, 2013). Her experience in the United States with clearer job descriptions and personal accountability had apparently thrown into sharp relief the relative lack of transparency (Gelfland, Lim, and Laver, 2004) back in Japan. Another issue was the gap between her influence as an expatriate (e.g., leading a team) and what she could achieve as a repatriate: “I have felt that my organisation is not clear, my organisation has been unclear for all the time but, but, first a couple months I didn’t think about that and then little bit thinking and now, and I, sometimes I’m, I got some feeling about I have no voice in this organisation.” This is a good example of the tension that Kinoshita-san experienced. She said she had no voice, she perceived a lack of support, and yet over time, she was afforded the freedom to shape and take unofficial opportunities in her company. Finally, it was not enough for her, however.

When we talked about what she felt needed to change in the Japanese organisation, it is no surprise that Kinoshita-san zeroed in on the fuzziness around reporting lines and job roles: “I think at least, at least the reporting line should be clearly organised because now it’s very, not complicated, but it’s, it doesn’t work now and I don’t think it is very efficient way for the company, just people are doing things individually or depends on who is doing, so I think it should be changed” (17 April, 2014). The fact that the head of R&D was a North American made change more likely: “I think now that research and development head is in, is U.S. people … and also the head of development is also U.S. person now, so
they’re, well, if we have several town-hall meetings in the company and when they come to Japan, their message is always like empowerment or needs of leadership … Those people, those people have, had some idea and they can trigger some changes in Japanese organisation. But there are lot of, lot of senior Japanese people or elder Japanese people here, so that change is not so dramatic. But I think it is, it could be changed because of that, top management is U.S. people and they are very open and clear to deliver their messages.” She spoke after she had quit about what should still be changed in GPI: “[M]y previous position, there is already one group leader and he has more than twenty direct reports, so the organisation was very flat, but I don’t think it works very well, and I would change it more, more small teams or team leaders, and also develop those leaders for management skills, and I would, probably I looking for reason about discrimination of women against the men” (13 April, 2015). She had not tried to change the system itself while with GPI, though. Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect that she would, even if she had identified other repatriates with similar misgivings. However, she had certainly tried to improve the particular situation around her by helping colleagues in the U.S.A. and Japan.

Although Kinoshita-san could see pressure building within GPI, she felt that the existing job rotation system for managers inhibited change and risk-taking: “[B]ecause of those job rotations, the managers will keep their positions like for a few years, so I don’t know, some are really want to improve the organisation or not” (17 April, 2014). This was another reason why Kinoshita-san felt it was important and necessary for her to have the freedom to initiate contacts and communication across different parts of the global organisation: “I think in my department, I think there are, there should be more collaboration with other teams and there, what I
want the more is like a interest to other teams to expand, like area, or to improve our performance. But I think, I think that my management of my team is recognised, but it is, it is not how can I say, it is not good to say something about other team or something about other team’s job. But very, but what I intended, not I am complaining those jobs, but I think more collaboration or doing that, doing jobs on the same page. The role is different, but still we need some understand each other, so I think like ah, I hope to be allowed to those, to improve interaction with those people, our department.” She considered that her unsupported efforts were insufficient, however, and rued the lack of backing from managers.

When she reflected on her career in April, 2014, she talked about her ability to affect it, and in doing so, suggested how working overseas had had an impact on how she perceived work in an organisation: “[R]ecently, I think I can, I can plan it by myself because, like as the team structure or some other things, I think I, so, but I’m not sure it’s because of my age or because I went to U.S., I don’t know, but before, before going to the U.S., I think it’s, like my career is like random or just changed by someone. But after I went to U.S., I, I start thinking career rather more deeply. One thing is other people around me always think about that. It’s same thing with me ... But some people are just floating and some people are, like their job or role are what still change to that every year, but they can manage those things. But I think that’s one way to do the things in Japanese companies, that the company say something, they just do that and after, a year later they will get some another thing in the same, even in the department, but they get some other responsibility and they do that. That’s one way, I think, but I’m not good at those things” (17 April, 2014). Kohonen (2005) points out that working overseas may have a significant impact on someone’s self-perception and career hopes, since an
international assignment is a major life event (Guzzo, Noonan, and Elron, 1994), and as noted above, that seems to be the case with Kinoshita-san. She was no longer comfortable with career drift (Kato and Suzuki, 2006); she wanted to get off the raft taking her down river and choose which mountain to climb (Okubo, 2013). With the benefit of hindsight, she had reached a tipping point, although I could not see it at the time.

Six months later, Kinoshita-san was working for a competitor to GPI. Her new employer, Jackson Pharmaceuticals [also a pseudonym], was headquartered in the United States. Ironically, though, Kinoshita-san found herself using less English there than she had at GPI. Jackson Pharmaceuticals Japan had started out as a joint venture approximately thirty-five years previously, with the Japanese partner being bought out about twenty years later. In 2014, JPJ had around 2,000 employees, and it proudly reported that it was ranked in Japan’s top twenty best employers. (All data were taken from the group’s global and Japanese websites on 15 November, 2014.) Kinoshita-san wanted both the role and the title of manager, and she was given them at JPJ: “Ninety percent of the reason [for my move] is my development. So I need, I like to have more experience in my area, and also I like to develop my managing skills, and this position I thought I can do both, and so far I am satisfied with that, with my decision” (14 November, 2014).

Furthermore, Kinoshita-san was given a written job description. Not only was her present role clearly described, but also Jackson Pharmaceuticals internally posted online information about new opportunities throughout the global group. The requirements for each of those jobs were stated explicitly, which meant that Kinoshita-san now felt that she better understood how personnel decisions were being made. That had most certainly not been the
case at GPI. (All of the repatriates in this study made similar comments about the opacity of promotion and rotation criteria in their respective companies.) For the time being, however, Kinoshita-san was focussed on domestic challenges: “I’m thinking to stay in Japan because this company, or Japanese organisation, is not so big and I see a lot of opportunities to improve the organisation or improve the company ... and also there is a, headquarter is very big, so like, people working in Japan organisation, I’m not sure, but people in this organisation is, don’t, don’t say their opinion enough to global organisation” (14 November, 2014). Compared to GPI, JPJ had fewer than five times the number of people working in R&D. She now had a voice that was heard, a formal management role, a clear job description, and a better understanding of how the HRM system worked. Women were in management roles, too: “[O]bviously, there are a lot of, lot of women at leadership position in the current company.” There was explicit career planning: “I have a regular one-on-one meeting with my manager ... [O]f course, we talk about usual works or projects, but also we discuss my talent development or training, and ‘What is your next step or career ladder?’ So those things, I didn’t have such a conversation in my previous company” (13 April, 2015).

Clearly, Kinoshita-san was happy to be able to talk with senior people about her role in her new company. When she spoke with me about her career in our final interview, she sounded more ambitious for herself than previously: “[M]y area is clinical pharmacology, so I like to have higher position in that area, but now, I like to have higher position because, because we can see more things and can do more higher develop works, but I, I see some other opportunities than clinical pharmacology area now, so it’s, it’s interesting” (13 April, 2015). She had been stimulated by
her move. However, it hadn’t been easy to leave people behind at GPI: “[M]y team members, like that four people working with me, and two people are very young and I have helped them to develop themselves, so I talked with them individually and both two young people cried, so it was very sad situation” (14 November, 2014). Furthermore, “I miss my colleagues who worked with me because I had a lot of, lot of good relationships with those people. Sometimes I feel frustrated now because there is no relationship with people, so it takes me more time to complete something.” This is something that mid-career hires in Japan have reported to me off the record over the years: by moving companies, they leave behind their douki (colleagues who joined at the same time), as well as their sempai (senior people), kouhai (junior coworkers), and former bosses, which means that they have weaker networks in their new organisations. On the other hand, they are less encumbered by the demands of those personal relationships.

Looking back over Kinoshita-san’s case, she was unclear of GPI’s reasons for sending her to the U.S.A., and she was unhappy with the poorly defined role given to her upon her return. To deal with this situation, she took the initiative to learn about a new therapeutic area, and she unofficially mentored and managed a growing team of younger colleagues. She felt a strong need for work-related personal development, and this is consistent with the literature (Jokinen, Brewster, and Suutari, 2008; Biemann and Andresen, 2010). Even so, she finally lost patience with her Japanese employer and the lack of transparent structure. This exasperation was compounded by what she perceived as institutionalised gender discrimination. Afterwards, she expressed some regret over her decision to leave, however: “I felt there was a ceiling there [at GPI], but probably, I was wrong. I was wrong. I could create more higher, higher or increase my role, but I couldn’t
see, or I didn’t know how to do that … So after my decision, I talked with some senior people and then they are, they are very nice, so if I had talked with them before, probably, hmm, I cannot say I didn’t leave, but my attitude or my action was a little bit different if I have talked with those people before” (14 November, 2014).

Atkinson (2006: 242) notes that a breach of affective trust between employee and employer is “likely to lead to strong emotions of violation and a consequently more transactional contract.” More open and explicit communication between Kinoshita-san and her managers, particularly those in relatively senior positions, would very likely have eased this situation. All of this is consistent with Olds and Howe-Walsh: “To avoid incongruent expectations in the psychological contract, communication is vital as it plays a key role to avoid misunderstandings … leading to a reduced likelihood of resignation” (2014: 13). Kinoshita-san herself said, “[A] lot of my colleagues, previous expats, said those, those people return to the same position before, before they work, and they are so frustrated because they, they including me, don’t understand how company, how, how we can contribute the company and how company want to, wants to use us or how, how we can help the company. We cannot see and we were just told, ‘Do the same things,’ so, so it doesn’t, it doesn’t make sense … I, not only myself but also some, my colleagues, couldn’t hear we could be a key person for globalisation” (14 November, 2014). While her colleague Ozaki-san was given the chance to develop his career and his skills within GPI, Kinoshita-san was convinced that she needed to go to another company to find that recognition and support.

Ironically, Kinoshita-san told me after her move that she suspected GPI actually did have some kind of strategy and plan for
repatriates like her. Somewhat poignantly, she told me, “I think it’s [just] a breakdown of communication” (13 April, 2015). Given the considerable investment of time and money on both sides, it seemed a terrible waste that her career at GPI should end due to a lack of trust that, to my mind, had as much to do with poor communication as it did with gender. However, this is not to deny that gender complicated the situation and amplified her feelings of mistrust. Regardless, there is an important lesson here for companies dealing with repatriates.
10. DISCUSSION

“Although Life-time Employment died again and again on the headline of media, however, the essence of Japanese-style management has yet to change.”

(Yashiro, 2013)

The six case studies have thrown up various points for discussion. In this chapter, then, I will discuss my findings by comparing and contrasting the data. This will lead me to the conclusion of the thesis, which echoes Yashiro’s (2013) comment above: lifetime employment survives in large Japanese companies, and their internal labour markets continue to allow them to assign staff in a flexible way to meet the demands of a changing business environment. Furthermore, continuity of employment provides repatriates with new opportunities for self-development. To support this conclusion, I will begin with an overview of the six case studies, and then look at similarities on the one hand, and differences on the other. I will move on to examine connections between my data and the literature, before looking in a little more detail at the rationale for ad hoc career management. I will finish with an examination of Kato and Suzuki’s (2006) concept of career hope (to which I will return in the conclusion chapter) and a final summary of the discussion. First, then, let me review what we have learned from the case studies.

10.1 RECAP

If we compare and contrast the cases, Kinoshita-san’s decision to leave her company marks her out from the other repatriates, all of whom stayed with their employers. This was despite there being obvious triggers to quit for at least two more of them: Ozaki-san with the voluntary redundancy opportunity and calls from headhunters, and Okayama-san with the unwelcome change in job
and his desire to do his “favourite thing.” This then begs the question of why there were such different outcomes. Each person’s case is different, of course, and with such a small sample size it is not possible to draw any hard-and-fast conclusions about the general population of repatriates. Nonetheless, given the granularity of the interview data, it is worthwhile exploring areas such as gender, trust, promotion, appetite for change, rationality, and career hope to try to understand similarities and differences. Before getting to that, though, I will preview what is to come in the pages that follow.

I will argue here that the Japanese approach to human resource management characterised by commentators such as Dore (1973, 1986, 2000) and Jacoby, Nason, and Saguchi (2005b) has sustained. Company-specific labour unions (kigyou kumiai), a seniority system (nenkou joretsu) for wages and promotion, and lifetime employment (shuushin koyou) are often identified as the pillars of that approach (for instance, Kawaguchi and Ueno, 2013). Evidence from the case studies touches on the latter two of these, and in particular, upon the assumptions of lifetime employment held by the repatriates. Simply put, the career job is not dead in Japan, despite predictions to the contrary. From the repatriates’ point of view, they had all been through potentially unsettling, significant, and life-changing experiences. They had been exposed to overseas colleagues and business ideas, as well as foreign lifestyles. Yet, these people still wanted to stay with their companies, and they showed qualified support for the existing HRM system.

One explanation for this situation is a status quo bias that kept them where they were (see Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988, for a definition). Another possibility is that they had nowhere else to go
(continuance commitment), or at least, nowhere attractive to go, although Kinoshita-san’s case suggests this is not accurate. A third way to understand the outcome is to see that they were given new opportunities and organisational support in an implicit, fuzzy, and ad hoc manner that was effective for all but one of them. Overall, they were rational to stay and to support current HRM practices. When they struggled to reacclimate or to perceive value in what they were doing, they made an effort to find their own meaning. The overseas assignments from which they had returned were fond memories, rather than some kind of distracting “cognitive noise” (Neill and Westberry, 1987). They had readjusted to working life in Japan, although given their fresh perspectives, they felt some reservations about how things functioned. Nonetheless, they did not try to act alone or in concert with other repatriates to pull HRM practices down a path of convergence with Anglo-American business norms. Despite a sense of solidarity, they did not band together with other repatriates in their companies to demand more transparency in HR decisions, nor did they now refuse assignments unless they were given explicit reasons and job descriptions. Rather, to differing degrees they were critical supporters of the status quo. Their continued employment, and that of other repatriates, will increase the likelihood that Japanese companies are equipped to handle on their own terms the significant demands of globalisation, as well as to deal with diversity of gender and nationality.

A key reason for this optimism is that despite their tacit overall support, the people in this study were not noticeably conservative. Indeed, they explicitly talked of their hopes for calibration of their respective HRM systems. Nonetheless, they all had long-term organisational careers, including even Kinoshita-san, who found a more suitable company in which to continue and finish hers. It
remained in their interests to support the system and ensure that it survived, even as it adapted. They continued to benefit from the security that the status quo offered them as core employees. There was little certainty when it came to their career paths, it is true, but there was certainty about the privilege of having stable careers in their respective organisations. In this, as well as in their initial decisions to sign on for lifetime employment, they demonstrated that they were rational and self-interested (which is one of the themes mentioned at the start of this chapter).

At this point, I should clarify once again that claiming lifetime employment in Japan has survived is not intended to be revelatory. Rather, it is confirmatory. After all, the point has been consistently argued by commentators such as Matanle (2006), Van Maanen (2006), and Keizer (2009). Saito and Vaszkun (2010: 601) summarise this neatly: “[W]e can conclude that LTE [lifetime employment] practices persist in Japan today, but the relevant population is certainly more restricted than it was 20 years ago … [C]ompanies seek constantly to make their employment system more flexible using an increasing proportion of non-regular workers in operations. However, they continue to provide stable employment as well.” We have seen that other academics and practitioners dispute this (for instance, Watanabe, 2003; Kato and Suzuki, 2006), but the perceptions of the repatriates here provide empirical evidence for the overall “stability and resilience under pressure in the Japanese management system” identified by Matanle and Matsui (2011). That management system is currently searching for ways to evolve without making wholesale changes which harm the interests of its key stakeholders, and they are supported in this by the repatriates. This conclusion is reinforced later in these pages by additional firsthand data from interviews with four HR managers (Kimura-san; Kuroda-san; Daicho-san and
Takahashi-san), two other repatriates (Uchiyama-san and Takeichi-san), one Japanese man who left his company mid-career (Okada-san), and a Briton (Ms King) with over thirty years of experience in Northern European multinationals. (As with the six repatriates, each individual’s and company’s name has been disguised.)

Turning to detailed data from this study, table 4 below compares and contrasts the cases. Each point is then explained more thoroughly in the pages that follow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities between the Cases</th>
<th>Differences between the Cases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Lack of detailed and accurate job description for assignments</td>
<td>A. Intention to leave employer for self-employment or another company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Uncertainty about process for deciding promotions and assignments</td>
<td>B. Degree of trust in the organisation (including HR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lack of explicit discussion about career path</td>
<td>C. Sense of alienation from the organisation and absence of hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Feeling that overseas assignment helped career to some degree</td>
<td>D. Desire for change in Japanese organisation (particularly HRM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Personal focus on opportunities to learn and develop</td>
<td>E. Boost for network, especially with senior people</td>
</tr>
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<td>6. Development of useful skills while working overseas</td>
<td>F. Feeling of affinity for, and debt towards, employer</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Enjoyment of overseas assignment (both living and working)</td>
<td>G. Amount of overseas exposure in post-repatriation role</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Impact on Japanese colleagues in Japan</td>
<td>H. Surprising post-repatriation assignment</td>
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<td>9. Feeling of kinship with other repatriates</td>
<td>I. Degree of impact on Japanese organisation</td>
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Table 4: Similarities and Differences between Cases

I will begin my explanation by working through the points of similarity (1 to 9), and then follow up by doing the same with the differences (A to I). The table shows that the repatriates had little...
explicit information from their companies about their careers and HR decisions. Most trusted that their employers had their best interests at heart, although Kinoshita-san consistently talked of a sense of alienation and concerns about gender discrimination. Many concurred that some degree of change to their companies’ HR systems was necessary and desirable, but they were not unanimous in this. All said they would willingly work overseas again, and they shared the feeling that their overseas assignments had been worthwhile for them and for their organisations. The degree and type of impact that they reported having on their companies varied from person to person, but they did all perceive some positive effect.

Table 4 has summarised many of the study’s findings. I will go into more detail in sections 10.2 and 10.3 below. To give the study participants’ opinions additional context, and to provide a broader and more nuanced perspective for this study, I will include data from interviews with the four HR managers, two other repatriates, one Japanese job-hopper, and the British administrator mentioned earlier. In the interests of brevity, I have kept their respective biographical particulars to a minimum.

10.2 SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE CASES

Turning to point 1 in the table, the lack of detailed written job descriptions for the returning expatriates was a common point between all six of the cases. This is not surprising, given that “Japanese employees have a tendency to think that the scope of their jobs is broad and ambiguous” (Ueda, 2011: 2). This applies to employers, too. Ozaki-san, for instance, commented, “[T]here was no so-called ‘job description’ in Tokyo office, in Japanese company” (29 August, 2011). Hirata-san told me that in his career to date, “I have never received the written job descriptions” (27 July, 2012).
Okayama-san said about his job in Germany, “I just received the oral explanation for my new assignment. There are no document about, for, job description” (25 April, 2012), and the same applied when he returned to Japan. Uchiyama-san, a female manager at Nishimura Chemicals (where Hiroshima-san also worked), spent twenty months tasked with identifying useful new technologies for her company in the United States. At the start, she found her overseas assignment challenging because she was not given explicit objectives: “[T]he boss didn’t give me clear assignment. What he said was, ‘Look for something what you want to do and report anything what you want to do’” (21 October, 2011). When she came back to Japan, she faced a similar situation, so Uchiyama-san created her own job by negotiating with both her immediate supervisor and the director of her research facility. The result was an oral, rather than written, job description.

What is more, none of the participants had been given a picture of his career path. This connects with both point 2 and point 3 in the table. Formal planning was conspicuously absent, despite the likelihood that since these people had all been chosen for expatriation in the first place, they had been identified as high potential employees. Takeda-san said of his division manager and the HR department, “I think they may consider my career development, but I don’t know clearly ... I cannot control my career and my position by myself. Basically, I need to, I need to follow company’s guide and company’s direction” (20 May, 2013). Hiroshima-san, the man who was taken aback to be suddenly moved to Nishimura’s pharmaceuticals business, said, “[I]n companies like our company, there could be lots of surprises in your career plans” (14 June, 2013). Kimura-san, an HR manager working for a leading automotive company (identified here as Kyoujinsha), made a comparable comment about his own
experiences as a repatriate: “When I was told by big boss to say, ‘OK, change your job’ suddenly, I was very surprised, of course, but many times I had a similar situation: called by my boss and he said to me, ‘OK, to, from next month you go this way, you go this way,’ and I follow and I enjoy ... I trust [the system and my bosses]” (7 August, 2014).

Meanwhile, Daicho-san, an HR manager at a specialty chemicals producer with over 7,000 employees in twenty countries (Higashi Chemicals), commented that his company’s repatriates “think of overseas experience as one step towards skill up and higher position, fuzzily” (e-mail on 23 January, 2013). Retention was not a problem. His company had eighty-five expatriates outside Japan at that time, and approximately twenty people were repatriated and expatriated each year. Where they worked after returning to Japan depended on their business units. Daicho-san and his colleague, Takahashi-san, estimated that only two repatriates had quit the company in the previous five years. Both of those people had worked in the United States. The first was a man in his mid-thirties who had moved to an established non-Japanese multinational in the same industry a year after returning. The second was a man in his late-forties who had quit two years after repatriating; Daicho-san and Takahashi-san were unsure what he had done next. The other 100 or so had stayed with Higashi Chemicals. Apparently, then, fuzziness was not a major problem for repatriates at Higashi Chemicals.

Daicho-san summed up the lack of repatriate mobility: “I assume many people think of it as virtue that working for only one company” (e-mail on 18 June, 2012). Similarly, Ono (2010: 16) contends that “Japan has the lowest job mobility among the OECD states, with the lowest share of workers with tenure under 1 year,
and the highest share of workers with tenure over 20 years.” Takeichi-san, an expatriate at Higashi Chemicals in the U.S.A., told me that while looking for another job in Japan was a possibility, “I don’t think I will really take that option” (29 October, 2012). Two years later, he was working for Higashi in Vietnam. His time in the United States had benefitted his organisational career, and he was happy to stay with his company.

However, mapping out the future was important for the job-changer, Okada-san. Although he was not a repatriate, I interviewed him because he had moved from one large Japanese organisation to another. His first employer, Hakuta, was a respected company with around 3,000 employees and sales of almost $3.5 billion. Its flagship product was a household brand. Okada-san’s new employer, Yamasawa Pharmaceuticals, had almost 20,000 employees, with sales of nearly $10.5 billion. In addition to its greater scale, its global network was more developed than Hakuta’s. Okada-san commented with some pride that Yamasawa had a comparable HRM system to industry giants such as Pfizer and Novartis, where some of his friends worked, and that there was much more career planning than he had previously experienced. He liked it: “I can see my future, of course, five and ten years because Yamasawa have the system to think about that. So we have to get interview with my boss and in that, during the meeting I want to, I have to say my view, my view five years or ten years later. So that means our company, our company know what I want to do in the future” (8 August, 2013). His previous employer (Hakuta) was more traditional, and similar to the companies for which most of his university and high school friends worked. At Hakuta, “although people have very, very nice knowledge or very good experience, sometimes they can’t promote because of bad relationship with top management ... But on the other hand, ...
Yamasawa pay money for work performance. That’s why relationship is not so big problem ... I think more important, how can I say, people relationship, it’s more important [at Hakuta] than work performance.” He made a related point a little later: “Yamasawa human resource policy is ... if very young employee can work very well, they have a chance to get lot of money than elderly people. But Hakuta completely different ... Hakuta only pay employee’s age.”

Later in this chapter, I will touch on the differing degrees to which working overseas gave the repatriates in this study an opportunity to establish and deepen such relationships with key managers in their respective companies. In the meantime, all of the repatriates felt that their international assignments had directly or indirectly boosted their careers. This is the fourth point in the table. Improved English ability was perhaps the most prosaic of the benefits they perceived. By being better able to speak and understand that language, they had greater access to information, projects, and people. Takeda-san, for instance, told me that his company had sent him abroad to improve his knowledge in two areas: “So firstly, company want to get ... want me to learn manufacturing practice and manufacturing technology and so on; secondly to learn, to improving my English, to communicate effectively each other, English speakers” (20 May, 2013). A year later he said, “I need to continue to learn English during work, to attend the company’s course and to try to discuss in conference, in meeting, and so on” (28 April, 2014).

Ozaki-san, too, pointed to the importance of English language skills and to the gains that he had made in that area, before going on to explain that he had also acquired general communication skills: “I learned a lot. Many things. First of all, communication.
Interpersonal skills. English technical, of course. In terms of interpersonal skills, in order to make a good communication with people from different cultures, English itself is not all, [just] one of the tools, so if you want to make a good relationship with a non-Japanese, let us say, you can use any skill set like body language or how to contact the people, or face, or way of saying something, like that. That is not English, technical English skill set. It is more soft skill set, I think. That is in some cases more important than English itself” (29 August, 2011). Hirata-san revealed his quiet ambition when talking about what he had gained. His overseas experience had given him skills, knowledge, and opportunity. He envisaged going abroad again, this time to manage a business: “I want to be president or managing director of a company, even it’s a small company, or if I have the such position I have to consider the management of that, of the company. It will be a good opportunity to, for next role ... If we stay in Japan, we will manage only sales organisation or only some[thing] smaller” (19 April, 2014).

The benefits accruing to the repatriates as a result of their international assignments also relate to the fifth and sixth points in the table, namely the repatriates’ shared focus on learning and development and the acquisition of useful skills. They were keen to acquire new abilities and knowledge, in addition to broader personal networks, and felt that these profited themselves and their employers. Kinoshita-san, for instance, even during her darkest days at GPl back in Japan, was pleased that she was able to facilitate communication between her former American colleagues and their Japanese counterparts: “[T]hey ask those questions to me and I could find some people to answer those questions” (2 August, 2012). Significantly, though, her Japanese colleagues did not seek her help in the same way, which
contributed to the sense of alienation and frustration that were apparent in her case. I will return to this later.

As well as learning from the experience, the six repatriates all reported enjoying their time abroad (the seventh point in table 4), and were willing to be expatriated again in the future. This was not just because of the potentially interesting work opportunities mentioned by Hirata-san above, but also because of the lifestyle. Indeed, they initially had mixed feelings about returning to Japan. This was also true of Takeichi-san, who was sent at the age of twenty-eight by Higashi Chemicals to the United States to gain experience as a sales representative. He spent six months there as a trainee. Prior to his return to Japan, he told me in a telephone interview, “I don’t really wear a tie and suit here, and I go to the office by car, and also people can speak very frankly here in United States, but when I go back to Japan, I have to wear a tie and jacket every day, including summer. I have to get in very crowded trains” (29 October, 2012). His brief time in the U.S.A. changed the way that he thought about commuting, everyday communication, and formality. The impact on the repatriates of working abroad was apparent in comments such as his.

Given this, it is not surprising that the returning expatriates made an impression on their colleagues back in Japan. This is the penultimate point in the table, point 8. For instance, Ozaki-san memorably compared himself to popular fictional heavyweight boxer Rocky Balboa, who trained new champions. He was also given responsibility for instigating formal changes in the ways in which global project teams, which of course included Japanese members, were organised and evaluated. Meanwhile, colleagues sought advice from Hirata-san because of his overseas sales experience: “[T]he people around me knows that, my experience, so
they consult, consult me” (30 November, 2013). Kinoshita-san helped younger colleagues navigate global projects in her unofficial role as their mentor-manager, which contrasts with Tahir and Azhar’s (2013) finding that female repatriates typically have no chance to use the knowledge gained as an expatriate. (Uchiyama-san, the female repatriate at Nishimura Chemicals introduced above, also talked about being able to use her learning to help those around her.) Hiroshima-san taught Japanese coworkers how to write more effectively in English. Takeda-san acted as a bridge between overseas colleagues in manufacturing and his own compatriots in quality assurance. Okayama-san contributed his overseas experience to discussions with Japanese coworkers: “I comment that my experience, case by case” (15 January, 2013). All six of the repatriates featured in my case studies, then, were able to support their peers in Japan through their experience abroad.

In addition, each repatriate felt a connection with colleagues who had also lived and worked abroad, which is point 9 from the table. We have already seen that Kinoshita-san found she shared a common outlook and vocabulary with other repatriates around her. Hiroshima-san talked about how he and other repatriates had a collective focus and purpose: “[T]here are some people who have overseas experience in our company, and before I go to United States, I have chances to talk with those people, but although I know, like, some knowledge, I feel that there’s some distance between those colleagues and myself because what I know is by knowledge, not by actual experience. So now I have some experience of my own, so I can talk, so I, how do I say, from same standpoint or same point of view, so I think that’s quite help me communicate better” (14 June, 2013). Similarly, Ozaki-san said of a Japanese coworker who had worked in the United States, “[W]e have a similar thinking” (15 January, 2013). There was the
potential for these people to band together in some way to act in concert to force change within their companies. Nonetheless, we have seen that this is not what happened. Rather, they used their knowledge and skills to support the status quo.

10.3 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CASES
Those are the main parallels between the cases. Naturally, there are differences of type and degree between the repatriates’ experiences, too. The most glaring of these is intention to quit, which is point A in table 4. One of the repatriates, of course, not only had the intention, but also acted on it when she moved to a competitor within three years of her return. We saw earlier in the literature review (Bonache, 2005; Lee and Liu, 2006) that repatriates are reported to be more likely to leave their companies than their domestic colleagues. The main reason given for this is that returning ‘home’ is typically more problematic than anticipated (Sussman, 2002, refers to “repatriation distress”), and there is support for this in my own study. As an example, Hirata-san mentioned, “Yes, I felt again too many drinking opportunities and go home at night, go home very late” (15 December, 2012). He reported spending much less time with colleagues after hours in the United States, and had forgotten how common it was to do that in his company back in Japan.

In addition, the literature shows that people who have remained in the domestic organisation may feel that repatriating colleagues now have confused perspectives and loyalties. Furthermore, there is a perception that expatriation sometimes damages careers, rather than enhancing them (Bolino, 2007). While expatriates are away, they are out of sight and out of mind, and when they come back, there is often no appropriate position for them. Compounding this, domestic peers and managers may show
limited interest in repatriates’ time abroad, and little desire to emulate them, or even to learn from them. The result is that repatriates face frustration and isolation. Although that was apparently true for Kinoshita-san in my study, the other five repatriates all found their Japanese colleagues to be interested in their experiences, as well as grateful for their help and advice about working with overseas partners. In fact, even Kinoshita-san was encouraged to pass on her knowledge to the younger colleagues whom she unofficially managed, and those younger people were happy to learn from her.

An additional reason for repatriates to quit is said to be that they find better career opportunities elsewhere (see Lazarova and Tarique, 2005). After all, repatriates have acquired valuable skills and knowledge, and if their present employers cannot give them positions which they feel are commensurate with those skills and that knowledge, they are likely to leave. Yet, five of the six repatriates in my study did not make such a determination. This can be explained in a number of ways. As I have already stated, and as I will argue again later in this chapter, Japanese repatriates typically make the rational decision to stay because they perceive credible opportunity within their respective companies. They have invested in their organisational careers, and they have hope for the future. Given the characteristic Japanese context of assumptions about lifetime employment, as well as the typically relational ties between employer and employee, there is also reduced pressure for short-term career progress. Ozaki-san and Takeda-san talked about the possibility of moving to other companies, and we saw that Okayama-san dreamed of starting his own business, yet none of these repatriates reported any real effort to follow up with concrete action.
This leads us to point B in the table, which is the degree of trust that the study participants had in their organisations. Trust is one of the key themes I identified at the very start of this chapter. While it is very difficult to adequately define the term (Blomqvist, 1997), I have taken it to refer to the feeling that another party will look out for one’s interests, and a reliance on that actually happening. Based on this working definition, Kinoshita-san had very little trust in her company allowing her to formally manage a team, which was the career step she most wanted to take. She attributed this to unequal opportunity based on her gender (another of the themes). Lack of opportunity is said to be reflected in low female expatriate numbers. Tungli and Peiperl (2009: 165), for instance, find in their study of Japanese, German, British, and U.S. companies that “the overall female expatriation rate was 7%, with the U.S. companies reporting 11% and the Japanese reporting 0.4%.” Daicho-san and Takahashi-san, the HR managers at Higashi Chemicals, told me that as of the end of 2012, they had only ever had one female expatriate, although she had gone on to become a director of the holding company. Only ten percent of Higashi employees were female, so women were rare in the organisation as a whole, and they were hugely under-represented in the expatriate population. However, Daicho-san and Takahashi-san explained that very few women at their company were interested in working overseas. From an outside perspective, this is somewhat surprising, since female Japanese are said to be more suited to global roles than their male counterparts, and more interested in doing that kind of work (see Itou, 2015). This, then, could be presented as evidence of institutionalised gender inequality.

Kinoshita-san was certainly keen to go overseas and work on global projects, but believed that her gender limited future
opportunities within GPI, particularly when it came to promotion. She also told me that communication in Japan was a problem. This affected her relationships within the company and became the focus of her sense of alienation (point C in the table). Interestingly, however, she did not feel this way about her former colleagues in the United States: “U.S. people, they are helping me, and we had a lot of internal discussion also, and they are, they are very nice. So sometimes they just gave me a call or some set up a teleconference with me, and so they use very early morning time, so I think they are very nice. But in Japan, I couldn’t get enough support or enough advice, and I’m not sure about Japan organisation or my previous boss, what was his thought” (19 November, 2013). Lack of perceived support, poor communication, and her loss of career hope, are crucial to her story. While she was sure that her gender was immaterial for North American business people, she had the opposite feeling about their Japanese peers: “I don’t know, but average men don’t like that [women in management] because they can keep some power if they keep women away from their area” (28 November, 2012).

Looking specifically at the issues facing female repatriates, Scullion and Linehan (2002) highlight a lack of recognition for achievements while abroad, a paucity of suitable assignments back in their home organisations, a sense of having outgrown those organisations, issues with readjusting socially (both for themselves and their families), and also a perception of being passed over for promotion because they had been out of sight and out of mind. It could be argued that all but the readjustment issue applied in Kinoshita-san’s case; unlike other repatriates, for instance, she did not talk about making good connections with senior Japanese managers while overseas. However, the other female repatriate whom I interviewed experienced no such problems. Uchiyama-san saw no
gender bias at her company, Nishimura Chemicals, and trusted that it would look out for her interests. In this respect, she was very different from Kinoshita-san, and her faith was rewarded: she had been promoted just before going to the U.S.A. in 2009, and in 2014, she was sent by the chief technology officer of her company to the West Coast because her American husband was there. Her previous overseas assignment had given her the skills that she needed in her new role, and the CTO had told her that he hoped “to replace the current, the director of the ... office to me” (telephone interview on 4 March, 2015). Another promotion was likely just around the corner, then.

Moving on to point D in the table, the repatriates had different types and degrees of reservations about their companies’ HRM systems. Hiroshima-san, for instance, talked about the difficulty in refusing postings, even if they meant considerably longer daily commutes or working in a relatively alien function. This was echoed by Kimura-san, the HR manager at automotive giant Kyoujinsha: “[W]e have no right to refuse the job change, basically” (7 August, 2014), and is consistent with Mehri’s (2005) claims of coercion. We have already seen in Hiroshima-san’s case that he had started to build a house near his laboratory in a town seventy-five miles and ninety minutes away from Tokyo, only then to be transferred to the head office. It is reasonable to imagine that such treatment could encourage feelings of dissatisfaction. Indeed, a commercial survey reported only five percent of Japanese as being very satisfied with their current jobs, as opposed to eighteen percent of Chinese, twenty-four percent of Britons, thirty percent of Americans, and thirty-one percent of Indians (Randstad, 2014). Takeichi-san said after returning to Japan, for instance, that his on-the-job sales training in the United States “was very good for me, but the point is there is no, how can I say, relation between
this training and new job. That’s why I’m in difficult position” (11 December, 2012).

Based on these data, it appears as if Japanese as a whole are less positive about their jobs than their counterparts in other countries. The price that core employees pay for lifetime employment may be relatively high, then. There is another explanation for the gap, though, which is response bias. Japanese respondents have been found to be comparatively negative when answering surveys, and also to use the positive extreme of a scale relatively sparingly (Tellis and Chandrasekaran, 2010). In fact, they tend to select midpoints when asked about positive emotions (Lee, Jones, Mineyama, and Zhang, 2002). If we accept these cross-cultural findings, then the response bias goes some way towards explaining these data, since Japanese are relatively unlikely to say that they are very satisfied with their jobs. It is certainly my experience that Japanese are prone to saying that something is “futsuu” and then to translate that into English as “normal” or “as expected,” but what they often mean (when asked to describe their feelings further) is that they are actually quite positive. I put this to a Japanese friend who had been in North America for fifteen years, and I got the following response: “I don’t really agree the first part (comparatively negative) but agree about usage of extreme scale. Scale interpretation is very difficult I think. Futsuu is futsuu for Japanese, too, not particularly good or bad. At least our generation, we are trained to be same as others which is futsuu. And if you don’t have particular opinion, it’s in the middle of the scale. If we are happy, we probably mark 4 out of 5 not 3” (e-mail on 13 June, 2015). From my point of view, the telling comment is about being trained to be the same as others, as this makes it more likely that strong emotion will end up being squeezed into the middle of a scale.
An additional reservation with the HRM system raised by study participants related to their pensions. Ozaki-san, for instance, had been told that he would lose out financially if he quit because he had a company pension. This actually happened to Okada-san, the non-repatriate who changed employers. He told me that because he had left Hakuta after just eight years, he was refunded only thirty percent of the money that he had paid into the company pension. However, “I didn’t mind if Hakuta want the money ... [b]ecause my purpose, my purpose of transfer to company is not money, but possibility ... And of course, if I get, I promote to higher management area, I think I can recover that lost [money]” (8 August, 2013). He was thinking rationally, or at least rationalising his decision to move. Hope of career advancement (what he called “possibility”) was key to this. Clearly, the perceived benefit of working in a larger organisation (Yamasawa) with greater global reach and more career opportunities outweighed the cost of losing seventy percent of his pension payments. He also gave up his (admittedly limited) seniority within Hakuta, while putting his relationships with former colleagues at risk. For him, lifetime employment with Hakuta did not exert sufficient gravitational pull compared to the attraction of working for Yamasawa for the rest of his career. It was a rational career decision, in that he had carefully weighed the pros and cons.

Returning to the repatriates, another potential issue with respect to the existing HRM system was the gap between their responsibilities when working as an expatriate and those they took on when they returned to Japan. Overseas, they had worked in smaller organisations. Some had held higher positions, as reflected by their job titles. Uchiyama-san, the female manager at Nishimura, became vice president of R&D while in the United States, for instance. At Daicho-san’s specialty chemicals company, expatriates
were often given positions two or three steps above their rank at ‘home.’ When they returned, they usually went back to their original positions. Although it was likely that they would be in pole position for future overseas assignments, this was not communicated explicitly to them by HR and division managers because the future was unknowable. For the same reason, career paths were not explicitly mapped out, since “the business environment rapidly change and their organisation also changes … HR side needs not these clear career plan because we have to suit the business environment” (interview with Daicho-san and Takahashi-san on 11 January, 2013). For these HR managers, it was important that the company could respond flexibly to changes in the business environment, which necessitated maintaining fuzziness about individuals’ career paths. On the other hand, we have seen that this did not sit comfortably with some of the repatriates, including GPI’s Ozaki-san: “I think I expected the company, or senior management level, to show what the possibility we have in the career development when I, after the experience in the U.S. or Europe and then go back to Japan, what is the opportunity here to build a career in our company? That should be told by management level, but it may not be the case [that they do explain this]” (29 August, 2011).

In response to questions about how their careers were actually managed, the repatriates usually talked about senior people in their departments, divisions, and companies. More than the HR department, they saw these managers as being the ad hoc decision-makers about assignments, and as a result, careers. Some of the repatriates felt that they had built a stronger personal network with executives in their companies while abroad, but this was not universal (see point E in the table). Kinoshita-san, for example, did not mention having that access and level of
communication, and this seemed to play a part in her decision to leave, as she lost hope that things would shift in her favour. As we have seen from her case, though, when senior managers found out that she had tendered her resignation, they were shocked. Perhaps if she had enjoyed closer relationships with these executives, she would not have felt the need to quit. Meanwhile, Hirata-san told me that he would have had the same opportunities to make relationships with senior managers even if he had not worked abroad. Nonetheless, he mentioned that while overseas, “I had the chance to meet with our company president twice in five years and our other division manager ... It’s also drinking, and it was good that, when he came to U.S. and he personally asked me to have a drink in a hotel lobby or something, and I could talk with him what I was thinking or what is currently the U.S. company’s situation” (15 December, 2012).

Continuing this point about intra-company networks, Takeda-san mentioned that “during my assignment in Ireland I can, I could talk to senior management at international level, because international vice president was based in Ireland” (15 August, 2012). Hiroshima-san commented, “I had the chance to introduce some technologies to senior people in some of our companies, and another reason is that since we had office in United States, we had the chance to have some visitors from Japan, which is usually senior people” (5 December, 2012). Three years into his overseas assignment, Ozaki-san was asked to take over project management responsibilities for a high stakes project: “I got involvement with a lot of chief team members, including Japanese colleagues, of course U.S. colleagues, and European colleagues and Asian colleagues, to put together the team effort to have a good plan and then get approval” (29 August, 2011). Their overseas assignments had given these particular repatriates access to influential people
in the Japanese organisation, then, which most likely strengthened their career prospects and affective bonds with their companies.

Related to this, then, is the concept of commitment (point F). We saw in the literature review that Meyer and Allen’s (1991) three-component model includes affective and normative commitment. Okayama-san felt normative commitment towards his company: “Two, three years I want to contribute our company, thanks, to express my thanks to my company for staying Germany” (4 June, 2013). Takeda-san also mentioned “some debt” to his employer because of the opportunity he had been given to work overseas (15 August, 2012). There was even stronger evidence of affective commitment amongst the repatriates. Ozaki-san, for instance, commented, “I learned a lot from my old partner Andrei. Still I learn a lot from him, but now I am very comfortable and also I’m excited to work with him, Mike [the head of global R&D] ... So that is why I don’t think I look for another opportunity outside our company at this moment” (22 May, 2012). Hiroshima-san, too, displayed affective commitment: “I would like to say that my loyalty to the company is mostly due to the people in the company” (email on 17 December, 2012). Uchiyama-san, the woman who moved back to the United States, also singled out specific individuals: “I feel loyalty to ex-director of my lab and his boss who sent me to US. Also, I want them think it was not a wrong choice/decision that they sent me to US and make them smile. Having said that, it makes me face with the dilemma. I think I need to make myself more independent, skillful and challenging to make them feel that way as I mentioned above, but it wouldn’t happen or could happen but slowly if I continue to work for my company. On the other hand, if I leave my company to change myself to make them feel happier, I might not be able to return something to them” (email on 27 January, 2012).
An obvious way in which the repatriates could contribute to their companies was in guiding global projects and connecting the HQ to overseas subsidiaries. This takes us to point G in the table: amount of overseas exposure in post-repatriation role. As we have seen, this differed from repatriate to repatriate. Ozaki-san, for instance, continued to handle global tasks. In fact, he increasingly took on roles and responsibilities that spanned different parts of GPI’s organisation. At the other end of the scale from Ozaki-san was Okayama-san, who came back to a new business development position similar to the one he had enjoyed in Germany, but with a Japan focus. He was then transferred to a product testing job that was entirely domestic. After eight months in this new role, “I used to the, my work, but still not so interesting for me” (3 December, 2014). This was partly because there was no chance to use English or the knowledge he had gained in Germany, and partly due to the fact that he could no longer meet people from other organisations. Takeichi-san, the sales representative for Higashi Chemicals who went as a trainee to the United States, was also disappointed in his job when he returned: “I’m in very tough situation right now because what I learned in United States and what my boss, my new boss, expect me is very different, but my boss think I can do whatever my boss expect” (11 December, 2012). However, Takeichi-san’s subsequent job in the HQ working under another repatriate, and then his transfer as a sales manager to Vietnam, made up for his dissatisfaction in the short-term.

Like Takeichi-san, we have also seen that some of the repatriates were blindsided by their assignments in Japan. Others, though, knew what to expect, despite not having received written job descriptions. This is point H in the table. Hirata-san was one of those who was somewhat shocked, as he was put into an accounting and finance role, in spite of his sales background and
stated desire to work on improving the division’s global supply chain. Hiroshima-san and Okayama-san were taken aback by their second assignments post repatriation, and while Hiroshima-san was happy with the outcome, Okayama-san was disappointed with the domestic, internal focus of his new job. Ozaki-san was given three different positions in his first three years back, but each appeared to be a progression in his career, so he was broadly positive. Kinoshita-san and Takeda-san, on the other hand, came back to familiar roles that they had anticipated being given. Takeda-san saw this as a step towards becoming head of the quality function, and was content. Kinoshita-san, on the other hand, quit because she had too little hope of formal career advancement. In short, she did not trust that her employer would protect her interests.

We have seen from the literature that employers often expect knowledge and skill gains from their repatriates, some of which influence other employees. Point I in the table refers to the impact that the repatriates felt they had on their home organisations after returning, then. This is another area in which their experiences varied. Kinoshita-san told me that she had almost no sway, although she still acknowledged, “[I]n my level, we understand what the organisation is doing or what organisation is thinking. In that way, so I think, not, not active, active participation, but we can support” (17 April, 2014). Takeda-san was more upbeat, talking about his ability now to connect the quality function in Japan with manufacturing elsewhere in the world: “I know manufacturing site people, so I can share organisation at manufacturing site. So it is easier to get a correct contact person. Yeah, it is easier to get correct contact person, and I can share with my colleagues, even though the item is not related to my job directly” (14 December, 2012). Hiroshima-san, too, was pleased to
be able to help Japanese colleagues communicate with overseas counterparts based on what he had learned from working closely with non-Japanese. Uchiyama-san, the female repatriate from Nishimura Chemicals, was more ambitious: she had set her sights on changing the way that her organisation assessed new technologies and partnerships, and was disappointed that she could not fully achieve her goal. She attributed this failure to the company being overly conservative and risk averse. It seems that the repatriates had limited but real impact, and their feelings about this differed. Overall, they were not behaving as change agents, but rather as supporters of the people around them.

10.4 CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE DATA AND LITERATURE
This concludes the point-by-point discussion of the contents of table 4. Hereafter, I will tie this information together with the literature and my own observations. A good place to start with that is reconfirmation of the rationale and motivation behind sending employees abroad and then bringing them back. The benefits for companies are well documented in the literature. They include the acquisition of new skills, information, and personal networks by expatriates that improve communication and increase organisations’ global effectiveness. As Takeichi-san, the young repatriate from Higashi Chemicals told me, “Higashi starting this [six-month overseas work experience] programme so that young people can learn how to do business overseas … Our company just started globalisation … Actually, the company doesn’t know how we do, how do we do, so what I was told is to find [by] myself, find things what I have to say [and do while overseas] by myself” (29 October, 2012). Such ad hoc decisions and tactical responses were intended to enable and improve the process of globalisation. Takeichi-san told me in another interview that he had ideas for combining aspects of the Japanese and American approaches to
his area of sales: “Japanese people are very, how can I say, general, like, ‘I knows this and this and this,’ but the amount of knowledge is not that much, [not] more than American specialised sales guy has, so I want to mix it up” (12 April, 2013). If he were successful, that would likely be very valuable for his company. As Yeaton and Hall (2008: 78) note, “Companies need to learn how to tap into the knowledge and benefits that overseas assignments offer not only to their employees, but to the company itself.” Takeichi-san was not alone in looking for ways of helping his company. In fact, we have already seen that Hiroshima-san, Ozaki-san, and Hirata-san were amongst those who found specific ways of doing exactly that.

Yeaton and Hall’s (2008) admonishment that companies need to ensure that they profit together with their expatriates makes it clear that there are benefits that accrue to employees who go overseas. As we saw, the literature argues that one reason employees agree to expatriate assignments is the boost that international experience might give to both their internal and external careers (Tung, 1998; Stahl and Cerdin, 2004). In other words, expatriates expect that they will be able to get a leg up in their current company, or in another one, and also that they will find some personal meaning in their work as a result of their broader experience. There is an assumption of self-directed and boundaryless careers in this analysis. However, since such careers make less sense in Japan than in North America or Europe, is there a different explanation of Japanese employees’ agreement to go outside Japan? One such explanation was mentioned earlier by Kimura-san, the HR manager at Kyoujinsha, and Hiroshima-san, one of the case study repatriates: refusal is not a real option. A less menacing perspective was given by Daicho-san and Takahashi-san, the HR managers from Higashi Chemicals. While abroad, expatriates have the opportunity to be involved more widely in
company management, and they enjoy the freedom to make decisions relatively quickly. They can cultivate new friends and business acquaintances. Furthermore, they are more likely than their domestic peers to be chosen for future international assignments, and they may even get a career leg-up back in Japan: “I think in the future these experience is perhaps a good advantage ... Many, our kind of general manager position, they are repatriate” (11 January, 2013). What is more, repatriates can satisfy their desire for skills development and knowledge acquisition. In other words, there is a potential boost for both external and internal careers. The development aspect appeared to be more important for the repatriates in this study, though.

Living and working overseas also gave them a chance to look at themselves and their companies in a fresh light. Uchiyama-san, for instance, enjoyed the speed of business in the United States, and the characteristic directness of the communication. In contrast, “I notice that I can be irritated more easily [now in Japan] when I can’t get a direct answer. Western business people usually give me direct answers” (21 October, 2011). She also commented, “I had an opportunity to work in US where people seem to have concrete goal so I started to consider what I really want to do and what I can concentrate to do in my life?” (e-mail on 31 October, 2011). While there is the potential for learning and organisational improvement as a result of a constructively critical eye, there is also a risk to employers that expatriated staff come back negatively judgemental and unsupportive of the status quo. However, we have seen very limited evidence of such disruption in these cases, as the participants appeared to want to use their experiences for the benefit of their companies.
As an example of this general support, none of the case study participants, not even Kinoshita-san, challenged the benefits of lifetime employment. In this, they were rational. Their acceptance of the practice could also be seen to be the result of collectivist tendencies in Japanese people and Japanese culture, since “collectivists are willing to sacrifice their individual benefits for their own group because they believe that the group will finally be able to give them more benefit than what they would get by pursuing their self-interest” (Ueda, 2011: 3). In the context of careers, collectivist people would likely consider that they were better served by taking a long-term view and staying with their employers, rather than looking for advantage in the short-term and moving from one company to another.

Another argument is that Japanese core employees are underpaid at the start of an organisational career and overpaid at the end (Yamaguchi, 2004). Keizer (2010: 36) points to “firm-specific skills and delayed compensation” as reasons to remain in a long-term employment relationship. Based on their investment, the Japanese repatriates in this study likely felt the benefit of remaining where they were. Indeed, it was probably no coincidence that Okada-san quit Hakuta after eight years, rather than after eighteen – he was less vested financially and in terms of seniority. Meanwhile, when Kinoshita-san left her company post-repatriation, it was to go to an organisation headquartered overseas. At a gaishikei, there would be a different employment and remuneration logic, so she felt that she stood to gain from her move.

As for the likelihood of structural change, we have seen that opinions on this were mixed. Many of the repatriates talked about the need for some level of adjustment, but as noted above, none of them supported ending the practice of lifetime employment.
Takeichi-san, the sales trainee, advocated change to HR evaluations: “We cannot do same way, I mean Japanese unique traditional evaluation system. And if we started to new style, new evaluation method, I think it would work in more than ten years, after ten years, or five years, after long years after, so we should start now. Like our company doesn’t have a system that people get lower rank no matter how he failed. Once we passed exam, we can stay forever in this level, in this salary position” (14 January, 2014). Uchiyama-san became a mother during this project, and for her, changes in the way her company handled non-Japanese employees and working mothers were important: “I think we have to change our, you know, HR system or, you know, for women who have kids, and if they want to make the, you know, female promote in a higher position, they have to change system or nothing would work … I think the workers in a company is changing, not only, you know, Japanese, but a foreigner, from our point of view, foreigners. If so, everybody has different reason or different background … If so, the system should be changed” (29 April, 2014). Furthermore, she felt that the organisation had a chance to learn from her situation: “I think it’s good for me and good for my company because I’m learning things, but they learn something from me, too, because they have to handle this kind of situation person.” This neatly encapsulates the mutual benefit to be gained by employers and repatriates.

Predictably, Okada-san, was apparently unequivocal in both predicting and supporting big changes. After all, he had moved to a larger company with more opportunities, a stronger global network, and a culture that focussed more strongly on individual performance. He predicted that other Japanese companies would implement new HRM initiatives: “I think typical, typical Japanese style will be disappear … because nowadays Japan is globalised
and younger people live in that Japan” (8 August, 2013). He saw younger people accessing more information in English from the outside world, for example, and the Japanese government encouraging greater efforts to learn English (McCurry, 2011). He later added a historical perspective: “Japan-based company kept skilled employees by a sense of safety of perpetual employment before. That system was supported by high economic growth in Japan. However, nowadays, economic system in Japan has been changing and became tight competition society. In this situation, Japan based companies have to change their HR system and I believe that is clear break from past obsolete Japanese HR history to give employees new kinds of big motivation” (e-mail on 1 September, 2013). Nonetheless, having boldly forecast the end of Japanese HR practices, he then commented, “I think Japanese typical style will be disappeared, but a little bit remain. So fundamentally, it maybe remain, but maybe it becomes more flexible.” It seemed, then, that his opinion was not so different from those of the repatriates in the study. At the very least, he was more ambivalent and confused than he realised.

The overall acceptance of the existing system that we saw from the repatriates was mirrored by the four HR managers with whom I spoke. Kimura-san from the automotive company, for instance, did not question lifetime employment in Japan, although he did add, “We have some doubt with long-time, long-term employment in outside of Japan … [but] even the U.S., we had many, many people who're working in Kyoujinsha many years” (7 August, 2014). Kuroda-san, who was HR department head at the Japanese subsidiary of a U.S.-headquartered medical instruments and pharmaceuticals group (Palink Instruments), had similar comments to make. He had begun his career with a British bank in Tokyo, and had since worked for a further five companies over
thirty years. He was unsure whether or not wholesale change in key Japanese HRM practices was desirable for employees and companies, and he doubted it would really occur: “I think the younger ones lately also becoming more, not domestically oriented, but more, become conservative, I should say. So they prefer big company … I think they tend to see the big company is more safer place to live … Japanese company, some of the time, cases, it’s like a family environment, which is comfortable for them to be there” (12 April, 2013). This brings to mind Dore’s (1989) community-type firm, and is also consistent with something that Uchiyama-san said about her reason for joining Nishimura in the first place: “I just wanted to do something to, for big company and my, you know, whole life would be stable and I could get a salary kind of forever until I retired …” (6 March, 2013). Kuroda-san talked about the fringe benefits that large companies in Japan often offered employees, too, such as subsidised housing, as well as the ‘glue’ of company-specific pensions, and mentioned that it was hard for a foreign-capital firm (gaishikei) to lure people away from those companies. The implication here is that Japanese who enjoy the benefits of lifetime employment are rational to support it.

Kuroda-san himself was unusual, as he had started his career with a gaishikei (the British bank mentioned earlier). Even at that time, he was thinking about his next move: “I didn’t think I would stay until sixty” (12 April, 2013). Having said that, though, “It would have been nice to stay one company and build up my career. That’s one way of doing it, and that would have, I don’t know, that would have been easier rather than moving here and there, but I mean, I am OK with what I am right now.” He viewed his career path as being atypical, but at the same time, he also saw some increase in the degree of labour mobility in Japan because of corporate acquisitions and broader structural changes. All in all, though,
“Japanese people are still loyal to their company and also probably feel more comfortable staying the same kind of environment.” He then qualified his earlier observation about the changing labour market by commenting, “[T]he market itself is not as much as U.S. or Europe for people to move around.” He was in favour of some kind of pay-for-performance approach in Japanese companies, and he predicted it would become more commonplace: “I would say a company will ask for more results from all those employees and a pay-for-performance kind of culture will be more common in the future, so I would say that will speed up or facilitate the trend going that direction. I don’t know which is good or not. That’s a different story.”

Kuroda-san went on to explain that his current employer, which had its global headquarters in the United States, used the same HRM system in Japan as it did in other territories. As this surprised me, I pressed him further: “I mean, actually, you know, the objective setting and things are the same, but the application’s a bit different ... So the bonus system we employ is the traditional Japanese bonus system, so pay out two times a year, and say like five months is a regular standard payment” (12 April, 2013). All in all, he concluded that the North American and Japanese remuneration systems were actually very different, since the Japanese system did not differentiate much between the best and worst performers. His comments painted a confused and authentic picture of stasis and change, similarity and difference.

Meanwhile, Kuroda-san was critical of what he had seen of repatriation processes in Japan: “Japanese companies not as good as other foreign company ... I think it’s getting better, but still, you know, just send them outside and bring them back in and let them do and see how they develop” (12 April, 2013). As evidence of this,
he spoke of a friend of his father’s, a man whom Kuroda-san had met when the former was an expatriate in the United States. While the expatriate had flourished overseas, “I had a chance to meet [him again] ... and my first impression with him is that I ... I felt he was shrinking ... But that's what Japanese company do to employees, which was really sad ... [H]e looked two size smaller.” Kuroda-san’s metaphor of shrinking is certainly striking. I have not found much support in my fieldwork for his stark portrayal of repatriation diminishing people, but I certainly agree that there is a strong element of do-and-see in Japanese HRM, as illustrated in the case studies. Hirata-san was unexpectedly put into to an accounting and finance position; Ozaki-san was given a new position each year for the first three years after his return; Kinoshita-san found she needed to make interesting work for herself as she waited for a project to begin; Okayama-san was moved from a role he relished to one he found boring; and Hiroshima-san was sent to a group company in a new (to him) industry. More logically, perhaps, Takeda-san was given a larger role in quality assurance upon his return. Seen from a longer range point of view, though, Hirata-san’s management experience was being rounded out; Ozaki-san was put into ever bigger roles that built on his skills; Kinoshita-san was given the freedom to mentor and informally manage younger colleagues; Okayama-san had the chance to work as a ‘connector’ in Japan; and Hiroshima-san was excited by his brand new challenge.

Seen in this light, the “let them do and see how they develop” approach mentioned by Kuroda-san appears to be functional, both for individuals and their companies. Uchiyama-san, for instance, said, “I now have something that few researcher in Nishimura Chemicals have. I just want them leverage my skill. I have heard a good word, ‘SME,’ subject matter expert. I believe I can use my skill
as SME when I work with some other members and it can speed up commercialization of new chemicals” (e-mail on 28 January, 2012). Only Kinoshita-san’s story challenges this assertion that the improvised approach was practical and functional, since she chose to move to a company that formally recognised her management role, rather than staying at GPI, which did not. The lack of formal planning was damaging in her case, as it led to an absence of hope.

10.5 RATIONAL AD HOC (FUZZY) CAREER MANAGEMENT

It is apparent from my research that ad hoc career management is a key part of traditional Japanese HRM. This approach is evident in the stories of the repatriates and the comments of the various HR managers. The Japanese companies glimpsed in this study are able to be reactive in their approach to regular employees’ careers because of mutual assumptions of lifetime employment that underpin the relationship. It is certainly possible to argue that if a company wants to retain talent in a system that features relatively high levels of labour mobility (for instance, the United States: see Borghans and Golsteyn, 2010), then it needs to paint a clear and attractive picture of possible career progression, using this both as an incentive for performance and as ‘glue’ to stick the individual to the organisation (at least for as long as the organisation deems that beneficial). On the other hand, if an employee is likely to stay with his company for his entire career, then his company has less need to create an explicit career plan in advance. Rather, the company has the luxury of assigning jobs according to its own evolving needs. This is a feature of Japanese culture, and there is much in Japanese literature and Buddhist teaching that speaks of the changing, evanescent nature of existence. The cherry blossom (sakura) season each spring in Japan is an annual reminder of this. During that period, Japanese celebrate the fragile and impermanent beauty of the flowers that bloom and fall over a
period of about two weeks around the start of April, sitting under cherry trees drinking and eating and viewing the blossoms. As Kuroda-san, the HR manager at Palink Instruments, pointed out, “[T]he world we are living, or life we are living ... it's ever changing” (12 April, 2013). The HRM and career management approaches described here are realistic and rational responses to that perceived reality, and they are made possible by the logic of lifetime employment and internal labour markets.

In order to get the perspective of a practitioner outside Japan, I asked a Briton (Ms King) for her reaction to the case studies. She had worked for over thirty years as an administrator for several multinational companies based in Northern Europe. Her conclusion after reading the cases was that the ad hoc Japanese approach made sense in its own context: “What I find interesting is the role HR seem to play in these companies, which compared with companies I have worked for is not that important or all encompassing. It’s almost as though HR rubber stamp senior managers’ decisions and occasionally identify someone for a particular role. There is no succession planning, no formal career development, no strategic recruitment. Take Jensen Worldwide [identity disguised] ... There was a huge HR industry ... to deal with expats and repats (things have changed now with nationals taking more senior roles). They also had a fast track scheme for graduates ... but that finally fell flat on its face come the mid 2000s as there weren’t the appropriate positions into which these high flyers could be slotted. So you could argue the fuzzy logic approach is more realistic and efficient: after all, why spend millions on grooming people for high positions when those positions are not available?” (e-mail on 15 August, 2014). I concur. This research has shown that there is an argument to be made for maintaining current praxes in Japan.
However, Takeichi-san’s local colleagues in the United States were reportedly shocked by what he told them of his trainee mission in their company, since they had very different expectations about role clarity, job rotation, and career paths: “They were surprised because my company didn’t give me any direction before I came, I went to United States, so whenever I said them I have to find what I do in this six-month training, they surprised: ‘Why your company didn’t do anything to you?!’ And also to move different division in company made them surprised. Those American think they lost their career till then [if they move to another division]” (11 December, 2012). When Takeichi-san was later assigned to work in Vietnam, the reason he gave for that decision provides us with a clear example of the ad hoc human resource management to which I have referred throughout this thesis: “[W]e established our new plant in Vietnam last year … [I]n Japan, actually, there are many people who knows this industry [identity disguised] much more than me but they don’t really like to go to work overseas, so that’s, I’m the, I am the oldest guy who want to work abroad … so that’s why company thought I’m the best … [T]he company wants send somebody who joined that training system to go to overseas for long term, like me, five years, so to, for company that I go to, I went to United States and go to Vietnam is the same, same plan in the big, big [scheme of things]” (14 January, 2014). For Takeichi-san to be given this new challenge, it was necessary for more senior people to indicate that they were not interested in going abroad, and then for him to declare the opposite. When he started to work in Vietnam, he had to draw on all of his experience, as there were many challenges, but “compared with working in Japan, there are lot to do and I can make decision by myself. It is very fun to me and good to my experience while big responsibility on me” (e-mail on 27 June, 2014). In other words, he was being given a chance to build on what he had learned in the United States.
Chance plays a significant role in Japanese repatriate careers, then, but this does not deny the long-term rationality of Japanese core employees when it comes to supporting the existing HRM system. We saw Beck and Beck (1994) argue in the literature review that although Japanese are renowned for their loyalty, with lifetime employment as a striking example of this quality, ‘loyalty’ is actually a different concept in Japan than it is in Western cultures. The word has a very strong emotional nuance in the West, while in Japan, it combines both emotional and rational elements. This means that Japanese employees are not blind to their own interests: “To understand the history of employment in Japan, then, it is essential to allow an analytical framework wherein an executive’s career is not merely an economic arrangement nor an emotional commitment, but an agreement that involves the offering of almost every aspect of the employee’s life—economic productivity inextricably intermingled with emotional fealty—to the company” (1994: 28). In the short-term, there may be inexplicable or unwelcome assignments imposed on Japanese lifetime employees, but over the long run, their interests will be served. Since change is inevitable, it makes sense to insur against unfavourable change by becoming part of an organisation that can provide some structure and protection from life’s vicissitudes. Such a determination displays personal agency and rational choice, although not in the way conceptualised in the North American and European literature on careers.

In line with this consideration of rational interests, my study lends support to the contention that international assignees gain significant skills by working overseas (Oddou, Osland, and Blakeney, 2009; Jokinen, 2010). On the other hand, I have found little in Japan to corroborate the literature on protean and boundaryless careers. Broadly speaking, that literature describes
how employees prioritise their own personal growth so that they can sell their new skills to other companies. Stahl, Chua, Caligiuri, Cerdin, and Taniguchi (2009), for instance, claim that employees are increasingly interested in gaining global skills so that they have greater market value. Some of the repatriates introduced above thought about leaving their employers, and Kinoshita-san actually did. Nonetheless, even in Kinoshita-san’s case, she cannot be said to have gained “independence from, rather than dependence on, traditional organizational career principles” (Arthur, 1994: 296), since she found another company that offered her what she perceived as being a more sustainable organisational career. Based on this, the boundaryless and protean career theoretical lenses are not helpful in Japan. Also, there is a cultural angle to consider: Thomas, Fitzsimmons, Ravlin, Au, Ekelund, and Barzantny (2010: 1440) point out that “culturally different self-concepts influence what is desirable with regard to exchange relationships with employers.” Lifetime employment certainly appears to remain desirable for employers and core employees in Japan.

Given the Japanese environment, none of this is surprising. As an example, the Toyota Motor Workers’ Union decided in 2012 to refrain from requesting an increase in basic monthly pay for its members. In the wake of the financial crisis, this was the third year in a row. The reason? “It recognizes that the auto group faces a tough business environment” (Nikkei Weekly, 2012b). Furthermore, “The Toyota union will call on management to maintain seniority-based automatic annual pay raises” (ibidem). This is evidence that characteristic aspects of the Japanese stakeholder system are still being supported from within by key stakeholders, and that the relationship between large Japanese companies and their regular workers remains relational.
Finally, drawing on much of the above, we come to Kato and Suzuki’s (2006) career hope. Comments in my research diary show that when I first read their paper, I was unconvinced that the concept could explain the attitudes and behaviour of the Japanese repatriates in my study. As we saw in the literature review, they define the term as being “the understanding that at a certain point of time, the possibility of reaching a better state still exists among the countless possibilities of one’s future” (Kato and Suzuki, 2006: 269). One reason for my scepticism was that there was too much emphasis on short-term career agency implied in the phrase “countless possibilities.” Given the relative lack of fluidity in Japan’s full-time labour market, this seemed like a highly misleading characterisation, yet the authors (ibidem: 267) claim that “Japanese firms are presently incapable of providing lifetime commitment.” What is more, they write that “[u]nder the new situation, many Japanese employees came to realize that they must develop and secure their own careers independently” (ibidem: 266). To a large extent, this thesis has contradicted that assertion. However, none of the above renders the concept of career hope itself redundant.

Yashiro (2013) sheds more light on to the central role of career hope for core employees in Japan: “Competition of promotion is within the tenure cohorts, called nenji ... [C]ompanies can maintain motivation of staffs as long as they keep the future prospects of upward mobility ... The first stage of the tournament is intentionally set rather long in the case of Japan. According to the survey of the Japan Institute of Labour, the first selection is 3.4 years after joining the company in the United States, 3.7 years in Germany, and 7.8 years in Japan. Similarly, the majority of nenji lose their prospect of promotion 9.1 years after [being] new
school graduates in the United States, 11.5 years in Germany, and 22.3 years, 45 years old in Japan.” This is convincing. We saw that Kinoshita-san lost hope of promotion with GPI when in her mid-forties. One obvious explanation was her gender. The flatness of the Japanese organisation was another. Largely because she could no longer see a future in which she was given formal recognition of her skills and status by GPI, she sought an opportunity elsewhere. Doing the work of a manager was insufficient for her: she wanted the title to go with the responsibility.

Of the other five expatriates introduced in the case studies, all maintained hope of advancement, even if for Okayama-san that hope was dulled by a lack of interest in his second post-repatriation job. Takeda-san was confident that his abilities would be recognised appropriately once he had performed well in his latest role, and the other three (Ozaki-san, Hirata-san, and Hiroshima-san) had all been promoted since returning. They were hopeful of further success, too. This expectation is key. It is the strongest differentiator between their cases and Kinoshita-san’s. It would be easy to posit gender as the reason for the gulf in perception, and as I have already mentioned, there is some merit to this argument, but it is not entirely accurate. After all, Higashi Chemicals could point to a woman who had been promoted to the board of directors after working overseas. In addition, the other female repatriate who contributed interview data to this study, Uchiyama-san, had career hope within her company, and it was fully justified.

10.7 SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION
The career job is not dead in Japan, and the short-term relationships and corrosion of character described in Sennett’s (1998) dystopian vision have not taken root there. This raises a
vital question: do Japanese HRM practices really need to alter so radically? After all, Japanese companies appear to be finding ways of making incremental changes without adversely affecting too many livelihoods. In this, they are taking care of their chief stakeholders, the core employees. Anglo-American companies talk of internal marketing (see Lukas and Maignan, 1996; Conduit and Mavondo, 2015) and of human resources being their key asset. Yet, those same companies typically do not give employees long-term stability. Rather, there is profit in churn (Jacoby, 1999a and 1999b). However, in Japan, if you are lucky enough to be a core employee, then you have the relative certainty of lifetime employment. You know that your company has made a decision to invest in you over the course of around forty years. Your employer doesn’t need to declare that people are its most valuable asset, since its internal labour market is built on that premise. This is an alternative to the Anglo-American model that is promoted by certain commentators, and it is one that is still viable. This is not to say that all systems should look like the Japanese examples glimpsed in this study. However, it is to say that there are varieties of capitalism that are still relevant, despite the transforming pressures that are part of globalisation and technological development. In this, I agree with McCann, Hassard, and Morris (2010). GDP growth and higher quarterly corporate profits are not the only meaningful metrics of value, and nor should they be.

Before moving on to the conclusion of this thesis, let me wrap up this chapter by once again addressing the study’s contribution. It can be seen in the empirical detail, the research design, and the theoretical findings. Empirically, the six case studies present granular accounts of how Japanese repatriates reflect on their overseas assignments and how they envisage their future careers. These accounts enrich our understanding of repatriation outcomes
in general, and contribute specifically to the English-language literature on Japanese repatriates. In terms of the research design, the extended fieldwork allows the stories to develop dynamically, while the focus on repatriates, rather than organisations, adds a fresh perspective. Finally, the theoretical contribution comes from evidence that there is an ad hoc approach to career management in Japan, and that hope plays a key role in its effectiveness. Meanwhile, significant convergence has not yet occurred, despite claims to the contrary. For example, the dreadful view of short-termism in the United States so vividly described by Sennett (1998: 139) does not resonate in Japan: “The social bond arises most elementally from a sense of mutual dependence. All the shibboleths of the new order treat dependence as a shameful condition.” There is still mutual dependence between Japanese work colleagues, as well as between employers and their employees. That is certainly threatened by various forces, but the response we have seen in these pages is to make measured changes on a scale, and at a pace, that do not cause irreparable damage to the interests of core employees (such as the repatriates in this study) who have lifetime jobs and a long-term view of their career interests. That response appears to me to be both laudable and illuminating, particularly in the context of renewed confidence in the United States so soon after the chaotic aftermath of the financial and economic meltdown that originated there in 2008.
11. CONCLUSION

“In order to be more flexible and responsive to changes in the global economy, [Japanese] companies are reducing their core, and expanding their periphery labor force. But companies, especially the large ones, are still honoring the implicit contract of lifetime employment and protect those who are in the core.”

(Ono, 2010: 23)

In this final chapter, I will begin by briefly summarising the goals, scope, and findings of this study. Those findings are in line with Ono’s (2010) comment above: lifetime employment for those in the core persists in Japan. Companies and staff continue to benefit from this arrangement, as Japanese career management is both ad hoc and tactically functional. Next, I will move on to look again at the contribution that I have made methodologically, empirically, and theoretically to the field, before turning to the limitations of the research design and execution. Following that, I will explore what I have learned from this project as an academic researcher, and then make some suggestions for further inquiry into the areas of repatriation and Japanese careers. Finally, I will speculate more broadly about the future of Japanese human resource management.

11.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

As described at the very beginning of this thesis, I set out to try to understand the career perceptions of specific Japanese repatriates through their own eyes. This gave me a window on to present-day Japanese HRM, allowing me to assess the arguments for and against significant change and convergence in certain Japanese business practices. The four research questions I posed at the start were the following: how do Japanese business repatriates’ careers develop after their return to Japan, do repatriates become vectors for change in characteristic Japanese HRM practices, are Japanese
companies abandoning lifetime employment, and if lifetime employment does continue to exist in Japan, does it make sense for repatriates to support it? I also became interested in the amount of change that is likely in response to the various types of pressure being exerted on organisations. Takahashi (2014), for instance, describes the daunting challenges faced by Japanese companies as they promote equal opportunity for females, find ways of working successfully with non-Japanese, and try to improve their retention of young employees. To achieve this, he argues for fuller application of two key Anglo-American HRM practices in Japanese companies: management by objective (MBO) and career counselling. However, it is significant that he sees these as ways of retaining young employees for the duration of their careers. His goal is to ensure the viability of lifetime employment, rather than to converge on Anglo-American ‘best practices.’

Looking at the research questions above, my study has shown that Japanese repatriates are subject to ad hoc career decisions that are typically made for them by division managers and other senior executives with the support of HR. Some of those decisions match their expectations, while others do not. Overall, though, there is a strong bond of trust between the repatriates, who are core employees and who enjoy the tacit promise of continued lifetime employment, and their employers. In the long run, the repatriates assume that their interests will be served. It is true that they can see areas in which existing HRM practices might be improved. Greater transparency in the decision-making process for job rotation is one such area. They also make small incremental improvements to their own environments by influencing and helping colleagues with better information, knowledge, and skills. Nonetheless, they are not vectors for wholesale change. If anything, they are an evolved old guard, which is allowing large traditional
Japanese companies to handle social and global stresses that challenge how they run their businesses. As for the future, lifetime employment will sustain for the time being, even as it comes under increasing pressure.

This last statement is contentious. Kawaguchi and Ueno (2013) cite evidence from Kambayashi and Kato (2012) that the number of core employees will dwindle if current hiring and retention trends continue. Furthermore, Kawaguchi and Ueno go on to identify diminishing returns in Japan to company-specific human capital, suggesting that lifetime employment is no longer a rational HRM approach. As globalising Japanese companies look at their systems across different countries and regions, they must consider the extent to which lifetime employment practices benefit them outside Japan, the practicalities of maintaining a separate system for Japan, and indeed the utility of those practices anywhere at all. As a result of all of this, Japanese companies have had to reconsider how they run their operations. For instance, to what degree should they devolve decision-making authority to subsidiaries abroad? What should be the role of expatriates and inpatriates? Crucially for my research, the suitability of existing HRM practices for repatriates has also been brought into question.

We saw in the literature review (see Keizer, 2009, for a summary) that predictions of sweeping business reform have been evident in journals, books, and the media since before the Japanese bubble burst in the late 1980s and the world’s admiration for the country’s economic miracle started to evaporate (Ito and Weinstein, 1996; McCann, 2014). Wartzman (2009), for instance, identifies “the unease that many people in Japan are feeling as the country’s decades-old model of ‘lifetime employment’ continues to dissolve (and its labor practices look more and more like those of the U.S.).”
The *Economist* has consistently championed change in Japan, with the following quotation serving as a good example: “A prized skill for leaders in Japan lies in being able to ‘read the air’, or to sense what is important but unstated. What is in the air now, reckon foreign and Japanese investors alike, is nothing less than a revolution in companies’ attitude to both shareholders and returns” (*Economist*, 2015d: 54). The article goes on to say, “Change is undoubtedly needed ... There is no firm that better embodies the results that reform can achieve than Hitachi. It was formerly one of Japan’s most conservative: the consummate ‘community’ firm, at which employees and their families, and suppliers and their dependents, all took precedence over shareholders ... Last year it all but abandoned one of the central pillars of Japanese business: the seniority-wage system, in which salaries are based on age and length of service rather than on performance. The results of all this have been stellar. Its operating profits in the year to March rose by 12% to ¥600 billion ($5 billion). Now, says Kathy Matsui of Goldman Sachs in Tokyo, stockmarket investors are all searching for the next Hitachi. Activists and private-equity firms are sensing an opening up of opportunities” (ibidem). Even assuming that the article has correctly identified cause and effect, it fails to explain adequately how reforms will benefit Japanese employees and Japanese society as a whole, rather than just shareholder activists and investment funds looking for a quick return on their financial capital. For example, the *Economist* (2015c: 11) claims, “The argument for Japanese firms to act as a safety net is less potent than it once was,” but it doesn’t justify this sweeping statement. In contrast, I believe that protecting lifetime employment for core employees makes sense both strategically and ethically. Society’s needs should trump those of short-term investors. In that case, we need also to be mindful of the interests of those who do not benefit as much from the system as core employees, of course.
This is not to deny that gradual evolution may be taking place in Japanese business attitudes and practices. The repatriates in this study supported some kind of change in Japanese business practices, for instance. Kinoshita-san (13 April, 2015) opined, “I think that Japanese companies should hire mid-career people. So if those things happen, that people staying in that company think about the, need to think about their career, because there are lot of, plenty of people are coming or they will get higher position than people there.” And yet this thesis has provided evidence (following Buchanan and Deakin, 2009; Matanle and Matsui, 2011) that assumptions of lifetime employment within the community firm continue to underpin the careers of core employees in large Japanese companies. The six repatriates introduced in the case studies, along with the two other repatriates, one job-changer, and four HR managers who appeared in the discussion chapter, all show this to be the case. They disagree about the extent to which this situation will change in the future, and they have different ideas about the desirability of any such transformation, but they certainly embody an enduring system that has features which distinguish it from what we have typically seen in the literature about HRM practices in North America and Europe. In addition, while Kawaguchi and Ueno (2013) above have argued that lifetime employment is disappearing, more recent evidence suggests that Japanese companies are once again aggressively recruiting new graduates for full-time positions in the core (Ootaka, 2014; Nikkei Shimbun, 2015). My conclusion, then, is that lifetime employment will sustain, and that this is a positive thing for employees and employers alike.

11.2 THIS STUDY’S CONTRIBUTION
Moving on, the contribution of this study was described at the end of the previous chapter, and I will revisit it here. As already noted, I
have been able to add to our knowledge and to scholarship in three ways. The first is empirically, as the study provides in-depth data in English that are focussed on an increasingly important area: repatriate careers. Because of the research, we now know more about how Japanese repatriates experience this key life event in career terms. The literature review showed that there has been very little written in English, and yet Japan is home to fifty-seven companies in *Fortune’s Global 500* ranking (*Fortune Magazine*, 2014) and has a significant share of the world’s expatriates and repatriates. One conclusion from my study is that expectations of explicit repatriate career paths in Japan are unreasonable given the prevailing fuzzy logic HRM response in that country to the unpredictability of business and markets. At the same time, trusting and relational bonds exist for many repatriates and their employers, and these underwrite tactical flexibility. The “flexible rigidities” described by Dore (2000) persist, despite Dore’s own later doubts (2009). They have been described in these pages in terms of ad hoc tactical decisions and enduring rationality.

The second element in my contribution comes with the study method. The iterative process of interviewing repatriates over a period of between two and four years each is unusual in the field of repatriate studies, and it has provided detailed data that quantitative research or a cross-sectional qualitative interview approach would not have been able to render. The research method has enabled dynamic, and often non-linear, repatriate career stories. This is in the tradition of career narrative literature (Zeller, 1995; Bujold, 2004). Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbroeck, and Van Vianen (2009: 240), for instance, insist that “21st century theories should approach careers as individual scripts.” The assumption of those writers is that the work environment is no longer stable, and so
there is a premium on flexibility. Although repatriates such as those introduced in this study have the near certainty of lifetime employment to shape their futures, there is still an emphasis on flexibility, since they are typically rotated and promoted to a variety of roles within their companies. As a result of this, they need to respond to the demands of different positions (for instance, Hiroshima-san in handling the move to a different industry within the Nishimura Group, Hirata-san in taking on a management accounting position, and Ozaki-san in adapting to three different roles in the first three years after repatriating). Seen in this way, the narrative approach has merits for deepening our understanding of the dynamics of Japanese repatriate careers, even if it has been under-utilised to date.

The third part to the contribution of this study relates to theory. As argued above, my research has lent credible support to the claim that Japanese HRM practices remain in rude health, despite strong and persistent pressures for change. Furthermore, it has delineated an ad hoc, fuzzy logic to career planning and career management that is ostensibly functional for the majority of the repatriates interviewed for this thesis. Consequently, Japan continues to provide evidence that the Anglo-American vision of highly flexible external labour markets, portable skills, “just-in-time loyalty” (Tulgan, 2009), portfolio careers, and career agents is not the only rational and workable approach to employment in the early years of the twenty-first century. It is true that commentators such as the Economist (2015d) feel that Japanese business is finally on the verge of a radical and (in their eyes) long-overdue transformation. However, given the powerful contextual forces still at play, such as qualified support for the status quo from core employees, this is improbable.
Also with respect to theory, the case studies provide evidence of the relevance of Kato and Suzuki’s (2006) career hope for Japanese repatriate careers. As noted in the literature review and reprised in the previous chapter, uncertainty complicates any attempts to understand Japanese careers. Kato and Suzuki propose career mist, career drift, and career hope as an integrated framework to achieve this. Although the focus for their work is white-collar workers in their late twenties and early thirties, the framework seems to apply to the older repatriates introduced in this study, too. Admittedly, some of the finer details of Kato and Suzuki’s (2006) work lack resonance. A key difference between their analysis and my own comes in the contention that individual goals necessarily change because the majority of Japanese companies can no longer offer lifetime employment and organisational careers. That is not what I have found. Rather, individual careers over the short-term are at the mercy of ad hoc and functional decision-making within organisations. Furthermore, career drift finds no support in this thesis if we accept Kato and Suzuki’s definition of it meaning individuals have little interest in their own careers. However, my study participants acknowledge that they cannot see the future (career mist) and have very limited control (which is what I understand by career drift). Most importantly, career hope is a powerful theoretical lens for examining why Kinoshita-san left her company, and it merits further investigation by other researchers.

Finally, despite implications of the uniqueness of Japanese HRM, certain features of the approach extolled in this thesis have been espoused outside Japan. In fact, concern about truncated time horizons and misplaced priorities can be found amongst high profile practitioners and commentators. For example, Laurence Fink, chairman and CEO of the asset management institution Blackrock, wrote in *McKinsey Insights*, “[W]e’ve become
mesmerized by the possibility of short-term, one-off gains” (Fink, 2015). Waters and Foley (2015) reported on the preference of some entrepreneurs for private investment, rather than IPOs, citing fears of short-termism on Wall Street and “voracious activist investors.” In the introduction chapter, we also saw that Jack Welch stated companies should concentrate on employees, customers, and products (Guerrara, 2009). In my opinion, many Japanese companies actually live up to that admonishment, prioritising firstly employees, then customers, and thirdly products and services. On the other hand, their Anglo-American peers as portrayed in the literature tend not to do the same. The example of Japanese companies, then, may help business people and policymakers elsewhere to chart a way forward.

11.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY
Implicit in claims about the contribution made by this research, of course, is an acknowledgement of the limitations. The first of these relates to the small number of study participants. The data have come principally from six participants (forty-two of the interviews), as well as from sessions with eight other people (for a further sixteen interviews). It would be foolhardy to make definitive claims based on these interviews about Japanese repatriation procedures and outcomes, let alone Japanese HRM as a whole. Nonetheless, I can proffer my interpretation and invite readers to critique it based on their own points of view. Next, the interviews were conducted in English, but none of the participants was a native speaker of that language, with the exception of Ms King (whom I interviewed only once). This could certainly have been problematic. Koulouriotos (2011), for example, has identified linguistic and cultural issues when working with non-native speakers. To deal with this, the transcripts were all sent to, and checked by, the interviewees after each interview. I also met with the repatriates repeatedly during
the project, and confirmed what I thought were the key points of previous discussions. Furthermore, I sent the case studies to the six repatriates in July, 2015 for final comment. Finally, there was occasional use of Japanese, a language in which I am fluent, to confirm opinions during the interviews.

Another limitation relates to the sources of the information. The repatriates’ accounts are self-reported, and I did not triangulate data with supervisors or HR departments. For one reason, gaining access through official channels would have been complicated at best, and the amount of resulting data would probably have exceeded my ability to process it. More fundamentally, my unit of analysis was the repatriates themselves. This meant that to some extent I could compare like with like (Japanese repatriates who had worked abroad in English-speaking business environments). Having said that, the repatriates were overseas for differing lengths of time (one to six years) and in three different countries (Germany, Ireland, and the United States of America). They came from various industries (chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and medical instruments) and had a variety of roles (sales, clinical development, project management, quality, and business development). They were in their thirties and forties, single and married, childless and parents. Not only were their demographic profiles divergent, but there were assorted reasons for them to be sent overseas in the first place (such as training, management, specialist skill provision, information sharing, and liaison with the Japanese headquarters). Therefore, depending on the level of abstraction, they were either alike or dissimilar. My intention was never to find representative subjects for a positivist piece of work, but there is certainly now an opportunity for someone using a different research method to follow up on the study’s implications.
11.4 PERSONAL LEARNING POINTS FROM THE STUDY

As a green academic, I have been challenged by the tension between the very personal and specific implications of social constructionism and the need to speak to a wider audience about the applicability and usefulness of my study. I have interpreted interview data within particular contexts, so a lot of editing has quite naturally taken place. How authentically, then, have I characterised each person and his ideas? I have also drawn some possible conclusions about Japanese repatriates, but the people who took part in this study are not intended to be representative of the broader repatriate population. Next, I have related the data to other studies and claims about Japanese employees at Japanese companies, yet it is easy to argue that repatriates are not typical employees. Following on from that, the companies glimpsed in these pages are major Japanese corporations, with the exception of the two gaishikei organisations for which Takeda-san and the HR manager Kuroda-san worked. Given that I have speculated about the future of HRM in Japan, to what degree can these companies be considered barometers? Put bluntly, we need to be very careful about reading too much significance into the study data. These caveats are all important, but nevertheless, this thesis gives detailed and nuanced context to the bigger picture of how Japanese companies appear to be dealing with significant pressure for change in their approaches to human resource management.

During my doctoral studies and fieldwork, I have also learned a lot about my own preconceptions with respect to Japanese HRM and broader business practices. Before I began at Manchester Business School, I believed that Japanese companies should find ways of protecting their identity and building upon it. For one thing, convergence potentially impoverishes our world by limiting
diversity without gaining much of value in return. For another, Japanese companies have their own traditions, values, and practices, many of which I find admirable. The apparent opposite of the externally stable, internally fluid Japanese HRM system characterised in these pages can be found in the external fluidity and internal role stability apparently promoted by the Anglo-American system. By this I mean that Japanese companies tend to encourage their employees to stay for the long-term, and then periodically put them in fresh roles. On the other hand, many Anglo-American companies now have a tendency to hire people for specific roles, and then to change personnel when they deem it necessary. As Aoki (2005) points out, however, it is not that simple: subsidiaries in Japan of overseas multinationals may approximate to the U.S. model, while U.S. companies in comparatively rural areas may use what resemble Japanese-style practices. Nonetheless, the behaviour of employees typically reflects the employment norms of the country in which they work. The U.S. system, then, takes change for granted. Schrager (2015), for instance, fingers “the relatively low levels of churn in the workforce” for the slow recovery of the labour market in 2014 and 2015. Mobility had been higher in previous years, apparently. While it is not surprising to read analysis such as this, when it comes to Japan, I find implications of the need for churn distasteful. In a world of rapid change, there is something valuable from an individual employee’s perspective about having a stable foundation. That may apply to companies and to society as a whole, too.

Hassard, McCann, and Morris (2009: 227) also commend the virtues of the Japanese system: “The technical performance of Japanese companies remains hugely impressive, and this is still based on the long-term commitment model of employment, which
for decades has been one of the bases of their competitive strength. Moreover, top executives in Japan are still not paid excessive bonuses/share options as there is not the same market for corporate control or executive talent as exists in the UK and the USA. Japanese workplaces exact extremely heavy demands on staff, but at least there is a strong degree of loyalty shown by the company in return for these sacrifices. This is something that many of the US or UK firms in our study could learn from.” Similarly, the emphasis in the expatriate and repatriate literatures on retention implies that Japanese-style continuity of employment is valuable from a company perspective.

At the same time, though, my thesis does not fully examine the drawbacks of this HRM approach. I admit that there is a danger of overly celebrating a system that has some pernicious aspects, most obviously in terms of gender discrimination (Estévez-Abe, 2013; Yasukawa and Nomura, 2014) and the treatment of non-regular workers (Kumagai, 2013; Osawa, Kim, and Kingston, 2013). Mehri’s (2005) account of working in the automotive industry in Japan attributes employee loyalty more to coercion and powerlessness than to mutual benefit. In his view, the reason that staff do as they are bidden by managers is that they have no choice – they will be punished otherwise. This does not sound like a system that respects employees. Similarly, the Economist (2011) claims that in Japanese companies, “you do what you are told and get what you are given.” However, while there are elements of compulsion and limited choice in the ways in which their companies decide where and when to post these repatriates, they have surrendered a degree of control so that they can benefit from long-term employment stability and enjoy being part of a community firm. There are pros and cons with any approach, of
course, and individuals will have varying perspectives. For me, though, there is much to celebrate about the Japanese HRM that I have observed and experienced firsthand.

Another point of reflection is that I now realise a clearer focus earlier in the research process would have helped me to explore the topic more thoroughly over a longer period of time. What began as an examination of the workings of global teams in Japan-based organisations became first an examination of expatriation, and then a study of repatriation. My research interests changed quite radically as I better understood my motives for carrying out the study and realised the limitations of my resources. In other words, I now know much more about what excites me as a scholar, and I have a better grasp of how to plan and conduct an academic inquiry given limited access, time, and money. With the guidance of my first and second supervisors, along with annual review board members at the University of Manchester, I have tried throughout the three years of the fieldwork to address weaknesses in my approach and analysis through reflexive consideration.

As well as making discoveries about myself, I have learned about the rigour, determination, and excitement that are necessary to complete an academic research project such as this. My endeavours were hindered by the lack of clear research questions at the start, for example. Connected to this, I initially brought too little theoretical clarity to the research process. My tendency was to focus on the empirics. At times, I got caught up in the individual participants and their stories and lost sight of the potential significance of the study as a whole. This was complicated by the epistemic concerns raised above. If perception and interpretation are contextual, and if the context is always changing, then what can I say that is of import for other academics and practitioners?
The answer to that is everything and nothing: it is up to the reader to judge for herself the applicability and utility of this account of my research. In the method chapter, I cited Golden-Biddle and Locke’s (1993) discussion of the need for authenticity, plausibility, and criticality. My goal has been to live up to their standards.

### 11.5 RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research on Japanese business repatriation could take a number of approaches. For instance, a quantitative cross-sectional study might provide statistical support for the claims made in these pages. More purposeful selection of study participants based on clear profiles would allow for easier comparison of data. The possible impact of factors such as length of overseas assignment, gender, age, function, and industry could all be investigated, too. This would require a more positivist approach than my own, of course. In addition, job roles and responsibilities before, during, and after international assignments could be examined to look for potential links. Perhaps most obviously, a study of the impact of gender on both expatriate and repatriate opportunities would provide practitioners and academics alike with valuable insights.

For my part, I would like to continue to follow the careers of the repatriates introduced here, thereby building on the longitudinal aspect and providing a more nuanced and detailed analysis. In the light of their own experiences, for instance, how do they manage their own subordinates? Additionally, a qualitative study of HR managers in a variety of companies and industries might give us greater insight into the strategic approach and vision of Japanese companies as they continue to deal with the various pressures outlined in this thesis. Will Japanese companies be able to sustain their approach to HRM, as I have concluded, or if fundamental change has taken hold, whose interests will be served by it?
11.6 WHAT NOW FOR JAPANESE HRM?

Vaszkun and Tsutsui (2012: 382) frame the future of Japanese HRM in the following way: “The question today is whether people in Japan would rather live in a more protected economy, where employment is stable, group members can look out for each other, and relatively weak employees and economic sectors can be carried by more competitive ones, or whether they would prefer a more liberal, market-oriented economy, which, due to harsh global competition, may lead to unprecedented instability, insecurity, and social polarization. For sure, this question is very complex.” I imagine that like me, the repatriates in this study would plump for the former.

As already stated, I believe that Japanese companies will find a way of maintaining their focus on employees as the key stakeholders. They will do this together with those employees, and this may even give them competitive advantage as workforces and markets become less stable and more global. As evidenced by the increasing use of standardised tests (Yoshida, 2013), English is finally gaining traction in Japan after many years of lip service and hobby status. Improved English skills will help Japanese companies to lower transaction costs related to business communication. The influence of female employees is growing, too, which is not entirely unrelated: Japanese women are said to be more open to learning and using languages to communicate beyond national borders (Itou, 2015). As Japanese organisations get better at handling gender diversity, they will reap a productivity reward. Additionally, there are more non-Japanese inpatriates and local hires than ever before working in headquarters in Japan, as well as increasing expatriate numbers at group companies overseas (Oki, 2013). Hand in hand with this, the repatriate population is growing. As communication and management skills
improve, there will surely be significant gains accruing to Japanese organisations and people. Repatriates, with their overseas experiences and knowhow, will play an important role by making adjustments to the ways in which they and their employers approach business. Ironically, perhaps, this will allow continuity of existing practices.

Admittedly, there is a degree of wishful thinking here. For me, the normative demands of commentators insisting on systemic change in Japanese HRM practices threaten to diminish our world and Japanese companies by insisting on changes that are not properly understood. If organisations in Japan really can sustain their emphasis on core employees and customers, then they will continue to provide a viable alternative to the predominant American model. There is something remarkable about mutual ongoing investment by companies and employees. Time horizons are necessarily stretched, as suggested by the number of long-lived companies in Japan: “The country is currently home to more than 50,000 businesses that are over 100 years old. Of those, 3,886 have been around for more than 200 years. As a point of comparison, only one in every four U.S. companies founded in 1994 was still operating in 2004” (Pinsker, 2015). Short-term churn is not the only, or perhaps even the best, approach to work and management. I hope and believe that Japanese companies and Japanese employees will continue to show that. With the cover of Bloomberg Businessweek portraying an eagle riding a Harley Davidson and declaring, “Roar Eagle Roar!” (2015), we need information and inspiration from elsewhere to help us to frame the ways in which we apprehend modern-day business. If not, we may get caught up in another destructive cycle of hubris, boom, and bust, and have too little idea of how to break free of it.
APPENDIX: LIST OF FOURTEEN INTERVIEWEES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym (Gender)</th>
<th>Company Pseudonym (HQ)</th>
<th>Repatriate / HR / Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ozaki, Hiroaki (M)</td>
<td>Global Pharmaceuticals (Japan)</td>
<td>Repatriate (U.S.A., 6 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hirata, Kazuo (M)</td>
<td>Mizutama Chemicals (Japan)</td>
<td>Repatriate (U.S.A., 5 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hiroshima, Takahiro (M)</td>
<td>Nishimura Holdings (Japan)</td>
<td>Repatriate (U.S.A., 1 year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Takeda, Katsunori (M)</td>
<td>Brookline Technologies (USA)</td>
<td>Repatriate (Ireland, 1 year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Okayama, Tarou (M)</td>
<td>Japan Conductors (Japan)</td>
<td>Repatriate (Germany, 2 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Kinoshita, Yasuko (F)</td>
<td>Global Pharmaceuticals (Japan)</td>
<td>Repatriate (U.S.A., 2 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Uchiyama, Seiko (F)</td>
<td>Nishimura Chemicals (Japan)</td>
<td>Repatriate (U.S.A., 1 year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Takeichi, Naoki (M)</td>
<td>Higashi Chemicals (Japan)</td>
<td>Repatriate (U.S.A., 1 year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Kimura (M)</td>
<td>Kyoujinsha (Japan)</td>
<td>HR (repatriation experience)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Kuroda (M)</td>
<td>Palink Instruments (USA)</td>
<td>HR (overseas study)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Daicho (M)</td>
<td>Higashi Chemicals (Japan)</td>
<td>HR (Japan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Takahashi (M)</td>
<td>Higashi Chemicals (Japan)</td>
<td>HR (Japan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Okada (M)</td>
<td>Hakuta (Japan) and Yamasawa (Japan)</td>
<td>Mid-career job-changer (Japan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. King (F)</td>
<td>Various (Northern Europe)</td>
<td>Administrator (UK)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


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6 INTEC Japan Inc. is now trading as Link Global Solution Inc. (www.link-gs.co.jp).


