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## **Are You Willing to Do What it Takes to Become a Senior Global Leader?**

### **Explaining the Willingness to Undertake Challenging Leadership Development Activities**

#### **Abstract**

Although the importance of on-the-job-learning as a global leadership development tool has been widely acknowledged by both scholars and practitioners, there is limited research on the willingness of employees to undertake such challenging assignments. Building on social exchange theory, we examine potential factors explaining the willingness of individual employees to undertake challenging global leadership development activities, such as cross-functional and international assignments and assignments related to reorganizations or new businesses. Our analysis of 427 individuals from 14 multinational companies reveals that the willingness to accept on-the-job challenges is positively associated with knowing that one has been formally identified as talented, identification with corporate values, and acknowledgement of the effectiveness of developmental assignments. Previous experience of working or studying abroad, and cross-functional experience also turned out to be positively related. Interesting differences emerged with regard to international vs. domestic assignments.

#### **Introduction**

As a direct consequence of the further globalization of business, the need for managers who are able to successfully lead global integration and co-ordination work has increased dramatically, to the extent that the shortage of global leadership talent has been raised as one of the biggest challenges facing multinational firms (MNCs) today (Cappelli, 2008). Consequently, activities aimed at developing global leadership skills, defined as demanding assignments that expand the capacity of individuals to undertake global leadership roles in the future, have become a top Human Resource Management (HRM) priority for these firms.

Among the various conceptualizations, it is common to divide such development activities into three categories: on-the-job learning, learning through developmental relationships such as

mentoring, and formal training (McCall et al., 1988). According to the 70/20/10 principle of leadership development, on-the-job learning constitutes the most important development tool – the 70 per cent – for growing future leaders (Evans et al., 2011). The best developmental assignments are typically novel and challenging, requiring problems to be overcome, difficult decisions to be made, and conflicts to be resolved (McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002; Van Velsor et al. 2010).<sup>1</sup> Examples include assignments to turn around an underperforming unit, to deal with a merger or reorganization, and to undertake an international task in a different cultural and institutional environment. Common to all of these is the need to work under pressure in complex and high-uncertainty conditions, and to influence people with diverse mindsets, ambitions and goals (Evans et al., 2011). For potential leaders who are willing to engage in such tough developmental activities these experiences add to the depth and breadth of their global leadership skills (Van Velsor et al. 2010).

Although the importance of on-the-job-learning as a leadership development tool is widely acknowledged among scholars and practitioners, there is limited research on the willingness of potential leaders to undertake such challenging activities (Collings et al., 2007; see also Altman and Shortland, 2008). Clearly, a lack of motivation may lead to failed assignments and incur significant financial costs (see e.g., Yan et al., 2002 on assignment costs in an international context), or people may shy away from developmental but high-risk activities – and the consequences include missed opportunities for both the focal individuals and their employers. Apart from the body of literature examining motivations for undertaking international assignments (e.g., Altman and Shortland, 2008; Yan et al., 2002), there is little research on what influences the willingness of potential future leaders to rise to the challenge.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Given the focus on on-the-job leadership development activities, which most typically include challenging assignments of different kinds, the terms ‘activities’ and ‘assignments’ are used interchangeably in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the current research on challenging assignments focuses solely on international assignments. We use this research to highlight relevant issues, but note that this paper covers a broader range of challenging assignments. It is also possible that one and the same assignment includes a variety of challenges, such as reorganizing a failing business abroad.

In addressing this significant research gap we examine the factors that potentially explain the willingness of individual employees to undertake challenging activities focused on global leadership development. Building on social exchange theory, we argue that employees in whom a firm invests are likely to want to reciprocate in positive ways (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Guest, 2004), and may be more willing to engage in such activities (Rousseau, 1990, 1995). We further suggest that people naturally conduct subjective cost-benefit analyses and compare available alternatives in order to assess the worth of a particular action (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974; Roloff, 1981), and that this process influences their willingness to undertake developmental activities.

In what follows we develop a number of hypotheses examining potential factors explaining employees' willingness to undertake challenging activities aimed at global leadership development, and test them on 427 managers and professionals from 14 MNCs. In addition to identifying factors associated with individual attitudes towards challenging assignments more generally, we conduct further analyses on the willingness to take on international assignments. Our findings contribute to the literature on global leadership development, and also have practical implications for corporations seeking to develop future talent.

## **Hypothesis development**

Global talent management seeks to ensure that the organization meets its future needs for leadership competence, and employee development through challenging job assignments is a central strategy for meeting such human capital demands (Collings and Mellahi, 2009). In order to secure a pipeline of capable leaders it has become common corporate practice to establish 'talent pools' of employees who are considered likely to be able fill crucial roles in the future (Mäkelä, Björkman and Ehrnrooth, 2010).

From a social exchange perspective it is likely that employees who have been selected into such a talent pool will see this as an indication of their employer's commitment to them, signalling future opportunities in the organization (Guzzo and Noonan, 1994; Meyer and Allen, 1991). According to social exchange theory, employees interpret such corporate actions as an investment by the employer, to which they then respond with positive attitudes and behaviours that support organizational goals (Guzzo and Noonan, 1994; Kuvaas and Dysvik, 2008). This link, or balance, between the perceived inducements from the organization and the obligation of reciprocity is referred to in the literature as a psychological contract between the employee and the employer (Rousseau, 1995; Shaw et al., 2009).

First, in line with this rationale, members of talent pools are likely to reciprocate the perceived corporate investment by seeking to add more value (McCall et al., 1988; De Pater et al., 2009). If an employee perceives that the employer is investing in him/her, the norm of reciprocity should thus increase his/her willingness to engage in developmental activities (Rousseau, 1995). Furthermore, members of the talent pool may also wish to retain their current high organizational status in the future, and competence development is one way of achieving this. Consequently, we expect individuals who have been identified as talent to be more willing to undertake challenging activities related to global leadership development than those not similarly identified.

*H1. Individuals who know that they are identified as corporate talent are more likely to be willing to undertake challenging global leadership development activities than are those who are not identified as talent.*

Second, as social contracts also include the notion of shared norms (Rousseau, 1995; Shaw et al., 2009), we suggest that the more an individual identifies with the organization, the more willing she or he is to undertake challenging assignments. According to social identity theory, people tend to

constantly and actively classify themselves (and others) into different social categories based on perceived group differences, status, and their relation to various out-groups (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982). Organizational identification is a result of such a process, and refers to a “perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member” (Mael and Ashforth, 1992: 104).

Identification has been linked not only to the ways in which people define themselves and feel part of a larger whole, but also to important organizational outcomes such as employee performance, satisfaction and retention (Ashforth et al., 2008). For example, organizational identification has been found to foster internalized obligations, positive attitudes, and behaviours that are congruent with the organization’s goals and norms (Meyer and Allen, 1991; Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Following on from this, it is thus likely that employees who identify more with their employer are more willing to undertake challenging developmental activities – which they feel contribute to the organization of which they consider themselves a part. Thus, if an employee perceives that undertaking challenging developmental activities is desired and valued by the organization, she or he is more likely to feel both obliged and also intrinsically motivated to do so (Meyer and Allen, 1991; O’Reilly and Chatman, 1986). We consequently suggest:

*H2. The more individuals identify with the corporation, the more willing they will be to undertake challenging global leadership development activities.*

Third, social exchange theory shares the assumption of rational behaviour with economic theory, in that people tend to make choices that are beneficial to themselves, maximizing personal advantage by weighing potential benefits against potential costs (Allingham, 2002; Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974). Building on this notion of rationality, it follows that people making decisions about what

assignments and experiences to go for tend to choose those that maximize value for themselves. In other words, they engage in the explicit or implicit comparison of available alternatives, and choose those with the most favourable input-outcome projections (Gavetti and Levinthal, 2000). For example, the literature on boundaryless careers provides evidence that employees increasingly take charge of their own career development (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Stahl, Miller and Tung, 2002), and they do so by undertaking activities enabling them to achieve personal ambitions and a level of professional excellence that allows them to be masters of their own career destiny (Eby, Butts and Lockwood, 2003).

It thus seems logical that individual employees' perceptions of the effectiveness of different development activities are likely to influence their willingness to seek them out. In other words, the more effective a leadership development tool one perceives challenging assignments to be, the more favourable its input-output ratio is expected to be, and the more likely the person is to undertake such tasks. Hence:

*H3: The more effective developmental tools individuals perceive challenging global leadership development activities to be, the more willing they will be to undertake such activities.*

Fourth, and related to the above, relevant previous experience (such as earlier international assignments, cross-functional rotation or other strong learning experiences) may also shape an individual's perceptions of challenging assignments, giving them first-hand knowledge of the developmental benefits that can be accrued (Gavetti and Levinthal, 2000; Morris & Snell, 2011).

It is clear from the literature that international experience, for example, is a key source of competence development (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2000; Gregersen et al., 1998), increasing an individual's exposure to and acquisition of various leadership-related skills and knowledge such as a broader mindset, absorptive capacity, and networking (Cappellen and Janssens, 2005; Carpenter et

al., 2000). Although earlier assignments may have negative connotations if they were not fully successful, on the whole previous experience of overcoming challenges tends to result in feelings of personal competence development, growth and satisfaction (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Suutari and Mäkelä (2007), for instance, report that managers with multiple international experiences tend to appropriate a major part of their personal development to previous challenging assignments. In addition to international working experience, studies abroad typically offer similar opportunities for learning and overcoming challenges (e.g., Van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005).

Consequently, we argue that, *ceteris paribus*, employees who have undertaken foreign assignments or have studied abroad are more likely to see the opportunities and to be less concerned about the potential risks (knowing they have overcome such adversities before) involved in undertaking challenging activities than those without such experiences. We thus put forward the following hypotheses:

*H4a: The higher the number of foreign assignments that individuals have done, the more willing they will be to undertake challenging global leadership development activities.*

*H4b: Individuals who have studied abroad will be more willing to undertake challenging global leadership development activities than those who have not studied abroad.*

Similar benefits can also accrue from cross-functional experience. There is a sizable body of literature on cross-boundary teams working across functional, unit and cultural boundaries, for example (see e.g., Stahl et al., 2010 for a review). The potential benefits of such a variety of experiences include entering into new and diverse knowledge and network relationships, being better able to understand other domains and perspectives, and increased innovativeness (Boland and Tenkasi, 1995; Obstfeldt, 2005). Furthermore, working in diverse teams has also been linked to

satisfaction, indicating that exposure to new and different ways of thinking and the learning potential inherent in a cross-boundary environment may be highly rewarding (Stahl et al., 2010). Therefore, following a similar logic to the above, individuals who have had previous positive and beneficial cross-functional experiences should be more willing to take on challenging global leadership activities in the future. We thus suggest the following:

*H4c: Individuals who have had previous cross-functional experience will be more willing to undertake challenging global leadership development activities than those who do have not had such experience.*

## **Methods**

We tested the above hypotheses using a questionnaire administered to 427 respondents from 14 MNCs, the majority of which are headquartered in Finland (two of them are foreign multinationals with major operations in Finland, which were the focus of the study in these companies). The organizations varied in size from 1,000 to over 17,000 employees, and came from a variety of industries including manufacturing, finance and services, and communications. Contact with the companies was established through corporate HR managers, who also served as key informants throughout the study. The managers were asked to identify individuals in their corporations who they believed might become future top managers or members of the management team, defined as employees “you believe might be top managers / management-team members in your company in the year 2020.” The number of such individuals varied between 20 and 100 depending on the corporation. The respondents received an e-mail invitation to take part in the survey, which was to be completed online. After two e-mail reminders, a response rate of 64 per cent was achieved.



## Dependent variable

**Willingness to undertake challenging global leadership development activities:** The respondents were asked to respond to the following question on a seven-point scale (1: not at all, 7: to a great extent): “*How WILLING are you to undertake the following leadership development activities during the next ten years?*”: Moving to new positions (for at least one year) in other countries; Moving to new positions (for at least one year) in another division/business unit; Moving to new positions (for at least one year) in other functions (e.g., services, sales, HR, finance); Undertaking shorter-term job assignments in other countries (for 2-12 months); Undertaking shorter-term job assignments in another division/business unit (for 2-12 months); Undertaking shorter-term (for 2-12 months) job assignments in other functions (e.g., services, HR, finance); Working on cross-boundary (borders, functions, business units/division) project assignments alongside your regular job; Starting new business units; and Implementing reorganizations.

These items together created a formative dependent variable consisting of the different types of challenging assignments MNCs most typically use in their on-the-job global leadership development (see e.g., Evans et al., 2011). A formative construct is one in which the indicators together influence, or cause, the latent variable, as compared to a reflective construct in which the indicators are influenced by, or reflect, the latent variable (Bollen and Lennox, 1991). Such a formative construct is often referred to as a ‘combination’ (Maccallum and Browne, 1993), or ‘composite’ (MacKenzie et al., 2005) variable, as the measures are seen to ‘form’ the construct and the measurement error is at the construct level (in that the indicators may not explain part of the construct) rather than the indicator level (Bollen and Lennox, 1991). The Cronbach’s Alpha of the dependent variable was .88.

## Independent variables

**Talent identification.** In order to assess whether or not the respondent had been identified as talent, we asked him or her: “*Are you formally identified by [The MNC] as belonging to a talent pool/ group of high potentials or similar?*” (see Björkman et al., 2012). We then created a two-category grouping variable in which group 1 = those who know that they have been formally identified as talent, and group 2 = those who do not know whether they are identified as talent or know that they are not formally identified as talent.

**Identification with the corporation.** In order to measure identification with the corporation we asked the respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following three statements, adapted from the values-based construct validated by Reade (2001): *i) The corporation’s global practices express my own values, ii) The corporation represents values that are important to me, and iii) I see no difference between my values and the corporate values of my corporation.* The questions were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = “do not agree” and 7 = “agree entirely”), and the Cronbach’s Alpha was .78.

**Perceived effectiveness.** The variable assessing the perceived effectiveness of challenging assignments was obtained by asking the respondents to respond on a seven-point scale (1= not at all, 7= to a great extent) to the question: “*How EFFECTIVE do you believe the following leadership development activities are?*” The practices were identical to those of the dependent variable (Cronbach’s Alpha .90).

**Previous experience.** First, the variable **Worked abroad** was assessed on the following question: “How many times have you worked/done an assignment of at least 2 months abroad?”. The question “Have you ever studied abroad for a period of at least 2 months?” was used for the variable **Studied abroad**, and received a value of 1 if the person had studied abroad and 0 if not. Lastly, the variable **Cross-functional experience** was assessed with the question “Have you previously worked in another function?” (1=yes; 0=no).

### Control variables

We added a number of control variables to the model. First, several individual-level characteristics may cause exogenous variation in the data. For example, respondents of different genders and ages may differ in their attitudes to challenging assignments, and in being able to undertake them, due to family circumstances and spousal careers for example, in particular if they involved moving abroad or travelling extensively (Altman and Shortland, 2008). We therefore added a control variable for both the gender (1=male, 2=female) and the age of the respondent (1 = -30 years, 2 = 31-35 years, 3 = 36-40 years, 4 = 41-45, 5 = 46-50 and 6 = 51+ years).

Second, additional variance may emanate from the respondent’s formal education, indicating differences in current capabilities, which may influence the need for further development. For example, an MBA/EMBA degree is intended, among other things, to develop global leadership capabilities, and may influence the propensity of individuals to engage in further development. We added this as a binary control variable (1 = MBA/EMBA degree and 0 = no MBA/EMBA degree). Third, we controlled for the respondent’s tenure, in both the corporation and his/her current unit, and current position, as the length of practical experience may also influence both future development needs and the willingness to develop. Lastly, on the assumption that exogenous firm-

level factors such as the corporate culture can have an influence, we controlled for the corporation through a blocking variable in our general linear regression model.

## Results

Given our nested dataset, we tested our hypotheses by conducting a multilevel analysis using general linear regression modelling. We considered this approach appropriate as it enabled us to control for exogenous firm-level effects through the categorical grouping (blocking) variable ‘Corporation’. We also included other control variables in the model. Table 1 gives the correlation results and the key descriptive statistics, and Table 2 presents the results of the general linear regression. In order to separate the effects of the control and independent variables we estimated two models: the baseline model (Model 1) only includes the control variables, whereas the full model (Model 2) incorporates all the independent and control variables.

INSERT TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

As Model 1 shows, of the control variables, age ( $\beta=-.10$ ;  $t=-1.98^*$ ) and tenure in the unit ( $\beta=-.13$ ;  $t=-2.76^{**}$ ) were significant. This indicates that older, more established employees tend, to a larger extent, to have already reached their desired and/or potential career level and are thus less willing to undertake new challenging assignments (they may also have other restrictions, such as family ties, than younger employees). All the other control variables were non-significant, including the blocking variable ‘Corporation’, indicating no significant corporate-level differences.

Our hypotheses were assessed in Model 2 ( $F = 8.035^{***}$ ,  $R^2=.33$ ). Hypothesis 1 posits that individuals who know that they are formally identified as ‘talent’ are more willing to undertake challenging assignments than are those who are not identified as such. Our results support this

hypothesis in that the analysis shows a significant difference between the two groups ( $\beta=.30$ ;  $t=2.66^{**}$ ). Hypothesis 2, suggesting that the more individuals identify with the corporation, the more willing they are to undertake challenging assignments, is also supported ( $\beta=.10$ ;  $t=2.03^*$ ). The third hypothesis posits a relationship between individual-level perceptions of the effectiveness of challenging assignments, and this is also strongly supported ( $\beta=.42$ ;  $t=9.21^{***}$ ).

Next, we assessed the effects of the experience variables. Hypothesis 4a positing that previous experience of working abroad would be significantly related to an individual's willingness to undertake challenging assignments is supported ( $\beta=.24$ ;  $t=2.10^*$ ), as is Hypothesis 4b assessing the effect of whether the individual had studied abroad or not ( $\beta=.26$ ;  $t=2.42^*$ ). Lastly, according to Hypothesis 4c, previous cross-functional experience also increases employee willingness, and the results suggest that this is indeed the case ( $\beta=.27$ ;  $t=2.45^*$ ).

#### *Willingness to undertake international assignments*

Having estimated the effects of our independent variables on the dependent variable 'Willingness to undertake challenging global leadership development activities', we conducted a post hoc analysis with regard to the respondents' willingness to undertake international assignments in order to assess whether the effects would be similar with this particularly important tool for developing global leaders (Stroh et al., 2005).<sup>3</sup> We replaced the dependent variable in the post hoc model with the variable 'Willingness to undertake international assignments', measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7 with reference to the question "*How WILLING are you to undertake the following leadership development activities during the next ten years? Moving to new positions (for at least*

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<sup>3</sup> We also conducted a post-hoc test dividing the dependent variable into 'long-term' and 'short-term' assignments. The results of this test were largely similar to those of the original model and to each other. It thus seems that the salient difference between types of assignment is that of domestic vs. international, rather than short-term vs. long-term, at least in the context of global leadership development. However, it may be that different predictors than those used here will yield notable differences between the willingness to undertake long-term vs. short-term assignments, and we call for more research in this potentially interesting area.

*one year) in other countries and Undertaking shorter-term job assignments in other countries (for 2-12 months)*” (Cronbach’s alpha .73). We then changed the perceived effectiveness variable accordingly in order to assess the perceived effectiveness of international assignments (Cronbach’s alpha .74) (we also ran the model with the original perceived effectiveness of challenging assignments, the results remaining broadly similar).

The results of this model are largely similar to those of the original model, but with interesting differences that shed more light on the important issue of international assignment motivations. In this model, those identified as corporate talent were also more willing to undertake international assignments ( $\beta=.47$ ;  $t=2.95^{**}$ ). The corporate values hypothesis was also marginally significant, although only at the  $p<.10$  –level ( $\beta=.12$ ;  $t=1.74$ ). Further, perceived effectiveness had a significant impact on the willingness to undertake international assignments, as expected ( $\beta=.45$ ;  $t=8.49^{***}$ ).

However, an interesting picture emerged from the experience variables, in that whereas ‘Studied abroad’ ( $\beta=.34$ ;  $t=2.21^*$ ) had a significant effect, ‘Worked abroad’ did not ( $\beta=.24$ ;  $t=1.49$ ). This may indicate that many individuals with previous experience of working abroad perceive less of a need to do so in the future. There may be a similar explanation for the surprising but interesting negatively significant result with regard to the control variable ‘MBA/EMBA degree’ ( $\beta=-.67$ ;  $t=-3.12^{**}$ ). Although we can only speculate, it may be that individuals who have obtained an MBA/EMBA degree feel that they have already made significant investments in their competence development, and therefore perceive less of a need to do so in the future, particularly with regard to the most extensive personal (and, for many, family) investment of taking on assignments abroad. Negatively significant  $\beta$ -values were also found with regard to the respondent’s tenure in the corporation ( $\beta=-.16$ ;  $t=-2.49^*$ ) and at the  $p<.10$  level for age ( $\beta=-.12$ ;  $t=-1.92^{**}$ ;  $p=.56$ ), indicating that more experienced employees are less willing to take on international assignments. These findings may again point to the negative influence of family-related issues on

the motivation to accept such assignments (Altman and Shortland, 2008). Cross-functional experience was not associated with an increased willingness to engage in international assignments. The results of the post hoc test are presented in Table 3 below.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to identify factors associated with the willingness of potential leaders to undertake challenging developmental activities aimed at fostering global leadership. According to our analysis of 427 respondents from 14 multinational corporations, the willingness to undertake such challenging assignments is positively associated with the person's knowing that he/she has been formally identified as talent, his/her identification with corporate values, and his/her previous experience. The significant effect of having been included in a corporate talent pool is noteworthy: it seems that just the fact of being told of having been identified as a potential future leader may in itself have a positive impact on leadership development (McCall et al., 1988; De Pater et al., 2009). These findings are also in line with those of Björkman et al. (2012) suggesting that being identified as a talent is positively and significantly related to a number of positive employee attitudes, including the acceptance of increasing performance demands and a commitment to building up one's skills.

Further, the more effective individuals perceived global leadership development activities to be, the more willing they were to undertake them. This result points to the importance of motivational factors in accepting challenging assignments, with the practical implication that corporations would do well to communicate the effectiveness of such experiences in terms of the personal development of their employees. Research on organizational alignment reports similar

conclusions: providing a rationale for strategic decisions and actions has a significantly positive effect on employees' strategically aligned behaviour (van Riel, Berens and Dijkstra, 2009) – in other words, if the firm explicitly makes it clear to its employees why on-the-job challenges are important and valued, the employees are more likely to want to tackle them. These motivational aspects stand out among the key managerial implications of this study, and we return to them below.

Previous experience of studying abroad, having worked abroad, and having worked in another function were all positively associated with an individual's willingness to undertake challenging development activities. Although one must be careful not to draw far-reaching conclusions based on cross-sectional data (it would be preferable to examine changes in willingness before and after a particular experience, for example, although this is highly challenging on a practical level in terms of data access), the results indicate that such experiences increase the individual's willingness to undertake a range of challenging assignments. These results build on and expand findings reported in the literature on international management suggesting that broadening experiences, which are challenging by their very nature, both effectively facilitate the improvement of leadership skills (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2000; Gregersen et al., 1998), and constitute an important source of personal development (Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007).

Certain results related to the control variable should also be noted. Although there was no difference in terms of gender, tenure in the corporation and age were negatively related to the willingness to undertake both challenging assignments in general and international assignments in particular. One possible explanation is that more established employees are likely to have already reached their desired and/or potential career levels, and may also have more family and other personal restrictions, and therefore see the input-output (investment-benefit) ratio as less favourable. Another surprising finding with regard to the post hoc analyses was that individuals with an MBA/EMBA degree were less willing to accept international assignments. As discussed



above, one logical explanation for this unexpected result is the possibility that such individuals think they have already made sufficient investments in their own knowledge and skills, and thus do not need to undertake international assignments (which require more personal and family investment than other types of challenging assignments). In fact, previous research has shown that MBAs often approach their degree from a return-on-investment perspective, and one key takeout reported by graduates is the development of leadership skills (Bruce and Edgington, 2003; Global MBA Graduate Survey Report, 2011). We conclude that further research is needed on the attitudinal effects of tenure, as well as of MBAs/EMBA's and other similar activities related to managerial and leadership development.

Lastly, our post hoc findings with regard to international assignments are interesting and show a significant contrast versus other types of challenging assignments. As briefly noted above, this indicates that, at least in the MNC context, the international vs. the domestic dimension is the most salient in creating differences in the willingness to undertake challenging on-the-job developmental assignments, rather than a long-term vs. short-term dimension, for example (see Footnote 3). This is noteworthy, and in line with previous findings indicating that international assignments are not always welcome (Collings et al., 2007; see also Altman and Shortland, 2008). What we add is comparison with a broader range of challenging assignments, and find that it is not so much the fact that the job is challenging, but the internationality (or perhaps, the non-domesticity) of the experience that is the problem. Caligiuri, Joshi and Lazarova (2009) and Altman and Shortland (2008) discuss international assignment issues among women expatriates, in which family and spousal considerations feature strongly; such considerations are the likely culprits more generally, too. Yet, international assignments have been shown to be crucial elements of global leadership development. Perhaps individuals and firms should be more creative in offering international experiences: they could send employees abroad at an earlier stage in their career, look into non-

traditional types of international assignment (such as commuter, part-time and virtual assignments; see e.g., Collins, Scullion & Morley, 2007), or focus more on family support.

Like all research, this study suffers from certain limitations. First, the results may at least partly reflect the context in which the study was conducted, the 14 MNCs being mainly headquartered in Finland. In particular, Nordic egalitarian values may influence the extent to which companies differentiate between ‘talents’ and ‘others’, employee attitudes with regard to differentiation, and family/spousal considerations of international assignments. Therefore, any generalizations beyond the Nordic countries should be made with caution.

Second, given the cross-sectional nature of our study, we cannot rule out the possibility that common method variance influenced the results. In particular, it would be logical for individuals who perceive challenging assignments as effective to indicate in the context of one and the same questionnaire their willingness to take them on, thus introducing a social desirability bias. We took several steps to detect and reduce the likelihood of such bias, both in the design of our questionnaire as well as in the data analysis, in line with suggestions put forward by Podsakoff and Organ (1986), and Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003). In terms of research design, we placed the dependent variable items and the ‘effectiveness’ independent variable items in different screens and at a distance from each other in the on-line questionnaire in an effort to ensure that there was a significant time lapse between the two sets of items. Additionally, the dependent variable items were answered first. This created a degree of psychological separation between the effectiveness independent variable items and the dependent variable, which diminishes the effects of consistency artefacts and creates a perceived psychological disconnection between the independent and dependent variables (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986; Podsakoff et al., 2003). We also ran Harman’s single factor test to assess the extent of potential common method bias across the independent variables: we ran three explorative factor analyses (unrotated principal component analysis, principal component analysis with Varimax rotation and principal axis analysis with Varimax

rotation), all of which revealed the presence of three distinct factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The three factors together accounted for 59.48 per cent of the total variance (principal component analysis with Varimax rotation), the largest one accounting for 20.95 per cent. Thus, although some bias may still be present, this should not have an undue influence on our results.

We could conclude from our results that individual-level motivational factors are an important issue to consider in global leadership development. Employees who recognize the value of challenging assignments, either as a result of previous positive experiences or cognitive action-outcome considerations, are more likely to want to undertake challenging activities that foster global leadership development. Further – and importantly – the likely benefits are greater when individuals are motivated. We know from previous research that individual-level attitudes and conditions have a major impact on the actions and behaviour of employees (Felin et al., 2012). Therefore, in addition to paying attention to various tools and means of leadership development, firms should also consider motivational factors that are internal to the individuals. In fact, research has shown that *both* ability *and* motivation drive behaviour (Minbaeva et al., 2003), yet many training and development activities primarily and explicitly focus exclusively on the knowledge and skills dimension. Motivational aspects are likely to be particularly important in an era of self-managed careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Stahl et al., 2002), and we call for more research and for more practical focus in this area: some firms are doing this already, and perhaps more should follow suit.

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**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Means	5.30	0.46	5.33	5.09	.41	.36	.62	1.27	3.15	0.13	4.48	3.56	2.87
sd	1.18	0.47	1.06	1.12	.49	.48	.49	0.46	1.32	0.34	1.29	1.41	1.23
1. Willingness to undertake challenging assignments													
2. Talent identification													
3. Identification with corporation		.06	.06										
4. Perceived effectiveness		.08	.15**										
5. Worked abroad		.20**	-.02	.94									
6. Studied abroad		.23**	.03	.14**	.21**								
7. Cross-functional experience		.16**	-.01	.03	.15**	.05							
8. Gender		-.01	.13**	.08	-.11*	.06	-.13**						
9. Age		-.08	.05	-.03	.23**	-.13**	.04	-.06					
10. MBA/EMBA degree		-.01	.02	.05	.06	-.00	-.05	-.02	.12*				
11. Tenure in corporation		-.12*	-.04	.01	-.12*	-.11*	.23**	-.07	.11*	-.06			
12. Tenure in unit		-.20**	.01	-.15**	-.16**	-.17**	-.09	-.15**	.04	-.03	.38**		
13. Tenure in position		-.15**	.05	-.05	-.07	-.06	-.11*	-.04	.06	.06	.24**	.44**	

All two-tailed tests. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table 2.** Regression models: the willingness to undertake challenging assignments

	Model 1. Controls only			Model 2. Full model		
	B	Std. error	<i>t</i> -statistic	B	Std. error	<i>t</i> -statistic
Corporation <sup>4</sup>			NS			NS
Talent identification				.30	.11	2.66**
Identification with corporation				.10	.05	2.03*
Perceived effectiveness				.42	.05	9.21***
Worked abroad				.24	.11	2.10*
Studied abroad				.26	.11	2.42*
Cross-functional experience				.27	.11	2.45*
Gender	-.09	.13	-.66	-.08	.12	-.65
Age	-.10	.05	-1.98*	-.08	.05	.06
MBA/EMBA	-.11	.17	-.61	-.14	.15	-.97
Tenure in corporation	-.05	.05	-.97	-.11	.05	-2.31*
Tenure in unit	-.13	.05	-2.76**	-.04	.04	-.94
Tenure in position	-.05	.05	-.94	-.03	.05	.46
R <sup>2</sup>	.09			.33		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.06			.29		
F	2.150**			8.035***		
N	427			427		

\**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001, NS = not significant.

<sup>4</sup> The blocking variable 'Corporation' gives several coefficients, which are not recorded in the interest of space and relevance. Both the blocking variable and the individual company coefficients are non-significant.

**Table 3.** Post hoc regression models: the willingness to undertake international assignments

	Model 1. Controls only			Model 2. Full model		
	B	Std. error	<i>t</i> -statistic	B	Std. error	<i>t</i> -statistic
Corporation <sup>5</sup>			NS			NS
Talent identification				.47	.16	2.95**
Identification with corporation				.12	.07	1.74
Perceived effectiveness				.45	.05	.49***
Worked abroad				.24	.16	1.49
Studied abroad				.34	.16	2.21*
Cross-functional experience				.03	.16	.22
Gender	-.17	.18	.35	-.17	.17	-.98
Age	-.17	.07	-2.58*	-.12	.06	.06
MBA/EMBA	-.66**	.24	-2.78	-.67	.21	-3.12**
Tenure in corporation	-.13	.07	-1.86*	-.16	.07	-2.49*
Tenure in unit	-.13	.07	-1.86	-.02	.06	-.37
Tenure in position	-.08	.07	-1.14	-.09	.07	-1.31
R <sup>2</sup>	.12			.31		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.08			.26		
F	2.965***			7.016***		
N	427			427		

\**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001, NS = not significant.

<sup>5</sup> The blocking variable 'Corporation' gives several coefficients, which are not recorded in the interest of space and relevance. Both the blocking variable and the individual company coefficients are non-significant.