

The Corporate–Individual ROI Gap: Why Returning Expatriates Leave Despite Successful Assignments

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ABSTRACT

International assignments represent expensive and time-consuming endeavours for multinational enterprises (MNEs). However, many repatriated expatriates (REs) depart from the organisation within one to two years after returning, even when the assignment was deemed successful by typical standards. This apparent paradox underpins this conceptual paper, which suggests that expatriate return on investment (ROI) comprises two separate and often diverging accounts: a corporate ROI, calculated based on cost recovery, knowledge transfer, and strategic capability development; and an individual ROI, assessed by the returnee in terms of career capital, status, and psychological contract fulfilment. Building on psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989, 1995) alongside career capital and boundaryless career theory (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Dickmann & Harris, 2005), the paper integrates existing research on expatriate ROI (McNulty & Tharenou, 2004; McNulty et al., 2013), repatriate turnover (Kraimer et al., 2012; Stroh et al., 1998), and repatriate knowledge transfer (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). It introduces the Dual-Ledger ROI Divergence Model, which explains post-assignment attrition as a consequence of the increasing divergence between these ledgers, rather than of either ledger in isolation. The analysis then focuses on Nigeria, where the "Japa–Japada" migration cycle, a significant skilled-labour drain, and poorly institutionalised repatriation practices make the ROI gap for both companies and individuals particularly critical for organisational competitiveness and national progress. The paper's novelty lies in reframing repatriate turnover as a relational-accounting problem rather than a readjustment or satisfaction problem, and in situating this reframing within an emerging-economy setting that the extant literature has largely overlooked. The paper closes with a theory-informed research agenda and practical recommendations for Nigerian and multinational employers seeking to narrow the gap and retain returnee talent.

Keywords: expatriate return on investment, repatriation, psychological contract, career capital, employee turnover, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

International assignments remain among the most expensive and strategically consequential human resource interventions available to multinational enterprises (MNEs). Collings et al. (2007) estimate that approximately 50 million people are expatriates in the sense of living and working abroad for a defined period, a population whose management has spawned a global mobility services industry now valued in the billions of dollars and still expanding as firms pursue emerging markets, technical specialists and cross-border integration. As a consequence of this scale, MNEs invest significant resources in the appointment, training, migration and remuneration of assignees, and hope that the assignment will provide the organisation with improved managerial competence, market knowledge, and organisational learning (McNulty & Tharenou, 2004). However, there is a large and, most strikingly, consistent set of facts suggesting that much of this investment is dissipated in the return leg of the assignment–repatriation process. Some industry figures indicate that, with the aid of the homecoming, the likelihood of a repatriate's turnover increases sharply to approximately 12% after one year and up to 44% within two years (International Insurance, 2026), while estimates by Allianz Care put it at around 1 in 4 after 12 months. In fact, the same figures indicate that only a small proportion of those who their employers bring back feel their skills, networks and cultural understanding have been fully exploited, with one survey finding 58% of repatriates were not promoted, despite expecting to be promoted, and 61%

saying that there was little opportunity to use their international experience once home (Allianz Care, 2025). These are not "marginal" numbers; they are numbers that are more common among those who can be seen as the "firm's employees. These are numbers among those who can be considered as the "firm's employees," and they are not "marginal" numbers.

Two ideas underlie this conundrum, and they need to be clarified immediately before the argument can move forward. The first is repatriation, which is not simply an employee's physical return to the home country, but a whole new organisational and psychological shift, one that often comes as a surprise and is not well managed, and thus is usually much harder to adjust to than the initial expatriation process (Szkudlarek, 2010). Expatriate return on investment (ROI) is the second, and the analytical fulcrum of this paper. Expatriate ROI, as defined by McNulty and Tharenou (2004), is the ratio of costs that an organisation may experience from sending an employee abroad, such as salary premiums, relocation, family support and replacement costs, to the benefits it receives from that assignment, such as knowledge transfer, leadership development and global capability. Critically, McNulty et al. (2013) later showed empirically that this corporate-level determination of ROI is analytically and practically distinct from an individual-level calculation that the expatriate makes on his/her own, which is oriented around career advancement, skill utilisation, status, and the realisation of expectations set before and during the assignment. The present paper makes that distinction (Corporate ROI vs Individual ROI) a theoretical tool used to explain how and why "successful" assignments (by the conventional organisational measures of completion, performance ratings, cost containment, etc.) can fail to result in the return of the returnee. This paper does not identify any single fault in the adjustment or support process as the reason for post-repatriation attrition; rather, it attributes the growing disparity between the two internally coherent but externally divergent accounts as the main reason for that attrition.

This worldwide trend takes on special poignancy when it arrives in Nigeria. Nigeria is also one of the largest exporters of skilled professional labour and, increasingly, a place of active return migration that is now commonly known in Nigeria as "Japa-Japada" ("Japa" is derived from the Yoruba language for leaving the country, and "Japada" is the new term for the return journey) (Thomas et al., 2025). The size of the outward flow is significant – the World Bank (2024) estimates that Nigeria received US\$19.5 billion in remittance inflows in 2023, up from US\$17.2 billion in 2020, with a significant share attributed to the growing number of skilled Nigerians residing and working abroad. The World Health Organisation estimates that more than 15,000 Nigerian doctors are working abroad, more than the number of doctors in Nigeria's federal health system. At the same time, the Academic Staff Union of Universities has reported that over 50% of lecturers at the nation's universities under 40 have held academic appointments abroad since 2020 (TheCable, 2025). Labour-market research in Nigeria also supports this migration and the corresponding challenges Nigerian employers face in retaining their returnees, either because they lack career development opportunities within their companies or because the skills acquired abroad are not applied there (Isiaka, 2025; Lawal et al., 2022). In this context, the economy that's also bleeding talent and trying to bring it back, albeit with mixed results, the ROI on the corporate-individual level is a very national issue: lost talent is lost talent, and each time a returner is tempted back to Nigeria, a second time, it is not just a cost to the organisation, it is a loss of the very talent the "Japada" movement is supposed to bring back.

There is a large body of academic literature that confirms (though not entirely uniformly) the points of this argument. On the corporate side, McNulty and Tharenou (2004) and subsequently McNulty, De Cieri and Hutchings (2013) established that ROI cannot be adequately understood as a single figure computed from the firm's books alone; their Asia-Pacific study found that substantially different antecedents drove corporate ROI and individual ROI and were, in many cases, poorly correlated with one another, such that a firm's own sense of a successful, cost-justified assignment coexisted with considerable individual dissatisfaction. Breitenmoser and Bader's (2016) critical review of repatriation outcomes affecting corporate ROI catalogued a wide range of organisational-level variables, career support, mentoring, position guarantees and knowledge-transfer mechanisms, that shape whether firms actually realise the returns they expect, while Lazarova and Tarique (2005) showed that the transfer of tacit knowledge from repatriate to organisation is itself contingent on the returnee's motivation and on organisational absorptive capacity, meaning that even the corporate ledger is partly hostage to the individual's post-return psychological state. On the individual side, a parallel and largely separate stream of research has used psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989, 1995) to explain repatriate dissatisfaction and exit: Perera, Chew and Nielsen (2017) reconceptualised expatriate failure as a

function of perceived breach of obligations owed by both the parent and host organisations, Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison and Ren (2012) demonstrated that identity strain arising from a perceived loss of status on return predicts voluntary turnover independently of job satisfaction, and Stroh, Gregersen and Black's (1998) classic study of the gap between repatriates' pre-return expectations and their post-return reality remains one of the most frequently cited empirical demonstrations that expectation-reality divergence, not maladjustment per se, drives the decision to leave.

Notably, however, these two streams of literature, the corporate-ROI stream descending from McNulty and Tharenou (2004) and the individual psychological-contract and career-capital stream descending from Rousseau (1989) and DeFillippi and Arthur (1994), have developed largely in parallel rather than as an integrated account of the same phenomenon. Mehreen et al.'s (2025) systematic review of 129 peer-reviewed repatriation articles published between 1989 and 2024 confirms this fragmentation directly, concluding that the field has moved from an early focus on individual readjustment to a later focus on organisational outcomes such as retention and knowledge transfer without ever fully theorising the relationship between the two levels of analysis, and further finding that almost 70% of the reviewed studies drew on repatriates from developed economies such as the United States, Australia and Japan, leaving repatriation in emerging markets, including virtually the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa, conspicuously under-examined. While studies have therefore established the existence of a corporate ROI logic (McNulty & Tharenou, 2004; McNulty et al., 2013; Breitenmoser & Bader, 2016) and, separately, the existence of an individual psychological-contract and career-capital logic that governs repatriate satisfaction and turnover (Rousseau, 1989; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Kraimer et al., 2012; Perera et al., 2017), there remains a paucity of theoretical work that treats these two logics as a single, interacting system whose divergence, rather than the deficiency of either logic alone, is the proximate cause of post-repatriation exit. Despite the availability of a growing body of Nigerian human resource and migration scholarship documenting skilled-labour outflow, the Japa-Japada return cycle and weak organisational retention practice (Isiaka, 2025; Lawal et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2025), a conceptual account of why completed international assignments nonetheless culminate in repatriate exit, specific to the Nigerian organisational and institutional context, is lacking. Against this backdrop, this study ultimately asks: through what conceptual mechanism does the divergence between corporate and individual assessments of expatriate ROI explain the voluntary turnover of successfully repatriated employees, and what does this mechanism imply for organisations operating in Nigeria's distinctive migration and labour-market environment?

To answer this question, the paper pursues four specific objectives: (i) to synthesise and critically integrate the hitherto separate corporate-ROI and individual psychological-contract/career-capital literatures into a single theoretical account of repatriate turnover; (ii) to develop and present a conceptual model, the Dual-Ledger ROI Divergence Model, that specifies the mechanisms, moderators and organisational outcomes through which this divergence operates; (iii) to contextualise this model within the Nigerian labour market, drawing on the country's Japa-Japada migration dynamics and documented organisational retention practices; and (iv) to derive theory-informed managerial, policy and future-research implications for narrowing the corporate-individual ROI gap. The novelty of the paper is twofold. Theoretically, it is, to the author's knowledge, the first work to explicitly formalise the "ROI gap" as a relational construct, the distance between two socially constructed ledgers, rather than treating corporate ROI and individual ROI as parallel but separately measured outcomes, thereby offering a parsimonious explanation for why assignment "success" and repatriate "retention" can and frequently do diverge. Nigeria is among the first countries to test the boundaries of current repatriation theory. However, it remains largely unexamined due to its significant skilled emigration, ongoing discussions on reverse migration, and its primarily informal approach to managing repatriation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper combines insights from two theoretical streams (psychological contract theory and career capital/boundaryless career theory) to delineate the mechanism by which a disconnect between the corporate ROI ledger and the individual ROI ledger results in repatriate turnover. Neither of these traditions alone is enough: psychological contract theory helps one understand how a returnee perceives the gap as a violation and thus worthy of action. Career capital theory helps one understand what the returnee perceives as having been substantively lost or gained during the gap. Read together, they provide the theoretical architecture for the Dual-Ledger ROI Divergence Model proposed in Section 5.

Psychological contract theory

Rousseau (1989, 1995) defines the psychological contract as an individual employee's belief, formed through explicit and implicit organisational promises, regarding the terms of reciprocal exchange between that employee and the employer. Unlike the formal employment contract, the psychological contract is subjective, perceptual and asymmetric: it exists in the mind of the employee, is rarely fully known to the organisation, and is violated whenever the employee perceives that the organisation has failed to deliver on an obligation it was believed to have undertaken. Applied to expatriation, Perera et al. (2017) extend Rousseau's framework into a dual-foci model, arguing that expatriates form psychological contracts not with one but with two organisational parties, the parent company that sends them and the host company or subsidiary that receives them, and that expatriate "failure", including post-repatriation exit, is better explained by breach of these contracts than by the maladjustment explanations that dominated earlier expatriate research. Wang, Wang and Zhu's (2023) multi-foci study of Chinese expatriates lends further support to this reframing, showing that expatriates hold distinguishable and independently viable expectations of career support, recognition and reintegration assistance from each organisational party with whom they interact.

The psychological contract is most fragile at the time of return, especially in repatriation. The assignment is usually a one-way street; on departure, it is often expected that the individual will be able to offer the employer a return on their investment, whether in a promotion, a wider scope of work or a higher profile within the organisation. Kraimer et al. (2012) demonstrate, however, that for many of the returnees, the discrepancy between the international, high-status identity they cultivate overseas and the comparatively low status, narrower scope or lack of advancement they experience at home is felt – and not necessarily dissatisfaction with pay and conditions per se – that predicts voluntary turnover. This claim is substantiated by empirical evidence from Stroh et al. (1998), which shows that only the discrepancy between what repatriates anticipated prior to return and what they actually experienced after return is linked to intention to leave, rather than the levels of experience. From a psychological contract point of view, this is a simple violation – the organisation was thought to have made a promise (or implied it through the employee's reasonable expectations) about the course of the post-assignment relationship, and the individual ROI ledger is the employee's own record of whether the promise was kept. If it is not, then exiting is a logical relational reaction to an actual violation, consistent with the context of the psychological contract literature, which suggests that violations lead to reduced trust, commitment, and, ultimately, retention.

Career capital and boundaryless career theory

The second pillar concerns what is exchanged and what is felt to be lost when exchange does not occur. DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) competency-based theory of the boundaryless career conceptualises career capital in terms of three interdependent competencies: knowing-why (identity, motivation and values), knowing-how (skills and expertise) and knowing-whom (professional networks and relationships). Increasingly, as careers become less dependent on any single organisation, individuals consider jobs in terms of career capital rather than just immediate pay, and assess whether they can retain that capital within their current organisation (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). This applies directly to international assignments, as Dickmann and Harris (2005) demonstrate empirically, showing that assignments are perceived as a central way to build all three types of career capital and that the recognition, use and reward of the capital by the employer is a separate and independent process from the accumulation of the capital.

Theoretically, this difference is what is driving the gap between corporate and individual ROI. ROI is considered when the assignment has generated value from an organisational asset for the company, transferred the knowledge within the market, whether the individual who created the asset sees any ROI, or built a new subsidiary's capability. From the person's point of view, on the other hand, ROI is only realised when the career capital they have generated overseas (the knowing-why, knowing-how, knowing-whom) is recognised and translated into tangible career progression at home. A returnee who believes that the organisation is not willing or able to utilise his or her career capital for promotion, remit or recognition has all incentives not to return; indeed, according to the boundaryless career logic, the professional legitimacy to reject to mobilize the same capital elsewhere, such as with another organisation, another firm, another country, another region, even – and here the true potential of the boundaryless career is unleashed – abroad, by re-emigration. In this sense,

the Nigerian "Japa-Japada" cycle as described by Thomas et al. (2025) is a micro-level instantiation of a career capital logic at the level of the individual professional, but one that is population-scale: once a professional has returned, he or she has a demonstrated tendency to move his or her career capital from one country to another when it is no longer flowing into the home country.

Integrating the two lenses: the ROI ledger as a jointly constructed, divergence-prone account

Taken together, psychological contract theory supplies the affective and relational mechanism (perceived breach motivates exit). In contrast, career capital theory provides the substantive content of the exchange being evaluated (specifically, what is being gained or withheld). The corporate ROI ledger and the individual ROI ledger should be seen not as two separate measures of the same reality but as two socially constructed accounts. Each is internally consistent according to its own logic: one based on cost-benefit accounting for the firm, and the other on psychological contract fulfilment and career capital conversion for the individual. They are compared only against each other, imperfectly and only by the individual, since organisations rarely have visibility into or an incentive to track the individual ledger at all. It is this structural asymmetry, one party keeping both books. In contrast, the other keeps only its own, which the Dual-Ledger ROI Divergence Model formalises in Section 5, and it is this asymmetry, rather than any deficiency intrinsic to either ledger, that this paper positions as the theoretical explanation for why organisationally "successful" assignments so often end in individually motivated exit.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a conceptual, theory-building methodology appropriate to its stated objective, namely the integration of two previously separate literatures into a single explanatory model and its extension to an under-examined national context, rather than the empirical testing of hypothesised relationships. The approach follows established conventions for conceptual and critical-review contributions in international human resource management, in which a narrative yet systematically bounded synthesis of the literature serves as the evidentiary basis for theory development (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2016; Mehreen et al., 2025).

Literature search and boundary-setting

The literature underpinning this paper was identified through a structured search of Scopus-indexed and other peer-reviewed sources using combinations of the terms "expatriate return on investment," "repatriation," "repatriate turnover," "psychological contract" and "career capital," supplemented by Nigeria- and Africa-specific searches combining these terms with "brain drain," "Japa," "diaspora" and "reverse migration." The search was deliberately not restricted to a fixed publication window, consistent with Mehreen et al.'s (2025) observation that repatriation scholarship spans more than three decades and that foundational theoretical contributions (for example, Rousseau, 1989; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) remain the standard reference points for subsequent empirical work; however, priority in the discussion of contemporary Nigerian labour-market dynamics was given to sources published from 2022 onward to ensure currency. Sources were included where they addressed (a) the definition, antecedents or measurement of expatriate or corporate ROI; (b) psychological contract or career capital theory as applied to international assignees; (c) empirical or conceptual accounts of repatriate turnover, retention or knowledge transfer; or (d) Nigerian or comparable Sub-Saharan African skilled-migration and return-migration dynamics. Sources that addressed expatriation only in passing, or that concerned migration phenomena unrelated to organisationally sponsored international assignments (for example, purely lifestyle-driven or retirement migration), were excluded from the core theoretical synthesis. However, a small number of such sources are retained where they usefully corroborate contextual statistics.

Analytical approach

Consistent with conceptual-paper conventions in the field (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2016), the analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the corporate-ROI literature and the individual psychological-contract/career-capital literature are each synthesised independently to establish their respective internal logics and empirical support. Second, the two syntheses are read against one another to identify points of theoretical convergence, tension and, most importantly, the structural gap between them that neither literature, read alone, adequately theorises;

this comparative reading is the paper's principal contribution and is presented in Section 4. Third, the resulting integrated account is formalised as a conceptual model (Section 5) and is then contextualised within the Nigerian labour market using the Nigeria-specific evidence base assembled in the search process, in order to test the model's plausibility and practical relevance against a concrete, data-rich national setting rather than leaving it as an abstract cross-national generalisation.

Scope and interpretive stance

Because this is a conceptual rather than an empirical paper, it does not report primary data collection, sampling or statistical analysis; its claims are theoretical propositions intended to guide, and to be tested by, future empirical work, several directions for which are specified in Section 8. The Nigerian contextualisation draws on secondary statistical and survey evidence reported in the sources reviewed (for example, World Bank, 2024; Isiaka, 2025; Thomas et al., 2025) rather than on original fieldwork, and the paper is correspondingly explicit, throughout, about which claims are drawn directly from cited empirical studies and which are theoretical extensions proposed by the author.

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS: TWO LEDGERS OF EXPATRIATE ROI

The corporate ROI ledger

The corporate ROI ledger has its clearest theoretical statement in McNulty and Tharenou (2004), who observe that, despite the considerable sums MNEs spend on international assignments, no consensus definition or measurement framework for expatriate ROI existed prior to their work. They define expatriate ROI as a function of assignment costs, including salary differentials, relocation, housing, education allowances, pre-departure training and the cost of assignment failure, set against assignment benefits, including the internationalisation of key managers, enhanced cultural and language capability, reverse knowledge transfer and support for the firm's broader global strategy. Their main methodological contribution is the insight that there is no such thing as "one best" ROI formula, because the purpose of an assignment is different (the purpose can be one of filling a position, management development or organisational development), thus ROI should be assessed based on the specific strategic purpose for which the assignment was approved.

In operationalising this framework empirically in an Asia-Pacific sample, McNulty, De Cieri, and Hutchings (2013) found that individual ROI and corporate ROI are related yet based on quite different antecedents, and that they often differ in magnitude for the same assignment. The study revealed that selection rigour, pre-departure preparation, and host-country support were significant predictors of corporate ROI. In contrast, perceived career advancement and family adjustment influenced individual ROI, and all other factors mentioned were under the organisation's control. This finding is important not only because it provides empirical, rather than conceptual, evidence that a firm rates an assignment ROI-positive and the assignee rates the same assignment ROI-negative, but also because it represents exactly the situation this paper suggests inspires voluntary repatriate turnover.

In their critical review, Breitenmoser and Bader (2016) have compiled the organisational-level variables identified throughout the literature that influence, if not determine, the actualisation of corporate ROI rather than just its intention. The review outlines three main "leverages" – career support mechanisms (mentoring, career planning, position guarantees), knowledge-transfer mechanisms (debriefing, documentation, communities of practice) and organisational-context variables (headquarters versus subsidiary orientation, industry sector) – which firms can use to turn assignment costs into realised benefit. Lazarova and Tarique (2005) clarify this image when talking specifically about knowledge transfer, which is the most important of the intended corporate ROI – the transfer of tacit, experiential knowledge from repatriate to organisation is not automatic on return, but depends on the repatriates' willingness to share and the absorptive capacity of the organisation. This is an important qualification to the corporate ledger: even assignments that appear, by cost-accounting standards, to have generated positive ROI may in practice be realising only a fraction of their potential benefit, because the mechanism by which tacit knowledge becomes organisational capability runs directly through the motivational state of the same individual whose own ROI ledger this paper argues is simultaneously, and independently, being computed.

The individual ROI ledger

Running parallel to, but historically disconnected from, this corporate-ROI literature is a substantial body of work explaining repatriate outcomes through the individual's own psychological and career-related accounting. Rousseau's (1989, 1995) foundational psychological contract theory provides the relational mechanism: employees form beliefs about reciprocal obligations, and perceived non-fulfilment of those obligations ("breach") predicts reduced trust, reduced organisational commitment, and increased turnover intention. Perera et al. (2017) extend this theory specifically to expatriates, proposing that expatriate failure, including post-repatriation exit, is better explained as a function of psychological contract breach originating from either the parent organisation or the host organisation than as a function of cross-cultural maladjustment. This explanation had previously dominated the expatriate-failure literature. Wang et al.'s (2023) qualitative study of Chinese expatriates corroborates this multi-foci structure, finding that expatriates hold distinct expectations of career support and reintegration assistance from each organisational party, and that violations by either party independently damage the employment relationship.

Applied specifically to the repatriation phase, Stroh, Gregersen, and Black (1998) provide one of the field's most durable empirical findings: repatriate turnover intention is best predicted not by the objective quality of the position to which the employee returns but by the gap between what the employee expected on return and what he or she actually experienced. Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison and Ren (2012) extend this expectation-reality logic into identity theory, showing that repatriates who were more strongly embedded, and therefore more strongly identified as "international" employees, during their assignment experience greater "identity strain" on return when they perceive job deprivation relative to non-internationally-experienced peers, and that this strain, rather than general job dissatisfaction, is the proximate driver of turnover. Lazarova and Cerdin (2007) and Tharenou and Caulfield (2010) add a further layer, showing that repatriates increasingly evaluate their post-return position not solely against the employer's internal career ladder but against external labour-market opportunities, consistent with the boundaryless career reasoning of Arthur and Rousseau (1996) and DeFillippi and Arthur (1994): the more marketable the career capital accumulated abroad, the more credible the option to exit becomes, and the less an employer's internal, and often slower, career-progression logic can retain the individual.

Two features distinguish this individual-ledger literature from the corporate-ledger literature reviewed in Section 4.1. First, its unit of analysis and its evidentiary base are almost entirely the individual repatriate's perceptions, expectations and self-reported intentions, whereas the corporate literature's unit of analysis is the firm's realised costs and benefits; the two literatures are, in a strict methodological sense, studying different dependent variables. Second, and more consequential for this paper's argument, the individual-ledger literature contains virtually no explicit theorisation of how the individual's perceived ROI relates to or is shaped by the organisation's own, typically unstated, assessment of the same assignment's corporate ROI. The psychological contract is, by Rousseau's (1989) own definition, held asymmetrically: the individual has a rich, continuously updated account of the exchange relationship, while the organisation, particularly in decentralised or matrixed MNE structures, frequently has no equivalent, centrally held account of what any specific returnee believes he or she is owed. It is this asymmetry, one party keeping a running ledger visible only to itself while systematically under-observing the other party's parallel ledger, that this paper argues is the structural precondition for the corporate-individual ROI gap to open, and eventually to widen, unaddressed.

Fragmentation, developed-economy bias and the case for Nigeria

Mehreen et al.'s (2025) systematic review of 129 peer-reviewed repatriation studies published between 1989 and 2024 provides the most direct evidentiary confirmation of this fragmentation. The review documents a clear historical progression in the field's dependent variables, from individual readjustment difficulties in the earliest studies, through organisational outcomes such as retention, performance and knowledge transfer from the 2000s onward, without identifying a body of work that explicitly theorises the interaction between these two levels as a single divergence-generating system. The same review reports that almost 70% of the studies it analysed drew their samples from developed economies, principally the United States, Australia, European countries and Japan, and explicitly calls for research attention to repatriation from emerging economies, noting that "our knowledge about the differences in practice between developed and emerging market repatriations is

limited" as emerging-market MNEs rapidly expand their own global presence (Mehreen et al., 2025).

Nigeria represents an unusually apt setting in which to address this call, for reasons that go beyond mere geographic novelty. First, the scale of Nigerian skilled emigration and the emerging, policy-salient counter-flow of return migration, captured in Nigerian public discourse by the "Japa-Japada" terminology (Thomas et al., 2025), provides a population-level analogue to the individual-level career capital redeployment logic set out in Section 2.2, allowing the conceptual model developed in this paper to be evaluated against observable, large-scale behavioural patterns rather than remaining a purely laboratory-scale proposition. Second, Nigerian human resource management scholarship independently documents precisely the organisational deficiencies, weak career development architecture, limited application of internationally acquired skills, and underused HR analytics for retention risk that Section 4.1 identifies as the corporate-side levers determining whether ROI is realised (Isiaka, 2025). Third, the severity of the underlying labour-market pressure is difficult to overstate: Lawal et al. (2022) document a marked acceleration of health-workforce emigration from Nigeria during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, while WHO estimates cited by TheCable (2025) place the number of Nigerian doctors now practising abroad above 15,000, exceeding the total number employed in Nigeria's federal health system, a stock of departed capability so large that even a modest improvement in the organisational realisation of ROI for repatriates would carry outsized national significance. Taken together, these features make Nigeria not simply an additional case to which an existing Western model might be mechanically applied, but a setting whose structural characteristics, high absolute rates of both emigration and return, weakly institutionalised repatriation practice and an unusually visible public discourse around the return-migration decision, allow the corporate-individual ROI gap mechanism proposed in this paper to be observed, in effect, at a higher and more consequential resolution than in the developed-economy contexts on which the existing literature has concentrated.

THE DUAL-LEDGER ROI DIVERGENCE MODEL

Building on the theoretical integration set out in Section 2 and the conceptual analysis in Section 4, this paper proposes the Dual-Ledger ROI Divergence Model as its principal contribution. The model's central proposition is that repatriate turnover is best predicted not by the level of either the corporate ROI ledger or the individual ROI ledger alone, but by the size and trajectory of the gap between them, and that four interacting mechanisms systematically produce this gap.

Model components

Corporate ROI ledger. Consistent with McNulty and Tharenou (2004), the corporate ledger comprises assignment costs (compensation premiums, relocation, training, family support, replacement costs of failure) set against realised benefits (knowledge transfer, managerial development, subsidiary capability, strategic positioning). This ledger is typically computed, where it is computed at all, at the level of the global mobility or finance function, on a cost-recovery time horizon, and is rarely disaggregated to reflect any individual returnee's own perception of the exchange.

Individual ROI ledger. Consistent with career capital theory (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Dickmann & Harris, 2005) and psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989, 1995), the individual ledger comprises the career capital accumulated abroad (knowing-why, knowing-how, knowing-whom) set against the extent to which that capital is recognised, deployed and rewarded on return (promotion, remit, status, autonomy). The returnee continuously computes this ledger, is highly sensitive to comparisons with pre-departure expectations and with the trajectories of non-internationally experienced peers (Kraimer et al., 2012), and, by the nature of the psychological contract, is largely invisible to the organisation unless actively solicited.

Divergence mechanisms. The paper identifies four mechanisms through which the two ledgers, which need not diverge in principle, come in practice to diverge:

(a) **Asymmetric visibility.** Because the corporate ledger is held by the organisation and the individual ledger is held by the returnee, and because, as Rousseau (1989) observes, psychological contracts are rarely made explicit, the organisation typically has no reliable signal of the individual ledger's state until the returnee's

dissatisfaction has already progressed to turnover intention or resignation.

(b) Career-capital conversion failure. As illustrated in a review of the literature by Breitenmoser and Bader (2016), many organisations lack the structural mechanisms, position guarantees, career plans, mentoring, etc., needed to effect an actual role change; thus, recognition may be intended but not perceived.

(c) Identification and comparison effects. The more "successful" the assignment from a corporate performance perspective, the larger the potential identity gap upon return, and the more likely it is to result in a highly motivated leaver. Paradoxically, as Kraimer et al. (2012) show, the stronger the international identity, the more successful the assignment was, and the worse the felt strain of any post-return status loss.

(d) Market pull from outside. As with boundaryless career reasoning (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010), the same career capital that the organisation has yet to monetise into internal reward is also on display, and valuable, to the external labour market; thus, the individual ROI, which has not yet been monetised into internal reward, is not neutral over time, but is rather a depreciation of the firm's retention position as external alternatives become more attractive by comparison

Outcome. In this context, the assignment may appear to be 'successful' and 'cost-effective' on the corporate ledger. However, it becomes a net loss on the individual ledger from the time of its return, yielding the empirical fact of high turnover after return (International Insurance, 2026).

Model logic in summary form

The model can be summarized in a simple proposition: Repatriate Turnover Risk is a positive function of the ROI Gap (the perceived distance between the individual's career-capital-conversion expectations and the organisation's realised recognition of that capital), and the ROI Gap is itself expanded by low asymmetric-visibility correction (weak mechanisms for surfacing the individual ledger within the organisation), low career-capital conversion capacity (weak position-guarantee and mentoring infrastructure), high identity strain (high international identification and high perceived status loss), and high external market pull (high perceived marketability of accumulated career capital relative to internal reward). Crucially, the model predicts that corporate ROI and turnover risk are not inversely related in any simple sense: an assignment can generate strong corporate ROI, extensive knowledge transfer, high performance ratings, and cost recovery, while simultaneously generating a wide and widening individual ROI gap, because the two ledgers are computed from different inputs, on different time horizons, by different parties. This is the core theoretical assertion of this model and what the paper primarily proposes as a new way of looking at a topic that has traditionally been explored as a unified movement between corporate ROI and repatriate retention.

Applying the model to the Nigerian context

The Nigerian evidence reviewed in Section 4.3 is consistent with and helps illustrate each of the model's four divergence mechanisms. In Nigerian organisational contexts where, as Isiaka (2025) notes, HR analytics that can predict or anticipate reductions in retention are underutilised, then it makes for a more plausible case where organisations are less able than their developed-country counterparts to detect a widening individual ROI ledger before it becomes visible as a way of leaving the organisation. Career-capital conversion failure is corroborated by the same study's finding that limited developmental opportunity and constrained, hierarchical organisational structures are frequently cited by professionals, including returnees, as reasons for leaving Nigerian employers (Isiaka, 2025). Identity and comparison effects plausibly operate with particular force in Nigeria, given the high visibility, in Nigerian public and media discourse, of the "Japa" narrative itself, which normalises and valorises international experience as a marker of individual distinction, potentially heightening the psychological salience of any post-return status loss relative to contexts where international assignment is a routine rather than an exceptional career event. External market pull, finally, is arguably at its global maximum in the Nigerian case, precisely because the "Japa-Japada" cycle documented by Thomas et al. (2025) demonstrates that a large, active, and increasingly normalised outward migration channel exists as a standing alternative to internal career progression, such that a Nigerian returnee facing an unconverted individual ROI ledger faces a comparatively low-friction, well-trodden and socially legible option to redeploy that ledger

abroad once again. The Dual-Ledger ROI Divergence Model thus offers a parsimonious, theoretically grounded account of why Nigeria's return-migration cycle, celebrated in policy discourse as a solution to brain drain, may, in practice, function as a comparatively short repatriation-to-re-emigration loop unless the organisational mechanisms that address the four divergence pathways are deliberately strengthened.

DISCUSSION

The Dual-Ledger ROI Divergence Model in Section 5 addresses the paradox introduced at the start: why do expatriates return home despite successful assignments according to traditional organisational metrics? The model explains that "success" and "ROI" are subjective and socially constructed concepts. Additionally, the organization and the individual involved in an assignment often have different ideas of what constitutes success and ROI, and these perspectives are not always mutually observed or aligned. These re-examined perspectives have implications that extend beyond the empirical and concern the repatriation process itself.

First, it is suggested that the traditional focus on repatriation "support programmes" (career counselling, mentoring, reintegration training) is necessary but not sufficient, if these programmes are only designed to increase the inputs in the corporate ledger – better selection, better preparation – but not provide a mechanism to surface and respond to the individual ledger in real time. Breitenmoser and Bader (2016) show that such programmes do improve realised corporate ROI; this paper's contribution is to note that improved corporate ROI does not automatically translate into a narrower gap, and may in some circumstances widen it, if the same programmes raise the returnee's expectations (through explicit promises of career advancement) without a parallel increase in the organisation's actual capacity to deliver on those expectations. This is consistent with Stroh et al.'s (1998) foundational finding that turnover intention tracks the expectation-reality gap rather than the absolute level of either variable: an organisation that raises expectations without correspondingly increasing delivery capacity may inadvertently manufacture the very divergence it is trying to prevent.

Second, the model helps to explain a feature of the empirical literature that has previously been treated largely as a set of independent findings, namely that assignment performance ratings, knowledge-transfer completion and repatriate retention are only weakly and inconsistently correlated across studies (McNulty et al., 2013). If corporate ROI and individual ROI are computed from different inputs on different time horizons, as this paper argues, then weak correlation between corporate-side performance indicators and individual-side retention outcomes is not an anomaly requiring a more refined measure of either construct; it is the expected signature of two loosely coupled accounting systems, and future empirical work would do better to model the gap between the two ledgers directly, rather than continuing to search for a single unified predictor that subsumes both.

Third, the identity-strain and external-market-pull mechanisms identified in Section 5.1 jointly imply a counter-intuitive managerial risk: organisations may be most exposed to repatriate turnover precisely among their most successful assignees, those who achieved the deepest cross-cultural embeddedness, the strongest international identity and the most marketable accumulated career capital (Kraimer et al., 2012; Dickmann & Harris, 2005). This inverts a common managerial assumption that assignment "success," defined in terms of adjustment and performance abroad, is straightforwardly a predictor of post-assignment retention. The model, however, proposes that assignment success is a double-edged sword predictor because receiving a successful assignment both raises the corporate return on investment level and raises the returnee's level of expectation (increasing the bar the organisation must overcome if it is not to be perceived as a failure) and increases his or her external marketability (decreasing the cost of being perceived as a failure). Organisations that treat assignment completion and strong performance ratings as evidence that a returnee is "safe" to retain without further intervention may therefore be systematically underestimating the retention risk associated with precisely their highest-performing repatriates.

Fourth, the Nigerian contextualisation in Section 5.3 suggests that the divergence mechanisms identified in this paper are not merely present but potentially amplified in emerging-economy settings characterised by high external market pull (an active, socially normalised emigration channel), low organisational capacity for career-capital conversion (constrained internal labour markets and hierarchical structures) and low HR analytic maturity (limited proactive identification of retention risk) (Isiaka, 2025). This is consistent with, and extends, Mehreen et al.'s (2025) call for repatriation research to move beyond its developed-economy concentration: the

present analysis suggests that emerging-market settings such as Nigeria's may not simply replicate developed-market dynamics on a smaller scale, but may represent structurally distinct configurations of the same underlying mechanism, in which the ROI gap opens faster, is detected later and is resolved, from the individual's perspective, through a comparatively low-friction re-emigration option that has no equally salient analogue in most developed-economy repatriation contexts.

Finally, the discussion returns the paper to its own novelty claim. Existing frameworks have variously offered corporate-level ROI accounting (McNulty & Tharenou, 2004; McNulty et al., 2013), individual-level psychological contract accounts of expatriate failure (Perera et al., 2017), and identity-based accounts of repatriate turnover (Kraimer et al., 2012), each a valuable but partial lens. The Dual-Ledger ROI Divergence Model's contribution is not to supersede any of these accounts but to specify, theoretically, how they relate to one another as components of a single divergence-generating system, and, in doing so, to reposition the "gap" itself, rather than either ledger in isolation, as the primary object of managerial attention and future empirical measurement.

THEORETICAL, MANAGERIAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical implications

The Dual-Ledger ROI Divergence Model contributes to international human resource management theory in three ways. First, it offers a structural, rather than purely motivational or attitudinal, explanation for repatriate turnover, one that locates the causal mechanism in the relationship between two accounting systems rather than in either system's absolute level. This complements, rather than displaces, psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989, 1995) and career capital theory (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994), by specifying more precisely why breach and unconverted career capital arise in the first place: they arise where organisational visibility into the individual ledger is weak and organisational conversion capacity is limited, conditions that are themselves measurable and, in principle, manageable. Second, the model extends McNulty and Tharenou's (2004) foundational ROI framework by formally distinguishing the size of the corporate-individual gap from the level of either ledger, offering researchers a testable construct, ROI-gap magnitude, that can be operationalised through paired measurement of organisational assignment-evaluation data and individual career-capital-conversion perceptions, a pairing that, per Mehreen et al. (2025), has rarely been attempted in the existing literature. Third, by extending the model into the Nigerian labour-market context, the paper responds directly to the developed-economy concentration identified in Mehreen et al.'s (2025) systematic review, offering the field a theoretically motivated basis for treating emerging-economy repatriation not as a lower-resource variant of developed-economy repatriation but as a structurally distinct configuration shaped by the strength of external market pull and the maturity of organisational HR infrastructure.

Managerial implications

For MNEs and Nigerian employers, the model implies that closing the ROI gap requires interventions targeted at each of the four divergence mechanisms rather than generic "repatriation support." Addressing asymmetric visibility requires structured, mandatory post-return dialogue, structured career conversations, 360-degree reintegration reviews, or, where feasible, HR analytics that track career-capital-conversion indicators and surface the individual ledger before it hardens into turnover intention, thereby addressing the underused HR analytics gap documented by Isiaka (2025). Breitenmoser and Bader (2016) point to several mechanisms as necessary to achieve corporate ROI – some of these are also necessary for closing the individual gap when it comes to career-capital conversion failure: Organisational commitments before departure and after return, position guarantees, mentoring by senior sponsors and documented career-pathing. Addressing identity and comparison effects requires deliberate management of the returnee's status transition, including public recognition of international achievement, assignment of duties that visibly draw on newly acquired expertise, and calibrated peer-comparison management, so that the very success that deepened the returnee's international identity is matched by a status transition that does not read, relative to non-internationally-experienced peers, as a demotion. The employer in the external market pull must assume that the returnee has a recently revealed preference to invest his career capital abroad, similar to the initial choice to invest capital in the acquiring country, and respond by investing in retaining him as a loyal employee. Nigerian employers operating within

the "Japa-Japada" cycle should treat each returnee as a loyal employee with a demonstrated recent revealed preference to invest his career capital abroad, and invest in keeping him as a loyal employee in the same way that they invested in acquiring him.

Policy implications for Nigeria

At the national level, the model suggests that Nigeria's policy discourse around "Japada" and reverse brain drain, currently focused substantially on macroeconomic incentives for return (remittance channels, investment schemes, diaspora bonds), would benefit from complementary attention to the organisational-level mechanisms that determine whether returnees, once physically repatriated, are retained rather than cycling back into re-emigration. Policy instruments that incentivise or require large employers, particularly in sectors with acute skilled-labour outflow such as healthcare (Lawal et al., 2022) and higher education (TheCable, 2025), to adopt structured repatriation and career-capital-conversion practices, potentially modelled on the mentoring and position-guarantee mechanisms identified by Breitenmoser and Bader (2016), could meaningfully improve the return on Nigeria's own considerable, and largely uncoordinated, investment in attracting its diaspora home. Without such organisational-level attention, the risk identified by this paper is that Nigeria's celebrated "Japada" movement functions less as a durable reversal of brain drain and more as an extended, and ultimately still leaky, staging post on a continuing cycle of international mobility.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As a conceptual paper, this study's principal limitation is the absence of original empirical testing. The Dual-Ledger ROI Divergence Model is offered as a theoretically grounded and contextually plausible proposition rather than an empirically validated finding, and its propositions require systematic testing before they can be treated as established. Future research should prioritise four directions. First, paired empirical studies that simultaneously measure organisational assignment-evaluation data (corporate ROI indicators) and individual career-capital-conversion perceptions (individual ROI indicators) for the same cohort of repatriates are needed to operationalise and directly test the ROI-gap construct, thereby addressing the measurement gap identified by Mehreen et al. (2025). Second, longitudinal designs that track repatriates across the first one to two years of return, the period in which industry data suggest turnover risk rises most sharply (International Insurance, 2026), would allow researchers to observe the trajectory of the gap rather than relying on cross-sectional snapshots. Third, comparative studies across Nigerian sectors with markedly different skilled-emigration intensity, healthcare, academia, technology and financial services, would help establish whether the divergence mechanisms proposed here operate uniformly or are moderated by sector-specific labour-market conditions. Fourth, research explicitly comparing "Japada" returnees who re-emigrate with those who remain would provide a direct behavioural test of the external-market-pull mechanism central to the proposed model, and would additionally allow researchers to examine whether gender, given the gender-specific retention barriers documented in related Nigerian and comparative HRM research (Isiaka, 2025), moderates the size or resolution of the corporate-individual ROI gap. Finally, because this paper's Nigerian evidence base draws substantially on secondary sources and sector-level statistics rather than firm-level primary data, future work should seek access to organisational assignment records, where available, to test the model against actual, rather than reported or estimated, corporate ROI computations.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explain a persistent and consequential paradox in international human resource management: why expatriates who, by conventional organisational measures, complete their assignments successfully so frequently leave their organisations shortly after returning home. Drawing on psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989, 1995) and career capital and boundaryless career theory (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Dickmann & Harris, 2005), and synthesising a body of literature that has developed the corporate-ROI and individual psychological-contract/career-capital perspectives largely in parallel (McNulty & Tharenou, 2004; McNulty et al., 2013; Perera et al., 2017; Kraimer et al., 2012), this paper has argued that expatriate ROI is best understood as two structurally distinct, asymmetrically visible ledgers, and that it is the widening gap between these ledgers, rather than the deficiency of either alone, that drives voluntary repatriate turnover. The resulting Dual-Ledger ROI Divergence Model offers a parsimonious account of why assignment

success and repatriate retention can, and frequently do, diverge, and specifies four concrete mechanisms, asymmetric visibility, career-capital conversion failure, identity and comparison effects, and external market pull, through which organisations can, in principle, intervene to narrow the gap. Extending this model to Nigeria, a country simultaneously exporting skilled labour at scale and attempting, through its emerging "Japada" discourse, to recall that labour home, this paper has argued that the same structural mechanisms that produce repatriate turnover in developed-economy contexts operate with particular, and arguably amplified, force in the Nigerian labour market, where external market pull is unusually strong, organisational career-capital-conversion infrastructure is comparatively underdeveloped, and HR analytic capacity to detect the individual ROI gap before it manifests as resignation remains limited. The paper's central practical message follows directly from its theoretical argument: organisations, in Nigeria and elsewhere, that wish to retain their most internationally capable employees must learn to manage the individual ROI ledger with the same deliberateness they already apply to the corporate one, for it is in the space between the two that their most costly and most preventable losses of returnee talent are currently occurring.

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