

Experiences, Perceptions, and Behaviors in Effective Expatriate Business Model Transfer

By Yu Tanabe*, Barbara W K Son[±] & Robert Robertson[○]

International assignments often involve expatriate professionals sent to subsidiaries for short, predetermined periods, which can limit their capacity to innovate within the host country. Harzing et al. (2016) found that knowledge transfer from headquarters is more effective when an expatriate leads manufacturing operations. Short-term expatriates are typically engaged for specialized tasks and skill transfer in irregular or highly specific activities, as well as scheduled production (Salleh et al. 2013). However, their limited tenure and the culturally specific nature of the information they acquire can impede both their comprehension and their ability to transmit this knowledge effectively (Kiessling et al. 2023). This study applies Systems Thinking theory (Sweeney and Sterman 2007) to examine the international transfer of business models, a critical approach for managing the complexity and dynamism inherent in such processes. This exploratory case study investigates how expatriates transfer and adapt organizational methodologies from their home countries to host-country contexts. Given the notable success of certain Japanese non-manufacturing firms in transferring their business models to the U.S. market, this study focused on two organizations: Kura Sushi USA, Inc. and Round One Entertainment, Inc. An interview-based survey was conducted with the expatriate entrepreneurs on June 23, 2025. The study employed the Steps for Coding and Theorization (SCAT) method, a qualitative analytic approach well suited to single-case studies and the systematic analysis of open-ended questionnaire responses (Otani, 2007). The findings indicate that expatriate entrepreneurs played a pivotal role in facilitating knowledge and system transfer, embedding their companies' operational standards into U.S. subsidiaries with an emphasis on accessibility, meticulous attention to detail, cost efficiency, and responsiveness to customer feedback. The findings will provide practitioners with practical insights to inform and prepare them, contributing valuable knowledge to the field.

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Introduction

Expatriates play a vital role in enabling the one-way transfer of knowledge from their home country to international markets. While their successes raise questions about how broadly their approaches to transferring international business models can

*Chief Operating Officer of Kintone Corporation, USA.

[±]Professor, Akio Morita School of Business, Anaheim University, USA.

[○]Dean, Akio Morita School of Business, Anaheim University, USA, and Senior Research Fellow, Commonwealth Institute, University of London, UK.

be applied, they also highlight the essential contributions they make. Toyota's experience in the United States—especially its difficulties entering the electric vehicle market against Tesla's platform strategies (Anderson et al. 2022)—demonstrates the complexities of global expansion and the necessity of careful preparation. Prior research has looked into knowledge transfer between headquarters and subsidiaries, showcasing cases like Toyota, which achieved significant success through technology and knowledge transfer strategies that focused on strong domestic operations in its home country (Liker 2020). Similarly, Indian IT multinationals have sent skilled expatriates to facilitate knowledge transfer by communicating headquarters' methods, externalizing expertise, and internalizing explicit knowledge (Patel et al. 2021). However, these studies often miss the detailed perspective of the individual carrying out an international business model transfer in the host country. Limited progress has been made from the subsidiary perspective (Meyer et al. 2020), creating a gap that this research aims to fill by examining the expatriate's role in such transfers.

Understanding expatriates' behaviors is critical, as adapting a business model from the home to the host country requires deep cultural understanding and empathy toward employees, customers, and business partners in the host environment. Unlike Toyota's production-oriented approaches (Takeuchi et al. 2008) or Indian IT firms' onsite-offshore model (Patel et al. 2021), multinational corporations may increasingly need to transition from designated expatriation to self-initiated expatriation or other flexible alternatives to remain competitive in global careers, changes in which expatriates themselves will play a pivotal role (McNulty et al. 2017).

Paik et al. (2017) draw attention to the underexplored phenomenon of expatpreneurs—entrepreneurs operating abroad—which remains largely overlooked in international business research. Building on this gap, the present study examines expatriates employed in their home country who adapt their business models from their place of origin to the host nation, a group critical to understanding international business model transfer. Guided by Systems Thinking theory (Sweeney and Sterman 2007), the study addresses the complexity and dynamism inherent in these processes. Employing exploratory research with expatriates, it examines how organizational methodologies are transferred and adapted from home to host countries. International assignments typically involve expatriate professionals sent to subsidiaries for fixed, limited durations, often constraining their capacity for innovation in the host country. This study explores the process of international business model transfer by examining the experiences of expatriates, with particular attention to how organizational methodologies from the home country are adapted and applied in a host-country context. The central question investigates the experiences, perceptions, processes, and behaviors that expatriates engage in to effectively transfer business models, and how these elements interrelate to facilitate successful implementation. This research further examines the development of a global entrepreneurial mindset, its teachability, and the broader implications of transnational entrepreneurship for professional training and the preparation of future generations.

Literature Review

A Systems Thinking Approach to Global Expansion

Arnold et al. (2015) describe Systems Thinking as a set of synergistic analytical skills that enhance the capacity to identify and understand systems, anticipate their behavior, and design modifications to achieve desired outcomes. Halecker (2016) argues that a Systems Thinking perspective clarifies the complexity of business models and offers a framework for business model innovation. Similarly, Bashan et al. (2021) contend that applying core Systems Thinking principles can strengthen global quality systems by improving understanding of their structure, governance, and associated challenges. A central feature of Systems Thinking is its holistic orientation, which views business model transfer as an interconnected whole, recognizing how changes in one element influence the others.

Roles and Trends of Expatriates in Global Corporations

Global business research has highlighted the significance of intercultural dimensions. Cross-cultural competency training is essential, considering the central role of cultural understanding in international business, including open innovation (Paresashvili 2021, Alassaf et al. 2020, Hunt et al. 2012). Multilevel cross-cultural conflicts were partly attributable to financial and sales failures in Nissan's global operations (Krupskiy et al. 2025). Organizational capability should encompass cultural competence and effective communication (Furuta 2021). Cultural intelligence, defined as a set of capabilities that enable individuals to function effectively across diverse cultural settings, is central to this process (Ang et al. 2015). Deardorff's (2006) Intercultural Competence Model, comprising attitude, knowledge, skills, internal outcomes, and external outcomes, provides a useful framework for evaluating expatriate managerial performance, developing intercultural competence, and assessing learning outcomes. Similarly, Osei-Bonsu (2016) argued that culturally competent managers must engage in self-reflection, critically examining their biases, attitudes, and worldviews.

Peltokorpi and Froese (2009) distinguished between organizational expatriates, who are assigned to international posts by their home organizations, and self-initiated expatriates, who independently choose to live abroad. Building on this distinction, Vance et al. (2016) introduced the concept of expat-preneurs—entrepreneurs who voluntarily relocate to a foreign country to establish or engage in new business ventures. They further classified expat-preneurs into two categories: those who intentionally move abroad for entrepreneurial pursuits and those who temporarily reside overseas to explore new business opportunities. Paik et al. (2017) identified the company-assigned expatriate (CAE) as a distinct subset of entrepreneurial SIEs. This category refers to individuals who proactively relocate to another country to launch a business, often without direct support from a multinational corporation (MNC).

Home-to-Host Country Knowledge Transfer

Internal knowledge development and transfer are vital for providing MNCs with a competitive advantage. Harzing et al. (2016) argued that expatriates play a distinctive role in facilitating knowledge transfer from headquarters to subsidiaries by leveraging internal expertise to address regional challenges and advance organizational objectives. Hill (2022) further noted that decentralized models significantly influence corporate growth across nations. Within such complex business environments, expatriates are often required to manage strategic dualities—balancing equally important yet conflicting imperatives between headquarters and local operations.

Leveraging Expatriates' Knowledge and Experience

Asmussen et al. (2013) identified a negative relationship between subsidiaries' external knowledge and knowledge transfer within MNCs, an outcome consistent with accommodation, despite the underlying cognitive processes of subsidiaries remaining largely concealed. Tomlins et al. (2021) emphasized that tacit knowledge, which cannot be formally taught but is developed through reflection and experience, plays a critical role in business performance. Expatriates contribute to this process by leveraging their social capital—the networks of relationships among individuals within a society—to influence MNC management decisions in ways that support local operations (Colakoglu et al. 2009). However, Harzing et al. (2016) cautioned that expatriates may be less willing or able to transfer tacit knowledge if they lack sufficient cultural and institutional understanding to grasp local perspectives. The stakes are high, as failure in an international assignment can cost the parent company up to three times the expatriate's home-country salary in addition to relocation expenses (Hill 2022), underscoring the urgency of effective knowledge management and expatriate support.

Methods

Theoretical Frameworks and Research Design

Intensity Sampling Theory (Aguinis and Solarino 2019, Patton 2014) emphasizes obtaining rich, in-depth insights from highly knowledgeable “experts,” recognizing that such depth cannot be achieved through large random samples. In international business and management research, these individuals often serve as “elite informants” whose specialized knowledge and strategic perspectives justify smaller sample sizes. Consistent with Information Power Theory (Malterud et al. 2016), the adequacy of a sample depends on the extent to which it provides information relevant to the study's aims; thus, the greater the information power, the fewer participants are required. This reasoning aligns with Elite Interview Theory (Dexter 2006), which conceptualizes “experts” as proxies for understanding complex systems. Accordingly, Aguinis and Solarino (2019) privilege the depth of strategic insight over statistical representativeness. Guided by a research philosophy that emphasizes investigating

underexamined phenomena in international business, this study responds to Paik et al.'s (2017) call to further examine “experts” as a distinctive yet under-researched dimension of international professional careers.

This study examines the business model transfer processes of expatriates who were initially employed in their home countries and later adapted those models within host-nation contexts. Semi-structured interview surveys facilitate systematic comparison across cases while also allowing for the exploration of emergent themes. The selected demographic is both theoretically salient and empirically significant, as expatriates function as boundary spanners between home- and host-country institutional environments (Kraus et al. 2023).

In light of the sampling and interview theoretical frameworks discussed above, this study conducted interviews with two expat-preneur “experts,” selected for their prior experience as organizational expatriates who subsequently transitioned into business development manager roles in the host country, using purposive sampling (Aguinis and Solarino 2019, Malterud et al. 2016, Peltokorpi and Froese 2009). Their expatriate positions were particularly relevant because they were directly involved in the business model transfer process, which was the central focus of this research. The limited number of participants reflects the highly specialized nature of the research topic and the scarcity of individuals with direct, expert-level experience in expatriate-led business model transfer (Aguinis and Solarino 2019). Both participants represented a rare category of professionals—expat-preneurs—whose career trajectories involved direct responsibility for transferring and adapting home-country business models, a phenomenon that remains insufficiently explored in existing international business literature (Paik et al. 2017). The participants were founding members of two U.S.-based subsidiaries, *Kura Sushi USA, Inc.*, and *Round One Entertainment, Inc.*, and held key leadership positions during the establishment of these organizations. They possessed extensive prior knowledge of home-country operations and were directly and intensively involved in the transfer and adaptation of core business models to the U.S. market. Their organizational roles, expatriate status, and depth of engagement in the business model transfer process rendered them particularly well-suited to address the central focus of this in-depth qualitative investigation.

We applied the Steps for Coding and Theorization (SCAT) method, a qualitative approach particularly effective for analyzing single-case studies and open-ended survey responses (Otani 2007). The study concentrated on Japanese non-manufacturing firms, as Japan remains the largest foreign investor in the United States, with more than 6,000 companies operating there (Gresser 2024). Among these, the notable success of certain Japanese non-manufacturers in adapting and transferring their business models to the U.S. market stands out. The research highlighted two cases: *Kura Sushi USA, Inc.* and *Round One Entertainment, Inc.* *Kura Sushi USA, Inc.*, a subsidiary of *Kura Sushi, Inc.*, has leveraged advanced technology, premium ingredients, and affordable pricing to deliver an interactive dining experience. Similarly, *Round One Entertainment*, a U.S. subsidiary launched in 2010, differentiated itself from competitors by offering a wide variety of activities designed to appeal to diverse audiences, ensuring an engaging and entertaining experience for all.

Data Collection and Analysis

To explore the process of business model transfer and the success factors relevant to expatriates' experiences, interviews were conducted on June 23, 2025, with founding members of two U.S. subsidiaries who possessed prior knowledge of their home-country operations. This study deliberately selected two participants who met the definition of organizational expatriates proposed by Peltokorpi and Froese (2009) and who later assumed business development roles in the host country. Their positions as organizational expatriates were particularly significant, as they were directly engaged in the business model transfer process that constituted the core focus of this research.

The interview process was conducted rigorously to ensure methodological validity. All interviews were carried out in Japanese to allow participants to express their perspectives fully and authentically, and each interview was digitally recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness. Following data collection, the audio recordings were transcribed into written English and subjected to a systematic coding and thematic analysis. This multi-stage process enhanced analytical rigor and consistency, in line with established qualitative research practices (Sargeant 2012). To further ensure the validity of the interview-based qualitative data, several strategies were employed. An audit trail was maintained through detailed documentation of all stages of data collection, transcription, coding, and analysis, thereby promoting transparency and reproducibility of the research process. In addition, rich, thick descriptions were provided, as illustrated in Tables 1 and 2, offering detailed accounts of participants' experiences and contextual factors. These narratives enable readers to assess the transferability of the findings to other settings.

SCAT, as described by Otani (2007), is a four-step coding process: <1> identifying target words in the text, <2> substituting them with external words, <3> adding explanatory words for clarification, and <4> deriving broader themes and constructs. For confidentiality, participants are referred to as Expatriate A and Expatriate B. The data were systematically organized into keywords and themes informed by the literature, underscoring the study's rigor and attention to detail. Qualitative data analysis offers a powerful means of gaining deep, nuanced insights into expatriates' personal perspectives and social realities in the host country. It moves beyond data collection to interpret significance within broader contextual and structural dimensions, such as cultural differences, organizational systems, and economic conditions that shape individuals' lives and viewpoints (Creswell et al. 2017).

Results

Tables 1 and 2 present the SCAT analysis sheets, which structure and interpret the narratives by integrating four key topics. From this process, the theory was derived and articulated, serving as a crucial tool for re-contextualizing the data.

Table 1. Analysis Sheet for Expatriate A by Steps for Coding and Theorization

No.	Text	<1> Noteworthy words or phrases from the text	<2> Paraphrase of <1>	<3> Concept from out of the text that accounts for <2>	<4> Themes, constructs in considerations of context	< 5> Questions & tasks
A1	I was asked to help due to my 7 years of on-site experience.	7 years of on-site experience	Short-term expatriate assignment	Specialized tasks and skill transfer	Organizational expatriates (OEs)	Do they consider him an expat?
A2	The opening was chaotic, but I managed as the leader.	Opening was chaotic	Inspire themselves through their roles	Self-motivated with conviction	Executing the specific duties and responsibilities	Why did the former CEO leave the company?
A3	A conveyor belt-equipped sushi bar may be hard to sell when divested.	When it comes time to divest	Risky to make big investments	Risky to make big investments in a startup	Foreign markets are more unpredictable	How did he get approval for additional investment?
A4	Though the company decided to divest, we could win with our core competence.	Could win with our core competence	To verify what I was thinking	Tacit knowledge empowers subjectively	Beliefs from tacit knowledge	What convinced him that he could do it?
A5	HQ did not acknowledge our struggles on our difficult journey.	Did not acknowledge our struggles	Did not grasp our issues	Cannot be on the same page	The gap between the HQ and the local subsidiary	What helped him cope with the gap?
A6	Our new store, with the latest technology, allowed customers to order via touch panel and pick up via a second conveyor belt, boosting sales.	Order via touch panel and pick up via the second conveyor belt, boosting sales	Touch panel ordering and second conveyor belt delivery became popular.	The newest technology is increasing sales dramatically	Verifying the value proposition and revenue model to decrease ambiguity	MNCs do not value foreign markets until they can profit alone. (Hamel & Prahalad, 2017)
A7	Given California's minimum wage increase, Toyota's relocation to Texas was ideal for our growth due to the new market.	Toyota's relocation to Texas was ideal for our growth y	Toyota's shift to Texas prompted our investment	Stores near the Toyota HQ verified customers	Business advances go slowly because one year stimulates the next	How did the HQ respond to a new market entry plan?
A8	I opened the first 12 stores, managed them, and planned everything.	Opened the first 12 stores	Experienced the entire business flow by myself	Acquiring knowledge through on-site experience	Tacit knowledge from on-site experience	Tacit knowledge is only gained via experience (Tomlins et al. 2021).
A9	I carefully examined our market successes and failures in comparison to Japan.	Examined our market successes and failures	Following failure, the business always improved	Empathy of the foreign market	Customer discovery and development	Startups fail due to ignorance of the market (Blank, 2020)

A10	We may have HR issues if we only hire Japanese and ignore the need to diversify.	Ignore the need to diversify	Unbalanced hiring may bother local staff	Hiring with no business reason may backfire	Biases and attitudes must be examined by managers	Cultural intelligence aids success (Ang et al., 2015).
A11	We cannot change the business process overnight, so applying locally takes 3 years. All were told the truth.	Cannot change the business process overnight	Honestly informed about the issue	Disclosed to all employees	Unwavering transparency inspired and motivated employees to succeed	Meritocracy can motivate and inspire excellence
A12	Due to large income gaps, HQ set expatriate pay without local market prices until IPO.	Set expatriate pay without local market prices	Substantial income gaps between Japan and the U.S.	Avoiding local market prices may hinder talent acquisition	Talent retention requires local market data adjustments	
A13	I want to go public since we can offer stock options to attract top talent from the industry.	Offer stock options to attract top talent	An IPO can boost the capacity to attract top talent	Recognizing and acting on local price signals	Build trust and norms by investing in people	
A14	After listening to US-hired executives, I realized my ideas were close to theirs, so I accelerated local practice.	Realized my ideas were close to theirs	Listening to U.S.-hired executives confirmed my ideas	Risky decisions come from HQ without local experience	Build trust and reduce risk with local expertise	
A15	I did a wide range of tasks, including property, contracts, construction, filing, and training.	Did a wide range of tasks	Did all of the duties alone when every store opened	Being proactive and responsible for assigned tasks	Embracing the startup mindset	
A16	Due to ample funds, stock options, and credibility, an IPO accelerated store openings, hired top talent, and rented prime locations.	Due to ample funds, stock options, and credibility	Businesses grew by engaging local businesses	Strategic and institutional effects on foreign IPO performance	IPOs increase transparency and credibility, helping stakeholders trust foreign firms	
A17	Our investment banker suggested rebranding as a tech company to attract investors and boost our value.	Our investment banker suggested rebranding	Emphasized the significance of promoting technology	Local human network develops innovation and revenue models	Social capital drives market entrance, knowledge, and opportunities	How did he meet the investment banker?
A18	After meeting with the investment bankers, I trusted local talent and their skills and dedication.	Trusted local talent and their skills and dedication	Seeing their talents and dedication has restored confidence and trust	Localize leadership to boost host nation prosperity	Localizing a workforce and managing talent can boost growth	
A19	I thought other restaurant companies had great people, so we	Should we hire talented people with stock options	Hire excellent industry executives	A solid strategy for attracting and	Local experts see market trends, business	

	should hire talented people with stock options when we go public.	when we go public	with stock options	retaining top talent	practices, culture, and law	
A20	I brought a business model that the HQ had developed in Japan that stood out.	The business model that the HQ had developed	Brought a standout business model	Business model export and adaptation	Cultivated and reinterpreted in a host nation.	
A21	New store sales increased with customer service and social media. Rapid growth and lucky timing surprised us.	Rapid growth and lucky timing surprised us	New chance, effective adaptation, and timing led to success	Being flexible in unexpected situations attracts customers	Flexibility to handle unexpected situations leads to success	All parts of the system are connected (Meadows, 2008)
A22	I see that not everything is foreseeable. Luck contributed to our success.	Luck contributed to our success.	Mindset of growth and adaptability	Unexpected events can undoubtedly affect the result	Leverage unexpected events to seize a favorable opportunity	System is connected (Meadow, 2008)
A23	Being familiar only with California, I drove across the US alone to consider my national development plan.	To consider my national development plan	To assess the market, I needed to see and touch it	Startups must know their market and industry	Empathize with customers' challenges to start a business	Financial setbacks due to failed investments and strategies
A24	I realized a central kitchen is impossible in a large country. The Japanese context made that work, but the US is different.	The Japanese context made that work, but the US is different	Success stories worked in Japan but not in the US	HQ advises improperly, while subsidiaries perform local functions	HQ and subsidiaries have a complex relationship	
A25	Executives gave U.S. orders without local context based on their experiences.	Without local context based on their experiences	No local experience-based context	HQ lacks local context	Subsidiaries desire autonomy	Tacit knowledge via experience (Tomlins et al. 2021)

Note. Adapted from SCAT by Otani (2007)

Table 2. Analysis Sheet for Expatriate B by Steps for Coding and Theorization

No.	<0> Text	<1> Noteworthy words or phrases from the text	<2> Paraphrase of <1>	<3> Concept from out of the text that accounts for <2>	<4> Themes, constructs in considerations of context	<5> Questions & tasks
B1	I changed jobs because I aspired to compete on the international stage.	Aspired to compete on the global stage	Aim to compete globally	Aspirations of competing on a global scale	Self-initiated expatriate pursuing a global career	Would his former employer send him to the U.S.?
B2	I was actively seeking a company that meets my career goals.	Fit my career goals	My professional objectives	Actively seeking an organization	Self-assessment and goal definition	What makes expatriate selection difficult?

B3	After joining the company, I received intensive on-site training at a store near headquarters for two years.	Intensive on-site training at a store	Dedicated over two years to intensive on-the-job training	Training occurs within the actual work environment	Developing implicit knowledge through real-world work experience	Had he known he should spend two years in Japan?
B4	I was on the field's front lines and did all the groundwork, like polishing the floors with the part-timers.	All the groundwork, like polishing the floors with the part-timers	Actively advancing knowledge and practice in a field	Leading the field, setting new standards or approaches	Tacit knowledge is gained through personal and professional experience	How can he stay motivated as a frontliner?
B5	He found the entity in the U.S. before me, while I worked in Japan.	While I worked in Japan	Focused on running operations in Japan	Carrying out the actual work and tasks	Hands-on execution impacts output	Did he want to move to the U.S with his colleague?
B6	The company expected me to create an operating manual, so I worked tirelessly onsite.	I worked tirelessly onsite	Discover what could happen in the store	Groundwork boosted accuracy, retention, and consistency	Converting tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge	Did he believe the local team would accept his operations?
B7	I ran stores without being assigned. My pride in knowing every worker's name made work fun.	Ran stores without being assigned	Did part-time, new hire, and store manager duties	Engaged in every role from the highest to the lowest levels	Individual knowledge becomes organizational knowledge	Does he think two years in Japan were necessary?
B8	After the first, second, and third stores stabilized, HQ invested heavily in the U.S.	HQ invested heavily in the U.S.	Invested heavily after the first three sites made a profit.	Protect investments and capitalize on global markets.	Manage risks associated with international expansion.	MNCs ignore global markets until they profit (Hamel, 2017)
B9	First expatriate-founded company and left after HQ heavily invested.	Left after HQ heavily invested	Focused on completing his own tasks	Completing the assigned tasks	Specialized tasks by short-term expatriates	Was it a temporary assignment for him?
B10	While a well-defined plan is time-consuming, HQ lets us react rapidly to unforeseen events and exploit new possibilities.	React rapidly to unforeseen events and exploit new possibilities	Dynamic thinking from the HQ was practical in starting a business	Miscalculated investments and strategies could cause major financial losses	A well-defined plan can hinder resource allocation and direction	Was Japan's strong executive leadership helpful?
B11	I struggle with state laws, as every U.S. store opening caused issues, unlike	Every U.S. store opening caused issues	Challenging journey, but our adaptability became our strength	Leadership fosters exceptional adaptability among team members	Leadership enhances team adaptability	When he opened the store, how did he find professionals

	Japan's business laws.					in each state?
B12	Since all members supported us during our hardest times, working with engaged employees from the start was crucial.	Working with engaged employees from the start was crucial	Having individuals who were engaged from the beginning was critical	Mission and values motivate employees in difficult situations	Local team autonomy, as engaged employees are the company's greatest asset in tough times	Why did his teammates stick with him during the hardest times?
B13	We were gaining skills and knowledge at an incredible pace through overcoming challenges.	Gaining skills and knowledge at an incredible pace	Learning a lot despite the challenges	Problems can teach useful skills and knowledge	Managing people and resources is most heavily influenced by local culture	Has the company retained most team members?
B14	I assessed scales and found enduring solutions, then we enhanced efficiency with each opening.	Enhanced efficiency with each opening	Improved efficiency with each opening	Learning curve is going up	Every problem strengthened the business	Has he kept business partners for years?
B15	We considered placing interactive games near the entrance to create a lively store atmosphere.	To create a lively store atmosphere	To enhance the shop's vibrancy	Focusing on customer acquisition and market presence	Market presence and customer acquisition must be prioritized	
B16	I developed a more appealing party plan for the party space through trial and error.	Party plan for the party space through trial and error.	Changing our plans based on what we learned.	Meet customer needs by experimenting and learning	Actively advancing knowledge and practice in a field.	
B17	I knew American culture and language. Not only the strategy but the company's goals and my abilities matched.	Not only the strategy but the company's goals and my abilities matched.	Knowing the culture and language, the company goals, and my skills matched.	The ability to understand foreign consumer behavior is crucial.	Culturally aware expatriates can adapt to local preferences.	Hunt et al. (2012) stressed cultural awareness.
B18	Anime and games with unique graphics, controls, and depth make us more popular than our competitors.	Make us more popular than our competitors	Customers notice our value immediately	Unique service gaining consumer favor	Attract local customers with unique traits and factors	Did he benefit from Japanese subculture?
B19	To fill large spaces and diversify their tenant base, operators wanted	A mall featuring more than retailers, movie	Our adaptability reassured mall operators	Adapting services to local tastes and regulations	Local business partners value foreign firms' adaptability	

	a mall with more than retailers, movie theaters, and restaurants.	theaters, and restaurants was desired	that we could diversify tenants	shows market commitment		
B20	With its unique ability to add value through enjoyment, our business was a possible solution.	With its unique ability to add value through enjoyment	A unique business model led to a favorable contract	A business model impressed local business partners	Strong localization and cultural adaptation	Was the store location strategy permissive or proactive?
B21	As a manager, I made it my personal mission to emulate the operations from Japan.	Made it my personal mission to emulate the operations	Not just a professional goal, but a personal commitment	Totally committed to professional and personal aims	Autonomy drives corporate success	Self-initiated expatriates (Peltokori & Froess, 2009)
B22	I can manage one store, but as we open two or three, quality drops without me	Quality drops without me	Launching multiple sites lowered the quality	Overcome difficulties in understanding local labor practices	Tacit knowledge is hard to formalize	Tacit knowledge cannot be taught (Tomlins et al. 2021)
B23	Thinking about our value, I wondered what customers wanted, such as the ability to play games without breaking down.	Thinking about our value, I wondered what customers wanted	Considered the fundamental nature of our business	Understand and adapt customer insights	Understanding local circumstances enables precise marketing and operational adaptations	
B24	I organized maintenance machine resources and operations, so managers must report downtime over several days.	Organized maintenance machine resources and operations	Methodized operations emphasize their roles' urgency and importance	Implement metrics and evaluation to keep teams focused and successful	Empower local teams to meet local market needs	
B25	Bringing Japanese way is ideal, but we adapted it for localized operations.	Adapted for localized operations	Customized to the local conditions	Adapt to cultural norms	HQ can hinder performance (Bouquet et al. 2015)	Did HQ oppose his U.S. adaptation strategy?
B26	I managed the first two stores, and reliable local members took over my role.	Reliable local members took over my role after the third store	After the third store, trustworthy locals took over.	Local staff's market expertise and adaptability	Stock levels increase (Meadow, 2008)	Is there a role for an area manager in Japan?

Note. Adapted from SCAT by Otani (2007)

Assigning codes is a central feature of the SCAT method, which provides researchers with an effective means to construct coherent storylines and develop theories that interlink themes and concepts. Accordingly, the storylines and theories for organizational expatriates A and B were derived from Tables 1 and 2 in this section.

Storyline and Theories for the Organizational Expatriate A

Despite the company's decision to divest, the organizational expatriate A persuaded headquarters to transfer its core competencies from Japan. Drawing on his experience, he analyzed both market successes and failures, compared them with the Japanese context, and emphasized the importance of diversification. By accelerating the adoption of U.S. management practices, his business model—originally developed in Japan—proved successful, leading to increased sales in the U.S. through enhanced customer service and strategic use of social media advertising.

Entrepreneurial expatriates demonstrate adaptability to foreign markets by leveraging their core competencies, value propositions, and revenue models. Culturally proficient leaders are vital in international operations, as they encourage self-reflection and promote awareness of biases. Building relationships and trust within the host country strengthens cooperation, improves access to information, and reduces uncertainty for multinational corporations. Furthermore, developing a localized workforce and effective talent management strategies fosters growth, as local employees offer valuable insights into customer preferences, cultural practices, business norms, and legal frameworks. Ultimately, understanding customer requirements and challenges is critical for successful business model transfer, since standardized policies may otherwise risk contributing to brain drain.

Storyline and Theories for the Organizational Expatriate B

After the first three stores stabilized, headquarters increased its investment in the U.S. and tasked organizational expatriate B with responding swiftly to unexpected events and seizing new opportunities. Supported by his team during the most challenging times, he collaborated with engaged employees to overcome obstacles. His familiarity with American culture and language ensured alignment between the company's goals, strategic direction, and his leadership capabilities. Although he had previously established an ideal operation in Japan, he advocated for tailoring operations to local conditions. Focusing on the value proposition, he emphasized understanding customer needs and aligning them with what employees could effectively deliver, thereby ensuring satisfaction.

Practical experience in the host country proved essential for acquiring tacit knowledge and enhancing organizational success. While expatriates must transfer expertise from their home country, they must also recognize the critical importance of local adaptation. This dual understanding allows them to respond effectively to unexpected circumstances and capitalize on emerging opportunities. In many cases, a step-by-step approach is more effective than rigid strategic planning, particularly when adjusting to local business environments. Local teams are integral to this

process; empowering them with autonomy and adapting service operations to meet local customer expectations fosters greater satisfaction and wider adoption.

Discussion

Previous expatriate research often overlooks the detailed perspective of the individual responsible for transferring an international business model within the host country (Liker 2020, Patel et al. 2021). Similarly, limited attention has been paid to the subsidiary's role in such transfers (Meyer et al. 2020), leaving a gap that this study addresses by focusing on the expatriate's contribution to business model adaptation and implementation.

Theoretical Justifications and Applications for Modeling Experiences, Perceptions, and Behaviors in Business Model Transfer

This study applied Systems Thinking as a theoretical lens to explain how business models are transferred and adapted in contemporary international business environments. Rather than viewing business model transfer as a static replication process, this research conceptualized it as a dynamic and evolving system shaped by continuous interactions among organizational expatriates, subsidiaries, and host-country institutional contexts. Under these conditions, Systems Thinking provides a suitable theoretical foundation for capturing non-linear relationships, feedback mechanisms, and adaptive processes embedded in business model transfer. Consistent with Halecker and Hartmann's (2013) assertion that the complexity and diversity of business model innovation necessitate integrative analytical approaches, this research applied Systems Thinking to connect qualitative interview findings to broader theoretical explanations. Specifically, Systems Thinking was employed to highlight the strategic role of organizational expatriates as boundary spanners, who reconcile the differences between home- and host-country practices. Through this lens, expatriates are understood not as passive implementers of predefined business models, but as active agents whose experiences, perceptions, and behaviors shape the adaptation of business models within the subsidiary's unique operational environment.

Drawing on Meadows' (2008) framework, the study applied systems concepts to analyze the interconnectedness of organizational functions, external institutional pressures, and individual-level capabilities. Meadows' emphasis on system interdependence and leverage points was theoretically applied to explain how business models evolve through interactions among multiple system components rather than through isolated managerial decisions. Interview evidence supported this application, as organizational expatriates consistently acknowledged their limited ability to control complex systems and emphasized that modeling serves as a perspective for understanding relationships and feedback loops rather than as a tool for direct control.

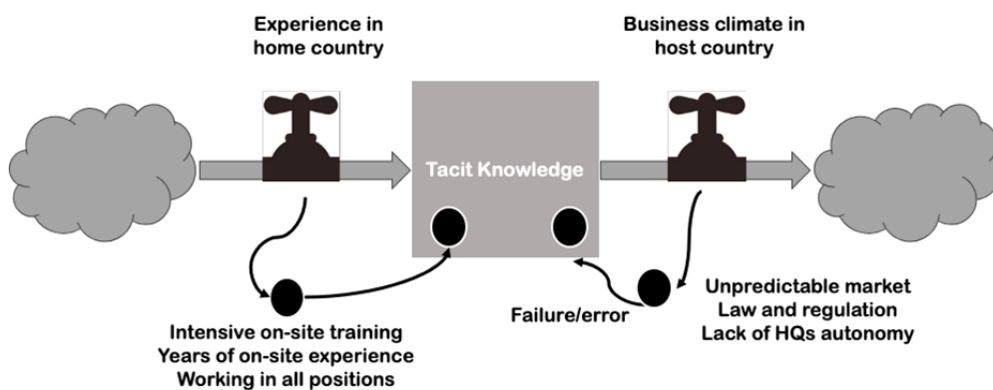
To operationalize this theoretical application, Meadows' stock-and-flow diagrams were employed to model key system elements identified in the qualitative data, including expatriates' tacit knowledge, social capital in the host country, and

adaptive capacity. These elements were theorized as interdependent stocks influenced by flows such as learning, relationship-building, and contextual adjustment. This application enables a systematic examination of how changes in one element can reinforce or constrain others, thereby shaping the effectiveness of business model transfer over time. Overall, the theoretical application of Systems Thinking in this study demonstrated how business model transfer can be better understood as a complex, adaptive process. By integrating qualitative insights with systems-based modeling, this approach enhances theoretical understanding of international business dynamics and provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing how business models are translated, adapted, and sustained across diverse institutional contexts.

Organizational Expatriates' Tacit Knowledge

Consistent with Tomlins et al. (2021), this research recognizes that tacit knowledge—developed through reflection and experience rather than formal instruction—is critical to business performance. The knowledge development of organizational expatriates, a critical component of system dynamics, is shaped by feedback loops (Figure 1). A feedback loop occurs when a change in a stock affects its associated inflows or outflows, thereby triggering processes that reinforce, reduce, or stabilize the level of that stock over time (Meadows 2008). Organizational expatriates A and B acquired tacit knowledge through their practical experience in their home country's work environment. Their tacit knowledge was transformed from individual to organizational, underscoring the relevance of the theory of Nonaka and Takeuchi in explaining the firm's knowledge transformation process (Nonaka 2009). As expatriates gain tacit knowledge through local experiences, they tend to diverge further from their headquarters. These iterative loops can foster exponential growth but may also hinder expatriate performance (Meadow 2008).

Figure 1. *Organizational Expatriates' Tacit Knowledge*



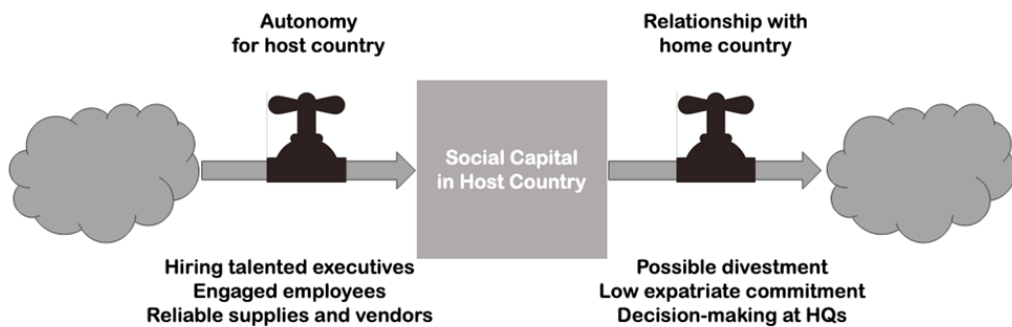
Note. Adapted from the Stock-and-Flow Diagram by Meadows (2008)

Social Capital in a Host Country

Expatriates leverage their social capital, the network of relationships within the host country, to influence multinational corporation (MNC) management decisions

and enhance local operations (Colakoglu et al. 2009). Organizational expatriates A and B strongly advocate the use of social capital in the host country. According to Osei-Bonsu (2016), they exemplify culturally competent managers who engage in self-reflection by critically examining their biases, attitudes, and worldviews. Both A and B actively cultivated social capital with executives, employees, and vendors or suppliers in the host country, leveraging these networks to strengthen organizational integration. They also drew on the social capital embedded within multinational corporations to influence local employees and business associates. This influence proved vital in shaping decisions that significantly impacted the subsidiary’s strategies and operations, highlighting both the importance of their role and the personal growth derived from ongoing self-reflection. As subsidiaries deepen their social capital within the host country, their strategic alignment with headquarters correspondingly diminishes (Figure 2). Ultimately, expatriates must balance centralized guidance with local autonomy, and A and B continued to realize the benefits of social capital development through their lived experiences across both home and host contexts.

Figure 2. *Social Capital in a Host Country*



Note. Adapted from the Stock-and-Flow Diagram by Meadows (2008)

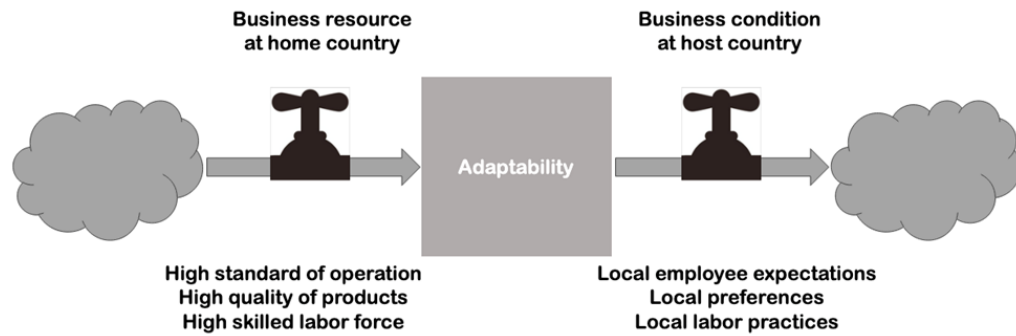
Adaptability of Organizational Expatriates

As Blank (2010) argued, startup ventures often emerge from cultivating a customer base and establishing a strong market presence. Organizational expatriates A and B exemplify this principle through their successful adaptation of practices and ideas from their home country to the host country. What set their efforts apart was not simply adaptation but the unique reinterpretation and cultivation of these practices within the host context. To attract and retain customers, they consistently responded to shifting market trends, technological advancements, and evolving consumer demands, while emphasizing value creation. Their customer-centric approach, which is critical for sustaining a competitive advantage, reflects a strong commitment to addressing customer needs and preferences. By introducing and adapting Japanese concepts to the U.S. market, organizational expatriates A and B created offerings that were both distinctive and valuable to American consumers.

Organizational expatriates A and B also demonstrated an inspiring commitment to business development, leveraging their adaptability as organizational expatriates, defined as individuals dispatched by their home companies for international

assignments (Peltokori and Froese 2009). Despite being organizational expatriates, 'A' and 'B' experienced a significant shift in mindset, resembling that of self-initiated organizational expatriates, a clear indication of their adaptability (Fig. 3). This shift also underscores the evolving nature of the distinction between organizational expatriates and self-initiated organizational expatriates, a fascinating aspect of expatriate management.

Figure 3. *Adaptability of Organizational Expatriates*



Note. Adapted from the Stock-and-Flow Diagram by Meadows (2008)

Bringing Results

Organizational expatriates A and B must demonstrate tangible results to their headquarters. Hamel (2017) argued that many multinational corporations (MNCs) do not consider foreign markets strategically significant until those markets achieve independent profitability. Unlike short-term expatriate assignments, which are typically designed for specialized tasks or skill transfer (Salleh et al. 2013), the transfer of a business model represents a long-term commitment that requires sustained dedication and resilience. This highlights the significant weight of their assignment. In this context, expatriates A and B also encountered Nonaka's (2009) perspective that knowledge-centric enterprises offer a distinctive lens on managerial roles, organizational design, and business strategy, further shaping their approach to international operations.

Systems Thinking and Feedback Loop

According to Meadows (2008), stocks and flows are fundamental to understanding system behavior. Stocks, whether tangible or intangible, can be illustrated by the knowledge levels of expatriates A and B. They represent the accumulation of resources over time, such as the knowledge and experience these expatriates acquire in their roles. Flows, by contrast, reflect the dynamic rate of change in a stock, such as the pace at which expatriates localize their businesses. These flows consist of processes—learning and adaptation—that alter stock levels and facilitate business localization. Stock levels increase when inflows exceed outflows, decrease when outflows surpass inflows, and remain stable when the two are balanced. The experiences of expatriates A and B exemplify this interplay of stocks and flows described by Meadows.

Because tacit knowledge transfer has a dual character involving both a sender and a recipient (Kiessling et al. 2023), successful expatriates are those who collaborate effectively, establish personal connections with stakeholders in the host country, and generate positive energy and enthusiasm among them. Their success was largely driven by an enrichment process aligned with the corporate objective of creating value for start-up members in the U.S. This process emphasized continuous improvement in individual performance through the ongoing development of skill sets. Importantly, enrichment was not limited to enhancing the intellectual capital of corporate talent; rather, it was grounded in on-the-job training designed to provide employees with as many opportunities as possible in the home country before their transfer abroad. Kiessling et al. (2023) further emphasized that employees in a host country can build social capital and relational networks that facilitate the transfer and application of tacit knowledge, thereby fostering innovation. The two U.S. cases examined here illustrate how expatriates effectively adapted to new contexts and influenced individuals, groups, and organizations that held unfamiliar cultural perspectives. In doing so, they embedded their companies' standards into foreign subsidiaries, focusing on accessibility, attention to detail, cost reduction, and responsiveness to customer feedback.

Balancing Standardization and Adaptation

As noted by Harzing et al. (2016), expatriates' effectiveness in transferring tacit knowledge may be limited if they lack sufficient cultural and institutional understanding. Transferring a business model within MNCs is inherently challenging because it requires balancing global standardization with local adaptation, while also managing a core group of employees across diverse settings. Kura USA and Round One USA illustrate how this balance can be achieved by adapting their core business approaches to align with local cultural norms. Although both companies retain distinct Japanese and broader Asian characteristics in their policies and strategies, they also demonstrate unique adaptations that reflect responsiveness to host-country contexts. In doing so, they embed cultural adaptation into their operations regardless of store location. At the same time, both companies reinforce their Japanese identity by promoting services that emphasize functionality, cost-consciousness, casualness, and ease of use across all markets, which consistently elicits favorable customer responses. Their strategies—such as selling flat packages and employing do-it-yourself methods—demonstrate how they simultaneously preserve their brand identity while tailoring their models to diverse international markets.

Systems Thinking and Leverage Points

Meadows (2008) argued that Systems Thinking helps identify leverage points—areas where small adjustments can produce significant impacts on the overall system. This concept is particularly relevant to business model transfer, as it enables organizations to identify and act on key areas for adaptation. Organizational expatriate A's journey illustrates several leverage points that became turning points in the company's expansion. For instance, his rapid implementation of a new

system, once approved by the local government, triggered an unexpected surge in sales. This momentum coincided with the rise of social media through the iPhone, which amplified customer experiences as diners eagerly shared their visits online. Organizational expatriate A quickly recognized this trend and leveraged social media advertising to attract new users and stimulate organic growth, creating a dynamic and somewhat unexpected acceleration in market penetration.

Challenges also emerged for Kura, such as California's rising minimum wage, which led the company to consider expanding operations beyond California. After successful market entries in Texas and Georgia, Kura began preparing for an initial public offering (IPO). Despite initial skepticism regarding the company's ability to succeed outside California, its strong performance in the Eastern and Central time zones demonstrated significant potential to attract investors. Guided by Systems Thinking, organizational expatriate A viewed the IPO not only as a mechanism for securing future growth but also as a strategic means of attracting top talent within the food industry. The IPO provided access to substantial capital, facilitating accelerated store expansion, enhanced recruitment through equity-based incentives, and improved access to prime real estate. Ultimately, Systems Thinking positioned the IPO as a critical leverage point for ensuring long-term competitiveness and sustained growth in the U.S. market.

Limitations of the Study

Conducting qualitative interviews is a rigorous process that requires careful planning and execution. The preliminary stages of this study—including the development of an interview strategy, the selection of participants, and the implementation of the interviews—were essential to ensuring methodological rigor. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that may constrain the generalizability of the findings.

One limitation of this study is its reliance on an accessible sample, which may not fully represent the broader target population due to restricted access to certain individuals or organizations. In addition, some interview participants did not elaborate extensively on their feelings and perspectives in response to open-ended questions, potentially limiting the depth of the qualitative insights obtained. Finally, the inclusion of two organizational expatriates with relatively short business experience in the host country may further restrict the transferability of the findings to more established expatriate populations.

Gaps and Implications for Future Research

This study deliberately focused on a non-manufacturing firm entering the U.S. market, given the strong technology and knowledge transfer from headquarters to the U.S. subsidiary. Additionally, the exclusion of long-established U.S. subsidiaries minimized confounding influences arising from interactions with multiple business divisions, thereby allowing for a more focused examination of business model

transfer. While this strategic selection strengthened internal coherence, it also highlights several important gaps that warrant future investigation.

First, future research should examine foreign firms that have divested from the U.S. market. Studying such cases may provide valuable systems-thinking insights by illuminating how breakdowns in business model transfer occur. Comparative qualitative analyses of successful versus failed market entries would deepen understanding of the conditions, configurations, and decision pathways that shape outcomes. The experiential knowledge of these firms offers an underutilized opportunity to expand theorization in this domain.

Second, both participants in this study were founding members of newly established subsidiaries in the host country, meaning their organizations lacked long operational histories in the U.S. context. Self-initiated expatriate entrepreneurs operating within long-established subsidiaries are likely to encounter different structural constraints, institutional pressures, and cultural barriers. Future research should explore how business model transfer unfolds in more mature subsidiary contexts, where legacy systems and entrenched practices may alter expatriate agency.

Third, the participants' professional trajectories exhibited notable similarities, which limits the variability of perspectives captured in this study. Future studies should therefore investigate a broader range of foreign firms operating in the U.S. market to assess alternative approaches to business model transfer. In particular, research tracking self-initiated organizational expatriates from non-Japanese firms would extend the generalizability of current findings and enrich cross-national comparisons.

Finally, adopting a configurational perspective on self-initiated organizational expatriates offers multiple promising avenues for future research. Examining how different combinations of individual attributes, organizational contexts, and institutional environments influence business model transfer can significantly advance systems-thinking approaches in international business. Such research holds strong potential to generate novel insights into overseas business model transfer and to refine theory at the intersection of expatriation, entrepreneurship, and international strategy.

Practice Implications

This study highlights the critical role of systems thinking in expatriate-led business model transfer by enabling foresight and the identification of leverage points—small yet strategically significant interventions through which expatriate entrepreneurs can influence the broader organizational system. Recognizing these leverage points allows firms to more effectively transfer core business concepts while anticipating unintended consequences that may arise when adapting business models to host-country contexts. As a result, organizations are better positioned to manage complexity, mitigate risks, and capitalize on emerging opportunities during international expansion.

The findings further indicate that expatriate entrepreneurs played a pivotal role in facilitating both knowledge and system transfer by embedding home-country operational standards within U.S. subsidiaries. These standards emphasized

accessibility, meticulous attention to operational detail, cost efficiency, and responsiveness to customer feedback. Such practices supported organizational alignment while allowing for contextual adaptation in the host market.

For practitioners, these findings offer actionable insights into how expatriate entrepreneurs can be strategically leveraged as system integrators during international expansion. By applying systems-thinking principles, firms can better prepare expatriates to navigate cross-border complexities, align organizational processes, and sustain business model coherence in host-country operations. Collectively, these implications contribute to practical guidance for organizations seeking to enhance the effectiveness of expatriate-led business model transfer.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study indicate several important policy implications for organizations engaged in international business model transfer. First, organizations should formally integrate system dynamics tools, such as stock-and-flow diagrams, into strategic planning and review processes that involve organizational expatriates, subsidiary managers, and headquarters leadership. Embedding these tools into governance and decision-making structures enhances systemic awareness and enables expatriates to interpret local feedback loops more effectively, thereby supporting adaptive and context-sensitive business model transfer.

Second, given the central role of social capital in host-country operations, governance frameworks should explicitly recognize that the accumulation of local social capital may result in strategic divergence from headquarters. Rather than viewing such divergence as a failure of alignment, organizational policies should allow for flexible adaptation while maintaining core strategic objectives and values. This approach promotes local responsiveness without undermining organizational coherence.

Finally, expatriate management policies should incorporate cultural competence and adaptive capacity into performance evaluation and incentive systems. Rewarding reflective, culturally informed, and adaptive behaviors reinforces the strategic importance of expatriates' experiential learning and supports more effective transfer and evolution of business models across diverse institutional contexts.

Conclusion

Understanding the impact of expatriate behavior is critical, as transferring a business model from one country to another often requires a deep understanding of, and empathy toward, the host country's employees, customers, and business partners. By focusing on companies without long-established U.S. subsidiaries, the study avoids interactions with other business divisions that could introduce unrelated variables, ensuring a targeted and strategic approach to theorization. Systems Thinking fosters a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, emphasizing the need for businesses to assess system performance, derive insights from feedback, and

implement necessary adjustments as the business model evolves. This approach is indispensable for successfully transferring an effective business model.

This study contributes to international business and management theory by applying Systems Thinking as an integrative lens to explain how business models are transferred and adapted across institutional contexts. Rather than conceptualizing business model transfer as a linear or static replication process, this research reframes it as a complex, adaptive system shaped by continuous interactions among organizational expatriates, subsidiaries, and host-country environments. In doing so, it extends existing literature by highlighting the dynamic, non-linear, and feedback-driven nature of business model transfer in contemporary global organizations.

A key theoretical contribution lies in reconceptualizing organizational expatriates as active system agents rather than passive implementers of predetermined business models. Through the Systems Thinking lens, expatriates are positioned as boundary spanners who mediate between home- and host-country practices, reconcile institutional differences, and influence the adaptation process through their experiences, perceptions, and decision-making behaviors. This perspective enriches expatriate and international management literature by emphasizing the agentic and adaptive roles of expatriates in shaping organizational outcomes.

Studying foreign companies that have divested from the U.S. market may further enhance understanding of System Thinking applications. Organizational expatriates A and B were founding members of subsidiaries in the host country, meaning their companies did not have a long operational history there. Self-initiated expatriate entrepreneurs operating within long-established subsidiaries would likely encounter different challenges and barriers. Nonetheless, by examining expatriates' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors in detail, this study provides a nuanced understanding that complements and extends existing literature on international business model transfer. Future research has substantial potential, particularly studies tracking self-initiated organizational expatriates from non-Japanese firms involved in transferring business models from their home countries to host nations.

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