

## GLOBAL LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER IN KOREAN MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS: SELF-EFFICACY AS A MODERATOR

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We investigated the effects of global leadership competencies on knowledge transfer, and, in particular, the moderating role of self-efficacy in this relationship. Participants ( $N = 122$ ) were randomly selected employees of South Korean multinational corporations. They were working with global stakeholders and were participating in international competency training programs. Results showed that there was a moderating effect of self-efficacy on goal achievement in the relationship between the global leadership competency of innovation and knowledge transfer. Enhancement of a positive context for social associations and the provision of useful feedback are central for global leaders in the formation of self-efficacy, which precedes knowledge transfer.

*Keywords:* global leadership competencies, knowledge transfer, innovation, self-efficacy, goal attainment, multinational corporations.

Leadership is one of the most widely studied topics in management research (Yukl, 1989). In the global economy, for organizations to be successful it is essential that managers have the necessary global leadership competencies (Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2007). Caligiuri and Di Santo (2001) stated that the

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Some of the data presented here were used in a conference presentation by the first author, and are reported in the Korean Academic Association of Business Administration Fall Conference (2012) proceedings.

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financial success of *multinational corporations* (MNCs) relies on the ability of their employees to develop global leadership competencies. Although the demand for global leadership development has been evident in recent years (Bird & Mendelhall, 2016; Jokinen, 2005; Tubbs & Schulz, 2006), there is still a significant gap in understanding how the desired competitiveness is achieved in organizations.

In an era of global competition, the key to business success is how well knowledge is shared among individuals and teams within organizations (Argote, McEvily, & Reagans, 2003). Knowledge transfer in MNCs provides opportunities for mutual learning and collaboration among employees. These actions result in improved performance and cooperation and potentially stimulate knowledge sharing and organizational innovation (Wang & Noe, 2010). Growing evidence suggests that organizations are more productive when managers create conditions for knowledge to be transferred by potential providers and used by the recipients (Davenport, 2005). That is, knowledge transfer as the outcome of global leadership competencies in MNCs can be determined by an employee's ability to achieve intended results. Indeed, self-efficacy is a central motivational construct to predict employee behavior because it affects the level of confidence that foreign partners and stakeholders have in the organization (Hsu, Ju, Yen, & Chang, 2007).

Consequently, more knowledge is required in regard to the interaction of employees' global leadership competencies with knowledge transfer, and the potential influence of self-efficacy on this relationship. This information would ensure more success in the achievement of work goals via the global assignment of employees. In this study we investigated the relationships among global leadership competencies, self-efficacy, and knowledge transfer in MNCs.

## Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

### Global Leadership Competencies and Knowledge Transfer

*Global leadership* can be defined as a process of influencing and facilitating a group of people across cultures to achieve organizational vision and goals in complex and diverse settings (Osland, Bird, Mendenhall, & Osland, 2006). Mendenhall et al. (2013) defined global leadership also as "the process of influencing others to adopt a shared vision through structures and methods that facilitate positive change while fostering individual and collective growth in a context characterized by significant levels of complexity, flow, and presence" (p. 500). *Global leadership competencies* can thus be identified as those universal qualities that enable individuals to perform their job across national and cultural boundaries (Jokinen, 2005).

Recently, international training programs have been provided in many MNCs for selected employees to develop global competencies to improve their

knowledge, skills, and attitude that are necessary when they work with global stakeholders. As the competitive field of organizations widens, it has become necessary for corporations to expand into the global arena (Bird, 2013; Shen & Lang, 2009). Researchers have developed and adopted the construct of global leadership competencies, because multinational corporations need to plan global strategies and compete in the international marketplace (Mendenhall, Kuhlmann, Stahl, & Osland, 2002). Bird and Mendenhall pointed out in their 2016 review that over 160 global leadership competencies have been identified in the literature. However, many competencies overlap with the only difference being in semantic terms (Bird & Mendelhall, 2016). Also, most researchers have mainly focused on expatriate management and cross-cultural development and not on other aspects of global leadership competencies, for example, innovation (Jokinen, 2005).

Scholars have identified global leadership competencies differently. For example, Srinivas (1995) outlined eight components of global competencies required for an organization to compete successfully in a global environment: curiosity and concern with context, acceptance of complexity, diversity consciousness and sensitivity, seeking opportunity in surprises and uncertainties, faith in organizational processes, focus on continual improvement, extended time perspective, and systems thinking. Conner (2000) identified six skills and abilities needed by global leaders working in host subsidiaries, namely, business savvy, ability to use personal influence, global perspective, strong character, ability to motivate people, and entrepreneurial behavior. Moran et al. (2007) stated that the main outcomes of cross-cultural training can be used as selection criteria for global leadership, and identified eight components of training outcomes: empathy, openness, persistence, cultural sensitivity, respect for other cultures, role flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, and communication skills.

Adler (2000) noted that global leadership is distinctive because it is focused on cross-cultural interaction rather than on either single culture description or multicountry comparison. Thus, the leaders' process of developing global competencies is based on their understanding of the dynamics of the international business environment and core competencies. Bueno and Tubbs (2004) interviewed 26 leaders who had more than 4 years of international business experience, and concluded that the core global competencies were communication skills, motivation to learn, flexibility, open-mindedness, respect for others, and sensitivity. Tubbs and Schulz (2006) developed seven metacompetencies of global leadership comprising 50 competencies, which they identified in a team-oriented culture as understanding the big picture, attitudes, leadership, communication, innovation, leading change, teamwork, and followership.

After reviewing the literature from 1993 to 2012 and extracting 160 global leadership competencies, Bird (2013) categorized the competencies into three groups related to business and organizational acumen, managing

people and relationships, and managing self. More specifically, Bird identified 15 competencies after he had minimized conceptual overlap by integrating and synthesizing the 160 competencies. The business and organizational acumen group of the 15 competencies includes strategic thinking, business savvy, managing communities, organizational savvy, and leading change. The managing people and relationships group features cross-cultural communication, interpersonal skills, valuing people, empowering others, and team skills. The managing self category includes resilience, character (comprising integrity, maturity, and conscientiousness), inquisitiveness, flexibility, and global mindset.

To measure global leadership competencies, Yoon (2011) empirically identified five dimensions that may facilitate knowledge transfer: cross-cultural adaptability, innovation, vision and strategy, communication, and global mindset. In this study we defined *cross-cultural adaptability* as the degree of psychological comfort and familiarity that an individual feels in a new cultural environment (Black & Mendenhall, 1990). *Innovation* refers to the development of an organizational climate in which new ideas are supported, creative decision making is improved, and individuals are encouraged to use their creative abilities (Sheremata, 2004). Vision and strategy are the competencies that allow employees to demonstrate their knowledge of an entire organization, and to identify a particular vision or strategy as being likely to lead to organizational success (Tubbs & Schulz, 2006). *Communication* refers to the competencies in which an individual demonstrates appropriate emotional intelligence, skillful use of language, and effective negotiation and presentation skills. *Global mindset* reflects a combination of an individual's perspective and attitude toward, and knowledge of, various cultures (Shen & Lang, 2009).

As knowledge transfer is important for organizational competitiveness, we reasoned that the main challenge is to examine the relationship between global leadership competencies and knowledge transfer. *Knowledge transfer* refers to the extent to which individuals transfer strategic information to their colleagues. Kogut and Zander (1993) highlighted that the ability of employees to create and transfer internal knowledge is a critical competitive advantage for MNCs, in comparison to their domestic competitors. The ability to integrate knowledge across nations and cultures in MNCs depends on leadership initiatives. Bartlett and Ghoshal (1989) noted how individuals contribute to the achievement of organizations' strategic goals through knowledge transfer. In other words, a global leader transfers knowledge and develops the host country's ability to coordinate with headquarters' targets and strategies. International assignees are boundary spanners of an MNC's knowledge transfer flows (Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2009; Reiche, 2011). Further, knowledge flow between parent country and host country staff of an MNC can be initiated by international assignees (Reiche, 2011).

A growing number of researchers have shown the positive influence of global leadership for promoting knowledge transfer between employees (e.g., Srinivas, 1995; Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006). When leaders in MNCs constantly learn from followers and foster a mutual learning environment, employees are more likely to meet leaders' expectations and share their knowledge. Liao, Fei, and Chen's (2007) findings confirmed the effect of leadership style on knowledge transfer at both the individual and organizational levels. More recently, the empirical results of Han, Seo, Yoon, and Yoon's (2016) study showed that there was a positive relationship between leadership style and knowledge transfer within organizations. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Global leadership competencies will be positively related to knowledge transfer within organizations.

### **Self-Efficacy as a Moderator**

*Self-efficacy* refers to individuals' confidence in their ability to succeed at a specific task, and is considered a critical factor for the improvement of employees' motivation and performance. Researchers have examined the relationship between an individual's recognition of diverse cultures and self-efficacy (Goleman, 1998; Jokinen, 2005). Self-efficacy may interact with global leadership competencies to affect knowledge transfer because, as employees acquire more global leadership competencies, they are more likely to share their knowledge, achieve success in their task performance, and gain more confidence and belief in their ability to acquire global qualities, such as leadership competencies. Brown, Jones, and Leigh (2005) found that both self-efficacy and personal goal setting are determinants of successful actions.

Researchers have established the relationship between self-efficacy and knowledge transfer. In the theory of knowledge management, the importance of self-efficacy in successful knowledge transfer has been accounted for (Easterby-Smith, Lyles, & Tsang, 2008). Argote et al. (2003) identified individuals' self-efficacy and motivation as critical to knowledge transfer. In a recent meta-analytic review, Wang and Noe (2010) found that self-efficacy promoted employees' intention to transfer knowledge. Moreover, knowledge transfer has been shown to play an intensifying role in increasing employee competencies and has been investigated as a mediating variable between self-efficacy and employee creativity (Wu, Hsu, & Yeh, 2007).

Self-efficacy has also been found to moderate the relationship between global leadership competencies and knowledge transfer (Chang, Gong, & Peng, 2012). Bandura and Cervone (1986) argued that individuals who scored high on self-efficacy were more likely to increase their efforts to attain their intended results. It is possible that employees strong in global competencies will actively learn from others, leading to more knowledge being acquired in different

contexts. Such efforts, in turn, can be reinforced by self-efficacy that influences the level of performance of the self-efficacious individual.

As the role of self-efficacy in regard to new experiences is important, researchers have focused on the direct influence of self-efficacy on knowledge sharing. Few researchers have examined the moderating role of self-efficacy between global leadership competencies and knowledge transfer specifically in MNCs. The reasoning we have set out suggests that greater self-efficacy would strengthen the relationship between a leader's global competencies and knowledge transfer in an organization. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Self-efficacy will moderate the effect of global leadership competencies on knowledge transfer within organizations.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

We conducted this study with the approval of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Ulsan. We distributed a participant recruitment letter through a paper and online survey to employees of Korean MNCs, targeting employees who were in positions related to global assignments or who were working with global stakeholders at the time of the survey. We assumed that most participants would have had experience working with foreign colleagues and global subsidiaries.

Of 140 randomly selected employees, 127 (91%) responded. All were participating in international competency training programs that were provided at a corporate learning center. Demographic information collected by the human resources directors and managers in the company where each participant was employed included job position, education level, work field, gender, age, industry, number of overseas assignments, time spent in overseas assignment, whether or not the employee had previous experience with foreign coworkers, and company tenure. Of the 127 responses, only those with completed surveys were used. We eliminated five respondents because they did not answer critical survey items and, consequently, we used 122 responses in the analysis procedure.

The majority of participants held management roles (72.1%,  $n = 88$ ), and as 96.7% ( $n = 118$ ) were men, this indicates that in Korean MNCs, men are preferred for global work assignments. In regard to their education level, most participants held a bachelor's degree (96.7%,  $n = 118$ ), with only four (3.3%) holding a high school or associate's degree. Of the participants, 62.0% ( $n = 76$ ) had more than 2 years' experience of an overseas assignment, and 37.7% ( $n = 46$ ) had not had an overseas assignment.

### Measures

All instruments used to measure the three main constructs were translated according to the translation-back-translation method, performed by three

linguistics professionals from a panel of bilingual experts. Two doctoral students translated the questions from English to Korean, after which the questions were translated back to English by another independent bilingual expert. Also, a panel of several experts who had majored in management and who had extensive work experience refined all the survey items, thus ensuring the content validity of the items. Participants assessed each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 5 = *agree strongly*.

**Global leadership competencies.** To measure the global leadership competency dimensions of cross-cultural adaptability, innovation, vision and strategy, communication, and global mindset, we used a 23-item scale developed by Tubbs and Schulz (2006). The measure has been shown to have acceptable reliability (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Engberg, 2014). Sample items are “I like to learn through reframing” and “I understand how various cultures of this world interact socially.”

Confirmatory factor analysis results indicated that the five-factor model fit the data well,  $\chi^2 = 232.76$ ,  $p < .01$ ; goodness-of-fit index = .91, comparative fit index = .92, Tucker–Lewis index = .92, root mean square error of approximation = .06.

**Knowledge transfer.** We adopted three items developed by Simonin (1999) to assess participants’ perception of the level of knowledge transfer in their organization. A sample item is “I have learned a great deal about job-related knowledge and skills from a coworker.”

**Self-efficacy.** We adopted five items developed by Chen, Gully, and Eden (2001) to measure participants’ perception of their level of confidence in solving problems and achieving their goals in the workplace. We operationally defined the degree of self-efficacy as the average score across the five items. A sample item is “I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself.”

## Data Analysis

We used hierarchical multiple regression analysis to identify the relationships among the five dimensions of global leadership competencies, personal characteristics, and knowledge transfer in MNCs. We assessed the significance of the interaction after controlling for all main effects.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and Pearson zero-order correlations are presented in Table 1. Each global leadership competency was significantly positively correlated with knowledge transfer. To avoid multicollinearity, we examined variance inflation factors, all of which in the regressions were below 3, indicating that multicollinearity was not found (Pedhazur, 1997).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations Among Study Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Job position	2.43	1.23	—													
2. Education level	3.09	0.39	.06	—												
3. Work field	2.76	1.34	.16	.09	—											
4. Gender	0.97	0.18	-.24**	-.07	-.10	—										
5. Industry	2.13	1.05	.38**	.12	.22*	-.52**	—									
6. Overseas experience	3.05	1.63	.43**	-.01	.04	.09	.12	—								
7. Age	6.85	4.78	.60**	.08	.11	.08	.04	.33**	—							
8. Cross-cultural adaptability	3.06	0.65	-.13	-.18	-.01	.09	-.03	.04	-.05	(.82)						
9. Vision and strategy	3.55	0.63	.01	-.13	.02	.03	-.01	.04	.11	.42**	(.83)					
10. Innovation	3.93	0.61	-.12	-.01	-.02	.07	-.25**	-.14	.09	.37**	.52**	(.85)				
11. Communication	3.68	0.62	-.19*	-.21*	-.10	.00	.02	-.18	-.09	.52**	.47**	.38**	(.73)			
12. Global mindset	3.87	0.59	-.02	.01	.10	.04	.12	-.01	.05	.28**	.42**	.37**	.26**	(.78)		
13. Self-efficacy	3.82	0.54	-.13	-.16	-.15	-.01	-.07	-.09	.03	.46**	.43**	.30**	.47**	.18*	(.82)	
14. Knowledge transfer	3.64	0.49	-.08	-.02	-.15	.03	-.09	.02	.04	.42*	.38**	.42**	.30**	.21*	.41**	(.91)

Note. N = 122. Cronbach's alpha coefficients are reported in parentheses on the diagonal.

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01.

### Hypothesis Testing

We tested Hypotheses 1 and 2 using hierarchical regression models. After we had controlled for demographic variables to partial out their effects, the results indicated that innovation and cross-cultural adaptability were statistically related to the participants' perception of knowledge transfer. In contrast, the communication, vision and strategy, and global mindset variables were not significantly predictive of knowledge transfer. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was only partially supported.

Table 2. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis of the Relationships Among Demographic Information, Global Leadership Competencies, Self-Efficacy, and Knowledge Transfer

Variables	Knowledge transfer			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Control variables</b>				
Job position	-.065	-.021	-.011	-.009
Education level	-.016	.068	.076	.004
Experience with foreigner coworkers	-.049	-.055	-.046	-.041
Gender	-.169	-.153	-.088	-.060
Industry	-.020	-.006	-.001	.018
Overseas experience	.016*	.016*	.020*	.018*
Age	.014	.005	.001	.001
<b>Main effects</b>				
CA		.208**	.166**	.130
VS		.106	.069	.077
IN		.195**	.200**	.203**
CM		.001	.031	-.050
GM		.002	.007	-.010
SE			.184**	.239**
<b>Interactions</b>				
SE × CA				.034
SE × VS				-.065
SE × IN				.341**
SE × CM				.144
SE × GM				-.100
$R^2$	.042	.299**	.325**	.366**
$\Delta R^2$		.257	.026	.042

Note.  $N = 122$ . CA = cross-cultural adaptability, VS = vision and strategy, IN = innovation, CM = communication, GM = global mindset, SE = self-efficacy.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

As shown in Table 2, the full equation explained 36.6% of the variance in knowledge transfer. Of the control variables as a block, only overseas experience positively predicted knowledge transfer and remained significant in Model 4. The results in Model 4 show that self-efficacy was significantly associated with

knowledge transfer, and the interaction between innovation and self-efficacy was significant. No other interaction for the individual global competencies and self-efficacy was significant. To further probe the interaction effect, we applied the simple slope test (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006). The pattern of the interaction (see Figure 1) showed that high innovation increased knowledge transfer only when self-efficacy was high. Hypothesis 2 was thus supported.

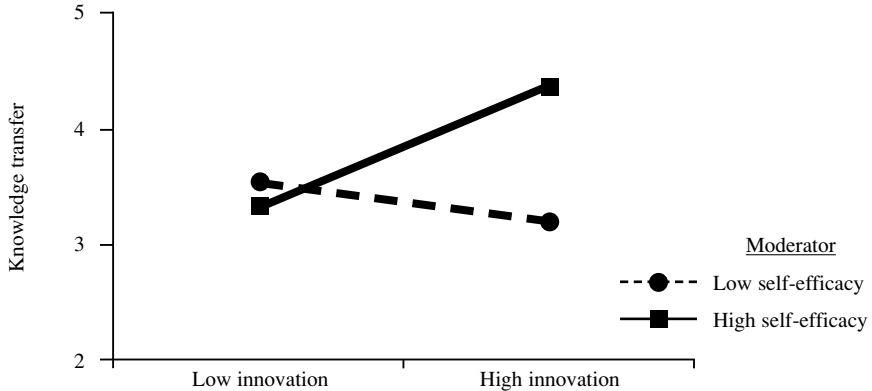


Figure 1. Moderating effect of self-efficacy in the relationship between innovation and knowledge transfer.

## Discussion

In this study we aimed to determine the extent to which the relationship between global leadership competencies and knowledge transfer was significant, and to assess the moderating role of self-efficacy in this relationship. Results supported the theoretical interactive predictions, providing support for the important moderating role that self-efficacy plays in the explanation of knowledge transfer in the workplace. Our findings reinforced the notion that employees with a high level of innovation competency are more likely than others are to share knowledge with their coworkers. Results also showed that the positive relationship between innovation and knowledge transfer was moderated by self-efficacy. That is, self-efficacy strengthens the positive relationship between innovation and knowledge transfer. Further, high innovation increases knowledge transfer between individuals when self-efficacy is high.

There are implications in this study for international human resource management research and practice. Several researchers have reported that individual characteristics—self-efficacy, relational skills, success in assignments, and language fluency—are positively related to employees' success in the global

workplace (Claus, Lungu, & Bhattacharjee, 2011). We found that self-efficacy had a positive impact on employees' perception of knowledge transfer. In particular, we identified a moderating effect of self-efficacy on goal achievement in the relationship between innovation and the degree of knowledge transfer. This suggests that managers interested in developing global competencies should focus on enhancing employee self-efficacy, which precedes knowledge transfer. Organizational managers can use the analysis of job applicants' self-efficacy as a selection criterion, as well as providing development programs to enhance desirable global leadership competencies.

In our empirical test we also found that the relationship between global leadership competencies and knowledge transfer was moderated by self-efficacy, which can have important implications for selection, training, and development for global leadership. We have contributed both to the literature on competencies empirically associated with global leadership, and to the methods used to examine the relationship of global leadership competencies with knowledge transfer. Although global leadership researchers have continued to garner more empirical evidence for better understanding of which global leadership competencies are effective in different contexts, more empirical research needs to be conducted to confirm the validity and reliability of a set of global leadership competencies.

There are several methodological limitations in this study. The generalizability of the results is limited to the employees of organizations in South Korean MNCs when we conducted the survey. In addition, our research model did not include cultural distance and individual performance, both of which can significantly influence global leadership competencies. Cultural context plays a pivotal role when an individual is communicating with people from diverse cultures. Also, global leadership competencies may be affected by cultural differences between the parent country and the country where employees are working (Brett, Behfar, & Kern, 2006). Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) noted that employees whose culture is different from the one in which they are employed, perceive their organizational environment differently because of individual differences such as personal traits, and that understanding these differences is critical when business is conducted across nations and cultures. Thus, future researchers should explore how global leadership competencies are valued and influenced by diverse cultures.

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