

The dual role of multinational employees

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Abstract: *Within multinational company, language differences can cause communication barriers among employees. In practice, many multinational companies use bridge employees as a way to overcome language communication barriers. However, we argue that bridge employee is a double-edged sword with both a debilitating effect and an energizing effect on multinational company. Multinational companies should consider their own actual needs, weigh the pros or cons and choose the best employees.*

Key words: *multinational company, bridge employees, dual effect.*

I. Introduction

Under the background of economic globalization, many senior managers of multinational companies in China are gradually changing from European and American to overseas Chinese or returned overseas personnel. It suggests people who have multi-cultural background and multi language ability is recognized by multinational companies . This type of employee is called “bridge employees”. what’s more, This group who can adapt to the differences of cultures, have multiple cultural experience, or a strong ability to analyze and judge the differences cultures. In other words, they have a keen understanding, and can play a more important role in managing communication and cultural translation, which is very important to overcome the language barriers in multinational companies (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Sekiguchi, 2016). However, we argue that bridge employee is a double-edged sword with both a debilitating effect and an energizing effect on multinational company.

II. The concept of bridge employees

Bridge individuals refer to employees who have specific language skills and can play a bridge role between different language groups in multinational companies (Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011). Although bridge individuals are concerned and discussed by scholars, there is no unified definition. In the past literature, there are many terms similar to bridge individuals, such as boundary spanners (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Barner et al., 2014), language nodes (marschan et al., 1999), brokers (Eisenberg & mattarelli, 2017; mattarelli et al., 2017), and cultural mediators (Okamoto & Teo, 2012). Among them, the meaning of boundary spanners is the closest to bridge individuals in the context of language differences . However, the scope of boundary spanners is more extensive (Sekiguchi, 2016). Besides, boundary spanners refer to people who can promote internal communication within the same organization, while bridge individuals emphasize organizations with cross international companies (tushman & Scanlan, 1981)

In the context of many multinational companies thinking about how to solve the language barriers employee communication, Harzing et al. (2011) earlier proposed the concept of bridge individuals, which is used to describe employees who can promote communication between headquarters and subsidiaries. However, there are still few studies on bridge individuals, and it is not enough for the research on the definition and role of

bridge individuals (harzing et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2019; Sekiguchi, 2016). In this paper, we integrate the concepts of bridge individuals, boundary spanners and Bridge individuals, and define them as "bridge employees". Specifically, Bridge employee refers to people who have a good command of different languages, are familiar with the cultural background of their home and host countries, and can promote communication or management in the company.

III. The positive role of bridge employees

Promote internal connections within organization

The role of bridge employee can not only help multinational companies overcome language barriers, but also enable them to have high-quality interaction with team members—play a "link" role in the internal network of organization (Fitzsimmons, Liao, & Thomas, 2017). In other words, multicultural employees can help multinational companies integrate different cultures, alleviate the stereotype of employees on different cultural groups, and help to avoid conflicts (Crisp & Turner, 2011; Lücke et al., 2014). In a multicultural organization, cultural differences can lead to alienation or distrust among different groups (Lauring & Selmer, 2011). In this case, bridge employees can make full use of their language ability and cross-cultural background to explain the behavior of different groups through language and cultural knowledge (Dau, 2016; Fitzsimmons et al., 2011). Such as, Okamoto and colleagues (2012) found that employees in the Japanese subsidiary in Australia who played the role of cultural translator helped to alleviate the resistance between Japanese expatriates and non Japanese employees.

Impact on organizational social networks

Individuals with multicultural backgrounds have certain initiative in their cultural environment, and their thoughts or behaviors can be flexibly changed according to their cultural environment (Archer, 2007). Thus, they can use their cultural and linguistic knowledge to purposefully strengthen their ties with specific cultural groups inside and outside the organization (Korac, 2003; Moore, 2016). At the same time, they can use the recognition from different groups to form a network of cross-cultural and cross organizational boundaries. Considering that common cultural characteristics can affect the strength of relationships (Manev & Stevenson, 2001); bridge employees have stronger network centrality than single cultural individuals.

Promote knowledge transfer between parent company and subsidiary company

Bridge employees play a key role in the knowledge transfer between MNCs' headquarters and subsidiaries (Harzing & Pudelko, 2014; Harzing, Pudelko, & Reiche, 2016; Reiche, 2009). With the increasingly complex and uncertain characteristics of the global economic environment, many multinational companies pay more attention to the internal flow and integration of knowledge. In this process, culture is regarded as an obstacle to the international transfer of knowledge. Therefore, bridge employees with cross-cultural background experience can more effectively detect and resolve the complexity of multi-cultural. Thus, bridge employees play a bridge role in cultural communication and effectively promote knowledge transfers and absorption. For example, harzing and colleagues (2014) found that bridge employees can promote communication and knowledge transfer between headquarters and foreign subsidiaries. Liu et al. (2015) conducted a study on Chinese immigrants working in the UK and found that immigrants with high bilingual and bicultural abilities play an important role in knowledge transfer.

Improve the influence of subsidiaries

Bridge employees can identify the sources of influence of subsidiaries and help expand their influence, such as resource control, legitimacy and network centrality (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008). In other words, bridge employees can help subsidiaries obtain valuable resources by using multi-cultural knowledge and

international thinking. Specifically, bridge employees can use cultural identity to develop cultural norms that can be accepted by different cultural groups to help subsidiaries obtain legitimacy (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2010). At the same time, bridge employees' flexible thinking can help enterprises capture innovation opportunities and form subsidiaries influence (Govindarajan & Trimble, 2012).

IV. The negative role of bridge employees

When bridge employees play a bridge role between different language groups, it will not only have a positive impact, but also a negative impact. Specifically, bridge employees play a bridge role in cross-cultural communication in multinational companies. When their ability can not meet the requirements of bridge role and most other work requirements at the same time, their work pressure will increase and their roles will conflict (Liu et al., 2019; Harzing et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2011). What's more, the role conflict caused by work needs will further aggravate their emotional anxiety, which will be bad for the development of company (Liu et al., 2019; Maslach et al., 2001).

In addition, multinational companies with centralized power or serious home country tendency, such as those with ethnocentrism, may have strong prejudice and discrimination against multicultural employees (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1998; Perlmutter, 1969). Besides, companies that use the native language will convey the most important message that will emphasize identity of the home country. In this case, multicultural employees may cope with the cultural pressure brought by the company by suppressing the threatened cultural identity, which will have a negative impact on individuals and organizations (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014; Kane & Levina, 2017; Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2014). For example, multicultural employees may suffer from emotional distress and deliberately fail to comply with rules and regulations (Petriglieri, 2011). In contrast, multinational companies that encourage multilingualism will create an atmosphere of respect for multiculturalism, and the important skills of bridge employees will be valued and used well, which is essential for today's global companies to gain competitive advantage. (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014).

V. Conclusion

With the development of globalization, many enterprises have set up subsidiaries in other countries. Bridge employees play a bridge role in multinational enterprises. Specifically, bridge employees can promote the communication within the enterprise, influence the social network of the organization, promote the knowledge transfer within the enterprise and expand the influence of the subsidiary company. However, multinational enterprises should also pay attention to the negative effects of bridge employees.

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