

Concept Paper

The Diffusion of Human Resource Transformation in Scandinavia: A Supply-Side Perspective

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Abstract: Since the turn of the millennium, human resource transformation (HRT) has emerged as a popular management concept among organizations and consultants around the world. HRT has been presented as a recipe for how to transform the traditional personnel function and make personnel and HR work in more business-oriented, cost-effective, and value-creating ways. Through a comparative study of the actors that make up the so-called “management fashion arena” around HRT in the Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, and Denmark), the study provides insight into how the national actors influence and shape the diffusion of popular management concepts. The study shows that there are both similarities and differences between how the supply side is configured in the three countries. For example, large consulting firms have played an influential role in all three countries, while the influence of actors such as business schools and professional organizations varies considerably between the countries. The findings also suggest that there are powerful alliances between actors involved in the diffusion of HRT. Overall, the study sheds light on the global diffusion and “travel” of a predominantly North American-based HR concept and its reception in Scandinavia.

Keywords: HR transformation; management concepts; management fashion; fashion; neo-institutional theory



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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The idea of human resource transformation (HRT) can be traced back to academic publications from the early 1990s [1]. During this time, there was an increasing interest in human resource management (HRM) and criticism of the influence and position of the HR function [2,3]. Even though the U.S.-based HR professor and guru Dave Ulrich was not the first to use the label human resource transformation, these ideas quickly became closely associated with him [4] (p. 103). Ulrich argued that the HR function should be more closely related to the organization's strategy and value-creation activities. In this way, the HR function would increase its reputation and obtain a stronger position in the organization [5].

HRT involves changing HR practices so that they align with the organization's strategy. In addition, it is necessary to reorganize the structures with the help of technology. Therefore, the idea of “shared services” was emphasized [6]. Furthermore, HR workers must upgrade their competencies so that they can handle organizational needs and expectations [5] (p. 101). According to Røvik [7] (p. 155), the pressure toward changes in the HR function has been a global trend that reflects a strong emphasis on organizational results and performance. Røvik referred to Ulrich [8], who argued that HR must be more oriented toward organizational competitiveness than employee comfort.

HRT has been the subject of considerable attention from practitioners [9], consultants [10], and organizations of HR professionals in several countries around the world [11,12]. The status of HRT as a buzzword has created pressure to adopt and implement the concept to be perceived as a modern organization with state-of-the-art HR practices [13,14] (p. 189).

1.2. Purpose and Contribution

Despite the global popularity of the HRT concept, it is generally an under-researched area. Much of the discourse on HRT is dominated by HR consultants and gurus. In contrast, scholars have mostly been on the sidelines, and as a result, there are relatively few critical examinations of the evolution of the HRT concept. There has been little comparative research on the factors that could explain its diffusion and popularity. Instead, extant research on HRT is dominated by case studies of how the concept is implemented and what effects it has on the HR function and the line organization [15–18]. In particular, studies have focused on the structure of the HR function and its role as an HR business partner [19–22].

In this study, we followed a different approach, which is aimed at investigating the role of the supply side on the diffusion and popularity of HRT in the three Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, and Denmark). We address the following overall research question: *What is the role of the supply side in the diffusion of HRT in each of the three Scandinavian countries?* Doing this entails conducting a detailed comparison of the configuration of the supply side of HRT, or what is referred to as the “management fashion arena” [23,24], in each of the three respective countries.

Several researchers have called for more cross-contextual research on management fashions [25,26]. In his seminal paper on management fashion, Abrahamson noted that “management fashion markets probably differ across countries both in the frequency and duration of management fashions” [27] (pp. 262–263). In previous research, it has been suggested that specific actors and institutions in each country can influence the tendency of “fashion consumers” to adopt or reject management concepts. Malmi [28] (p. 669) argued that “a detailed study on the interplay of academics, consultants, professional associations, and the media in creating management fashions could contribute substantially to our understanding of how and why new ideas are introduced in organizations”. Similarly, van Vee, et al. [29] called for more systematic research on the roles of different actors in the lifecycles of management fashions.

Hence, by answering these calls from the management fashion literature, the study provides new knowledge about the potential role and interplay of different fashion-arena actors in the cross-national diffusion process. The Scandinavian countries offer an ideal environment for this type of study, as these three countries are similar in many ways, for example, in terms of management style [30], work organization [31], and other aspects of social and economic life [32]. Therefore, differences in the impact of the HRT concept may be attributed to the involvement and activity levels of different types of fashion-setting actors.

1.3. Theoretical Lens and Approach

Management fashion theory was used as a theoretical lens and organizing framework in this study [27,33,34]. In prior research, it has been shown that this theory is well-suited to explain the diffusion of other HR-related concepts, such as talent management [35], e-HRM [36], and HR analytics [37]. As noted by Paauwe and Boselie [38] (p. 64), the field of HR is influenced by numerous fashion trends, and organizations tend to imitate what is currently considered state-of-the-art and “best practice”.

Research on management fashions has shown that the market for management concepts and ideas such as HRT consists of a supply and a demand side [27,34]. The supply side of the management fashion market is often referred to as the “fashion-setting community” [27]. Examples of fashion-setting actors include consulting firms, management gurus, business media organizations, and conference organizers [23,24]. Together, these actors play a key role in the creation, development, and popularization of new management concepts. Based on the actors identified in the literature as the central players in the diffusion of management concepts, we analyzed the relative importance of each of these in relation to the diffusion of HRT as an HR fashion in the Scandinavian countries.

1.4. Research Approach

The research approach followed in this paper can be characterized as qualitative and explorative. As stated earlier, we aim to study the diffusion of HRT across the three Scandinavian countries from a supply side perspective. This entails carrying out a comparative analysis of the various supply side actors involved in the three national markets around HRT. To be able to evaluate the influence of a wide range of actors (e.g., consultants, gurus, conference organizers, business schools), it is necessary to “zoom out” and take a birds-eye view.

In designing this study, we took inspiration from previous studies in the literature, which pointed out that it can be challenging to assess the impact of management concepts and ideas in different national and regional contexts [24,39–41]. Instead, a more realistic and pragmatic aim is to attempt to “paint an overall picture” [39] (p. 638) or construct a “mosaic” [40] of the concept’s impact in a given context. In this study, we pieced together a wide range of scholarly and practitioner-oriented sources to construct an overall picture and narrative of the role of the supply side in diffusion of HRT in the three countries.

In the search for literature on HRT, we followed a snowballing-type procedure, where we examined and identified several key HRT publications. We then used a mix of backward snowballing (examining the reference sections of the key publications) and forward snowballing (examining recent publications that have cited the key publications) [42–44]. In addition, we used exploratory Google searches to identify and track the activities of influential actors in each of the three countries.

There are several limitations related to our chosen research approach, such as a reliance on desk research and secondary data. However, we made these choices pragmatically given the aims and constraints of the paper. We will revisit these limitations in the final section of the paper.

1.5. Structure

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides an outline of the theoretical framework of the “management fashion arena”, which will be used as a theoretical lens and organizing framework that will guide and structure the empirical analysis. Section 3 provides an analysis of the fashion arenas around the HRT in each of the three Scandinavian countries. Section 4 examines the findings in relation to the literature on management fashions. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper by identifying contributions, limitations, and areas requiring future research.

2. The Role of the Supply-Side in the Diffusion of Management Concepts

This section outlines key elements of the theory of management fashions that will be as a lens and organizing framework to structure the analysis of the diffusion of HRT in the three Scandinavian countries.

2.1. The Management Fashion Arena

The management fashion market can be characterized as a normal competitive market. The market has a supply side consisting of the various actors in the fashion-setting community and a demand side consisting of organizations and managers who are consumers and users of management concepts and ideas [27,45]. The market is sometimes referred to as the “management knowledge industry” [26] or the “management fashion industry” [27].

Much past research has focused on the supply side of the management fashion market. In an early article on management fashion, Abrahamson [27] highlighted the role of actors on the supply side, which he referred to as the “fashion-setting community”. Fashion-setting actors, such as consultants, gurus, and business school academics, create, launch, and disseminate new management concepts. In a similar vein, Kieser [33] suggested the conception of a field of fashion-setting actors, which he called the “management fashion arena”. The fashion arena consists of various fashion-setters who promote and support a particular management concept.

In the following, we will go into more detail about the configuration of the management fashion arena.

2.2. Configuration of Actors

The structure and configuration of the arena is complex since it typically consists of many types of actors. In the management fashion literature, researchers have identified several such fashion-setting actors [23,24,46], including consultants, gurus, professional groups, conference and seminar organizers, higher education institutions such as business schools, vendors of technological solutions, business media, and alliances of actors who position themselves in social media as experts and thought leaders.

Table 1 presents an overview of the most relevant actors in the management fashion arena. It should be noted that Clark [47] argued that there are additional players involved in the arena and emphasized the important supporting role of the various actors who work with management gurus, such as book editors, conference organizers, and ghostwriters. Although these actors could be seen as more peripheral actors, it can nevertheless be argued that they are important “behind the scenes” actors that pull important strings and in some ways function as gatekeepers.

Table 1. The main actors involved in the management fashion arena.

Actor type	Description	Relevant References
Consultants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consulting companies help clients implement management concepts. There are different types of consulting firms. Large firms are typically generalists and offer services related to a wide range of concepts and tools, while smaller, specialist consultancies tend to focus on one aspect (e.g., IT or strategy). 	[48,49]
Management gurus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management gurus present concepts and ideas about business and management in books, conferences, and seminars. It is possible to make distinctions between different types of gurus (e.g., global/local gurus or scholarly/consulting/managerial gurus). 	[50,51]
Professional groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional organizations have many functions concerning management concepts, e.g., licensing, training, certifications, and professional development. These organizations also monitor and discipline the public behavior of their members. 	[25,52]
Conference and seminar organizers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These actors organize conferences and seminars that focus on specific management concepts. Often these organizers team up with other actors such as consultants and software firms who make presentations about their experiences and products/services. 	[33]
Business media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The business media include not only traditional outlets such as business newspapers, magazines, and books, but increasingly also TV channels, Internet newspapers, blogs, and social media networks. 	[24,53]

Table 1. Cont.

Actor type	Description	Relevant References
Business schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business school professors often publish research on concepts in scholarly and practitioner-oriented journals and magazines. • While these articles may put a critical spotlight on new concepts, some academics become experts on certain concepts and may serve as scholar-consultants who write books about them and undertake consulting gigs on the side. • Concepts are also often integrated into education programs, especially MBA and executive education courses and materials. 	[54]
Software and ICT vendors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Software companies develop complementary products that help organizations implement management concepts. • These companies tend to focus on the technical aspects of concepts. For example, in the case of the balanced scorecard concept, there were at one time more than 100 different software packages on the market. 	[46]
High-profile user organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-profile organizations serve as opinion leaders and models for other organizations • Other organizations may be inclined to imitate the behavior and practices of prestigious organizations 	[55]

2.3. Interactions and Dynamics

There are frequent interactions between different actors in the arena, such as between the business media and consultants. For example, consultants tend to write fair amounts of articles on management concepts in print and social media [24,56]. Furthermore, consultants and software solution vendors tend to cooperate since their services and products are complementary [24,46]. In addition, there are frequent linkages and overlaps between actors, and some actors might assume more than one role in relation to a management concept (e.g., consultant/academic) [47,57].

The management fashion arena is also dynamic. Since the 2000s, technological advances have led to the development of software solutions (e.g., business analytics) that help organizations utilize and implement management concepts and ideas. Therefore, actors such as software firms have become more influential in the management fashion arena [24]. In the field of HR, software firms have been promoting the use of technological solutions related to HR and people analytics [24]. Another trend that has resulted in changes in the landscape of management fashion is the emergence of social media. Social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter have changed the configuration of the management fashion arena and reduced the power and influence of management gurus and other gatekeepers, such as editors of print media publications. Today, almost anyone can “tweet” or blog about new management concepts and ideas. Therefore, the digital age has led to an overall democratization of the management knowledge market [58,59].

3. The Management Fashion Arena around HRT in Each of the Three Scandinavian Countries

This section provides a description and analysis of the actors involved in the management fashion arena around HRT in each of the three Scandinavian countries. The analysis focuses on the following types of actors that are considered to have had a particular influence and relevance in the diffusion of HRT:

- (1) Management gurus;
- (2) Consulting firms;
- (3) Professional organizations;
- (4) High-profile user organizations;
- (5) Business media;
- (6) Business schools;
- (7) Conference organizers.

3.1. Management Gurus

Management gurus play an important role in creating and legitimizing new management concepts and ideas [50,51,60]. As mentioned in the introduction, HRT has to a large extent been associated with the American professor and consultant Dave Ulrich [4,61] (p. 103). *Forbes* and *Business Week* have ranked him as one of the most influential people in management education [62]. Ulrich has also been featured in *HR Magazine's* ranking of the world's most influential HR thinkers [63] and various other rankings of the most important and influential leaders in HR [64]. These awards and accolades can be seen in connection with Ulrich's key position in the global HR surveys conducted since the late 1980s, known as the Human Resource Competency Study (HRCS). From 1987 to 2021, this study was carried out eight times, and the researchers looked at the roles played by the HR function as well as competency structures [65,66]. The study of 2021 used data from more than 21,000 respondents around the world.

If we look back at some of the things that have cemented Ulrich's position in relation to HRT, Sparrow [61] showed that Ulrich discussed the strategic role of the HR function already during the 1980s. Over the next decade, he published two articles in the prestigious publication *Harvard Business Review* [6,67]. Ulrich's thinking about HRT was influenced and shaped by the zeitgeist of the era, which revolved around process improvement, organizational capabilities, and customer focus. Around the turn of the millennium, Ulrich was a household name in international HR circles and on the conference circuit. For example, he presented at the "Hay conferences" in Europe. Attending these conferences was perceived to be the trendiest thing to do as an HR manager in Scandinavia [68]. The book *Human Resource Champions* became an international bestseller, and it was followed by other publications that developed and fleshed out his thinking around HRT [5,69,70].

Popular concepts that are able to attract global attention are often pushed by management gurus with commercial interests tied to the success of the concept. This pattern can also be seen in the case of Ulrich and HRT. Since the late 1980s, Ulrich has been a professor at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. Following Huczynski [51], Ulrich can be considered an "academic guru". Alongside his job as a business school professor, he is also a partner in the consulting firm RBL Group. Even though this consultancy is based in Utah, it operates all over the world. It is behind several large-scale HR surveys and provides consulting services in the field of organization, management, strategy, and HR.

As HRT has grown in popularity around the world, there has been a shift in Ulrich's orientation. Over time, it became clearer that it was the consultant and partner of RBL who provided his recommendations. Swedish organizational researchers have made a similar observation by noting that Ulrich mainly appeals to the practitioner field. He is performing mostly for a paying audience and is highlighting the potential of his ideas rather than critically examining what happens when they are implemented in practice [71] (p. 70). As we will come back to later, Ulrich and RBL have on several occasions given speeches and carried out surveys in the Scandinavian countries [71,72].

3.2. Consulting Firms

Consulting firms play a central role in the diffusion of emergent management concepts [23,48,49,73]. It is certainly the type of actor that has received the most attention in previous research on fashionable management concepts. This is also the case for HRT where consultants have been involved since the concept's early days.

Large global consulting firms, such as Accenture, started using the rhetoric around the HRT concept around the turn of the millennium. A working group at the Norwegian office was tasked with conceptualizing and marketing the HRT concept. The approach was based on experiences from Accenture's customer projects in the U.S. as well as inspiration from Spencer [74–76]. Later, HRT became part of the service repertoire of several of the large consulting firms with offices in the Nordic countries [10]. A Swedish study suggested that consulting firms, such as Accenture, CapGemini, and Deloitte, have been actively promoting and marketing the concept. Experts from global consulting firms have participated in pilot studies, developed suggestions for new HR structures, and provided advice on the design and implementation of these changes. In cases where technology plays an important part in HRT, consultants have also provided adaptations of IT systems [71] (p. 77). In this way, consultants spread the experiences across firms, resulting in the establishment of a "best practice". A study from Sweden indicated that Capgemini used examples from the Danish armed forces [77] (p. 141).

In the Norwegian HRT market, EY has had a strong position. This firm has actively marketed the concept since the late 2000s. Partly, this is because EY in 2007 entered into a partnership with HR Norge, and together, they carried out the yearly HR survey in Norway [78]. In the Norwegian HR survey of 2012, EY identified success factors when it comes to the implementation of HRT. The recommendations were based on what was referred to as "theorists" and experiences from transformation projects [79] (p. 28).

A characteristic of Denmark is the role of smaller consulting firms all the way down to independent one-person consulting firms. One example is Gitte Mandrup (<https://gitemandrup.dk/>, accessed on 16 January 2022). Typically, consulting services are marketed under the motto "business-driven HR for ambitious HR professionals". The HRT ideas by Ulrich are heavily promoted. Mandrup's consulting firm is also listed as the publisher of a book providing examples of her practical experience with HR work and HR-related issues in Danish organizations [80].

Consulting reports from CapGemini (operating in all Scandinavian countries) provide an interesting window into the recommendations made to organizations implementing HRT. First, it is recommended that benchmarking is used to find a suitable size for the HR function. The second recommendation is to map activities and main areas where the HR function provides services and at what cost. The consultants conclude that much is spent on transaction-heavy HR processes and that too few resources are devoted to performance-enhancing HR activities. Moreover, it is seen as a considerable problem that HR work is carried out differently in decentralized divisions or business units. By organizing HR deliverables according to the HR shared services model, it is argued that it is possible to reduce the costs by up to 30% [81,82].

3.3. Professional Organizations

Professional organizations have a strong role since they are a collective actor that shapes the values and standards that are seen as appropriate in an organizational field [25,52]. In the field of HR, researchers have pointed out that national professional organizations play an important function in terms of network building between practitioners and by shaping professional identities and shared understandings [83]. Moreover, the organizations generally have a position and level of influence that allow them to set the agenda and shape what is talked about in the more formal meeting places, such as annual conferences [84].

The HR associations in the Scandinavian countries (HR Norge, Dansk HR, Sveriges HR Förening) frequently reference Dave Ulrich and RBL on their websites. Dansk HR calls Ulrich "the father of modern HR" [85], and when he visited Copenhagen in 2011, this event was covered under the heading "the boss is in town" [86].

In Norway, HR Norge has placed an increasingly strong focus on HRT [87]. For example, the concept of HRT was the focus of the 2012 HR survey and conferences featuring speakers from the Norwegian firm Yara, who presented their experiences with the concept [79,88,89]. At the two annual conferences that attract hundreds of participants, the

topic of HRT has been one of the main topics during the period 2009 to 2019. The concept has also received attention in news reports, HR practice surveys, and workshops featuring RBL consultants.

In 2012, HR Norge was the Northern European partner in the execution of Ulrich's global competency study (HRCS). This provided Ulrich and RBL with a stronger foothold vis-a-vis the European umbrella organization European Association for People Management (EAPM). EAPM is an organization with 34 member countries. The findings of the 2012 study were discussed in the publication "HR From the Outside In", where HR Norge was the author of one of the chapters [66].

3.4. High-Profile User Organizations

Røvik [55] emphasized the role of social authorization as an important factor in the diffusion of management concepts. This means that concepts must be associated with organizations that are perceived as modern and trendy.

In the case of Norway, Equinor (formerly known as Statoil) played a key role in the authorization process [90]. Several of the firm's HR employees attended courses and seminars on the concept of "business partner" in Utah, USA. In the authorization of the concept, HR Norge played an important role since the organizational changes in Statoil were the subject of much attention in Norwegian HR conferences [91]. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Boglind, Hällstén, and Thilander [15] noted that several well-known MNCs based in Sweden (Ericsson, ABB, and Volvo cars) undertook a major makeover of their HR function. These companies used the concept of HR transformation and referred to Ulrich's ideas as inspiration. Among the organizations that later were the basis for the Swedish study, there were several from the public sector, such as municipalities, hospitals, and the military [71,77].

Mandrup [80] showed how the transformation ideas have inspired firms such as Novozymes, Lego, IKEA, Carlsberg, and the Danish armed forces. It is also possible to identify narratives from organizations such as the Danish police [92], studies of Carlsberg [93], and YouTube videos that provide insights into the motivation behind the HR transformation in the Danish global logistics firm Maersk [94].

The review shows that the HR transformation concept has caught the attention of well-known organizations across many different industries in the Scandinavian countries. The concept first spread to private sector organizations but relatively quickly spread to the public sector as well. It appears that the concept has taken root in the HR functions of a large number of organizations. In the HR Norge member survey from 2004, nearly 37% answered that they had a centralized personnel function or had organized personnel tasks in a service center [95].

In a follow-up report on the same topic, more than 112 of the 180 organizations report that the HR department has undergone significant changes in the last few years [96]. Many had chosen to organize so that some selected services were delivered by HR centrally, while other services were delivered by HR personnel working in the business units. The findings show that many have increased the specialization and centralization of HR support [96].

Research in Sweden shows the same tendencies as in Norway. The centralized part of the HR function has grown considerably. Consequently, strategic HR issues are left to centralized units, while local and decentralized units are given resources in operational HR work [71].

3.5. Business Media

Several of Ulrich's publications have been translated into Scandinavian languages. The book titled *The HR Value Proposition* [69] was translated to Swedish in 2007 [97] and has been widely read by Swedish and Norwegian HR professionals. The book presented and discussed the ideas that provided the basis for HRT and that were elaborated on in the book *HR Transformation*, which provided a more technical and stepwise approach to the transformational journey [5]. The book was translated into Danish in 2010. The preface was

written by RBL's European partner Christine Cleemann, who at the time was affiliated with Copenhagen Business School (CBS). In the preface, HRT is marketed as a universal concept, and it is pointed out that the concept is equally suitable for private and public sector organizations. The book presents several tools and devices that can be used to carry out HR transformation projects and distinguishes between four phases in the implementation process [98].

The book *HR from the Outside in* has also been translated into Danish [66]. It is based on a global study with more than 20,000 respondents. The book provides practical recommendations to HR managers, consultants, and HR business partners on how to handle the business side of organizations.

Gitte Mandrup is an example of another book author who is strongly influenced by Ulrich's ideas and books on HRT. She has published two books. The first book, "*Perfekt Partnerskab*", is a handbook for HR professionals and provides a practical approach to business-oriented HR work. In the book, Mandrup described how to achieve a perfect partnership between the HR function and the line, with the aim of increasing organizational performance. The recommendations are based on experiences with HR business partners in well-known firms, such as LEGO, Carlsberg, and IKEA, supplemented by the author's own experiences [80]. In the second book, "*Formelen for Forretningsdrevet HR*", Mandrup argues that the HR function must be better able to understand its customers and become more business-oriented. The book's primary audience consists of HR professionals in both private and public sector organizations and presents a wide array of cases, tools, and checklists [99].

In addition to books, there are several HR-related journals and magazines that have promoted Ulrich's ideas. In Sweden, Hällstén [100] pointed out that journals such as *Personal & Ledarskap* functioned as central actors elevating the profile of Ulrich. In Norway, cases such as the use of HRT by Statoil and its use of Ulrich as a consultant during the implementation process were extensively covered [90]. The HR journal in Denmark has also published several articles in which there has been great enthusiasm for Ulrich [86,101].

3.6. Business Schools

In the literature on management fashion, it is emphasized that higher education institutions, such as business schools, play an important role in the legitimization and circulation of new management concepts and ideas [54]. For example, this happens as a concept becomes integrated into educational programs and curricula. Generally, Ulrich's ideas on HRT have been incorporated into educational programs in several Scandinavian countries.

In the literature on management concepts, it is noted that the academic environment can provide a more critical examination of the concept by performing "due diligence" and critically evaluating the strong claims made by proponents of concepts [56]. In Sweden, it is primarily researchers affiliated with the School of Business at the University of Gothenburg who have assumed this role. During the period 2008 to 2019, researchers have conducted case studies where they have followed the implementation of HRT and shared services by seven Swedish organizations. More specifically, they investigated how this has influenced both the organization of the HR function and the work of the line organization related to HR issues. The findings show that the concept has primarily been an important device for cost reduction and central control and not so much a way to increase the strategic influence of the HR function. Studies also show that change initiatives are much harder to execute than promised by the HRT concept literature [15,71]. The critical spotlight put on HRT by Swedish academics has generated some attention in HR-related magazines and the Swedish HR association.

Researchers based in Denmark have pointed to Sweden's experiences in their comments on the organization of the HR function [30]. Nevertheless, Ulrich's ideas are presented in a predominantly positive way, for example, by Christine Cleemann, who has been associated with Copenhagen Business School (CBS). Cleemann was a consulting partner for RBL in Europe and wrote the preface in the Danish translation of *HR Transformation* [98].

In publications, she has cooperated closely with partners in the consultancy circle around Ulrich [102]. CBS also has the Human Capital Analytics Group (HCA), which represents researchers with an interest in data-driven human capital decision making. In publications authored by Professor Dana Minbaeva, Ulrich is used as an authoritative source in the arguments for a stronger data-driven analysis culture in the work of the HR function [103].

In Norway, academic interest in HRT has been limited, with the exception of a Ph.D. thesis that has critically examined HRT in light of the historical evolution of the HR function in Norway [68].

3.7. Conference Organizers

Dave Ulrich has on several occasions spoken at conferences and seminars in the Scandinavian countries. He speaks for a paying audience and is focused on emphasizing the potential of his ideas rather than critically examining the organizational implications of adopting and implementing them. Boglind, Hällsten, and Thilander [71] (p. 70) showed that Ulrich, in the period from 2001 to 2013, visited Sweden on five occasions. During the last two visits, Comea Consulting was the organizer behind the event that gathered hundreds of participants in Stockholm.

In Denmark, there has been close cooperation between Dave Ulrich and the local consultant Gitte Mandrup, and Ulrich has visited Copenhagen multiple times [86,101]. In addition, Ulrich was invited by the Danish HR association to be a keynote speaker at their annual meeting in 2019.

In 2012, HR Norge arranged a one-day conference where the Norwegian firm Yara shared its experiences with HRT [88,89]. At the two annual HR Norge conferences, which attracted hundreds of participants, topics related to HRT were discussed in the years 2009–2019. Ulrich visited Norway in both 2009 and 2019. In addition, Ulrich's colleagues in the RBL Group have participated in several workshops on HRT.

Apart from the direct participation of Ulrich and RBL colleagues as speakers and participants, there has generally been considerable activity on the conference and seminar scene in the Scandinavian countries. In Norway, several organizations have presented their experiences with HR shared services, and different elements that touch on the role of business partners are increasingly being discussed in meeting places in the HR arena [91,104–106]. It is mostly HR Norge that arranges these HRT-related conferences and events.

3.8. A Summary of the Importance of Different Types of Actors in the Three Countries

The analysis in the previous subsections has shown that the relative importance of different actors varies from one national market to another. Table 2 summarizes the importance of various actors in the three Scandinavian countries.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of the relative importance of different actors involved in the three countries.

	Sweden	Norway	Denmark
Large, global consulting firms	High	High	High
Small, local consulting firms	Low	Low	High
Professional organizations	Low	High	Medium
Conference/seminar organizers	Medium	High	High
Business media	Medium	Low	High
Business schools	High	Low	Low
User organizations	High	High	Medium-High

The comparative analysis below reveals that are both similarities and differences between the three countries in terms of how the national management fashion arena around HRT is configured. When it comes to similarities, the influence of large global consulting firms has been high in all three countries. Our analysis also shows that user organizations and managers have been important role models for other organizations in all

three countries. Finally, there are some similarities between the roles of conference/seminar organizers. These actors have particularly been active in Norway and Denmark.

There are also interesting differences between these three arenas, for example, in terms of the role of small local consulting firms and professional organizations. In Denmark, small local advisory firms have made stronger efforts to promote HRT than in the other two countries. In Norway, professional organizations have been especially important, but in Denmark and Sweden, they have had less influence. The role of business schools also varies between the three national arenas. In Sweden, the academic staff of business schools has been actively shaping and influencing the discourse on HRT. In Norway and Denmark, academics have been much on the sidelines. However, it should be noted that Swedish academics have been quite critical of the HRT concept and have not functioned as legitimizers or cheerleaders. The critical spotlight has shaped and influenced the Swedish debate on HRT and contributed to a lower level of activity in relation to HRT in conferences and seminars than in Denmark and Norway.

4. Discussion

4.1. Travel Routes and Translation

For management concepts to “travel” quickly and widely across time and space, they need the support of “idea carriers”, such as consultants, gurus, and business school professors [26,107,108]. As our analysis has shown, global consulting firms appear to be the most powerful actors in the diffusion of HR transformation in Scandinavia. Large global consulting firms, such as Accenture, started using the rhetoric around the HRT concept around the turn of the millennium. Later, HRT became part of the service repertoire of several of the large consulting firms with offices in the Scandinavian countries. The project documentation from the global consulting firms that have assisted organizations in the implementation of HRT is also strikingly similar in terms of approaches and recommendations [109]. The consultants tend to emphasize the organizational dimension based on shared services and the promise that these structures will provide substantial cost reductions [81,82,110–113].

However, it is important to note that Ulrich’s view is that HRT is not a one-time event but a new pattern of thought and behavior [5] (p. 33). Transformation of the HR function must be much more comprehensive than simple changes to structures and delivery models. Ulrich put it this way: “HR transformation must change the way to think about HR’s role in delivering value to customers, shareholders, managers, and employees and not just about how HR services are delivered and administered” [69] (p. 2). In translations of the concept by consultants, the organizational dimension has become not just a means but an end in itself [49,114]. Cost reductions of up to 30% appear to be the most important drivers for a new organization of the HR function.

Another similarity in the approach of consultancies to HRT is the use of benchmarking to find the optimal size of the HR function. For example, McKinsey & Company has a database that contains data on administrative functions across organizations in a wide range of industries around the world. Through the use of benchmarking, the consultants spread best practices rooted in the belief that organizations are highly similar. In their arguments, consultants generally assume that universal HR structures will have similar effects in all contexts [115,116]. There is generally very little problematization of the role of contextual factors in the organization of the HR function as well as the fact that the organizations that are compared tend to be dissimilar.

The concept of HRT is utilized to varying degrees by consultants and organizations making changes to the HR function. Therefore, the influence of Ulrich can be viewed as indirect. Boglind, Hällsten, and Thilander [71] (p. 218) pointed to similar findings and argued that the transformation concept has a weaker position as a source of inspiration and modernity marker than expected. In our view, these findings can be interpreted differently. In the process of editing concepts so that they fit local contexts [117], the global reference points are deemphasized, while local markers are emphasized. Røvik [7] (p. 303) argued that this is part of the contextualization process in which concepts are translated locally so

that they attain a degree of relevance. Context-specific markers become stronger and the global origins of the standard are deemphasized [107,118].

Even though consulting firms still present client cases containing narratives about HR transformation in large multinational corporations [119], there is less attention paid to the concept than during the 2000s. However, as long as the position of the HR function is a topic of debate [120,121], the thinking around transformation still has relevance [122]. Consulting firms such as Deloitte are marketing their services using the label “Digital HR-Transformation”. Here, transformation is connected to more general ideas about digitalization, which nowadays are getting much attention in the business world [123,124]. The question is whether the rhetoric around digital HR transformation can be reflective of a second fashion wave around HRT [125]. Reinmoeller, Ansari, and Mehta [126] pointed out that management concepts that lose popularity can become re-popularized. This suggests that the life-cycle curve of HRT may look more like the double hump on a camel’s back than a bell (or an inverse U-shape).

4.2. National vs. Global Actors

The results can also be discussed considering the relative influence of national vs. global actors on the diffusion of management concepts and ideas. Overall, the data show considerable overlaps between the three management fashion arenas. For example, global consulting firms are active in all three countries. Furthermore, all three markets appear to be receptive to Ulrich as an international HR guru [50]. It is not surprising that the Nordic markets are open to international influences when it comes to HR and management ideas more generally. In short, the Scandinavian countries are small, open economies where English is considered an informal second language, especially in the realms of business and management.

The empirical data clearly show the important role played by country-specific actors in the diffusion process in the three countries. These actors include publishers of books; small, local, specialized HRT consultants; as well as professional HR organizations. Despite the presence of local actors, however, the national arenas should not be viewed as “closed systems” isolated from the influence of international fashion actors. On the contrary, the borders are blurred because the three national arenas are influenced by the international arena around the concept of HRT.

In the literature on management concepts and ideas, there has been considerable discussion of the interaction between different actors in the management fashion arena [26]. A characteristic of the alliances in both Denmark and Norway is that smaller consulting firms (<https://gittemandrup.dk/>, accessed on 20 January 2022) and the HR professional organization in Norway have collaborated with Ulrich and RBL Group. These actors have, in each of their respective countries, become powerful ambassadors of the HRT concept and promoted Ulrich’s ideas at conferences and seminars as well as via other outlets. The diffusion trajectory of HRT in Norway shows that a professional organization can assume the role of a central actor or “diffusion hub” that strengthens and authorizes management concepts [52,83].

Boglind, Hällstén, and Thilander [15] noted that several well-known MNCs based in Sweden (Ericsson, ABB, and Volvo cars) undertook a major makeover of their HR function. These companies used the concept of HR transformation and referred to Ulrich’s ideas as inspiration. Authorization from well-known and respected organizations has a great influence on the local appeal of a management concept. Sweden differs from the other Scandinavian countries by having a particularly strong academic research interest when it comes to HRT and Ulrich’s ideas [15,71]. The more critical perspective on the HRT concept, including the discussion of whether it works as intended, has influenced the academic discourse in Sweden. This could be a possible reason why nearly a decade has passed since the last time Ulrich participated in conferences in Sweden (2013).

The basis for the HRT concept was that the HR department throughout history has been limited in several areas [1,3,127]. Ulrich’s point of departure was similar when he

promised that HRT would usher in a new era in the field of HR [5,8]. The national actors that have been central in the diffusion of HRT in Scandinavia have used a similar type of rhetoric. Surprisingly, there has not been greater recognition that the HR department already had an influence on the C-suites of Scandinavian organizations during the 1990s and therefore diverged considerably from most other countries [30,128] (p. 223). Therefore, it can be argued that HRT in Scandinavian countries only to a limited extent has changed the status and influence of HR professionals despite the high-profile carriers who have hyped up and legitimized the concept.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

The current study has examined the diffusion of HRT in the Scandinavian countries from a supply-side perspective. It provides several contributions to the literature on HRT as a management concept and fashion.

First, the study provides new insight into the evolution of the HRT concept. It has shown how different actors influence and shape the understanding of this management concept in local contexts. In particular, global consulting firms have “stretched” [114] the HRT concept so that it focuses almost exclusively on organizational structuring using standard models for shared services [129]. HRT is rarely carried out as a change project directed at the HR function, as is suggested in the “official” HRT concept literature [5]. In this study’s context, HRT tends to be just a small part of larger restructuring and rationalization programs where the goal is centralization and reducing the costs related to the administrative support functions. In these change processes, organizations tend to introduce new IT-based systems that have a large impact on HR support.

Second, the study provides a comparative view of the diffusion of HRT. In the seminal paper on management fashions, Abrahamson [27] (pp. 262–263) noted that “management fashion markets probably differ across countries both in the frequency and duration of management fashions”. However, this issue has hardly been explored empirically [24]. Therefore, our study responds to the need for more comparative studies of management fashions by taking an in-depth look at the configuration of the national management fashion arenas around HRT in Scandinavia. The Scandinavian countries are an ideal place to study the diffusion of HRT because these three countries are similar in terms of management styles [30], work organization [31], and other aspects of social and economic life. A detailed study of the configuration of the management fashion arenas in the three countries provides insight into the relative importance of global vs. local actors in the diffusion of HRT.

Third, the analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of the interaction of different actors in the management fashion arenas [28,29]. The analysis of the arenas around HRT in the three countries shows that three national management arenas are configured differently [33]. The findings indicate that global and national-specific actors and networks (such as consultants, experts, business media, and professional groups) may influence the diffusion of concepts at the national level.

5.2. Managerial Implications

The study also has some managerial implications. Although the practical relevance of studying the diffusion of a fashionable HR concept may not be apparent to all readers, our view is that such investigations are useful for the HR community since it can lead to greater reflection on current thinking and practices. In previous research, it has been pointed out that actors in the HR field are prone to following the latest trends and fashions [35,37,38,130–134]. Therefore, it is important that researchers put a critical spotlight on different types of HR concepts and ideas and scrutinize underlying views and assumptions.

In-depth studies and expositions could also potentially make managers more critical and “enlightened” consumers of the latest and hottest management concepts and ideas.

Overall, this could provide the grounds for more realism in the adoption and implementation process as managers are better able to evaluate the potential costs and benefits associated with a particular concept.

5.3. Limitations and Future Work

Like any piece of research, this study has limitations. This is particularly the case due to the qualitative and exploratory nature of the current study. A limitation of our comparative analysis in Section 3 is that it is based on the authors' subjective judgments about the activities and influence of the various actors. An idea for future research would be to build a more sophisticated and objective "scoring system" that be used to gauge the relative importance of the different actor types.

The analysis in the current paper is limited to the actors involved on the supply side of HRT. In future investigations, researchers should attempt to collect data from actors on the demand side of HRT as well. Combining supply-side and demand-side data would allow for a more balanced view of the concept's diffusion and impact across the three Scandinavian countries.

Another limitation is that the analysis is limited to Scandinavia. The three Scandinavian countries are arguably quite similar in terms of institutional and cultural factors. In future studies, an idea would be to compare the diffusion of HRT across different cultural regions. Such studies could help uncover "sectoral and/or national patterns in the reception of fashions" [135] (p. 214).

However, carrying out large comparative studies is easier said than done. For this reason, most studies of fashionable concepts tend to be conducted in a single context. It is often practically costly and challenging to collect data in different countries [136]. This is particularly the case when it comes to the collection of data from the demand side, as this could entail the use and integration of different research methods, such as detailed case studies and/or surveys of the use of a concept across organizations [41,136]. Despite the potential challenges, such attempts could yield important insight into the application and impact of management concepts in demand side organizations.

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