

TALENT MANAGEMENT AS A MANAGEMENT FASHION IN HRD: TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA

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ABSTRACT

HRD practitioners have long shown concerns about the status and legitimacy of the occupation, and, arguably, this has not been unconnected to the range of titles HRD has been given over the years. Has there been an element of ‘management fashion’ about this, or have they reflected some real change at the level of practice? The paper considers whether ‘Talent Management’ (TM), as a recently-emerged area of interest for HRD, can be argued to display features of a management fashion. On the basis of a review of three main perspectives, we conclude that it is too early to say with regard to two of them, given TM’s recent emergence and the paucity of empirical material, but that TM displays features of institutionalism in TM talk in the business and professional literature. A research agenda, based primarily on institutional theory, is developed and a number of research questions outlined.

Keywords: Talent Management, HRD, fashion, institutional theory

INTRODUCTION: FASHION IN HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

HRM/D professionals have long searched for credibility, recognition and status in the eyes of executives, senior managers and employees (Legge, 1995), and the discipline/occupation has been given a range of titles over the years (eg employee development, people development, workforce development, training and development, learning and development, HRD) which have, arguably, reflected changing conceptions about the nature of the occupation/ discipline. Some commentators view changing management rhetorics as management fashions (Pascal 1990), not least because they often describe the same domain and are not significantly differentiated from each other (Legge, 1995). At the level of *practice*, others argue that ‘effective’ management practices are relatively stable, and not particularly faddish (Pfeffer, 1994), with the adoption of such practices contributing to enhanced financial performance (Huselid, 1995).

HRD has often been accused of being vulnerable to fashionable ‘fads’, rather than being based on sound evidence and robust theory (Swanson 2001); for Short et al (2003: 241) ‘The void is filled by the fads, which falsely offer panacea solutions and lead to the poor reputation of HRD in delivering real long-term benefits’. Short et al (2009:432) claim: ‘instead of new professionals turning to models and theories from a body of understanding of what works and why, we see them turning to a fad-driven body of literature that can be best described as *what sells*’. Is Talent Management (TM) such a fad? We will first discuss HRD before analysing TM.

There is debate over both the meaning and origins of the term HRD (eg Gold et al 2009); it is less common to see the term used in professional practice, than in academic contexts, especially in the UK (Sambrook and Stewart, 2005). Here the

terms ‘training and development’ are more common, sometimes combined with ‘learning’, especially in job titles. When the ‘HRD’ label first appeared in the literature, initially in the USA, European researchers compared HRD and Training and Development: did such re-labelling mean that either the approach or the content had changed, and were there substantive differences? Is HRD different from Strategic HRD (Walton, 1999), or is HRD by definition strategic, whilst training is operational? (Stewart and McGoldrick, 1996). Is HRD a subset of HRM, or a ‘movement’ in its own right (Gold et al, 2009).

Many authors attribute the first specific definition of HRD to Nadler (1970): ‘HRD is organised learning experiences provided by employers, within a specified period of time, to bring about the possibility of performance improvement and/or personal growth’ (Nadler and Nadler, 1989:4). Here, HRD seems to have two main purposes: improving performance and facilitating personal growth, or a performative versus a learning focus (Rigg et al, 2007), with an emphasis on ‘employers’. An alternative is: ‘HRD is constituted by planned interventions in organisational and individual learning processes’ (Stewart, 2007:66). Here, the definition is not limited to those in an employment relationship, but opens up a wider range of possibilities, as government policies, for example, form a context for HRD (McLean, 2004). Thus, HRD is usually seen as encompassing individual, organization and career development, involving such learning interventions as coaching, mentoring and OD and specific developmental processes such as management, leadership and talent development (McLagan, 1989).

Similar debates have taken place in HRM. For Blyton and Turnbull (1992: vii) ‘the rhetoric has outstripped the reality’, whilst for Storey (1989: 4) HRM represented ‘a radically new approach to managing people, demarcated sharply from traditional personnel management’. Similarly, when the prefix ‘Strategic’ was attached, some said that this was because it comprised new components (Fombrun *et al*, 1984), whilst others argued that the key messages were not new and old elements had merely been

repackaged (Mabey et al, 1998). Does TM represent a radically new approach to managing and developing people, or is it too ‘old wine in new bottles’?

HRD AND TALENT MANAGEMENT

In recent years, TM has emerged as an area of interest and focus for many HRD academics and practitioners; recent literature has begun to use the term *talent development* (eg Holland et al, 2007). For example, following Scullion and Starkey (2000), De Cieri et al (2009) discuss ‘international talent flows’, whilst Lehmann (2009) links the growing interest in TM, especially ‘talent development’, to the development of ‘knowledge-based economies’. ‘Talent development’ is often used here as a synonym for employee, people or workforce development.

‘TM’ did not appear until the late 1990s, when McKinsey & Company first coined the term in their report *The War for Talent* (1997; Michaels et al, 2001), exposing the ‘war for talent’ as a strategic business challenge and a critical driver of corporate performance. Others have argued that many HRD practices commonly associated with TM (such as assessment centres, succession planning and 360 degree appraisal) were developed as long ago as the 1950s (Cappelli, 2008), whilst others view TM as simply a repackaging of old ideas with a fresh name (Adamsky, 2003).

There have been a number of attempts to capture and/or define the terms ‘talent’ and ‘talent management’. For Duttgupta (2005: 2) ‘TM is a lot more than yet another HR process; the talent mindset is not just another HR fad. In the broadest possible terms, TM is the strategic management of the flow of talent through an organisation’. The CIPD (2009: 2) defines TM as ‘the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment of

those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to an organization’; talent is defined as ‘those individuals who can make a difference to organizational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential’. This is a common ‘exclusive’ definition of ‘TM’, reserving the term for ‘high-value’ staff- high performers and/or high-potentials, in contrast to ‘inclusive’ perspectives, where ‘talent’ is often merely a synonym for ‘staff’.

Other definitions stress the need to segment not just ‘people’ (eg Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005), but also ‘positions’ (eg Huselid et al, 2005). Collings and Mellahi (2009) argue for an approach to TM which identifies ‘pivotal positions’ as the starting point for ‘strategic talent management’. Iles et al (2009) identify three broad strands of thought regarding TM, often associated with a particular theoretical base:

- 1) *TM is not essentially different from HRD/HRM*, as both involve getting the right people in the right job at the right time and managing the supply, demand, flow and development of people through the organisation. TM may be a relabelling or rebranding exercise to enhance HRD’s credibility, status or ‘fashionability’, but conceptualising TM in terms of the functions of traditional HRD seems to add little or nothing new to our understanding of how to manage talent strategically (Lewis and Heckman, 2006).
- 2) *TM is integrated HRD with a selective focus*. Here TM may use the same tools, but its focus is on a relatively small segment of the workforce, defined as ‘talented’ by virtue of their current performance or future potential. The focus here is on ‘talent pools’, both internal and external to the organization, using concepts from marketing theory, such as ‘employer

brand' and 'workforce segmentation' to focus on attracting and retaining key individuals.

- 3) *TM involves organizationally focussed competence development* through managing and developing flows of talent through the organization. The focus here is on talent pipelines rather than talent pools. This strand is more closely related to succession planning and human resource planning, and focuses primarily on talent continuity, linking into succession planning and leadership development.

Whilst the above discussion has moved us some way in the direction of extracting the main features of TM (and whilst the distinctions between TM as HRD, as integrated HRD with a selective focus, and as organizationally focussed competence development are reflected both in the literature and in organizational practice), it does not go far enough in our view in capturing the contrasts in perspective between, on the one hand, an exclusive versus inclusive people focus, and, on the other, a focus upon organizational positions as against the people themselves (see, eg Iles et al, 2010).

Such interest in TM is not confined to the USA or the UK, but has become an issue for many multinational enterprises (MNEs). Tarique and Schuler (2010) and Beechler and Woodward (2009) discuss the 'global war for talent', Farndale et al (2009) the role of the corporate HR function in global TM, Mellahi and Collings (2009) the way corporate elites may act as a barrier to effective global TM, and McDonnell et al (2009) discuss global TM and leadership development in Irish MNEs. There has been some recent interest in China, a country with acute talent shortages. For example Hartmann et al (2009) discuss how western MNEs in China attempt to

balance global integration and local responsiveness. Iles et al (2010), in a study of TM policies and practices in multinational corporations located in Beijing, found that, for them:

TM seems to promise new and rather different approaches to the management of the people resource in organizations...[whilst] most interviewees saw a continuity with HRM... HRM was seen to have a broader scope than TM, and HRM was seen to emphasise egalitarianism in contrast to the 'segmentation' focus of TM. HRM was seen to focus on management functions, TM on the people involved, with a particular focus on the attraction, retention and development of 'talents'.

The development of senior managers and 'high-potential' people who are identified as strategic human resources and seen as critical to the company's survival has thus been increasingly recognized as a key role for the corporate HRD function, especially in the international firm.

To date, the TM phenomenon has not been subject to a significant degree of critical scrutiny, and there has been relatively little empirical research into the nature and application of TM strategies in organizational practice and the issues arising (Iles, 2007). As Lewis and Heckman (2006: 139) have commented:

given the number of consulting firms engaging in talent management and the growing numbers of articles and books on the topic, one might also believe 'talent management' to be a well-defined area of practice supported by extensive research and a core set of principles.

However, they argue that this is not the case; there are problems in the way TM has been defined in the practitioner press, and a lack of data supporting many practitioner claims. What is more, ‘the terms in the debate...are not clear and confuse outcomes with processes with decision alternatives’ (Lewis and Heckman, 2006: 140).

One approach to researching the TM phenomenon, explored in this paper, is to assess whether it is a management/HRD fad or fashion. A common research strategy here is to use print media indicators and bibliometrics, based on the ‘premise that the number of publications on an organization concept in the course of time reflects managerial interest in the topic’ (Benders et al, 2007:815). This approach has been applied to a range of phenomena, such as BPR, quality circles and the learning organization (eg Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). We gathered journal article counts using the key words ‘talent management’ from a search of the Emerald and Business Source Premier databases between 1985 and 2008, using them as a proxy for the development in popularity/fashion of the phenomenon. They revealed a notable increase in the numbers of articles relating to TM over this period, as Table 1 shows. In 2008 there were 361 articles related to TM in Emerald and 709 in Business Source Premier, compared to 130 in Emerald and 229 in Business Source Premier in 2000.

Place Table 1 here

Emerald contains practitioner and scholarly articles in the areas of Business, Management, Strategy, Leadership, Human Resource Management, Information science, Engineering and Technology, whilst Business Source Premier covers management, economics, finance, accounting, and international business. The data can also be presented in graphical form; as Benders et al (2008:816) have noted, such

graphs show ‘the non-cumulative number of articles published through time; such graphs typically show bell-shaped curves, suggesting the rise and fall of a fashion’s popularity’. The curves shown in Figures 1 and 2 suggest that TM is a management fashion whose popularity has yet to peak, let alone fall.

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Such curves, however, may over-simplify the pattern of discourse around TM, exemplifying knowledge production in the business and academic media (Spell, 1999, 2001) but not necessarily the take-up of TM within organizations. Discourse and practice in HRD may not be coterminous and may not co-evolve. Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999:731) proposed that the ‘lifecycle of discourse promoting a fashionable management technique co-evolves with the lifecycle of this technique’s diffusion across organizations’. However, Nijholt and Benders (2007) found, in the case of Dutch discourse on self-managing teams, that whilst the discourse was intensive for a period of time, there were signs of stabilization in the number of organizations using the practice: ‘organization concepts that are the subject of a temporary popular discourse are thus not necessarily transient in praxis’ (p628). The authors also point out that such research is highly dependent on the composition of the database (sources, construction, representativeness) and how the search process is conducted.

The debate about whether TM is a management fad or fashion, then, can be seen to have much affinity with earlier debates about HRD in relation to Training and Development, and then SRHD in relation to HRD, as well as concerns over HRD being fad-driven. Similar questions are raised with regard to the HRD occupation,

such as ‘Does this new talk/rhetoric have much to do with the recognition and status of the occupation?’ ‘Is the TM phenomena all or mainly just talk/rhetoric, that is, “old wines in new bottles”?’ ‘Does it signal some real change/innovation in the HRD arena?’

The TM debate can be said to be taking place at three main levels: (i) normative, (ii) empirically-informed, and (iii) conceptual. At the former (whether the protagonists argue for TM being a fashion/fad or a substantively new phenomenon), much of the debate ‘is rooted in exhortation and anecdote rather than data, and builds an argument based on the selective self-reports of executives’ (Lewis and Heckman, 2006: 142). At (ii) we do find some new empirical material relating to practice, usually integrated with theorising about that practice. At (iii) there is a reflective focus upon what we already know about the phenomenon, drawing upon secondary (rather than primary) material reporting practice and attempting to conceptualise what is happening and why. Of course, these are ‘ideal types’, and not always readily differentiated, particularly between (ii) and (iii). The present paper is primarily located at (iii), but we recognise that more reliable empirical and theoretically informed data is also required (see, however, Chuai *et al*, 2008a, 2008b; CIPD, 2007; Blass, 2009, Iles *et al*, 2010).

The next section reviews the management fashion phenomenon from three main perspectives: aesthetic, substantive vs. symbolic, and institutional, drawing upon them to examine the TM phenomenon in HRD. Our main concerns are with the purchase these perspectives can provide in helping us to understand the reasons for the burgeoning number of articles and reports on TM in recent years, and to develop a theoretically-informed research agenda which can help researchers assess the extent

to which TM is or is not an HRD fashion. The latter issue is also discussed in more detail in the concluding discussion.

MANAGEMENT FASHION, TALENT MANAGEMENT AND HRD

Aesthetic fashion

Fads and fashions have impacted upon many aspects of cultural life, such as popular music, dress, interior design, cuisine, and children's names and toys. Generally, writers have seen fashion and 'fashion swings' in management techniques/frameworks as distinct from the realm of aesthetics (Abrahamson, 1996).

With aesthetic fashion there is merely a need for the item or person to appear beautiful and modern, whereas management techniques/frameworks need to appear both rational (efficient means to important ends) *and* progressive (new, as well as improved relative to older management techniques) to be seen as fashionable. In other words, managers are unlikely to adopt management techniques for apparently irrational motives (such as simply appearing fashionable). Societal norms of technical progress create expectations that management must progress organizations toward some ultimate ends, and thus managers expect old management techniques, including HRD ones, to be replaced by newer and better ones designed to bridge performance gaps opened up by real technical and economic changes and developments.

Finding, adopting and then abruptly dropping the 'latest and greatest' organizational improvement or HRD programme is a widely recognized phenomenon (Pascal, 1990). Brickley *et al* (1997) obtained a bell-shaped curve when plotting the percentage of business articles addressing eight management fashions between 1970 and 1996, whilst Gill and Whittle (1993; see also Gibson and Tesone, 2001) talk about an 'organisational life-cycle' for management ideas, covering birth, adolescence,

maturity and decline. Pascal (1990) found that fashion curves had become higher but shorter over time, whilst Carson et al (2001) argued that the 'half-life' of fashionable management ideas or techniques has fallen notably from the 1960s. Management fashion has itself become a fashionable topic, appealing to both scholarly and business interests.

Abrahamson (1996:257) defines management fashion as 'a relatively transitory collective belief disseminated by management fashion setters that a management technique leads to rational management progress'. Management fashions differ in scope and duration: the belief that a management technique is at the forefront of management progress can be more or less widespread, and more or less transitory. Rapid, bell-shaped swings in the popularity of management techniques can occur, which can only be labelled as 'management fashions' when they are the product of a management-fashion-setting process, involving specific management fashion setters and followers (Abrahamson, 1991). Abrahamson (1996: 257) defines management fashion setting as 'the process by which management fashion setters continuously redefine both theirs and fashion followers' collective beliefs about which management techniques lead to rational management progress'. 'Fashion setters' (or 'fashion leaders') are actors who dedicate themselves to producing and disseminating management discourses that make management techniques appear fashionable and their users legitimate. Various organisations and individuals act as fashion setters, such as management consultants, business schools, academic gurus, 'hero managers', and the business press (Abrahamson, 1991; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). 'Fashion followers' are actors who translate these techniques into practice (which could mean 'merely' language-use) when such discourse becomes fashionable.

Management fashions from this perspective, therefore, do not always emerge spontaneously as a result simply of the enterprising behaviour of managers, but are often cultural commodities, deliberately produced by fashion setters in order to be marketed to fashion followers (though they may also emerge from innovative practice). Abrahamson's (1996) model of the management-fashion-setting process incorporates four main phases: creation, selection, processing and dissemination. Fashion setters sense incipient preferences guiding fashion demand, and create management techniques accordingly. The techniques chosen in the creation stage are not necessarily more technically efficient than those in use. However, fashion setters argue that their techniques are both innovations and improvements-this may be true, as knowledge is gained about what is effective and what ineffective, but they may equally well represent old techniques invented some time ago and since forgotten, but now reinvented/ rediscovered by fashion setters (Abrahamson, 1996); the 'old wine in new bottles' phenomenon (Cappelli, 2008). Sahlin-Anderson and Engwall (2002) note that management fashions are expected to disappear and become obsolete, but, nevertheless, their basic ideas will be repackaged and return. Fashion setters use rhetoric in an attempt to convince fashion followers that the advocated techniques are both rational and progressive, highlighting or exaggerating organisational performance gaps which can only be addressed by their selected techniques. Fashion setters can alarm managers by predicting possible managerial demise if the organisational performance gaps and their 'solutions' are ignored, whilst at the same time holding up promising futures by presenting cases of successful companies currently using such techniques (Chen and Meindl, 1991).

For Abrahamson (1996), socio-psychological and techno-economic forces shape management fashion demand. Fashion followers are rendered vulnerable to

fashion by ‘collective frustration’, which suggests that fashions are in demand because they satisfy managers’ psychological needs, frustration and despair. However, management fashion can lead to a new round of frustration and despair, enhancing receptivity for a new technique. Much organisational life can be routine, and ‘new’ techniques can help relieve ‘collective boredom’. Fashionable management techniques can feed managers’ appetites for novelty, symbolize management individuality and innovativeness, and symbolize those managers and organisations which are progressive. In emulating organisations perceived to be more successful/enjoying higher reputations, managers may hope to distinguish their organisations through ‘collective status seeking’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Pendulum swings in managers’ preferences for contrasting techniques (for example, between centralization and decentralization, employee motivation and control, product cost and quality) may also initiate changes in fashion demand.

Fashionable concepts are commonly characterized by a certain degree of conceptual ambiguity and formulated in highly general terms (Benders and van Veen, 2001), which, of course, lends them to being applicable to many situations and acceptable to a range of parties (Benders *et al*, 1998). Swan (2004: 308) notes that the malleability and plasticity of certain management ideas, and the ways in which their meanings are re-articulated across different domains, can make them even more popular. ‘Interpretative viability’ or flexibility is a prerequisite for a concept to ‘flow’ (Røvik, 2000; Benders and van Veen, 2001; Benders *et al*, 2007).

Substantive vs. symbolic perspectives on management fashion

An alternative perspective on management fashion distinguishes ‘substantive’ from ‘symbolic’ decision-making. Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) claim that organisations

seek legitimacy through substantive (or 'instrumental') and symbolic (or 'expressive') managerial decision making. Regarding the former, decisions are largely the result of external constraint and power-dependence relations, whilst symbolic action serves to legitimate and rationalize decisions and policies. To obtain or maintain the desired level of legitimacy, organisations can either initiate material change in organisational goals, structures, practices and processes, or portray or 'symbolically manage' the former in order to give the impression of consistency with social values and expectations. Thus, for example, managers might ostentatiously adopt TM terminology whilst leaving the regular HRD machinery of the organisation intact. Meyer and Rowan (1977) term this 'ceremonial conformity', enacted for its symbolic quality. As Oliver (1991:155) notes, 'the appearance rather than the fact of conformity is often presumed to be sufficient for the attainment of legitimacy'. Similarly, Meyer and Rowan (1977:349) suggest that 'by designing a formal structure that adheres to the prescriptions of myths in the institutional environment, an organisation demonstrates that it is acting on collectively valued purposes in a proper and adequate manner'. Such symbolic action can contribute to the social construction of market value (Westphal & Zajac, 1998).

Røvik (2000) distinguishes between 'tool' and 'symbolic' perspectives: new HRD techniques/frameworks or 'tools' such as TM may be adopted by managers in order to improve organisational performance (for example, enhancing leadership development or succession planning), but they may also be used as 'symbols' to project the impression of being up-to-date and innovative (eg re-labelling employee development as 'talent development').

It can, of course, be difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish substantive from symbolic outcomes, as they are linked (Pfeffer, 1981: 6) and the distinction may blur

over time as symbolic practices become embedded and generate complementary structures and processes (Riley, 1983). Management gurus and consultants trade in fashion, utilising persuasion and image manipulation (Clark, 1995), they also translate ideas into applicable methodologies and techniques (Fincham and Evans, 1999). The latter are themselves not immune to fashion, nor does a fad necessarily have merely superficial effects on organisational processes. Management gurus and consultants may propagate fads which are short-lived, but they can also create appetites for solutions with underlying themes (Abrahamson, 1996).

When the ideas, concepts, tools, and techniques of management/ HRD fads lose their newness, they do not necessarily disappear; even if not innovative in any strictly technical sense, they may still help the development of tangible solutions to organizational puzzles/challenges (Alvesson, 1995) and may be incorporated into emerging fashion demands, morphing into regular management/ HRD practices, albeit perhaps under new labels (Gibson and Tesone, 2001). Thus, management fads cannot be readily distinguished from recurrent management practices (Worren, 1996) and the point of differentiation between a fad and a practice is sometimes related to the age or novelty of the practice; new practices are often old fads (Gibson and Tesone, 2001).

It follows from the above that managers need to distinguish between symbols and 'real' tools, between fashion dealers and real organisational doctors, between rhetoric and reality. Røvik (2000) identifies three main motivations that encourage managers to adopt new concepts: (i) real organisational problems, (ii) externally-triggered problem descriptions, and (iii) attempts to strengthen the corporate identity. Managers may encounter problems through finding that current techniques/concepts do not work as expected, or that they have not fully understood a new concept, or that they are experiencing fundamental changes in their environment, the latter being a

key factor influencing managers to accept particular definitions of problems and whether to adopt currently popular concepts as solutions to those problems. Adopting management fashions is perhaps less risky than inventing new solutions.

Institutional theory and management fashion

The preceding discussion has referred to the influence of the institutional environment and the role of imitation in management fashion- how do they impact upon organisational decision-making in the HRD and TM domains? In the ‘Old Institutionalism’ influence, coalitions and competing values were central, along with power and informal structures. DiMaggio and Powell’s work (1983), which Greenwood and Hinings (1996) label as the ‘New Institutionalism’, put more emphasis on matters of legitimacy, the embeddedness of organisational fields, and classification, routines, scripts and schema. For DiMaggio and Powell (1983:143), organizational fields consist of those organizations which ‘in the aggregate constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products’. They introduced the *homogenization* phenomenon, where organisations become increasingly similar to each other as managers try to change them. The concept of *isomorphism* best captures this homogenization process: organisations in the same or similar social, economic and political contexts come to resemble each other over time. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) distinguish two types of isomorphism: competitive and institutional. Competitive isomorphism assumes an underlying systemic rationality, which emphasizes market competition, niche change and fitness measures, and is therefore likely to be most prevalent where free and open competition exists (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). DiMaggio and Powell argue, however, that: ‘It [competitive

isomorphism] explains parts of the process of bureaucratization that Weber observed, and may apply to early adoption of innovation, but it does not present a fully adequate picture of the modern world of organisations' (1983: 67). Firms face institutional pressure from government regulators, professional associations and social networks, as well as competitive pressure from other organisations. Organisations compete not only for resources and customers, but also for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic 'fitness'. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), three institutional mechanisms influence organisational decision-making: coercive, normative and mimetic.

Organisational coercive mechanisms arise from pressures exerted by political contexts and the challenge of legitimacy, from formal and informal pressures exerted by other organisations upon which they are dependent, and societal cultural norms. Such pressures may be experienced as *force majeure*, as persuasion, or as invitations to collusion (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Coercive mechanisms signal the fitness or apparent willingness and ability of the organisation to fulfil its constituents' role expectations (Meyer, 1979).

Normative mechanisms refer to the articulation between management policies and the professional background of employees in terms of educational level, job experience and craftsmanship. The extent of professionalization of the workforce has much to do with the form of management control system in place and related practices, and, in many cases, the influence of the professions *per se* can be as strong as that of the state. Professional networks, such as professional and trade associations (eg, the CIPD in the UK) help define and promulgate norms about organisational and professional behaviour. According to Perrow (1974), normative mechanisms create pools of individuals who not only share common expectations, but also occupy

similar positions across a range of organisations and possess a similarity of orientation and disposition. Normative isomorphism is reinforced by the process of filtering personnel; many professional career tracks in organisations are carefully controlled and monitored (both at entry and throughout the career path) so that individuals in similar positions across organisations tend to have similar biographies in terms of education, skills, work experience, and ideology (this may be less apparent however with the growth of boundaryless careers and greater career mobility).

Finally, mimetic mechanisms refer to imitations of the strategies and practices of competitors as a result of uncertainty; these are the mechanisms most often referred to in institutional theory discussions of management fashion. When organisational technologies are poorly understood, goals are ambiguous, and/or the environment creates symbolic uncertainty, organisations may model themselves on other similar organisations in their field, perceived to be more legitimate or successful (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). Later, fashionable managerial techniques may be ‘diffused unintentionally, indirectly through employee transfer or turnover, or explicitly by organisations such as consulting firms or industry trade associations’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 2002: 172). Kipping and Enwall (2002) and Sahlin-Andersson and Enwall (2000) have applied institutional theory to various aspects of the fashion process, such as popular management books and the management consulting industry. The extent of isomorphism in a given field can be influenced by the jurisdiction of belief systems, the nature of governance systems, and the structuration of fields, with organisations becoming increasingly aware that they share a common meaning system. Interacting more frequently may develop greater isomorphism (Scott, 1995).

For Tempel and Walgenbach (2007: 2) ‘particular organizational forms exist not because they provide an optimal input-output balance, but because they

correspond to institutionalized expectations'. Isomorphism thus results from adopting institutionalized elements, in particular expected structures and management practices. However, they argue that emphasising the adaptation of organizations to their societal and cultural (particularly institutional) environments, and the global diffusion and adoption of practices, downplays how such practices are interpreted or translated as they diffuse. Is there diffusion of a common global language, leaving leeway for local interpretation, or do the concepts themselves become more alike? In addition, an 'over-socialized' view of actors leaves little scope for agency in the role actors play as 'interpreters', 'synthesizers' and 'hybridizers' in the local interpretation and implementation of globally diffused practices.

This leads to the question 'how do transitory management fashions in HRD become institutionalized or taken for granted?' Perkmann and Spicer (2008: 812) comment that '...managers' decisions to embrace new ideas are often informed by collective beliefs about rational or progressive managerial practice, shaped by idea providers such as consultants or gurus'. They draw upon 'institutional entrepreneurship' and 'institutional work' to argue that fashionable management concepts acquire permanence when anchored within field-wide institutions. Institutional entrepreneurs can act as agents, purposefully working towards changing existing or creating novel institutions. For Scarbrough (2002), institutionalization is driven by the 'translation' of practices into specific organisational contexts through the actions of professional groups and consultants. Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) argue that 'gurus' legitimate a body of knowledge, large consulting firms engage in commodification and colonization, and business schools engage in due diligence and innovation. Building these institutions requires different types of institutional work: political work to generate new configurations of actors and reconfigure rules and

boundaries; technical work to suggest, recommend or prescribe certain courses of action; and cultural work to establish or reframe belief systems and values and link practices to more widely anchored discourses (such as knowledge management, economics or marketing).

Such work requires actors with different skills. Political work involves advocacy, and is more likely to be carried out by politicians, unionists, lobbyists and industry associations. Technical work involves theorizing, standardizing, mimicry and education; developing theories, standards, models and world-views and providing education and training is more likely to be carried out by social scientists, consultants, academics and professional bodies. Cultural work involves the construction of normative networks and identities, and is likely to be carried out by journalists, public relations and advertising specialists, professional bodies and social movements, building normative networks and extending the jurisdiction of professional knowledge (perhaps in contestation with other professional groups), as well as constructing professional identities (eg, the current debate about the emerging coaching industry as a profession and its implications for HRD-see Hamlin et al, 2008). Such actors seek to ‘promote discourses that associate practices with widely accepted norms and values’ (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008:829).

For Perkmann and Spicer (2008), institutional construction is more likely to take the form of ‘institutional partaking’, rather than being led by a single dominant ‘institutional entrepreneur’. A management fashion such as TM becomes ‘unfashionable’ by becoming an institution, being relatively permanently diffused as a result of the ‘institutional work’ performed by actors. An institutional infrastructure is then built within and across organisational fields, to which actual and potential adopter organisations are exposed.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION: TALENT MANAGEMENT, HRD AND MANAGEMENT FASHION-TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA

From a variety of perspectives, then, TM displays the features of a management fashion, as it appears both rational and progressive- ‘rational’ as an effective means to valued ends, and ‘progressive’ as new or improved in relation to older techniques. There is a lack of clarity and agreement in the TM literature as to its nature, definition and scope; such ambiguity is a key feature of a management fashion for a number of commentators (eg, Swan, 2004) as it allows ‘interpretative flexibility’ on the part of those adopting new ideas. This ambiguity of TM enhances its interpretative viability, and potentially greatly increases its scope for diffusion. At the same time, it enhances market opportunities for fashion setters to extend diffusion through claiming specialist expertise in interpreting and resolving this ambiguity.

So, *is* TM (just) one of the latest managerial rhetorics/fashions through which HRD is attempting to enhance its legitimacy and status, a form of ‘impression management’ (Marchington, 1995) aimed at impressing executives, senior managers, colleagues and policy makers? In order to respond to this question, a number of other issues and questions need to be addressed. We outline these below, drawing upon the three main perspectives on management fashion discussed above.

TM, aesthetic fashion and HRD

It remains to be seen whether, at least as far as *publications* referring to talent management are concerned, some form of bell-shaped curve characterises a rising and falling popularity-it is too early to say at this stage, as the line plot is still on an

upwards trajectory (see Figures 1 and 2). It is certainly being argued by would-be fashion setters that TM is a rational management technique, the adoption of which will help organisations to address performance gaps, and a range of actors have been acting in this capacity, such as management consultants and academics in business schools. At the same time, much affinity can be detected between the content of TM programmes and what has been advocated for some time in the HRD field. A number of research questions can thus be identified from this fashion perspective:

1) Using more refined bibliometric techniques, are fashion curves for TM in the academic and practitioner press coterminous or co-evolving? Such analyses should employ different databases (eg ABI/Inform) and use different search techniques; in particular, studies should distinguish between databases covering academic publications and those covering practitioners' magazines (Benders et al, 2007).

2) How is TM being taken up by organizations? Longitudinal studies or surveys of the kind reported by Nijholt and Benders (2007) in relation to self-managing teams would be useful here.

3) What has led to the upsurge of interest in TM amongst organisations and HRD practitioners in particular, in both rhetorical and practice terms? What are the 'problems' or performance gaps for which TM is offering a 'solution' that appears both rational and progressive? Is it, for example, the 'war for talent' (Michaels et al, 2001) or are there other reasons? Interviews and other qualitative techniques would be useful here.

4) What was lacking in 'traditional HRD' that TM addresses? For example, was it a lack of a selective/ segmented/ differentiated approach to the workforce?

5) Who have been the 'fashion setters' during the TM propagation and diffusion process? What role, in particular, have consulting firms, MNCs, HRD academics/

journals, business schools, as well as professional bodies such as the CIPD played in the spread of TM? Has interest been primarily ‘academic guru’ or consultancy-led? What has been the role of consultants and academics in legitimising and commodifying the concept of TM in HRD?

6) Who *are* the TM ‘fashion followers’ (when the legitimating discourse becomes fashionable)? Are they, for example, MNCs, who in turn become ‘fashion-setters’ for SMEs?

TM, substantive and symbolic perspectives and HRD

It seems to us that there is much affinity between Abrahamson’s (1996) emphasis upon ‘new’ management techniques needing to appear rational and progressive, and Ashforth and Gibbs’ (1990) substantive and symbolic perspectives on management fashion, with the latter acting to legitimize substantive changes/initiatives. The latter authors, however, also note that symbolic changes may occur without any real substantive change/initiative. There is much affinity with Rovik’s (2000) ‘tool’ and ‘symbolic’ perspectives. What is more, we suspect it is/would be very difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish the symbolic from the substantive in practice; likewise with respect to distinguishing a fashion from a generally accepted practice. The following research questions occur when these perspectives are applied to TM and HRD:

1) What influences organisations and HRD practitioners to adopt TM? Is it, for example, HRD’s search for status, reputation, legitimacy and credibility? (or is this merely a side-effect?).

2) To what extent, and in what ways, does TM offer substantive as well as symbolic meanings? As an example of the latter, does TM bring positive re-branding and reputational effects (such as ‘employer of choice’)? If so, does this generate ‘real’ benefits, for example in terms of employee recruitment and retention?

3) To what extent has TM been adopted 'ceremonially', perhaps rhetorically, whilst leaving existing HRD policies and practices unaffected?

TM, institutional theory and HRD

Institutional theory has increasingly emphasized organisational environments as the places where the primary conditioning mechanisms for socially defined and legitimized norms for organisations with respect to matters such as structural arrangements, procedures, routines and ideologies are to be found. According to Scott (1995), for example, institutional environments are characterized by the elaboration of rules and requirements to which individual organisations must conform in order to receive legitimacy and support. Many of these rules originate in and are sustained through public opinion and the education and legal systems (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). On this argument, organisational environments are not primarily oriented around efficiency or effectiveness concerns, but rather social and cultural pressures to conform to contemporary forms and practices. With regard to TM, as Røvik (2000) has argued, the above implies that managers/organisations adopt such managerial concepts when they feel pressure from their institutional environment, notwithstanding the fact that they recognize that they are vague and indeterminate, and may not necessarily promise any effectiveness or efficiency gains. This dilemma may be tackled by adopting a concept/fashion such as TM whilst remaining disengaged from it, such that there is little risk of it affecting routine operations (Rovik, 2000). Disengagement here, then, is about the separation of organisational talk and practice, about organisations superficially accepting new concepts whilst not making any fundamental changes to operations. However, Røvik (2000) also argues that in the longer term organisations that have adopted new concepts will often

gradually change their practices and processes in an attempt to close the rhetoric-reality gap.

In Figure 3, DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) three institutional mechanisms and Perkmann and Spicer's (2008) three types of institutional work have been transposed into the TM field, illustrating how such mechanisms could impact upon TM strategies, policies and goals within HRD. Figure 3 also incorporates insights from the aesthetic/management fashion and substantive/symbolic perspectives, in the main by reference to possible TM adoption outcomes, whether 'symbolic' (enhanced reputation, status, corporate identity, etc) or 'substantive' (attracting, retaining, developing talent, etc).

Place Figure 3 here

Drawing upon the institutional perspective in particular and the framework captured in Figure 3 more generally, the following research questions are suggested:

- 1) To what extent are the influences on organisations and practitioners to adopt TM primarily coercive (such as imposition from head office in the case of MNEs, or from government pressure or influence), and/or normative (through the action of professional bodies such as the CIPD) and/or mimetic, through imitation of more apparently 'successful' or 'high status' organisations?
- 2) How do managers and HRD practitioners interact with 'institutional workers' or 'institutional entrepreneurs' such as gurus or consultants?
- 3) What does the TM adoption process within the organisation actually involve? Does it vary across different organisations, different national and organisational cultures, etc? How are such ideas 'translated' and implemented through 'knowledge transfer/

migration/diffusion 'in different cultural and social contexts? (Iles and Yolles, 2002, 2003).

4) What kinds of political, technical, and cultural work have been employed in the promotion of TM? Who are the main actors, and what skills have they employed?

5) What is the nature of HRD specialists and external consultants' involvement in TM adoption, and what is the quality and effect of their involvement?

6) To what extent does TM adoption result from 'fashion setters' imposing it on 'fashion followers'? Do followers make their own judgements based on their own particular interests in deciding how to enact and adapt fashionable rhetoric? (according to a recent CIPD (2007) research project, this would certainly appear to be the case with TM in the UK).

7) To what extent, if at all, is TM becoming routinized, losing its novelty, and therefore becoming susceptible to displacement by a 'newer' technique/fashion?

To conclude, it should be noted that an empirically-informed study designed to address the sort of questions outlined above runs the risk of relying on management rhetoric via interview or questionnaire surveys of managers ('TM is a good thing and we are practising it in this company'). If managers, HRD practitioners, or consultants are asked if TM has been adopted for 'fashionable' reasons, they are hardly likely to admit it; it is in the interests of all parties to argue that its introduction is to solve 'real' ('substantive') organizational problems. In addition, given the varying definitions and interpretations attached to TM, careful interpretation will be necessary. Thus, empirical work may need to adopt other more subtle, 'indirect' approaches, such as longitudinal/multiple organisational levels/repeat visits, participant

observation, discourse/ethnographic methodologies, and network analyses in order to address some of the research questions outlined above.

What are the practitioner implications of such research? One is that organizations and HRD practitioners should not just ‘jump on the TM bandwagon’ because TM is fashionable, or practised by high-status, high-reputation organizations, or seems a way to give the profession greater credibility, or is the professional ‘flavour of the month’. They should ask what questions/issues TM is designed to address/solve; are they for example, issues of branding, attraction, retention, leadership development, or succession planning? If TM seems to deliver appropriate solutions, practitioners should then consider what form TM should take, given the mission and culture of the organization, for example, should there be an ‘exclusive’ focus on a select few ‘talents’ (perhaps recruited as ‘high-potential’, and in receipt of disproportionate investment in HRD), or an inclusive focus on developing everyone in the organization? Should the organization identify a few select positions as key/mission-critical, and tailor HRD efforts to those positions? Or should it focus HRD on building wider organizational competence and social capital? Whatever choice is made, practitioners, in their dealings with putative TM ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ and ‘fashion-setters’ such as consultants and gurus, need to critically examine the evidence base for claims of effectiveness or success, and the robustness of the theoretical underpinnings of such claims.

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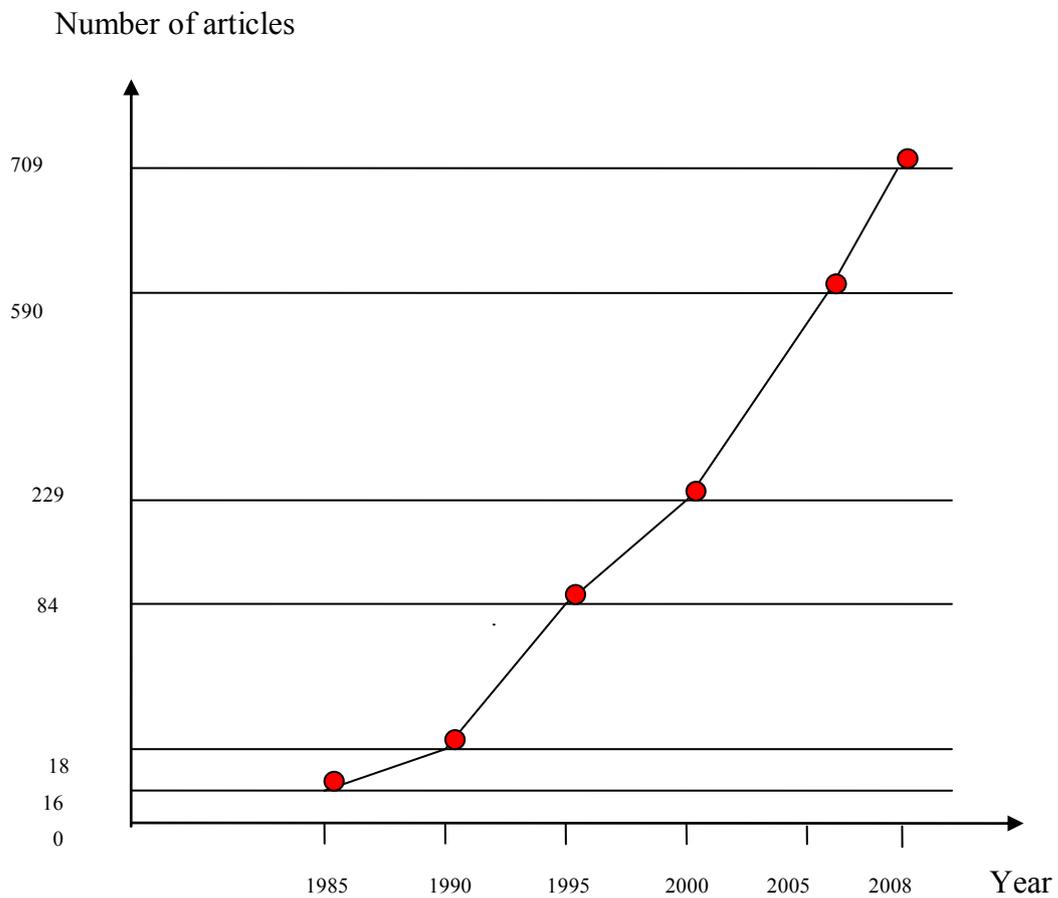
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Table 1. Article count of ‘Talent Management’ between 1985-2008

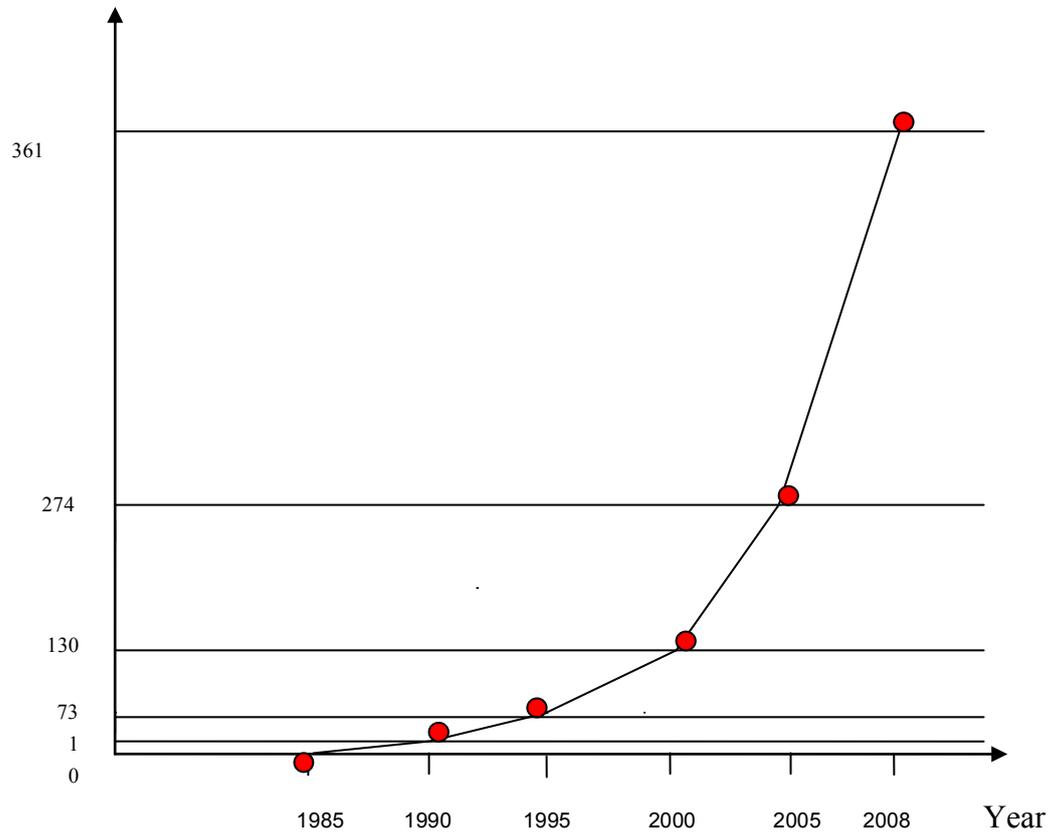
	Number of articles published during the Year					
	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2008
Business Source Premier	16	18	84	229	590	709
Emerald	0	1	73	130	274	361

Figure 1. Number of articles referring to talent management, Business Source Premier database, 1985-2008.



**Figure 2. Number of articles referring to talent management,
Emerald database, 1985-2008**

Numbers of articles



**Figure 3. Talent Management, HRD and the new institutionalism:
a research agenda**

(adapted from Boselie, P., Paauwe, J. and Jansen, P., 2001; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Rovik, 2000; DiMaggio and Powell, 1993)

