How hard can it be? A qualitative study following an HRT implementation in a global industrial corporate group

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to critically study the implementation and contextualization of the human resource transformation (HRT) management model within the human resources (HR) function of a global industrial company group.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative case study that includes two data collections.

Findings – Implementation of the HRT model led to tensions and conflicting interpretations of the mission of the HR function, and a "tug of war" about the distribution of work both within HR and between HR and line management. Splitting the HR function into three legs made the HR function's learning cycles more difficult. The corporate group had a decentralized and diverse business culture, and contextualization of the HRT model to this setting highlighted the model's embeddedness in the American business culture of centralization and standardization. Implementation of the model also entailed a transition from an employee to an employer perspective within HR.

Research limitations/implications – For an assessment of HR's total work other parts of the HRT model (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) need to be involved since HR professionals in the insourced or outsourced shared service center (SSC) and Center of Expertise (CoE) and the e-HR tools are equally important for executing the total HR's mission. Further studies of the problematic human resource business partner (HRBP) role are needed and also what the development of e-HR solutions means for the HR profession.

Practical implications – The authors argue for a continuous development of HR work, along with closer professional contact both with line managers (LMs) and within the HR function, for improved learning cycles and a need for contextualization when implementing management models.

Social implications – The paper discusses the HRT model's impact on HR practitioners' and LMs' work practice.
Originality/value – This article shows the need for contextualization when implementing management models. The lack of such contextualization led to severe tensions, and the intentions of an efficient and respected HR function were not achieved. The study contributes an evaluation of the tensions between HRT as a normative and standardized model in business settings accustomed to variety and decentralized decision-making.

Keywords HRT, Ulrich model, HRM work, Qualitative, Paradox theory, Tension theory
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Consulting firms and researchers have spent many years problematizing traditional human resources (HR) and have established concepts such as "value-creating HR" and "strategic HR." Rothwell *et al.* (2008), for instance, have argued that HR tends to be reactive and advocated for a more proactive role. An influential model for transforming HR into a more strategic function was presented by Ulrich (1997) and Ulrich and Brockbank (2005). Their model, labeled human resource transformation (HRT), was intended to make HR's administrative processes and deliveries more efficient and to create new work roles for HR practitioners focusing on creating values. They claimed that HR's value creation requires a deep understanding of external business reality, and that key stakeholders both within and outside the company participate in defining and recognizing HR's deliveries and added value. Another important area for HR, according to Ulrich and Brockbank (2005), is the role of process owner for competence management and being "champions" of employees' development and enhancement.

The advent of HRT and a more strategic orientation of Human Resource Management (HRM) created great interest in larger Swedish organizations in the first decade of the 21st century. Boglind *et al.* (2011), in studies of the introduction of HRT to Swedish organizations, discussed HR's aim to become more business focused and efficient as well as to obtain better legitimacy and status. However, after implementing this organizational form, occupational roles and delivery model, the content of HR work did in fact not change much (Boglind *et al.*, 2011). Costs and efficiency were the central driving forces for carrying through HRT in Swedish public and private organizations (Boglind *et al.*, 2011). Thus, there was no focus on the more "value-creating HR," that is, including values other than reducing costs.

The HRT model was criticized by Keegan *et al.* (2018) in their study of organizations after an HRT implementation. The model divides HR work into three subunits: the Center of Expertise (CoE), the shared service center (SSC) and the human resource business partner (HRBP). Ideally, the model's setup should enable the HRBP role to perform strategic HR work. However, according to Keegan *et al.* (2018), HR practitioners have faced contradictory demands related to the tensions between strategy and operations in HRM work and have experienced cognitive and emotional strain when trying to work within this complex system. Gerpott (2015) has also criticized the Ulrich model for being poorly matched with practical HRM work and discussed the existence of paradoxical tensions in HR work around HR's identity, learning, performance and organizing.

This article takes a closer look at what happened when the HRT model, a standardized and centralized management concept, was implemented in a highly decentralized organization with a wide variety of HR practices in different units. The aim of the study was to investigate and critically analyze the implementation of the HRT model (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) in a setting consisting of subunits with rather strong autonomy and where line managers (LMs) on the site level had the power and willingness to object to decisions made by corporate HR.

Analytical framework

The theoretical framework used in this article consists of the paradox/tension theory in combination with theories of national cultures. The paradox perspective is applied to examine the role of tensions as hidden sources of conflicting messages within organizations,

focusing on the role and work of HR functions. Smith and Lewis (2011) define paradox as "contradictory yet interrelated elements (dualities) that exist simultaneously and persist over time: such elements seem logical when considered in isolation, but irrational, inconsistent when juxtaposed." They classify the organizational tensions and paradoxes within organizations in four main categories representing the core organizational activities of learning, belonging, organizing and performing (Smith and Lewis, 2011). These paradoxes and tensions can arise in competing roles, occupations, missions and values as well as opposite strategies, power structures and sometimes competing goals.

In the HRM literature, several researchers have used the lens of paradoxical tensions to understand the work of HR functions, HR practitioners and the ambiguity and tensions inherent in HRM work (Link and Mueller, 2015; Gerpott, 2015; Keegan *et al.*, 2018, 2019). Gerpott (2015) discusses the functionality of Ulrich's business partner model, the overemphasis on strategy work and the downplaying of operational HRM work. Gerpott (2015) believes that the model has led not only to tensions and paradoxes (Smith and Lewis, 2011) for HR practitioners in their work, their professional identity, their work content and performance, but also to a poor adaptation to real HRM work. In addition, Gerpott (2015) stresses the weak scientific evidence that introducing the strategic HRBP role can have a positive impact on the company's success and performance, which is emphasized in the Ulrich model (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). The term "business partner" is used to cover several different tasks and roles, ranging from strategically oriented tasks to administration and consulting efforts. Business partnering in the Ulrich model involves a thorough reconsideration of what HR/personnel work is and how it is evaluated and measured, which means a profound change for the HR department's competence and way of working. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), it also "makes HR accountable to the business and expects HR to add real value. This is a shift away from traditional HR functions where purpose, priorities and successes were defined within HR" (CIPD, 2006). The intention of the HRBP role is to enable HR practitioners to become strategic partners with LMs and facilitate their achievement of set business goals (Ulrich, 1997).

Keegan *et al.* (2018) use a paradox lens to examine the HRT model (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). They claim that the division of HRM work into three subunits leads to challenges for HR practitioners, as these practitioners experience identity and learning conflicts between the new and old work content and working methods, and that it does not deliver the promised benefits but rather develops a gap between the service center and LMs.

Keegan *et al.* (2019) discuss how the HR function can manage tensions and paradoxes, building on the models of Smith and Lewis (2011) and Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2013). The paradoxes give HR practitioners opportunities to proactively manage these by embracing the opportunities instead of focusing on the obstacles. Strategies for handling paradoxes can be active or defensive and are influenced by how paradoxes shape each other via a recursive paradox–response cycle. Specifically, according to Smith and Lewis (2011), "paradoxes of organizing shape paradoxes of belonging and performing." There are four modes of response according to Keegan *et al.* (2019) with the Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2013) model, in response to conflicting demands and tensions which can be either defensive or proactive/adaptive. Defensive responses are concerned with suppressing demands, opposing demands or dividing the contradictory demands spatially or temporally. Conversely, proactive/adaptive responses involve accepting tensions and paradoxes as an inevitable part of HRM work and embracing creative processes to find solutions to upcoming organizational problems by making adaptations in cooperation with LMs (Keegan *et al.*, 2019).

Gerpott (2015) is also critical of the HRT model because of the American cultural context of the model, which conflicts with European culture, legislation and social contexts. National culture consists of beliefs, values and practices that are typical of a certain entity and are always a shared collective phenomenon expressed in people's preferences and way of doing

things (Hofstede, 2001 and https://www.hofstede-insights.com/). The national cultural imprint therefore also impregnates organizations, including their organizational structure, management culture and working methods. There may, for instance, be a preference for a centralized or more of a decentralized organizational structure, while flexibility and context adaption may be seen as an asset or as more of a threat. Leadership is, in turn, essential for shaping the culture in the organization or business. These cultural imprints obviously play a fundamental role in the transfer of a specific HR model from one national context to another and in how well the model can be made to fit the context.

Using Hofstede's six dimensions of national culture to compare Sweden and the USA reveals some important differences. The masculinity–femininity dimension is especially striking, as Sweden stands out as the most feminine country of all while the USA scores quite high in the masculine direction (5 vs 62). Masculine cultures are more focused on competition, with achievement and material rewards seen as important, whereas femininity stands for a more consensus oriented society with a preference for cooperation, modesty and quality of life. In the business context, masculinity vs femininity is sometimes related to "tough vs tender" cultures. Organizations in masculine cultures tend to be more hierarchical and centralized, while those in feminine cultures nurture good relations through negotiation and compromise rather than through dictation and submission. The Nordic countries clearly stand out as a region known for a working life that is equal and cooperation oriented, where large power inequalities are seen as a problem (Damm, 1993; Bevort and Einarsdottir, 2021). This is also consistent with Hofstede's (2001) findings that American leadership theories are based on the notion that subordinates should not take the initiative to make decisions on their own unless asked for, in stark contrast to what is seen as both natural and desirable in the Scandinavian countries (Brewster *et al.*, 1993). The willingness of local units to be able to make their own decisions – often almost rising to the level of demands – might also be related to the high degree of risk-taking, low uncertainty avoidance and low power distance in Sweden.

It must be noted that there is no best organizational culture to aim for, since the best organizational culture is always contextual. We suggest that this is an important factor to consider when transferring a model that originated in a specific national cultural context to another cultural context.

Research methodology
To achieve the aim of the investigation, a case study design was selected. The main references for this case study research were Beach and Pedersen (2016), Bennet and Colin (2006), Merriam (1998), Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Miles and Huberman (2014), all of whom have emphasized seeking rich qualitative data. To capture valid data about HRT implementation, the researchers aimed to be sensitive and trustworthy. A critical approach (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) was applied in the analysis, in order to be able to challenge a highly influential model for HRM work and its conceptualization in a global HRM work practice, and to question presupposed truths and solutions.

Setting of the case and data collection
Data were collected at both central and local levels within the HR function of a specific company group (CG), in order to examine the contextualization of the HRT model. The CG was chosen for this study because it has strong roots in the Swedish organizational culture and because the implementation project within the CG was led from Sweden. It was therefore important to examine the implementation in the Swedish organization, as this would be a model for the restructuring of the entire CG's global HR organization. Two data collections were made. Participation observations and governing HR documents formed the data

collection in 2007 (the first data collection), which was followed by semi-structured qualitative interviews and shadowing in 2017 and 2018 (the second data collection). The first data collection mostly provided background information about the HR function's organization and the rationale behind the HRT implementation. The period between 2007 and 2017 was covered in three interviews in the second data collection. Finally, qualitative data analysis was used in line with thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006).

The first data collection was conducted in training programs for the introduction of the new HR organization, new work methods and the HRBP role in the CG's Swedish HR function. The main source of data was participatory observation (Czarniawska, 2007) in five two-day training programs (a total of ten training days) for future HRBPs and HR practitioners. In total, 15 workshops with 76 participants (56 women and 20 men) from 13 different CG units in Sweden were observed. Notes were taken of the views and reflections expressed by the participants on the change of occupational roles, HR organization and work practices. These empirical data were collected to shed light on the HR practitioners' need for additional training for the new HR organization, the new working methods and the HRBP role. This data collection provided a starting point and an opportunity to return to the CG for an independent follow-up case study of the HRT change, which constituted the second data collection. The data were used for an unpublished master's thesis.

By the time of the second data collection in 2017–2018, the CG had production in almost 20 countries, sales in almost every country in the world and around 100,000 employees, of whom 18% were women; 25% of the managers were females.

The main sources of data in this second collection were qualitative semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected interviewees (ten women and ten men) from HRBPs on different levels (n = 10) and shadowing of HRBPs (n = 2). The interviews also included their clients and the LMs (n = 8). The interviewees in the HR function and the line function were chosen from the overall organizational levels to the first line level (i.e. as parallel "pipes" within each function). The shadowed HRBPs were selected through voluntary participation. The shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007) was carried out to gain insight into the HRBPs' work practices. Additional sources were the CG Annual Reports for 2006, 2007, 2017 and 2018, governing HRM policy documentation, and PowerPoint presentations of HRM concepts. The period from 2007 to 2017–2018 was covered through interviews with three senior HR managers in the second data collection. Different individuals participated in the data collections, due to the substantial personnel turnover in the HR function.

Data analysis

The empirical data were transcribed and analyzed by the first author after each collection. The main analysis was completed after the second data collection and then discussed within the research team. This analysis was carried out in line with thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006), with the aim of keeping an open mind regarding what was said in the interviews and noticed in the observations and workshop discussions, as well as working continuously with the data analysis. A three-step design process was applied, using memo writing as a reflective tool throughout the analytical process to extract the themes. It was then possible to identify the central phenomena and main themes which provided relevant patterns and to critically evaluate the data. As the study was focused on paradoxical tensions in the meeting between the Ulrich model and a real HRM work practice, the lens of Smith and Lewis (2011), Keegan *et al.* (2018) and Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2013) was used in the analysis and discussion. The main tensions in the data were identified as follows:

(1) T1: centralized and standardized administrative solutions *vs* the need for contextualization and local adaptations

(2) T2: splitting of the HR function into three parts **vs** the need for an integrated HR function in order to facilitate cooperation, knowledge sharing and development within HR

(3) T3: a focus on strategy and value creation in HRM work and transferring the implementation of HRM practice/administration to LMs **vs** the LMs' expectations of HR work and perception of HR practitioners' professionalism.

Pre-understanding
The first author, who conducted all the data collection, had a long history of work experience in various HR roles and as HR managers in some of the CG companies (before 2005) and in other CGs (after 2005). These experiences provided in-depth insight into different work practices, the professional field and the CG itself, as well as the ability to discuss the HR function's work practice based on an inside view of the profession. It is worth considering how these experiences affected the analysis in addition to the availability of a deeper understanding of the contextual conditions. To delimit the impact of conceivable preconception and to ensure a critical distance toward the empirical material, the research group critically discussed the results at each step of the analysis.

Findings
The HR function in the CG had gone through several reorganizations before this study. A major reorganization took place in the early 2000s, which required changing the HR function's organization and working methods as well as reducing the HR staff. The process was cumbersome, and in the first decade of the 21st century there was a view among senior executives that the HR function was too costly and inefficient. As the HRT concept was receiving more and more attention and becoming more popular among large Swedish firms during this period (Boglind *et al.*, 2011), this model was seen as a solution to the perceived problem of inefficiency. The starting point for implementing HRT was a highly decentralized and autonomous HR organization, which was now to be transformed into a centralized organization with a standardized and process-oriented way of working. This change project covered the CG's entire HR organization. Given the complexity of different company sizes, focuses and products within the CG's business, the HR management team wanted to coordinate and restructure this highly autonomous HR organization. The HR practitioners were introduced to new professional roles as well as process-oriented and standardized working methods, which greatly affected their work content and the HR function. According to several informants, this change also meant that HR work became employer-focused and that the employees lost a neutral speaking partner.

2007 at the beginning of the transition
The earliest data were collected in 2007, covering training programs for the organizational change in the CG's HR function. These training programs were designed to handle HR employees' questions before the implementation of the new HR organization, as well as to create awareness of training needs for the future HRBPs and HR practitioners (HRT BP Training Intro, 2007). Objectives for the new HR function were set, and new focus areas and working methods were introduced. The new organization also meant that the HR function became fragmented and subordinated to the business areas, except for group-wide functions. During the training programs, the HR practitioners expressed that there were challenges and opportunities in the new HRBP role, the new organization and the new HRM working practices. There were also advantages: an improved and more efficient HR administration,

the shift from administration to strategy work and becoming members of line management teams. However, concerns were raised about not having the right skills for the new focus areas in HRM work. One of the HR practitioners said the following: "*It will take time for us to change, and we do not recognize ourselves in the new work role with the skills that we have. Why should we challenge new knowledge areas [i.e. business and operational knowledge] which others can do better? What will happen to our core competence now?*" Financial metrics becoming an important part of HRM work was also problematic for the HR practitioners: "*There is a lot of focus on counting heads but poor connection to the long-term costs – there is a lot of focus on the short-term profit perspective.*" The anxiety over too much focus on cost and revenues is obvious and can be interpreted as a need to safeguard the humanistic perspective.

The period between 2007 and 2017
When the HRT-inspired model for HRM work was introduced in the CG in 2006–2007, the HR management team chose not to outsource the HRM administration to an external party as had been the initial plan. Instead, the SSCs were organized in the CG within a geographic area, like the Americas, or nationally, like in Sweden. The original plan for a stronger centralization of the service centers was deviated from due to internal resistance in the HR organization. A schematic description of the CG's divided HR function is given in Table 1.

Most of the HRM administrative work was directed toward the SSC and the e-HR tools. The LMs were expected to have direct contact with the SSC, and to use the e-HR tools for their HRM administration.

The CoE, on the other hand, was a global and/or national function working behind the scenes and had no direct contact with the LMs. It contained HR personnel specializing in, for example, labor relations, labor law, compensation and benefits, leadership development and so on. The CoE developed common policies and guidelines to support HRM work, including training and development programs to be introduced in the CG's companies and units by the HRBPs in the line management teams.

The strategic HRBP was the HR practitioner allocated to a certain unit or company in the CG. All HRBPs were supposed to work through the line management teams and the LMs and not directly with coworkers (Internal document, HRBP Target Role, The CG, 2006). As the HRBPs were intended to be the only HR function at the operational level, local HR units were dismantled and the HR practitioners who did not become HRBPs were transferred to either the CoEs or the SSCs.

Viewpoints about the transformation
Several interviewees claimed that the senior decision makers in the CG had clearly underestimated the difficulties in changing the HR function's working methods and organization toward the new concept. According to one senior HR manager "*The HRT change was planned to be carried out in six months, but it took around ten years to complete.*"

E-HR portals	The shared service center	The HRBP	The Center of Expertise
• Employee self-service (ESS) • Manager self-service (MSS) • Team places for HR practitioners	• Frontline service providers • Subject matter experts	• **The only HR function within a company or unit** • The management team member • The strategic role	• **Process owners** • **Project owners** • Centers for training, development, leader development, etc

Table 1.
The HRT-inspired management model introduced for HRM work in the CG

Moreover, "*HR's working methods and tools in the* CG *were very diverse, old-fashioned, and difficult to align into the new centralized* HR *function and standardized* HR *processes.*" The entire transition to the new HR organization and working method entailed great strain and resistance within the HR function. One senior HR manager concluded that "*The whole* HRT *change was extremely painful to the* HR *function, when the* HR *department in the independent company structure lost their independence. There was a lot of anxiety and resistance to the* HRT *change among the* HR *practitioners.*"

As well as addressing the shortcomings of the e-HR tools, there was a need to find a balance between the demands for local administrative solutions and the standardized and centralized SSC. It was a huge challenge for the new units to be accepted at the local site level, as before 2007 the local sites had their own HR departments. In several sites/factories, local HR administration solutions were being re-established, and to some extent there was a return to a previous work approach of using HR generalists with strong contextual knowledge instead of using the SSC to deal with local HR problems and to make agreements with local unions. The result of all this was more of a four-legged stool of HR, including a local HR who was able to provide local HR services and administration in a contextualized way, thus maintaining a diversity in HR issues within the group.

HR from the LM's perspective
The transfer of HRM administration to LMs was a controversial solution. The second data collection showed that the LMs' workload had increased due to the growing need for follow-up, reporting and routine HRM administration. The LMs wanted to have a closer and more personal contact with their HRBP, to be able to get direct support with people-related matters and HRM administration and to have better and fewer e-HR tools. The e-HR system solutions and IT platforms were not always synchronized, and the LMs thought there were too many e-HR tools to handle. One LM stated that there were "*too many keystrokes to push to get things done.*" Similarly, a senior LM said the following: "*I am trying NOT to spend so much time on the* HR *and Finance follow-up tools—I'm doing what I'm here to do [i.e., be a leader and troubleshooter].*" The HR "toolbox" was thus not always adapted to what the business or the LMs wanted but reflected more what HR wanted or what HR thought the LMs would need.

The production managers also required closer daily support. One of the production plants had established a service level agreement with HR, based on the wishes of the line organization. An LM said about this: "*How hard can it be?*"

The challenges of the HR function
The implementation of HRT led to that the CG LMs got a more radical change in HRM practice and administration than they had anticipated. A senior HR manager said the following: "*We implemented a solution but did not ask what problems it should solve, and the more difficult part has been to get acceptance for the HRBP's strategic role.*" There was resistance within the line organization to HR's strategic ambition. Strategic HR work was also a challenge for the HR professionals, as it was a stated goal in the model and drove their own expectations of the role. Interviewees in the second data collection talked about strategic HR work but had neither the time to perform this work nor a clear definition of what it should be. According to one HRBP, "*You are supposed to be a strategic partner, but in reality, there are many practical and administrative tasks. The role is very fragmented. Here, they want very concrete help with administration.*" Thus, the purpose and design of the HRBP role reflected the aspirations of the CG's HR management team, but the LMs' requests for administrative assistance and service sent a contradictory signal to the HRBPs.

Neither HR's mission nor the interface between HR and the LMs were entirely clear to the HRBPs and LMs, and old work habits were hard to change. A senior HR manager in

the second data collection expressed concern over the HR function's lack of a clear mission and the need for both business knowledge and collective agreements: "*Is it just us thinking we are doing a good job and are important? These are important questions, what is our assignment? The business perspective is important, our [knowledge of] collective agreements is also important.*" One solution in the studied units was to hire production managers for the HR function in order to bring knowledge of leadership and operations to the function.

Fragmentation of HRM work
The Ulrich model of dividing HRM work into three subunits and using e-HR tools did not work smoothly for the practical HRM work in the CG, partly because it was difficult for LMs to obtain tailored service from SSC. One senior HRBP manager said the following: "*We are not very happy with* SSC. *They don't understand what we need here [...] the service is not adapted to our reality.*" As the LMs found it difficult to get the right administrative support from the SSC, the center was bypassed via local arrangements for training, leadership development and HRM administration. LMs continued to turn to their HRBP for daily support and assistance, rather than using the SSC or the manager's self-service portal. In one of the production plants, the shadowed HRBPs were dealing with a variety of mundane tasks as well as supporting the LMs with HR administration. One HRBP said the following: "*Our role is so diverse, and you can't handle everything. The line-managers want personal contact, they aren't using the* SSC *as their first action, and there aren't good technical solutions in the e-HR tools. There's a very unclear boundary between* HR *and the line-managers.*" The HRBPs were also solving tasks that, according to the CG's Ulrich model, should have belonged to the CoE.

Another consequence of the model's physical and functional division of HRM work was that knowledge development, knowledge transfer and learning within the CG's HR function had become more difficult. The HRBPs in the CG needed closer collaboration with other HRM experts in the CoE and SSC, and a dismantling of the model was ongoing within the studied CG unit in order to tie the necessary HRM expertise and HRM administration more closely to the HRBPs and the LMs. The SSC had little knowledge of local conditions and local practices, and their knowledge of standard practices was often not appreciated by the LMs. A senior HRBP manager indicated that there had not been sufficient governance to get the necessary support, knowledge transfer and cooperation between the HRBPs and the SSC in Sweden: "*Who controls who in the model, and there's no country management team for following up between* SSC *and* HRBP *in Sweden. The* HR *service delivery model [i.e. HRT] is built on the fact that there is a national management team that links* SSC *to the business. It has not been done here, so it divides the model in Sweden.*"

Discussion
This study provides insights into the conceptualization of a generic management model for HRM work, by critically analyzing the HRT model based on the intentions of an implementation and how it evolved over 11 years. The results related to the main tensions identified in the study are presented in Table 2 using the conceptualization of Smith and Lewis (2011), Keegan *et al.* (2018) and Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2013).

Although the implementation was rhetorically successful, it also led to a "tug of war" over administrative tasks between LMs and HR, as well as conflicting interpretations of the HR function's mission. Managers outside the HR function clearly underestimated the complexity of the HR function's work ("*How hard can it be?*") and the difficulties stemming from the huge variation in HR practices and local agreements across the company. The variation was strong not only between different countries, but also between

Tensions	Empirical results	Response strategies according to Keegan *et al.* (2018) and Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2013)
T1: centralized and standardized administrative solutions *vs* the need for contextualization and local adaptations	The American culture embedded in the Ulrich model's standardized work methods collided with the CG's line managers' need to have close daily support The SSC was perceived to be too remote/inaccessible and unable to handle a variety of local collective agreements The line managers were critical of the number of e-HR tools they were expected to handle and noted that these tools did not always address their needs Some of the line managers did not understand how the HRT model worked	**LM opposing –** The line- managers bypassed the e-HR tools and the service center or requested support from the HRBPs instead **HR adjusting –** There was a partial dismantling of the strict splitting of the HR function to local setups of HRM administration, training, and recruitment centers
T2: splitting of the HR function into three parts *vs* the need for an integrated HR function in order to facilitate cooperation, knowledge sharing and development within HR	The splitting of the HR function into three subunits and e-HR made it more difficult to share and develop knowledge in the HR function There were complex interfaces between the SCC, CoE and HRBPs, causing duplication of work	**HR splitting –** A generic model for HRM work was implemented without reflecting on the consequences for the HR function **HR adjusting –** The HRBPs needed closer collaboration with other HRM experts in the CoE and SSC. There was an ongoing dismantling of the model in order to tie the necessary HRM administration more closely to the HRBPs The HRBPs were developing tailor-made HRM concepts outside the CoE
T3: a focus on strategy and value creation in HRM work and transferring the implementation of HRM practice/administration to line managers *vs* the line managers' expectations of HR work and perception of HR practitioners' professionalism	The line managers were doubtful about HR's competence in strategy, operation and business and did not recognize HR's strategic and value adding mission HR's mission and interface to the line managers were not entirely clear to the HR practitioners There was a skills gap between HR practitioners' skills and work experience and the model's strategy, finance, leadership and business focus The leadership role also needed to be adapted to this HRM working model, which was not addressed in the project	**LM suppressing –** A concurrent problem was the difficulty of clarifying the actual mission for the HR function, due to contradictory messages of "what we are expected to do (by the rest of the organization) and what the HRT model suggests we should do." Most of the HR practitioners lacked sufficient knowledge in important competence areas related to the business focus **HR suppressing –** HR had unilaterally transferred responsibility for HRM administration and implementation of HRM practices to line managers **LM opposing –** The line managers questioned HR's strategic mission, business impact and other aspects which took place at the expense of HRM administrative support to the line managers

Table 2.
Tensions present in HRM work in the CG. Response strategies of the LMs and HR

different business units and even *within* business units. The centralization of HR work through the CoEs and SSCs often did not create efficient processes; instead, LMs preferred to have close contact with HR practitioners, preferably located at the same site. Thus, HR's actual work content remained unclear due to the tensions between the functional mission of HR and the expectations of the LMs (cf. Link and Mueller, 2015; Gerpott, 2015; Keegan *et al.*, 2018, 2019). Keegan *et al.* (2018, 2019) have also criticized the HRT model's built-in tensions and conflicting demands between strategy and operations in HRM work, arguing that HRM strategy work has been overemphasized. Keegan *et al.* (2018) suggest that HRBPs should have closer contact with LMs and employees and have in-depth knowledge of key HR operational skills. Keegan *et al.* (2018) also see a risk that the HRT model's division of HRM work will lead to this work becoming even more fragmented in the future, and according to Gerpott (2015), the HRT model works poorly in practical HRM work. American culture is more in line with standardization and centralization, while the Scandinavian style is more in line with decentralization and context adaptation. In this study, lack of cultural adaptation manifested itself in tensions between the standardized solutions in the model and the culture of autonomy and local solutions in the CG.

One finding of this study was that obstacles to collaboration, knowledge exchange and knowledge development within the HR function were overlooked. These obstacles were consequences of the Ulrich model's division of the HR function. The HR practitioners experienced identity and learning conflicts between new and old work content, and the model's division of HRM work affected HR practitioners and work methods (cf. Link and Mueller, 2015; Keegan *et al.*, 2018). Within the CG there was an absence of governance to get the necessary support, knowledge transfer and cooperation between the HRBPs and the SSC in Sweden. There were also complex interfaces between the SSC, CoE and HRBPs, which led to duplication of work within the HR function.

The delegation of HRM practices to the LMs was another area that could affect the HR practitioners' professional area and lead to a deprofessionalization of HR knowledge. Link and Mueller (2015) have emphasized not only the need for the HR function to participate more actively and train the LMs in how to work with delegated HRM tasks, but also to pay attention to the HR function's own needs for learning cycles.

This article has discussed several problems that arose from the division of work into the three subunits of the HRT model and shown how these problems gradually led to dissolution of the strict division of HRM work. Instead of the sole, multicompetent HRBP gluing together HR work with the rest of the organization, the CG units in this study developed their own local HR functions as an alternative, comprising about five to ten HR professionals each, who worked closely together to produce HR work and to support the LMs on the factory/site level. The Ulrich model, relying on standardized practices and strong individuals, was thus replaced by teamwork and local adaptation. This may well serve as a model for other organizations that foster decentralized decision-making, teamwork and a low level of conflict. Deviations from the centralized model were made with local arrangements of HR administration, leadership development and training at factory level, as a solution to the tension between local requirements and more standardized HR activities from the group level. Many local agreements with the unions about working conditions and compensation were still maintained on the factory level.

Overall, the HRT model's adaptation to the CG's reality revealed important weaknesses in the model, including the vulnerability and lack of anchoring of the HRBP role, the fragmentation of the HR work into the HRT model and the considerable variation in the quality and functionality of the e-HR tools. The "patent solution" of HRT according to Ulrich (1997) and Ulrich and Brockbank (2005), when translated into the CG's HRT model, only partially solved the HR function's quest for impact and more efficient HR administration in the CG. Still, for companies such as the CG, there might be no viable alternative to the HRT

model. Going back to the situation of 2007 was not seen as an option. However, what might be an alternative is a more federal approach to HR organization, by creating HR functions which integrate the SSC, CoE and HRBP more closely at a more local level. This would lead to some duplication in the HR work but would make it easier for the HR practitioners to be more knowledgeable about local conditions and to provide a higher quality of services while also supporting the HR function's need for its own learning cycles.

Limitations and future research

This case study investigated the conceptualization of the HRT model in a CG. For an assessment of HR's total work, other parts of the HRT model (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) need to be involved, since HR professionals in the insourced or outsourced SSC and CoE as well as the e-HR tools are equally important for executing the overall mission of HR. Further studies of the problematic HRBP role are also needed as well as investigation of what the development of e-HR solutions means for the HR profession.

Conclusions

The article describes an investigation of the HRT model as implemented in a large and culturally diverse CG. HR work and organizations are in fact far more complex than both this seemingly simple model and the ideas that people outside of HR may have, as exemplified by the title of this article. There are tensions between the model's ideal image and the HR reality, and the implementation of standardized HR processes is counteracted by desires for local adaptation and personalized service. A main conclusion of the article is that the streamlined HRT model is easier to implement in a less decentralized organization, since standardized solutions fit better in an environment of centralized decision-making. The HRT model increases the simplicity of HR internal roles, but there are still complex interfaces between the SSC, the CoE and the HRBPs. Complexity and tensions continue to prevail as standard processes from the central level intermix with unique site-level solutions.

The division of HRM work into the model's three subunits impaired the HR practitioners' opportunities to collaborate between different roles and functions, and thus made it more difficult to develop learning and knowledge sharing within the HR function. This suggests a need to develop improved governance to enable closer collaboration between the subunits and their HR practitioners. In line with previous research, our results show that the HRBP role is extremely demanding and challenging. It was difficult from the start to get acceptance for the strategic HRBP role and to adopt it on all organizational levels in the CG.

Overall, the translation of the HRT model into different national cultures exposed the model's embeddedness in American culture and the need for contextualization and adaptation (Hofstede, 2001). In relation to the long-standing debate about best practice vs best fit within the HRM field (cf. Boxall and Purcell, 2011), our conclusion is that instead of believing in one best practice model, we ought to consider the need of several competing models for companies to achieve a better fit between HR work and organization and their various national and corporate cultures.

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