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**SUSTAINABILITY AND TALENT MANAGEMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

The early stages of organizational diffusion of contemporary policies that were institutionalized elsewhere often presents managers and employees with the need to adopt new work practices and ways of understanding. This study examines well formed and incomplete employee narratives of sustainability and talent management. We discuss and then conclude on how non-standardized and even confused narratives can be illuminating for understanding the early diffusion of institutions and innovations in organizations.

**Keywords: Sustainability; Talent Management; Diffusion; Innovation; Narrative;  
Antenarrative**

**INTRODUCTION**

The amount and speed that organizational and management innovations spread across different countries is a major preoccupation for policy makers, researchers and management practitioners. An area of particular concern for international organizations, multinational corporations and national governments is the extent that initiatives will spread outwards from their region, or place of origin, where there is

institutional acceptance and some established routines. Implementation problems associated with a limited or slow diffusion of organizational and management innovations can have negative economic and social consequences.

This study on early organizational diffusion of contemporary policies addresses the adoption of sustainability an talent management practices. There is a substantial

body of literature on the diffusion of policies and practices within fields such as industries, professions and organizations (e.g., Anand, Gardner and Morris, 2007; Pinnington and Sandberg, 2014) as well as many investigations of early and late adopters (e.g., Palmer, Jennings and Zhou, Lounsbury, Ventresca and Hirsch, 2003; Kennedy and Fiss, 2009). However, our selected general research problem is on the uptake of institutional ideas and sets of practices in other regions and countries. We are interested in areas of policy and practice where, at the time of the empirical research, aspects of sustainability and talent management are comparatively more novel and less a part of everyday work practices.

The specific research problem addressed in this paper covers the early diffusion of narratives of sustainability and talent management rather than policies or work practices as such (e.g., Smets, Morris & Greenwood, 2013). We concentrate on examination of the verbal expression of narratives by employees that are not especially well rehearsed or formed, and are incomplete and uncertain, as is typical of areas of policy and practice that are not well understood or even accepted. The data collection and analysis for this study makes the methodological assumption

that these verbal and written narrative accounts are a part of work and practice. Therefore, they are regarded by the authors as not entirely separate accounts isolated from work behaviour (Sandberg and Pinnington, 2009) although it is also understood that their degree of integration with routine ways of working will vary substantially given that sustainability and talent management are not comprehensively embedded in the country. This research study is exploratory and the main research question is: What does the study of incomplete employee narratives of sustainability and talent management reveal about early diffusion of contemporary policies in different organizational and national contexts?

### **1. Sustainability and Talent Management**

Sustainability policies related to the environment have been issued by Federal and State (seven Emirates) organizations in the United Arab Emirates for over a decade, while talent management policies are much less

prevalent. There is a large body of government rules and regulations in planning, infrastructure and the environment, so many companies in industries such as construction, real estate, tourism and logistics are acquainted with compliance and

consultation with government authorities. In talent management, there are considerably less rules and regulations than exist in the field of the environment. Talent management as a managerial and organizational initiative has been promulgated in the UAE through a large number of workshops and conferences involving an extensive number of cross-sectoral stakeholders. Further, a wide variety of issues related to employment, and more indirectly to human resource management and talent management, is elaborated in UAE labour law and in national and emirate strategies on key agenda issues for the next 10-15 years.

Institutionalist research in business and management often conceptualizes the diffusion of various policies and practices as progressing towards a condition of wide acceptance and standardized routines that are maintained alongside a continuing diversity of cultures, practices and alternatives (Cooper, Hinings, Greenwood & Brown, 1996; Pinnington & Morris, 2002). The academic approach is to remain open minded to the dynamic and continually changing nature of institutions and work practices. Studies of the early stages of diffusion have often been conceptualized as characterized by 'precipitating' and 'enabling' field dynamics. The former concept emphasizes

the roles of interests and values in stimulating change and the latter the contributions of power dependencies and capacities for action (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996, p.1034).

Talent management refers to a broad cluster of policies and practices connected to the management of human resources (Chambers *et al.*, 1998; Morris & Pinnington, 2002). The theories vary from approaches concentrating on the 'war for talent' attracting and retaining people with scarce skills (Armstrong, 2009; Collings and Mellahi, 2009) to more collectivist and employee-focused approaches (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). Since the late 1990s, management consultants have proposed a range of talent management practices and produced surveys of attitudes and company implementation (Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod, 2001; Guthridge & Komm, 2008). In general, practice has not been so diverse as the variety of available prescription on how to implement talent management. For example, a CIPD (2008) survey of 20 large organizations with reputation for talent management found that the focus is primarily on leadership & senior roles (20/20 organizations) and high potentials (15/20 organizations) with limited extension to talent pools (4/20) and all employees (3/20).

Institutionalist researchers studying diffusion have drawn attention to the importance of analysing competing rationalities and different logics of practice (e.g., Lounsbury, 2007; Raynard, Lounsbury & Greenwood, 2013). In the context of talent management, this could involve examining the empirical evidence for verbal accounts, and possibly written documents and employee behaviours, expressing concepts similar to or conflicting with the talent management ideas available in published theories. In the context of early diffusion, this will involve identifying ways that managers and employers are confused about the specialist terminology and processes, or disagree with them. Minbaeva and Collings (2013) have addressed some of the variety in policy and practice that requires contingent and flexible responses by organizations when implementing ideas from talent management. Many approaches to talent management are compatible with management rationalities of strategic human resource management and international human resource management. Stahl *et al.*, (2012, p. 25) advise organizations to: “Align talent management practices with your strategy and values” and to “Make sure your talent management practices are consistent with one another.” Similar to a number of other popular articles

on talent management, these authors present a comparatively uncontentious managerial argument for organizations to engage in talent

management processes involving a set of well-known HRM activities, including succession planning (Talent Review), Recruitment and Selection, Development and Training, Performance Management, Retention, Compensation and Rewards. However, other aspects of Stahl *et al.*,’s (2012) proposals for talent management are less commonly practiced such as deliberately and simultaneously managing talent differentiation and talent inclusion. Similarly, people acquainted with Randall Schuler’s published work on HRM will soon identify substantial continuity with his later work specifically on talent management. Tarique & Schuler (2010) propose attracting, developing and retaining talent as IHRM “activity domains” for global talent management. In a similar vein, Schuler, Jackson & Tarique (2011) prescribe talent management challenges as involving resourcing the right numbers, location (position), competencies, motivation and price.

In contrast to talent management, in the area of sustainability there are many more principles and practices available through

national management standards such as Abu Dhabi's Estidama pearl rating system for green building (<http://estidama.upc.gov.ae/>), as well as international standards advocated locally such as Emirates Green Building Council's advancement of LEED standards ([http://www.buid.ac.ae/leed\\_workshops/](http://www.buid.ac.ae/leed_workshops/)).

There are also a large number of management standards for social responsibility and sustainability available through global organizations with offices or conferences and workshops in the UAE such as the Pearl Initiative (<http://www.pearlinitiative.org/>) working in partnership with the United Nations Global Compact—with members from local, regional and international organizations (e.g. Majid Al Futtaim, Zubair Corporation, and Aramex).

Taking into account how diffusion can be influenced by institutional conditions in wider social systems and by embedded local societal institutions, we will follow the argument of Strang and Meyer (1993, p. 487) that assumes 'diffusion is importantly shaped and accelerated by culturally analysed similarities among actors, and by theorized accounts of actors and practices.' To summarise this section, research on employee narratives during early diffusion of a management innovation that is more firmly standardized elsewhere should consider the

precipitating and enabling dynamics in the field. From the institutionalist perspective, this means researchers will attend to various influences in the field such as coercive, mimetic and normative factors. Their research should also characterise the narratives communicated in terms of different patterns of change within the field involving homogeneity ('isomorphism'), multiple coexistent rationalities ('sedimentation') as well as more diverse and chaotic forms of heterogeneity. Further, the empirical research should examine issues of both consensus and dissensus in the field expressed through well-formed and incomplete forms of narrative. The next section will now explain how we propose to study early diffusion inspired by some poststructuralist proposals for conducting qualitative research using narrative methods.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The study of incomplete narratives and narrative fragments is complicated by the analytical problems of first determining what is an antenarrative, and second, then presenting a plausible analysis and interpretation of its content and meaning. We have proposed that the study of incomplete narratives may be particularly useful for achieving an in-depth qualitative evaluation of the early organizational diffusion of

contemporary policies. These fields are likely to contain many ideas, meanings and stories from culturally diverse and different perspectives.

Since they are also likely to be comparatively non-standardized and even confused in their understanding and articulation of innovations and non-local institutions, the search and analysis of incomplete rather than well-formed narratives seems to be an appropriate way forward for researchers interested in early diffusion of institutions and innovations in organizations.

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