



Challenges in Transforming Traditional HR to Talent Management: Evidence from Karachi's Pharmaceutical Sector

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Abstract

The international shift from traditional personnel management to strategic talent management has become an urgent necessity for the competitiveness of organizations worldwide, but firms in developing economies face unique contextual barriers that remain poorly understood. This paper set out to name and discuss the obstacles that prevent the transformation of traditional HR practices to modern talent management in the Karachi pharmaceutical industry, and to propose effective mitigation strategies that can be used to effect this change. Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview method with 35 corporate employees working in multinational and local pharmaceutical companies, and subsequently focus group interviews with HR professionals to validate results, using the content analysis method of data synthesis. The analysis revealed four major barriers: structural rigidity characterized by hierarchical decision-making and centralized authority; resource scarcity, including financial constraints, technological deficits, and skill gaps; cultural resistance manifested as entrenched administrative mindsets and change aversion; operational inefficiency evident in fragmented processes and poor communication. These predicaments stem from archaic tradition, including administrative orientation, poor communication, and the absence of strategic orientation. According to these findings, the study recommends four corresponding mitigation strategies: agile restructuring to overcome structural rigidity, resource optimization to overcome resource scarcity, cultural alignment to overcome cultural resistance, and process streamlining to overcome the occurrence of operational inefficiency, all supported by transformational leadership. These results are highly useful and practical, offering a framework to bridge global HR models and the local realities of emerging economies.

Keywords: Traditional HR, Talent Management, HR Transformation, Pharmaceutical Sector, Pakistan, SDGs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) form the foundation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and by providing a comprehensive global framework for socioeconomic and environmental advancement for all countries. In the light of the context above, there is a need to modernize human resource procedures and practices to achieve the goal of equitable and sustainable economic and modernize growth. This can only be done by ensuring productive employment, providing opportunities for lifelong learning, growth, and development, and providing safe working conditions. This shift from traditional HR practices to strategic people management by adapting modern HR practices will directly aid in the achievement of important global goals. It will help in achieving and aligning with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). On the other hand, many organizations also support SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) by developing and promoting a skilled, innovative, and driven workforce that not only helps to build resilient enterprises but will help in pushing forward sustainable industrialization. This can only be done through modernization of the processes; organizations can help build transparent, fair, and accountable organizational systems that promote more powerful internal governance as well as protect the integrity of an organization that directly aligns with SDG 16 (Peace, justice, and trustworthy institutions).

In today's economy, organizations encounter obstacles that make it hard to stay on course. Consequently, switching from conventional business models to expert business-centered models is essential to boost productivity and profitability (Boxall et al., 2007). Organizational variances in the effects of environmental factors, goals, rules, and procedures lead to variations in human resource management techniques.

Conventional Human Resource Management (HRM) is an industrial-era strategy commonly known as traditional HR, which treats workers as organizational assets and uses standardized and orthodox management techniques to meet business needs. This method has given rise to concerns such as excessive turnover, dissatisfaction, and burnout within organizations (Townley, 2019).

A resourceful and enterprising individual with significant growth potential who catalyzes increased shareholder value is how Ś. Borkowska describes talent (Niedźwiecka & Curie-Sklodowska, 2016). One way to define the term "talent" is to list its attributes. These consist of strategic thinking, leadership qualities, a performance-driven mindset, an entrepreneurial spirit, persuasiveness, teamwork, strong levels of emotional intelligence, adaptability, change tolerance, and highly skilled specialized technical abilities.

The talent acquisition initial phase includes tasks, including determining the need for methods and strategies for finding and hiring skilled personnel in a certain field. Career management is the main focus of the transformation phase. This covers advancement and enhancement, evaluation, and inspiration. The primary duties to be carried out during the exit phase are related to strategies to keep outstanding employees from leaving (Farooq & Rayees, 2023).

This study aims to investigate the intricacies and hopes to contribute to the evolution by identifying and comprehending both models and the significance of contemporary talent management in addressing the stagnation in traditional HR methods.

1.1 Research Problem

Globally, there is a rapid and progressive switch in the role of HR department and HR personnel's as corporate heroes, change agents, and resource guardians (Zaheer et al., 2023), but Pakistani HRM is still in its very early stage, with characteristics of traditional HR practices including formal and taller structures, little to no autonomy, centralized authority with the most senior management only, and poor management-employee communication within the department and between various departments. Global phenomena of modern HR practices are not exactly replicable in Pakistan, as culture varies among theory-exporting and importing countries (Vonk & Silva, 2024). This creates a research gap because, in the presence of huge cultural differences, the theoretical understanding of one region/country cannot be replicated in a different region/country. Therefore, this research study explored the phenomenon of traditional HR practices and modern talent management.

1.2 Research Questions

RQ1. What are the barriers to transforming traditional HR practices into a modern talent management system?

RQ2. What counter-strategies can mitigate these barriers?

RQ3. How does the transformation from traditional HR to talent management work?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The strategic necessity to revise human resource practices to achieve sustainable and inclusive economic growth and industrial competitiveness is highlighted in the literature reviewed. This international requirement of changing the traditional HR approach to Strategic People Management is the theoretical base of this study. In particular, this study explores on-the-ground issues faced in implementing this internationally prescribed organizational transformation within the Karachi-based pharmaceutical industry's context.

The literature review indicates that strategic management of people is critical to developing an educated, innovative, and motivated workforce, which is directly linked to the development of productive employment and conditions towards sustainable organizational development. These change initiatives enable companies to be resilient and competitive by going beyond administrative efficiency to be proactive in responding to future challenges and talent needs. Nonetheless, a comparison of existing literature shows that there is a huge gap: on the one hand, there is a wide range of the global HR transformation models that have already been

thoroughly documented in Western contexts (Boxall et al., 2007; Townley 2019). It has been found that cultural dimensions (Vonk & Silva, 2024) moderate the success of the transformation significantly, but the previous experience of the developed countries has not been systematically compared with the realities of the emerging market.

2.1 Theory-to-Practice Gap

According to the HRM literature, one of the persistent problems is the theory-practice gap in HRM in Pakistan. Research has always shown that the roles of strategic HR in Pakistan are very different from those of the global strategic HR roles (Ain, 2014; Negt & Axel, 2024). For instance, Asadullah et al. (2015) used Ulrich's Champions Model on one of the NGOs in the health sector in Pakistan and concluded that HR was a "Champion of the employees," but was not at all a "Strategic Partner" or "Change Agent. All other barriers build on this discrepancy between the normative expectations and actual practice.

2.2 Cultural, Structural, and Competency Barriers

Barriers of culture and structure are another significant group of obstacles. Saqib et al., (2022) focus on "Seth" (family-owned business) culture where hierarchy, authority, and personal favoritism are more important than a formal and transparent HRM process. Other factors that affect efficiency, cited by Usman (2023) include cultural resistance, inability to adapt, and rigid organizational structures. Added to this are the incompetence problems among HR professionals. The research conducted by Ahmad et al., (2022), and Mufti et al., (2016) indicates that critical HR competencies such as strategic contribution, business knowledge, and credibility are lacking, while there is a lack of 'willingness' in adopting transformative roles. This competency gap is further compounded by the lack of skills in data analytics and adoption of technology discussed by Gogia et al., (2024).

2.3 Resource Constraints and Employee-Centric Failures

Limited resources and technologies are challenging, especially for local companies. It has been revealed that when HRIS or AI is adopted, top management support and relative advantage are important factors; however, lack of financial resources, organizational readiness, and technical expertise are recurring factors that hinder the implementation of HRIS or AI (Ahmer, 2013; Rehana et al., 2025). These resource shortages have been attributed to the failure to build human capital to support sustainable competitive advantage (Fareed et al., 2016). Moreover, there are four more types of problems related to the employees. Many studies have reported that poor employee engagement, lack of fair compensation and recognition, lack of feedback mechanism, and lack of career succession planning are direct results of traditional, non-strategic HR, resulting in high turnover and low morale (Bilal et al., 2023).

2.4 The Research Gap

Combining all the above challenges, a clearly defined and compelling research gap emerges. First, there is an imbalance between the industries studied, as the banking sector is one of the most studied industries in the past, whereas other dynamic industries, such as pharmaceuticals, which have special regulatory, research and development, and sales-related pressures and challenges, have not been studied extensively. Second, lack of contextualized transformation models; most global HR models are developed in the developed western economies context, which is “not exactly replicable in Pakistan as culture differs between theory-exporting and importing countries” (Vonk & Silva, 2024). Although some barriers have been identified, the literature does not provide an integrated understanding of how each kind of barrier (structural, cultural, operational, and resource) can affect the entire transformation process. Lastly, there is a lack of employee voice – the experiences of employees working in corporations from all levels of management are not adequately explored in existing work. The present study attempts to fill these gaps and tries to examine the HR transformation from the multi-level employee perspective in the Pharmaceutical Industry in Karachi.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

The study is based on three parallel theories, which jointly to some extent account for the obstacles to HR transformation, the impact of these obstacles on the employee level and the strategic route to a successful HR modernization. These theories collectively offer a powerful framework for understanding the empirical results of this study on the pharmaceutical sector in Karachi.

2.5.1 Institutional Theory: Explaining Persistent Barriers

The Institutional Theory, developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and extended by Scott (2014), states that organizations are situated in three environmental dimensions: regulatory, normative, and cognitive-cultural. This theory has been selected as the main theoretical framework for this research, as it is used to explain the resistance that global HR transformation models, which originate in culturally different environments such as Western countries, face when introduced into culturally different settings like Pakistan (Vonk & Silva, 2024).

If we apply the findings of this study to the concepts of Institutional Theory, we can understand three mechanisms that explain the persistence of barriers. The cognitive aspect shows up as the mindset that sees HR as more of an administrative or compliance desk job than an effective strategic partner. “Challenging the status quo and changing the mindset” (Case 5) was cited as the greatest challenge. Another said: “People fear the unknown” (Case 9); meaning that the role of HR is so much assumed that something different seems unheard of, or even threatening. This cognitive resistance was the most enduring, being explicitly stated by 11 cases and implicit in the responses of many.

Second, the normative pillar is enacted in the hierarchical framework of decision-

making and the assumption that power is solely with the senior manager. In this study, there was a strong consensus that "the HR that is influenced by the owner on the decision of hiring someone... mostly it is not happening" (Case 28) and that "there is no such standardization in the whole organization" (Case 1). Such pressures are indicative of the culture of these relationships, which are based on authority and improvised relationships within the organization, rather than formal procedures and transparency in HR processes, which is similar to the "Seth" (family-business) culture highlighted in previous research of Pakistan's organizational culture (Saqib et al., 2022).

Third, the regulatory pillar, or more specifically, its relative lack of strength in Pakistan, is a factor that adds to barrier persistence. In contrast to developed countries with robust enforcement of the rules and regulations governing the workplace, the lack of external pressures, such as the enforcement of rules and regulations governing the workplace, means that organizations can continue to have practices that are outdated and have nothing to lose. It is not the regulatory activity itself, but this institutional gap that allows traditional HR practices to continue. In this sense, the four barriers that were identified in this study (Structural Rigidity, Resource Scarcity, Cultural Resistance, and Operational Inefficiency), which are known to have a negative effect on organizational performance, could be explained in terms of the parsimony of Institutional Theory.

2.5.2 The AMO Model: Explanations of Employee-Level Consequences

The AMO framework, which was initially developed by Appelbaum et al., (2000) and has been broadly used in strategic HR research, suggests that employee performance (P) is a function of the three dimensions: Ability, Motivation, and Opportunity ($P = f(A, M, O)$). This theory is an explanation of why traditional HR practices have a negative impact at the employee level.

Traditional HR practices ignore ability (A) systematically. 18 cases in this study revealed a significant gap in employees' development and talent management, which is a critical area of opportunity that needs to be improved through greater investment in training, succession planning and career development activities. Another noted that they have found no way to measure their performances, and that if they did not have such systems, "how their succession plan can be formulated" is impossible (Case 3). Another participant commented, "When the road mapping is not carried out based on skills, the gap in training and development is highlighted" (Case 16). These results indicate that the traditional HR has a negative impact on the Ability dimension of the AMO model.

Motivation (M) is compromised by unfair compensation, lack of recognition and no rewards based on performance. One participant said, "I think it's HR's job to start thinking more in terms of performance-based compensation, that's what I think anyway... more of a traditional type of thing that can just meet the bare minimum of the rules" (Case 22). Several other respondents noted that 'to some extent, it is also the same here: when I am in a good book, in liking, then many things are suppressed' (Case 30), indicating that favoring and subjective judgment of what to

do take the place of objective motivation-promoting practices. Lack of fair recognition systems directly challenges the motivation to contribute beyond minimum levels from employees.

Opportunity (O) is denied due to lack of communication, feedback mechanisms, and career progression opportunities. The topic of ineffective communication/lack of feedback was raised in 13 cases. One participant mentioned that there was "no follow-up or collective feedback mechanism process" (Case 20). Another attributed the isolation of managers as one of the reasons for the gap: "Managers are mostly isolated, they rely on what the managers tell them, that's why there's a lack of feedback" (Case 25). If opportunities are lacking to participate, input is lacking and understanding of performance expectations is lacking, then employees can't turn ability and motivation into productive outcomes. The threefold gap in Ability, Motivation and Opportunity is cited as the reasons behind Karachi's pharmaceutical industry's high employee turnover, low engagement rates and underperformance within the organization.

2.5.3 The Ulrich's HR Evolution Model

The Ulrich's HR Evolution Model (Ulrich, 2008) is used to identify the trajectory a transformation will take. Ulrich's model describes four stages of HR evolution: (1) Administrative Expert (payroll, compliance, record keeping); (2) Functional Expert (specialized HR services); (3) Strategic Partner (HR with business objectives); and (4) Outside-In Leader (value to external stakeholders). This theory helps to understand what the transformation is trying to accomplish and offers a normative path for change.

The evidence from this study is uniform that organizations are in Wave 1 or early Wave 2. Twenty-five cases raised issues of resistance to change, out-of-date procedures and lack of adaptability within the organization. One of the participants expressed this: "Traditional HR is mostly administrative and operational in nature, and it is reactive in nature" (Case 4). Another commented that "Traditional HR practices are about administrative work and compliance, not strategic initiatives" (Case 18). The statements are those of the Administrative Expert that Ulrich discovered decades ago, but which continues to exist as the main paradigm in the pharmaceutical industry in Karachi.

Perhaps most importantly, this study found that the move from Wave 1 to Wave 3 is not a straightforward process but needs to be addressed simultaneously across all four categories of barriers (Structural Rigidity, Resource Scarcity, Cultural Resistance, Operational Inefficiency). Without dealing with cultural resistance or structural rigidity, no organization can move forward by investing in technology (to improve operational efficiency). As one participant sagaciously pointed out: "The acceptance is the biggest issue because people want this to get transformed very quickly... but the reaction from that automation is not coming immediately because no mindset has been changed" (Case 3). This discovery implies that in an economic context, the development of Ulrich's framework is contingent and multi-dimensional, and that it could be that other barriers, such as cognitive-cultural, are

superior to the technological or process barriers.

2.5.4 Integration of the Three Theoretical Lenses

The three theoretical lenses are brought together in a logical framework for the analysis of HR transformation. Barriers are created and maintained by the external environmental pressures like regulatory, normative, and cognitive, which are explainable by Institutional Theory. What is happening internally to these barriers that is causing negative employee-level outcomes (low ability, motivation, opportunity)? The HR Evolution Model developed by Ulrich, which shows the normative direction and end goal of transformation from Administrative Expert to Strategic Partner, gives a framework for HR transformation.

This integrated framework provides the empirical investigation in three ways. First, it focuses on the main institutional pillars that create each barrier category. Second, it anticipates that transformation will only occur if all three AMO dimensions are improved at the same time. Third, it implies that in order to ensure strategic partnership, process and technology (Ulrich's Wave 1→Wave 2 transition) are not the only barriers to be overcome; cognitive-cultural barriers (the cognitive pillar of Institutional Theory) also need to be tackled.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Philosophy

An interpretive framework has been used for the purpose of this research. According to Alharasheh and Pius (2019), an interpretive perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the topic by exploring different areas of complexity within the scope of the specific topic. To do so, thorough discussions have been conducted with various professionals from the industry, along with a panel discussion of HR experts. In addition to the apparent, a deeper understanding of the smaller, less evident elements that influence people's thoughts and opinions about the topic.

For explaining this research, Saunders' research onion framework has been employed, adopting an interpretivist philosophy and an inductive approach through interviews and focus group discussions. A multi-method strategy has been used and a cross-sectional time horizon to explore HR transformations in Karachi's pharmaceutical sector.

3.2 Research Proposition

P1. Cultural resistance and inadequate technology significantly impede the shift from traditional HR to modern talent management.

P2. Strategic change management and integrated HR tech effectively reduce obstacles to modern talent management adoption.

P3. The transition from traditional HR to talent management is a staged process

focused on function re-evaluation, data utilization, and employee focus.

3.3 Target Population and Sampling

The sampling technique that has been employed is purposive sampling to select corporate managers across all tiers in Karachi's pharmaceutical sector, focusing on professionals directly engaged with HR practices. This research study aims at exploring the shift from traditional HR to modern talent management by conducting interviews and expert-led focus group discussions. Data collection continues until saturation is achieved, ensuring comprehensive insights. This study employs qualitative content analysis to systematically interpret communication content, uncovering themes and patterns in HR practices that would enable the systematic identification, description, and interpretation of the most important factors regarding the shift from traditional HR methods to a strategic approach focused on employees in modern talent management (Azam & Qureshi, 2021).

The target population for this investigation consists of corporate employees working on any managerial level i.e. front tier, middle tier, and top tier. This deliberate selection is founded on logical considerations. The logical explanation for choosing the corporate personnel over field workers because they are more familiar with and involved with HR procedures. They are more likely to be directly affected by and have a say in strategic changes to talent management systems, such as efforts for career advancement, performance management, and leadership development. Additionally, they are directly linked to the larger organizational policies and objectives that contemporary HR approaches seek to accomplish. Corporate employees from finance, marketing, and business development are direct 'customers' of HR services. Their experiences reveal the impact of HR practices, not just HR's self-perception, and HR transformation affects the entire organization, not just the HR department. Therefore, interviews with corporate workers has provided important insights on the effectiveness, difficulties, and practical implementation of contemporary talent management techniques, which are essential for comprehending how HR is changing in the current business environment.

3.4 Methodological Rigor and Data Validation

Interview Protocol: A semi-structured interview guide was created based on the research propositions and literature review. Research questions: (1) existing HR practices and limitations; (2) perceived barriers to change; (3) experiences with change initiatives; (4) proposed mitigation strategies. The guide is given in Appendix A.

Coding Framework: Content analysis was based on the four steps described by Morse and Field (comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, re-contextualizing). Two independent coders analyzed the transcripts. In the early days, inductively generated codes were put in categories. Appendix B presents the coding framework with hierarchical structure of themes.

Inter-Coder Reliability: Inter-coder agreement was calculated for 20% of the transcripts (n=7). The coefficient of agreement (kappa) of Cohen was 0.84. The discrepancies were addressed by consensus discussion.

Triangulation: The methodological triangulation was accomplished by: (1) using semi-structured interviews with 35 employees working in various departments; (2) conducting focus group discussions with three HR practitioners and one HR theory expert; (3) using member checking, where five participants would review and confirm their interpretation of the transcripts.

Verbatim transcription of the interviews was done using TurboScribe software and then translated to academic English by the researcher and a second reviewer checked 20% sampling of interviews for accuracy.

Peer Review: The first framework was submitted to two independent academic researchers who were not familiar with the study to critically review the framework. Their comments were used to revise the initial model to the final, parsimonious model.

Raw Data Availability: Anonymized transcripts and the full coding structure can be obtained by the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

This rigorous research process was then re-contextualized through a process-review conducted by a panel of three experts, two qualitative research specialists and one HR practitioner from the industry. These experts reviewed the entire research process, evaluating each step. This expert review was essential due to the subjective nature of the data, which precluded the application of statistical formulas and automated analysis. Consequently, human judgment was required to assess the methodological correctness of the research process. The transcriptions were randomly sampled to review the quality of the interviews, confirm their existence, and verify the accuracy of each transcription. Excerpts from these interviews were then selected for content analysis, enabling cross-analysis across the transcripts. The identified content was subsequently synthesized and further categorized. This process facilitated the development of a tentative framework, providing a preliminary overview of the research. To gain a deeper understanding of this framework and its content, theorization was conducted, incorporating the researcher's intuitive understanding and the categorized data. Experts then reviewed the categorized data to validate the accuracy of the categorization within the research process.

4. DATA ANALYSES

This chapter contains analyses of data collected through interviews with professionals working in the pharmaceutical sector in Karachi. To gain a clear understanding of their profiles and experiences, we have divided the information into two steps. First, the backgrounds of the people interviewed (participants' profiles). Second, analyses of the content extracted from the responses through interviews. The responses received were somehow in Urdu and English, but were

then translated into English entirely.

Profile analyses are carried out to understand the diversity and pool of cases in this research study. The dataset comprises 35 employees from five different departments, i.e. Finance, Marketing, Business Development, Administration, supply chain. Information regarding gender, designation, qualification, years of experience, and department was extracted from the interview transcription.

It has been observed that the interview sample consisted of 68.6% male and 31.4% female, reflecting a relatively strong female representation compared to Pakistan's national labor force composition, where women constitute approximately 23.18% and men 76.82% of the workforce as of 2024 (United Nations [UN], 2024). For the purpose of easing up the understanding of the nature of work and hierarchy of levels, High-level roles like Business Manager and CFO focus on strategic leadership and stakeholder engagement, whereas the mid-level roles such as Manager Reporting and Compliance have been seen emphasizing n operational execution and regulatory compliance. The basic cross-tabulation of gender and qualification levels has revealed that males are more likely to pursue professional certifications in the industry, while females are underrepresented, reflecting broader gender disparities in access to advanced education and career advancement opportunities discussed in the Pakistani context.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Interview Participants (N=35)

No	Gender	Designation	Qualification	Experience (Years)	Department
1)	Female	Executive Assistant To CEO	B.Com (Graduation)	8	Admin
2)	Male	Senior Manager FP&A	ACA	4	Finance
3)	Male	Business Development Manager	Pharm D, MBA	5 ½	New Product Development
4)	Male	Marketing Manager	MBA	4 ½	Marketing
5)	Male	Associate Director Marketing Sales	Graduation	16	Marketing
6)	Male	Senior Manager FP&A	MBA, ACCA	4 ½	Finance
7)	Female	Finance Director	ACCA	12	Finance And Supply Chain

8)	Male	Director Finance	ICMA	8	Finance And Hr
9)	Male	Financial Controller And Company Secretary	ACA, ACCA	7 ½	Finance
10)	Male	Financial Controller	MBA	12	Finance And Treasury
11)	Male	Business Manager	Graduation	20	Business Development
12)	Female	Manager Business Development	Pharm D, MBA	11	Business Development
13)	Female	Marketing Lead	MBA	11	Marketing
14)	Female	Manager FP&A	MBA	6	Finance
15)	Female	Therapeutic Area Lead	MBA	4 ½	Marketing
16)	Female	Cluster Lead Business Development	Pharm D, MBA	14	Business Development
17)	Male	CFO And Finance Director	MBA	18	Finance
18)	Male	Manager Reporting And Compliance	ACA	4	Finance
19)	Male	Finance Governance Manager	ACA, ACCA, MBA	2.5	Finance Governance
20)	Female	Assistant Manager Finance	CA Finalist	8 months	Finance
21)	Male	Senior Manager FP&A	ACCA, MSc Accounting And Finance	11	Finance
22)	Male	Manager FP&A	ACA, Ma Economics	4.25	Finance
23)	Male	CEO	Graduation	25	Marketing
24)	Male	Marketing Manager	MBA	12	Marketing
25)	Female	Regulatory Senior	Pharm D	4	Regulatory Affair

26)	Female	Warehouse Executive	Pharm D	4	Raw Material Operations
27)	Male	Regional Sales Manager	BSc Microbiology	24	Sales And Marketing
28)	Male	Field Manager	Pharm D	5	Sales And Marketing
29)	Male	Continuous Improvement Manager	MBA	9	Supply Chain
30)	Male	Area Sales Manager	Pharm D	8	Sales And Marketing
31)	Female	Marketing Manager	MBA	10	Marketing
32)	Female	Finance Partner	ACA	6	Finance
33)	Male	Sales Manager	Pharm D	4	Sales And Marketing
34)	Male	Head Of FP&A	MBA	15	Finance
35)	Male	Finance Partner	ACA	4	Finance

Table 1 Note: N = 35. Management level classification: Front (0-5 years' experience or entry level jobs); Middle (4-12 years' experience with managerial responsibility); Senior (11-24 years' experience with strategic orientation); Top (12-25 years' experience with decision making authority); Company type classification: MNC (Multinational Corporation); Local (Pakistani owned pharmaceutical company).

Data collection and content analysis proceeded iteratively. Until 25 interviews (n=25), 15 distinct themes had been identified. Interviews 26 through 30 confirmed all existing themes without introducing new or emerging concepts. Three consecutive interviews (33, 34, and 35) yielded no new themes and highlighted repetition of same concepts. Therefore, saturation was determined to have been achieved at n=35, and data collection was stopped. (Morse J. &, 1996).

4.1 Content Analyses

Morse and Field's four phases, i.e., comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and re-contextualizing, are useful for organizing the analysis of qualitative data.

4.1.1 Comprehending

Interviews were conducted as a first step and subsequently transcribed by the researcher to ensuring accuracy. These transcripts then underwent a rigorous iterative process that involved repeated readings to identify and refine the main ideas and areas highlighted by the cases. Following this, a sifting and coding procedure was implemented as this process includes tagging the relevant labels to

identify key features in the data, wherein specific segments within each case's answers were underlined (Daymon and Holloway .2002)

The identified key areas were systematically clubbed, and then further sub-clubbing was conducted to consolidate overarching and overlapping areas for refining and condensing the data. This process aimed to achieve a clear picture of the data as well as highlight cases' perspectives into a set of specific, well-defined key areas, facilitating a focused and coherent analysis."

4.1.2 Synthesizing

After systematic coding of interview transcripts and synthesis of the coded text, the thematic areas were identified and clubbed together through an iterative approach of 'sub-clubbing' and 'clubbing'. This painstaking process allowed to sharply clarify the diversity of case perspectives in well-defined categories, a prerequisite for a focused and coherent analysis. The content was analyzed using descriptive analysis, which indicated a significant mismatch between the current HR practice and the desired HR talent management. The results compiled from employees from both local and multinational pharmaceutical companies in Karachi have been used to identify and pinpoint the barriers for transformation and mitigation strategies.

4.1.3 Theorizing

The theoretical framework emerged from initially synthesizing the transcripts from the interviews, according to Morse and Field (1996) who define theorizing as the process of formulating malleable theoretical schemes until the “best fit” is reached, and identified some perceived barriers that negatively affect employee engagement, which may be mitigated by transformational leadership and/or mitigation strategies. This model suggests that the positive energy generated by these buffer factors contributes to involvement in transformation and, thus, to effective modern HR practices. To validate and further refine this preliminary model, focus group discussions with HR panel experts were used to triangulate findings, to assess the impacts of HR leadership and to identify mediating variables. Barriers are operationalized as subjective perceptions of the barriers in cases explained by using an interpretive methodology, and counter-strategies and transformational leadership are hypothesized to act as a moderation between the negative effect of barriers and the positive performance of the cases. The validity of the framework was checked by focus groups to assess the role of moderating factors, and to guarantee strong and theoretically grounded final development of the framework.

The table 2 given below presents 15 key HR transformation themes, each discussed by multiple participants as reflected in the total number of frequencies.

Table 2: Summary of Identified Content

Current HR Practices	Key Areas	Frequency	Interview number
1.	Focus on traditional and outdated HR practices	25	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12,13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34,35
<i>Challenges of HR Transformation</i>			
1	Lack of Employee Development and Talent Management	18	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 24, 26, 29, 31, 34,35
2	Resistance to change	11	1,2,4,5,7,9,12,14,16,18,35
3	Inefficient Processes and Lack of Technology	11	19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 31, 33
4	Poor Communication and Lack of Feedback	13	2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 20, 23, 25, 29, 30, 31,35
5	Lack of Strategic Focus, Vision, and Long-Term Planning	13	1, 2, 3, 4, 5,6, 8,9, 19, 20, 21, 22,35
6	Lack of Employee Engagement and Well-being	9	1, 2, 4, 6, 11, 18, 24, 30, 31
7	HR Empowerment and Organizational Impact	9	11, 19, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31,35
8	Fairness and Recognition in Compensation	3	22, 30, 31
9	Employee Rights and organizational culture	7	18, 24, 29, 30, 31, 27, 28
10	Need for Adaptability and Agility	16	1, 3, 7, 9,12,13,15,16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 24, 31, 32,35
11	Focus on Future Challenges and Opportunities	10	2, 6, 9, 10, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 32
12	Administrative Efficiency vs. Strategic Initiatives	6	13, 14, 18, 19, 22, 30
13	Proactive Talent Management and Future Needs	11	14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 24, 26, 29, 31, 34,35
14	Adaptability in HR Practices and Skill Development	8	15, 16, 17, 20, 24, 29, 31, 34

The first version of the framework as discussed below is extracted solely from the excerpts of initial interviews done from the candidates, that has represented and built up an initial level of understanding of the key areas identified in this research. The second version of the framework is directly connected as it has gone through refined iteration, where the initial first framework served as the basis and ground for further exploration and further synthesis process.

Perceived Barriers to HR transformation

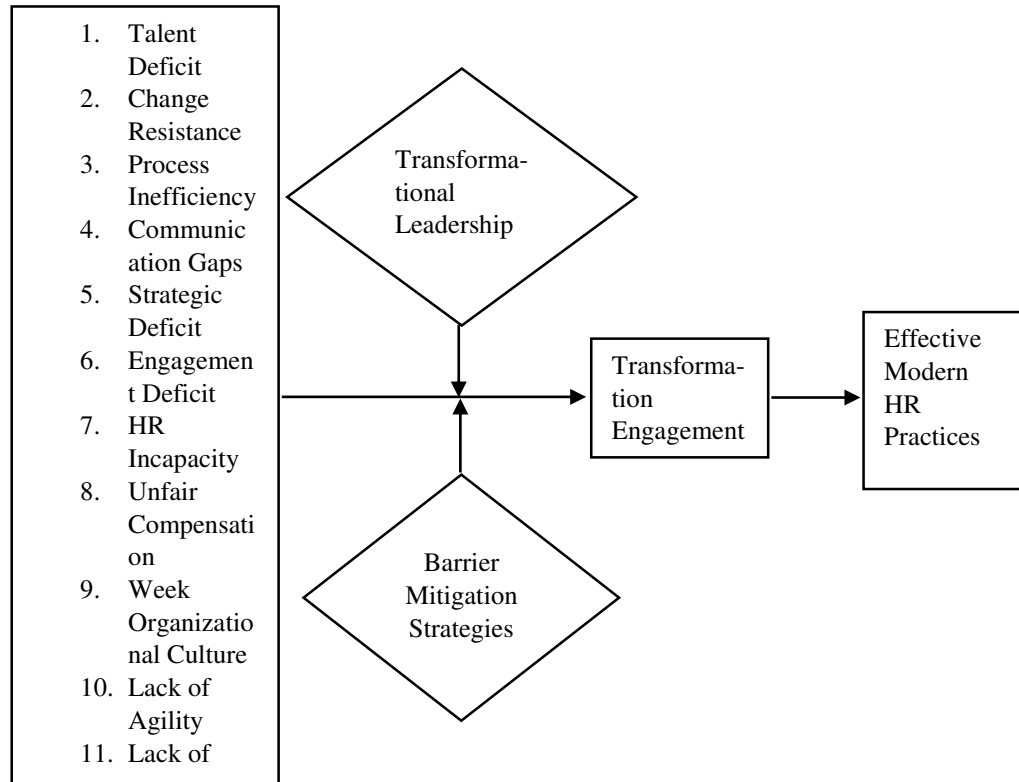


Figure 1: First version of framework

4.1.3.1 Focus group discussion

For further refinement, a focus group discussion was conducted consisting of three HR practitioners and one HR theory expert through the platform of WhatsApp® groups to gather in-depth insights and valuable opinions regarding the initial versions of the framework. Using an initial framework as the base for further exploration, the discussion panel further explored and refined key themes in depth and suggested further broader categories such as transformation barriers, leadership's role, and mitigation strategies that gave a refined picture of the research. This refinement process not only facilitated the collection of rich data but also allowed the researcher to refine their understanding and establish a clear roadmap for developing the final framework.

The focus group discussion critically explored the key areas, further interpreted them, validated the concepts, and clubbed them at the end, which helped in strengthening and deepening the initial framework's insights and bringing it to a final refined, clear picture. This entire process helped in creating a robust framework with clear conceptualization and understanding.

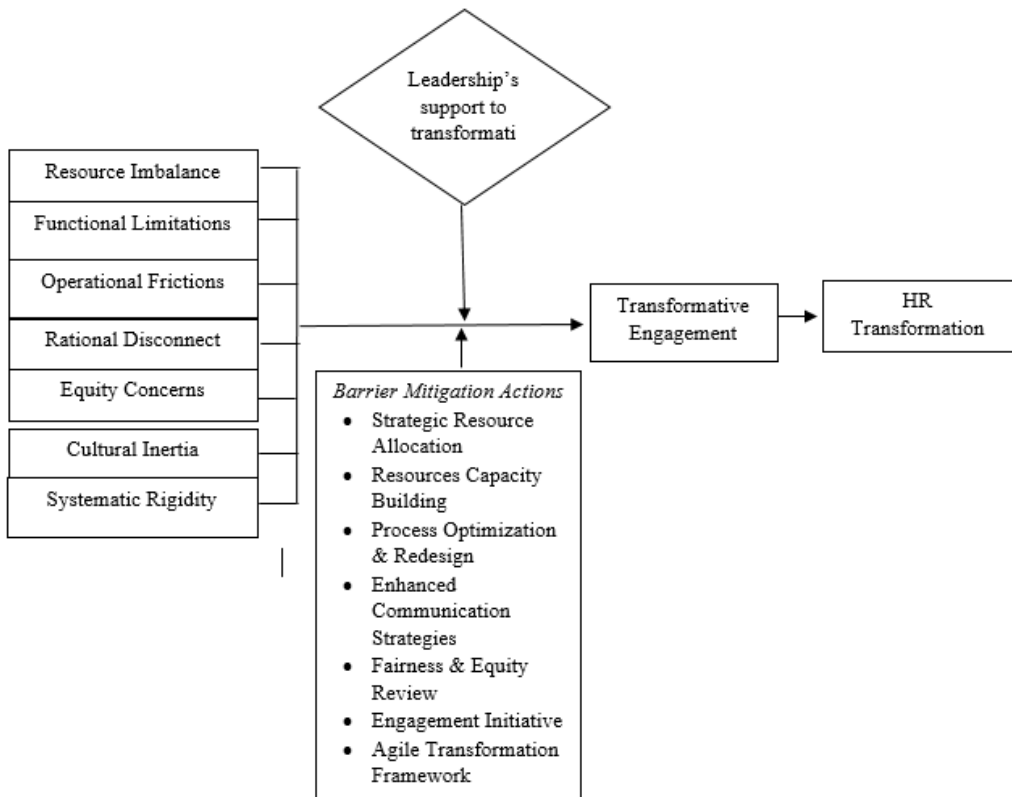


Figure 2: Second version of theorized model

A. Extracted concepts from focus group discussion

- i. Resource Imbalance: A gap between the necessary resources and the available ones (talent deficit, strategic deficit).
- ii. Operational Friction: Barriers in the way of the operations of organizations (process inefficiency, administrative incapacity, reactive actions).
- iii. Social Dissonance: Lack of interpersonal and organizational communication, lack of engagement
- iv. Systemic Rigidity: Problems in responding to internal/external pressures (change resistance, lack of agility, lack of future focus).
- v. Equity Concerns: Issues of fairness and justice in employee rewards (unfair compensation).
- vi. Temporal Constraint: Concentrate on current or frequent problems (short-term perspective).

vii. Cultural Inertia: Culture that is inhibiting adaptation or progress.

viii. HR incapacity: Not having the skills and/or resources needed in particular organizational functions (Functional Limitation).

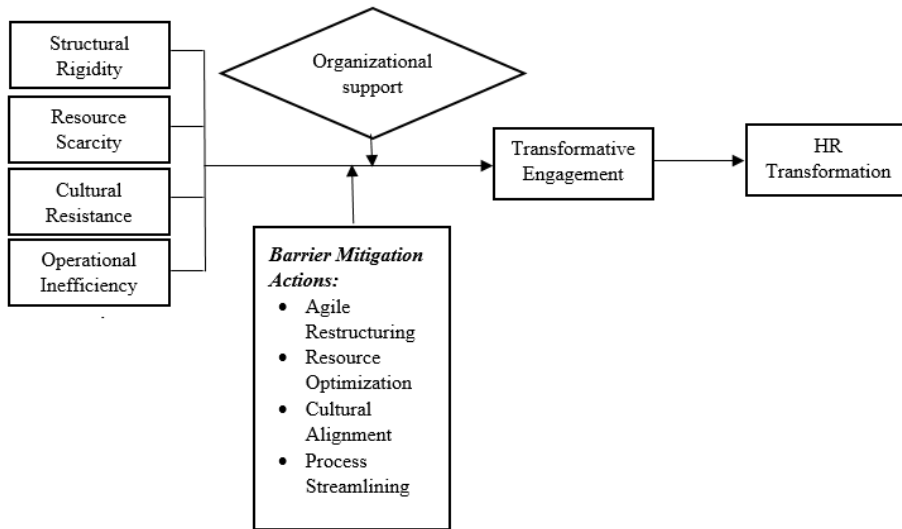


Figure 3: Final and parsimonious framework

The final framework suggests that strong organizational support is crucial for enabling transformative engagement. However, structural rigidity, resource scarcity, cultural resistance, and operational inefficiency can hamper this engagement. By strategically implementing agile restructuring, resource optimization, cultural alignment, and process streamlining, organizations can mitigate these barriers, foster greater Transformative Engagement, and ultimately achieve successful HR Transformation. This model offers a concise and integrated view of the key factors and actions involved in evolving the HR function. While the initial framework provided valuable insights about the potential barriers, the final framework achieves greater parsimony by explaining the phenomenon of HR Transformation with more strategic abstract with limited constructs. This not only makes the model more elegant, simpler and easier to understand but also helpful in applying conceptually with a more powerful and insightful understanding of the core dynamics involved in achieving HR Transformation.

4.1.4 Re-contextualizing

The researcher applied a detailed process, starting with expert-validated interview protocols and informed consent obtained from all 35 cases, then using AI to transcribe the interviews with TurboScribe. The content analysis was carried out using a rigorous technique as proposed by Morse and Field (1996) for a deep understanding of the narratives, and then followed a systematic synthesis by sifting, sorting, and clubbing activities, which identified important areas like barriers to HR

transformation and strategic HR problems. The theorizing process yielded a provisional model that depicts the interactions between the barriers perceived, the mediating variables, and transformation engagement. This process was then re-contextualized in a panel review process made up of two qualitative research specialists and one HR practitioner, who each evaluated each step because of the subjective nature of the data that would require human judgment. The experts randomly sampled transcriptions to ensure quality and presence of interviews and accuracy, and then chose passages to be analyzed across different experts and to validate content. This expert review confirmed the accuracy of the categorization in the research process, with the researcher's intuitive understanding added to the depth of interpretation of the framework.

4.2 Findings

Comparative findings of MNC and Local perspectives: Both groups identified similar barriers but the responses of local company employees were on a more severe level including “resource scarcity” and cultural resistance (e.g., “Seth culture”) while the MNC workers' responses were on a milder level including “global compliance standards” as a partial mitigator of the barriers. A minority of respondents indicated more advanced HR practices (such as from some of the MNCs), whereas the majority (n=31) indicated significant obstacles in their HR transformation, suggesting that the HR transformation is not complete throughout the sector.

4.3 Discussion

The results of the present study are seen in the light of the three theoretical frameworks introduced in the literature review. The three forms of institutional theory account for the four barriers identified: the cognitive, the normative, and the regulatory. Cultural Resistance was a dominant barrier, due to the deep-seated mindset people had in HR, as one participant said, “that would be the mindset, challenging the status quo [and] the biggest challenge would be the mindset” (Case 5). The normativization is carried through hierarchical structures of authority and the “Seth” culture of personally oriented favoritism, shown as the discovery that “the HR that is influenced by the owner... mostly it is not happening” (Case 28), where the “mostly” indicates the level of influence. The resource scarcity is due to the regulatory pillar, where they have minimal pressure to invest in modern HR infrastructure. The AMO Model illustrates the impact of these barriers at the level of the individual employee: Ability is affected by insufficient training (18 cases); Motivation is stunted by inequity in compensation and favoritism (13 cases); Opportunity is limited by lack of communication and lack of feedback mechanisms (13 cases). Finally yet importantly, Ulrich's HR Evolution Model places the targeted shift in HR's role between the “Administrative Expert” (Wave 1) and the “Strategic Partner” (Wave 3) positions. The results, however, go beyond what has been described in Ulrich's model, showing that in the context of a developing economy, this shift does not linearly take place, but involves a simultaneous mitigation of all four barriers, as one participant stated: “The acceptance is the biggest issue because the mindset has never been changed” (Case 3). This suggests

that cognitive-cultural barriers can be more significant than technological or process barriers. These three theoretical lenses, when combined, offer a complete picture of the barriers to change, their negative impacts on employees, and what makes for successful transformation in the pharmaceutical industry in Pakistan.

The three theories are of varying levels as they are operating at different levels and how they are aligned with our study. According to Institutional Theory, barriers (external/environmental) are a result of and the reason for their survival. These barriers have a negative impact on employee outcomes (individual level) and the AMO model explains why. Ulrich's model gives the direction of change (organizational level) a normative direction. When taken together, they provide a multi-level explanation: that Institutional pressures erect barriers to employees' Ability, Motivation, and Opportunity, and that Ulrich's model outlines the necessary shift from Administrative Expert to Strategic Partner in order to overcome them.

This research study is aligned with its findings and the evidence from interviews that directly support the formulated research propositions. The first proposition clearly highlighted findings that revealed outdated HR practices, resistance to change, inefficient processes, poor communication, and insufficient HR empowerment as significant contributors to the current HR crisis, and after that, and then confirmed the impact of structural rigidity on the entire transformation process. Furthermore, the second proposition found a strong connection between the critical role of HR empowerment, proactive business environments, technological integration, and employee development as effective counter-strategies to mitigate the barriers in real time and practically validate the suggested agile restructuring and cultural alignment strategies for the transformation process. The third proposition is based on exploration of HR transformation in pharmaceutical companies, which also aligns with the research objectives, as it has highlighted resource constraints, adaptability issues, and leadership's lack of vision as key challenges in the transformation process of modernizing talent management.

This research study is well aligned with several sustainable development goals (SDGs) on the various grounds by addressing and detecting crucial aspects of organizational development, promoting sustainable practices and promoting human well-being at bigger level. At first, it has been aligned to SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth by promoting effective HR transformation, which focuses on productive employment, skill development, and sustainable enterprise growth. By focusing on employee engagement, fair compensation, and improved working conditions in an organization, the findings of this study also supports the idea of creation of inclusive and healthy workplaces. Not only this that the research study has addressed resource gaps and operational inefficiencies but it has also contributed towards SDG 9 Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure by suggesting for more resilient, powerful and sustainable industrialization through optimized and efficient processes along with an adaptable environment in the organizations. The study emphasized on the factor of Cultural Alignment which aligns with SDG 16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions by promoting transparency, equity, diversity and effective governance systems and processes within organizations.

5. CONCLUSION

Four major key barriers that have caused hindrance in the process of transformation from traditional HR practices to modern talent management have been identified in this research study, which primarily include Structural Rigidity, Resource Scarcity, Cultural Resistance, and Operational Inefficiency that specifically hinder the adoption of modern HR practices in the pharmaceutical sector of Karachi.

Furthermore, the study has proposed some powerful barrier mitigation strategies that primarily include Agile Restructuring, Resource Optimization, Cultural Alignment, and Process Streamlining. These strategies not only provide a clear roadmap for organizations to navigate through the complexities of the transformation process of HR modernization but also take into account and respect cultural nuances within the organization.

5.1 Research Limitations

The study consists of several limitations, such as findings of this research are not generalizable to other sectors, being specific to Karachi's pharmaceutical sector. Whereas the data collection via telephonic interviews potentially limited responses depth and will require further investigation and exploration. The sample size of 35 might not be able to capture diverse HR practices across all over Pakistan, and the researcher bias and participant self-reporting bias could influence overall data authenticity. Furthermore, time and resource constraints were another limitation that restricted the research for the follow-up interviews that could have provided much more in-depth information. The cross-sectional design of the study, as explained, has also prevented the assessment of long-term HR transformational trends over the period of time, which made the findings culturally and contextually specific, as the data was taken at one specific point in time and not collected over the different periods.

5.2 Theoretical Contribution

This research study, by identifying unique cultural barriers in the context of developing economies like Pakistan, has contributed to developing and framing HR transformation theories. Not only this, but It has also suggested a new perspective to talent management literature with insights from various organizational settings and taking into account various perspectives and contexts that provide a culturally adaptive framework for HR modernization from the ground level. Furthermore, the study also suggested practical grounds for modifying global HR theories and strengthening the institutional theory by examining resistance to HR change in terms of traditional contexts.

5.3 Practical Efficacy

The research study provided practical guidance for many organizations, particularly in the context of the Pakistani pharmaceutical sector and similar emerging markets, to modernize HR processes and practices by addressing the structural and cultural

barriers discussed in this research. It also suggested various practical, actionable strategies such as agile restructuring, resource optimization, and cultural alignment, to not only facilitate a smoother HR transformation process but also enhance overall employee engagement and productivity at a higher level at organizational level as a whole.

5.4 Future Research Directions

As it is suggested, future research studies should validate the refined framework by quantifying the results through authentic statistical analysis, taking into account a much larger sample size. Other qualitative studies should also be done along with measurement metrics to understand various other factors that shape employees' attitudes towards HR transformation over the period of employment. Furthermore, longitudinal studies should also be conducted to track the effectiveness of modern HR practices over the period of time throughout the organization and identify evolving challenges during this process and after this process by practically assessing and gauging long-term outcomes like employee retention and productivity.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

Opening Remarks

Good morning sir/madam. My name is Huma Hanif and I'm a researcher exploring challenges of transformation from traditional HR practices to talent management in pharmaceutical sector of Karachi. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

Informed consent

We appreciate your participation in this voluntary interview. No identifying information will be included in the final report, and all of your answers will be kept private. For your convenience, the interview will be audio recorded. Do you have any questions before we start, and are you okay with this interview being recorded?

Interview Questions

1. What are some shortcomings of traditional HR practices in general and what are some shortcomings of traditional HR practices in your organization if any?
2. How can talent management benefit an organization?
3. What are the challenges of transformation of traditional HR to Talent Management, and how to deal with such challenges?

Conclusion

Thank You again for your precious and valuable time with us. Your participation is crucial to furthering our understanding of the subject and will add significant dimension to the data. We appreciate your taking part in this study and assure you that any information you provide will be treated with utmost confidentiality and decency. Your input will help shape the results and provide related insights that would contribute to the field.