

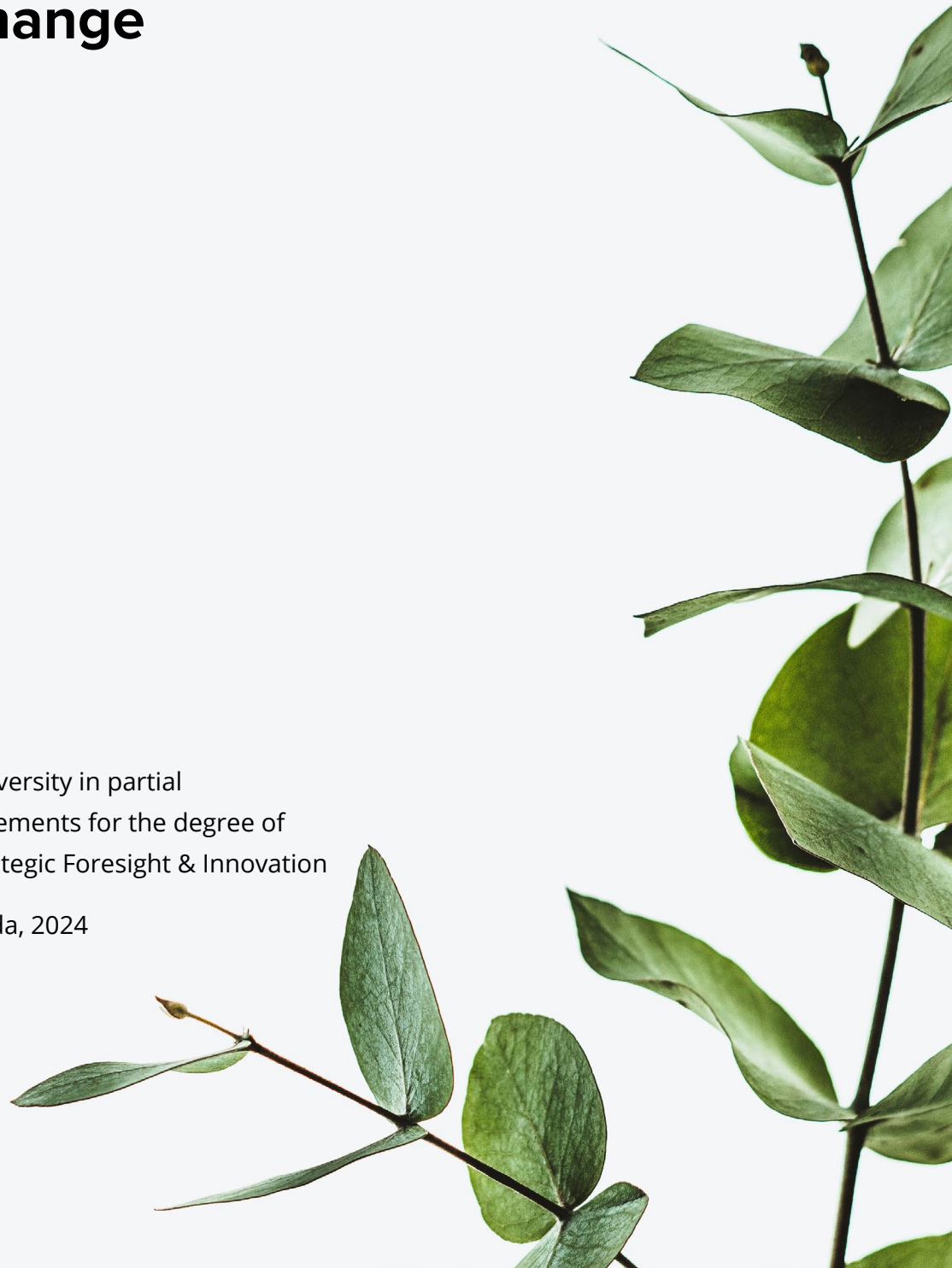
HR Transformation in the Ontario University Sector

Approaches, Barriers, and Methods to Sustain Change

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Abstract

Organizational transformation is a complex but often unavoidable process. With many Human Resources (HR) functions attempting to transition from being primarily administrative towards becoming strategic organizational partners, challenges and barriers inevitably arise. Using HR departments within Ontario universities as a case study, this research investigates common drivers for transformation, typical challenges, and strategies to sustain change. The qualitative data, gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews, highlights the potential of utilizing human-centred design (HCD) to facilitate HR transformations and implement the associated change management tactics. Findings suggest that some HR departments in Ontario universities currently incorporate HCD elements in their transformations (though often unintentionally) and that the university environment, with its collaborative nature, is well-suited for HCD approaches. This research concludes that a more intentional application of HCD practices can benefit HR transformation in Ontario universities and promote sustained change that centres the needs of employees.



Acknowledgements

I extend my deepest gratitude to the research participants who generously shared their time, experiences, and valuable insights. It was your candour, reflecting on successes and challenges alike, that has given depth and meaning to this research study. I hope the findings will offer guidance and support to others navigating their own HR transformations.

Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Nabil Harfoush, for your thoughtful guidance throughout this final chapter of my graduate degree. To my program cohort, it's been a joy and a thrill learning alongside you. Finally to my family and friends: Thank you a million times over for your patience and support.

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Introduction

Since its initial inception, the Human Resources (HR) function has significantly changed. Traditionally designed to serve an administrative purpose, HR now has the potential to become a strategic force within organizations. While the transition towards modernization is complex and fraught with barriers, it presents an exciting opportunity to reimagine HR's role. This research examines how human-centred design (HCD) can enable transformation within Ontario universities' HR departments. By prioritizing the needs and experiences of faculty and staff, HCD offers an approach that can support organizations in overcoming challenges while also enabling them to create truly employee-centric HR functions.

Background

What is Human Resources?

The history of North American HR can be traced to the mid-1880s when it originated as an organizational function that focused on personnel management and industrial relations (Kaufman, 2008). Throughout much of the 20th century, HR's role was limited to establishing the terms and conditions of work, ensuring regulatory compliance, and delivering core HR services such as payroll, pension and benefits administration, attendance tracking, and recruitment (Ulrich, 2012). However, beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, HR began to assume a new strategic purpose, aiming to add more value to organizations (Rotich, 2015). Rather than serve a solely administrative and compliance-based function, HR departments sought to enable their organizations' strategic vision and assume responsibility for factors driving their workforce's success. Yet this shift in purpose has not occurred ubiquitously across all industries and some HR functions find themselves to be outdated.

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In response, many of these departments are currently undergoing (or have recently undergone) significant transformation to better serve the needs of their organization and employees.

Why Ontario Universities?

Unlike a business that primarily focuses on profit, a university's core mission includes teaching, research, and knowledge dissemination (Council of Ontario Universities, 2022). The university environment is unique in that it is characterized by academic freedom and complex governance structures, and on campus there are often multiple union groups representing instructors and staff. There are 23 publicly assisted universities in Ontario (Figure 1). Each of these institutions undoubtedly face distinctive challenges, but as entities operating within the same broader system, they experience similar macro-environmental influences and pressures.

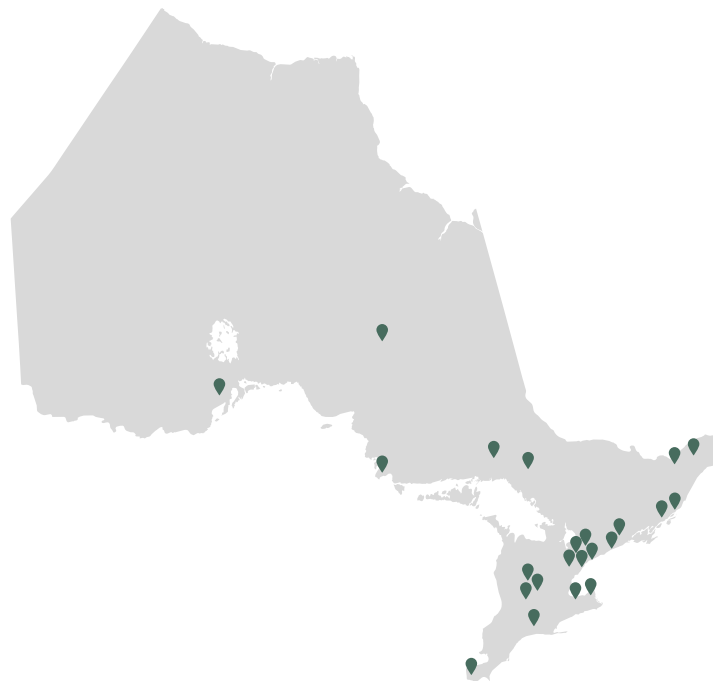


Figure 1. Map of Ontario with pins indicating locations of universities.

Examples of external forces currently impacting Ontario universities include:

- Provincially mandated tuition freezes and reductions in public funding.
- Changes to teaching and learning, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. virtual course delivery).
- Calls for action demanding Truth and Reconciliation for Indigenous Peoples, and commitments to dismantle systemic racism through Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).
- Widespread mental health crisis, impacting students and employees.
- Economic volatility and high cost of living, potentially leading to labour unrest.
- Technological disruption and Artificial Intelligence.

To meet student needs, modernize, positively contribute to communities, and identify financial efficiencies, Ontario universities are compelled to respond to these external factors—and as core business functions, so must the universities' HR departments. The pressures and complexities of macro-environmental forces paired with the HR industry's significant evolution over the last several decades, has resulted in exponential change for Ontario universities' HR departments. The level of change is even more significant for HR functions that have not kept pace with modern standards and instead struggle with inefficient operating models, archaic technology, and outdated policies and processes. Subsequently, many of these departments are undergoing significant transformation.

Context

Why Should an Organization Transform?

To maintain competitiveness and relevance in their respective industries, all organizations must continuously adapt to meet their customers' evolving needs. This can be achieved by establishing a sustainable business model that consistently assesses and responds to key trends, market dynamics, macroeconomic factors, and industry forces (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). If an organization (or a unit/function within an organization) neglects to steadily evolve, it risks becoming outdated and in some cases will be prompted to undergo a more drastic overhaul instead of adopting ongoing incremental changes. In addition, Ellermann et al. (2017) suggest that the extensive volume and variety of marketplace triggers are forcing organizations to change rapidly and continuously. Mortell & Hansen-Turton (2014) further support this point by stating that "the current reality is that all organizations face demands for constant change to meet ever-changing needs and industry trends" (p. 74). Consequently, the ability to manage transformation is a useful core organizational capability (Ellermann et al., 2017) that will ensure long-term relevance and growth.

What is HR Transformation?

HR, a fundamental unit within most sizable North American enterprises (Kaufman, 2008), is not exempt from market changes and as organizations modernize, their HR departments must advance correspondingly. Some HR functions may evolve gradually but many will undergo more significant change, particularly if they have become outdated in contrast to the modern HR industry. Madsen & Slåtten (2022) describe HR transformation (HRT) as a popular management concept among organizations and consultants globally, and suggest that it has been presented as a strategy for transforming the traditional personnel function into a more business-oriented, cost-effective, and value-adding entity.

Many HR departments aspire to embrace this change by modernizing their operating model, upgrading their technology, and becoming trusted advisors and coaches (Gartner, n.d.).

HRT can be defined as a program or initiative that aims to redesign the HR function to better support the organization's business strategy and enhance the employee experience.

Transformation will ideally result in increased organizational effectiveness, resilience, and sustainability—factors that enable HR to better meet the needs of a modern business (Blumenfeld et al., 2022).

Though the concept of HRT has been recognized since the 1990s (Beer, 1997; Schuler, 1990), acceleration from the COVID-19 pandemic and factors such as heightened geopolitical risks, hybrid working models, and the rise of millennial workforces (Durth et al., 2022) are forcing HR functions to reassess their value proposition and modernize to keep pace with the industry. Despite being somewhat behind, many HR departments in Ontario universities are currently undergoing significant transformations with aspirations of advancing institutional strategic priorities and establishing their organizations as employee-centric, progressive, top employers.

What is Human-Centred Design?

HCD is a problem-solving methodology that prioritizes and designs for human needs, capabilities, and behaviours (Norman, 2013). Its underlying principles include empathy, inclusion, collaboration, iteration, and innovation. Using an HCD approach enables designers to apply knowledge about human beings and their environmental interactions to the design of products and services (Van Der Bijl-Brouwer & Dorst, 2017). HCD is both a collection of methodologies and a mindset used to approach problem-solving. Popularized by the British Design Council, Figure 2 displays the Double Diamond, an example of how to implement HCD through a design thinking process.

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The Double Diamond process incorporates divergent and convergent thinking to guide practitioners in (ideally) reaching a human-centred solution.

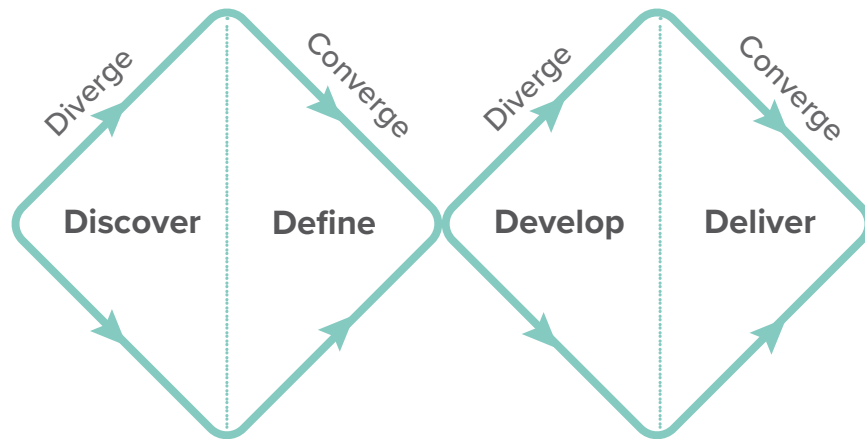


Figure 2. The Double Diamond Diagram. Adapted from “Design Council”, by Design Council, n.d. (www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-resources/the-double-diamond).

There are many possible HCD methods and approaches, but in this research paper HCD can be understood to encompass the following connected methodologies or practices: Design thinking, service design, ethnography, and co-design.

Since gaining popularity in the mid-2000s–2010s, partially through the success of design agency IDEO and educational institutions such as the Stanford d.School (Ackermann, 2023), HCD has been increasingly recognized as an innovative approach for tackling business challenges. Despite the necessary questioning and critique that has surfaced since HCD and the associated methodologies gained popularity (99U, 2018; Ackermann, 2023; Costanza-Chock, 2020; Lutz, 2022), the core purpose of designing solutions for what humans *actually* need is an important element in implementing organizational change.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to investigate how HCD methodologies and practices can be used to enable transformation in Ontario universities' HR departments. Beginning by establishing an understanding of the newly emerging role that HR aims to fill in an organization, research questions explored the transformation initiatives, drivers, employee needs, and barriers faced by these institutions. Despite its global popularity, HRT is generally an under-researched area with much of the discourse dominated by well-known management consulting firms and a few select individual experts (Madsen & Slåtten, 2022). There is even less information available on the use of HCD to enable HRT. The knowledge obtained through this research will fill a significant gap in existing literature and offer recommendations and solutions for departments undergoing transformation. The research outcomes are not only significant to HR departments in Ontario universities, but will ideally have broader implications for any public or private sector organization embarking on transformation.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question

How might human-centred design support or enable transformation in Ontario universities' HR departments?

Secondary Research Questions

- In what areas are Ontario universities' HR departments focusing their transformation efforts? What are they trying to achieve? What are the transformation drivers?
- How do Ontario universities' HR departments gain an understanding of internal and external stakeholder needs?
- What are the barriers preventing Ontario universities' HR departments from achieving their transformations?

Methodology

The data required for this study was collected through a blend of primary and secondary research. Given the gap in existing secondary research specific to the overlap of HRT and HCD, the project leaned heavily on primary research data. This qualitative study was designed using elements of grounded theory methodology and specifically relied on data collected through semi-structured interviews. The use of human participants was critical as the knowledge and experiences shared by individual experts enabled a deep and holistic understanding of the problem space and possible intervention points.

Phase 1: Literature Review

The literature review explored key topics including the history and future of HR, HRT across industries, HRT within universities, macro-environmental factors impacting Ontario universities, unique characteristics of universities, business transformation, and the application of HCD within organizations. The most significant gap in existing literature was an absence of knowledge on HRT within post-secondary institutions, with virtually no available information on HRT within Ontario universities. Further missing is the specific exploration of how HCD may be used to enable HRT.

The available research and literature on HRT explores rationale, process, direction, strategy, digitization, and operating model recommendations. A large percentage of HR transformation literature has been produced by management consulting firms, and thought leaders within the HR space (e.g. Dave Ulrich and Josh Bersin) regularly contribute to HR and HRT-related research setting the tone for HR progress. Lastly, there is a small amount of research within academic journals on the subject of HRT which explores why and how to transform HR to meet the future needs of organizations and employees.

Phase 2: Framing the System

Actors Map

Before beginning the interview process, an Actors Map (full version in Appendix A) was developed to both identify key participants and map their relationships within the broader system of transformation in Ontario universities' HR departments. An Actors Map enables the identification and representation of key participants within the broader system, which may include organizations, individuals, and both human and non-human agents (Jones & van Ael, 2022).

The initial draft of the Actors Map was based on the literature review, which revealed the significant stakeholders within the system. Developing the first iteration of this tool early in the research process informed the qualitative sample requirements. Revisiting the map after the primary data had been synthesized and analyzed ensured that the content and relationships could be updated where necessary to reflect on the new knowledge gathered through the semi-structured interviews. Specific segments of the Actors Map are included within the research analysis to highlight the stakeholders and relationships relevant to *why* Ontario universities' HR departments need to transform. Developing an understanding of who is impacted by HRT facilitates a deeper analysis of the problem space and enables more effective solution development.

Causal Layered Analysis

The Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), available in Appendix B, is a framework that can be used to identify and explore the complex issues associated with a specific research topic. Typically implemented in foresight practices to aid in scenario development, the CLA is also a standalone methodology that helps to understand and gather different perspectives on an issue (Inayatullah, 2019).

The CLA is depicted as an iceberg with four layers:

1. **Litany:** Events and trends, visible at the top of the iceberg.
2. **Structures and systems:** Underlying social, technical, economic, environmental, and political factors.
3. **Worldviews and values:** Discourse and assumptions behind the research question or problem space.
4. **Myths and metaphors:** Unconscious narratives or beliefs, grounding the iceberg.

Creating a CLA for transformation in Ontario universities' HR departments was a valuable sensemaking activity. The first version was drafted in advance of interviews, but then later revisited with some participants to validate and refine the content. This tool enabled a deeper understanding of the problem space and contributed to solution development.

Phase 3: Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected to gather primary data for this research study. In advance of conducting these in-depth, one-to-one, confidential interviews, the primary and secondary research questions were referred to as a starting point to develop objectives and a discussion guide for the conversation. The consistent set of questions that were posed to each participant is available in Appendix C.

17 participants were interviewed for this study, with each being either a current or former HR staff member employed by one of the universities in Ontario. Recruitment efforts focused on sourcing participants from a variety of institutions across the province. Essential criteria for inclusion was that each individual was either currently working on an HR transformation project at one of the Ontario universities, or had done so within the last five years.

Geographic Scope

Limiting the research study to a single province ensured that the institutions all follow policy set by the Government of Ontario's Ministry of Colleges and Universities, are all influenced by the provincial government, and as was the case in this research, all experience comparable funding barriers. Establishing strict consistency in control parameters was beneficial as it set boundaries on the broader system, leading to a more specific and effective analysis.

Phase 4: Data Synthesis and Analysis

Qualitative Coding and Affinity Mapping

Following data collection, interview transcripts underwent comprehensive synthesis and analysis. Beginning with qualitative coding, which involved identifying keywords and phrases to establish themes, the data was then reassessed through an extensive affinity mapping activity. This process involved capturing research data on individual sticky notes and clustering (and repeatedly re-clustering) them to identify patterns and themes. Rather than sorting individual sticky notes into predefined categories, similar data is grouped so that tacit knowledge (or information that is buried in the transcript) can emerge as a research insight (Hanington & Martin, 2017). These sensemaking activities resulted in the generation of themes and insights based on the data gathered during the qualitative, semi-structured interviews.

Causal Loop Diagrams

Once the interview data had been analyzed, Causal Loop Diagrams (CLDs) were used to discern underlying dynamics within the broader system, how forces influence variables, and also to ensure consideration of possible intervention points. CLDs are useful sensemaking tools that identify cause-and-effect relationships and patterns, and illustrate stories using a systems thinking mindset. The CLDs were particularly useful in critically thinking about the barriers identified during the qualitative interviews. Diagrams have been included in the accompanying analysis to illustrate key characteristics of each barrier.

Phase 5: Knowledge Activation

The final research phase explores how to activate the knowledge gained through this study. After identifying why HR departments are transforming, their current practices in executing transformation, and the transformation barriers they must contend with, a series of recommendations are presented that can ideally be used by any department undergoing transformation. Although these recommendations were specifically developed for Ontario universities' HR departments, many of them will be transferable to a variety of organizations and use cases. Following the series of recommendations is a proposal for a pilot project that intentionally integrates HCD into HRT. In future, the findings gained from this research could potentially be presented in a conference or published in an academic journal article.

Analysis

Why Do HR Departments in Ontario Universities Need to Transform?

Participants identified the following drivers as the most common reasons prompting their HR departments to transform. To further the analysis of this rationale, each driver is accompanied by a visual device that displays the actors (or stakeholders) relevant to the research, and their relationships within the broader system. A complete view and detailed description of the Actors Map is available in Appendix A.

Fallen Behind HR Industry

The HR function has been evolving for decades across various industries. However, recent factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid work models, and social justice demands for DEI have increased the need for change in many organizations. The HR departments in Ontario universities are not only responding to these significant changes but are also pressured to transform because many have fallen significantly behind the contemporary HR industry.

“

Private sector was quicker to the gate on bringing HR to the strategic table... Now at my university, we're moving towards an HR that is engaged at a strategic level.

(Participant 13)

”

Participants frequently explained that their HR department was late to transform. It became clear that many HR functions in Ontario universities have not prioritized incremental updates or ongoing modernization and were (in some cases) operating like a 1980s administrative function, entrenched in obsolete practices.

Section 4 | Analysis

The consequence of lagging behind industry-wide HR practices, coupled with unavoidable societal pressures for change, has resulted in more radical HR transformations. In these cases, departments are not only attempting to catch up with the present but are also scrambling to prepare for the future. Participants cited both ongoing budget constraints and limited investment allocation to HR as possible rationale for their departments falling behind industry standards.

Rationale: Ongoing Budget Constraints in Postsecondary Education

Though lack of funding is indeed a present-day barrier that impedes Ontario universities' HR departments from executing much-needed transformations (more on this later), participants cited ongoing budget constraints as a cause for **why** HR functions have become outdated. Romard and Robinson (2023) support this rationale by explaining that “over the last three decades, no province in Canada has moved more aggressively, or more consistently, to cut public funding to universities” (p. 5) and that there has been a “dramatic reduction in funding to higher education in Ontario since the 1990s as a direct result of budget and policy decisions by the provincial government” (p. 67).

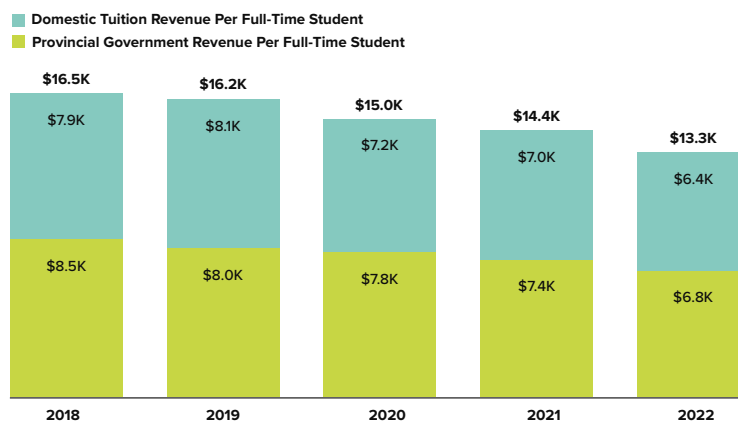


Figure 3. Real operating revenues (\$2020) of Ontario universities per full-time student. Adapted from “Back From the Brink: Restoring Public Funding to Ontario’s Universities,” by Romard, R. and Robinson, R., (November 2023).

As Ontario universities rely on public funds for a portion of their operating budgets, it is reasonable to deduce that the last three decades of provincial cuts will have impacted investment in HR. It is possible that underfunding may be further exacerbated by the perception that HR lacks strategic value. Overall, ongoing funding cuts and other financial challenges have contributed to delays in progression and modernization, thereby increasing the need for more drastic transformation.

Rationale: Limited Investment Allocated to HR

With teaching and research being the fundamental purposes of universities, it seems rational to discern that funding may not be prioritized for HR departments. Some participants suggested that because HR is a “back office” function, it may not be perceived to directly advance an institution’s education and innovation agenda. Hancock et al. (2022) explain “we’ve found that universities often do not continually improve HR processes in a way that allows them to advance and are typically further behind in this regard than large corporations” (Continually Investing in HR Services section, para. 1).

HR is also at odds with the primary “customers” of a university. First and foremost, universities serve students, who pay tuition to earn their degree. Yet HR’s customers (or clients), are the employees within the organization.

“ HR is that thing that is there, but it’s not necessarily part of the fabric of higher education. Higher education is about students, professors, teaching—not so much the initiatives coming through HR. ”

(Participant 4)

Section 4 | Analysis

This disconnect further exacerbates the priority with which funding may be allocated to HR. Striking a balance between reasonable investment in core business functions while also prioritizing the distinct vision of universities is critical. The risk is that over time, allowing any core business function to become outdated will create barriers to broader organizational advancement.

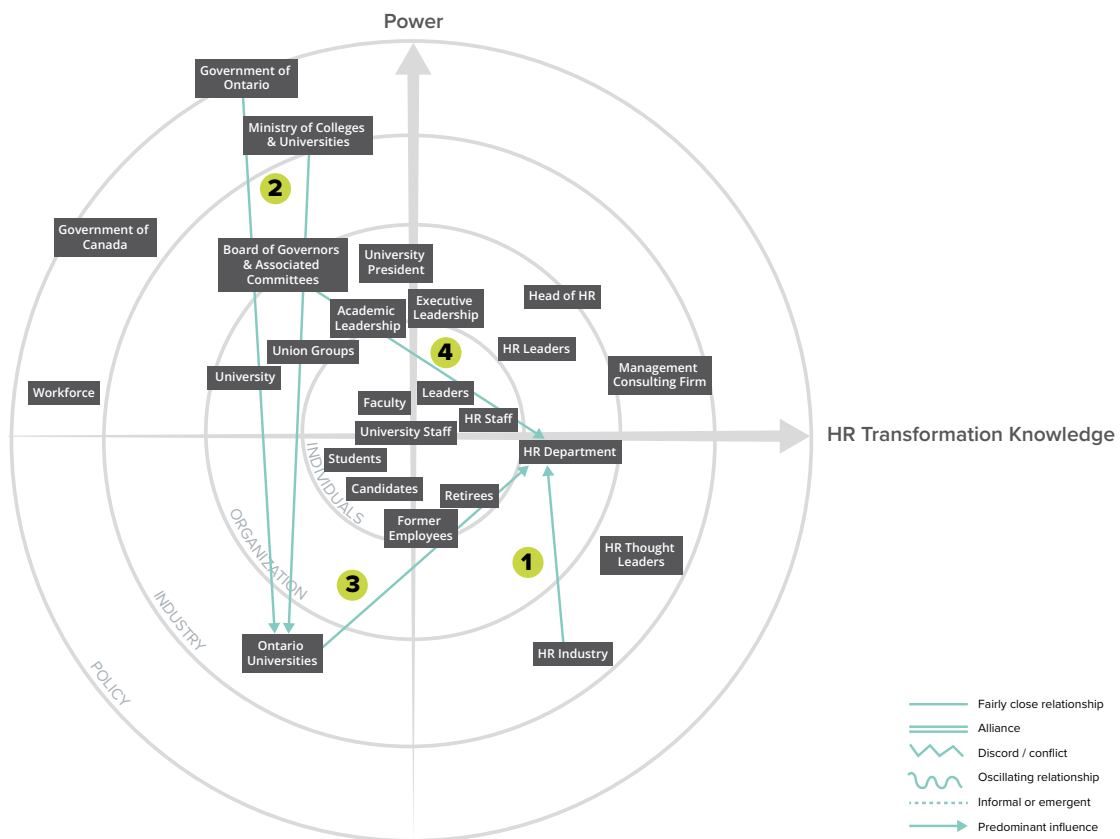


Figure 4. Actors who influence HRT in Ontario universities. The HR industry [1] influences the need to modernize, prompting transformation for HR departments that have failed to keep pace. The Government of Ontario and Ministry of Colleges and Universities [2] have a direct influence on public funding and policy, impacting Ontario universities. In turn, Ontario universities [3] influence their own HR departments. Within each university the Board of Governors [4] approves annual budgets, influencing funding allocations to HR.

Negative Reputation on Campus

In addition to keeping pace with industry standards, employee dissatisfaction can be a catalyst to transform—or at the very least an impetus to undergo significant change. Transformation aside, HR is not well-positioned to win popularity contests. Its dual role of serving the organization’s best interest can be at odds with striving to meet employee needs, and it is often involved in enacting difficult decisions and measures imposed by higher management. However, despite these unavoidable factors the need for transformation can become pressing when clients (and internal HR staff) frequently express dissatisfaction with HR’s overall service delivery. Participants indicated that low levels of satisfaction stemmed from several factors:

- **Obsolete technology:** Archaic, unsustainable technology that has been excessively customized to accommodate the diverse needs of the university workforce.
- **Inconsistent policies and practices:** Outdated and inconsistent policies and ways of working that rely on manual fulfillment rather than technological automation.
- **Complex processes:** Niche processes (developed in response to unique requests) that require intricate institutional knowledge to execute.
- **Lack of data:** Limited internal data and metrics hindering informed decision-making.
- **Reactive operations:** HR departments operating reactively rather than proactively, preventing them from providing strategic guidance to their clients.
- **Inefficiency:** Overall, inefficient ways of working that are frustrating for clients and costly to the institution.

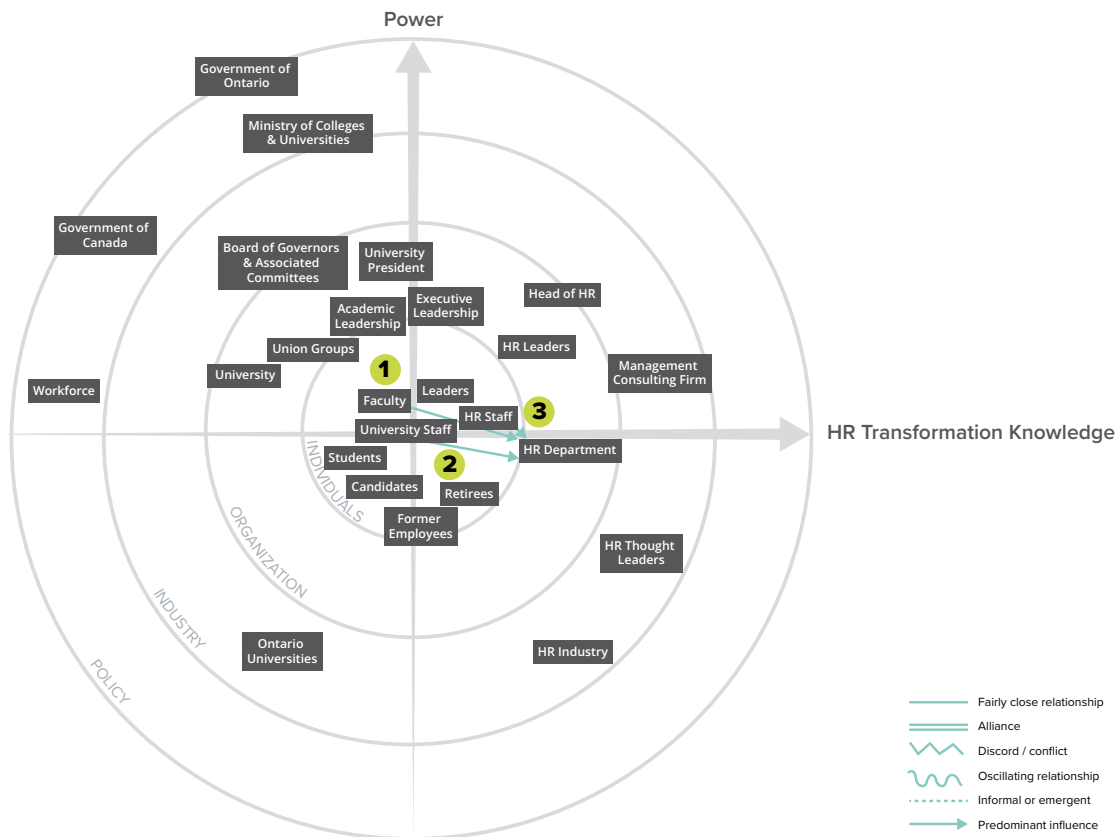


Figure 5. Internal actors with specific needs and expectations. Faculty [1], university staff (external to HR) [2], and internal HR staff [3] can have influence over the HR department if their needs are not being met—and if the HR department chooses to respond.

The Modern University Needs a Modern HR Function

Outdated HR departments can be driven to transform by external pressures (e.g. government mandates), internal pressures (e.g. senior leadership who recognize the need for change), and/or the HR department itself can also be a driving force for transformation. Interview participants explained that to avoid falling behind *and* provide effective services for a modern university, outdated HR departments must transition from being primarily administrative and transactional, to becoming strategic and employee-centric.

Administrative and transactional HR is reactive. It delivers “the basics” by focusing on routine tasks and the terms and conditions of work: payroll, pension and benefits administration, time and attendance, resume collection, and regulatory compliance (Ulrich, 2012).

Strategic and employee-centric HR not only delivers core, baseline services through streamlined and simplified processes that are integrated and connected to business needs (Schultz & Walt, 2015), but it is also proactive. It serves as a strategic business partner or advisor, assisting the organization in future planning and taking a more active role in promoting change (Korn Ferry Institute, 2017). It comprehensively addresses employee needs, nurtures a positive workplace culture, and adds organizational value by aligning with strategic planning and business objectives.

Ontario universities’ strategic plans often include themes of enhanced student experience, innovation, growth, and advancements in scholarly research, which are key characteristics for maintaining relevance in their sector. In line with this observation, some participants indicated that their university has grown significantly in a short period of time necessitating the need for more efficient HR service delivery to serve a larger employee population who often have new needs and expectations.

“ We were hearing that we needed to update HR practices, processes, and initiatives based on rising needs that were happening across the institution...Our legacy practices were creating barriers to advance.

(Participant 2)

”

Section 4 | Analysis

A modern HR function can be crucial in effectively supporting the vision of a progressive university. Inefficient ways of working will impose significant costs on organizations and may limit the adaptability and resilience of HR departments, hindering their ability to continuously evolve and meet the changing needs of the institution and future workforce. For example, a modern and competitive HR function will be equipped to support the university's innovation agenda by attracting and retaining top talent, leading researchers, and esteemed faculty—who subsequently attract and retain students.

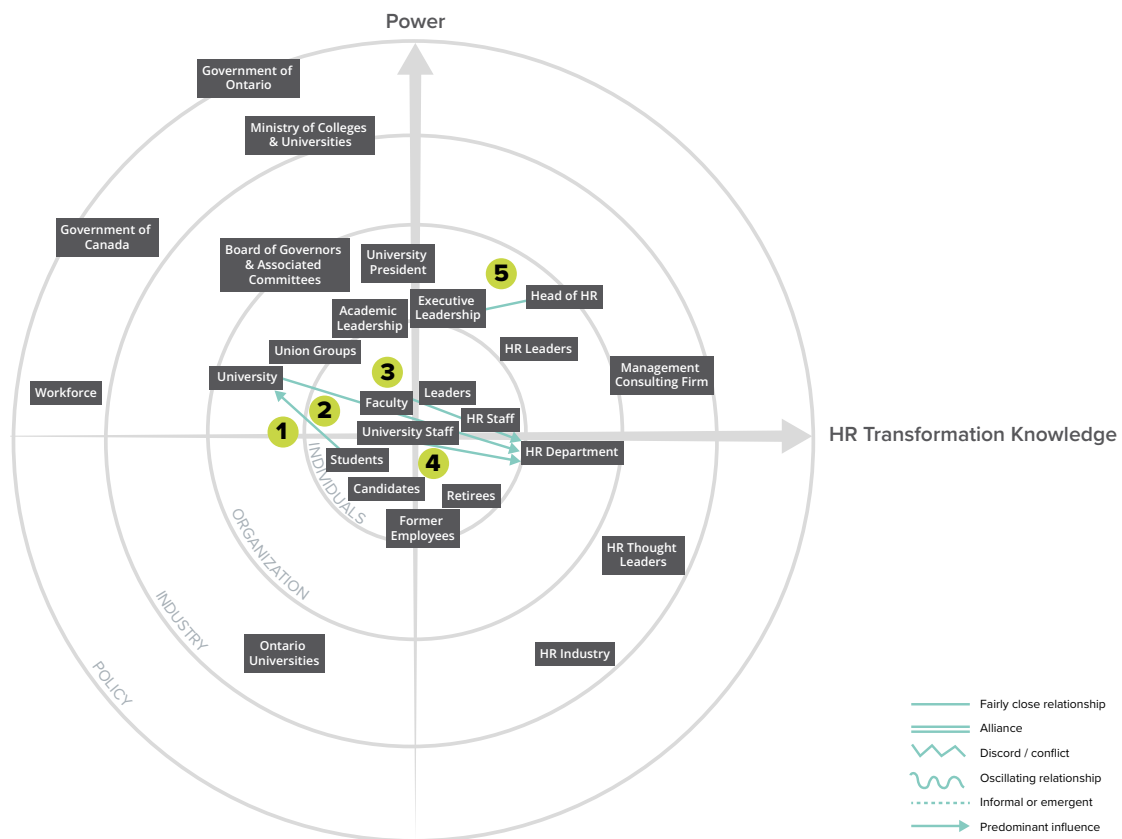


Figure 6. Actors who desire a modern, competitive university. Students [1] influence the university, and the university [2], faculty [3], and staff [4] influence the HR department. Executive leadership [5] has a fairly close relationships with the head of HR, who is expected to ensure that HR aligns with the university's strategic vision.

Workforce Expectations Define HR's New Role

The current workforce has increasingly complex needs and expectations of their organization, further prompting organizational change. In contrast to the early days of basic administration and compliance, HR is now responsible for driving initiatives in areas such as DEI, mental health and well-being, and hybrid/remote work to enhance the employee experience and meet the evolving needs of the workforce and organization.

“ There was a huge shift across all HR areas to focus on employee wellness... For an individual to be successful in their job, they need to be healthy. We have to have that holistic vantage point.

(Participant 15)

”

Employee experience is not limited to activities like performance management or learning and development. Recent macro-environmental forces significantly influence what employees expect from their organizations, and in turn from HR. Participants cited examples such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased the adoption of remote work and awareness of mental health challenges, or the Black Lives Matter movement, which calls for individuals and organizations to take concrete steps toward dismantling systemic racism. Factors like these are top of mind for the modern workforce, many of whom believe in holding their employer accountable. Universities, in particular, are pressured to respond to these factors as student populations are often vocal in their effort to drive institutional priorities.

Section 4 | Analysis

Choosing to holistically address employee needs is both an ethical and strategic decision. As MacArthur (2021) explains, “businesses of the future understand that increases in revenue are rooted in whole-person wellbeing” (para. 3). This sentiment is bluntly echoed in a McKinsey report that states “companies know that a better employee experience means a better bottom line” (Komm et al., 2021, para. 18). Fostering a positive and holistic employee experience will increase workforce retention but doing so requires a strategic approach that HR may not have capacity or capability to undertake if operating as an outdated, paper-pushing, administrative function.

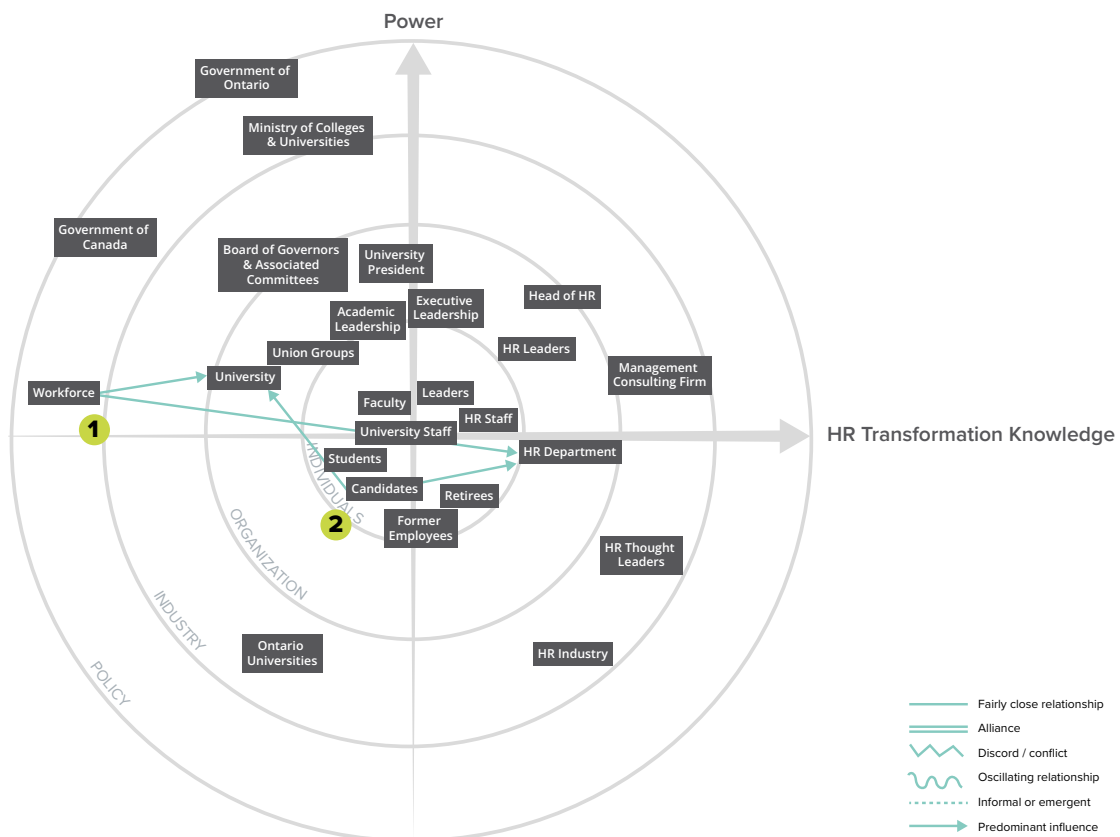


Figure 7. External actors who have staff employee experience expectations. The workforce [1] and candidates [2] influence both the university and HR department, prompting universities to holistically address employee needs.

How Are HR Departments in Ontario Universities Approaching Transformation?

There are multiple ways to implement an HR transformation but variables including budget, timeline, and scope will determine the approach. Despite the possibility for variance, interview participants identified fairly consistent ways of transforming. The following activities are included to provide a deeper layer of insight as to how Ontario universities' HR departments typically approach transformation. Some of these topics have also been reflected in the Recommendations section with more details on specific actionable steps.

Uncover the Current State

The transformation process typically begins with a current state assessment that uncovers internal factors relating to people, process, policy, and technology. This early work effort provides a clear understanding of how the HR department functions and identifies areas of concern. At this initial stage of the transformation, external consultants may be procured to assist the HR department in conducting their review and comparing their current operations and technology against industry best practices. The outcome of this process is often a gap analysis which informs a road map or plan for the future state.

“ The other thing that we did in order to validate where we were on the spectrum of personnel department versus high impact HR, was bring in the consulting firm and they did some analysis as well... [They asked] ‘How do they do their work? What proportion of their time are they spending on strategic work?’

(Participant 4)

”

Form an Engaged Project Team

The success of the transformation is greatly influenced by the core project team and project sponsor. An engaged and supportive project sponsor, typically in a senior leadership role, was generally identified by participants as the head of HR at their university. This individual is responsible for the future of the HR department and often spearheads the need for HRT. Participants emphasized the importance of their project sponsor's support and noted that access to this person was critical for a transformation's success.

“ We’ve been well sponsored, and our sponsors are promoting and championing the change. Where we failed before, in the past, is when we didn’t have senior leadership buy-in. ”

(Participant 12)

Participants went on to explain that the HRT project team should consist of engaged, energized, and committed members. It's vital that this group embraces the changes introduced by transformation and infuses enthusiasm into their work, thereby fostering a similar openness to change among other staff members. While many participants engaged external consultants at various stages (or for the entire duration of the transformation), internal representation on the project team is still required. These internal staff members will contribute invaluable institutional knowledge that external consultants cannot provide.

In addition to a dedicated project team, participants stressed the importance of securing buy-in from the leaders within HR to achieve positive outcomes in their transformation. These leaders are critical partners to the project team and are responsible for championing the change, supporting the work effort, and cascading appropriate messaging down to their teams.

Hire a Consulting Firm

The vast majority of participants interviewed for this study procured external consultants to lead some or all aspects of their HR transformation. The few participants who did not hire a consulting firm cited financial constraints as the rationale. Consultants are typically hired when an organization lacks the internal resources, capacity, or knowledge to carry out an initiative, or when an external expert's voice is needed to advance HR's agenda with senior leadership outside the department.

While external consultants may be viewed as an essential requirement for initiating and executing HR transformation, there are potential concerns associated with their involvement. By relying on consultants for the complex work of transformation, an organization risks hindering the long-term development and internal progression of its employees. Several participants identified a range of issues related to the use of consulting practices in Ontario universities, and the potential negative impact it could have on the organization's long-term sustainability. These concerns are reinforced by Collington & Mazzucato (2023):

The more governments and businesses outsource, the less they know how to do, causing organizations to become hollowed out, stuck in time and unable to evolve. With consultants involved at every turn, there is often very little 'learning by doing' (Unlearning by Not Doing section).

“ “There's value in us doing this work ourselves...I wish we could include more people in the department to do the work. There's something important about being engaged in the process and developing staff internally.”

(Participant 1)

”

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Another consideration that participants outlined is that the expeditious project plans laid out by consulting firms are often at odds with the realities of university culture. This may be as simple as the inability to schedule meetings with stakeholders during a defined window of time, or may be related to how limited university budgets can cause scrappy behaviour on the internal project team, obstructing consultants from performing their jobs.

“ I think we do a poor job of letting consultants do their job. We hire them, and they’re more than we can afford, and they likely don’t know our industry. And then we get them to do part of the work and we try to do the other part of the work, but we actually don’t have the ability to do the other part of the work. [We say] ‘We can do that, we can do this, we can do this piece,’ so that we don’t have to pay for it! There’s a lot of consulting firms that won’t work with higher education.

(Participant 10)

”

Prioritize Change Management

Participants repeatedly emphasized the crucial role of change management in HR transformation. All forms of business transformation are intrinsically linked to change management (Gudergan et al., 2022) and a key indicator of successful transformation is the organization's acceptance and adoption of the change. Change management is a vital facilitator of transformation, particularly in the heavily unionized environments of Ontario universities. Many of these institutions have multiple union groups on campus representing faculty and part-time instructors, as well as administrative and labour staff. These groups often wield considerable power and influence, and their support can be instrumental in facilitating transformative changes within administrative departments like HR.

As the majority of interview participants spoke about change management at length, a series of actionable strategies are outlined in detail within the Recommendations section. Though participants rarely identified the intersection of change management and human-centred design, interview data revealed the potential for significant crossover between these two practices. This connection is further explored and infused within the recommended strategies.

“ That change management foundation is really your critical success factor in everything that you do. ”

(Participant 17)

Understand Employee Needs

Some participants referenced using outreach methods such as employee surveys, interviews, and focus groups to understand the needs of both clients and internal HR staff. More emphasis was placed on deliberate outreach to discover client needs, while the needs of internal HR staff were often identified organically, such as through their involvement in the transformation.

Despite some overlap with HCD, the needs-finding activities were not typically characterized as such and were mainly limited to the discovery phase. Participants acknowledged that the methods and intentionality used to identify employee needs (both internal and external to HR) could be improved. They provided several reasons for not conducting more extensive needs-gathering:

- **Cost and capacity:** Time equates to money, and there aren't enough resources to conduct extensive needs-gathering.
- **Competency:** Lack of internal skills to carry out the process.
- **Assumptions:** Preconceived notions about the needs-finding results, marking the activity as non-essential.
- **Fear:** Apprehension about uncovering uncomfortable truths.
- **Hesitancy:** Reluctance to over-engage with stakeholders for fear of bothering them.
- **Delays:** Loss of momentum when approvals for outreach methodologies are delayed.
- **Staff turnover:** Personnel changes can disrupt the process.

“ We didn't reach out more because everything's a cost...And fear—we don't always want to hear what people have to say, or just don't see the value.

(Participant 10)

”

What Are the Transformation Barriers in Ontario Universities' HR Departments?

The most prevalent HR transformation barriers identified by participants are outlined in the following six insights. Each insight is accompanied by a Causal Loop Diagram, which was developed during the sensemaking process and aims to provide a deeper exploration of the barriers within this system.

Barrier #1: Limited Budgets

Participants unanimously agreed that budget constraints pose a significant barrier to HR transformation. Over the past 10 years, Ontario universities have seen decreased funding assistance from both the current Progressive Conservative (and previous Liberal) provincial governments, as well as a tuition rate freeze that was implemented in 2019 (Regg Cohn, 2023).

In 2023 several Ontario universities communicated that they were facing budget deficits (Brock University, 2023; Queen's University, 2023; University of Guelph, 2023; University of Waterloo, 2023; Wilfrid Laurier University, 2023). These transparent announcements follow trends of financial instability in Ontario postsecondary education. In response to Laurentian University's declaration of insolvency in 2021 (Harrison, 2023), the provincial government commissioned the Blue-Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability report *Ensuring Financial Sustainability for Ontario's Postsecondary Sector*, which further highlights financial concerns for Ontario universities. Compounding the last decade's funding decreases, other sources of financial pressure include recent declines in provincial operating grants, cuts to domestic tuition rates, high rates of inflation, unplanned costs due to the effective repeal of Bill 124, and increased student needs in areas such as mental health and housing (Council of Ontario's Universities, 2023).

“ We scramble every year for budget...and with the minimal budget that we do have, we’re just hoping not to lose it. So how do we create efficiencies within that?

(Participant 4)

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Some of the impacts of a tight transformation budget include project resourcing challenges, technology upgrade constraints, and limited or no expert consulting support when needed. This creates a paradoxical dilemma for HR departments in Ontario universities: they must transform to increase efficiency, yet limited funding is a barrier to their transformation efforts.

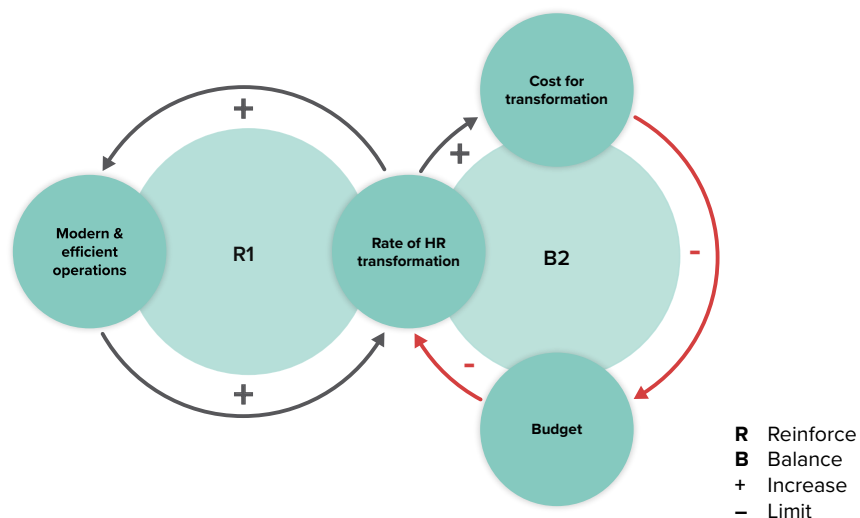


Figure 8. Rate of HRT Causal Loop Diagram. The rate of HR transformation increases modern and efficient operations within an HR department, which further increases the rate of transformation (R1). Conversely, the rate of HR transformation also increases the cost for transformation, which then limits the available budget. A limited budget will in turn limit the rate of transformation (B2).

Barrier #2: Lack of Dedicated Resourcing

Transformation in Ontario universities' HR departments is often hindered by a lack of dedicated resourcing, a challenge partly related to budget constraints. Many of these departments cannot afford a dedicated project team and as a result, existing HR staff are often tasked with executing transformation initiatives on top of their regular duties. Participants frequently (and begrudgingly) described this pattern as tackling transformation "off the side of their desks." Forced to divide their time between day-to-day operations and transformation, staff are unable to dedicate the necessary effort to the complex work required for HRT.

“ I worry about the people on the project team, I really worry. I think people are overextended, I feel overextended. You're asked to keep doing all the work that you're drowning in, but also can you think of the future? I think it's asking a lot of people who are already at capacity. ”

(Participant 1)

This split between regular responsibilities and transformation work can lead to delays in project timelines and may ultimately result in:

- Overextension and mental burnout among staff attempting to execute multiple initiatives.
- Low morale within the HR department as staff adapt to ongoing project delays and prolonged uncertainty.

Moreover, the longer it takes to implement a transformation, the more outdated the department becomes as the HR industry continues to advance.

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While this barrier may not be unique to higher education, the complexity of university environments can further strain the project team's capacity. In addition to HR's role of responding to unexpected personnel issues, grievances, or other legal concerns, participants described the university environment as "reactive" given that it must frequently respond and adapt to micro-environmental factors beyond its control. This underscores the need for dedicated resources and strategic planning in HRT initiatives.

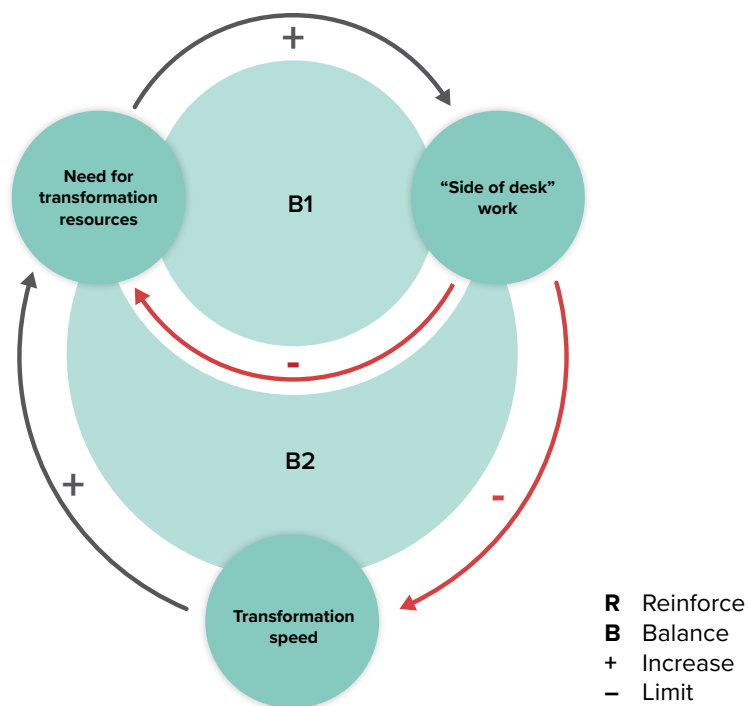


Figure 9. HRT resourcing Causal Loop Diagram. The need for transformation resources increases "side of desk" work, which then limits the need for resources (B1). However "side of desk work" also limits the transformation speed, which then increases the need for transformation resourcing long-term (B2), ultimately prolonging transformation programs.

Barrier #3: Transformation Skills Aren't Inherently HR Skills

In addition to internal capacity limitations and a lack of funding required to hire dedicated resources, the HR staff assigned to a transformation may not necessarily be “transformation experts.” Participants cited a tension between transformation capabilities (e.g. project management, change management, strategic thinking and planning) and the skills and knowledge of traditional HR staff.

“ Your traditional HR person has a very administrative focus, (or just somebody who’s been around for too long that has too many stories of ‘Yeah, we tried those things, but they never work out anyways.’) Anyway the type of people who will transform HR, versus the type of people who are fantastic at doing HR—they’re not inherently the same people. **”**

(Participant 3)

This gap is often bridged by engaging consulting firms to initiate or execute the transformation; however limited budgets and the necessity for institutional knowledge still require reliance on internal resourcing. Furthermore, relying too heavily on external expertise may hinder internal development and growth.

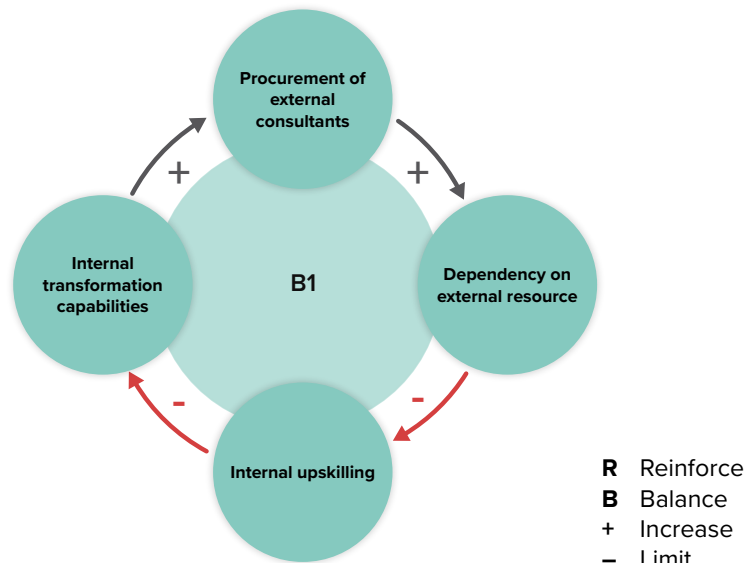


Figure 10. Internal upskilling Causal Loop Diagram. The procurement of external consultants can increase dependency on the external resource, which then limits internal upskilling, in turn limiting internal transformation capabilities, and ultimately increasing the procurement of external consultants (B1). This loop is a reminder that the procurement of internal consultants should be managed thoughtfully to ensure long-term internal benefit and growth.

The gap between traditional HR and transformation abilities may widen when organizations neglect to invest in ongoing training for long-term staff. It is important to note that long-tenure employment in Ontario universities is common, which is in part incentivized by generous pension plans. One participant noted that staff in higher education are often expected to step outside of their core roles to contribute to initiatives they're unfamiliar with. This type of experience can be beneficial for internal growth and development but may slow transformation if it is not also paired with ongoing, internal upskilling.

Barrier #4: Resistance to Change

Resistance to change is a common transformation barrier found across all sectors. This resistance may stem from an organization's culture, however, more specifically it can be traced to the individuals who are impacted by the change. Numerous factors can affect individual and organizational readiness for change. Employees may be hesitant to change their habits (Garvin & Roberto, 2005), or they may be fearful of a shift in power, the pressure to learn new skills, or the stress of joining a new team (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). They may also fear 'the unknown' or potential changes in their job roles (Creasey, 2024).

In the context of Ontario universities, these typical factors are undoubtedly present, but participants also identified unique elements specific to their environment as a rationale for increased resistance. Examples include the unionized workforce, the variety of diverse stakeholders within the ecosystem (students, faculty, staff, retirees), and the shared governance structure that is common within universities. These characteristics can slow the acceptance of change and make a transformation more challenging.

“ Critical to the success of any HR transformational project is to look at it through the lens of change and how it impacts individuals. These changes and transformations affect people's lives, they affect people's careers and they can have a huge emotional and physical impact on individuals. ”

(Participant 13)

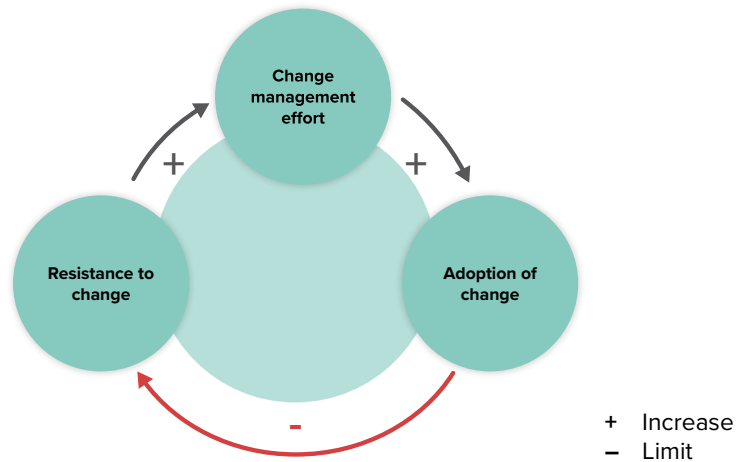


Figure 11. Resistance and adoption of change Causal Loop Diagram. Resistance to change increases the change management effort, the change management effort increases the adoption of change, and the adoption of change then limits the resistance to change. There will often be resistance or hesitancy to transformational change, but when carefully planned, thoughtful and strategic change management efforts can mitigate resistance.

Barrier #5: Elements of Decentralization

Participants highlighted that universities often exhibit elements of decentralization, which significantly influence their HRT approach. Organizational decentralization is characterized by the distribution of decision-making authority from top-level administrators to lower, local levels (Bimber, 1993; Huettermann et al., 2024). This shared power structure necessitates collaboration and stakeholder buy-in, especially given the presence of numerous influential groups who have contrasting needs within the university. The situation can be further complicated by potential tension between academic and administrative priorities. These elements of decentralization, prevalent across higher education institutions (Hancock et al., 2022), add nuance to the change management approach and may delay transformation efforts.

“ We’re very collaborative, we tend to be so mindful of everyone. Some things take longer because we want to make sure we’re going through the appropriate protocols and taking a really thoughtful, methodical approach. Sometimes the pace isn’t where we need it to be. ”

(Participant 2)

In some cases, participants spoke positively about decentralization and suggested that it promotes collaboration within the university culture while others outlined the risks and negative impacts. When departments and faculties have high degrees of autonomy, it can make gaining support and moving initiatives forward more challenging. In environments where endorsement is essential, collaboration and consensus become prerequisites for implementing HRT. This extra effort, integral to the change management approach, fosters advocacy and adoption of project decisions. However, it inevitably slows the speed of the transformation.

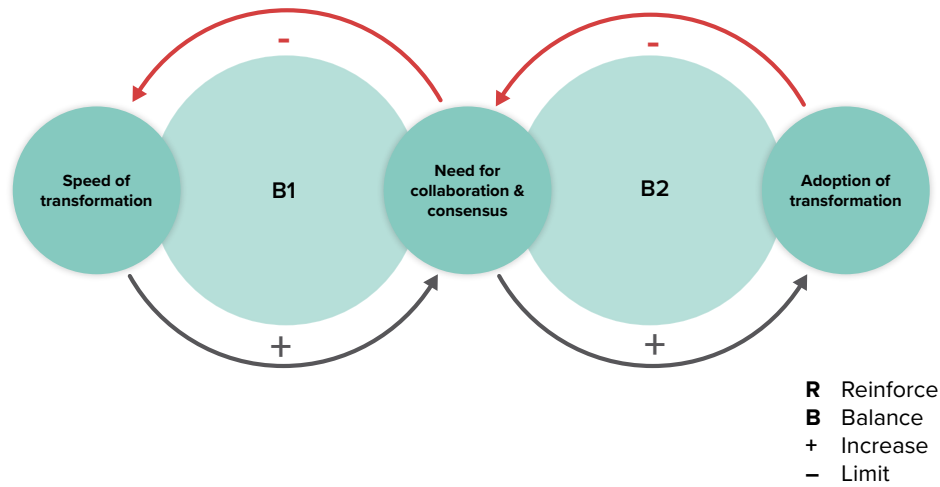


Figure 12. Collaboration and consensus Causal Loop Diagram. The need for collaboration and consensus limits the speed of transformation, thereby increasing the need for ongoing collaboration and consensus (B1). Conversely, collaboration and consensus also increase the adoption of the transformation, which then limits the need for ongoing collaboration and consensus (B2). In a university environment, the speed of transformation may inevitably be slower but the benefit of increased adoption is worth the time it takes.

Barrier #6: Culture Impacts Strategy

Departmental culture and internal challenges can pose significant barriers to transformation. Examples that surfaced in this qualitative research include project team misalignment, departmental silos within HR, and eroded trust between staff and leadership. Workplace culture, defined as the shared social constructs, thought patterns, assumptions, values, and beliefs within an organization or department (Barney, 1986; Bate, 1984) can override organizational strategy if there is a misalignment between the two (Mortell & Hansen-Turton, 2014).

HR departments undergoing transformation may need to contend with pre-existing workplace culture issues. However, the transformation process can also cause anxiety, fear, or low morale among HR staff, potentially leading to a negative or toxic culture. For example, unfavourable feedback gathered during current state assessments may be discouraging for staff to receive, particularly if they work in a broken system of outdated technology, processes, etc. that has not set them up for success. Employees may also be fearful of possible changes brought on by the transformation, such as departmental reorganization or changing work duties. If not carefully and empathetically managed, these factors can foster negativity and ultimately impede the transformation and associated change management initiatives.

“ We’ve paused on communicating internally about our transformation partly because the start was somewhat traumatic. It began with terminations and restructures, putting everyone on edge. We’ve since downplayed it. Transformation is a scary word—people wonder, ‘Am I the thing that’s going to be transformed?’

(Participant 16)

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Section 4 | Analysis

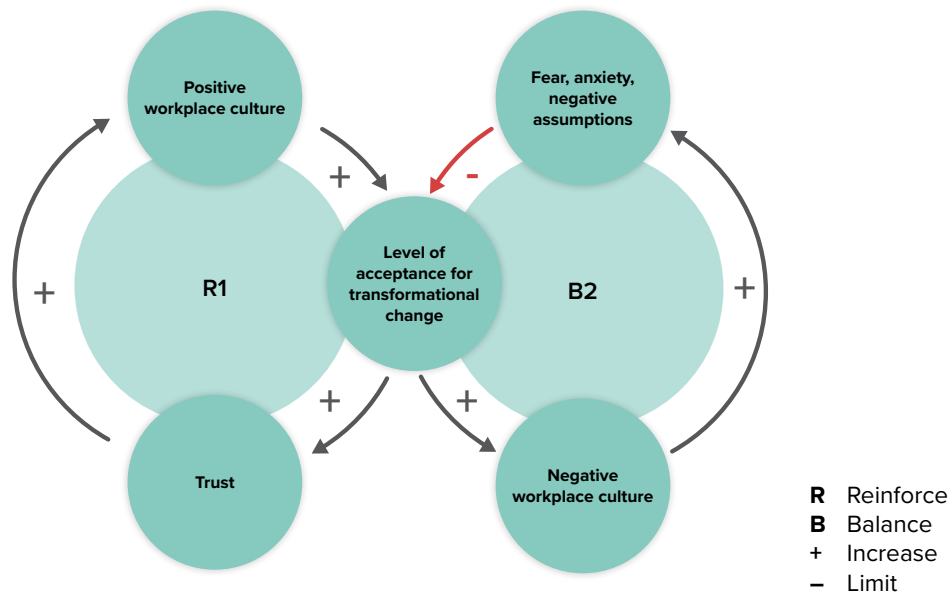


Figure 13. Trust and transformation Causal Loop Diagram. Trust increases positive workplace culture, which then increases the acceptance of transformational change, further increasing trust in the workplace (R1). However, fear, anxiety, and negative assumptions can limit the acceptance of transformational change, increasing a negative workplace culture, which then increases fear, anxiety, and negative assumptions (B2). Fostering a positive, trust-based culture is beneficial for an HR department undergoing transformation as it primes the employees to accept and embrace the change.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed based on the literature review and qualitative research data collected through the semi-structured interviews. While earlier analysis focused on some of the typical, high-level transformation approaches used by HR departments in Ontario universities, these ideas provide an in-depth exploration of actions and considerations. They are not a collection of step-by-step solutions, or an exhaustive list on how to transform an HR department, but are instead recommendations that both respond to the barriers identified in the qualitative research and also intentionally integrate HCD practices into transformation.

It is important to acknowledge the contributions of the interview participants in generating these recommendations. When aggregated and analyzed, their experience with HRT (and the related successes and failures) revealed distinct themes. Ideally, these compiled learnings are useful for others who are involved in a transformation.

Integrating Human-Centred Design Into HR Transformation

The underlying purpose of transformation is to create lasting improvements with positive organizational impacts. HCD is a valuable approach that can be leveraged to achieve this outcome. By prioritizing the experiences and needs of employees HCD ensures that solutions genuinely address pain points, resulting in benefits for both individuals and organizations.

While participants occasionally alluded to integrating HCD within their transformations, the majority did not use it intentionally or frequently—most likely because it is not a typical HR competency. In the rare cases where HCD was utilized, participants explained that it was most often initiated by external consultants in the early stages of the transformation. In these cases, the methodologies were not explicitly labelled or identified but were instead suggested as helpful tools or strategies that could be used to complete transformation tasks. This “light” approach can be an effective way to introduce HCD, as extensive training for an entire HR department (or even just the project team) is likely unrealistic.

Departments and project teams may choose to begin exploring HCD by embedding these related core values within their transformation approach:

- Cultivate empathy
- Centre the end-user(s)
- Investigate root problems
- Conduct user research and usability testing
- Challenge assumptions
- Embrace prototyping
- Advocate for iteration and continuous improvement

Discussing the definition of these terms and aligning on their possible applications is a simple way to set the project tone. HR departments may also consider inviting an external trainer to provide an overview of core HCD practices at the onset of their transformation to establish shared understanding amongst key HRT staff. Overall, if individuals adopt HCD values and commit to developing employee-focused solutions, it may prevent them from falling into a trap of designing only for themselves or powerful stakeholders.

Much like transformation, HCD isn't a typical HR competency. Yet, to deliver truly client-centric experiences a foundational grasp of HCD principles, woven into the culture of the department, can benefit HR professionals both during transformation and in their ongoing pursuit of developing high-quality, employee-centred services.

Developing Transformation Capabilities

The qualitative research identified a set of transformation capabilities that are beneficial for HR employees to gain. Assessing these capabilities and upskilling staff where possible will enhance the execution and delivery of transformation, prime an organization for growth and adaptability, and reduce the risk of stagnation.

Transformation capabilities are valuable in-house assets, even when an external consulting firm is engaged to facilitate part (or all) of a transformation. If an HR department has internal knowledge that prepares them to collaborate with consultants the engagement will be more effective and efficient. But more importantly, a workforce that has developed transformation-related capabilities will have a lasting impact on the organization as it adapts to change over time.

Soft Transformation Skills

Examples of soft skills that can significantly enhance the transformation include active listening, adaptability, agility, collaboration, comfort with ambiguity, confidence, diplomatic negotiation, empathy, resilience and the ability to foster trust and build relationships. An openness to continuous learning and experimentation are also advantageous transformation assets.

Core Transformation Capabilities

The following table includes examples of beneficial core transformation capabilities.

Capability	Description
Project management	Strategically plan, allocate resources, manage risk, communicate effectively, and manage timelines to drive change and achieve organizational goals within a specified time frame.
Change management	Plan, implement, manage, and monitor the transition from current to future state, while mitigating resistance and fostering change adoption among stakeholders.
Systems thinking & business strategy	Apply a “systems lens” to understand stakeholders and their relationships/influences, the organization structure, and its role within the broader ecosystem/political landscape. Use this knowledge to understand the implications of significant decisions.
Process design	Design new processes and analyze, redesign, and streamline existing processes to improve efficiency and adapt to changes.
Communication	Develop and deliver content that effectively communicates complex or possibly contentious information, and facilitate workshops or training sessions to collaborate with staff or share new learnings.
Data analysis & interpretation	Assess data to identify user needs, track progress toward goals, and measure the success of implemented changes.
Technology acumen	Understand the potential and limitations of technology relevant to the transformation, as well as data security and privacy concerns.
Human-centred design	Infuse HCD principles within the transformation by advocating for client/internal needs. When appropriate, leverage HCD methodologies to uncover needs and possible solutions.

Table 1. Core transformation capabilities identified during qualitative interviews.

Section 5 | Recommendations

A consideration that requires further research is the possibility of assembling key resources from multiple Ontario universities who are knowledgeable about transformation. This collective would have a mandate to establish a framework, or design an intensive course, that upskills and guides other Ontario university departments embarking on transformation. This approach would enable knowledge and resource sharing between universities, while also helping to empower localized teams to effectively execute transformation.

Collaborating With Consultants

Enlisting the expertise of a consulting firm to aid in transformation may be inevitable for many universities. If this is the case, consider how the engagement can be efficient, effective, and enhance internal capabilities. Working with consultants can be an opportunity to equip the HR department with new transformation capabilities, but the most crucial priority is to sufficiently transfer project knowledge to the internal team.

Knowledge Transfer

Maximum knowledge transfer should be prioritized in all consulting engagements to ensure that the internal team is equipped to maintain and continue the transformation. Aside from sharing functional information, when done well the knowledge transfer can facilitate learning and increase capabilities within the HR department. Consultants often possess unique skills that are not always developed on the internal team, and working with a consulting firm should be viewed as a positive learning experience. For example, when consultants are utilizing tools or methodologies, internal staff could be encouraged to consider how they might repurpose these techniques for future transformation initiatives or departmental projects.

Consider the following tactics:

- Clarify and agree on expectations for knowledge transfer during procurement.
- Structure a robust knowledge transfer plan to ensure that all critical project information is provided to staff, perhaps also considering a capability-building contract (Collington & Mazzucato, 2023).
- Align knowledge transfer activities with specific stages or tasks throughout the project.

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- Plan knowledge-sharing sessions where critical internal knowledge is transferred to consultants, and consulting expertise on transformation approaches are shared with internal staff.
- Ensure that documentation and robust knowledge repositories (process manuals, best practice guides) are provided to serve as lasting resources for internal staff.
- Request tools and templates, with how-to instructions, that can be used in the future.
- Assess how internal staff might job-shadow or absorb new knowledge to enhance learning.

A Human-Centred Change Approach

Thoughtful and strategic change management strategies are critical in driving employee adoption of change during transformation. The following recommendations aim to enable shared understanding and acceptance among employees, facilitating collective progress towards the desired outcomes.

Identified by participants during the semi-structured interviews, many of these practices demonstrate the use and value of HCD in HRT. This crossover was particularly apparent when activities to uncover employee needs inadvertently aided HR departments in furthering their change agenda and securing endorsement from stakeholders. In HCD the human is placed at the core of the design process, and similarly, change management is most effective when employees are actively involved in the transformation journey. In some instances the primary change management objectives may be to simply advance the organization's goals without centring employee needs, but integrating an HCD mindset into the change process will enhance the overall effectiveness. The following practices can be considered when planning and executing a change management strategy.

Stakeholder Identification

One of the first significant steps in developing a transformation change management strategy is to establish the various stakeholders within the organization. In this context, stakeholders are defined as individuals or groups who are impacted by, interested in, or able to influence organizational change. Stakeholder information can be gathered by conducting interviews with individuals who possess institutional knowledge, assessing existing artifacts (e.g. organizational charts), distributing surveys, etc.

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It can be useful to adopt a “systems thinking” lens when identifying and analyzing stakeholders. For instance, an Actors Map (example available in Appendix A) can be used to plot these stakeholders within the broader system and uncover their relationships, influences, power dynamics, or potential for conflict. Regardless of the tool or template used to identify the variety of stakeholders, completing this type of activity will foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the system dynamics.

The list of stakeholders is an essential artifact that should be utilized throughout the transformation to develop key messaging, plan training and drop-in sessions, identify champions, and promote the benefits of change. The stakeholder list can also be used for HCD activities such as persona development, user research, or usability testing. After the stakeholders are identified, their needs, pain points, and motivations can also be uncovered. Having a deep understanding of the primary stakeholders will also ensure that both benefits and possible negative impacts can be identified for each unique group. With the success of change management resting on individual adoption and behaviour changes, these initial stakeholder identification strategies and tactics are critical.

Community Engagement and Consultation

Community engagement and consultation are key change management practices that are necessary in university environments characterized by decentralization, complex or shared governance structures, and multiple distinct stakeholder groups. However, any organization can benefit from integrating this practice into its transformation strategy.

Engaging employees throughout the transformation process, as opposed to a single point in time (e.g. only during the initial current state assessment) offers multiple benefits.

This practice enables collaboration, ensures alignment, and sets the groundwork for increased change acceptance. It establishes a two-way feedback loop, enabling HR to share updates on progress, failures, and upcoming changes while simultaneously gathering feedback from faculty, staff, union groups, governance areas, and leadership on successes and areas for improvement. Actively listening to employee perspectives will enhance the quality of transformation initiatives as it provides valuable insight into how to address needs.

Some examples of how to implement community engagement and consultation include:

- **Establish a formal committee with cross-university representation** of employees who are either involved in implementing the transformation or are directly impacted by it. These individuals can provide input and feedback, perform assigned tasks, and act as liaisons with their respective departments or faculties.
- **Distribute surveys** to gather quantitative data from a broad range of participants. Manage survey participant expectations by providing updates on survey results or actionable next steps. If employees understand that their survey responses have been acknowledged, they will be more likely to engage with this method in future.
- **Conduct focus groups** to gather qualitative data—but be wary of dominant personalities or groupthink! Although focus groups are an efficient use of time in that many employees can participate during a single session, skilled moderation is required to ensure a balanced discussion where all attendees have a chance to contribute. It can also be useful to triangulate the results of focus groups with other data collection methods (e.g. surveys, 1:1 interviews) to develop a more comprehensive analysis.

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- **Host forums, town halls, or Question and Answer sessions,** either virtually or in person. As with key messaging, consider audience segmentation to ensure that content is applicable and that employees will be comfortable participating.
- **Facilitate co-design workshops** with key stakeholders or impacted users throughout the transformation journey. These collaborative HCD workshops foster a deeper understanding of challenges, instill a diversity of thought in solutions, and provide an opportunity for prototyping and planning. In addition to gathering meaningful data, co-design advances the change agenda by building awareness and enabling participants to feel ownership through their contributions.

Note: When developing these engagement/consultation strategies, be intentional about creating inclusive opportunities for all impacted employees. For example, consider the availability of night shift workers or instructors when scheduling sessions.

Providing various channels for impacted employees to receive updates and contribute ideas will raise important considerations specific to the unique stakeholder groups, and will increase the likelihood of change adoption. This approach fosters a sense of community within the organization and provides ways to build trust, making it an effective change management strategy for transformation.

“ We garner support as we go instead of asking for it at the end. When someone feels like they’ve been part of the solution they’re much more willing to support it as it rolls out. I think the realization has been that if you want something to be successful on campus, the key is collaboration.

(Participant 13)

”

Communication

Strategic communication is a valuable tool used to build awareness and understanding of the changes caused by the transformation. Everyone involved in, or impacted by, the transformation should understand why the changes are happening and what they entail. Communicating regular updates or announcements through carefully considered channels will enable the transformation team to share the rationale, desired outcomes, and specific impacts on different stakeholders while dispelling rumours, addressing confusion, and fostering endorsement. User research can help inform the development of targeted communications materials by ensuring that the messages resonate with different stakeholder groups and address their concerns or needs.

Developing a Plan

- The communications plan should outline key messages, audiences, communication channels, and timelines. This plan will ensure that targeted and consistent information reaches the right people at the right time.
- Be mindful of other initiatives or cyclical events that may compete for employees' attention when devising timelines (e.g. other program rollouts or significant dates within the academic calendar.)
- Secure sign-off and input from the project sponsor to ensure alignment and avoid missing any critical components.
- If necessary, adapt the plan in response to external factors that may disrupt the original communication timing or methods.
- Continuously reassess the communications content and plan based on community feedback, integrating and addressing questions and concerns throughout the process. Agile delivery will ensure that the messaging continues to be relevant and up to date.

Crafting the Messages

- Craft clear, concise, and jargon-free messaging. Provide just enough information, just in time, to ensure that employees can easily digest and retain important updates.
- Tailor messaging to specific stakeholder groups, while also taking into account the organization's change readiness.
- Identify the value for different audiences by answering "what this means for me" so that individual employees understand the relevance and benefits of the change. Consider the emotional and psychological impact on users to encourage smoother adoption.
- Consider communicating frequently and repeating specific information at certain points, such as in the lead-up to a particularly impactful change.
- Build trust by honestly and transparently identifying the challenges, uncertainties, and potential roadblocks associated with the change.

As transformation is typically a lengthy process, remember to balance consistent communication with the risk of overwhelming employees or instilling change fatigue. Provide updates on progress, celebrate successes, and transparently address challenges to develop a sense of collective purpose through the journey.

“ Understand the current state, understand people’s pain points, drivers, and needs and then bring it all together and connect it into a story that you can then sell—but bring [people] along the way... You have to keep integrating the feedback that you’re hearing throughout the process into the story.

(Participant 11)

”

Change Champions

Change champions are invaluable assets in transformation. These individuals are not only supportive of the change but are also vocal about it, and they play a crucial role in bringing along employees who are skeptical or resistant. The champions serve as ambassadors for the transformation by disseminating supportive and factual messages to foster adoption. It's especially important for HR leaders to champion the change within their own department, to ensure that the transformation can be adopted internally. It is beneficial to identify champions in areas outside of HR, as their understanding of the unique culture in their respective departments makes them particularly effective. To leverage the potential of change champions, consider the following strategies:

- Identify champions during community engagement sessions by noting employees who are excited about the transformation, ask multiple questions, or are eager to participate. Champions should be sourced from various departments and levels to ensure diverse representation across the organization.
- Empower champions by providing them with knowledge about the change initiative, its goals, and potential challenges. This will enable them to address minor concerns and answer basic questions within their sphere of influence.
- Establish a network of champions, (either formally or informally), to facilitate collaboration. This network will allow champions to connect, receive updates, and share best practices that support change messaging, fostering a sense of community and strengthening their collective impact.

Section 5 | Recommendations

- Provide ongoing support to champions by offering connections and resources and (when applicable) mentorship and coaching. Doing so will help them address challenges, navigate complex situations, and can be mutually beneficial if they can develop skills in leadership, communication, negotiation, and influence.
- Change champions can support HCD initiatives by recommending participants for activities such as user research or co-design sessions, or by participating in these activities themselves. They can also act as early adopters or participate in pilot projects, trial new processes, and provide feedback.

It's important to remember that not every employee will become a change champion. There will always be individuals who resist the change or feel neutral about it. Therefore, it's crucial to balance the energy and effort invested in finding and fostering champions.

Internal Adoption

The above tactics on stakeholder identification, communication, engagement and consultation, and change champions are not an exhaustive list or complete change management strategy, however, they are all important elements in developing a change plan with HCD elements. It is important to note that the above activities should be conducted both externally within the broader organization as well as internally within the HR department. The staff in HR need to feel that they're a part of the transformation—they cannot be dragged along or forced to participate in a journey they don't understand or believe in! Their positive engagement in transformation is extremely beneficial as this group has a deep understanding of the pain points in HR's current processes, technology, etc. and is well-positioned to provide excellent suggestions on service enhancements. Some specific strategies to foster internal participation and transformation adoption include:

- Communities of practice for various groups within HR that facilitate peer-to-peer learning, HR-related professional development, and resource sharing.
- Advance notice of communications materials that are being sent to university audiences outside HR.
- Frequent and early transformation conversations to ensure no one feels caught off guard.
- Assignment of specific transformation tasks to individuals or groups outside the core project team to nurture a sense of responsibility and engagement.

“ The positioning to HR in the early days was, ‘This isn’t working for you. You’ve told us you’re finding [the current state] hard—we hear you on how challenging it is.’ So yes, we’ve got to fix the client experience but we need to support HR internally as well. We want [HR staff] to stay and be happy and actually feel like they’re doing meaningful work and not just stuck in administration. This was a really important acknowledgement.

(Participant 14)

”

Mindset: Perfection Isn't the Ideal Outcome

Embracing a positive mindset geared towards continuous improvement primes transformation teams for success. Given the profound scope and scale of any transformation, it's unrealistic to expect a flawless implementation of all program aspects or technology changes.

Indeed, assuming a "one and done" approach can be detrimental to transformation as it leaves no room for iteration, additional feedback, and further enhancements.

Teams should not prioritize perfection and instead be motivated to learn from their failures and embrace an adaptable, flexible mindset. Possessing the confidence to acknowledge that mistakes are inevitable and that great learning comes from failure, is a key mentality for resilient teams. This culture should be espoused by the project team leadership, who are responsible for nurturing a supportive environment that adapts to challenges and unexpected setbacks. Cultivating resilience among the transformation team members will not only foster a mindset that enables the team to adapt to challenges while continuously learning, but will also ensure project health and ongoing improvements to the transformation delivery.

“ I’ve always said to my project team, it’s not about being perfect, it’s not about avoiding failure—it’s about what we do when something happens and how do we recover? How do we learn? How do we apply what we’ve learned to the next iteration? This is a key outcome when HRT goes well...The ability to move through failures and recover and move on, and also learn and do better the next time.

(Participant 11)

”

In addition, teams must be empowered to take risks that foster learning, which can be done in a relatively small-scale, controlled environment (Collington & Mazzucato, 2023). This deeper exploration into the problem space will increase the degree of innovative solutions implemented within the transformation. The practice of isolating experiments within defined and segregated confines can mitigate risk, in turn providing assurance to management.

A resilient mindset that embraces learning, controlled risk-taking, and iteration can be tied to HCD practices such as:

- Iterative process design
- Co-design sessions
- Usability testing for processes and technology
- Prototyping or piloting solutions with specific stakeholders

Continuous Improvement to Sustain Transformation Efforts

Ongoing Needs Finding

Participants repeatedly referred to transformation as an ongoing journey that often takes many years to complete. Given that there are multiple phases in a transformation, organizations can embrace an HCD and continuous improvement mentality by conducting regular or cyclical needs finding among impacted stakeholders.

Once an HR department has adopted and implemented protocols for uncovering employee needs, regularly gathering this feedback (and acting on it!) will not only bolster change management efforts but will also lessen the need for repeated drastic transformations. It is possible that unexpected external forces may trigger significant transformation, but ongoing needs-finding will at least enable HR to progress alongside the organization. It will allow HR to keep a pulse on changes happening in faculties and departments, measure the effectiveness of prototyped or new solutions, and more easily adapt to the evolving needs of employees. This continuous improvement effort results in incremental and ongoing enhancements and improvements, as opposed to drastic and costly future transformations.

Prioritizing the Employee Experience

A significant driver for HRT is the desire to enhance the employee experience. Ultimately this aspiration cannot belong to HR alone, as other areas within the institution are accountable for significant touch points throughout an employment journey. Nonetheless, HR departments are encouraged to prioritize employee experience and influence their colleagues in other departments to do the same.

Understanding and implementing a comprehensive and exceptional employee experience is beneficial to organizations for a variety of reasons, with a significant example being that they will have greater success retaining and developing top talent.

However, workforce needs and expectations will inevitably evolve over time. To establish and maintain relevant and effective employee experience strategies, HR departments should commit to ongoing learning that follows current trends and anticipates the future landscape of HR. Continuously building knowledge that centres around employee experience will lend itself to the ongoing enhancement of the people, process, policy, and technology HRT pillars.

To facilitate ongoing learning (and avoid becoming stagnant), HR departments could consider implementing the following strategies:

- Develop a dedicated unit, committee, or internal community of practice that focuses on employee experience.
- Establish a knowledge-sharing community of practice with other universities that focuses on HR transformation and HR best practices.
- Dedicate funds for HR employee professional development to facilitate ongoing learning for long-tenured staff.
- Build internal capabilities by rotating tasks/functions amongst staff within the HR department, inspiring innovative ideas and solutions through new perspectives.
- Create an employee exchange program that enables HR staff to swap positions with their counterpart in another university's HR department, facilitating knowledge sharing and learning.

Note: Exercise caution in implementing these strategies to ensure that side-of-desk assignments are avoided, and that funding constraints are considered.

Knowledge Activation

The recommendations in this report were developed in response to the challenges and factors that shape transformation in Ontario universities' HR departments. To expand on these solutions, the final phase of this research consists of a prospective pilot project that aims to explore ways of infusing HCD within the culture of a department undergoing transformation.

The qualitative research revealed that in some cases HCD elements are already implicitly applied to transformation initiatives (primarily through initial needs finding or select change management practices), yet its explicit use was rare. The intentional application of HCD methodologies may be unnecessary for HR staff to learn but adopting the underlying principles within their department culture offers some obvious benefits, particularly when considering how to foster positive employee experience within the organization. Building on these findings, the objective of the pilot is not to produce a group of advanced HCD practitioners, but instead to foster a collective understanding and appreciation for the value of designing solutions for human needs.

This pilot will consist of a series of workshops, training sessions, and qualitative data-gathering activities that enable HR staff to experiment with explicitly and implicitly integrating HCD within their transformation initiatives. The content and sequence of the activities are subject to change as they must be adaptive to the department's capacity and needs.

Proposed Pilot Outline

#1) HCD Intro and HR's North Star

Duration: 30–60 minutes

Audience: HR leadership group

Description & Purpose

Introduction to HCD

- Provide a primer and basic understanding of HCD principles.
- Discuss principles with the leadership team to determine how they might resonate with the existing department culture, identify any gaps, and explore other relevant philosophies established within the specific HR units.
- Assess any existing uses of HCD.

Vision formulation

- Formulate a collective “north star” for HR that centres the employee experience.

#2) Employee Journey and HCD Methods

Duration: 30–60 minutes

Audience: HR leadership group

Description & Purpose

Employee life cycle visualization

- Collaborate to create a visual representation of the employee life cycle. This will help establish a shared understanding of HR's end-users (clients) and their journey at the university.

HCD methodologies and tools

- Introduce various HCD methodologies or tools (e.g. persona development, empathy mapping, service blueprinting, design thinking), explaining their purpose and use. Discuss how these could be applied to each unit's transformation agenda.

#3) Applying HCD

Duration: 20–30 minutes

Audience: Individual HR leader

Description & Purpose

Pilot project opportunities identification

- Identify an existing process or project (or challenge) within a specific HR unit that may benefit from HCD methodologies.

#4) HCD in Action Part 1: Designing for the Employee Experience

Duration: 30–60 minutes

Audience: HR unit/team

Description & Purpose

Meet with the specific unit or team that is responsible for the selected project.

Introduce HCD

- Provide a primer and basic overview of HCD principles and discuss possible approaches of integrating HCD within the selected project.

Initial problem space discovery

- Establish a shared understanding of the selected problem space and explore the problem that needs to be solved.
- Use interactive/participatory methods to facilitate this conversation (e.g. preliminary empathy mapping).

Post-workshop task: Identify a designated representative from the unit/team to closely participate in the HCD process.

#5) Gathering Data to Form Insights

Duration: Varies, depends on method

Audience: End-users (i.e. employees outside of HR)

Description & Purpose

Data gathering

- Conduct a series of 1:1 interviews, focus groups, and/or distribute a survey to gather qualitative and/or quantitative data from the employees impacted or involved in the selected project or process.
- Ideally, the designated representative participates in data gathering and regularly provides updates to their broader team. Their level of involvement must be reasonable given other priorities.

Data analysis and synthesis options

- **Option 1:** Facilitator to transcribe and analyze data to uncover patterns and insights, then conduct workshop with the unit to share and validate the findings.
- **Option 2:** Facilitator to transcribe data and then lead affinity mapping workshop with unit/team (or designated representative) to collaborate on analysis and synthesis.

#6) HCD in Action Part 2: Designing for the Employee Experience

Duration: 60–75 minutes

Audience: HR unit/team or designated representative

Description & Purpose

HCD training and co-design

- Provide an overview and training on a specific HCD methodology (see examples below).
- Referring to previously gathered data, collaborate with the HR unit/team and/or the designated representative on the selected HCD methodology.

Choose one, or cycle through the options with the possibility of expanding this session to a formalized community of practice:

Empathy mapping

Gain a deeper understanding of the end-user experience by identifying their needs, motivations, and challenges which can then inform HR transformation strategies.

Persona development

Develop personas representing different employee groups within the organization to guide the design of HR policies and initiatives while considering diverse needs.

Journey mapping

Map out the employee journey, from recruitment to retirement. Identify touchpoints where HR can enhance the employee experience.

Service blueprinting

Create a blueprint that maps out a specific service delivery journey. It should highlight the touchpoints between the employee and HR services, visible business processes, and behind-the-scenes interactions.

#7) Prototyping and Iteration

Duration: N/A

Audience: HR unit/team or designated representative

Description & Purpose

Design and prototype

- Using the data and outputs of HCD activities, design a solution for the initial problem that was identified. Ideally this work happens collaboratively during a co-design session.
- Consider implementing the solution as a prototype with a specific area or employee group. Releasing the change to a smaller number of end-users allows for issues and enhancements to be identified before a broader rollout.

Feedback collection

- Implement mechanisms for collecting employee feedback on the prototyped solution. This could involve surveys, interviews, or focus groups.

Iterative design

- Introduce the concept of iterative design in HR transformation. This involves implementing changes, collecting feedback, making improvements, and repeating the cycle. This continuous improvement process ensures that HR transformation efforts remain responsive to employee needs.

Further Research

Areas for further research include:

- How do human factors and organizational culture influence an organization's ability to transform or innovate?
- What is the future of HR? As society changes, how might HR proactively respond?
- What are specific tactics that will build internal transformation capabilities? Would forming a network or community of practice with staff from similar organizations support this effort?
- How might in-house transformation or HCD Resource Centres be formed? Is this approach cost-effective? What value would it bring to an organization, and how would it change engagements with external experts?
- How can trust be improved within an organization? Can it be measured?

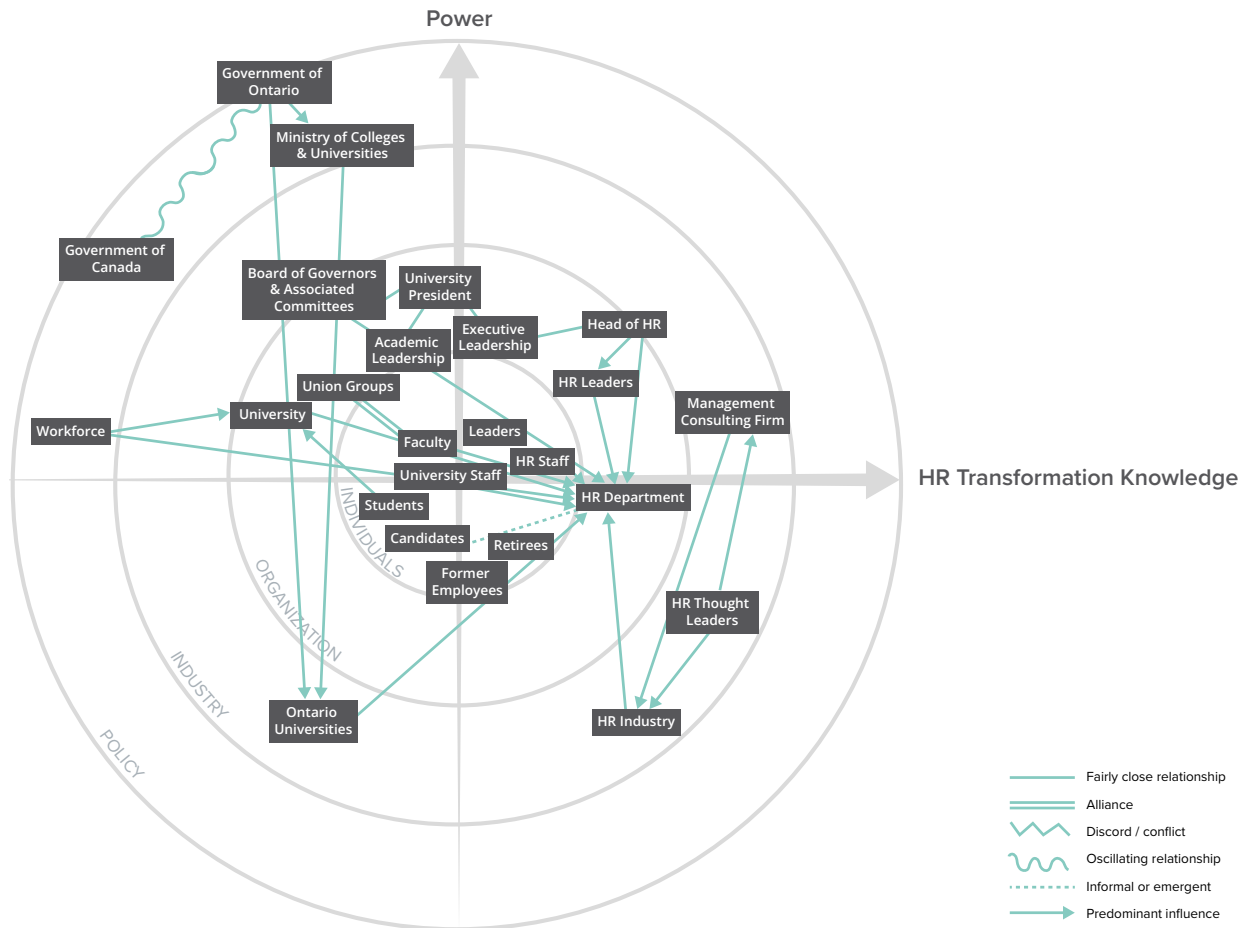
Conclusion

Transformation in any organization is not easy. It is a complex process with many variables that takes a considerable amount of time and effort. Using Ontario universities' HR departments as an entry point for investigating business transformation, the analysis uncovered: the rationale for transformation, how transformation is typically approached, transformation barriers, and finally a set of recommendations designed to sustain transformational change.

The overarching intention of this study was to assess how HCD elements can be integrated into HR transformation, and what value or benefit they may offer. The results show that some HR departments already integrate elements of HCD within their approaches to transformation, though it is often not done intentionally or used to its maximum potential. As the collaborative and consultative university environment lends itself well to HCD practices, an increased adoption of this mindset and associated methodologies will be beneficial in executing transformation and sustaining change.

Appendices

Appendix A: Actors Map & Description



Policy

- The Government of Ontario influences the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. Both these actors influence Ontario universities.
- The Government of Canada has an oscillating relationship with the Government of Ontario.
- The workforce influences the individual university.

Industry

- The HR industry and Ontario universities influence HR departments.
- HR thought leaders influence the HR industry and management consulting firms.
- Management consulting firms influence the HR industry.

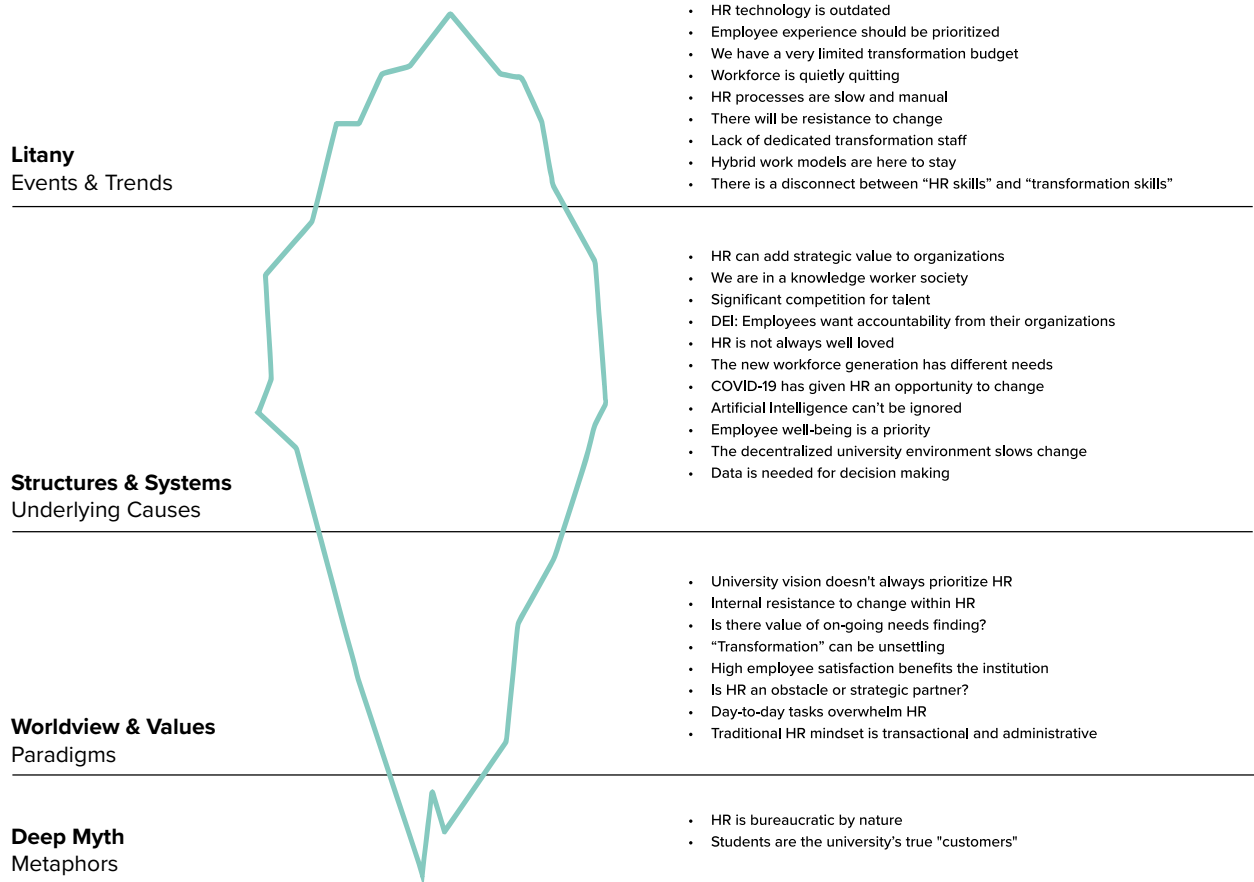
Organization

- The university influences the HR department.
- The university president has a close relationship with the Board of Governors & associated committees, academic leadership, and the executive leadership.
- The executive leadership have a close relationship with the head of HR, and they also influence the head of HR.
- The Board of Governors & associated committees influence the HR department.
- The head of HR influences HR leaders and the HR department, and has a close relationship with executive leadership.
- HR leaders influence the HR department.
- Union groups have an alliance with faculty.

Individual

- As a significant “customer segment” students influence the university.
- Candidates have an emergent relationship with the HR department.
- Faculty, university staff, and HR staff have influence over the HR department, particularly as these actors must be willing to adopt the transformational change.

Appendix B: Causal Layered Analysis (Iceberg Diagram)



Appendix C: Interview Questions

Part 1

My working definition of HR transformation is as “an evolution or initiative that aims to redesign one or more HR functions to better serve the needs of the organization and/or to support the organization in meeting its business strategy”.

- Is that definition aligned with how you would define HR transformation? Anything you would add or modify?
- What is your own experience with HR transformation projects?
- Have you worked on more than one HR Transformation?
- Which of the following options best describes your role in HR transformation projects: Individual Contributor/Team Member, Leader, or Project Sponsor?
- In your experience, what factors drive the need for transformation in HR departments? Driven by elements from the past? Driven by elements from the future?
- If you had to choose a few defining descriptors (i.e. the most memorable elements) of HR transformation projects you are working on/you’ve worked on, what would they be? They can be positive, negative, or neutral.
- Is there/was there anything about HR transformation projects you’ve worked on/you’re working on that keeps/kept you up at night?

Part 2

Many projects have internal and external drivers. Internal drivers might be related to an organization's strategic plan or long-term vision. External drivers might be related to economic or political factors happening in your community, or more broadly on a regional or national scale.

- In your opinion, what internal drivers prompted your organization to embark on HR transformation?
- In your opinion, what external drivers prompted your organization to embark on HR transformation?

Part 3

- In your opinion, what are/were the ideal outcomes for the HR transformation project you are working on/worked on? Did it/will it achieve its objectives?

Part 4

- In your opinion, how does/did your HR department aim to understand external client needs in relation to the transformation project? Internal staff needs?
- In your opinion, why was this approach selected to understand your internal/external client's needs?
 - Were you inspired by an industry best practice, or advised on how to approach this?
 - Were you surprised by anything that you learned during this process?

Part 5

- Do you have any current or past experience with you or your team/colleagues in HR using design methodologies or in any HR projects?
 - [Prompt if required] Design methodologies may include human-centred design, service design, design thinking, process design, etc.
 - [Prompt if required] It may also be helpful to think about whether there have been any iterative practices that intentionally incorporate feedback from humans impacted by the design into the solution
- [If unanswered] Are you aware of any design methodologies being used in higher education HR transformation projects specifically?

Part 6

- In your opinion, what are some of the barriers to transformation that exist in higher education HR?
- Are these barriers similar or different to other industries? Are these barriers similar or different to other industries?

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