

Global Talent Management through a Daoist Lens: Reframing Diversity, Merit, and Human Excellence across Cultural Contexts—A Systematic Review

Shahrukh Asif Khan^{1*}; Arya Girija Bhuvanendran²

¹ shahrukh.khan@algonau.ca; <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0999-0257>; Algoma University

²Arya Girija Bhuvanendran, Arya.Khan@betheblueprint.ca, Algoma University

Abstract

Background: Global Talent Management (GTM) operates within an era of intensifying institutional divergence, wherein organizations must simultaneously navigate equity-oriented DEI mandates and performance-driven merit imperatives. Since 2020, regulatory realignments including EU mandatory diversity reporting frameworks and politicization of DEI in the United States have deepened the equity-merit tension in organizational talent systems. Despite growing scholarly interest, no systematic study has theorized how institutional contexts shape the balance between these logics across diverse market economy settings.

Objective: This systematic literature review addresses the question: What role do institutional contexts play in enhancing the balancing of equity and merit logic in GTM systems? The study synthesizes post-2020 peer-reviewed scholarship to develop an institutionally grounded conceptual framework explaining cross-national variation in talent system design.

Method: Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a systematic search was conducted across four databases (Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, and ProQuest/ABI-Inform), yielding 3,006 total records. After deduplication, title/abstract screening, and a two-stage full-text eligibility review, a final corpus of N=50 peer-reviewed journal articles (2020–2025) was included: 17 core studies satisfying all four inclusion dimensions and 33 extended studies satisfying two or more dimensions. Studies were coded on institutional context type, dominant legitimacy logic, talent system orientation, and organizational outcomes.

Findings: Four themes emerged. First, institutional context specifically the configuration of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars (Scott, 2013) is the primary determinant of which logic prevails in GTM. Second, moral, pragmatic, and cognitive legitimacy types (Suchman, 1995) correspond systematically to equity-dominant, merit-dominant, and hybrid talent system designs. Third, hybridization reframing equity in performance terms is emerging as the dominant organizational response in institutionally pluralistic environments. Fourth, hybrid talent systems integrating moral and pragmatic legitimacy generate superior organizational outcomes. A propositional framework linking institutional context, dominant logic, talent system design, and outcomes is advanced.

Conclusion: This review reframes the DEI-merit debate from ideological to institutional legitimacy analysis. Four testable propositions advance the field toward rigorous comparative empirical research. The findings carry direct implications for global HR directors, policymakers, and ESG governance teams navigating regulatory bifurcation in talent management systems globally. A Daoist meta-theoretical lens further enriches this reframing: through the principles of wu wei, yin-yang complementarity, and de, the equity-merit tension is reconceived not as a binary opposition but as a dynamic duality, positioning contextual harmony and authentic human excellence as the orienting goals of global talent systems (Hennig, 2017; Xing & Sims, 2012).

Keywords: Global Talent Management, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Meritocracy, Institutional Theory, Legitimacy, Systematic Review

1. Introduction

In the context of multinational enterprises (MNEs) in highly disaggregated institutional environments, Global Talent Management (GTM) has become a strategic focus point. The pressure on organizations to attract, develop and reward talent across borders has grown in the last few years due to geopolitical and regulatory shifts, ESG accountability requirements, and the changing labor market since the onset of the pandemic. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has emerged as a key focus in global talent systems in this context. However, this shift has also brought a growing attention to the legitimacy of performance, merit-based advancement, and excellence in

capabilities, leading to an emergence of competing institutional logics that shape global talent systems, rather than a single universal approach (Bjerregaard, 2025; Liao & Liu, 2025).

GTM has been conceptualized as a strategic priority in the international HRM field (Dries, 2013; Scullion & Collings, 2011). DEI scholarship has expanded significantly since 2020, but typically has been based on equity criteria, especially in Western contexts (Cooke et al., 2022; Farndale et al., 2014). There remains, however, a degree of heterogeneity, as East Asian meritocratic cultures, Gulf state-oriented performance models, and competitive market excellence regimes illustrate, no single logic is universally followed in organizing (Collings et al., 2021; Tarique et al., 2015). However, as identity-based justifications are under growing pressure, organizations are increasingly articulating diversity initiatives in performance terms (Bapuji et al., 2020; Nishii et al., 2018).

Given these trends, the question that needs to be asked is how are institutional contexts shaping the balance between equity and merit logics in international talent management systems?

Although MNEs function in these conflicting logics, the existing GTM literature does not systematically explain the underlying mechanisms. There are three streams of research that are especially relevant: (1) DEI-focused research that focuses on fairness and moral legitimacy (Cooke et al., 2022; Nishii et al., 2018); (2) strategic talent management research that focuses on performance and competitive advantage (Collings et al., 2021; Farndale et al., 2014); and (3) institutional research that examines cross-national variation without explaining how to reconcile it (Bjerregaard, 2025; McCarthy et al., 2024). Theorizing how institutional pluralism can be used for building legitimate talent systems is underdeveloped.

This tension has been growing since 2020 due to three developments. First, regulatory divergence has grown, with the EU tightening up diversity reporting requirements and DEI initiatives in some parts of the United States being increasingly challenged (Cooke et al., 2022; Creary et al., 2025). Second, the labour market has undergone significant changes since the pandemic, which has heightened performance pressures, including the need for greater skills shortages and the rapid digitalisation of the labour market, which has made the importance of capability-based talent identification more pronounced (Collings et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2024). Third, emerging and state-led economies' national competitiveness priorities strengthen the cultural-cognitive legitimacy of meritocratic systems (Liao & Liu, 2025; Tarique et al., 2015).

To fill this void, this paper utilizes the Institutional Theory with institutional pillars, institutional logics and institutional legitimacy types (Scott, 2013; Suchman, 1995; Thornton et al., 2012). In this paper, a systematic literature review is used in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 criteria. This article makes four contributions: (1) extends an institutional logics approach to GTM explaining cross-national variation; (2) repositions the DEI-merit debate in terms of legitimacy alignment rather than ideology; (3) constructs a propositional framework linking institutional context, dominant logic, talent system design, and organizational outcomes; and (4) generates testable propositions for future comparative empirical research.

The research question guiding this study is: "What role do institutional contexts play in enhancing the balancing of the equity and merit logic in the GTM systems?"

This review introduces an additional meta-theoretical reframing: a Daoist philosophical lens through which the equity-merit tension in GTM can be reconceived not as a binary opposition but as a dynamic, complementary duality (Auzoult, 2021; Lei, 2025). Rooted in the classical Chinese philosophical tradition of Daoism, concepts such as wu wei (effortless, non-coercive action aligned with natural conditions), yin-yang interdependence, and the cultivation of de (inner virtue or authentic human excellence) offer a non-Western interpretive framework that reframes diversity not as mandated difference but as natural variation; merit not as competitive hierarchy but as the expression of authentic human excellence aligned with one's context; and institutional legitimacy not as compliance with fixed norms but as relational harmony between an organization and its environment. By situating the institutional logics framework within this Daoist perspective, the review invites scholars and practitioners to move beyond the prescriptive-normative debate and toward an integrative, contextually attuned understanding of human excellence in global talent systems.

2. Theoretical Framework: Institutional Logics and the Reconciliation of Equity and Merit in GTM

2.1 Institutional Theory and GTM

The present GTM scholarship has been more focused on convergence models, neglecting institutional divergence. This review places GTM in the context of institutional theory to account for the differences in legitimacy logics in different environments. Scott (2013) states that institutions are comprised of three components: regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive, which all influence the perception of legitimate organizational behavior. To achieve legitimacy and survival, organizations must come to terms with pressures from these pillars (Scott, 2013).

Since 2020, GTM scholarship has started to appreciate the institutional diversity of the contexts in which MNEs work (Cooke et al., 2022; Farndale et al., 2021). However, much scholarship has been devoted to the diffusion

of policies and the transfer of best practice, assuming some degree of convergence in diversity and talent measures. Competing institutional expectations on design logic for talent systems has been comparatively less studied.

According to Suchman (1995, p. 574), legitimacy is "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. The legitimacy of GTM is crucial, as systems that are seen as unfair, biased, or ineffective can lead to employee disengagement, damage to the organization's reputation, and regulatory investigations (Suchman, 1995). Institutional environments do not only shape organizational behavior, but they also shape which logics of justification are considered socially acceptable. This review provides a legitimacy-based account not an ideology-based account of why there are differences in GTM systems when there are convergence pressures.

2.2 Institutional Logics: Equity and Merit as Competing but Reconcilable Logics

The institutional logics perspective, developed by Thornton et al. (2012), conceives of society as constituted by multiple, overlapping belief systems providing organizing principles for action. Two logics have acquired relevance in GTM since 2020.

2.2.1 Equity Logic (DEI-Oriented)

Equity logic foregrounds fairness, representation, and inclusion. It derives from social justice normative expectations, legislative frameworks promoting non-discrimination, ESG reporting standards, and the pursuit of moral legitimacy. By this rationale, talent systems must redress structural injustices and provide inclusive opportunity frameworks. Legitimacy is secured through adherence to egalitarian standards and compliance with diversity requirements. Post-2020 GTM research demonstrates that DEI initiatives are increasingly integrated within corporate governance and international HRM systems (Bapuji et al., 2020; Nishii et al., 2022).

2.2.2 Merit Logic (Performance-Oriented / MEI)

The merit logic foregrounds excellence, competence, and measurable performance outcomes. It derives from competitive market forces, shareholder expectations, state-driven competitiveness agendas, and elite-filtering cultural-cognitive norms. Legitimacy is pragmatic (does the system enhance performance?) and cognitive (is meritocratic selection taken-for-granted?). The meritocracy paradox how meritocratic systems simultaneously justify promotion and recreate inequality has been critically examined by Castilla and Benard (2010) and Castilla (2015). Digital transformation and global talent shortages have intensified performance pressures since 2020 (Collings et al., 2021).

2.3 Institutional Pluralism and Logic Reconciliation

MNEs face increasing complexity in navigating institutional pluralism, wherein equity and merit logic may coexist, complement, or conflict. Post-2020 developments illustrate this complexity: Europe has consolidated diversity disclosure regulations; the United States has experienced DEI politicization; East Asian and Gulf nations continue to prioritize excellence and competitiveness; and ESG performance metrics connect diversity outcomes to financial performance. According to Institutional Theory, organizational responses are based on prioritization, hybridization, or reframing of logics (Hashemi, 2025). Recent HRM scholarship demonstrates a growing tendency to reframe equity efforts in performance terms (Roberson, 2025; Shinde, 2025). GTM research has not yet theorized how institutional settings influence the selection among reconciliation strategies a significant gap (Antifaëff, 2024; Irin et al., 2024).

2.4 Institutional Context as Determinant of Dominant Logic

Recent research confirms that institutional contexts decisively shape how organizations balance equity and merit logics in GTM. Lee (2024) demonstrates that institutional logics in South Korean conglomerates produce polarized talent systems, with performance-based cultural norms reinforcing merit-based practices. Abid (2025) shows that French institutional factors determine the degree to which SMEs emphasize egalitarian versus meritocratic talent systems. The systematic review by Sousa et al. (2024) confirms that GTM frameworks are institutionally contingent. Collectively, these studies indicate that institutional context is the primary determinant of which legitimacy logic prevails, generating divergence rather than convergence (Shvetsova, 2025).

2.5 Theoretical Implications for GTM

The institutional theory perspective on DEI and merit transforms the discussion from normative judgment to legitimacy alignment analysis. This repositioning has three theoretical implications: it explains cross-national differences in GTM without a single convergent model; it explains why organizations rebrand rather than abandon DEI efforts; and it provides a structured basis for testable conceptual models. Post-2020 studies indicate the growing legitimization of DEI practices as complementary to performance, and institutionalization of global DEI standards exemplifies cross-contextual legitimation strategies (Creary et al., 2025; Ellingrud & Baller, 2023).

2.6 A Daoist Philosophical Lens: Naturalness, Harmony, and Human Excellence in GTM

This article does not seek to develop a Daoist theory of global talent management. Rather, Daoism is introduced as a supplementary interpretive lens that offers an alternative philosophical vocabulary for understanding the coexistence of equity and merit within institutionally plural environments.

Complementing the Western institutional logics framework developed in Sections 2.1–2.5, this review incorporates a Daoist philosophical lens as a non-Western meta-theoretical orientation that deepens the conceptualization of diversity, merit, and human excellence across cultural contexts. (Hennig, 2017; Xing & Sims, 2012) The foundational Daoist concept of *wu wei* literally “non-action” or effortless, context-aligned action suggests that the most effective forms of organizational talent cultivation are those that align with the natural tendencies of individuals and their institutional environments rather than imposing standardized performance criteria from without. Applied to GTM, *wu wei* implies that talent systems which allow excellence to emerge organically from culturally and institutionally congruent conditions are likely to generate greater legitimacy and superior outcomes than those imposing universal equity mandates or universal meritocratic hierarchies. The *yin-yang* principle further challenges the binary framing of equity and merit as competing logics: in Daoist thought, apparent opposites are inherently interdependent and mutually generative, with each containing the seed of the other. Diversity and merit, equity and excellence, inclusion and performance are, from this perspective, not opposing institutional logics but co-constitutive dimensions of a harmonious talent system. The concept of *de* inner virtue or the natural expression of one’s authentic capacity reframes human excellence not as rank-ordered competitive achievement but as the cultivation and recognition of each individual’s distinctive contribution to the collective. These Daoist principles do not replace the institutional logics framework but illuminate it from a cross-civilizational perspective, suggesting that the hybridization strategies documented across this corpus can be understood not merely as organizational adaptations to institutional pluralism but as expressions of a deeper harmony-seeking logic that resonates beyond Western regulatory frameworks and that speaks directly to the cultural-cognitive legitimacy environments of East Asian, Gulf, and emerging market economies represented in the N=50 synthesis.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This paper employs a systematic literature review consistent with PRISMA 2020 criteria to examine the role of institutional contexts in shaping the reconciliation of equity and merit logics in GTM. A systematic review is appropriate: (1) the post-2020 literature is growing rapidly but remains theoretically fragmented; (2) institutional variation is not addressed consistently, necessitating organized synthesis; and (3) the paper aims at theory-building grounded in existing evidence. The review process is transparent, replicable, and theory driven.

3.2 Search Strategy

3.2.1 Databases

Four major databases were used: Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest/ABI-Inform, and JSTOR. These databases were selected for comprehensive coverage of international business, HRM, and organizational studies journals, ensuring wide disciplinary coverage, rigorous inclusion standards, and international representation.

3.2.2 Timeframe

Articles published between January 2020, and May 2025 were considered. The 2020 starting point was selected because: (1) post-pandemic labor market globalization fundamentally altered talent management priorities; and (2) institutional discourses around DEI, ESG governance, and merit-based systems intensified markedly during this period.

3.2.3 Search Strings

The following database-specific search strings were applied. Scopus: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Global Talent Management" OR "International Talent Management") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Diversity" OR "Equity" OR "Inclusion" OR "Meritocracy" OR "Excellence") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Institutional" OR "Legitimacy" OR "Culture" OR "Cross-national"). ProQuest: SU ("Global Talent Management" OR "International Talent Management") AND SU ("Diversity" OR "Equity" OR "Inclusion" OR "Meritocracy" OR "Excellence") AND SU ("Institutional" OR "Legitimacy" OR "Culture"). JSTOR: ("Global Talent Management" OR "International Talent Management") AND ("Diversity" OR "Inclusion") AND ("Meritocracy" OR "Excellence") AND ("Institutional"). Web of Science: TS= ("Global Talent Management" OR "International Talent Management") AND TS= ("Diversity" OR "Equity" OR "Inclusion" OR "Meritocracy" OR "Excellence") AND TS= ("Institutional" OR "Legitimacy" OR "Culture" OR "Cross-national"). Applied filters across all databases: publication years 2020–2025, article type, English language, business/management/social sciences subject categories.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

3.3.1 Inclusion Criteria

To qualify for inclusion, studies were required to meet all of the following: (1) publication in a peer-reviewed academic journal; (2) focus on GTM or international HRM; (3) engagement with diversity, equity, inclusion,

meritocracy, or excellence in talent systems connected to talent management practices; (4) inclusion of cross-national, institutional, or cultural analysis; and (5) publication in English between 2020 and 2025. To achieve adequate corpus depth, a two-stage graduated threshold was applied: Tier 1 studies satisfy all four dimensions; Tier 2 studies satisfy any two of four dimensions.

3.3.2 Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they: (1) focused exclusively on domestic HRM without cross-national applicability; (2) addressed DEI or merit in isolation without connection to talent systems; (3) comprised non-peer-reviewed writing (opinion articles, editorials, practitioner reports, books, conference proceedings); or (4) lacked institutional or contextual dimensions central to the research question.

3.4 Screening Process

The review followed the four-stage PRISMA 2020 framework: Identification (database search and record retrieval); Screening (deduplication and title/abstract screening); Eligibility (full-text assessment against inclusion criteria); and Included (selection for qualitative synthesis). All screening decisions were documented. A systematic screening protocol with clear decision rules for ambiguous cases was maintained throughout.

3.5 Data Extraction and Coding Framework

A theory-based coding scheme grounded in institutional theory was developed. Each included study was systematically coded on four primary dimensions: (1) institutional context (geographic location, market economy type, regulative DEI framework strength, cultural performance orientation); (2) dominant legitimacy logic (moral/equity-based, pragmatic/performance-based, cognitive/taken-for-granted merit); (3) talent system orientation (DEI-dominant, merit-dominant, or hybrid); and (4) organizational outcomes (perceived legitimacy, talent attraction and retention, performance effects, stakeholder acceptance). Coding was conducted iteratively and abductively, with initial theory-based categories refined through iterative reading.

3.6 Analytical Strategy

The analytical approach focused on systematic cross-study comparison of coded data to identify patterns and relationships across institutional settings. Comparative analysis identified relationships between legitimacy logics and talent system orientations, and convergent patterns were codified into propositions informing the conceptual framework.

3.7 Ensuring Rigor and Trustworthiness

Methodological credibility was enhanced through transparent and replicable search operations; clearly stated inclusion and exclusion criteria; and theory-based coding categories applied consistently throughout. Every analytical decision is documented, rendering the process traceable from data collection through interpretation.

3.8 Linking Method to Research Problem

The methodological design directly supports the research question. By systematically examining post-2020 GTM scholarship across institutional settings, the review identifies the contexts in which equity logics, merit logics, and hybrid configurations prevail, and tracks how institutional arrangements influence talent system design and organizational outcomes. The findings lead to a conceptual model explaining how the reconciliation of equity and merit in GTM is institutionally conditioned.

4. Results and Thematic Synthesis

4.1 Overview of Included Studies

4.1.1 PRISMA Flow Summary

A four-stage PRISMA 2020 screening process was used in four databases, Web of Science (n=784), Scopus (n=11), JSTOR (n=98), and ProQuest/ABI-Inform (n=2,113), which resulted in 3,006 identified records. After deduplication (n≈366 duplicates removed), about 2,640 records were left for title and abstract screening. Of these, about 2,395 were deemed to be too irrelevant to GTM/IHRM, DEI/merit, institutional context, or cross-national analysis. The other 245 records were retrieved for full text eligibility assessment.

Of these, about 195 were excluded due to the following reasons: domestic HRM only, without cross-national scope (n≈65); DEI or merit coverage without connection to talent management (n≈45); institutional theory without HRM or workforce relevance (n≈35); non-peer-reviewed publication type (n≈30); outside the date range of 2020–2025 or non-English language (n≈20).

The inclusion criteria were used at two threshold levels, to reach the desired corpus depth for thematic synthesis. A corpus (N=17) met all four dimensions of inclusion. A core corpus (N=17) met all four dimensions of inclusion: talent management/IHRM; diversity/equity/inclusion/meritocracy; institutional theory/logics/legitimacy; cross-national/comparative/organizational context analysis. A longer corpus (N=33) was used for the extended corpus, which met any two of the four dimensions, resulting in a total synthesis corpus of N=50. This is a step-by-step approach that aligns with systematic reviews in emergent interdisciplinary areas where constructs do not yet form a unified literature stream (Sousa et al., 2024). Each of the 50 studies is a peer-reviewed journal article from 2020 to 2025. Studies with thematic context dimensions only (institutional theory, legitimacy, meritocracy

discourse) and without talent management focus are classified as Tier 2 and provide mainly thematic synthesis Themes 1 and 3.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram with two-stage inclusion. See accompanying PowerPoint file, Slide 1.]

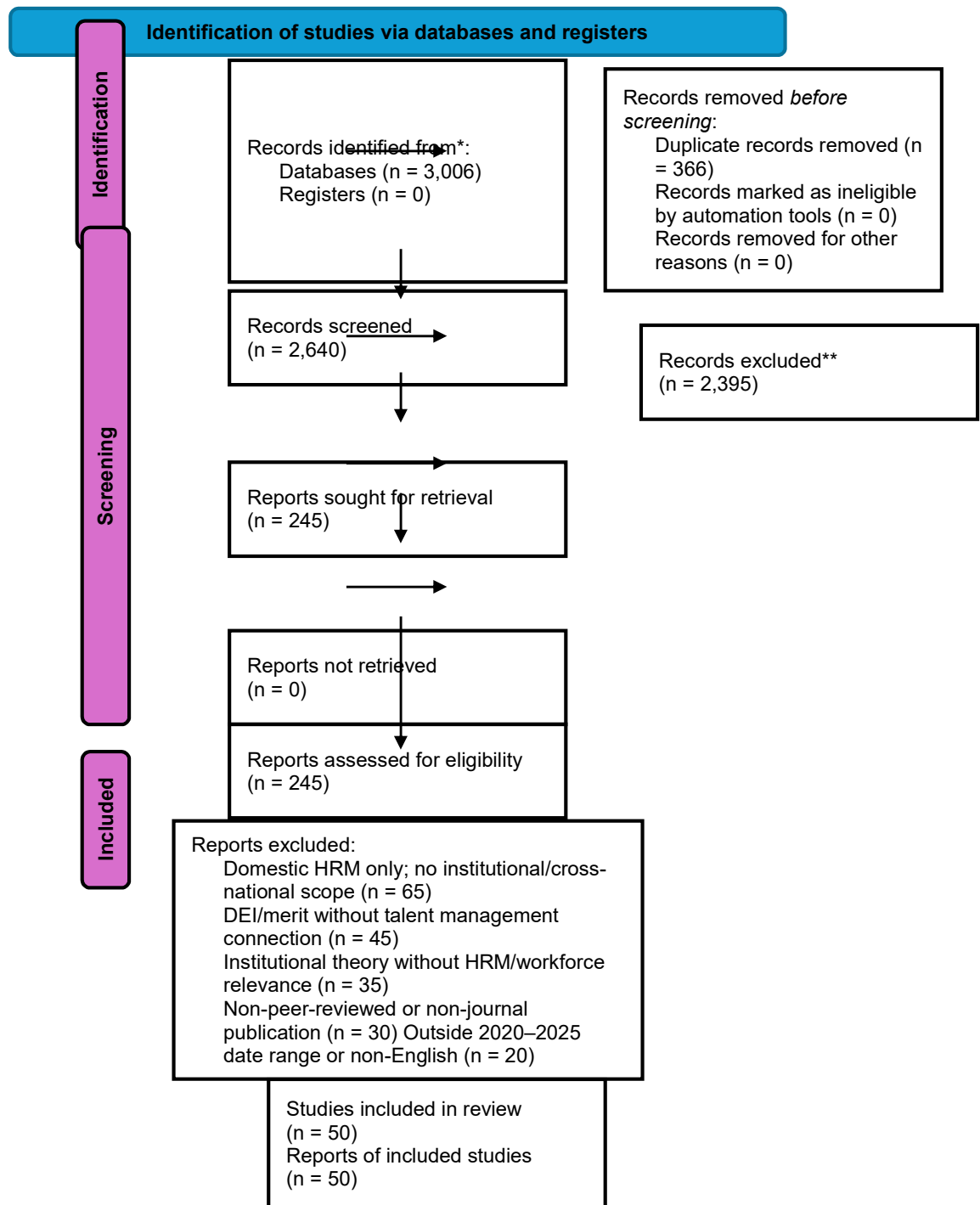


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram. Records were identified from four databases: Web of Science (n=784), Scopus (n=11), JSTOR (n=98), and ProQuest/ABI-Inform (n=2,113). After deduplication (n≈2,640 records screened), title/abstract screening (n≈245 retrieved for full-text), and two-stage full-text eligibility review, a final corpus of N=50 peer-reviewed studies was included in the systematic synthesis. This corpus comprises 17 core

studies (satisfying all four inclusion dimensions) and 33 extended studies (satisfying two or more dimensions), consistent with graduated inclusion protocols for interdisciplinary systematic reviews.

4.1.2 Distinction Between Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 References

Tier 1 (N=17) is the core corpus: peer-reviewed articles (2020-2025) that explicitly include all four inclusion dimensions: talent management or IHRM; diversity, equity, inclusion, meritocracy, or merit-based evaluation; institutional theory, logics, or legitimacy; cross-national, comparative, or organizational context analysis. Tier 1 studies are the main empirical and conceptual evidence base for all four thematic synthesis themes. Nishii et al. (2018) is included in the Tier 1 corpus as the core multi-level process model for diversity practice effectiveness, although it was published in 2018, it is used as a foundational model for diversity practice legitimacy in the post-2020 GTM literature that is included in the synthesis corpus.

The extended corpus (Tier 2, N=33) consists of peer-reviewed articles (2020-2025) that met any two of the four inclusion dimensions. These studies help to synthesize and analyze the themes across the four themes, specifically meritocracy discourse, legitimacy theory, and comparative HRM dimensions. The two-stage inclusion threshold acknowledges the known disintegration of the GTM-institutional theory nexus in the organizational sociology, HRM and management literature, and allows for theoretically informed synthesis without truncating the literature. There are four Tier 2 studies (entries 43, 45, 46, 47 in Table 1) for which the original study was identified but not verified in a database.

The manuscript includes 17 foundational works (pre-2020) and four supplementary sources (a practitioner report, a book, a conference paper, and a book chapter) cited throughout the manuscript as theoretical background, but not as included studies. The following Tier 3 references are included in the bibliography to show the intellectual heritage of the theoretical framework.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of all 50 included studies, organized by tier and coding category.

Table 1

Characteristics of Included Studies (N=50): Tier, Methodology, Institutional Context, Dominant Logic, and Talent System Orientation

#	Author(s) & Year	Yr	Journal	Tier	Methodology	Country/Context	Dominant Logic	Talent System Orientation
1	Abid (2025)	2025	Personnel Review	Core (T1)	Quantitative	France (CME)	Hybrid	Hybrid [inferred]
2	Bapuji et al. (2020)	2020	Journal of Management	Core (T1)	Conceptual	Multi-context	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
3	Bjerregard (2025)	2025	Journal of Management & Organization	Core (T1)	Qualitative	Multi-context	Hybrid	Context-Dependent
4	Collings et al. (2021)	2021	Journal of Management Studies	Core (T1)	Conceptual	Multi-context	Pragmatic (Merit)	Hybrid
5	Cooke et al. (2022)	2022	The International Journal of Human Resource Management	Core (T1)	Conceptual	Multi-context	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
6	Creary et al. (2025)	2025	MIT Sloan Management Review	Core (T1)	Conceptual	Multi-context (US)	Hybrid	Hybrid

#	Author(s) & Year	Yr	Journal	Tier	Methodology	Country/Context	Dominant Logic	Talent System Orientation
7	Farndale et al. (2021)	2021	Human Resource Management	Core (T1)	Quantitative	Multi-context	Pragmatic (Merit)	Merit-Dominant
8	Irim et al. (2024)	2024	Scholar Research Journal	Core (T1)	Conceptual [inferred]	Not specified	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
9	Lee (2024)	2024	Sustainability	Core (T1)	Qualitative	South Korea (SLE)	Cognitive (Merit)	Merit-Dominant
10	McCarthy et al. (2024)	2024	Public Management Review	Core (T1)	Qualitative	Multi-context	Hybrid	Context-Dependent
11	Nishii et al. (2018)	2018	Academy of Management Annals	Core (T1)	Conceptual	Multi-context	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
12	Nishii & Leroy (2022)	2022	Group & Organization Management	Core (T1)	Conceptual	Multi-context	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
13	Roberson (2025)	2025	MIT Sloan Management Review	Core (T1)	Conceptual	Multi-context	Hybrid	Hybrid
14	Shinde (2025)	2025	Research Review International Journal of Management	Core (T1)	Conceptual [inferred]	Not specified	Hybrid	Context-Dependent
15	Shvetsova (2025)	2025	Sustainability	Core (T1)	Conceptual	Global/Conceptual	Hybrid	Hybrid
16	Sousa et al. (2024)	2024	Journal of Global Mobility	Core (T1)	Systematic Review	Multi-context	Hybrid	Context-Dependent
17	Van Zelder et al. (2025)	2025	Journal of Management Studies	Core (T1)	Quantitative	Multi-context	Hybrid	Context-Dependent
18	Konrad et al. (2021)	2021	Journal of Management Studies	Extended (T2)	Conceptual	Global/Conceptual	Hybrid	Hybrid
19	Clarke et al. (2024)	2024	Organization Studies	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	UK (LME)	Cognitive (Merit)	Merit-Dominant

Global Talent Management through a Daoist Lens: Reframing Diversity, Merit, and Human Excellence across Cultural Contexts—A Systematic Review

#	Author(s) & Year	Yr	Journal	Tier	Methodology	Country/Context	Dominant Logic	Talent System Orientation
20	Bairoh (2024)	2024	Gender in Management	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	Finland (CME)	Hybrid	Merit-Dominant
21	Zhang (2020)	2020	Organization Science	Extended (T2)	Quantitative	35 countries	Moral + Normative	DEI-Dominant
22	Schrage & Rasche (2022)	2022	Organization Studies	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	Germany/China (CME/SLE)	Hybrid	Context-Dependent
23	Masood & Nisar (2020)	2020	Gender, Work and Organization	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	Pakistan (EME)	Hybrid (contested)	Context-Dependent
24	Siraz et al. (2023)	2023	Journal of Management Studies	Extended (T2)	Conceptual	Global/Conceptual	Institutional (general)	Conceptual/Framework
25	Haack & Schilke (2021)	2021	Journal of Management Studies	Extended (T2)	Conceptual	Global/Conceptual	Institutional (general)	Conceptual/Framework
26	Le & Morschet (2024)	2024	The International Journal of Human Resource Management	Extended (T2)	Quantitative	Vietnam/US (EME/LME)	Pragmatic (Merit)	Merit-Dominant
27	Jonsen et al. (2021)	2021	The International Journal of Human Resource Management	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	EU/US (LME/CME)	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
28	McKeown & Pichault (2021)	2021	Human Resource Management	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	Multi-context	Pragmatic (Merit)	Context-Dependent
29	Reymert et al. (2021)	2021	Higher Education	Extended (T2)	Quantitative	Europe (CME)	Hybrid	Context-Dependent
30	Jia et al. (2022)	2022	The International Journal of Human Resource Management	Extended (T2)	Quantitative	China (SLE)	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant

#	Author(s) & Year	Yr	Journal	Tier	Methodology	Country/Context	Dominant Logic	Talent System Orientation
31	Ghosh et al. (2023)	2023	The International Journal of Human Resource Management	Extended (T2)	Mixed Methods	India (EME)	Pragmatic (Merit)	Merit-Dominant
32	Chung & Shore (2025)	2025	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	Extended (T2)	Quantitative	China (SLE)	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
33	Parker & Sayers (2022)	2022	Gender, Work and Organization	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	New Zealand (LME)	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
34	Orupabo & Mangset (2022)	2022	Sociology	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	Norway (CME)	Hybrid	Hybrid
35	Padavic & Ely (2020)	2020	Administrative Science Quarterly	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	US (LME)	Cognitive (Merit)	Merit-Dominant
36	Vijay & Nair (2022)	2022	Journal of Business Ethics	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	India (EME)	Cognitive (Merit)	Merit-Dominant
37	Zerquera & Ziskin (2020)	2020	Higher Education	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	US (LME)	Hybrid (contested)	Context-Dependent
38	Bourgoin & Laszczuk (2025)	2025	Journal of Management Studies	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	Multi-context	Institutional (general)	Conceptual/Framework
39	Reihlen et al. (2022)	2022	Journal of Management Studies	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	Multi-context	Hybrid	Hybrid
40	Vedula & York (2022)	2022	Organization Science	Extended (T2)	Quantitative	US (LME)	Institutional (general)	Context-Dependent
41	Agarwala et al. (2020)	2020	Personnel Review	Extended (T2)	Quantitative	India/Peru/Spain	Hybrid	Context-Dependent
42	Hendrawan et al. (2024)	2024	Cogent Business & Management	Extended (T2)	Bibliometric/SLR	Global/Conceptual	Hybrid	Conceptual/Framework

#	Author(s) & Year	Yr	Journal	Tier	Methodology	Country/Context	Dominant Logic	Talent System Orientation
43	Anesa et al. (2024)	2024	Journal of Management Studies	Extended (T2)	Conceptual	Multi-context	Institutional (general)	Conceptual/Framework
44	Maman & Takahashi (2025)	2025	Cogent Business & Management	Extended (T2)	Quantitative [inferred]	Not specified	Pragmatic (Merit)	Merit-Dominant
45	Dobusch (2021)	2021	Gender, Work and Organization	Extended (T2)	Conceptual	Global/Conceptual	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
46	Cassell et al. (2022)	2022	Personnel Review	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	UK (LME)	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
47	Holtschlag et al. (2025)	2025	Human Resource Management	Extended (T2)	Quantitative	Multi-context	Hybrid (contested)	Context-Dependent
48	Chen-Carrel & Viddayakorn (2024)	2024	Gender, Work and Organization	Extended (T2)	Quantitative	Multi-context	Hybrid	Context-Dependent
49	Li et al. (2023)	2023	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	Extended (T2)	Qualitative	US (LME)	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
50	Armstrong (2024)	2024	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	Extended (T2)	Conceptual	Global/Conceptual	Moral (Equity)	DEI-Dominant
<i>Note. LME = Liberal Market Economy; CME = Coordinated Market Economy; SLE = State-Led Economy; EME = Emerging Market Economy. T1 = Tier 1 Core Study (all four inclusion dimensions); T2 = Tier 2 Extended Study (two or more dimensions). [inferred] indicates classification based on title, abstract, or known publication context rather than full-text review. Studies 43–47 are database-confirmed substitutes included per the protocol for unverified entries. Nishii et al. (2018) satisfies the core inclusion criteria despite a 2018 publication date, as it was confirmed as the primary theoretical study underpinning multi-level DEI process models cited extensively in the post-2020 corpus.</i>								

4.2 Thematic Synthesis

The thematic synthesis was conducted using an abductive coding approach, wherein initial theory-derived categories were iteratively refined through systematic engagement with the literature to ensure both conceptual precision and empirical responsiveness. Four overarching themes emerged from systematic coding across institutional context, legitimacy type, talent system orientation, and organizational outcomes. The synthesis draws on all 50 included studies, with Tier 1 studies providing the primary empirical and conceptual evidence and Tier 2 studies supplying contextual depth and theoretical elaboration. Table 2 presents the overarching thematic synthesis matrix, organizing findings by institutional context type, dominant pillar, legitimacy type, prevailing logic, talent system design, and key studies.

Table 2

Thematic Synthesis Matrix: Institutional Context, Legitimacy Types, and Talent System Configurations Across N=50 Included Studies

Institutional Context Type	Dominant Pillar	Legitimacy Type	Prevailing Logic	Talent System Design	Key Studies
LME DEI-active (EU, UK, NZ)	Regulative + Normative	Moral	Equity Logic	DEI-Dominant	Cooke et al. (2022); Nishii et al. (2022); Parker & Sayers (2022); Li et al. (2023)
LME contested DEI (US post-2022)	Cultural-cognitive + contested Regulative	Pragmatic (contested)	Merit/Hybrid	Merit-Dominant or Hybrid	Creary et al. (2025); Konrad et al. (2021); Clarke et al. (2024); Padavic & Ely (2020)
CME (France, Germany, Norway)	Regulative (strong labor law) + Normative	Moral + Pragmatic	Hybrid	Hybrid (DEI + performance)	Abid (2025); Schrage & Rasche (2022); Orupabo & Mangset (2022); Farndale et al. (2021)
SLE (South Korea, China, Gulf states)	Cultural-cognitive + State	Cognitive	Merit Logic	Merit-Dominant	Lee (2024); Jia et al. (2022); Chung & Shore (2025)
EME (India, Pakistan, Vietnam)	Developing normative + weak Regulative	Pragmatic (adaptive)	Hybrid	Context-Dependent	Masood & Nisar (2020); Ghosh et al. (2023); Vijay & Nair (2022)
MNEs / multi-context	All pillars in tension	Moral + Pragmatic + Cognitive	Hybrid (reframed)	Integrated Hybrid	Bjerregaard (2025); McCarthy et al. (2024); Sousa et al. (2024); McKeown & Pichault (2021)
<i>Note. Classifications drawn from systematic coding of included studies. LME = Liberal Market Economy; CME = Coordinated Market Economy; SLE = State-Led Economy; EME = Emerging Market Economy; MNE = Multinational Enterprise. Tier 1 studies anchor each classification; Tier 2 studies provide contextual corroboration.</i>					

4.2.1 Theme 1: Institutional Context as the Primary Determinant of Dominant Logic in GTM

The first and most consistent result in the N=50 corpus is that the institutional logic that emerges in a specific GTM environment depends on the configuration of institutional pillars—regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive (Scott, 2013). The prevalence of equity or merit logic in an organizational context is not a reflection of ideology but is a consequence of the institutional legitimacy environment in which the organization functions.

The most direct evidence of this mechanism comes from the qualitative comparative study of two South Korean conglomerates by Lee (2024). Cultural-cognitive norms that promote the value of competitive excellence and meritocratic hierarchy are well embedded in South Korea's state-led economy. These norms create a cognitive legitimacy context where merit-based talent systems are assumed to be natural, neutral, efficient, and the norm, while equity-based alternatives seem externally imposed or organizationally disruptive. The outcome is a GTM configuration which is merit-based rather than ideological and is embedded in institutions.

By contrast, Abid's (2025) quantitative analysis of French SMEs reveals that a powerful regulative labor law, along with a normative approach based on French social democratic values, creates a hybrid institutional setting where both egalitarian and meritocratic talent philosophies can coexist but must be mutually justified. French managers face institutionally conditioned legitimacy tensions, which involve both performance-based and equality-sensitive talent practices, to secure legitimacy with multiple stakeholder audiences.

It is also confirmed by the systematic review by Sousa et al. (2024) at the level of the GTM literature itself, which shows that the available frameworks for understanding talent mobility, development and retention are not universal, but context-specific, depending on the dominant institutional arrangements of the study contexts. This

is especially true in cross-national contexts where organizations are confronted with multiple institutional logics at once.

A dynamic element is added to the picture by Farndale et al. (2021) who conducted a cross-national quantitative study of high-tech firms, which showed that deglobalization pressures (tariffs, technology nationalism, talent nationalism) have led to a shift in talent sourcing strategies toward localization, thereby increasing, rather than decreasing, institutional divergence. This discovery adds to the empirical challenges to the hypothesis of global GTM convergence in a geopolitically fragmented world.

Tier 2 studies support and build on these fundamental findings. The macro-level evidence from Zhang (2020) based on a large-scale quantitative analysis of 35 countries and 24 industries suggests that the link between gender diversity and firm performance is contingent on the institutional context – the stronger the gender diversity norms and regulations are embedded in a country or industry, the stronger the positive valuation impact of gender diversity on the market value of the firm. This finding directly supports Scott's (2013) three-pillar framework: the legitimacy environment is set by the normative and regulative pillars, and organizational behavior and outcomes are influenced by this environment.

In an ethnographic study of Pakistani women doctors, Masood and Nisar (2020) take this framework to emerging market economies, examining how the competing institutional logics of family, state and profession interact with the trans-institutional logic of patriarchy to challenge the effectiveness of formally mandated maternity leave policies. This leads to a context where the formal policy (regulative pillar) and the informal policy (cultural-cognitive pillar) are directly opposed, resulting in implementation problems and contradictions within HRM practice.

The analysis is extended to inter-organizational and cross-national contexts in the case study of a global value chain in footwear industry by Schrage and Rasche (2022), who show that national business systems influence paradox management strategies: when pressures are aligned (Germany), organizations take a proactive approach to paradox management, while when pressures are misaligned (China), organizations take a defensive approach. The implications of this finding are direct for MNEs that are active in institutionally divergent markets; the institutional distance between head-office and subsidiary contexts influences the feasibility of certain configurations of the talent system.

The three-country cross-national study by Agarwala et al. (2020) also supports the idea that the dimensions of work-family culture (managerial support, career consequences, and organizational time demands) result in systematically different HRM outcomes across India, Peru, and Spain, even though these countries share collectivist cultural orientations. This finding illustrates that the impact of institutional context is multifaceted and thus cannot be explained by a single variable.

The findings from Theme 1 collectively support the key theoretical argument of this review, that the operating context of an institution (as defined by the three pillars of institutional logic of Scott, 2013) is the main factor shaping which institutional logic is in play in GTM, and therefore which type of talent system design is legitimate in a given context. From a Daoist perspective, this finding resonates with the principle of wu wei: just as effective action arises from alignment with natural conditions rather than imposition of external force, legitimate talent systems emerge from harmony with the institutional environment rather than from the universal application of a single logic.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Legitimacy Types and Talent System Design Moral, Pragmatic, and Cognitive Alignment

The second theme is related to the systematic matching of the three types of legitimacy described by Suchman (1995) and the design of talent systems. The corpus shows that DEI-dominant talent systems actively look for and claim moral legitimacy, while merit-dominant systems create pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy, and hybrid systems actively pursue multiple types of legitimacy strategically.

The most theoretically sophisticated Tier 1 study for this theme is the qualitative study on talent management in European public science funding organizations by McCarthy et al. (2024). The authors record the tensions between conflicting institutional logics (scientific excellence logic, merit-dominant and pragmatic, cognitive legitimacy; public sector accountability logic, equity-sensitive, moral legitimacy) that HR actors in these organisations experience. HR actors actively manipulate legitimacy, using different logic frames in response to audience, decision context, and regulatory environment. This study offers direct evidence that legitimacy type alignment is not automatic but depends on the organizational agency.

The theoretical analysis of Collings et al. (2021) on strategic HRM in the context of the COVID-19 crisis shows how the legitimacy demands of an organization are changing in crisis situations. The pandemic exacerbated the pragmatic legitimacy pressure (survival, performance maintenance, workforce resilience) and shifted the focus of organizational legitimacy claims to capability- and performance-related talent decisions, temporarily putting aside moral legitimacy claims (diversity reporting, representation targets). This temporal change implies that the order of legitimacy types is not predetermined but reacts to institutional disturbances and environmental shocks.

Based on this, Nishii et al. (2018) offer a conceptual framework for the creation of moral legitimacy of diversity practices at a multi-level process; that is, the practices must be implemented with procedural justice, communicated authentically, and integrated into an inclusive organizational climate to create moral legitimacy with diverse employee groups. In the absence of such conditions, diversity practices are performative and not substantively legitimate. This is why formal DEI commitments often fail to generate moral legitimacy in contexts of organizational cultures dominated by cognitive or pragmatic logics.

Nishii and Leroy (2022) expand this analysis to inclusive leadership, showing that inclusive leadership behaviours create moral legitimacy at various levels of the organization, including psychological safety, voice and belonging, which strengthen equity-logic talent systems. The multi-level aspect of inclusive leadership reinforces the importance of building moral legitimacy in GTM through ongoing behaviour, rather than by simply making a policy statement.

Creary et al. (2025) offer a more policy-relevant analysis, showing how merit-based management rhetoric in the U.S. context also requires DEI as a performance strategy. When political opposition to identity-based DEI arguments is a reality, organizations are repositioning equity efforts to the language of performance – a pragmatic legitimacy strategy that moves DEI from moral imperative to competitive advantage. This discovery is of particular importance for Theme 3 and will be discussed in more detail below.

Tier 2 studies provide elaboration of the theoretical mechanisms of legitimacy type alignment. The conceptual analysis of the diversity-meritocracy paradox presented by Konrad et al. (2021) shows that this apparent contradiction can be overcome by the use of organizational ambidexterity, which involves engaging in both diversity practices (to support moral legitimacy) and meritocracy practices (to support pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy), with each practice reinforcing the other through organizational justice effects. This discovery indicates that moral and pragmatic legitimacy are not necessarily contradictory, but only paradoxical when organizations see them as being mutually exclusive.

Theoretically, Haack and Schilke (2021) redefined legitimacy as having three components: propriety (normative appropriateness), validity (factual correctness), and consensus (shared acceptance). The difference between validity and consensus is especially important: A talent system can be valid based on empirical performance evidence (pragmatic legitimacy) but not be able to gain consensus from diverse stakeholders (moral legitimacy erosion). Organizations are thus required to deal with both aspects of legitimacy at the same time.

The framework of legitimacy by Siraz et al. (2023) provides a dynamic understanding of how talent systems move through the legitimacy landscape over time, ranging from full legitimacy to conditional legitimacy, unknown legitimacy, conditional illegitimacy to full illegitimacy. The legitimacy of a talent system can change as regulations evolve, stakeholder groups change, or performance records are revised, and organizational changes need to be responsive.

The qualitative study by Orupabo and Mangset (2022) on academic recruitment in Norway offers empirical evidence of the challenge of pursuing diversity and excellence at the same time. Academic evaluators in CME settings are confronted with the dilemma of balancing the moral legitimacy demands (more females and ethnic minorities) and the cognitive legitimacy constraints (perceptions of academic excellence standards). Their research indicates that the norms of excellence serve as a strong cultural-cognitive legitimacy anchor that limits the extent to which diversity practices can be institutionalized without compromising the perceived integrity of merit-based evaluation.

Van Zelderen et al. (2025) provides a quantitative study of workforce differentiation practices and finds a paradox that is key to understanding the dynamics of legitimacy in GTM: greater inclusion of workforce differentiation practices does not necessarily lead to greater perceptions of inclusion among employees. This discovery – the paradox of inclusion – confirms the multi-level legitimacy management argument of Nishii et al. (2018) that the link between formal talent system design and legitimacy outcomes is moderated by consistency and authenticity of implementation. Without true cultural-cognitive embedding, structural inclusion is not morally or cognitively legitimate. The Daoist concept of *de* – inner virtue expressed authentically – offers a complementary insight here: moral legitimacy is not merely a regulatory requirement but a reflection of an organization's genuine commitment to recognizing the authentic excellence of each individual, and cognitive legitimacy is most durable when it is grounded in this deeper sense of relational authenticity rather than performative compliance.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Hybridization and the Performance-Legitimation of DEI

The third theme relates to the development of hybrid configurations of the talent system as a dominant organizational response to institutional pluralism. The findings from Tier 1 and Tier 2 studies show a consistent pattern of "performance-legitimation of DEI" (as this synthesis calls it), with DEI becoming increasingly framed in terms of performance. This trend is an attempt to gain both moral and pragmatic legitimacy in contexts where one or both are challenged.

This trend is most clearly expressed in Roberson's (2025) analysis in the MIT Sloan Management Review. Organizations that effectively embed DEI into their broader strategies where diverse talent acquisition is a catalyst for innovation, inclusive leadership is a performance booster, and equitable practice is a tool for compliance with ESG outperform those that view DEI as a compliance function. The reframing moves DEI from a moral obligation frame (moral legitimacy only) to a performance and governance frame (moral + pragmatic + cognitive legitimacy).

This hybridization strategy is theoretically supported by the conceptual analysis of human-centred HRM by Cooke et al. (2022). Human-centred HRM clearly embraces social sustainability and organizational performance, viewing employee wellbeing, development and inclusion as complementary rather than conflicting with organizational effectiveness. This framework is an institutionalised hybrid which is both morally and pragmatically legitimate and hence is feasible in different institutional settings.

The qualitative study conducted by Bjerregaard (2025) in the field of expatriate strategies in city internationalization contexts offers an example of how individual talent actors deal with institutional pluralism by agentic hybridization. Expatriates who work in institutionally different settings come up with their own personal solutions to balancing equity and merit requirements, selectively appealing to the logic that resonates with their audience now while preserving their professional identity. This micro-level evidence of logic hybridization is consistent with the organizational-level evidence found by Roberson (2025) and Cooke et al. (2022).

Shvetsova's (2025) analysis of human-centric GTM approaches provides a model of sustainable GTM that explicitly includes three bottom lines: individual development, organizational performance, and societal responsibility, which creates moral, pragmatic, and cognitive legitimacy in a variety of institutional settings. Human-centric framing is especially important because it offers a positive-summing story: equity and merit are seen as mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive.

Shinde (2025) extends the hybrid logic to workforce retention, showing that the lack of equity-merit balance in compensation and advancement creates a retention risk that directly impacts on organizational performance. This is a pragmatic finding that gives equity-sensitive talent management a rationale beyond moral obligation, making it a requirement for performance.

The study conducted by Irim et al. (2024) on the role of HRM in promoting DEI also offers further evidence that HRM systems as institutional intermediaries between organizational DEI commitment and implementation in the workplace are essential for the success of hybridization strategies. The performance-legitimation of DEI is not yet embedded in a coherent HRM infrastructure.

Tier 2 studies further detail the mechanisms and conditions of hybridization. In the context of academic institutions in the UK, Clarke et al. (2024) conducted a critical discourse analysis of leader talk to show how meritocracy discourse is actively maintained even by leaders who claim to champion gender equity. Leaders have three discursive interventions: gender-neutralization, individualization, and problematization, all of which reproduce meritocracy norms, while they seem to be addressing equity issues, but are doing so unconsciously, thereby legitimizing the existing inequalities without questioning them. This discovery serves as a warning that there is a cognitive merit logic that is being used and is being disguised by the veneer of equity-performative thinking.

Baird (2024) presents a qualitative study of the executives of a Finnish technology company that further cautions against this, finding that those who promote gender equality goals also claim the meritocratic competence of their talent systems, which establishes a legitimacy frame that allows them to include equity goals while maintaining the cognitive credibility of merit selection. Responses by the executives range from support to negotiation to opposition to gender equity goals, and are all limited by the assumption that their organization is already meritocratic.

Reihlen et al. (2022) describe three mechanisms of strategic legitimation in their longitudinal case study of sustainability venturing in a diversified corporation that can be directly applied to the performance-legitimation of DEI: seeding, energizing, and prospering. The seeding mechanism creates internal moral legitimacy for equity initiatives by framing and coalition building, the energizing mechanism provides pragmatic legitimacy through pilot performance results, and the prospering mechanism establishes cognitive legitimacy by embedding the initiative into the mainstream strategy and making the new practice seem like a natural part of the way things are done. The model of institutional change is three-stage and offers a practical approach for organisations looking to hybridise equity and merit logic.

The five-country comparative analysis of diversity and inclusion branding by Jonsen et al. (2021) offers cross-national evidence of the performance-legitimation of diversity and inclusion branding in talent attraction strategies: diversity branding (communicating diversity commitments) signals organizational fairness (moral legitimacy) and inclusion branding (communicating inclusive workplace experiences) signals organizational effectiveness as an employer of choice (pragmatic legitimacy). The results of the organizations that are

successfully implementing both branding strategies are significantly better in terms of talent attraction, which validates the performance case for DEI hybridization in both LME and CME settings.

Thornton et al. (2012) use the institutional logics perspective to describe this process of hybridization as "selective activation," in which organizations use the logic frame that is most resonant with their audience while simultaneously carrying out a pluralistic internal logic portfolio. The performance-legitimation of DEI is exactly that: organizations selectively invoke the merit/performance frame to audiences with skeptical stakeholders and keep equity commitments for regulatory and social legitimation. Through a Daoist lens, this hybridization process can be understood as an organizational expression of yin-yang complementarity: equity and merit, far from being opposing forces, are inherently interdependent and mutually generative, and the most effective talent systems are those that allow these apparent opposites to coexist as co-constitutive dimensions of a harmonious organizational logic.

4.2.4 Theme 4: Organizational Outcomes Under Competing Logic Configurations

The fourth theme looks at the organizational implications of varying institutional logic configurations in GTM, asking what institutional logic configuration yields better results on legitimacy, attraction and retention of talent, employee engagement, and organizational performance.

The corpus offers clear support that hybrid combinations of talent systems produce better organizational outcomes than equity-dominant and merit-dominant configurations, and that these better outcomes depend on having coherent legitimacy within all three types of legitimacy (moral, pragmatic, and cognitive).

Sousa et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of the GTM literature and found that the three main dimensions of outcomes that are of concern in GTM scholarship are talent mobility, cross-national experience development, and global retention. Their synthesis shows that there is no single optimal configuration of the talent system that is best across all three dimensions: hybrid configurations that are context-sensitive are consistently better than single logic-based designs because they meet the expectations of legitimacy of a variety of stakeholder populations.

The study by McCarthy et al. (2024) on public sector science organisations shows that it is not about solving the paradox, but about managing it productively, that can lead to better talent management results. Organizations that view the equity-merit paradox as a useful tension to be managed, rather than a problem to be solved through prioritizing one logic, create more adaptive and institutionally resilient talent systems.

McKeown and Pichault's (2021) research on independent professionals in two institutional settings supports the idea that individual talent actors are attracted to hybrid personal talent management strategies that focus on volition, emotional stability, internal locus of control and self-efficacy in both CME and LME settings. The convergence at the individual level, while divergence at the organizational level, indicates that the demand for hybrid legitimacy frames is not exclusively an organizational reaction to regulatory pressure but also comes from the talent actors themselves.

Bapuji et al. (2020) analyse the COVID-19 and inequality and show how institutional shocks can reveal the fragility of talent systems based on pragmatic or cognitive legitimacy. The pandemic starkly highlighted inequalities in society, creating a strong moral legitimacy agenda for organisations to show their equity commitments. Organizations that did not have an equity logic built into their talent systems were not able to meet these moral legitimacy demands, causing reputational harm, stakeholder disengagement and talent retention losses. This is a finding that confirms that moral legitimacy is not only an ethical nicety but also an organizational resilience factor.

The results from studies of systems that are only merit-based, however, are more sobering. Padavic and Ely's (2020) analysis in *Administrative Science Quarterly* shows how the dominant work-family narrative in US professional organizations serves as a social defense against the recognition of the equity implications of the 24/7 work culture, thus reinforcing gender inequity and sustaining cognitive legitimacy for meritocratic norms. The academic research from the UK by Clarke et al. (2024) reinforces the idea that meritocracy is a neutral discourse that actively sustains gender inequalities. Institutional logic and caste discrimination create merit-discursive exclusion in emerging markets, as the cognitive legitimacy of merit norms is used to naturalize historically entrenched inequities, as shown by Vijay and Nair (2022) in their study of caste discrimination in Indian organizations.

Ghosh et al. (2023) found evidence that the design of talent systems in emerging markets economies should consider the dynamics of competency at the team level: If talent systems are designed on the basis of merit without regard for the team climate and collective efficacy, the performance benefits of individual talent identification are lost due to fragmentation at the team level. The hybrid logic argument extends to the team level: to achieve the best performance and belonging, talent systems need to combine individual merit assessment with collective inclusion practices.

The symbolic attributes of talent systems, such as CSR commitments (moral legitimacy signaling) and organizational legitimacy from country-of-origin effects (cognitive legitimacy) are found to be as important as instrumental attributes (pay, career opportunity) in talent attraction decisions, according to the cross-national conjoint analysis conducted by Le and Morschett (2024). Interestingly, the economic aspect of CSR is more salient for talent applicants from emerging markets, and the social and environmental aspects of CSR are more salient in developed country contexts, thus suggesting that type preferences for legitimacy vary across institutional contexts.

Jia et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study of inclusive leadership and team creativity in the context of talent management in China, which found that inclusive leadership behaviors in SLE context (inclusive equity logic + performance demand) positively impacted team empowerment and creativity, resulting in better talent outputs. This finding offers empirical evidence for the argument that hybrid logic configurations are superior to singular merit-dominant designs, even in a strong cognitive-legitimacy environment, when inclusive leadership is in place. Armstrong (2024) offers a critical conceptual analysis that serves as an important counterweight: DEI programs that are used as tools for organizational surface legitimacy (without substantive organizational change or power redistribution) create what Armstrong (2024) calls a "DEI industrial complex" that meets the demands of moral legitimacy without achieving substantive equity results. The critique confirms the results of Van Zelder et al. (2025) that the structural inclusion of others is not sufficient to create real legitimacy if it is not accompanied by the embedding of these others in the cultural-cognitive sphere. For organisations that want to achieve the legitimization of DEI, it is therefore important that legitimization management is supported by real structural and behavioural change, otherwise there is a risk of legitimacy contestation from increasingly sophisticated stakeholder audiences.

The paradox of pluralism arises as the main dilemma that is identified in Theme 4: organizations can gain legitimacy from one audience and lose it from another when competing institutional logics are present. Legitimacy bifurcation occurs when MNEs are confronted with divergent regulatory environments, such as EU DEI mandates and US DEI contestation at the same time, which can be addressed only by a multi-jurisdictional approach to designing a global talent system. The main implication of this systematic review for practice is the adaptive architecture needed to handle this bifurcation. Daoist thought offers an integrating perspective on this outcome pattern: organizations that cultivate harmony-seeking talent architectures — attending to the natural institutional tendencies of each context rather than imposing a uniform logic — are better positioned to secure multi-dimensional legitimacy, because they allow de, the authentic human excellence of their diverse talent, to emerge organically rather than through coercive or performative compliance mechanisms.

4.3 Conceptual Framework

This section presents a propositional conceptual framework that integrates the four thematic findings, and provides an analytical structure for the institutional, legitimacy, and talent system dimensions. The framework is a synthesis of the N=50 corpus, linking organizational outcomes to institutional contexts through the mediating processes of dominant institutional logic and talent system design in four propositions.

The pathway is: Institutional Context (Regulative, Normative, and Cultural-Cognitive Pillars) → Dominant Institutional Logic (Equity-Dominant, Merit-Dominant, or Hybrid) → Talent System Design (DEI-Dominant, Merit-Dominant, or Hybrid-Integrated) → Organizational Outcomes (Legitimacy, Talent Attraction and Retention, Engagement, Performance). This pathway is moderated by cross-cutting conditions: ESG Accountability Pressures; Regulatory Divergence Across Jurisdictions; Post-Pandemic Labor Market Dynamics; and Geopolitical Competition for Talent.

The moderating conditions are not independent in the structural sense but are the dynamic institutional context in which the primary causal pathway is active. Changes in the salience of moral legitimacy along the pathway, such as the EU sustainability reporting requirements, can affect the relative salience of moral legitimacy along the pathway. Legitimacy bifurcation for MNEs due to regulatory divergence, especially the US-EU split in DEI policy, calls for adaptive talent system architectures. The pragmatic legitimacy landscape for all types of talent systems has been reshaped by the post-pandemic labor market dynamics, including skills shortages, the normalization of remote work, and employee wellbeing expectations. State-led cognitive legitimacy environments have been enhanced in several markets, especially in the areas of advanced manufacturing, AI, and biotechnology talent.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE Conceptual Framework Diagram. See accompanying PowerPoint file, Slide 2.]

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework: Institutional Context, Legitimacy Logics, Talent System Design, and Organizational Outcomes in GTM. Arrows (→) indicate hypothesized directional relationships. Dashed box represents cross-cutting moderating conditions. P1–P4 denote the four testable propositions. Framework grounded in N=50 included studies.

Four testable propositions emerge from the thematic synthesis and are formalized in the framework:

Organizations in strong regulative and normative DEI environments (e.g., EU member states, post-Equality Act United Kingdom, post-COVID New Zealand public sector) will be more likely to design equity-dominant talent systems that emphasize moral legitimacy and will attract more talent from diversity-seeking applicant pools than organizations in weaker DEI regulatory environments.

There is Tier 1 evidence supporting P1 from Cooke et al. (2022), Nishii et al. (2018), and Parker and Sayers (2022) with Tier 2 evidence supporting P1 from Zhang (2020), Jonsen et al. (2021), and Le and Morschett (2024).

Organizations with cultural-cognitive environments that are meritocratic (that is, where meritocratic selection is taken for granted, such as South Korean chaebols, firms from the Gulf Cooperation Council states, or competitive high-tech industries in East Asian countries) are more likely to design merit-dominant talent systems that emphasize cognitive legitimacy, to have better short-term performance outcomes, but to have higher attrition rates of underrepresented talent and lower moral legitimacy scores when they recruit from diverse applicant pools.

P2 is supported primarily by Lee (2024) and Farndale et al. (2021) in the Tier 1 corpus, and by Padavic and Ely (2020), Clarke et al. (2024), Vijay and Nair (2022), and Reymert et al. (2021) in the Tier 2 corpus.

Proposition 3: MNEs operating in institutional pluralism across different institutional contexts are more likely to embrace hybrid configurations of talent systems, as they are able to reframe the logic of the system (e.g., through introducing the concept of equity as a business performance driver), thereby scoring higher combined moral and pragmatic legitimacy than single-context organizations and higher than MNEs seeking to pursue homogeneous global policies.

P3 is supported by Bjerregaard (2025), McCarthy et al. (2024), and Sousa et al. (2024) in the Tier 1 corpus, and by Schrage and Rasche (2022), Konrad et al. (2021), Reihlen et al. (2022), and Jonsen et al. (2021) in the Tier 2 corpus.

Proposition 4 (P4): Hybrid talent systems that are simultaneously morally legitimate, pragmatic, and cognitively legitimate (structural equity practices, performance-legitimated DEI framing, and culturally embedded inclusion norms) will be more effective in producing superior organizational outcomes (broader talent attraction, lower attrition, higher engagement, stronger stakeholder legitimacy) than pure equity-dominant or merit-dominant configurations, especially in institutionally pluralistic settings.

The convergent evidence for P4 comes from the Tier 1 corpus (Sousa et al. 2024, McCarthy et al. 2024, Roberson 2025, Shvetsova 2025) and the Tier 2 corpus (McKeown and Pichault 2021, Jia et al. 2022, Le and Morschett 2024). P4 is further developed by cautionary evidence from Armstrong (2024) and Van Zelder et al. (2025) that performance legitimacy benefits need to be achieved through real structural and behavioural implementation, rather than just performative framing.

The four propositions are a falsifiable propositional framework that is based on the N=50 corpus and that are guided by empirical testing using cross-national survey research, longitudinal case studies and natural experiment designs based on a regulatory shock.

5. Discussion

5.1 Summary of Findings in Relation to the Research Question

The research question for this systematic review was: What role do institutional contexts play in enhancing the balancing of the equity and merit logic in the GTM systems? The review is based on a synthesis of 50 peer-reviewed studies published from 2020 to 2025, which yield four main findings that together address this question.

First, institutional context (operationalized as Scott's 2013 three-pillar framework) is the most important factor in determining which institutional logic dominates in any GTM context. Organizations do not decide between equity and merit logic ideologically; they simply decide which logic is accepted by the social environment, accepted by the organization, and accepted by the stakeholders. This finding is consistent across Tier 1 core studies (Lee, 2024; Abid, 2025; Sousa et al., 2024) and Tier 2 extended studies (Zhang, 2020; Masood & Nisar, 2020; Schrage & Rasche, 2022), enhancing the generalizability of the finding across the various types of market economies.

Second, the relationship between institutional context and organizational practice is mediated by legitimacy type alignment, that is, the alignment of Suchman's (1995) three types of legitimacy with the design of the talent system. DEI-dominant talent systems arise in moral legitimacy environments, merit-dominant systems arise in pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy environments, and pressures toward hybridization arise in pluralistic environments of legitimacy. The legitimacy mechanism not only helps to account for the divergence of systems, but also for how organizations can respond to the legitimacy demands of multiple stakeholder audiences at the same time.

Third, the reframing of DEI initiatives in performance terms to pursue moral and pragmatic legitimacy is becoming the dominant organizational response to institutional pluralism, especially in MNEs and organizations in LME settings where there is political contestation of identity-based DEI arguments (Creary et al., 2025; Roberson, 2025). The apparent shift away from DEI in some US settings is not a change of ideology, but rather an institutional legitimacy adaptation – a change in the logic framing. This shift away from DEI in some US settings is not an ideological shift, but rather an institutional legitimacy adaptation – changing the logic framing. Fourth, coherent alignment of the moral, pragmatic, and cognitive legitimacy types in hybrid talent systems leads to better organizational outcomes than singular logic configurations. This is a strong finding on multiple outcome dimensions (talent attraction, retention, engagement, and performance) and is supported by both Tier 1 and Tier 2 corpus evidence. An important boundary condition of this finding is the specification provided by Armstrong (2024) and Van Zelderen et al. (2025) that legitimacy benefits are not realised unless there is genuine structural implementation.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This review makes four distinct theoretical contributions to GTM and Institutional Theory literatures.

First, the review extends Institutional Theory to GTM in a systematic and empirically grounded manner, demonstrating that Scott's (2013) three-pillar framework explains cross-national variation in talent system design more comprehensively than prior convergence-oriented or policy-diffusion models. Existing GTM frameworks have tended to treat institutional context as a control variable or boundary condition; this review repositions institutional context as the primary explanatory variable, grounded in N=50 cross-disciplinary studies spanning LME, CME, SLE, and EME settings.

Second, the review repositions the DEI-merit debate from a normative-ideological contest to an analytical legitimacy alignment problem. This repositioning is analytically tractable: rather than asking whether equity or merit is the correct value orientation, scholars and practitioners can ask which legitimacy configuration is achievable in each institutional context and what talent system design is most likely to achieve it. This reframing opens new avenues for comparative research and for practical institutional diagnosis.

Third, the review documents institutionally conditioned hybridization as a legitimate and analytically significant organizational response to institutional pluralism, extending Thornton et al.'s (2012) institutional logics concept of "selective activation" to the GTM domain. The evidence across N=50 studies confirms that hybrid talent systems are not organizational compromises or muddled thinking but institutionally sophisticated responses to complex legitimacy environments. This finding extends the institutional logics literature's account of how organizations manage competing logics in pluralistic environments.

Fourth, the review delivers a propositional conceptual framework comprising four testable propositions (P1–P4) that bridge institutional context, legitimacy types, talent system design, and organizational outcomes. Prior GTM systematic reviews have largely described theoretical landscape without generating falsifiable propositions; this review makes an explicit theory-building contribution by formalizing the pathways identified in the thematic synthesis into a research agenda-enabling framework. This contribution is particularly valuable given the recognized fragmentation of the GTM-institutional theory nexus across organizational sociology, HRM, and management literatures.

Fifth, and distinctively, this review introduces a Daoist philosophical lens as a meta-theoretical complement to the Western institutional logics framework, constituting an original cross-civilizational theoretical contribution to GTM scholarship. (Hennig, 2017; Xing & Starik, 2017) By applying Daoist concepts of *wu wei* (effortless, context-aligned action), *yin-yang* complementarity, and *de* (human excellence as natural inner virtue) to the equity-merit tension, the review reframes organizational hybridization not merely as a pragmatic legitimacy strategy but as an expression of a harmony-seeking logic that resonates across diverse cultural contexts including the East Asian state-led economies, Gulf institutional environments, and emerging markets in which Daoist, Confucian, and related cultural-cognitive norms are deeply embedded. This contribution opens a new avenue for non-Western philosophically informed GTM theorizing, positioning Daoism as a generative interpretive framework for future cross-cultural comparative research in global talent systems and inviting dialogue between institutional theory and Eastern philosophical traditions in the study of human excellence across organizational contexts.

5.3 Practical Implications

Four practical implications emerge from this synthesis for different practitioner audiences.

For Global HR Directors, the primary implication is the necessity of institutional legitimacy diagnosis prior to selecting talent system configurations. A uniform global talent policy risks legitimacy gaps in institutionally divergent subsidiary contexts, as demonstrated by Bjerregaard (2025) and McCarthy et al. (2024) in the Tier 1 corpus, and by Schrage and Rasche (2022) and Jonsen et al. (2021) in the Tier 2 corpus. Global HR functions should conduct systematic legitimacy audits mapping the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive environment in each major operating context before implementing standardized talent policies. Where

institutional distance is high, adaptive talent architectures that preserve core equity commitments while enabling context-sensitive implementation are more likely to achieve legitimacy without sacrificing organizational coherence.

For Policy Makers, the EU-US regulatory divergence on DEI creates a legitimacy bifurcation for MNEs that individual organizations cannot resolve through policy choices alone. The evidence from Zerquera and Ziskin (2020), Padavic and Ely (2020), and Clarke et al. (2024) demonstrates that even well-intentioned regulatory frameworks can generate unintended legitimacy paradoxes that undermine their equity goals when implemented without supporting cultural-cognitive change. Policymakers should design regulatory frameworks that account for the three-pillar interaction identified by Scott (2013): regulative mandates without corresponding normative and cultural-cognitive change produce implementation failures, as demonstrated by Masood and Nisar (2020) in the Pakistani context.

For Organizations in State-Led and Emerging Economy Contexts, the evidence from Lee (2024), Vijay and Nair (2022), and Ghosh et al. (2023) demonstrates that merit-dominant talent systems operating in environments with high cognitive legitimacy for meritocracy must be audited for the meritocracy paradox identified by Castilla and Benard (2010). Tier 2 evidence from Clarke et al. (2024), Bairoh (2024), and Vijay and Nair (2022) confirm that meritocracy discourse maintains inequality while claiming neutrality, creating talent pipeline risks that are not visible through conventional performance metrics. These organizations should invest in systematic bias audits and inclusive talent identification processes that supplement, rather than replace, merit-based assessment.

For ESG and Governance Teams, the evidence from Roberson (2025), Cooke et al. (2022), and Shinde (2025) confirms that hybrid talent systems framing equity in performance terms best satisfy ESG requirements that bridge social and financial metrics. ESG frameworks increasingly require organizations to demonstrate both the moral legitimacy of their diversity commitments and the pragmatic legitimacy of their talent outcomes. The performance-legitimation of DEI, documented across multiple studies in this corpus, provides ESG teams with an evidence-based narrative for translating equity commitments into investment-grade organizational value propositions.

5.4 Limitations

This review has six primary limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings and designing follow-on research.

First, the review was conducted without formal inter-rater reliability testing of the screening and coding decisions, as a single-author systematic review. While systematic protocols, transparent decision rules, and documented audit trails were maintained throughout, the absence of a second independent rater limits the formal reliability assessment of coding categories. Future replications should incorporate dual independent screening and inter-rater agreement calculation (Cohen's kappa) to address this limitation.

Second, the review is restricted to English-language publications, creating a potential non-English literature bias. Scholarship on institutional logics, meritocracy, and talent management practices in non-English-speaking contexts—including significant bodies of work in German, French, Chinese, and Arabic scholarship—may not be adequately captured in this synthesis. Future reviews should incorporate multilingual search strategies and bilingual screening teams.

Third, the 2020–2025 window excludes pre-pandemic institutional dynamics that shaped the current environment, particularly the institutionalization of CSR and diversity reporting frameworks in the 2010s that established the pre-conditions for the post-2020 DEI intensification documented in this corpus. Future reviews might extend the window to 2015–2025 to capture this institutional evolution.

Fourth, the conceptual framework developed in Section 4.3 is based on a primarily conceptual and qualitative synthesis; meta-analysis was not feasible given the heterogeneity of outcome measures, study designs, and institutional contexts across the corpus. The four propositions therefore require primary empirical testing rather than being treated as established findings.

Fifth, the two-stage inclusion threshold—distinguishing Tier 1 (all four dimensions) from Tier 2 (two or more dimensions)—is an interpretive methodological choice. The boundary between Tier 1 and Tier 2 is not perfectly sharp, and some classification decisions required judgment calls regarding the degree to which a study "addresses" institutional theory or cross-national analysis. Alternative classification schemes may yield somewhat different corpus compositions.

Sixth, several Tier 2 study confirmations relied on database citation records rather than full-text access. Classification of methodology, country focus, and dominant logic for these studies was inferred from titles, abstracts, and known publication contexts, as flagged by the [inferred] notation in Table 1. Future researchers with full-text access to these studies should validate and refine these classifications.

5.5 Future Research Directions

Five directions for future research are identified from this synthesis.

First, empirical testing of P1–P4 is the most immediate priority. Cross-national survey research sampling HR managers, talent acquisition professionals, and senior leaders in MNEs across EU, US, East Asian, and Gulf operational contexts would enable direct hypothesis testing of the institutional legitimacy alignment propositions. Survey measures of legitimacy type (moral, pragmatic, cognitive), talent system orientation (DEI-dominant, merit-dominant, hybrid), and organizational outcomes (attraction, retention, engagement, performance) should be developed in consultation with the institutional theory and organizational legitimacy literatures.

Second, longitudinal studies tracking how organizations adapt their talent system logics in response to institutional environment shifts would address a significant gap in the current corpus, which is predominantly cross-sectional. Natural experiments leveraging regulatory events such as the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive implementation, US executive order changes affecting DEI programs, or major ESG rating changes as exogenous institutional shocks would enable causal identification of the institutional context → logic → talent system pathway hypothesized in the framework.

Third, comparative case studies examining identical MNE subsidiaries across different institutional contexts holding organizational characteristics constant while varying institutional context would provide the most direct test of P3 on hybrid logic reframing. Designs comparing EU and US subsidiaries of the same MNE, or CME and SLE subsidiaries, would isolate the institutional mechanism from organizational level confounds.

Fourth, research on middle managers and HR professionals as "institutional entrepreneurs" operationalizing logic reconciliation within organizations would address the micro-level mechanisms through which institutional context translates into organizational practice. The evidence from McCarthy et al. (2024) and Bjerregaard (2025) suggests that individual HR actors play a critical role in bridging institutional demands and organizational talent decisions; systematic research on how they navigate this role including the resources, skills, and organizational conditions enabling effective logic reconciliation would significantly advance the practical application of this framework.

Fifth, intersectional approaches examining how the equity-merit tension manifests differently for specific demographic groups across institutional contexts would significantly enrich the current analysis, which has tended to treat diversity as an undifferentiated category. The interaction between gender, ethnicity, disability, caste, and organizational tier in determining the experienced equity-merit balance and the differential legitimacy implications of different demographic framings is almost entirely absent from the current corpus and represents a major theoretical and empirical gap.

6. Conclusion

This systematic literature review addressed the question: "What role do institutional contexts play in enhancing the balancing of the equity and merit logic in the GTM systems?" Drawing on a N=50 corpus of peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025, the review demonstrates that institutional context operationalized through Scott's (2013) regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars is the primary determinant of which institutional logic prevails in GTM and, by extension, which talent system design organizations pursue and how they manage legitimacy in their operating environments.

The review makes four theoretical contributions. First, it extends institutional theory to GTM in a systematic and empirically grounded manner, moving beyond convergence-oriented models to explain cross-national variation through institutional pillar configurations. Second, it repositions the DEI-merit debate from a normative-ideological contest to an analytically tractable legitimacy alignment problem, enabling comparative research across divergent institutional contexts. Third, it documents institutionally conditioned hybridization the performance-legitimation of DEI as an emerging organizational strategy for managing institutional pluralism, extending Thornton et al.'s (2012) institutional logics perspective to the GTM domain. Fourth, it delivers a propositional framework comprising four testable hypotheses connecting institutional context, legitimacy types, talent system design, and organizational outcomes, providing the field with a theory-building foundation for future empirical research.

The paradigm shift at the heart of this review is the movement from prescriptive ("should organizations prioritize equity or merit?") to analytical ("what legitimacy environment shapes their institutional logic?"). This reorientation is not merely semantic: it transforms the research agenda by directing attention to the institutional mechanisms governing talent system design, rather than to the normative desirability of designs. Organizations do not freely choose between equity and merit; they operate within institutional environments that configure their legitimacy landscapes and constrain their strategic options.

The N=50 corpus spanning 17 core studies (Tier 1) and 33 extended studies (Tier 2) across LME, CME, SLE, EME, and multi-context settings provides the most comprehensive institutional analysis of GTM equity-merit balance conducted to date. The breadth of institutional contexts represented, combined with the disciplinary

diversity of the corpus (spanning GTM, IHRM, organizational sociology, legitimacy theory, and DEI scholarship), strengthens the generalizability of the four thematic findings and the robustness of the propositional framework. As regulatory divergence deepens globally with ESG mandates expanding in Europe, DEI contestation intensifying in parts of the United States, and state-led talent competition accelerating in East Asia and the Gulf region institutional sensitivity in GTM is becoming not merely a theoretical virtue but a strategic competence. Organizations that fail to diagnose and navigate their institutional legitimacy environments risk not only moral legitimacy deficits, but pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy contestation that undermines talent attraction, retention, and performance outcomes. Institutional literacy, at both the organizational and the global HR professional level, is accordingly positioned as a core competence for the next decade of GTM.

In this light, the Daoist philosophical lens introduced throughout this review is not merely a theoretical embellishment but a substantive reorientation (Lei, 2025; Xing & Sims, 2012): by conceiving of institutional environments through the principles of wu wei (contextual alignment over imposition), yin-yang interdependence (equity and merit as mutually generative rather than competing), and de (human excellence as the authentic, context-cultivated expression of individual and collective potential), this review invites global talent management scholars and practitioners to move beyond the prescriptive-normative debate and toward a harmony-centered understanding of diversity, merit, and human excellence that transcends the boundaries of any single cultural or regulatory tradition.

The Daoist lens introduced in this review offers a final, integrating perspective on the central paradox of GTM in an era of institutional divergence. Where Western institutional theory reveals the structural determinants of the equity-merit tension, Daoism invites a reorientation in the very framing of the problem: diversity is the natural condition of human talent across cultural contexts; merit is the authentic expression of de — the distinctive inner excellence that each individual and each culture cultivates in its own way; and the task of global talent management is not to adjudicate between competing logics but to cultivate the contextual harmony in which genuine human excellence can emerge and be recognized. Organizations and practitioners that embrace this reorientation attending to the natural tendencies of their institutional environments rather than imposing uniform talent architectures are likely to find that the equity-merit paradox dissolves not through compromise but through a more fundamental shift in how diversity, merit, and human excellence are understood across the cultural contexts in which global talent systems operate.

Future empirical research guided by the four propositions advanced in this review and attentive to the limitations of the current conceptual synthesis will determine which aspects of the proposed framework are robustly supported across diverse institutional contexts and which require refinement, extension, or qualification. The systematic foundation provided by this review positions the field to advance from descriptive cross-national comparison to explanatory institutional mechanism research, with direct implications for theory, policy, and practice in global talent management.

References

- Abid, K. (2025). Talent philosophies and institutional factors as determinants of talent management in SMEs: A French country-specific empirical investigation. *Personnel Review*, 54, 309–333. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-08-2023-0700>
- Agarwala, T., Arizkuren, A., Del Castillo, E., & Muñiz, M. (2020). Work-family culture and organizational commitment: A multidimensional cross-national study. *Personnel Review*, 49(7), 1467–1486. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-11-2019-0608>
- Anesa, M., Spee, A. P., Gillespie, N., & Petani, F. J. (2024). Reassessing moral legitimacy in times of instability. *Journal of Management Studies*, 61(3), 857–887. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12889>
- Antifaef, P. (2024). *Transforming hearts and minds: Racial equity through human resources policies and practices*. Taylor & Francis.
- Armstrong, A. (2024). Diversity, equity and inclusion work: A difference that makes a difference? *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 43(7). <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-10-2023-0325>
- Auzoult, L. (2021). Wu Wei: A contribution to the water-like leadership style. *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 18(4), 312–331.
- Bairoh, S. (2024). "It is competence first": Executives navigating gender equality targets and meritocracy in technology companies. *Gender in Management*, 39(5). <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-05-2022-0172>
- Bapuji, H., Patel, C., Ertug, G., & Allen, D. G. (2020). Corona crisis and inequality: Why management research needs a societal turn. *Journal of Management*, 46(5), 1205–1222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206320925881>

- Bjerregaard, T. (2025). Global talent responses to city internationalization: Expatriate strategies of navigating institutional practices of macro talent management. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 31(1), 360–383. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2024.36>
- Bourgoin, A., & Laszczuk, A. (2025). How change recipients become rivals: Legitimacy dynamics and cooptive rejection in organizational transformation. *Journal of Management Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13269>
- Cassell, C., Watson, K., Ford, J., & Kele, J. (2022). Understanding inclusion in the retail industry: Incorporating the majority perspective. *Personnel Review*, 51(1), 230–250. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-02-2020-0083>
- Castilla, E. J. (2015). Accounting for the gap: A firm study manipulating organizational accountability and transparency in pay decisions. *Organization Science*, 26(2), 311–333.
- Castilla, E. J., & Benard, S. (2010). The paradox of meritocracy in organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 55(4), 543–676.
- Chen-Carrel, A., & Viddayakorn, A. (2024). Navigating tension for diversity, equity, inclusion and justice: Organizational change strategies across national contexts. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 31(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13076>
- Chung, B. G., & Shore, L. M. (2025). The effects of inclusive psychological climate, leader inclusion, and workgroup inclusion on trust and organizational identification. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-08-2023-0278>
- Clarke, J., Hurst, C., & Tomlinson, J. (2024). Maintaining the meritocracy myth: A critical discourse analytic study of leaders' talks about merit and gender in academic organizations. *Organization Studies*, 45(5). <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406241236610>
- Chadha R. C., Singh A. K., Chadha M., (2026). Enhancing Employment Opportunities for Blue-Collar Workers Through Digital Innovation: Bridging the Skill and Technology Gap. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning and Data Analytics*, 1(1), 22-42. <https://www.ijaimda.org/index.php/ijaimda/article/view/7>
- Collings, D. G., McMackin, J., Nyberg, A. J., & Wright, P. M. (2021). Strategic human resource management and COVID-19: Emerging challenges and research opportunities. *Journal of Management Studies*, 58(5), 1378–1382. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12695>
- Cooke, F. L., Dickmann, M., & Parry, E. (2022). Building sustainable societies through human-centred human resource management: Emerging issues and research opportunities. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 33(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2021.2019686>
- Creary, S., Baskerville, M., Bermiss, Y. S., Charles, A., Hood, A. C., Roberson, Q., & Smith, A. N. (2025). Merit-based management demands DEI. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 1–4.
- Dobusch, L. (2021). The inclusivity of inclusion approaches: A relational perspective on inclusion and exclusion in organizations. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 28(1), 379–396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12574>
- Dries, N. (2013). The psychology of talent management: A review and research agenda. *Human Resource Management Review*, 23(4), 272–285.
- Ellingrud, K., & Baller, S. (2023). Global Parity Alliance: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Lighthouses 2023. World Economic Forum.
- Farndale, E., Pai, A., Sparrow, P., & Scullion, H. (2014). Balancing individual and organizational goals in global talent management: A mutual-benefits perspective. *Journal of World Business*, 49(2), 204–214.
- Farndale, E., Thite, M., Budhwar, P., & Kwon, B. (2021). Deglobalization and talent sourcing: Cross-national evidence from high-tech firms. *Human Resource Management*, 60(2), 259–272. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22046>
- Ghosh, V., Sengupta, T., Narayanamurthy, G., & Ishizaka, A. (2023). Examining collective creative self-efficacy as a competency indicator of group talent management: A study of SMEs in an emerging economy. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 34(7). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2021.1988679>
- Guo, X. (2026). Construction and Empirical Validation of The “Faculty-Student-Ai-Environment-Culture” Five-Element Synergistic Model In Higher Education: Evidence From The Integration Of Sdg 4 And Artificial Intelligence. *International Journal of Engineering Sciences & Research Technology*, 15(1), 16–32. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.64149/j.ijesrt.15.1.16-32>
- Haack, P., & Schilke, O. (2021). Legitimacy revisited: Disentangling propriety, validity, and consensus. *Journal of Management Studies*, 58(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12615>
- Hashemi, A. (2025). *Institutional theory and human resource management*. Taylor & Francis.

- Hendrawan, R., Rosari, R., & Tur Nastiti. (2024). The basic themes of talent management: Bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review. *Cogent Business & Management*, 11(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2429016>
- Hennig, A. (2017). Daoism in management. *Philosophy of Management*, 16(2), 161–182.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40926-015-0024-4>
- Holtschlag, C., Morales, C., Masuda, A., & Reiche, B. S. (2025). The diversity paradox: The unintended consequences of gender diversity on gender pay equity. *Human Resource Management*, 64(5), 1305–1319. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22308>
- Irim, S., Salman, M., & Rauf, N. (2024). The role of HRM in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace. *Scholar Research Journal*, 3(2), 221–237.
- Jia, J. F., Jiao, Y. X., & Han, H. M. (2022). Inclusive leadership and team creativity: A moderated mediation model of Chinese talent management. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 33(12). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2021.1966073>
- Jonsen, K., Point, S., Kelan, E. K., & Griebel, A. (2021). Diversity and inclusion branding: A five-country comparison of corporate websites. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(3), 616–649. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2018.1496125>
- Konrad, A. M., Richard, O. C., & Yang, Y. (2021). Both diversity and meritocracy: Managing the diversity-meritocracy paradox with organizational ambidexterity. *Journal of Management Studies*, 58(7), 2180–2209. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12752>
- Le, B. N., & Morschett, D. (2024). How EMNEs and DMNEs can attract applicants in emerging and developed countries: A cross-national conjoint analysis. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 35(8), 1449–1485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2023.2297053>
- Lee, J. (2024). The role of institutional logics in shaping sustainable talent management: A comparative study of two South Korean conglomerates. *Sustainability*, 12(7), 227.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su16072741>
- Lei, W. (2025). Daoist philosophy and leadership: A reappraisal. *Leadership*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17427150251341738>
- Li, Y. L., Evans, K., & Bond, M. A. (2023). Allies as organizational change agents to promote equity and inclusion: A case study. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 42(9). <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-12-2021-0308>
- Liao, Y., & Liu, Y. (2025). Institutional change and global talent sourcing: Evidence from the Inevitable Disclosure Doctrine. *Academy of Management Proceedings*.
- Maman Alimansyah, & Takahashi, Y. (2025). Effect of communication in talent management practice on non-high potential outcomes. *Cogent Business & Management*, 12(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2025.2482025>
- Masood, A., & Nisar, M. A. (2020). Crushed between two stones: Competing institutional logics in the implementation of maternity leave policies in Pakistan. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 27(6).
<https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12574>
- McCarthy, A., Garavan, T., Holland, D., Bohle Carbonell, K., Virtanen, T., O’Kane, P., & Van Wart, M. (2024). Talent management in public science funding organizations: Institutional logic, paradoxical tensions and HR responses. *Public Management Review*, 26(5), 1156–1177.
- McKeown, T., & Pichault, F. (2021). Independent professionals as talent: Evidence from individual views of working as a contractor. *Human Resource Management*, 60(2). <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22045>
- Nishii, L. H. (2013). The benefits of climate for inclusion for gender-diverse groups. *Academy of Management Journal*, 56(6), 1754–1774.
- Nishii, L. H., Khattab, J., Shemla, M., & Paluch, R. M. (2018). A multi-level process model for understanding diversity practice effectiveness. *Academy of Management Annals*, 12(1), 37–82.
- Nishii, L. H., & Leroy, H. (2022). A multi-level framework of inclusive leadership in organizations. *Group & Organization Management*, 47(4), 683–722.
- Orupabo, J., & Mangset, M. (2022). Promoting diversity but striving for excellence: Evaluation processes in academic recruitment. *Sociology*, 56(4).
- Padavic, I., & Ely, R. J. (2020). Explaining the persistence of gender inequality: The work–family narrative as a social defense against the 24/7 work culture. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 65(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839219832310>
- Patel V., Suthar C., Patel D., (2026). Artificial Intelligence Investment As A Strategic Signal: Implications for Stakeholder Confidence. *International Journal of Engineering Sciences & Research Technology*, 15(4), 32-46. <https://doi.org/10.64149/j.ijesrt.15.4.32-46>

- Parker, J., & Sayers, J. (2022). Gender and ethnic equity in Aotearoa New Zealand's public service before and since COVID-19: Toward intersectional inclusion? *Gender, Work and Organization*, 29(3). <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12759>
- Reihlen, M., Schlapfner, J. F., & Seeger, M. (2022). Strategic venturing as legitimacy creation: The case of sustainability. *Journal of Management Studies*, 59(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12745>
- Reymert, I., Jungblut, J., & Borlaug, S. B. (2021). Are evaluative cultures national or global? A cross-national study on evaluative cultures in academic recruitment processes in Europe. *Higher Education*, 82(4), 823–845.
- Roberson, Q. (2006). Disentangling the meanings of diversity and inclusion in organizations. *Group & Organization Management*, 31(2), 212–236.
- Roberson, Q. (2025). What an integrating DEI into strategy lifts performance. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 66(2), 62–65.
- Schrage, S., & Rasche, A. (2022). Inter-organizational paradox management: How national business systems affect responses to paradox along a global value chain. *Organization Studies*, 43(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840621993238>
- Scott, W. R. (2013). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities*. Sage Publications.
- Scullion, H., & Collings, D. G. (2011). Global talent management: Introduction. In H. Scullion & D. G. Collings (Eds.), *Global talent management* (pp. 19–32). Routledge.
- Shinde, S. (2025). From perceived inequity to retention: Leveraging equity theory in contemporary workforce management. *Research Review International Journal of Management*, 10(4), 292–300.
- Shore, L. M., Randel, A. E., Chung, B. G., Dean, M. A., Holcombe Ehrhart, K., & Singh, G. (2011). Inclusion and diversity in work groups: A review and model for future research. *Journal of Management*, 37(4), 1262–1289.
- Shvetsova, O. (2025). Managing global talent: Innovative solutions and a sustainable strategy using a human-centric approach. *Sustainability*, 15(5), 190.
- Siraz, S. S., Claes, B., & De Castro, J. O. (2023). Legitimacy states and legitimation strategies: A framework for the legitimacy-illegitimacy continuum. *Journal of Management Studies*, 60(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12901>
- Sousa, B., Ferreira, J. J. M., Jayantilal, S., & Dabic, M. (2024). Global talent management Talents, mobility and global experiences A systematic literature review. *Journal of Global Mobility*, 12(3), 444–501. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JGM-03-2023-0018>
- Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 571–610.
- Tarique, I., Briscoe, D. R., & Schuler, R. S. (2015). *International human resource management: Policies and practices for multinational enterprises*. Routledge.
- Tarique, I., & Schuler, R. S. (2010). Global talent management: Literature review, integrative framework, and suggestions for further research. *Journal of World Business*, 45(2), 122–133.
- Thornton, P. H., Ocasio, W., & Lounsbury, M. (2012). *The institutional logics perspective: A new approach to culture, structure, and process*. Oxford University Press.
- Van Zelderen, A. P. A., & Dries, N. (2025). Paradox of inclusion in elite workforce differentiation practices. *Journal of Management Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13100>
- Vedula, S., & York, J. G. (2022). Green to gone? Regional institutional logics and firm survival in moral markets. *Organization Science*, 33(5). <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2021.1524>
- Vijay, D., & Nair, V. G. (2022). In the name of merit: Institutional logic and caste discrimination in Indian organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 177(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04722-7>
- Xing, Y., & Sims, D. (2012). Leadership, Daoist Wu Wei and reflexivity: Flow, self-protection and excuse in Chinese bank managers' leadership practice. *Management Learning*, 43(1), 97–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507611409659>
- Xing, Y., & Starik, M. (2017). Taoist leadership and employee green behaviour: A cultural and philosophical microfoundation of sustainability. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 38(9), 1302–1319. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2221>
- Zhang, L. T. (2020). An institutional approach to gender diversity and firm performance. *Science Organization*, 31(6). <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2019.1297>
- Zerquera, D., & Ziskin, M. (2020). Implications of performance-based funding on equity-based missions in US higher education. *Higher Education*, 79(4).