

THE CURRENCY OF TALENT MANAGEMENT: A REPLY TO "TALENT MANAGEMENT AND THE RELEVANCE OF CONTEXT".

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we provide a commentary on the article in this special issue by [authors' names] on the relevance of context to the field of talent management. We agree that further research is needed to explore the link between macro, meso and micro-level considerations. The authors pose a question in relation to the contribution of talent management to the social and moral development of society; which, for us, raises issues as to the extent to which individual agency in ethical issues is possible in environments designed to regulate and control talent. We concur that a more critical, pluralist approach to talent management scholarship is needed and that talent management should go beyond a mere economic exchange. We suggest, as yet unexplored, notions of strategic exchange, and individual identity provide a richer picture of the employment relationship. Thus this paper raises a number of possible directions for future TM research.

KEYWORDS: talent management, strategic exchange, identity, equity, ethics

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we provide a commentary on the article in this special issue by [authors' names] on the relevance of context to the field of talent management. This provides us with a welcome opportunity to reflect on the state of talent management as a phenomenon which, as the authors remind us, is at the adolescent stage (Collings, Scullion & Vaiman, 2011) in its development. The main messages from the article are: that there is no one best way of defining talent; that talent management research needs to be less managerialist/unitarist and a more critical, pluralist approach should be taken, with more consideration of issues of both talent management legitimacy and the impact of power relations across its processes; that talent management initiatives can create both economic *and* non-economic value at societal (macro), organisational (meso) and individual (micro) levels, and that there is an urgent need to take into account talent welfare issues, such as perceived fairness. Such messages also provide important lessons for practice, not least in the design and implementation of talent management strategies and policies, which the authors see as one way of increasing the engagement of talent. In our consideration of [the authors'] paper, we examine their core assertions, underscored by two major questions: 'What is the current state of talent management research and practice?' and 'What might be the future direction for talent management research?'

ANALYSING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PAPER

We will now consider the main assertions made in [authors'] paper and also contribute ourselves to the on-going debates about talent management theory and practice.

Assertion 1: There is no consistent definition of either talent or talent management in the academic literature.

In our research for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (Tansley, Turner, Foster, Harris, Sempik, Stewart & Williams, 2007) we identified how case study organisations used a definition of talent management which had its genesis in the

McKinsey (Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod, 2001) work; however we found that this definition varies depending on the size and complexity of the organisation.

Talent has been defined at individual and group (talent pool) level, with different biases across languages (Tansley, 2011) and definitions being changed to allow for changes in the context e.g. labour market issues of supply. This aligns with [the authors'] view on context and talent management, that all definitions are context-driven and therefore cannot be universal. And leads us to ask, 'to what extent does it *really* matter that there are no universal definitions of talent and talent management?'

Assertion 2: The talent management literature is one-dimensional, biased and focused on a narrow set of HR practices, and there should be more of a focus on talent and their work, with particular regard to both the employment and work relationship.

[The authors] suggest that there needs to be an extension of talent management research to contexts other than US, private sector and multi-national organizations and we can see how this is currently being played out in the literature. Although studies of talent management in small and medium-sized enterprises and public organizations have been slow to appear, with regard to geographical coverage there are a growing number articles on talent management e.g. in China (Farrell & Grant, 2005; Hartman, Feisel & Schober, 2009; Iles, Chuai & Preece, 2010) and others (please refer to Table 1.0 below). Other gaps are also being filled, such as talent management in different sectors (see Garavan's (2012) case study in the scientific sector) and the different roles for enactment of talent management.

The other gap highlighted by [The authors] is the lack of attention to the (talent) employment and work relationship, and they suggest that this is important because 'the employment relationship is more than just an economic exchange'. We agree and suggest that the notion of *strategic exchange* (Watson, 2003; Tansley & Watson, 2000) can be analytically useful here, as it is a process by which individuals exchange both material and symbolic

resources with others in their lives by engaging in a ‘dialogue’ with their cultures (Watson, 2003, p126). We therefore recommend that in order to further expand the theoretical contextual debates in the article, there should be more critical reflection on the conceptual grounding of individual identity and strategic exchange at meso and micro-levels.,

Assertion 3: A more critical/pluralist perspective needs to replace the current managerialist/unitarist approaches, not least to ensure that both the economic and non-economic value created by talent is appreciated.

[The authors] persuasively argue that most talent management texts are managerialist in approach emphasising performance, efficiency and effectiveness objectives. We agree that this one-dimensional view of talent management overlooks more critical notions of power and individual agency in the management of talent and also that ‘non-rational’ processes such as cultural norms, beliefs and rituals are equally important’.

We were particularly taken with [the authors’] question ‘to what extent can talent management contribute to the social and moral development and growth of society, creating conditions for its citizens to live a fulfilled life?’ In our view, macro-level expectations placed on corporations, governments and institutions focus on societal, economic and environmental goals directly relate to the meso level of organisational strategic goals of ensuring competitiveness and, in the private sector, profits. The work of scholars researching the ‘societal claim’ for talent management has already begun with regard to human resource development and society (Garavan & McGuire, 2010) and corporate social responsibility and society (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2012).

In relation to the creation of non-economic social and moral value at the meso level, just and fair treatment of talent across the enterprise has been shown to be an essential value requirement of talent management initiatives (Swales, 2013). For this to occur we need to understand what happens to agents' ability to exercise independent moral judgement and act on

it, when the whole talent management process is about absorbing talent into the corporate mind-set and making them think, act and judge from the corporate and profit point of view.

At the micro level, the 'value' of talent management has been profitably studied in the area of global talent mobility initiatives, where Kirk (2010), in her interpretivist doctoral study of senior talent within a large, global case organisation, reveals the struggles that such individuals have to reconcile their differing mobility needs with those of their employer.

DISCUSSION

[The author's] article overall suggests the importance of talent management practitioners contingently developing effective talent management strategies that meet micro, meso and macro objectives in the context of the strategic constraints which their organisations face (Bethke-Langenegger, Mahler & Staffelbach, 2011). It also recommends that practitioners take account of the relationships between talent management, corporate culture and business strategy as well as ensuring the internal consistency of their talent management systems. With regard to scholarly work, studies at the macro level relating to the impact of TM on society are rarely seen, perhaps because this is a rather ambitious goal and difficult to operationalize. However, at the meso and micro levels there are a myriad of opportunities for further research, some of which we show in Table 1, below:

TALENT MANAGEMENT COMPONENTS	SUGGESTED AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Defining talent (Tansley, 2011). Elite talent (Alvesson & Robertson 2006; Mellahi & Collings, 2010; Clegg & Baumeler, 2010).	How can the over-emphasis on elite talent be addressed? What important differences exist between those organisations taking talent as strengths and those as competencies? What can the critical management literature offer studies on organisational 'elites'?
Talent management across sectors	What are the similarities and differences of talent management across the private, public and not-for-profit sectors organisations? Which talent management practices in the larger organisation 'travel' to the context of the smaller enterprise?
Talent management across geographic regions	India (Chadee and Raman, 2012, Sharma, Goel & Rastogi, 2013); Korea: (Tung, Yongsun, & Johnseok, 2013); Spain (Oltra, & Vivas-López, 2013); Italy (Guerci & Solari, 2012); Australia (Jones, Whitaker, Seet & Parkin, 2012) and Russia (Holden & Vaiman, 2013).
Employer branding (Albert, Ashforth & Dutton; 2000; Ambler, & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens, Van Hove & Anseel, 2007 Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen & Schoonderbeek, 2013).	What value propositions (promises) do employers make to talent and how are they fulfilled?
High potential related to high performance. (Dries & Pepermans, 2008; Dries, 2011; Dries, Van Acker & Verbruggen, 2011).	Define in context what constitutes high potential and high performance of talent.
The value of talent management to society.	How can harnessing talent skills, knowledge and learning agility bring value to both the organisation and to society?
The role of talent 'positioning' (Tarique & Schuler, 2010), that is, 'having the right talent at the right place at the right time with the needed competencies and motivation at all levels and all locations of the firm' (Whelan, 2011, p488).	In talent planning how do we position the 'right' talent in the 'right' place at the 'right' time? (Lengnick-Hall & Andrade (2008) in Vance & Vaiman (2008). Which metrics are important for enabling human capital management to meet an organisation's strategic goals? What do we see as links between talent management, knowledge management and human capital management?
Micro-politics and power in talent management from pluralist/critical perspectives on talent management.	'Who decides who is labelled as "talented" and "not so talented"?' How does legitimacy of a particular approach to talent management play out in practice?
The value of taking a language-based analysis of talent management (Huang & Tansley, 2012).	How can critical discourse analysis inform talent management research?
Drawing from other fields, such as anthropology Tansley & Tietze (2013), ethics (Swales, 2013), identity work (Kirk, 2012) and strategic HRD (Ganavan, 2013).	Other disciplines offer much promise for 'deep mining' of conceptual and empirical insights: anthropology, sociology; identity studies, labour market economics,
The 'dark side': Talent derailers (Ross, 2013) Capability (Downs & Swales, 2013) Discrimination and power Developing 'corporate psychopaths' [i.e. those individuals who are willing to lie and present façade in order to secure career advancement' (Boddy, 2005.).	To what extent should talent derailers be viewed not as failures rather than corporate entrepreneurs or even 'mavericks' who exercise their free will and follow their own moral compass? How do talent management systems encourage the development of 'corporate psychopaths' (Boddy, 2011)? What is the relationship between discrimination and power in the management of talent of different gender, ethnicity and disability?

Table 1: How current areas of talent management research can inform future studies

CONCLUSIONS

A number of components of talent management vex both practitioners and scholars, not least how organisational talent is defined (Tansley, 2011); whether to ‘make’ or ‘buy in’ talent (Whelan, 2011); which positions should be filled from a talent pool; which characteristics of talent should be measured (such as high potential and high performance) and how; which designs should be enacted (e.g. as exclusively elite or inclusively as the majority of staff); which talent management roles HR should take (Sparrow, Farndale and Scullion, 2013); and which combination of strategies, policies and system processes can enable talent management (Vaiman and Collings, 2013, p1737). In all of these areas, the current global economic climate and the differing needs of talent for each organisation suggest that a contingency approach in the context of talent management is the order of the day.

The recommendations in [the authors] article are important because they both theoretically demonstrate how changes in research are occurring at a fast pace, with scholars framing and re-framing what they take talent to be and re-inventing ways in which talent management could be undertaken and by whom, and they also clearly show that what practitioners of talent management need to understand is not just what individual talent can do for the organisation, but what organisational initiatives such as talent management can do for the individual in their life careers.

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