Towards an understanding of talent management as a phenomenon-driven field using bibliometric and content analysis

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A B S T R A C T

This review adopts a phenomenon-driven approach in reviewing the talent management (TM) literature, applying methods derived from bibliometrics and content analysis to evaluate the state of the field and derive implications for research and practice unbiased towards a-priori assumptions of which frameworks or methods are most adequate. Based on analyses of publication volume, journals and their impact factors, most cited articles and authors, preferred methods, and represented countries, we assess whether TM should be approached as an embryonic, growth, or mature phenomenon, and examine dominant (i.e., resource-based view, international human resource management, employee assessment, and institutionalism) versus 'alternative' (i.e., knowledge management, career management, strength-based approach, and social exchange theory) theoretical frameworks. Our goal is to assist TM researchers in positioning their work more explicitly vis-à-vis current debates in the existing literature and encourage them to think about which approach best fits their research aims, questions, and designs.

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Although at present only limited consensus exists as to the definition of talent and TM and the appropriate methods to study these constructs, the academic literature on TM is noticeably expanding from year to year (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013a), seemingly unhindered by this "lack of theory" (Reilly, 2008, p. 381). It would appear, then, that research on TM can be categorized as phenomenon-driven, as opposed to theory-driven (Dries, 2013b). Whereas traditional, theory-driven research follows a process whereby hypotheses are developed based on gaps detected within the current knowledge of a field—guided by established definitions, operationalizations, and measures—phenomenon-driven research takes a different route, one that "starts with the generation of facts, most typically from large-sample analysis, that can inform us as to what we need a theory for […] Then, as we get into exploring the whys and hows, a combination of quantitative and qualitative studies will be fruitful" (Hambrick, 2007, p. 1349). von Krogh, Lamastra, and Haefliger (2012) identify two interdependent indications of a topic of study qualifying as a 'phenomenon': first, no currently available theory has enough scope to account for the phenomenon or for relevant cause-and-effect relationships associated with it; and second, no research design or methodology is superior to others in exploring the different aspects of the phenomenon. Taking the above into account—along with the fact that TM emerged as a 'hot topic' in human resource (HR) practice almost a decade before it became an academic topic of interest (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels, 1998)—we conclude that TM as a field is, indeed, phenomenon-driven, which has distinct implications for future research and theory development.

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A number of reviews have been published in recent years, each approaching the act of reviewing the TM literature from a different angle: Lewis and Heckman (2006) review issues with the definition of TM based largely on the practitioner literature; Collings and Mellahi (2009) develop a conceptual model of strategic TM, emphasizing the centrality of 'pivotal positions'; Tarique and Schuler (2010) create an integrative framework for understanding and advancing research on global talent management (GTM); Dries (2013a) identifies a number of discrepancies, tensions, and taken-for-granted assumptions based on a multidisciplinary review of the TM literature; Thunnissen et al. (2013a) take a more critical review approach, drawing attention to the economic and non-economic (i.e., social and moral) value that can be created by TM at three levels: individual, organizational, and societal; and Cappelli and Keller (2014) review the potential implications of present-day labor market challenges and uncertainties for TM theory and practice.

The current review takes a more phenomenon-driven approach to reviewing the TM literature than existing reviews, applying methods derived from bibliometrics and content analysis to come to a more or less 'objective' and 'quantifiable' assessment of the state of the TM literature at the present time without making a-priori assumptions about which theoretical and methodological approaches to TM are more legitimate than others. Based on analyses of publication volume, journals and their impact factors, most cited articles and authors, preferred methods, and represented countries, we assess whether TM should be approached as an embryonic, growth, or mature phenomenon (von Krogh et al., 2012), and establish a research agenda based on our analysis of dominant versus 'alternative' theoretical frameworks found in the TM literature. In so doing, our aim is to assist (aspiring or active) TM researchers in positioning their work more explicitly vis-à-vis current debates in the existing TM literature and encourage them to think about which theoretical approach best fits their research aims, questions, and designs—preferably prior to collecting data.

1. Methodology

A sequential, two-step review approach was followed so as to compile a database of relevant TM articles for our bibliometric and content analyses.

1.1. Step 1: data collection and cleaning

Using the search term 'talent management' we searched the ISI Web of Science (WoS) and the Scopus databases for relevant articles. Following recommendations in the bibliometrics literature (e.g., Ponomarev, Lawton, Williams, & Schnell, 2014), we restricted our search to English-language publications in peer-reviewed academic journals that mentioned 'talent management' in their title, abstract, or keywords, excluding specific types of publications such as brief communications and commentaries, editorial notes, symposia, presentation slides, and book reviews. Our search procedure generated 176 articles for the ISI WoS database and 264 articles for the Scopus database, of which 162 overlapping—resulting in a list of 278 articles, all published between January 2001 and May 2014 (i.e., when we closed our data collection procedure). Although typically, the earliest reference on TM mentioned in the literature is Chambers et al. (1998)—a practitioner article introducing the notion of the 'war for talent' based on a 1997 McKinsey survey (also discussed in the Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001 book)—our search in the ISI WoS and Scopus databases did not find any peer-reviewed publications on TM prior to 2001. Five articles proved impossible to find in a full-text format, resulting in a final database of 273 articles.

1.2. Step 2: data coding

Based on existing reviews of the TM literature (i.e., Cappelli & Keller, 2014; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Dries, 2013a; Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Thunnissen et al., 2013a), the four authors of the present paper jointly developed a coding template, including the following sections: research question (open text field); problem setting (open text field); country affiliation of the first author; country of data collection; methods used; TM outcomes of interest; independent and dependent variables measured; theoretical framework; definition of talent; and definition of TM. We then divided the 273 articles across the author team for coding. We first ran a pilot test of our coding template on a randomly selected set of 15 articles, with the aim of achieving an adequate level of inter-rater reliability. Subsequently, each member of the research team coded his or her allotted articles in groups of 25 articles. The four authors compared coding experiences during and after the pilot test, and again after each bundle of 25 coded articles. The pilot test revealed that for several of the 15 articles, we were unable to code any of the sections in our coding template; therefore, we decided to introduce the option of excluding an article from further analysis, accompanied by an open text box in which a coder had to indicate why he or she felt it was impossible to code the article according to our predefined template. We ended up not coding 135 articles from our database (49.4%). The most common reasons for exclusion from further analyses were: having a strong 'practitioner' focus without any mention at all of definitions, theoretical frameworks, or references to the academic literature; and mentioning the term talent management only once or twice and without further discussion, in an article that primarily deals with another topic (e.g., cloud computing, corporate governance, supply chain management). Our final database thus contained 139 fully-coded articles—strikingly, all articles retained for coding turned out to be from 2006 or after. Below, we discuss the findings of the bibliometric and content analyses we performed on the data resulting from our coding efforts.