Appreciating and 'retooling' diversity in talent management conceptual models: A commentary on "The psychology of talent management: A review and research agenda"

John W. Boudreau *

Marshall School of Business and Research Director, Center for Effective Organizations, University of Southern California, DCC 200, 3415 South Figueroa, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0871, USA

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ABSTRACT

This commentary on "The Psychology of Talent Management" suggests that readers should avoid concluding that the diversity of talent management concepts across psychological disciplines is something to be "corrected," and instead embrace it as a resource to be tapped for future understanding. It suggests two frameworks to enhance these efforts: "Retooling" talent management using well-known frameworks applied to more traditional organizational resources, and tapping research on "shared mental models" through which teams articulate and appreciate their diverse concepts of tasks and goals.

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"The psychology of talent management: A review and research agenda" (Dries, 2013—this issue) provides an intriguing summary of the different perspectives on talent, by reviewing several psychological disciplines, providing a useful reminder of the implicit assumptions about talent, in the minds of researchers, leaders or practitioners. It has a particular value as a reminder that much writing and practice in talent management provide little definition of the "talent" concept, and to call for greater attention to definitional and implicit assumptions. I found very useful the articulation of distinctions such as talent as embodied in the individual versus talent embodied in capacities, between talent as egalitarian versus talent as the elite, and talent employment versus deployment.

The article's narrative and tables nicely articulate how these and other distinctions carry important implications for research and practice. Indeed, I found one compelling message to be that there is much promise in integrating and explicating conflicting definitions and assumptions about talent. I foresee the article motivating useful and well-intended research to better illuminate these conflicts, resolve them and strive for more commonality in the talent definition.

In this commentary, I wish to sound a cautionary note against the conclusion that talent management research and practice *require* a common definition to advance. The article does not directly suggest this, but it would be regrettable if it motivates debates about syntax and technical differences in meaning. There is a risk that we miss the valuable opportunities it suggests for an appreciation of diversity, and the integration and synergy that comes with such an appreciation. A comprehensive and common talent definition is not necessary for improving talent systems that enhance individual, organization and social contributions of talent management. Nor is a common definition necessary to future integrative research. Even today, the implicit meaning of talent varies, but is often sufficient for organizations to accomplish very valuable talent management contributions.

I respectfully propose that a potentially overlooked value of this article, and the debates it will motivate, goes beyond reconciling diverse talent definitions, to exploiting the value in such diversity.

Here, I will provide examples of frameworks to guide research and practice exploring the means through which such diversity develops and is expressed. Codifying and illuminating this diversity can make talent management systems more effective, and illuminate unstated assumptions that cause sub-optimization or implementation difficulties. This is true even if we do not need to

* Tel.: +1 213 740 9814; fax: +1 213 740 4354.
  E-mail address: John.Boudreau@usc.edu.
  URL: http://www.ceo.usc.edu/.

resolve them. A very intriguing objective is to examine how and why different constituents, disciplines and organizational systems may simultaneously embody different talent definitions or "mental models," and what those differences reveal about unaddressed issues of theoretical understanding and practical application.

For example, I found Table 2 and the associated narrative to be very useful, and to suggest both synthesis and very healthy differences between the different domains, such as I/O psychology and educational psychology. The concise depiction of the criteria, contributions and gaps was helpful in illuminating the surprising diversity of views. It is striking that such diversity exists even within a relatively common discipline of psychology, let alone if one included related disciplines such as labor economics, anthropology, political science and sociology. However, it is also true that in the space of a single article, such a wide-ranging summary cannot fully capture the cross-domain relationships. Thus, the articulation of the main gaps in Table 2 is helpful, but might incorrectly lead readers to conclude that the main goal should be to either reconcile these gaps, or perhaps to reject the domain because its findings or research methods are not compatible with other domains. While the article does not suggest this, I believe it is useful to emphasize the point that the value may be in the diversity, and a worthy challenge is to search for frameworks that can both acknowledge and incorporate that diversity.

I will develop these ideas using two related concepts. The first is "Retooling Human Resources (HR)" (Boudreau, 2010), which means tapping the power of accepted frameworks from other disciplines to reframe HR, and thus talent management, in ways that better illuminate hidden assumptions and opportunities to integrate diverse definitions. For example, one can reframe employee turnover using frameworks from operations and logistics that optimize inventory turnover. The second is the concept of "mental models" and in particular the research showing that shared mental models (SMMs) have powerful effects on the performance of teams (Boudreau, 2012).

I will also propose that an emerging discipline—cognitive psychology—should be considered as an addition to the disciplines noted in this article, and as a further source of potential understanding about talent management decisions.

1. "Retooling HR": seeing talent management through the lens of business disciplines

The article effectively demonstrates the diversity of views of "talent" across different psychological disciplines, and provides an interesting platform to consider the diversity with which talent is viewed across business disciplines. "Retooling HR" reframes HR questions with the logic of disciplines such as finance, marketing, operations management and engineering. These are often logical frameworks that leaders outside of HR understand and trust. More important for this commentary, such frameworks often provide ways that leader appreciate and integrate diverse views of concepts such as inventory, risk, and optimization. Like "talent," such concepts have a variety of definitions, but frameworks such as return-on-investment or inventory-optimization help leaders understand the distinctions well enough to improve their decisions.

For example, items in inventory can be seen as creating value for what one can sell them for in their present form, but they can also be seen as creating value for what they can be transformed into through further refinement within the organization. Inventory optimization frameworks have long helped leaders articulate, discuss and resolve the dilemmas associated with inventory value and use. Applying the analogy to "talent," the article shows that talent is considered both as embodied in the person as they exist today ("play to the strengths"), or embodied in how the person might be further developed ("enhance the areas of weakness").

Table 1
Retooling HR embeds talent decisions in business logic.

Talent management framework	Traditional business logic	Retooled to apply to talent
Tournament and other models of career progression (Rosenbaum, 1979); selection validity and meta-analysis	Supply chain analysis can identify optimum sourcing and shipping routes that optimize risk, cost and return	Career paths, recruiting sources and succession plans can be optimized by thinking of them as alternative sources or routes to supply future needed talent
Employee downsizing, turnover and functional vs. dysfunctional employee separations (Cascio, 2002)	Inventory analysis can identify levels of inventory, shortages and surpluses that optimize cost and risk	Employee turnover, shortages and surpluses can be optimized like inventory, by considering risks and costs of holding versus ordering new inventory
Utility analysis and the standard deviation of performance in dollars, performance management (Cascio & Boudreau, 2011)	Engineering performance tolerance analysis can identify the components of a product or process must be held to tight tolerances and which can be allowed to vary, to optimize risk, cost and return	Performance management and work analysis can be used to identify where variations in employee quality and performance make large vs. small differences, and optimize performance management to focus where the value is highest
Competency and skill development (McCall, 2010)	Financial portfolio analysis can identify the combination of "asset classes" to hold, in order to optimize expected risk and return, considering uncertain future conditions	Competency and skill planning can optimize the types and proportions of skills in the workforce, considering the probability of future scenarios and the correspondence of skills and competencies to those future scenarios

Source: Adapted from Table 13.1 in Boudreau (2012). Decision logic in evidence-based management: Can logical models from other disciplines improve evidence-based human resource decisions? Chapter 13 in D. Rousseau (ed.). The Oxford handbook of evidence-based management. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 223–248.