



## Talent management and the relevance of context: Towards a pluralistic approach



Marian Thunnissen <sup>a,\*</sup>, Paul Boselie <sup>b</sup>, Ben Fruytier <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Research Centre for Social Innovation, HU University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> School of Governance, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

<sup>c</sup> Nijmegen School of Management, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to contribute to the development of a broader, more balanced approach to talent management that will help in studying and implementing talent management across different contexts. The paper starts with an overview of the advances made in previous reviews and studies with respect to three central themes: the definition of talent, intended outcomes of talent management, and talent management practices. We identify the one-dimensional and narrow approach to the topic as a main limitation of the existing talent management literature. Through the use of theories from the organizational theory and the strategic HRM domain, we add new perspectives and develop a multilevel, multi-value approach to talent management. In so doing, we offer an in-depth discussion of the potential economic and non-economic value created by talent management at the individual, organizational, and societal level.

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### 1. Introduction

Talent management has been one of the most debated themes in human resource management (HRM) theory and practice in recent years. Next to leadership development, value-based recruitment and performance management, talent management is seen as one of the key human resource themes and challenges by leading multinational companies such as IBM and Shell (Pauwe, 2007). Business leaders expect that the intensifying competition for talent will have a major effect on their companies. In spite of the economic recession, they regard the search for talented people as the single most important managerial preoccupation for this decade (Deloitte, 2010; Guthridge, Komm, & Lawson, 2008).

Articles published in the popular and practitioner press, as well as consulting companies, pay a great deal of attention to talent management and how to win the 'war for talent' (Iles, Preece, & Chuai, 2010; Vaiman, Scullion, & Collings, 2012). Over the course of the past decade academics have produced a considerable amount of publications on talent management as well. This, however, does not imply that all talent management scholars speak the same language. Consensus on the meaning and underlying principles of talent management is lacking. In their 2006 review, Lewis and Heckman stressed the point that talent management, as a field of study was still in its infancy as it lacked a clear and consistent definition of its core construct as well as a clearly defined scope and a conceptual framework based on empirical research. In 2009, Collings and Mellahi came to the same conclusion. Yet, a few years later, Collings, Scullion, and Vaiman (2011) observed some progress regarding the establishment of a definition and conceptual boundaries of talent management, and concluded that the field was moving from infancy into adolescence. The authors state that many, mainly US-based, scholars have contributed to this advance.

However, Collings et al. (2011) reported a biased approach to talent management in their review of the literature. Specifically, they noticed a dominant influence of the US context on the debate, because of the adoption of Northern American thinking and research by the US based scholars (Collings et al., 2011). In addition, Powell et al. (2012) identified a strong focus on the private

\* Corresponding author at: Research Centre for Social Innovation, HU University of Applied Sciences, Postbus 85397, 3508 AJ Utrecht, The Netherlands.  
E-mail address: [Marian.Thunnissen@hu.nl](mailto:Marian.Thunnissen@hu.nl) (M. Thunnissen).

sector and on multinational companies in contemporary talent management literature. These observations raise the question of whether current assumptions and concepts in the talent management literature, which are strongly embedded in the context of multinational, private, and US-based organizations, are appropriate for describing and studying talent management in organizations in other contexts, such as small and medium enterprises, public organizations, and organizations located outside of the US. Consequently, Collings et al. (2011) urge the need for new influences “[...] as the field moves into adolescence it is important that insights from beyond the US context influence the debate. This is not a critique of the significant contributions which have emerged from the USA, but rather a call for a counterbalance from different perspectives and traditions” (p. 455).

In this paper we will respond to the call of Collings et al. (2011). The main aim of this paper is the development of a broader, more balanced approach to talent management that takes into account the importance of context, and of the different actors involved. This approach to talent management will support the study and implementation of talent management practices in a wider range of organizations than has been the case to date. The paper starts with an overview of the achievements so far in the existing academic talent management literature and research. Subsequently, we scrutinize these advances with a critical eye, and discuss possible limitations of the dominant views expressed in the talent management literature. We move on to add new perspectives originating in organizational theory and strategic human resource management (SHRM), thus placing talent management in a broader perspective. These new perspectives are then integrated into a multilevel, multi-value approach to talent management. In so doing, we offer an in-depth discussion of the potential economic and non-economic value of talent management at the individual, organizational, and societal level. From all of the above, we formulate an agenda for future talent management research, suggesting new directions for empirical research in a wide range of organizations with the ultimate goal of advancing academic knowledge about talent management processes and success factors.

## 2. Mapping the field of talent management: achievements so far

Recently, Thunnissen, Boselie, and Fruytier (2013) conducted a literature review in which they analyzed 62 academic publications on talent management (published between 2001 and 2012). The authors conclude that, up until 2012, most of the academic publications on talent management have been conceptual, approaching the field from many different angles. Talent management literature is built on a broad range of academic traditions, including SHRM (e.g., linking strategy to the management of valuable talents), international HRM (e.g., managing talent in a multinational and/or cross-cultural context), and organizational behavior (OB) (e.g., linking talent management to career development and management development). Thunnissen et al. (2013) also conclude that, although progress is being made, there is still only a limited amount of empirical research on talent management (as was the conclusion of Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Rather, the academic literature on talent management focuses on (1) the conceptualization of talent and talent management; (2) the intended outcomes and effects of talent management; and (3) talent management activities and practices (Thunnissen et al., 2013). In the following paragraphs we will give a short overview of the existing literature on each of these themes.

One of the key issues in the talent management literature is answering the question ‘What is talent?’. To advance the study of talent management, consensus on the conceptualization of talent is important, both for scholars and practitioners (see also Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & González-Cruz, 2013-in this issue; Tansley, 2011). Today, no unanimous definition of talent exists. Opinions differ on whether or not to differentiate the workforce and, if so, according to which principles. There is also a debate on the question of whether talent is innate or acquired, and the extent to which it should be characterized as potential or as manifested performance (see also Dries, 2013-in this issue; Meyers, Van Woerkom & Dries, 2013-in this issue; Tansley, 2011). Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013-in this issue) propose that two dimensions are of importance in defining talent in the context of the world of work. The first dimension makes a distinction between talent as people (subject approach) and talent as characteristics of people (object approach). The *subject* approach to talent management focuses on valuable, scarce, inimitable and difficult-to-replace individual employees. It reflects the basic assumptions of human capital theory as described, among others, by Lepak and Snell (2002) in their HR architecture model. Scholars supporting the *object* approach, on the other hand, regard talent as individual attributes, such as abilities, knowledge, and competencies. This approach is related to the AMO paradigm (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000), which proposes that employee performance is a function of the employee’s ability (A), motivation (M) and opportunity (O) to perform (Boxall & Purcell, 2011). The second dimension of Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013-in this issue) makes a distinction between inclusive (i.e., all employees) and exclusive (i.e., a specific employee group) approaches to talent management. Sparrow, Hird, and Balain (2011), as well as Stahl et al. (2012), point out that organizations use both the inclusive and exclusive approach, although the exclusive approach seems to be most preferred. Taken together, the two dimensions (subject–object and inclusive–exclusive) generate a number of plausible talent management models—for example, a small defined talent management model (exclusive–subject approach) that focuses on a select group of high-performing and/or high-potential employees; or a broadly defined talent management model (inclusive–object approach) that encourages every employee to fulfill his or her potential. Empirical research is required to test the prevalence and utility of these different models in practice.

A second key issue in the talent management literature is the operationalizing of the intended outcomes and effects of talent management. According to most scholars in the field of talent management the main objective of talent management is to achieve organization related goals. At this organizational level, several types of outcomes and effects are discussed in the academic talent management literature. First, some authors describe outcomes at the level of the HRM subsystem. According to this type of approach, talent management should be aimed at fulfilling the quantitative and qualitative needs for human capital, thus narrowing the supply–demand gap organizations are confronted with (e.g., Beechler & Woodward, 2009; McCauley & Wakefield, 2006). Others claim that talent management should contribute to overall firm performance (e.g., Cappelli, 2008; Cheese, Farley, &

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