



The currency of talent management—A reply to “talent management and the relevance of context: Towards a pluralistic approach”

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we provide a commentary on the article in this Special Issue by Thunnissen, Boselie, and Fruytier on the relevance of context to the field of talent management. We concur that a more critical, pluralist approach to talent management scholarship is needed, that talent management should go beyond a mere economic exchange between talent and their employer, and that further research is needed to explore the link between macro, meso and micro level considerations. Thunnissen, Boselie, and Fruytier pose insightful questions about the contribution of talent management to the social and moral development of society and legitimating talent management at meso level. For us, these questions raise issues about the extent to which individual agency in ethical issues is possible in environments designed to regulate and control talent. We suggest that underexplored notions of strategic exchange and individual identity provide a richer picture of the talent employment relationship and raise a number of possible directions for future talent management research.

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1. Introduction

In this paper we provide a commentary on the article in this special issue by Thunnissen, Boselie, and Fruytier 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 Thunnissen, Boselie, and Fruytier (2013-in this issue) remind us, is at the adolescent stage in its development (see also Collings, Scullion, & Vaiman, 2011). 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 Thunnissen et al. (2013-in this issue) see as one way of increasing the engagement of talent. In our consideration of their 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?’

2. Analysing the contributions of the paper

We will now consider the main assertions made in Thunnissen et al.’s (2013-in this issue) paper and also contribute ourselves to the on-going debates about talent management theory and practice.

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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 et al., 2007) we identified how case study organisations used a definition of talent management which had its genesis in the McKinsey work (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001) and found that this definition varies depending on the size and complexity of the organisation. Furthermore, talent has been defined at individual and group (talent pool) level, with different biases across languages (Tansley, 2011) and definitions change over time to allow for changes in the environmental context—e.g., labour market issues of supply. This aligns with Thunnissen et al.'s (2013-in this issue) view on context and talent management that all definitions are context-driven and therefore cannot be universal. It also 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 focussed 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.

Thunnissen et al. (2013-in this issue) suggest that there needs to be an extension of talent management research to contexts other than US, private sector and multi-national organisations 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 organisations have been slow to appear, there are a growing number articles on talent management in different geographies, not least in China (Farrell & Grant, 2005; Hartman, Feisel, & Schober, 2009; Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010) (see Table 1). 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 (e.g., Sparrow, Farndale, & Scullion, 2013).

The other gap highlighted by Thunnissen et al. (2013-in this issue) 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 (Tansley & Watson, 2000; Watson, 2003) 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.

Thunnissen et al. (2013-in this issue) 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 Thunnissen et al.'s (2013-in this issue) 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, & Korschun, 2008).

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.

3. Where to next?

Thunnissen et al.'s (2013-in this issue) 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, & Staffebach, 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 macro, meso and micro levels there are a myriad of opportunities for further research, some of which we show in Table 1, below.

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