



Commentary on: “Talent—innate or acquired? Theoretical considerations and their implications for talent management”



David G. Collings^{a,*}, Kamel Mellahi^b

^a DCU Business School, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland

^b Warwick Business School, The University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Talent management
Context
Performance
Value creation
Workforce differentiation

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a commentary on the article in this special issue by Meyers, van Woerkom, and Dries (2013—this issue) on the meaning of the term ‘talent’ with a particular focus on the extent to which talent is an innate construct (nature), mostly acquired (nurture), or more based on an interaction of the two. While acknowledging Meyers et al.’s comprehensive and convincing overview of the differing perspectives on talent as innate versus acquired, we expand on their ideas in two important ways. Firstly, moving beyond debates on the exclusivity versus inclusivity of conceptualizations, we argue that the key focus for organizations should be on maximizing value creation through calibrating the level of talent required by the organization and ensuring that talents are deployed in those strategic jobs with the greatest potential for value creation. Secondly we touch on the translation of talent into performance in the organizational context by bring the import of context to the fore. We conclude with some directions for further study.

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1. Introduction

In their paper Meyers, van Woerkom, and Dries (2013—this issue) pose an important question around the meaning of the term ‘talent’ with a particular focus on the extent to which talent is an innate construct (nature), mostly acquired (nurture), or more based on an interaction of the two. The paper is well motivated and it is a truism that heretofore the literature on talent management has largely neglected the discussion of this important micro-level question. Indeed, the focus of extant work has been on the systems and processes of talent management (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Farndale, Scullion, & Sparrow, 2010; McDonnell, Lamare, Gunnigle, & Lavelle, 2010; Schuler, Jackson, & Tarique, 2011; Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Vaiman, Scullion, & Collings, 2012) and the *management* of star employees (Groysberg, 2010). Indeed, it appears that as a field talent management shares similarities with the literature on strategic human resource management (HRM) in this regard. As Wright and McMahan (2011) recently noted—strategic HRM research has recently largely focused on the practices that impact human capital rather than the human capital itself.

Meyers et al.’s (2013—this issue) paper presents a comprehensive and convincing overview of the differing perspectives on talent as innate versus acquired and presents a continuum reflecting the various interpretations of these perspectives and some implications of an organization’s position on this continuum on the design of talent management practices. This issue is particularly pertinent given the evidence that organizations are increasingly willing to pay a premium to attract and retain those they perceive to be highly talented individuals (Ang, Slaughter, & Ng, 2002; Goldsmith & Veum, 2002). This is underpinned by the implicit assumption that talented individuals produce outstanding performance that helps firms achieve a competitive advantage.

* Corresponding author: DCU Business School, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland. Tel +38317006397.

E-mail addresses: David.collings@dcu.ie (D.G. Collings), kamel.mellahi@wbs.ac.uk (K. Mellahi).

We agree with the general premise of the paper. Therefore, rather than rehearse Meyers and her colleagues' arguments, we focus on expanding on the ideas in the paper. In particular, we address the issue of exclusivity of talent and consider the role of context and its implications on talented individuals' performance.

As we have outlined in an earlier paper in this journal, we define strategic talent management “as activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization” (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 304). Thus, for us, effective talent management is about maximizing the organization's sustainable competitive advantage and any discussion of the notion of talent comes back to a consideration of that point. Indeed, this point is acknowledged by Meyers et al. (2013—this issue) in their paper, however in building on their arguments we ask two key further questions. Firstly, rather than focusing the debate on the exclusivity of talent, we argue that a key question for organizations is where best to invest a limited pool of resources to maximize the contribution of talent within the organization (see Becker & Huselid, 2006; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007; Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Secondly, we question how the same individuals performing the same role in the two different contexts can have different performance outcomes—or how talent translates into performance.

2. Exclusivity versus maximizing value creation

A key point of departure for Meyers et al. (2013—this issue) is the ambiguity around the exclusivity of talent management systems, with a suggestion that authors such as ourselves and John Boudreau and colleagues privilege a small, elitist percentage of the workforce only—the high potential, highly performing, or strategically important employees—which contrasts to others who argue for a more inclusive approach. While their suggestion that we, and others, propose a more ‘exclusive’ approach to talent management is fair, such a position is not premised solely on the qualities of the talents in the organizations. Indeed, we would argue that the baseline of investment in human resource practice in any organization should be high. We are convinced by the contribution of appropriately designed and coherent HR practices to individual and organizational performance outcomes. Thus, we recognize the contribution of all employees. However, as Jeffrey Pfeffer (2001) has argued convincingly in the context of the war for talent, stacking an organization with talented individuals will not necessarily translate into high levels of organizational performance. Rather this stream of literature calls for a greater level of differentiation between roles in organizations, with an emphasis on strategic over non-strategic jobs (Becker & Huselid, 2010), or between those organizational roles which promise only marginal impact vis-à-vis those which can provide above-average impact (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007). This shift in perspective is premised on the recognition that organizations currently overinvest in non-strategic roles (Becker, Huselid, & Beatty, 2009; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007; Collings & Mellahi, 2009). We call for a shift in thinking from a focus on inputs (talents) required for a role or task significance to considering jobs in terms of potential outputs and strategic significance (Becker & Huselid, 2010; Becker et al., 2009). As Becker and Huselid (2006, p. 904) argue

“When employees are able to contribute to a firm's strategic objectives, they have (strategic) value. In other words, human capital [or talent] is only strategically important if it directly implements the firm's strategy. Presumably not all strategic processes will be highly dependent on human capital. As that dependency increases, employee performance behaviors in that business process are increasingly a complement to effective strategy implementation”.

The implications of this perspective for an organization's assumptions around the nature of talent are twofold. Firstly, it raises a question around the amount of talent required in an organization. For example does the organization require top talent in every organizational role or would having average levels of talent in roles which have limited potential for variation in performance and which rely to a lesser extent on human capital be more effective (see Becker & Huselid, 2010; Collings & Mellahi, 2009 for a discussion)? Secondly, as noted by Meyers et al. (2013—this issue), a differentiated approach to talent maximizes the commitment of those employees who add the greatest value to the organization. In contrast, having highly talented individuals in roles with limited scope to apply their talents and contribute to organizational success is likely to translate into frustrated employees who feel underemployed which is likely to translate into employee turnover (Erdogan & Bauer, 2011). Thus there is a strong argument that a differentiated approach to the management of talent is not elitist but rather facilitates the maximum contribution of talents to organizational performance and facilitates higher levels of engagement of all employees in organizations.

3. The relationship between talent and performance

The second key question that Meyers et al.'s (2013—this issue) discussion of the nature of talent raises for us concerns how talented individuals performing the same role in the two different contexts can have different performance outcomes—or how does talent translate into performance. While Meyers and her colleagues provide a very useful summary of research on talent transfer, this literature stream has its roots largely in how athletes can transfer their athleticism from one sport to another. While this raises some important questions it fails to consider how an individual doing the same role can display markedly different performance levels in two different organizations.

One compelling empirical example of this issue is Huckman and Pisano's (2006) study of cardiac surgeons performing the same task across multiple hospitals at approximately the same time. Their study found that the performance of individual surgeons

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