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Article

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EDITORIAL

Talent Management: Quo Vadis?



Background to the Special Issue

The fundamental intellectual utility of talent management, coupled with its manifestations in professional practice, and how aspects of both might better be observed and understood, lie at the very heart of this special issue. In proposing the special issue originally, and in subsequently developing and framing our thinking in order to ensure that our initial ideas coalesced into a fully-fledged and coherent call for papers, we had several questions which we felt were worth pursuing and which ultimately informed that final call. Those questions can be broadly classified into three wide-ranging domains. Firstly, there were questions relating to the conceptualization, theoretical development and framing of the field. Secondly, there were those focused on the exact contours and anatomy of practice implementation and evaluation. Finally, there were particular questions centring on stakeholder perceptions and priorities related to talent management adoption.

With respect to conceptualizing, developing theory and framing, we were especially interested in the theoretical utility of talent management and the evidence regarding the establishment of the boundaries of the phenomenon. In addition, we were curious about which theoretical lenses might offer particular explanatory power in explicating the mechanisms governing talent management systems, along with which specific constructs and research designs were being employed to capture talent management practices and their consequences for various stakeholders.

Our questions on the contours of practice and its evaluation had an equally foundational quality. Here we were interested in exploring what the adoption of talent management within the organizational setting entails and how it has been witnessed. We were seeking to better understand whether empirical work supported practitioner claims about the value of talent management as a practice-led phenomenon. And we wondered about complementarities with other areas and whether the work on talent management served to advance previously generated insights from proximal fields such as strategic human resource planning and competency-based management.

Our interest in stakeholder perceptions centred on whether and how the emerging body of work on talent management furthered our understanding of the contemporary employment relationship at micro, meso and macro levels. In addition to levels of analysis issues, we were eager to understand what contextual exigencies shape talent management processes and preferred practices in different settings and locations. Moreover, we were keen to uncover empirical evidence of any unintended consequences of talent management, and what the cumulative data from evaluation studies might tell us about the impact of the adoption of talent management practices, as well as talent management practitioners, on performance.

The Trajectory of the Field of Talent Management

The initial questions above, which guided our thinking, are themselves of course very much rooted in an active and lively debate in the evolving body of academic and practitioner literature dealing with talent management. Effective talent management is proposed as one of the critical capabilities that will distinguish successful global firms (Garavan, 2012) and is viewed as consequential for our ability to deliver on the potential of the knowledge economy (Tolich, 2005). Calls have been made for the development of a talent science (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005) to underpin and buttress what has been characterized as the dominant human capital topic of the 21st century (Cascio and Aguinis, 2008).

Consequently, the literature on talent management has been growing continuously, though to some in a somewhat haphazard way (Cappelli and Keller, 2014). It has been observed to be built upon a wide range of academic and applied perspectives (Nijs et al., 2014; Tarique and Schuler, 2010), something which may over the course of time prove to be a strength or a weakness depending on our capacity to coalesce dispersed theoretical insights and engage in robust evaluation studies. A recent retrospective analysis of the empirical effort to date suggests that the insights

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generated are scattered over a wide range of different academic outlets (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016).

The result is described as a somewhat fragmented body of knowledge that remains imprecise and characterized by a rather vague, and at the same time, appealing rhetoric (Dries, 2013). Arising from this, there have been calls for a more significant degree of critical scrutiny of the phenomenon (Iles et al., 2010) in order that we might more fully evaluate its true value from a science-practice perspective. Sparrow and Makram (2015: 249) concluded that because such “different values, assumptions, allegiances and philosophies are being surfaced” in the evolving field of talent management, “answering questions about value” is the core challenge that must now be addressed for the field to develop further.

Fundamental definitional challenges are central to many of the contestations that have arisen to date. Although by now the definition by Collings and Mellahi (2009) is among the most widely accepted in terms of establishing aspects of the boundary of the phenomenon and field, talent management has not yet fully shed its foundational quality. This has brought about commentaries suggesting that it may involve elements of re-branding which will run their course as a management fashion. Additionally, as a portmanteau term, talent management is employed in such a diversity of studies with the result that, though employing the same label, they may not necessarily be studying the same phenomenon. This challenge can be expected to increase in the time ahead and may act as a constraint on the coalescing of the field as the umbrella term becomes the chosen point of departure for an increasingly diverse, loosely connected, range of studies of various individual and systems phenomena in different organizations and contexts.

Arising from the definitional challenge is an underlying conceptual ambiguity. This, in part at least, may be accounted for by both what Thunnissen (2016) identifies as the lack of a stable theoretical foundation and what Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) highlight as overlooked talent philosophies. There is little doubt that, from a conceptual perspective, progress identifying lenses and levels through which the phenomenon can be observed, assessed and evaluated has been made over the past decade (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Fardale et al., 2010; Fardale et al., 2014; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Sparrow and Makram, 2015; Tarique and Schuler, 2010), but few would disagree with the premise that more fundamental theoretical scaffolding is merited in order to fully appraise its place in the lexicon of management scholarship.

Empirically, a great deal has also been attempted but it does have a bricolage type quality. This has prompted calls for a more evidence based approach (Allen et al., 2010; Briner, 2015). In addition, there have been calls for a more critical perspective on talent management, something which could pay dividend in terms of markedly improving “the quality of talent conversations in organizations” (Lewis and Heckman, 2006: 152) and which could shape and refine the direction of academic enquiry.

Overall, early criticisms pointing to the disjointed nature of the field remain (McDonnell et al., 2017), questions referring to the “theoretical pedigree, the empirical foundations and the practical implications for stakeholders to the process remain open” (Morley et al., 2015: 3) and the “limited

robust evidence on effectiveness” (Powell et al., 2013: 292). It is also argued that talent management is a field that is maturing as a result of significant debates about its breadth and focus (Sparrow and Makram, 2015) and it is precisely this growth and development that now provides the opportunity to reflect on the implicit value claims and to take stock of what has been achieved in a critical manner in order to move the field forward.

The Response to our Call

Against the backdrop of these on-going debates, and guided by the initial questions that were exercising our own thinking about the field, we invited manuscripts for this special issue that would critically reflect on what has been accomplished in talent management. Our motivation for encouraging the adoption of a more critical perspective centered on the value and utility of identifying alternative approaches that can help us to understand the phenomena in question and, in generating such understanding, offer the prospect of opening new lines of enquiry. In particular, we were interested in manuscripts that held the prospect of offering deeper insights on promising theoretical lenses that might serve to unearth the conceptual utility of talent management and further its theoretical base. The latter issue of expanding and strengthening theory in the domain area is viewed as a particularly important endeavor in order to provide a point of departure for future empirical work (Dries, 2013).

Our initial call for papers generated much interest by way of prospective submissions. A series of bilateral conversations between the Guest Editors and scholars who were considering submitting took place, largely focusing on the core idea underpinning the submission that the author was planning to make and whether it might fit with the initial call. The extent and the depth of many of those exchanges confirmed for us as an editorial team both the scale and spread of the network of scholars who are now actively contributing to the field of talent management, along with the diversity of research interests with which they are engaged. However, because of our desire to surface critical issues as levers for constructive theorizing or empirical assessments which we felt might serve a key purpose in moving the field forward, inevitably a narrower and more focused range of scholarship emerged.

After these multiple interactions, the special issue that we now curate here formally commenced with a total of 23 initial submissions, all of which were read by the editorial team and assessed both for their fit with the call for papers and their potential contribution to the field. Following this initial process of assessing, reviewing, critiquing and evaluating, ten of those manuscripts were entered into the review process and sent to at least two expert reviewers. Following on from a first round of developmental reviews, nine were subsequently offered the opportunity to revise and resubmit in light of the feedback received, all of whom took up the challenge and resubmitted a subsequent revision. Of these, six moved on to a second round of reviews, after which four were accepted, making up the collection together with a first invited paper. This process culminated in the collection we proudly present here.

The Contributions to the Special Issue

The special issue opens with Sparrow's contribution, *A historical analysis of critiques in the talent management debate*. In this detailed and integrating account, he traces the historical development of the talent management field, highlighting how, over time, a stronger theoretical base is gradually and incrementally emerging. Raising the question of whether the talent management field is fragmented, as many have claimed, or whether it is undergoing a process of steady development, Sparrow highlights the need to stay focused not only on developing strong theoretical arguments but also staying connected to dynamic practice. Opportunities to expand the field from its meso (organizational) roots to micro (employee) and macro (societal) contexts abound. The article explores the various criticisms that talent management has faced as its language has been adopted in scholarly work, calling for future critiques to be more tightly focused, based on evidence, and clear in suggesting potential solutions to move the field forward. Overall, Sparrow argues that through a process of developing arguments and counterarguments, the field is becoming increasingly coherent; a tradition that should continue, and which is expounded by the articles in this special issue.

In the next article, the focus turns to the empirical contributions that the literature on talent management has brought forth to date to complement more theoretical developments. Thus, in *Rigor and relevance in empirical talent management research: key issues and challenges*, Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo offer a critical reflection on the way in which talent management is investigated in practice. Based on a content analysis of 174 peer-reviewed articles published between 2006 and 2017, the paper outlines nine critical issues regarding the quality (in terms of relevance and rigor) of the extant empirical talent management research. Despite the enormous growth in academic interest in talent management, Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo come to the conclusion that the quality of talent management research is, in many cases, worrisome and hindering the progress of the academic field. In order to secure the quality of empirical talent management research, their primary recommendation is that scholars, in general, need to be more precise, rigorous and critical in how they approach their research, highlighting the need to collaborate between experts in the field.

In line with the opening article's call for focused and evidence-based critiques and our desire for more critical talent management perspectives, Makarem, Metcalf and Afioni contribute with *A feminist poststructuralist critique of talent management: towards a more gender sensitive body of knowledge*. From this lens, and based on an analysis of talent management foundational texts, they offer a critique on the gendered nature of much of the talent management research, dominated by exclusivity, individualization, performativity, and masculine attributes, highlighting the many voices and experiences that remain marginalized in the talent management discourse. From this, they suggest alternative ways that could assist in both the validation of talent management knowledge and in the incorporating of different sensibilities.

With such approaches, it would be possible to integrate gender and difference considerations into the conceptual and practical advances of talent management as the field matures.

A recent turn injected into the broader talent management literature relates to the development of a macro perspective and the extent to which adopting such an approach might surface new lines of enquiry. Khilji et al. (2015: 237), in making the case for incorporating the macro view in global talent management, define it as "the activities that are systematically developed by governmental and nongovernmental organizations expressly for the purpose of enhancing the quality and quantity of talent within and across countries and regions to facilitate innovation and competitiveness of their citizens and corporations". King and Vaiman, in their contribution in this issue titled *Enabling effective talent management through a macro-contingent approach: A framework for research and practice*, take up the challenge of explicating the value of a macro perspective. They argue that the forces and systems that shape the available supply, composition and flow of talent into and out of organizations have become increasingly complex on a range of fronts, not least political, institutional, technological, and cultural ones. Referred to as the 'architecture of external macro talent management systems', they identify three pivotal elements that serve as constraints, namely: a firm-level orientation to talent management that limits the cross-level integration of talent strategy and results in a micro-macro gap in the nested talent systems; a primarily HR-centric orientation towards organizational talent management, which may serve to constrain the primacy of talent management as a business strategy lever; and a predominantly intra-organizational focus that may limit management agency due to a lack of integration with the external talent management context. As a countermeasure to these constraints, they suggest that adopting a macro-contingent view for further cross-level conceptualization and empirical study is required in order to lift current constraints on the topic's conceptual utility and to bridge the micro-macro gap in the talent management literature.

In the final contribution in this special issue, we designedly availed of the Counterintuitive Perspectives section offered by *Business Research Quarterly*. In it, Claus paints a picture, in her article titled *HR disruption: Why we must reengineer talent management*, of how the field of practice has developed and will develop further. It landscapes particular aspects of what both talent management practice and human resource management might look like in the future. The contribution, in particular, helps us to think about the link between future academic research and practice, as recommended by Thunnissen and Gallardo in their paper in this issue. The article pushes the boundaries of our thinking, exploring how progressive organizations are creating more meaningful employee experiences for their talented employees. To do so, Claus assembles a suite of ideas from adjacent fields such as design thinking, experience mapping, touchpoint management, rapid prototyping, agile management, behavioural economics, and HR analytics to address the challenges faced by changing patterns of demography, technology, and globalization. By applying

micro, meso and macro level reasoning, future opportunities and challenges for talent management are identified.

Concluding Remarks

As you will read in the issue, each of these contributions address key aspects of our original call for papers, providing insights regarding the theoretical development of the field (Sparrow) and a critical evaluation of the empirical evidence to date (Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo), helping to clarify the boundaries of what we already know or do not yet fully know about the concept of talent management. A strong critical theory perspective is added through Makarem, Metcalf and Afiouni's contribution from a feminist perspective, developing that range of stakeholder perceptions that we believe is essential for moving the field forward. Finally, the contours of practice of talent management are clearly delineated (Claus), providing direction for both future practice and research in an academic field that has traditionally developed hand-in-hand with dynamic practice. Interestingly, all contributions to this special issue are conceptual, which once again underscores the need for more robust empirical studies going forward (as argued by Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo in this issue): the balance between developing the field both conceptually and empirically remains critical (McDonnell et al., 2017).

Looking to the future, we believe that the time has come to concretize our thinking and modelling in talent management research. We have critiqued the emergent definitions during the field's infancy and are reaching a point of growing consensus regarding what talent management entails. We now need to shift our focus to refining our conceptualisations and developing appropriate theory to strengthen the field further. In so doing, we should be particularly mindful of adopting different stakeholder viewpoints and different levels of analysis, the combination of which could prove especially useful; indeed, this should be encouraged to ensure that we are being both critical and constructive in our commentaries.

In conclusion, there have been continuous challenges over the last quarter century, attempting to distinguish talent management from strategic human resource management in particular. In reality, in some contexts, the term 'talent management' has become simply a substitute for strategic human resource management. What should we do about this? Or is it at all necessary to do anything about this? Here the earlier reflections by Dyer and Burdick (1998) on the then protracted debate on the distinction between 'personnel management' and 'human resource management' may prove instructive. They highlighted that the energy spent on debating the emerging difference over two decades between personnel management and human resource management culminated in a conclusion by the end of the 1990's that the function was the same but the activities were delivered in an increasingly individualized manner. Importantly, the energy and vigor which characterized that debate engaged in by scholars at that time was certainly not wasted as it allowed for the development of clear conceptualizations of the phenomena of interest; however, there was a clear point in time beyond which that debate became somewhat redundant. We are not

convinced that the distinction between talent management and strategic human resource management is yet entirely clear or even absolutely necessary, but the field appears to be on the cusp of an advance that will define the future of a deal of research on how human resources (talent) are managed in organizations worldwide.

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