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REGULAR ARTICLE

A historical analysis of critiques in the talent management debate



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Abstract Current debates around talent management echo previous concern about the development of the field of IHRM. This paper uses historical analysis to examine two questions: has the field followed a logical progression and process of increasing coherence; and has its narrative been shaped in ideological ways? It identifies six concepts that guided and enabled the subsequent development of the talent management field. It shows how a selection of these ideas were re-packaged through the introduction of new notions to build two competing narratives: a star performer perspective and a human capital management perspective. It examines the progressive critiques and problems that then had to be solved to address these concerns. There is evidence of periodic ideological re-interpretations of talent management but there has nonetheless been a logical, progressive and issues-driven evolution of ideas in the field into which the current critical perspectives must now be fitted.

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Introduction

We know there is a fragmented body of knowledge in the talent management field, and definitions of talent and talent management remain imprecise. This paper examines two questions of relevance to a more critical view on the talent management debate. The first question is whether the current critical examination taking place should lead us to conclude that the field has become fragmented and is in need of some restructuring, or whether there is rather

a pattern, a logical progression and process of increasing coherence that can be detected in the various critiques that have developed. Is the field fragmented or undergoing a process of slow but progressive coherence? The second and related question is whether the talent management narrative has been shaped in ideological ways or not?

The paper addresses these questions by adopting a historical perspective. It uses a historical analysis to show how the language of talent management, and the ways in which this language has been used to imply what should be involved in the field, has evolved over time. It reviews the core narratives and critiques that have developed in order to reveal the antecedents to the current debates and the assumptions

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that drove this critical narrative. It then positions these narratives against the broader thrust of academic thinking. In adopting a historical perspective the paper takes an evolutionary perspective. It argues that a series of legitimate issues have been raised over time through critique, but that the subsequent attempts that were then made to address these issues led to a series of logical developments. The field has always been driven by the need to resolve the issues that a talent management philosophy creates. Far from being a field that faces a crisis of definition and purpose, there is a slow but ongoing process of coherence taking place, driven by a healthy process of critique. However, all is not well. This evolution of critique runs the risk of totally divorcing the academic evolution of the field from the world of practice.

In relation to the first question, that of progressive coherence or fragmentation, the debates that we are seeing today in the field of talent management closely echo previous debates about the development of the field of IHRM. At the end of the decade of the 2000s (coincidentally the period when the field of talent management began to gain a broader academic audience) there was a debate in the IHRM literature about the problem of “infancy” and a lack of theoretical integration in that field. From the mid-1980s to the turn of the 1990s the IHRM field was considered to be in its “infancy” (Laurent, 1986). The charge was that the field had become fragmented, the majority of theories had been created outside the field of IHRM, and this had created an experimentation and abstractness in thinking that merely confused the identity of a field (Peltonen, 2006; De Cieri et al., 2007; Hippler, 2008). The counter position was the evolutionary view of the field (Stahl and Bjorkman, 2006; Sparrow, 2009). These writers argued that the field of IHRM had not moved through a haphazard and opportunistic expansion, but rather through a sequential development of thinking that reflected and captured the successively evolving cultural, geographical and institutional challenges faced by the multinational corporations. There was a logical pattern to, and a natural “issues-driven” narrative that could be used to explain the concerns that IHRM researchers had had to face, absorb, interpret, and then re-analyse (Sparrow, 2009).

Returning to research on talent management, it is important to note that the level of academic interest is relatively recent, as evidenced by a number of special issues on the topic dating from 2010. These special issues were intended to delineate the topical research issues, and build an extended community of academics. However, they have also brought a wave of critical thinking into the field of talent management, directed both at practitioners and at the lack of attention given by HR strategy and human capital management (HCM) researchers to the realities of practice. In historical sequence, the pursuit of global talent management was covered in *Journal of World Business* (Scullion et al., 2010), European perspectives were covered in *European Journal of International Management* (Collings et al., 2011), and Asia-Pacific perspectives in *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources* (McDonnell et al., 2012). There then followed a general review of debate in *International Journal of Human Resource Management* (Vaiman and Collings, 2013). After this first tranche of research, special issues went on to analyse the current theories and future research directions in *Journal of World Business* (Al Ariss et al., 2014), general

progress and prospects in *Human Resource Management Review* (Collings et al., 2015), the nature of strategic talent management in *Employee Relations* (Scullion et al., 2016), and the importance of a number of organisational contextual factors in *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance* (Vaiman et al., 2017).

This explosion of academic debate helped to bring the topic of talent management to a wider academic audience beyond the early HR strategy writers, notably bringing global talent management (GTM) and International HRM (IHRM) researchers into the debate. These GTM and IHRM researchers – as outsiders moving into a field – were on the one hand able to quickly spot the many flaws and inconsistencies in the debates that had been taking place. But on the other hand, they were not on the whole HR strategy academics and were not therefore automatically cognisant of the prior historical context and critiques from within the HR strategy field. They were therefore well placed to understand the cultural and institutional limitations that surround what had previously been a very Anglo-Saxon HR led debate around talent management, but less engaged with the HR strategy context. This latter context is analysed in this paper. Consequently, there was a period of a few years in which both communities “equalised” their insights, slowly integrating each others’ findings into their own narratives. This has spawned a range of critical perspectives.

The gist of these critiques was as follows. Reflecting the debates about IHRM, there was academic debate as to whether the talent management field was still in a stage of infancy or had reached a stage of adolescence (Collings et al., 2011; Thunnissen et al., 2013; Thunnissen, 2016). It was also argued there was still no precise definition of what was meant by talent management and this was slowing down the development of the field (Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Iles et al., 2010; Tarique and Schuler, 2010; Garavan et al., 2012). The assumptions and philosophies used to both define ‘talent’ and ‘talent management’ and also to underpin its practice, were seen as extremely varied (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Meyers et al., 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Dries, 2013; Sparrow and Makram, 2015). As a result, even today, the majority of talent management research is still focused at the meso- (organisational) level, with only limited attention being paid to individual-level research (see for example Nijs et al., 2014; King, 2015, 2016; Swailes and Blackburn, 2016) or more macro-level factors (Khilji et al., 2015; Vaiman et al., 2018a,b).

A recent systematic review of studies in leading journals (McDonnell et al., 2017) found that 60 per cent of studies now have some empirical component, and draw on primary research to some extent. Less than 30 per cent have any theoretical framing, and such framing is often superficial. Bibliometric analysis of the recent empirical effort suggests there remains a fragmented body of knowledge, scattered across a wide range of journals (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016), resulting in a lack of any stable theoretical foundation. These critical observations and criticisms are not challenged in this paper. Indeed, the need to address such criticism will be central to the future development of the field.

In relation to the second question – the potential impact of ideological interpretations – it will become evident from

this paper that there has been an element of re-packaging, re-branding, re-cycling and re-inventing of talent management on behalf of practitioners but also on behalf of academics. This has pushed some of the existing HRM literature into the new language of talent management.

This has created tensions. When seen in a broader societal context, there are many ethical questions that might be raised about an elite perspective on talent management. The debate about inclusive versus exclusive talent management within the literature is an example of such tension. One could be reminded of the famous quote from George Orwell's *Animal Farm* as the animals realise that Napoleon the pig has replaced their seven commandments with the maxim "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others". The statement presents two apparently incompatible positions in a seemingly plausible linguistic form – with "equal" suddenly seen as a relative term rather than an absolute one – so that there can be different degrees of "equal"-ness! As literature teachers remind us, the point of the *Animal Farm* quote is that the initially well-intentioned commandment that "all animals are equal" can be manipulated to the point where all the other animals on the farm suddenly realise that the pigs have envisioned themselves as the privileged "some", and that under their regime, working animals exist only to serve the larger glory of the leadership!

From an ethical perspective, did Napoleon the pig replace the commandments of talent management with an inappropriate maxim? Has our language created the practices we intended? To think about this, we need to first ask what were the commandments that perhaps got put to one side as simpler maxims took hold?

Acknowledging the enabling concepts

It is easy to assume that the development of talent management as an academic discipline dates from around the time of the recent special issues and review articles. Certainly, much of the critical literature on the topic has been based on these more recent contributions. However, Sparrow et al. (2014) pointed out that a number of intellectual developments occurring well before this period served to establish the base problems and assumptions that have shaped and directed our more recent academic study, and helped establish the recent talent management narrative. They called these developments "enabling concepts".

This article develops and refines this notion of *enabling concepts* and applies it to the recent growth of critical perspectives in the talent management field. It attempts to break down the critiques and surface the evidence and assumptions upon which the critiques are based.

An analysis of the history of talent management suggests that there have in fact been six enabling concepts that have shaped the development of the talent management narrative. These are expanded upon later, but can be summarised as follows.

The first enabling concept – developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s – was the convergence and integration of two previously separate traditions – those of resourcing and career development – into a single *life-cycle perspective*. This convergence argued the importance of thinking

about the whole episode and duration of an employee's tenure with the organisation (Beer et al., 1984). This whole episode concept was reflected in subsequent definitions of talent management, which stressed its focus on cradle to grave processes to recruit, develop and retain employees within an organisation (American Productivity and Quality Center, 2004). Similarly, talent management was seen as the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment of individuals who through their potential have a positive immediate or long-term impact on organisational performance (CIPD, 2008). This required an integrated set of processes and procedures at the organisational level to attract, onboard, retain, develop move and exit talent in order to achieve strategic objectives (Arendon and Scholes, 2010).

The second enabling concept was the *competency movement* (Boyatzis, 1982). This captured the increasing individualisation of organisations and focused on and the ways in which skills, abilities, and motivations could be codified within the individual. The movement argued that recruitment and career development (and other elements of an HR system) are best managed against a single set of behavioural indicators. The competency movement was an early attempt to enable a human capital specification.

The third enabling concept was the subsequent development of *portfolio thinking* about human assets. This led to frameworks that facilitated the *categorisation* of all managerial employees in order to identify and highlight so called "high potentials". The performance-potential framework categorised managers across a two-dimensional matrix, with performance on one axis and potential on the other (Odiorno, 1984). It took its lead from, and co-opted, the language of product market categorisation of businesses. Product market language described high-high business units as "stars", the low-low ones as "dogs", high-low ones as "cash cows", and low-high ones as "problem children". The read over from business units to categories of talent is self-evident.

The fourth enabling concept was the growth of the *human resource planning movement*. This brought a focus on the importance of forecasting, planning and managing staffing in the broader context of meeting business needs, and augmenting short-term management development activity with longer horizon activities such as succession plans (Gubman, 1998; Fitz-enz, 2000). Systems could be developed that built upon the competencies so identified, by "measuring" the effectiveness of the person and placing them into a broader system of organisation-level competencies. Competencies (and talent) could be identified and predicted by augmenting individual-level competency data with insight from strategic vision workshops, business process mapping, cultural analysis, business scenarios, and study of expert knowledge. This was not called talent management as such, although it was in practice. Instead it was described as a "total resource development system" (Boam and Sparrow, 1992).

The fifth enabling concept was the assumption that *informed workplaces* were changing the power of talent (Zuboff, 1988). This surfaced some uncomfortable realities in our HR thinking – such as the role and nature of power. Whilst organisations needed firm-wide systems that enabled competency requirement forecasting, human resource development, and HR planning processes, there

were nonetheless a small number of people who could have an extraordinary impact on the organisation. However, technological innovations and IT were impacting the value of talent. In an “informed” workplace, individuals and groups could create new meanings and new understandings about strategy and performance through the information they used. As a consequence of these shifts, it was argued that a process of “upgrading” was taking place in the nature of strategic talent. There was a need for those people who had the power to understand business and social opportunities that now existed (this type of understanding was termed “intellective skills”). Such high-value and difficult-to-replace technical talent, it was argued, was best seen as a strategic asset.

The sixth and final enabling concept was the intellectual shift taking place in the field of selection at the time from pay-for-the-job to *pay-for-the-person thinking*. The pay-for-the-job approach had always assumed that jobs could be designed, evaluated and differentiated dependent upon their size and complexity. Employees could therefore be fitted to the job (or fitted into the broader organisation culture or values in which jobs sat) through the process of selection. However, the pay-for-the-person approach (Lawler, 1994), following a similar logic to the “informed” workplace perspective, argued that jobs had become too flexible, too uncertain and too unpredictable to be “sized” in any reliable or stable way. It was more appropriate therefore to design HR systems around highly skilled people, especially those who possessed high levels of self-efficacy because they had what were called “job crafting” skills. The competent person, it was argued, had the capabilities to design their own jobs in appropriate ways. Sadly, not all people, either possessed or displayed these newly-important skills. Hence the talented were a subset of the broader human resource.

Although these six intellectual developments began to dominate much HRM thinking from the 1980s onwards, it was only really once we got to the late 1990s and early 2000s that we saw the use of talent management as a label in its own right (Sitzer and Dowell, 2010). The label brought with it many “fuzzy concepts”, many implicit notions and assumptions, and indeed some overt ideologies. What was new was the way in which this language was subsequently used to imply what should be involved in the field. Language is important, for it can be used to allow those interested in a topic to “gain entry” to associated ideas, thereby changing their own practice and mindset, whether for good or bad.

Re-assembly into the war for talent narrative

By the early 2000s then, six enabling concepts had gained force. Their assumptions were not particularly contested. However, a situation emerged in which organisations were forced to design more competitive HR strategies in their struggle as employers to “land” and “upskill” employees in what was presented as a cut throat and free-agent employment market (Sears, 2003). The most famous – perhaps now infamous – exposition of this position was the book *The War for Talent* by Michaels et al. (2001). If we analyse this “war for talent” narrative, it is evident that it actually reflected many of the six enabling concepts and assumptions discussed above. This is perhaps why it quickly became a dominant

narrative – it just re-packaged and re-assembled many of the intellectual developments of the 1980s and 1990s into a palatable (to practitioners, but not to academics) and plausible solution.

The definition of talent in the *War for Talent* book was, with hindsight, a re-packaging of three of the six prior enabling concepts. First, it co-opted the earlier competency movement and notions of human capital, but it also subtly extended effectiveness to include an individual’s social capital. Talent was defined as the sum of a person’s abilities (gifts, skills, knowledge, experience, intelligence, judgement, attitude, character and drive) and a sharp strategic mind, leadership ability, emotional maturity, communication skills, the ability to attract and inspire other talented people, entrepreneurial instincts, functional skills, and the ability to deliver results (Michaels et al., 2001). Second, all the HR systems – but particularly performance appraisal, rewards and incentives, work or job design – were to be designed around Lawler’s (1994) notion of a pay-for-the-person as opposed to pay-for-the-job philosophy. Third, the argument that the whole HR system of an organisation had to be aligned to a performance-led talent strategy reflected Odiorne’s (1984) earlier notions about categorising and differentiating employees into a portfolio. Rather than using a 9-Box performance-potential taxonomy, the differentiation of employees was infamously captured as A, B and C players. This meant assessing the performance and potential of employees and pursuing an elite strategy i.e. investing in the A players by giving them promotion, compensation, and development opportunities, affirming the potential of B players, and acting decisively (either quickly re-engaging or more likely removing) C players.

However, the war for talent management narrative also introduced four new ideas. The first new idea was that HRM policy was to be influenced by three concepts from marketing thinking: (1) talent management was to rely on there being an *employer brand*, positioned to attract key people (the stars) and then to exceed their expectations; (2) employee *value propositions* (EVPs) should convey a clear statement of the more explicit obligations that the organisation would commit to for talented people and propositions that could drive attraction and retention behaviour; and (3) talented people were *consumers*. Implicit in the system of workforce segmentation and the identification and isolation of particularly critical workforce segments (which in turn had prior antecedents in 9-Box thinking) the needs of the consumers of the talent system (i.e. of the small elite of critical talent) and what they cared about most, suddenly became important.

The second new idea was that talent management therefore was *not* about having sophisticated HR processes concerned with succession planning, recruitment and compensation, but rather having HR systems that *differentiated and affirmed the status of talent*, hiring assumed talented people and paying them more than they thought they were worth.

The third new idea was the notion that talent management needed a leadership imperative – a cultural *mindset* – in which the language of talent management signalled the importance of the surrounding managerial culture to the success of any particular HR strategy. The philosophy asked how organisations could develop, sustain and

manage “pools” of talent, how they could engrain a talent “mindset” into their culture, and how they could align their varied HR programmes and processes more effectively towards the needs of the proposed small elite of talent.

The fourth new idea was that the narrative stressed two competitions - one between individual talent (an interpersonal talent management focus) and one within the individual so that they could be of their best (an intrapersonal talent perspective).

Critiques of the war for talent narrative

Criticism of talent management has a long and proud history. However, again we need to place much of our current critique into its historical context. Citation should reflect this. Many of the points made today were actually made in the very early days of the field.

At the same time that the enabling concepts outlined earlier were being re-assembled into the War for Talent narrative, [Fitz-enz \(2000\)](#) argued that management teaching was either ignoring, or avoiding the question of human value in business environments. Even worse, it was throwing out gratuitous or simplistic platitudes about it. He argued that talent shortages were not solvable just by attending to productivity. The use of portfolio thinking to categorise individuals and concentrate resources where they had the largest return on investment missed the point. Rather, managers had to address fundamental issues around fulfilment at work. Knowledge of, and feedback on achievement was only of value as part of a human capital planning philosophy.

The original discussion of human capital planning introduced the first new pattern – the first set of logical and evolutionary developments – into our thinking. This was the notion of *human capital planning capabilities* being more important than portfolios of talent. It acknowledged that lean, efficient and effective performance could be delivered through the efforts of talent – but not through the more lazy and fairy-tailed (Fitz-enz’s language) practice of benchmarking a portfolio of star managers. Rather, human capital planning required an integration of five core elements: planning, acquiring, maintaining, developing and retaining human capital. By converting this human capital planning cycle into a talent management system, the organisation had to develop two (difficult to build) planning capabilities: (1) measuring the impact that human capital (talent) had on the collective ability to execute an organisation’s business processes, evaluated and analysed only against truly best practices, not simple and essentially copied processes; and (2) the use of the forward-looking skills of trending, forecasting and predicting.

Portfolios of talent were an unnecessary distraction. Similarly, at about the same time [Pfeffer \(2001\)](#) produced his famous critique of the “star talent” perspective. Many years before the global financial crisis would later legitimise recent discomfort with an elite perspective, he argued that a cultural mindset that emphasised a fight to source talented individuals was “hazardous” to the organisation’s broader health. He argued the new talent management narrative misdirected the attention of those interested in the nature

of organisational effectiveness, assumed the wrong fulcrum for improving this effectiveness (i.e. focusing on people, or stars, at the expense of systems) and given human behaviour, would create a set of side effects that would nullify any human capital gains. His key objections were fivefold. First, the Star approach emphasised individual performance at the expense of teamwork creating disharmony between employees who in reality needed to work collaboratively. Second, market-led HR practices made it hard to share knowledge, ideas, and best practices because celebration of individual brilliance created an elitist and arrogant attitude, downplayed the importance of learning and wrongly assumed that those dubbed as “Stars” should have their way over otherwise perfectly good ideas coming from a “B” or “C” players. Third, organisations that adopted an “A” player approach relied heavily on monetary incentives to attract and retain key individuals, making the approach expensive, non-strategic and easily imitable. Fourth, labelling (especially as a C player) would lead to horn and halo effects (where past performances biased judgements about current performance and future potential) with negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Lower expectations lead to fewer resources being available to B and C players, demoralisation, and thus poor performance, artificially inflating the contribution of “A” players. Fifth, the philosophy suggested that individual ability was a fixed invariant trait, a dangerous assumption that was not supported by research on careers.

The second new pattern and set of logical and evolutionary developments in our thinking was the *incorporation of an organisation design perspective* into the talent management narrative. In order to ameliorate the ethical objections some HR professionals had to classifying people as “A, B, or C”, [Huselid et al. \(2005\)](#) softened the language in order to compromise the competing narratives of [Michaels et al. \(2001\)](#) versus [Pfeffer \(2001\)](#). Understanding that there might not be the same emotional reactivity to classifying positions – or segmenting jobs – within the organisation they co-opted ABC language and applied it to positions not people. This was organisation design thinking. A positions were strategic (by dint of having a disproportionate role in a organisation’s ability in executing some part of its strategy). Yet there was wide variability in the quality of work displayed by employees in A positions. B positions may be strategic for the company but the skills required to perform them were common and there was little variability in the performance of employees in these positions. C Positions were required for the company to function but were not strategic to its success and could easily be outsourced. In a nod to the war for talent narrative, it was still argued that A position holders required autonomous decision making and enriched job design, and performance based compensation, but they called for a more targeted approach to the allocation of “star talent”. Organisations did not need A players throughout their operations; only in A positions. However, by building an element of intrinsic reward in-built into these positions, and attracting those who seek job enrichment at their work place, the talent management strategy could be less reliant on monetary rewards, thereby making the strategy more acceptable to the wider organisation and society.

Critiques from the human capital management narrative

This early human capital management discourse never went away, but it would be fair to say that it was somewhat subsumed by the war for talent narrative. However, by the late 2000s the early work on workforce analytics had evolved into the broader topic of strategic workforce planning (SWP). This created a more receptive context for the early critiques to take hold. SWP used a combination of data and analytics to create insight into the relative value of specific talent to the execution of an important strategy, and the necessary investments and actions needed to avoid any loss of value.

The third new pattern and set of logical and evolutionary developments in our thinking was that the workforce plan should be seen as the *talent component to the business strategy*. A number of writers, coming from a human capital planning perspective, went on to refine Huselid et al.'s (2005) positions perspective (see for example Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005, 2006, 2007; Ingham, 2007; Cappelli, 2008; Boudreau, 2010; Boudreau and Jesuthasan, 2011). Cappelli (2008) drew upon this work to define talent management as the process through which employers anticipate and meet their needs for human capital. The human capital management discourse tried to influence the way that nascent talent management functions thought about their processes. It made it clear that any talent management process had to be analysed in terms of whether it helped improve business performance. Nahapiet (2011) reminded us that the word capital reflects a concept from economics to denote potentially valuable assets. Under the impetus of human capital management thinking, there were three significant critiques of the study of talent management that helped shaped the subsequent developments in our research narrative. Boudreau and Ramstad (2006, 2007) also developed thinking about the *talent component to the business strategy*. They argued that the field needed to do four things: (1) translate the organisational capabilities articulated in the strategy into specifications for individual talent; (2) develop frameworks to segment the existing, or the target talent population on the basis of the centrality of the roles to the strategy (not to segment on notions of individual performance and potential); (3) help organisations decide whether they should pursue “build” or “buy” talent strategies; and (4) develop frameworks to identify which decisions about human capital were most crucial and then connect these decisions logically to questions of organisational effectiveness. They returned the talent management field to the underlying question of how organisations could *create value from their human capital* and introduced two new notions into the talent management narrative: (1) the need for a “talentship decision science” with the goal of increasing “the success of the organisation by improving decisions that depend on or impact talent resources” (2007, p. 25); and (2) the notion of ‘pivotal talent pools’. The latter was defined as groupings and clusters of talent (i.e. not just positions) in which differential human capital investments could make the biggest difference to strategic success. They noted that pivotal talent pools could exist in undervalued parts of the organisation and were rarely to do with “star” managers.

The fourth new pattern and set of logical and evolutionary developments in our thinking was the *introduction of risk management thinking* into the talent management narrative, Cascio and Boudreau (2010, 2012) argued that talent strategies had to be risk aligned to balance the inherent risks in talent planning, with investments in talent for several future scenarios, according to their relative likelihood and risk. They introduced risk optimisation, management and mitigation frameworks to look at human resource strategy and strategic workforce planning. Their critique of talent management thinking raised three new questions about (1) the illusion of predictability, (2) the most appropriate governance of talent systems, and (3) its functional ownership (which might not be HR functions). Human capital strategies had to be built around the reduction of uncertainty, elimination of bad outcomes, and insurance against bad outcomes.

The fifth new pattern and set of logical and evolutionary developments in our thinking was a further refinement of the *talent management – organisation design interface* by Collings and Mellahi (2009). Their work led to another softening of the “star talent” approach and a clarification of the links between talent management and organisation design. They argued that organisations must de-link their talent management strategy from their leadership development activity and its debates about star performers. Building on the observations of Boudreau and Ramstad (2006, 2007) that talent management was not just linked to top tier employees of the organisation, and strategic positions did not just include those near the strategic core of the organisation, they argued that talent management should be seen as a more contextual endeavour, and should become an organisation-wide strategy. Though this aspect of talent management was naturally still one (and an important) part of a broad strategy, they co-opted the notion of a “human resource architecture” to facilitate the filling of these positions with competent incumbents and to differentiate their management to ensure their continued commitment to the organisation.

Critiques from the world of practice

The sixth new pattern and set of logical and evolutionary developments in our thinking was a convergence of concern between academics and practitioners about the need for organisations to *manage the social dimension in which talent was developed*, rather than the capability and resources of individuals. Practitioners became more questioning of their achievements and there was a groundswell of critique of their own practice. Cheese et al. (2008) argued that if the combined capacity and will of people to achieve an organisation’s goals was to be treated as a productive resource, then talent management had to be managed hand in hand with broader workforce engagement. Schiemann (2009) complained of unfocused activities, woefully inadequate measures in a nascent field, and a failure to accept that talent management was not just a business issue, but a social issue. Davies and Kourdi (2010) feared practitioners had overly bought into the notion of star talent and rather than concentrating on executive potential

for tomorrow, needed to focus on the knowledge, innovation and relationships between talent that needed to take place inside organisations today – the vital many were as important as the special few. They needed to manage how talent worked – managing the whole ecology of an organisation and its ability to create social capital. Sparrow et al. (2011) teased out differences in the underlying philosophies, providers, practices and principles of talent management, finding immense variability of practice, the way that these practices were bundled together by organisations under the label or umbrella of talent management, the underlying models of potential, leadership and human capability, career advancement and career derailment, and differences in the underlying *principles* – the fundamental rules that guided action and conduct within the talent management system.

Reflecting this pessimism, academics similarly came to the conclusion that decisions around talent management in practice were rarely optimal and there was often only a weak link to the previous academic narrative. Practice was not based on the frameworks being promulgated by the human capital management academics, but was still driven by the informed preferences, or intuitive instincts, that senior managers had of the visible talent within their organisation (Mäkelä et al., 2010; Vaiman et al., 2012). Even when informed by data provided by HR functions, organisations lacked a synthesis, provision of usable metrics and analysis or any explanation of important nuances. Finally, practitioners were also bounded by the natural cognitive limits of managers and had neither the time, capability nor inclination to access data about all of their organisation's talent – the suspicion was that the inclination was to select those who were "good enough" based on previous experiences and beliefs about talent.

This remains the case. Makram et al. (2017), in studying both the talent system designers and the talent system implementers from a strategy-as-practice perspective, drew mixed conclusions in terms of the level of strategic thinking in practice. Managers continue to view talent management as a bundle, or set, of management ideologies manifested in all their HR-related practices, and continue to see performance management as the cornerstone of their talent management.

Enter the global talent management researchers

The seventh new pattern and set of logical and evolutionary developments in our thinking was the linkage created between talent management and the broader field of international HRM. Interestingly, this introduction of both more critical and more global academic debate came at exactly the same time as the period of practitioner self-critique. The entry of IHRM researchers into the field soon led to an acknowledgement that there was a geographical narrowness in our understanding of talent management practice, as discussions around practice had been dominated by both the study primarily of Anglo-Saxon organisations and by analysis of US academics (Scullion and Collings, 2011; Stahl et al., 2012). It became apparent there were many differences in the understanding of, definition of, meaning in, and goals of

talent management across countries (Collings et al., 2011; McDonnell et al., 2012; Vaiman and Collings, 2013). The research problem became one of understanding: (1) the effectiveness and types of talent management activities in different national contexts; (2) the conceptual and intellectual boundaries of talent management; and (3) the practice of talent management in different types of organisations that might be common in a particular geography, such as SMEs.

Given the importance of cultural values, and differences in individualism, it was not surprising that the entry of IHRM researchers saw a reprise of the early critique of an elite approach to talent management by Pfeffer (2001). This led to what might be called the elite versus egalitarian debate in the early special issues of the early 2010s – although this time debated for very different reasons (Farndale et al., 2010; Scullion and Collings, 2011; Dries, 2013; Meyers and van Woerkim, 2014; Schiemann, 2014; Sparrow et al., 2014). Calls for a more egalitarian perspective found much favour in the early reviews of the field (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Schuler et al., 2011; Scullion and Collings, 2011). However, Sparrow et al. (2014) argued again that this debate reflected three different assumptions and different positions that might be taken:

1. it might reflect a belief that a small proportion of the workforce (however the individuals in question might have been identified or whatever their role or position in the organisation) can or should have a disproportionate effect on organisational performance.
2. it might reflect some acceptance that an elite possessing high levels of appropriate capital can have a disproportionate effect, but the real objection is to the disproportionate level of financial reward and the extent of favouritism afforded this workforce segment (this may be based on cultural or ethical objections).
3. it might reflect an acceptance that some people can have disproportionate impact, but the real objection is scepticism about the ability of organisations to correctly identify and position such individuals (i.e. a belief the system is prone to biases, errors and a lack of diversity in the mindsets of those eventually selected into the pool), which makes the issue of rewards all the more galling.

Authors rarely made it explicit exactly what their issue with an elite approach was.

However, in terms of evidence, the recent analysis of the elite-egalitarian dichotomy has actually helped the broader field move forward. We now know that being a part of a chosen elite (where membership is transparent and is known to the individual) has been found to impact how favourably such talent perceives the general HR practices to be (Marescaux et al., 2013), their pay levels (Dries and Pepermans, 2008); their (lower) intentions to quit (Dries et al., 2014; Khoreva et al., 2017; Redundo et al., 2019), and their levels of both affective commitment (Gelens et al., 2015), commitment to increased performance demands, and identification with their work units (Björkman et al., 2013).

However, inclusion in the elite pool is often unknown to the pool members. Moreover, the decision making about selection for the talent pool can be subject to structural biases in the form of strategic blindness and cognitive biases

(Vaiman et al., 2012; Sparrow et al., 2014). It may also be impacted by factors such as the cultural and institutional distance between the geographical location of candidates and HQ decision makers, the level of personal closeness between candidate and decision-makers, or indeed the network position of a candidate in the internal social and power networks of the organisation (Mäkelä et al., 2010). Finally, any decision to select individuals to be part of this elite pool can of course be perceived in terms of unfairness and inequality between employees (Gelens et al., 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). The worry that “all animals are equal, only some animals are more equal than others” remains!

Conclusion

In relation to the issue of the potential impact of ideological interpretations the paper argues this was clearly evident. There was an instant critique of the war for talent narrative, yet in historical terms, when it came to capturing the attention of managers, the early human resource planning view of talent management was out-competed by the war for talent narrative. Although this narrative was actually a logical extension of the prior work, the way the arguments were packaged led to two clear ideological assumptions. First, that organisational effectiveness and productivity were best served by the sum of individual star contributions rather than by more incremental, collective and systems-based interventions. Second, that rewards should be unevenly provided and focused on the small elite of high value-added (in business terms) individuals. The analysis shows that the building blocks – the six enabling concepts that led to talent management – were not questioned in the emerging critical perspective on talent management. It was the way in which they were (re-) assembled into a dominant narrative that created discomfort and created critiques based around the excessive use of rewards, narrow and restrictive employee segmentation, and slow and limited diffusion of the more developmental aspects of the thinking to layers down the hierarchy.

This creates a challenge for critical management. We have to be clear which elements of the narrative we object to, on what evidence base, which philosophical assumptions we question, or accept, and how we intend to re-assemble a new narrative that is problem-free. Whilst being wary about some of the simple maxims that took over the field or practice around the late 1990s and early 2000s, we equally must not fall into a trap of taking a critical perspective simply for the sake of criticism. If we are to critique the talent management field, we need to either challenge the progressive evolution of ideas, or be clear which of the enabling concepts we acknowledge to still hold true, and which might no longer apply, but for explained and evidenced reasons. A critical narrative must also suggest an alternative (and superior) way forward, and this alternative must also fit with the realities and fallibilities of practice. This is not an easy task. Whilst accepting and supporting the many critical charges that are currently being levelled at the field, this paper should alert us to the need to place these critiques in context and to also consider the broader trajectory on which the field appears to be based.

In relation to the second question examined – whether the current critical examination taking place shows that the field has become fragmented and in need of some restructuring, or whether there is actually a pattern, logical progression and process of increasing coherence that can be detected in the various critiques that have developed, the paper concludes that the latter situation is much in evidence. The paper has identified seven new patterns and sets of logical and evolutionary developments in our thinking. The field of talent management has evolved “at the intersection of HRM, strategy, international business and other related fields” (McDonnell et al., 2017, p. 90). This inevitably means that it draws upon a very wide range of theory, with such theory often being used tangentially and in a very situational context. The early research reviewed in this paper drew upon traditions as various as human capital management, strategic human resource management, the Resource-based View (RBV) of the firm, expectancy theory and marketing perspectives such as brand equity and signalling theory, supply chain management. More recently, attention has been drawn to the contribution that might be made by social exchange theory, resource dependency theory, institutional theory, learning theory, the theory of value, and strategy-as-practice theory (Makram et al., 2017). Of course, building a field on a wide range of academic and applied perspectives may be a double-edged sword: it may prove to be a strength over the course of time and ensure that we can contextualise study across a wide range of countries and contexts; but this depends on the capacity of researchers to coalesce dispersed theoretical insights and to engage in robust evaluation studies.

The logical evolution of ideas however was evident from the very beginnings of the field. A series of findings in the 1980s and 1990s acted as antecedents for the talent management narrative: a convergence and integration of the two previously separate research traditions of resourcing and career development into a single life-cycle perspective; the understanding of individual competencies associated with managerial effectiveness; the use of portfolio thinking to categorise individuals in terms of performance and potential; the growth of the human resource planning movement and placing of individual talent into a broader system of organisation-level competencies; the informing of the work place and technologically-driven development of more fluid, social, distributed, and less hierarchical work arrangements; and the shift from a pay-for-the-job to a pay-for-the-person approach in selection. Together these developments served to illustrate the impact and value that talented individuals, when managed in a planned system, could have on organisational performance.

The subsequent war for talent narrative was actually a logical development of these enabling concepts. It built upon ideas from the competency movement and its traditional human capital specifications, by adding the importance of social capital to the specification of effectiveness. Hand in hand with the notion that talented people bring with them their own networks came the idea that organisations therefore had to attract these people. The problem of attraction was addressed by borrowing notions from marketing – brands, value propositions, consumer management and rewards for performance. Although ultimately it took the global financial crisis and subsequent

societal re-appraisal of all things elite to ultimately lead to the demise of the war for talent philosophy (in academic circles, but also a self critique by practitioners), *prior* to the crisis there had been a parallel and logical evolution of ideas from within the human capital management community.

The work carried out by human capital management scholars resumed the logical development in thinking. It developed the notion that talent management was as much to do with the organisation design and way in which jobs were aligned to the strategy and the sharing of knowledge, as it was to do with the individuals occupying those jobs. This created a series of issues that then had to be solved: how could HR functions translate the organisational capabilities articulated in the strategy into specifications for individual talent; where in the organisation design did the most useful clusters of talent exist, and how could notions of risk management help mitigate the illusion of predictability but nonetheless allow for differential human capital investments in clusters of talent. This led to a further de-linking of the talent management strategy for leadership development activity and star performers from the analysis of the broader human resource architecture to skill the organisation with competent incumbents.

Even the entry of IHRM researchers into the field represented a logical extension. The intensification of competition between MNEs and increased importance of learning across borders was much dependent upon the quality of leadership and management talent – especially those with distinctive competencies, the desire to manage in culturally complex and geographically distant countries, and ability to build social networks and facilitate the exchange of knowledge necessary to support globalisation. The shortages of such capabilities in many geographies and local labour markets came hand in hand with the globalisation of a number of professional labour markets. It was natural that IHRM researchers would move into the field, but also that this would lead to an acknowledgement that there was a geographical narrowness in the understanding of talent management practice, but also (unsurprisingly) many differences in the understanding of, definition of, meaning in, and goals of talent management across countries.

In the final analysis, whilst there is evidence of periodic ideological interpretations of talent management, and grounds for concern over a lack of focus, there has nonetheless been a logical, progressive and issues-driven evolution of ideas in the field, into which the current critical perspectives must now be fitted.

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