



## Commentary on “The meaning of ‘talent’ in the world of work”



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### ABSTRACT

This paper provides a commentary on the article in this Special Issue on “The meaning of ‘talent’ in the world of work”, welcoming its analysis of the definition, meaning and conceptualisation of talent and seeking to develop further its research recommendations. In particular, it argues that the relationships between talent and gifts should be further explored, proposes that exploring its use in other languages than English would be useful, and suggests comparing its identification and development in management and other fields, especially sport and the arts. It also proposes multidisciplinary research and research into talent and talent management in various contexts, including sectorial, cultural, institutional and structural contexts. Finally, it proposes that factors which influence how talent is identified need further analysis, and perspectives from resource-based theories, ethical theories, development economics, and social capital theories should be utilised.

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“The meaning of ‘talent’ in the world of work” (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013 – this issue) makes several useful contributions to talent management (TM) theory and practise, primarily through a review of the talent concept and approaches to defining talent. As Lewis and Heckman (2006, p. 140) claim: “the terms in the debate are not clear and confuse outcomes with processes with decision alternatives”. TM is defined variously as a combination of standard HR practises, the creation of talent pools to ensure employee flow, and “as an unqualified good and a resource to be managed primarily according to performance levels” (p. 141). The article helps clarify this boundary issue (Vaiman & Collings, 2013): who or what is to be considered as talent and ‘talent-managed’, why, and how? How does ‘talent’ differ from longer-established terms in the literature?

As Figure 1 summarises, talent can be seen as ‘object’ – the ‘what’ of TM or individual characteristics, with a fundamental distinction between talent as natural ability (inborn, unique abilities) and talent as mastery (systematically developed skills and knowledge). Innate talent is often associated with gifted pupils, with early signs of talent used to predict future success, allowing trained people – talent spotters/scouts – to identify talent before exceptional levels of mature performance have been demonstrated. Early indications of ‘high potential’ therefore provide a basis for predicting who is likely to excel. Gagné (1999), however, stresses that talent emerges from learning, “the superior mastery of systematically developed abilities and knowledge in at least one field of human endeavour, rather than mere potential” (Heller, Mönks, & Passow, 2000, p. 67). He clearly differentiates between gifts (natural abilities) and talents (systematically developed from gifts); all talents are developed from natural abilities through learning. Systematic comparisons with how talent is conceptualised, talent scouts/spotters used, and talent assessment/development by coaches undertaken in management, sport, education and the arts would be useful areas for further research. Talent can also be seen as ‘subject’ – the ‘who’ of TM, embodied in people. Object/subject approaches are seen as complementary, specifying which characteristics to identify and provoking discussions on cut-offs and norms.

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The article helpfully discusses practise implications – e.g., the relationship between perceiving talent as fixed and talent assessments, as well as differing emphases towards ‘buying’ versus ‘building’ talent. It proposes in line with earlier literature (Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010) that an organisation's approach depends on its mission and culture – the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of TM. CIPD (2007) found ‘talent’ mainly focused on individual attributes, with great variations over definition; concepts were often organisation-specific and highly influenced by the nature of the work (in health, clinical excellence; in IT, technical skill; in restaurants, chef creativity).

Research proposals include developing more theory, researching the validity of the talent construct and the reliability/validity of talent identification and assessment, seeking evidence of TM/outcome relationships, and analysing the antecedents and outcomes of TM in different contexts using in-depth case studies, discourse analysis, and inter-disciplinary research. How new/substantial is the contribution of TM to HRM? Is it just another management fad, given its bibliometric similarities in terms of journal counts to other fashions (Iles, Preece, & Chuai, 2010; Preece, Iles, & Chuai, 2011) Valverde, Scullion, and Ryan (2013) found little awareness of it in Spanish medium-sized companies, even when applying TM techniques; it was often seen as a fancy/faddish concept. Many TM techniques are not new (Cappelli, 2008); is TM merely a re-labelling of HRM, ‘old wine in new bottles’ (Iles, 2011; Preece et al., 2011)? The article usefully explores the rationale for using talent as distinct from earlier ‘object’ terms (e.g., skill, knowledge, competence, commitment, human capital). In this commentary, I will first discuss issues over talent definition and then consider the proposed research agenda, especially the development of theory and the study of TM in different contexts.

## 1. Defining talent

Often companies do not even know how to define talent, let alone how to manage it (The Economist, 2006). For Tansley (2011, p. 266), “people are rarely precise about what they mean by the term ‘talent’ in organizations and the implications of defining talent for talent management practice”. ‘Object’ views often vaguely refer to skills, knowledge, ability, competence, potential, behaviour and capability. The article discusses how ‘talent’ first entered English through the Bible to denote units for measuring silver (Tansley, 2011, Matthew 25:14–30; Luke 19:12–28). Here, other terms denote valued personal attributes, such as ‘light’ or ‘gift’ (e.g., ‘spiritual gifts’; the different preferences in the Myers–Briggs Type Inventory as ‘gifts differing’). Not to “hide your light under a bushel” (Matthew 5:15, Matthew 5:14–16) is often interpreted as an advice to not be too modest but to use the talents/gifts God has given. This has normative connotations: a moral imperative to develop, apply and use such talents, with condemnation of people who ‘throw/fritter away’, ‘squander’ or ‘waste’ their talents. As the article points out, ‘talent’ evolved to refer to aptitudes and abilities; in the early 19th C, Sir Walter Scott in his diary entry March 14th 1826 praised Jane Austen as having “a talent for describing the involvements of feelings and characters of ordinary life...”. In *Pride & Prejudice* (Austen, 2003) Mr. Bennett claims “it is happy you that you possess the talent of flattering with delicacy”, whilst Bingley protests “I certainly have not the talent...of conversing easily with those I have never seen before”. Talent appears here to denote a natural, fluent facility or social skill; it operates quite narrowly, specific to a particular field or domain – a ‘talent of or for’ something specific, not a general ability. Perhaps talent specificity/width is an additional talent dimension for further research?

Austen (2003) and others use ‘accomplishments’ for skills acquired through practise; Bingley is amazed “how young ladies can have patience to be so very accomplished, as they all are”. Essential for marriage, these are not the exceptional abilities of a ‘gifted’ (mostly male) elite, reminding us of the contextualised, gendered nature of ‘talent’, alluded to briefly in the Gallardo–Gallardo et al. (2013 – this issue) paper as “the perception of talent by relevant others”. That talent can be ‘identified’ is therefore problematic, not a value-free activity. The gendered nature of leadership (Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003), personal attractiveness/appearance (Watkins & Johnston, 2000), popularity, likeability and the manipulation of reputation (Martin & Hetrick, 2006) affect how talent is socially constructed. Cultural and institutional distance between MNE decision-makers and employees, homophily between individuals and decision makers, and network position all influence inclusion or exclusion in talent pools (Makela, Bjorkmam, & Ehrnrooth, 2010).

By the nineteenth century talent was also seen as embodied in the ‘talented’ – e.g., the 1914 Huddersfield rugby league ‘Team of All Talents’, the 1890s Sunderland ‘Team of All the Talents’. How widely should this group be defined? The article by Gallardo–Gallardo et al. (2013 – this issue) as well as Thunissen, Boselie and Fruytier (2013), and CIPD (2007) note that talent can be seen inclusively, as ‘all people’ (complete definition) or exclusively, as ‘some people’ (elite definition). ‘High performance’ and/or ‘high potential’ underpins most definitions of talent/TM (e.g. CIPD, 2007; Iles, Chuai, et al., 2010). Talents are often grouped into different pools, collectives defined as ‘talent’ and ‘talent-managed’ (Tansley & Tietze, 2013). A box matrix of ‘performance’ and ‘potential’ is often used, with ‘talent’ reserved for ‘high-value’ staff in ‘talent pipelines’ (Cappelli, 2008) making up only a small percentage of a workforce – perhaps the top percentage of employees in particular grades based on appraisals, or qualitative assessments of current capability/future potential to deliver exceptional performance.

## 2. Future research

The article proposes analysing TM in different contexts, but not how talent and talent management carry specific cultural connotations in other languages. Tansley (2011) and Holden and Tansley (2007) note that in German ‘talent’ is strongly related to specialised job knowledge, in France to eloquent use of French. Talent definitions seem culturally based; more ‘collectivist’ societies such as Spain (Valverde et al., 2013) or Poland (Skuzka, Scullion, & McDonnell, 2013) seem averse to use the term or make a small privileged group ‘stand out’. In Finnish, talent implies ‘inborn’ and ‘domain-specific’ attributes, raising issues in companies

committed to egalitarianism. In one MNE, the more neutral ‘competence’ was used, yet training and development programmes were still aimed at specific stratified talent pools or groupings at different levels (Kabwe, 2011). Vaiman and Holden (2011) and Ali (2011) note that TM may be seen as offering opportunities to migrate; in Germany, Festing, Schafer, and Scullion (2013) found most firms preferring inclusive/developmental approaches, characteristic of a ‘coordinated market economy’ (Hall & Soskice, 2001) and ‘cooperative hierarchy’ (Whitley, 1999). Studying TM wherein “industry and organizational factors interact with institutional and cultural forces in shaping talent management in practice” (Scullion & Collings, 2011, p. 4) is a potentially fertile research area, e.g. regional structures (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007; Preece, Iles, & Jones, 2013), different organisational structures (Scullion & Starkey, 2000) and different national/cultural contexts (Doh, Tymon, & Stumpf, 2011; Hartmann, Feisel, & Schober, 2010; Iles, Chuai, et al., 2010).

The Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013 – this issue) article briefly mentions workforce segmentation, differentiating not just ‘people’ but also ‘positions’ (Huselid, Beatty, & Becker, 2005). Collings and Mellahi (2009) also argue for the identification of ‘pivotal positions’ bearing disproportionate influence as a starting point for TM, pooling high performers through a “differentiated human resource architecture” (p. 304). This could be developed further, using marketing (e.g. ‘employer branding’, Jiang & Iles, 2011), labour segmentation, and logistics/supply-chain management concepts (Cappelli, 2008). Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013 – this issue) usefully relate workforce differentiation (inclusive/exclusive) to subject/object distinctions to generate a fourfold typology.

One theoretical rationale for segmentation not discussed is provided by the resource-based theory of the firm (RBV): human capital provides pools of resources for sustained competitive advantage (Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001). For Purcell (1999, pp. 35–36), “it is the ability to identify a distinctive group of employees who, for whatever reason, constitute this intangible strength that is important... the identification of a core group of employees, sometimes small in number... the development of distinctive policies and practices to maximise their performance... a simultaneous differentiation with non-core, peripheral workers”. Purcell (1999) does not use the terms ‘TM’ or ‘talent’ but provides one rationale for adopting such terms.

Future research might also usefully draw on the ‘HR architecture’ literature on the value and uniqueness of human capital (Lepak & Snell, 2002) to further analyse segmentation, particularly human capital composition and continuity. de Vos and Dries (2013, p. 1818) propose that talent – at least from the organisational point of view – “refers to human capital in an organization that is both valuable & unique, generating four quadrants: low-value/high uniqueness (partners), high value/low uniqueness (traditionals), high-value/high uniqueness (core creatives) and low-value/low-uniqueness (contractors)”.

Assumptions and metaphors in TM often stress talent ‘rarity’ and ‘conflicts’ over sourcing it (e.g. the ‘war’ for talent), raising important social and ethical issues (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). Selecting a minority on the basis of differential contribution can be de-motivating in relation to the majority; exclusion from talent pools can be interpreted as signalling inferiority. Talent is a relative term; the ‘talented’ exists only in relation to the less talented/untalented. Can TM be ethical? This again is a fertile area for research, especially if as suggested concepts like ‘strengths’ from positive psychology or ‘capabilities’ from development economics (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999) are employed instead of scarcity/deficiency metaphors (Downs & Swailes, in press).

A related research direction is to develop more collective perspectives on ‘talent’. Groysberg, Nanda, and Nohria (2004) show how organisational performance is not solely the product of a few exceptional talents; ‘star’ analyst performance often declined when changing jobs, depending on firm-specific resources and qualities, but less when moving with their team, or where receiving systems and culture were similar (Minbaeva & Collings, 2013). Iles, Chuai, et al. (2010) found that whilst ‘exclusive’ TM was most common in China, some saw TM as organisationally focussed competence development, pointing to a more collective/positional stance. Using the axes ‘inclusive–exclusive’ and ‘people–position’, they argued that TM can be explored in more collective, team-based ways, focusing attention on social capital, teamwork, leadership, and networks (Iles & Preece, 2006). Oltra and Vivas-López (2013) show how Spanish firms employ team-based TM to enhance organisational learning; talent also needs direction, opportunity and stimulation to be developed and consolidated.

In conclusion, the Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013 – this issue) article makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the concept of talent and offers a number of helpful suggestions for further research, especially using alternative theoretical perspectives and analysing TM in different contexts.

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