



Talent management, from phenomenon to theory: Introduction to the Special Issue

“Talent management has always seemed to me to be a tricky subject. It is at risk of becoming mere hyperbole, as in ‘the War for Talent’, or of becoming the fad of the conference circuit because the term lacks a clear definition. Proposed definitions are, at worst, a mélange of different concepts strung together without a clear statement of what is meant by talent and how we might manage it” (Reilly, 2008, p. 381)

1. The state of the talent management field (Is it a field?)

Although over 7000 articles have appeared on talent management to date—mostly in the HR practitioner literature—the topic is still not taken ‘as seriously as it should’ in the academic literature, as illustrated by the Reilly (2008) quote above. There appears to be a huge discrepancy between practitioner and academic interest in talent management, most likely caused by a lack of clear definitions (Lewis & Heckman, 2006), demonstration of added value over related concepts such as strategic HRM, competency management, and knowledge management (Chuai, Preece, & Iles, 2008), and solid empirical work (Dries, 2013–this issue).

Thus far, the majority of articles that have appeared have been conceptual, and largely reflective of the Anglo-Saxon (i.e., US or UK) business context—although global (and cross-cultural) talent management is an increasingly popular topic area (see Scullion, Collings, & Caligiuri, 2010). Very few empirical articles about talent management can be found in the academic literature (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Those studies that have been published are typically case studies, or survey or interview studies in which HR managers are asked to typify their organization’s talent management practices and their underlying rationale (e.g., Stahl et al., 2007). The most often-cited articles on talent management tend to depart from a human capital/resource-based view (RBV) framework (e.g., Collings & Mellahi, 2009), although in recent years some work on talent management has focused on the experiences of individual employees (as well as groups or categories of employees) from a more psychological/organizational behavior (OB) perspective (e.g., Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale, & Sumelius, 2013; Höglund, 2012). As to the question of why talent management is an important topic to research, authors typically refer to the ‘war for talent’—originally a consultancy credo invented by McKinsey (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001) to draw their clients’ attention to future scarcities in the labor market.

From all of the above, we can conclude that talent management—at least as an area of academic inquiry—has yet to reach the status of a ‘mature’ field. There are signs, however, that the field is rapidly growing. As a recent bibliometric analysis conducted by Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Gallo, and Dries (2013) demonstrates, there has been an upsurge of research activity around the topic of talent management between 2010 and 2013. Especially when conference presentations and symposia are included in the analysis (as an indication of publications that can be expected after 2013), we see that more and more authors and research departments from around the world are doing ‘something’ relating to talent management.

The purpose of this special issue is to contribute to the field by offering a set of (partly overlapping) conceptual foundations and theoretical frameworks upon which researchers interested in talent management can build to position their work in the academic literature on talent management (or even, in other streams of the management or OB literature). As the reader will see—and as we spell out later in this Introduction to the special issue—across the five papers and their associated commentaries a number of recurring themes become obvious, but also some tensions. It is our firm belief that this special issue reflects the current state of the talent management field—consensus about some aspects of talent management, constructive disagreement about others—and that the advancement of the field will lie in empirically examining (or better yet, ‘evidencing’) the assumptions we might be taking for granted (see Swailes, 2013–this issue), as well as in further conceptual work on the nature and boundaries of the talent management phenomenon.

The main challenge we seem to face as talent management researchers is to take the academic ‘road less traveled’ and work back from a phenomenon which we know is important in HR practice, towards a theoretical framework (or, most likely, a set of theoretical frameworks) that will allow us to design, conduct, and publish top-tier academic work. Let’s do it!

2. Overview of the papers and commentaries in this special issue

This special issue had its origins in a symposium held at the 2012 annual meeting of the Academy of Management, organized by a group of junior scholars who in recent years have been in touch with each other frequently about their individual talent management research projects. In that sense, the ideas in the five papers in this special issue cannot be seen as completely ‘independent’ from each other—‘cross-fertilization’ took place to a certain extent. Therefore, we also invited a number of senior scholars to write commentaries on each of the five papers. Below, we summarize the key points of each paper and commentary.

Paper 1 (Dries, 2013–this issue) takes a phenomenon-driven approach to its review of the literature. Rather than departing from the ubiquitous idea that there is not much theory available about talent management, the author asserts that many interesting perspectives can in fact be found in literature streams from outside the HRM domain, most notably in the psychology literature. The paper discusses a number of theoretical perspectives as well as tensions and assumptions in the literature (and in HR practice) that can be used as a basis for hypothesis building. Very specific suggestions are made for research questions and designs with the aim of advancing talent management from a ‘growing’ to a ‘mature’ field of study.

Commentary 1 (Boudreau, 2013–this issue) builds in part on the Dries 2013–(this issue) paper, and in part on other work (e.g., Boudreau, 2010), to make two key points. First, that rather than looking for generic, unanimously shared definitions of talent and talent management, there might be more value in examining the diverse forms in which talent management manifests in HR theory and practice, and why this high degree of diversity persists. Second, that exploring the diversity in the talent management literature might benefit from adopting a ‘shared mental model’ lens (Boudreau, 2012)—i.e., shared between different academic domains; shared between HR and non-HR leaders in organizations. In addition to I/O psychology, educational psychology, vocational psychology, positive psychology, and social psychology, which Dries 2013–(this issue) proposes are potentially valuable sources for further theory development about talent management, Boudreau 2013–(this issue) suggests that inspiration can be drawn from the finance, marketing, operations management, engineering, and cognitive psychology literature as well.

Paper 2 (Gallardo–Gallardo, Dries, & González–Cruz, 2013–this issue) starts with an etymological analysis of the term ‘talent’ so as to set the historical backdrop for the terminology used in the talent management literature today. As the authors’ analysis demonstrates, within the literature we can distinguish between ‘object’ versus ‘subject’ conceptualizations of talent, as well as between ‘exclusive’ versus ‘inclusive’ approaches. The paper concludes that there is much diversity in the use of the term ‘talent’ in the academic literature, and that the talent management literature is often rather normative in that different groups of authors tend to advocate one meaning of talent consistently, without considering alternative meanings. Implications for breaking this *impasse* are spelled out.

Commentary 2 (Iles, 2013–this issue) expands the etymological discussion offered by Gallardo–Gallardo, Nijs, Gallo, and Dries (2013) a bit further, adding on a number of concerns that future research will have to tackle in order to advance academic understanding of the ‘talent’ concept. Most notably, Iles 2013–(this issue) suggests that talent management researchers should broaden their scope to include cultural and language issues in the (social) construction of ‘talent’; use the HR Architecture model developed by Lepak and Snell (2002) as a theoretical basis; devote (much) more attention to the ethical implications of talent management; and consider conceptualizations of talent beyond the individual level (e.g., at the teamwork level).

Paper 3 (Meyers, van Woerkom & Dries, 2013–this issue) reviews the literature on gifted children, personal strengths, meta-competencies, employee potential, and expert performance with the aim of offering a substantiated answer to the question “Can talent be developed, and if so, to what extent?”. Considering projected labor market scarcities around the world, the nature–nurture debate is assuming a more and more central position within the talent management literature. Based on research findings from a broad range of domains (e.g., education, sports, business), the authors spell out specific implications for HR practitioners facing the challenge of talent development in employees at different levels of performance.

Commentary 3 (Collings & Mellahi, 2013) reframes the debate addressed in the Meyers et al. 2013–(this issue) paper (i.e., “is talent innate, acquired, or the result of a perfect mix of nature and nurture?”) into a different debate (i.e., “how can the contribution of talent to organizations be maximized?”). In particular, the authors point out that, in addition to the question of whether talent can be developed and to what extent, another question is of crucial importance—Why does the same person behave ‘more talented’ in one context than another? Consequently, Collings and Mellahi 2013–(this issue) suggest that the social and physical contexts surrounding talent—and how these might facilitate or inhibit the emergence of talent—are an important area for future research.

Paper 4 (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013–this issue) offers a distinctly critical review of the existing talent management literature, diagnosing it as overly narrow in focus, unitarist, and managerialist. The central point of the paper is that it is conceivable for talent management to serve a function beyond the creation of economic value for organizations. To this end, the authors propose an expansion of the talent management paradigm to include non-economic target outcomes, as well as the perspectives of stakeholders outside of management, such as individual employees and society at large.

Commentary 4 (Tansley, Kirk, & Tietze, 2013) examines Thunnissen et al.’s 2013–(this issue) call for a broader, more inclusive talent management paradigm further, proposing that the tension between agency and structure might be a relevant one for talent management research departing from a critical perspective. The authors propose that the potential contribution of talent management to the social and moral development of society, potentially linked to corporate social responsibility (at the macro

level) and justice/fairness in the treatment of employees (at the micro level), is an important topic for the talent management field, which has remained underexamined to date. Tansley et al. 2013-(this issue) conclude with an adage: Ask not only what individual talent can do for organizations, but also what organizations can do for individuals (in the way of encouraging them to reach their fullest potential).

Paper 5 (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013) offers an extensive list of research propositions with the aim of encouraging more empirical study into the outcomes of talent management interventions. The authors draw specifically from the workforce differentiation paradigm (i.e., the 'exclusive' approach) to develop a research agenda for talent management. Theoretical insights from the literature on perceived organizational justice are discussed and linked to gaps in the literature on talent management. In so doing, the paper established a solid framework for the study of differential employee reactions to talent management practices.

Commentary 5 (Swales, 2013-this issue)—rather than addressing the key points in the Gelens et al. 2013-(this issue) paper directly—sets out to critique some of the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying many, if not most, publications on talent management. Is there really a war for talent taking place in labor markets worldwide? Or are HR people simply quite bad at detecting talent, mistaking their own lack of assessment skills with labor market scarcities? The author posits that much of the rhetoric surrounding talent management is set in place to serve the interests of those who benefit from it—e.g., HR consultants; managers seeking to create performance anxieties and competition among their staff. As an alternative he proposes a more humanistic framework for talent management, in which 'developing people' is considered a legitimate end in itself. Contrary to what one might expect, however, Swales 2013-(this issue) is not against differentiation among employees—in fact, he argues that *not* differentiating between people exhibiting different levels of motivation and effort is more unethical than doing so.

3. Implications for further conceptual and empirical work

Both common themes and tensions can be distilled from the different papers and commentaries in this special issue, each of which represent fertile grounds for further research within the talent management domain.

3.1. Common themes

- Talent management is a phenomenon rather than a theoretical construct, so it makes sense to study it as such—i.e., by being open to a plurality of perspectives found in HR practice rather than departing from normative frameworks advocating 'one right way' of approaching or studying talent management.
- Talent can mean different things to different people (e.g., researchers, companies, HR practitioners, individual employees), and considering the immature state of the field it is difficult, at this point in time, to evaluate which meanings of talent are 'more valid' than others. Depending on the theoretical framework you use, the population you wish to study, and the academic discipline you aim to contribute to, your talent management project might look very different from other, pre-existing work.
- One of the main discussions that surfaces from all five papers is that about inclusive versus exclusive talent management. It appears that this is the 'hottest topic' within the already 'hot topic' that is talent management—i.e., as a company, do we believe that everyone has talent and manage our people according to that principle, or do we have a more 'specific' (and/or rare) notion of what talent means to us?—and therefore potentially the most 'rewarding' topic area for future research.
- Another framework identified by several papers in this special issue as valuable for talent management research is social exchange theory. Adopting a social exchange framework to your talent management research implies studying the employer–employee relationship, rather than one party (HR managers) or the other (employees affected by talent management practices) and moves the focus of research away from HR practices and individual perceptions, towards relationships and processes.
- Several of the papers and commentaries in this special issue directly or indirectly discuss the ethical dimension of talent management. Possible areas for further research include studying talent management in relation to corporate social responsibility, business ethics, organizational justice, and employee well-being, burn-out, and stress.
- Finally, almost all of the authors featured in this special issue warn their readers to adopt a critical approach to talent management as a topic of study, as it is a concept originating from the consulting world. Many 'quasi-truths' and conjectural assumptions resonate through the talent management literature, and all too often start to lead their own lives without being hindered by any form of empirical evidence. Our mission as academics should be to falsify those assumptions that are simply incorrect (or not always correct), and collect evidence for those that hold true.

3.2. Tensions and remaining questions

Although it would seem from the papers and commentaries in this special issue that there is much consensus about what constitutes the talent construct as well as the talent management domain, we can also identify a number of tensions that can be rephrased as questions in urgent need of further academic scrutiny:

- Can the talent management literature benefit from allowing diversity in perspectives on what talent management actually is (as suggested by Boudreau, 2013-this issue)? Or is it time to settle on a singular talent management paradigm (the most frequently suggested framework appearing to be human capital theory—see Collings and Mellahi (2013) and Iles, 2013-this issue) to avoid confusion and accusations (mostly from outside the field) of conceptual ambiguity? Arguments in favor

of diversity center on the observation that talent management is a ‘phenomenon’ and should therefore be studied in all its different appearances (Dries, 2013–this issue)—considering the fact that talent management is a relatively novel topic (at least academically speaking), becoming ‘normative’ too soon might create an all too limited playing field. Arguments in favor of a consistent theoretical framing center on the legitimation of talent management as a field for academic inquiry, which requires clear definitions (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). How can we build a case for the importance of researching talent management if we cannot offer a singular definition of our central concept? Future conceptual work might try to infer a generic definition of talent management that captures all possible approaches; as well as some ‘add-on’ components referring to the different foci companies might adopt (e.g., inclusive versus exclusive; Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Gallo, & Dries, 2013).

- To what extent should the strategic HR function include humanistic goals or responsibilities? As Thunnissen et al. 2013–(this issue) and Gelens et al. 2013–(this issue) demonstrate in their respective papers, when organizations implement talent management practices (especially those of the ‘exclusive’, workforce-differentiating type), ethical concerns surface. Is it morally acceptable for organizations to assess the ‘value’ of their employees and treat them accordingly (as talented or less talented, winners or losers)? To what extent is the well-being of employees (as directly or indirectly influenced by an organization’s talent management system) a concern for HR management? Within the talent management paradigm we wish to construe as academics—do we see people mostly a form of ‘capital’ to organizations, or are they first and foremost ‘humans’ (Inkson, 2008)? Clearly, this tension relates to the broader discussion around ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’ HRM (Gill, 2002), and also has implications for the first point we raised above, about which theoretical frameworks to use for talent management. For instance, the strength-based approach (e.g., Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001) implies more humanistic talent management practices than the resource-based approach (e.g., Ledford & Kochanski, 2004).
- What is the most promising avenue for advancing the talent management field? Should future work focus primarily on collecting empirical evidence for the claims we make? As Dries 2013–(this issue) writes in her Discussion, one of the most urgent challenges for the field is to start doing ‘real’ academic research, worthy of publication in top-tier journals. On the other hand it might be equally, if not more, important to critically examine some of the assumptions in the talent management literature, rather than taking them for granted and trying to back them with data (see Swailes, 2013–this issue). It might be best to tackle both issues simultaneously—by testing assumptions empirically, while maintaining a critical mindset that leaves ample space for alternative understandings of the meanings and effects of talent management in organizations.

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