

Questioning the Value of a Consistent Approach to Talent Management: When One Best Way is not Enough

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Abstract:

We adopt a discourse analytic approach in order to investigate the value of consistency in talent management. Specifically, we explore the ways in which talent management is talked about within a professional services firm. Our study reveals divergent opinions among the firm's executives and business units about whether consistent practices were required to realize the longer term benefits associated with effective talent management. Our study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how and why these divergent opinions emerge and their impact on the actual practice of talent management. In doing so, it questions the assertion that talent management should be systematically and consistently practiced. We suggest that rather than adopting a firm-wide, "one best way" approach, organizations would do better to identify and manage talent in ways that are fluid, flexible, and customizable.

Keywords: Talent management, talent identification, discourse analysis, professional services firm.

INTRODUCTION

Studies of “talent management” suggest that it can contribute (positively) to organizational and financial performance (Capelli, 2008; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Frank & Taylor, 2004; Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010; Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013a, b), and has the potential to increase an organization’s competitive advantage (Collings & Mellahi, 2013; Dries, 2013a; Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Mellahi & Collings, 2010; Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013; Stahl et al., 2007; Thunnissen et al., 2013a). It has long been argued that people-based resources not only act as a source of competitive advantage, but are an organizations greatest asset (Boudreau, Ramstad, & Dowling, 2002; Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001; Chambers, Foulton, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels III, 1998; Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Mellahi & Collings, 2010; Tarique & Schuler, 2010; van Dijk, 2008; Wellins & Schweyer, 2007). These assertions, combined with arguments about talent and skills shortages (Hays, 2011), including the ‘War for Talent’ (Chambers et al., 1998), establish powerful battle like imagery. Organizations must fight and compete for this significant resource, thus encouraging a strategic approach to the management of their ‘best people’, or in the context of this study, their ‘talent’.

A considerable tranche of publications about talent management has been produced by consultancy and practitioner stakeholders while some scholars have on occasion endeavoured to erect boundaries between the study of talent management and strategic human resource management (SHRM) (Dries, 2013b; Iles et al., 2010). Although such publications are useful in ensuring that the concept of ‘talent management’ is continually talked about and debated among practitioners and academics, they offer limited insights into the actual definition and practice of talent management within organizational settings. There are, however, a small number of empirical studies of talent management with some investigating talent identification as a specific talent management practice (see for example

Burbach & Royle, 2010; Hartmann, Feisel, & Schober, 2010; McDonnell, Lamare, Gunnigle, & Lavelle, 2010; Wiblen, Dery, & Grant, 2012). Our study draws upon and seeks to contribute to this emerging body of literature. It does so by developing our understanding of how and why talent management is defined as it is in organizations and the impact of this on its practice.

Specifically, our study explores the notion of consistency - behaving and acting in the same way - in relation to the definition and practice of talent management within a Professional Services Firm (PSF). In doing so it analyzes how discursive actors within the one organization talked about the value of 'consistency' in relation to a specific talent management practice - talent identification. The findings show variation in the composition and structure of the policies and practices employed to identify talent within the case organization. The findings also put forward evidence of divergent opinions about the value of consistency as executives and business units questioned whether consistent and mandated practices were required to realise the longer term benefits associated with effective talent management.

By exploring the talk about consistency in talent identification from a multiplicity of perspectives within the case organization, the study offers three contributions. First, as an empirical investigation of talent identification, it adds to a small body of research which examines talent management in organizational settings. Second, the study calls into question the normative assumption that talent identification practices should be mandated and systematically applied across an organizations entire workforce. Third, the study has implications for practice and encourages organizations away from a 'one-best-way' approach to talent management. In contrast to the literature which states that all employees should be subjected to the same talent identification processes (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Iles et al., 2010; Mellahi & Collings, 2010; Stainton, 2005), we argue that organizations need to enact

talent management practices which possess dexterity and fluidity. It is these characteristics which will enable organizations to identify “the best and the brightest” within the context of their operations and amend practices in order to react to changes in broader business models.

We present our study in six sections. First, we present a review of the literature pertinent to this study and indicate that organizations are encouraged to evaluate talent systematically according to pre-determined criteria. The second section introduces the discourse analytic approach adopted and articulates the contributions of discourse analysis to the study of talent management. Next we account for the selection of our research site and outline the methodology employed to identify and analyze the organizational processes associated with talent identification. The following section is dedicated to the presentation of our findings. It is here that we put forward evidence of divergent opinions about the value of consistency in talent management, and more specifically talent identification. The final section draws together the main points of our arguments and shows how our study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of talent management.

PERSPECTIVES OF TALENT IDENTIFICATION

Studies and surveys of senior executives continually report that talent management is of imperative importance and vital to an organizations competitive position (see for example PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012; Towers Watson, 2010; Wilson, 2010). Associated with the need to “recruit and retain the best talent” is the requirement for organizations to implement and enact internal talent management practices to identify, develop, appraise, deploy, and retain of high-performing and high-potential employees (Blass, 2007; McDonnell, 2011; Snell, 2008) or identify key positions and pivotal roles (Boudreau, 2003; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Mellahi & Collings, 2010). In order to manage “talent” effectively and ensure that the most valuable employees are retained, organizations are required to firstly identify talent

(Hartmann et al., 2010). They then need to engage in practices designed to extract strategic value from these employees, because as Mellahi & Collings declare, that the ‘availability of talent *per se* is of little strategic value if it is not identified...’ (2010:5).

Studies debate the value of intuitive, individualised and strategic approaches (Bassi & McMurrer, 2007; Jones, Whitaker, Seet, & Parkin, 2012) to talent identification. The first approach, whereby talent are identified through processes and practices underpinned by evaluations based on intuitive, subjective and personal opinions, is deemed of little strategic value to organizations, because identifying talent based on ‘...instinct and intuition [is] not only inadequate but reckless’ (Bassi & McMurrer, 2007:9).

The two latter approaches are the individualistic and system-level perspectives (Jones et al., 2012). Transitioning from ‘individualistic’ to ‘systems’ approaches, encourages organizations to shift the emphasis away from a focus on micro and individual-level talent practices to a macro focus on systems-level issues (Jones et al., 2012) in order to integrate and connect their talent management practices with those of the rest of the organization (van Dijk, 2008; Whelen & Carcary, 2011; Williamson, 2011). The individualistic approach views talent as a form of human capital and focuses on specific individuals without consideration of contextual factors (Iles et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2012; McDonnell, 2011). From this perspective, practices focus on the management of talented people (Mellahi & Collings, 2010) without regard for specific positions within the organization or organizational boundaries (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). This approach, Beechler and Woodward (2009) believe is not the most effective. They argue that is potentially detrimental to organizational performance because workforce differentiation is a core attribute of talent management.

The vast majority advocate for a “strategic” and “systems” approach asserting that the most effective practices are systematic, integrated and proactive (Berger & Berger, 2003; Busine & Watt, 2005; Collings, McDonnell, & Scullion, 2009; Collings & Mellahi, 2009;

Mellahi & Collings, 2010). For example Iles et al. (2010) and Stainton (2005) posit that all individuals should go through the same process. Collings and Mellahi similarly assert that the ‘systematic identification’ of key positions within an organization is the critical foundation of talent management (2009:304). These assertions, therefore, prescribe that employees should be subjected to the same set of policies and practices. In other words, a core requirement of a strategic and effective approach is to enact talent management upon a set of systems and practices, that give authority and mandates for action. The policies and practices associated with talent identification imply conditions for control and performance imperatives where they dictate whom, how and where of talent management practices.

Some concerns arise, however, about the emphasis attributed the notion of consistency in this way. For example, there are concerns about whether the adoption of a systematic approach will potentially have unintended consequences and result in the identification of “talent clones” (McDonnell, 2011). By prioritizing homophily at the expense of the ability to recognise idiosyncratic characteristics and attributing value to difference and diversity (Highhouse, 2008; Mäkelä, Björkman, & Ehrnrooth, 2010), we may well be restricting our perceptions of talent.

To contribute to a better understanding of talent management, we explore the talent identification practices within PSF, as well as the ways in which the ideals of consistency are talked about in relation to talent identification. In order to do so we use a discourse analytic approach outlined in the next section.

EXAMINING TALENT IDENTIFICATION THROUGH DISCOURSE

This study affords ‘Discourse Analysis’ a significant role in enhancing our understanding of talent management phenomena both theoretically and methodologically. Discourse analysis provides a useful framework to examine talent management in a number of ways. First, rather

than assuming that the meanings of “talent”, “talent management” and “talent identification” are common place, self explanatory, obvious or that they exist ‘out there’, this study assumes that these are socially constructed phenomena. In other words, talent and talent management are not concepts which can be discovered, but rather are defined within organizational settings (Maguire & Hardy, 2013). It is here that a discourse analytic approach has the potential to facilitate a greater understanding of ‘the intersubjective meanings embedded in social life... (and helps us) to explain why people act the way they do’ (Gibbons, 1987:3). This is a ‘unique contribution of discourse analysis in that it views discursive activity as constitutive of the social world and focuses on understanding the processes through which the social world is produced and through which it changes’ (Phillips & Oswick, 2012:10).

Second, a discursive perspective of talent management can highlight the role that language plays in constructing the meanings of talent management and associated concepts. As discourses play a role in constituting material reality where they produce rules, identity, context, values and procedures (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996) and these in turn influence social practices by shaping what can be said, who says it, when and where (Deetz, 1992; Fairclough, 1992; Hall, 2001). Therefore a discursive approach has the potential to reveal multiple interpretations (Hardy, 2001) or variations in accounts (Potter & Wetherell, 1987:35) operating within the context of one organization.

Third, a discourse analytic approach has the ability to indicate that the meanings attributed to talent and talent management are the outcome of a process of negotiation, with meanings to be negotiated by different organizational stakeholders with different views and interests (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005). The outcomes of these processes of negotiation can result in meanings which are then attributed different levels of acceptance within organizations or as Grant and Marshak (2011: 207-208) note ‘these explicit and tacit negotiations lead to the emergence of a dominant meaning that becomes an accepted

or privileged discourse...’. Although some discourses related to a particular organizational issue may seem to dominate, ‘their dominance is secured as part of an ongoing struggle among competing discourses that are continually reproduced or transformed through day-to-day communicative practices’ (Hardy, 2001:28).

In applying a discourse analytic approach we are therefore able to consider how certain ways of talking or constructing knowledge about talent management are ‘ruled in’ whilst others are ‘ruled out’ (Hall, 2001; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004). Maguire and Hardy (2013:234) note however, that discourses, even if they are considered normal, standard and acceptable (Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas, & Davies, 2004), should not be considered to be stable, but rather subjected to an ongoing process of negotiation whereby,

Discourses are, however, never completely cohesive: they are always partial, inconsistent, and contested to some degree and, therefore, never able to determine social reality fully (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). As a result, actors can also draw on them to challenge what was once taken-for-granted in order to destabilize meanings, therefore forming the basis of change (e.g. Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Tsoukas, 2005) through their discursive work...

Fourth, we acknowledge that discourses can have a dual affect within organizations. On the one hand, as alluded to above, discourses can be seen as resources which are used by actors to create an understanding of an object, in this case talent identification. On the other hand, these actors are also significantly bound by a finite number of existing context-specific discourses and hence discourses have the potential to exercise power over an actor in a particular social context. By recognizing this dual nature, we are able to consider the relationship between ‘idea’ and ‘practice’ or ‘talk’ and ‘action’ (Vaara, Kleymann, & Seristö, 2004). As such discourses can be mobilized and used to justify or account for an actor’s actions or specific decisions. In other words the ways in which actors ‘talk’ about a concept or object can be directly implicated in shaping their ‘actions’ or the way in which they ‘practice’ their discourses whereby power and discourse are mutually constitutive (Hardy &

Phillips, 2004). The nature of this relationship has not received a great deal of attention in extant talent management literature.

RESEARCH METHODS AND APPROACH

A single site case study (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was employed to fulfil the research aims. Specifically, this study uses a case study of multiple units of analysis within one professional services firm. A case study with multiple embedded units of analysis (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009), for this approach enables the examination of multiple discourses, from multiple perspectives within the boundaries of a single site.

A case study which employs qualitative methods has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of talent management because: (1) qualitative studies are highly appropriate for the study of poorly understood phenomena (Maguire & Phillips, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 1995) such as talent management; (2) they offer a framework to explore and explain the ‘what’ and ‘how’ (Yin, 2009) of talent and talent management; (4) they facilitate the collection and presentation of empirical data that captures the historical and situated dynamics which are important for discourse analytic studies (Fairhurst, 2009; Sillince, 2007); and (5) they are well suited to the study of talent management given the incremental and non-linear nature of talent management practices (Groves, 2007).

The discursive processes of talent management at PSF provided the context for the case study. In order to show evidence of multiple talent management policies and practices within the case organization, data pertaining to the talk and action of multiple subunits of analysis were collected and analysed. These were Corporate (Corporate HR function and PSF Senior Executives), and two business units, referred to as FinCo and KnowCo. These business units were purposefully selected as embedded units of analysis because they were representative of typical and atypical settings (Stake, 2006) which is valuable because:

When knowledge is being constructed, no two observers construct it exactly the same way. Complete confirmation is not possible; views are partly agreed on, partly not...when what is not agreed on is important, the different views should be reported (Stake, 2006:37).

Employing this research design offered an opportunity to explore, in-depth, multiple perspectives about talent management whilst incorporating a diversity of contexts (Stake, 2006).

Data Collection

The findings are based on data collected over a three year time period commencing in March 2009. After initiating contact with the case organization and establishing their commitment to the study, publically available data pertaining to the organization was collected. This activity was guided by the desire to become familiar with the case and involved the collection of an array of texts which detailed the operations and strategies of PSF, made reference to talent management, detailed the successes and achievements of the organization, or were deemed to provide insights into the organization. During this process, texts of both primary and secondary nature were collected. These were published both inside and outside of the organization and included internal reports, internal and external presentations, company websites, and media commentary. Although this was the first data collection activity undertaken, the collection of publically available data continued throughout the duration of the study in order to ensure that the situated dynamics of the organization, as well as its communication pertaining to talent management could be considered over a period of time.

Subsequent to the collection of publically available data and becoming familiar with the case, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The collection of data via this activity was conducted over a period of 30 months between March 2009 and August 2011. Several phases of interviews were conducted with an array of stakeholders which reflected the

emergent research design adopted and the explicit desire to obtain multiple perspectives of talent management over a period of time. The first phase of interviews was conducted with members of PSF's Corporate HR function. This specific cohort of actors was selected on the belief that they were best situated to provide initial insights into the practice of talent management given their positions within the organization. Incorporating the opinions and experiences of executives from the HR function also takes into account past research which has argued that the HR function plays a key role in talent management (Calo, 2008; CIPD, 2006; Devine & Powell, 2008). The interview schedule for this round of interviews was designed as a means to learn how individual actors talked about talent, talent management and talent identification. These interviews ranged from 23 to 94 minutes in duration and were recorded and transcribed. Insights derived from these interviews revealed that corporate executives were not directly involved in the identification of PSF's talent.

In light of these initial findings, the second phase of interviews was conducted with executives positioned at the divisional level of PSF as it was such individuals who were responsible for identifying talent. This approach is in line with Miles and Huberman (1994) and Creswell (2009) guidelines for purposeful sampling and selection with interviewees selected on the basis that they formed both homogeneous and heterogeneous samples. The primary contacts for the study facilitated introductions to executives involved in talent management at the divisional level. Interviewees were first asked to provide contextual information about themselves and their positions and then to provide insights into the object of talent management as well as the process of talent identification more specifically. Second phase interviews were conducted by the same researcher, ranged from 28 to 62 minutes in duration and were recorded and transcribed.

Interviews continued to be conducted until August 2011 at which time the collection of interview data was deemed to be representative of talent management both within and

across PSF. Additional executives including those from PSF's senior executive team (including the CEO, COO and CSO) were interviewed and asked to share their overarching opinions and experiences pertaining to talent management. Subsequent interviewees were also conducted with the main contacts for the study as well as key executives located in the Corporate HR function. These interviews sort to revisit questions previously asked as the focus of enquiry turned to gaining insights to how the opinions and experiences of executives, both from a personal and professional viewpoint, may have changed over the course of the study. As such, questions about potential 'changes' in talent management were posed. All of these interviews were again conducted by the same researcher. Overall a total 79 interviews with 44 actors were conducted which resulted in 70 hours of interview data, all of which was transcribed, reviewed and then subsequently analysed (Lawler, 1998; Roulston, deMarrais, & Lewis, 2003).

The data collected from interviews was further complemented by data obtained from qualitative observations (Creswell, 2009). Iterative analysis of interview data obtained from the first and second phase interviews revealed information about how PSF sought to develop their employees and the various programs through which this was conducted. Those which were identified as being linked to the practice of talent management were attended and observed during the course of the study. The inclusion of data derived from this activity: enabled the lead researcher to liaise with and observe the practice of talent management firsthand; facilitated the collection of additional data which can be recorded in real-time (Creswell, 2009); generated insights into how particular aspects of talent management were practiced by the organization whereby the 'practice of talent management' could be witnessed. Furthermore it facilitated the observation of a vast array of formal and informal conversations and interactions which focused on people engaged in conversations (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in line with the work of Maguire and Phillips (2008) and Maguire and Hardy (2013) via a five stage process. In the first stage, an event history database was constructed (Van de Ven & Poole, 1990). This involved chronologically ordering the data according to its source and genre (e.g. interview transcripts, interview notes, audio recording of interview, website, company documentation, informal meeting, internal or external presentation, non-participant observation). This data was further organised into a discursive event history database (Maguire, 2004) which sought to capture who said what, and when (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). As such the same data was categorised according to the functionality and location of the actor who generated the data. For example, distinctions were made between actors located within (referred to as HR executives) and outside of the HR function and whether they were involved in the creation and delivery of practices organization-wide (referred to as corporate executives) or within a specific division, known as 'business units' (Business Unit executive).

Second, using content analysis, the data was subjected to a detailed and systematic examination and interpretation in order to identify key discursive themes (Berg, 2009; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). All data was coded for references to talent and talent management as the focus turned to the talent management discourse and analysis of what was used to bring the concepts of 'talent', 'talent management' and 'talent identification' into existence as objects (Maguire, 2004). This involved initially separating the data according to: the concepts used to position the drivers and importance of talent management; the language used to construct meaning to the concept of "talent"; and the language used to construct the meaning of the practice of talent management. It was within this activity that specific references to the process of talent identification were made and subsequent coding directed. Discussions pertaining to talent identification were initially grouped into numerous categories of

responses, also referred to in discursive studies as ‘first order’ codes (Maguire, 2004; Maguire & Phillips, 2008). The terms used to represent these categories of responses, were wherever possible, reflective of the terms and the language used by actors and within the primary texts. Many of these were most appropriately expressed via a simple descriptive phrase (Corley & Gioia, 2004) rather than keywords.

The third stage of analysis involved the creation of narratives at the organizational and business unit levels. The aim being to collate and combine the opinions and experiences presented by executives according to differing functional locations (referred to in this study as business units) in order to create narratives representative of the embedded units of analysis. More specifically multiple accounts were juxtaposed against each other to ascertain the degree of convergence (Maguire & Phillips, 2008) or divergence within the business unit. Composing these narratives, at both a micro and macro level (Maguire & Hardy, 2009), enabled reflections of how talent and talent management concepts and objects were produced and whether they were amended over time.

The fourth stage of analysis focused on the triangulation of data to assure that the right information and interpretations were obtained (Stake, 2006). This was undertaken via a process of complementing and comparing the narratives with other data including information gathered from the organization’s website, company documents, presentations and non-participant observations. This process was selected because it provided several research methods to explore the same thing (Stake, 2006). Efforts were made to note whether data was generated by or targeted towards an audience located, within the organization, directed to those located outside the organization, or produced externally.

The fifth and final stage of analysis involved a process of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This stage of analysis focused on the identification of relationships and emerging patterns (Eisenhardt, 1989) between the categories of responses. This was followed

by the clustering of these responses into key discursive themes. These were further analysed and clustered into theoretical categories, where like categories were combined (Corley & Gioia, 2004). This was a systematic, abductive (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Vaara & Monin, 2008; Wodak, 2004) and iterative process, where there was continuous movement between the coding of the data, emerging themes, existing theory and the research until the patterns were refined into adequate conceptual categories (Eisenhardt, 1989). This permitted a synthesis that was anchored both empirically in the data and theoretically in the literature (Maguire & Phillips, 2008). The data was triangulated within and across sources as well as business units, in order to enhance the validity of the initial findings and to learn more about the potential divergences and convergences (Heracleous, 2006) across the organization. The focus here was on establishing insights which, when combined, would be representative of the opinions and experiences of actors at a multiplicity of levels (executives, business unit and organization) and from multiple perspectives (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009).

This paper forms part of a wider research project examining talent management in Australian organizations, with all interviews, transcription and coding of data conducted by the corresponding author. Whilst the study, because of the qualitative case study approach, presents findings which should be applied to other contexts with caution, it has the potential to offer insights into complex social processes that quantitative studies and data cannot easily reveal. These insights are examined in the section that follows.

THE STUDY: TALENT IDENTIFICATION AT PSF

PSF operates within the professional services industry and focuses on the delivery of knowledge and services to clients primarily located and operating within Australia. Although structured as a member firm of a larger private listed company located in the United Kingdom, PSF brands itself the 'largest independent management consultancy firm in

Australia' (PSF's website: About us) and operates wholly within the legislative requirements of Australia. The organization sustains a partnership ownership structure with two levels of seniority within the partnership structure; equity and non-equity partner.

In January 2010 PSF comprised of over 5000 employees located in offices around Australia, separated into six business units. The client services and offerings of PSF cover an array of areas including audit, tax, consulting, and financial advisory services. Such services and offerings were provided to both public and private clients as well as an array of specific industries. PSF offered clients a diverse array of services, separated according to six business units, each of which differing in its specialisations and value proposition. Each business unit differed in terms of number of employees, number of partners, office locations as well as the desired and valued skills and capabilities of the employees located within the division. PSF organizational structure resulted in the separation all of employees into either of two categories of roles within the organization: a 'corporate' or 'business unit' role.

Talent management was important to PSF. PSF recognised that the organizations ability to recruit and retain talented employees was significant to the organizations success. There was deliberate investment in an employer branding and marketing strategy which sought to position the organization as a leader in the Professional Services Industry, and an employer of choice. By doing so, PSF hoped that it its external corporate image would act as a talent pull mechanism and widen the pool of talent from which the best candidates could be selected and recruited.

There was also an inherent relationship between the concepts of talent and talent management with PSF's operations because "PSF is a knowledge based organization... where the tasks of the organization cannot be achieved without its people" (Corporate HR partner). Accordingly, the notion that "talent" was a source of competitive advantage was frequently appropriated (Chambers et al., 1998). This created a situation whereby PSF's value

propositions were underpinned by the employees and talent whereby “People Power: That is the attracting, equipping, developing and retaining talent is the firm’s key source of competitive advantage” (Chief Operations Officer- Internal presentation).

Corporate Talent Identification Discourses

Conducting operations in an industry which was inherently founded on the provision of knowledge and services of its employees ensured that the topic of “talent” as represented via the organizations ‘People Agenda’ remained ‘topical’. Corporate executives were united in their opinions about the importance of talent management and remarked that references to the term ‘talent’ pervaded much of their internal discussions and was positioned as synonymous with the effective management of valuable human resources within the organization.

Corporate executives upon interview commenced by revealing that PSF did not have a firm wide approach to talent management, with the vast majority stating that there was ‘not a consistent approach’. The absence of an organization-wide approach or pre-established and mandated definition of talent created a situation whereby the meanings of “talent”, were not pre-determined and imposed, but rather the subject of ongoing negotiation and various interpretations. Initial enquiries about talent management indicated that the practice of talent management was not underpinned by a well-defined talent management object and hence there was the potential for variance in the way that talent management was attributed meaning and practiced across the organization. There was not a consistent definition of ‘talent’ nor was there a mandated set of practices which specified the ‘who’, ‘what’ or ‘how’ of talent identification at PSF.

Whilst all corporate executives agreed that the desired outcome of talent identification within PSF was to identify a specific cohort of talent subjects whom could be promoted to the role of ‘partner’ a number of challenges were, however, experienced during the process. As

briefly mentioned above, the organization did not have a firm-wide approach to talent identification and as a result responsibility for this specific process rested with senior executives within each of PSFs divisions. The absence of a pre-determined definition of talent resulted in a situation whereby executives at a divisional level were able to determine the focus and structure of their talent management practices. More specifically, the six divisions of PSF were not required to evaluate employees according to specific performance criteria, nor were they required to identify talented employees via a specific process. The ability to exercise agency in this way, helped to ensure that there was not a consistent set of processes through which “talent” were identified. The vast majority of executives disclosed this with many specifically stating “there is no consistent approach”.

Given the ability for business units to exercise agency and power over both the concept of talent and the object of talent identification, much of the talk was centred around how talent ‘should’ be identified. Although not responsible for the identification of talent within PSF, the vast majority of executives from PSF’s corporate HR function talked at length about the desire to be able to measure the performance and potential of employees the same way, according to the same criteria with talk about ‘consistency’ featuring prominently in interviews. Throughout the study, this group of actors continually affirmed their belief that the identification of talent should be conducted in a consistent manner across PSF, for example, “We need to create a consistent framework that will be applicable to all of the business units” and “we need to identify our top talent through a robust and consistent methodology”.

Furthermore, executives believed that a consistent process of talent identification would ensure that the value of an employee was evaluated and ‘measured’. Systematic evaluation would result in the generation of an array of talent based metrics which would then be used to form the basis of the identification of high performing employees, from which

potential partners could be identified. A systematic and consistent approach, based on metrics and data, was representative of a talent identification process which could be considered 'objective' and 'fair' as it would help to ensure that employees in all of PSF's different divisions would be subjected to the same process. These characteristics were seen as more beneficial and effective than PSF's current 'subjective' and 'ad hoc' approach.

The importance attributed to a consistent talent management framework and as a result consistent talent identification process emerged in response to the perceived limitations and challenges of PSF's existing approach. As stated above, the practice of talent management at PSF was not underpinned by pre-determined understanding of the concept of talent and as such numerous executives at the divisional level were able to attribute value to a vast array of skills and capabilities solely within the context of their divisions operations. Rather than positioning agency as a positive aspect of the object of talent management and talent identification, the absence of what many referred to as a 'consistent' talent management framework was framed as a weakness and limitation PSF's talent management practices in three notable ways.

Firstly, inconsistency not only created an environment whereby there was the potential for there to be vast variation in the skills and capabilities deemed valuable across the organization, but that the practice of talent management also differed. This created a context whereby the 'doing' of talent management differed, "...if you think about six different businesses doing very different things in very different ways...". Secondly, there was no assurance that the practices adopted at a divisional level were informed by and aligned to PSF's strategic plan and ambitions. This created a context whereby PSF's divisions may not be working together:

There are not the links back into what we are doing [national HR function] and what they are doing [business units], and how we are all supposed to be working together. There is not a consistent approach to it. (Corporate HR executive)

A third notable limitation was that executives situated at the corporate level were unable to exert influence over who was being identified as “talent”, because they were not directly involved, nor privy to the talent identification process. A few HR executives admitted further that their knowledge of ‘how’ employees come to be classified as talent was considerably limited, for example:

There are the [HR teams] within the [business units] which do their own things and we do not have sight of that. (Corporate HR executive)

They other [HR Executives] think that we [national HR] know what is going on but we don't. (Corporate HR executive)

The challenges and limitations, of what many referred to as an ‘ad hoc’ approach, were used to explain the need for an ‘integrated’ approach to talent management. An integrated approach to talent management, whereby talent would be identified systematically was not only beneficial because it would encourage ‘consistency’ but also something for which there was a demand and ‘appetite for’. For example:

So it is fair to say that but there is a real appetite and readiness now in the business to create an integrated approach to talent management...specifically looking at key areas of the identification of talent. So how do we identify talent consistently across the business... (Corporate Senior HR executive)

A key stakeholder who didn't share in the proclaimed appetite for a consistent approach to talent identification was the organizations CEO. Although conceding that an integrated approach where PSF's six divisions were conducting talent management in a ‘similar manner’ would both desirable and beneficial, he did not advocate for talent identification process which was mandated nor structured. PSF's CEO believed that talented employees were best identified through a process of observation or ‘seeing’. Therefore, and in his own words, senior executives responsible for talent identification can ‘...tell me who your talent are’ and ‘you know talent when you see it’.

The ability to implement a consistent and systematic talent identification process would, as a result of these assertions, prove challenging because, as detailed in the quote below, the CEO did not want a pre-defined 'process'.

...his view [the CEO] is that leaders need to lead and should be able to, should be capable of doing a lot of these things that with all our HR instincts are trying to build process around, so he is very wary about creating a one size fits all leadership model where we are identifying or putting, putting up as a template of what we think a leader or high potential should be. He is very wary about doing that and ending up with a cookie cutter approach to talent, which if you look at the diversity of leaders in our group, there are massive differences in why, they are great leaders are lots of different reasons and there are lots of different reasons of why people are good leaders, and he is really encouraging that diversity so the downside of that is that he would say we don't need a process around this, I expect my leaders in each of the individual businesses to tell you the talent is, and to tell you who you should put on the program. So he is holding his leaders accountable for a lot of our talent identification piece which means that we find it very difficult to put process around it and define it and turn it into something where you can tick boxes to know who is talent and who isn't. And that is a school of thought that you can either agree or disagree with but that is the reason why we have a lot of these things where they are relatively undefined because there is a lot of leader, what is the right word, there is a lot of subjectivity, a lot of autonomy of the different leaders and who they feel it is talent.

The desirability of a consistent approach to talent identification was met with further resistance with some executives questioning whether such an approach would result in the identification of 'talent clones'. A systematic approach, whereby employees are evaluated according to pre-determined characteristics, could lead to the identification of employees with similar or the 'same' rather than different or 'diverse' characteristics. Members of PSF's senior executive team used the phrase 'talent clones' on numerous occasions to provide discursive legitimacy for a subjective and seeing based talent identification process, with the CSO openly declaring, 'Once we start cloning [talent] we are in trouble'. These assertions ensured that the best and most effective way to practice the object of talent identification remained a topic for debate. Debates about the value of a consistent or mandated talent identification practices were further complicated within PSF as business units differed in

opinions of whether talent identification should be systematically applied. Two of these divergent opinions are illustrated through FinCo and KnowCo

Talent Identification in KnowCo: Attributing Value to Consistency

KnowCo executives agreed that talent identification was core to the practice of talent management with executives reporting that the practice of talent management commenced with this talent management object, ‘Talent management is based on identifying...talent’ (Principal partner). There were suggestions that the policies and processes adopted in KnowCo were more sophisticated and ‘structured’ than other business units in PSF because all employees within KnowCo were systematically evaluated in line with the defining characteristics of a talented individual within the context of the business unit.

The vast majority of executives declared that the practice of talent management was underpinned by a ‘consistent’ talent management framework. Most executives believed that this, and more specifically a pre-established concept of talent, would lead to more effective talent management practices. A senior HR executive attributed great importance to this whilst declaring that “the key is having a robust definition to do something about your talent”.

In order to evaluate an employee’s ‘performance’ and ‘potential’, this business unit would apply a series of pre-defined criteria including but not limited to: technical expertise, marketable skills (that could be sold to clients) management capabilities, capacity to be an inspiring leader, ability to generate revenue, client satisfaction and behaviours consistent with the culture. With all employees measured and allocated a score out of 5 for each:

We have a lot of criteria around what really constitutes a partner pipeline that is healthy, aligned to where the business is going and the broader business plan, and what we are planning on what we need so we are obviously ... so within the talent line, the partner pipeline is... we are very targeted about how we select them. (KnowCo Senior HR executive)

Having a well-defined concept of talent upon which the performance of employees was to be measured against was considered appropriate and beneficial because they were indicative of processes which were ‘objective’ and ‘robust’:

At a high level we actually look at talent quite holistically and there is all of the performance side about how they perform, and how they are performing and what they are doing. We have a very robust performance management system. (KnowCo HR executive)

Despite these emergent concessions, there was the belief that senior executives could be transparent in their decisions about the identification of talent and could justify an employee’s inclusion or exclusion from the talent pool because their talent identification processes were founded upon measures which were pre-determined. This ensured that the process was consistent, with consistency believed to be core to ‘objective’ processes. Although the business unit did not have in place a policy which explicitly required employees to be informed about the results of the performance review process and their ‘ranking’, the use of a technologically enabled systems based approach ensured that talent subjects could be notified of their “talent” status if required because the object of talent identification involves consistently evaluating employees according to the business units well-defined concept of talent.

The evaluation of employees according to the ‘same’ criteria may exclude some potentially valuable employees from the business unit’s talent pool because the underlying objective of a consistent and systematic process is to identify employees with a similar set of skills and capabilities. This creates a situation whereby employees who demonstrated skills and capabilities in line with the defining characteristics of the concept of talent were valued and classed as “talent”.

Some executives professed that despite the benefits of a consistent approach, there was the need to be mindful of the repercussions of evaluating employees according to the

same criteria. There was also some desired to stay away from the identification of ‘talent clones’. In other words, executives wanted to be able to also recognise ‘difference’ as evidenced in statements by two senior partners: “we want a partner jigsaw puzzle where all the pieces are not the same” and “everyone is different and we need to find a way to manage [talent] as individuals”. The ability to recognise a diverse array of attributes and characteristics was fraught with challenges because the business unit adopted processes which were underpinned by talent metrics and measures and sought to enact a one-best-way approach to potential partner identification.

Talent Identification in FinCo: The Value of Flexibility and Fluidity

Acknowledging that the provision of knowledge based services underpinned PSF’s value propositions; the effective management of valuable human resources was of paramount importance. PSF’s location in the professional services industry was used to legitimate the practice of talent management with the vast majority of executives noting that talent management was ‘core’ to its operations and ‘...part of what we [PSF] do’. FinCo executives confirmed that terms such as “talent” and “talent management” pervaded internal talk and texts and noted that this language was frequently appropriated within their everyday discourse.

FinCo executives confirmed that talent management at PSF was not underpinned by a consistent talent management framework. Executives foreshadowed their discussions with this concession with the vast majority explicitly stating that there was not a ‘consistent’ approach. Executives within FinCo acknowledged that they were able to determine the content and form of the processes through talent was identified within the context of their specific operations because, talent management at PSF was not underpinned by a pre-defined concept of talent or set of talent management objects. The absence of a firm-wide or

consistent approach to identifying talent was deemed a ‘challenge’ with variation thought of as a limitation of talent management at PSF.

Whereas many executives noted that the meanings attributed to the object of talent identification were negotiated at the business unit level, only a small number were able to provide further insights into ‘how’ talent identification ‘differed’. One senior HR executive was particularly useful in detailing the different processes and noted that business units across PSF tended to identify talent via one of two distinctive processes. The first focused on systematically ‘evaluating’ employees according to an array of ‘metrics’. By contrast, the second approach allocated salience to ‘subjectivity’ and the assumption that executives can ‘see’ and observe talent in action,

...but the partners tend to have two schools of thought on that [talent identification]. For example there are some groups in the firm, like KnowCo and TaxCo, who have a much more structured approach, who have a tool, that you know you could put millions of things in and spit out results. But in FinCo... they are like ‘well I will just tell you who my top talent is’. (Senior HR executive)

The observational processes adopted by FinCo were considered ‘valuable’ with a HR executive professing that “...the value is actually in the discussion and the debating” because in alternative scenarios, the identification of talent could be based exclusively on one person’s opinion, “...Because sometimes it’s just one persons opinion, you know, just a name on a paper”. In this way, a subjective process was beneficial because it “talent” was identified on the basis of a multiplicity of views.

The verification processes foreshadowed above involved an array of discursive practices through which talent subjects were to be identified, including questioning whether the employees being discussed, were representative of the “talent” in FinCo. These verification processes were considered to be appropriate. They were also attributed value as a consequence of client based nature of the work that FinCo and PSF employees undertook.

The relationship between the nature of the professional services industry and the need to include a multiplicity of views were legitimate,

Because the people here have non-traditional reporting lines as well so you don't necessarily have a line executive as such...So people might go off and do this job and work with lots of different partners so it's important to have that discussion... (FinCo Senior partner)

In this way, a subjective and flexible process was beneficial not only because "talent" was identified on the basis of a multiplicity of views but that it also ensured that the 'right' employees were being identified,

And so then at the executive meetings we still and have a discussion about it. So for example we say who are they? What are they doing? Are they the right people? Just because you put them on list are they really our talent? Have we captured the right people? (FinCo Senior HR executive)

The decision to adopt talent identification processes which were flexible and fluid was consciously and made with determination. Rather than conceding that the object of talent identification were indicative of processes which had been unintentionally implemented and enacted, executives continued to profess that their subjective and observational based approach was not only the most appropriate, but also the most effective. As such, there was little evidence of an intent to amend or change the basis upon which talent were identified. The ability to conduct subjective discussions about the performance and potential of employees ensured that the definition of talent was revised and modified as senior executives negotiated the defining characteristics which were 'right' for FinCo. That is, the absence of a consistent and mandated approach to talent identification at PSF at both the organizational and business unit level provided mechanisms through which the definition of talent and the identification of talent subjects were able to be amended and reorganized.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite the stated commitment to talent management, the practice of identifying talent at PSF was affected by the absence of a pre-established, mandated and therefore consistent definition of talent because it created a situation whereby there was not an organization-wide approach for identifying talent. Therefore, responsibility for the both the establishment and enactment of the policies and processes rested with each of PSF's six different business units. This gave rise to an organizational context whereby business units, via their senior executives, were able to determine the focus, structure and desired outcomes within the context of their operations. There was further evidence of potential variation in the object of talent identification with corporate executives not advising their business unit counterparts about the criteria, nor the processes through which valuable employees were to be identified and subsequently categorised as "talent". The findings showed evidence of divergent opinions about the value and importance of conducting talent management under the guise of a consistent understanding of talent enacted through talent identification processes which were to be consistently applied across the organization. These discussions culminated into divergent opinions about whether talent identification objects should be enacted through either systemic and controlled, or subjective and fluid, processes. The enactment of a consistent practice would facilitate an integrated approach and would lead to policies and practices deemed to be objective and robust, for senior executives, including Corporate executives, would be able to mandate the who, what and how of talent identification within PSF. In contrast, the more flexible and fluid approaches, played down the value of consistency. Rather, it attributed value to subjectivity and the ability to discuss the value of talent from a multiplicity of perspectives. In doing so, executives and business units were able to amend or update the criterion of evaluation underpinning the processes as well as the processes themselves.

These empirical insights help us to enhance our understanding of talent management, and more specifically talent identification in a number of ways. First, whilst it has long been argued that talent management is imperative to organizations because people and talent-based resources are critical to an organization's success, we still know very little about how talent management is talked about within organizational settings. Therefore, by exploring the ways in which an array of discursive actors talk about 'consistency' in talent identification, this study has offered new insights which indicate that there can be divergent opinions about the desire to ensure that all employees are subjected to the same talent identification process.

Second, we call into question assumptions of the existing literature, including those which argue that talent subjects must be identified through a set of processes which must be systematically, and therefore consistently applied. The vast majority of the literature declares that effective talent identification processes are not only proactive, but they are integrated and applied systematically within organizations (Busine & Watt, 2005; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Iles et al., 2010; Stainton, 2005). The inability to conduct talent identification processes that are standardised, facilitated through a talent management system and then applied consistently to all employees, will be of detriment to an organization's performance and success. We argue that the literature underestimates the implications of conducting talent management in this way. Our argument is that the enactment of talent identification upon a consistent definition of talent may in practice limit an organization's ability to recognise and reward diversity. The possibility of multiple meanings of talent within organizations leads to questions about whether a systematic approach, whereby an entire workforce is evaluated according to predetermined criteria, could create an environment in which sameness, rather than difference, is appreciated. That is, a well-defined or systematic approach to the object of talent identification could, in practice, be indicative of a rigid approach that prioritises

homophily at the expense of the ability to recognise idiosyncratic characteristics and attribute value to difference and diversity (Highhouse, 2008; Mäkelä et al., 2010).

Given that the findings of this study has put forward new insights which illustrate the potential for well-defined talent identification practices could result in the identification of ‘talent clones’ (McDonnell, 2011), it is suggested that the literature is limited in the ability to appreciate the complexity associated with talent management. In contrast with the vast majority of talent management publications, this study argues that organizations should be encouraged to identify, develop and retain talent in ways that are fluid, flexible and customisable. Whilst it is essential that talent management be informed by and aligned to an organization’s present and future strategic ambitions, the study encourages the literature to recognise and appreciate fluidity for therein lies an important distinction between integrated processes – where various parts are linked and coordinated, and that of a systematic approach – where talent management is conducted in accordance with a fixed plan. Thus, the study argues that the implicit assumption that there are so called ‘best practices’ may inadvertently result in a narrow, rather than holistic perspective, of talent management.

Third, the study has implications for practice and encourages organizations away from a one-best-way approach to talent management. In contrast to the prevailing normative assumption that systematic and consistent talent identification practices (Busine & Watt, 2005; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Iles et al., 2010; Stainton, 2005) underpinned by a well-defined talent concept, are essential components of talent management, this study argues that a nuanced understanding of talent management may be of greater benefit. This is because the systematic processes whereby employees are evaluated against predetermined criteria will, as prefaced above, prioritise homophily and implicitly privilege the identification of ‘talent clones’. One-best-way approaches may be harmful, rather than beneficial to organizational performance for it limits the ability to recognise and reward idiosyncratic attributes which

may be valued by the organization, or by external stakeholders, including current and future clients.

A more nuanced understanding of talent management and the enactment of practices which possess dexterity and fluidity may enable organizations to react to changes in broader business models. The ability to capitalise on developments in the external marketplaces is vital. Given that the value proposition of professional services firms are underpinned by the talents of their workforces, the ability to predict and/or respond to the needs of clients is paramount. Changes in market conditions and external factors stemming from environmental, social and technological factors may have wider implications for talent management. For example, technological innovations which have facilitated the collection of publically available and proprietary data have enhanced the value of mathematical and analytical skills as organizations seek to exploit information and 'big data'. Therefore, there is a need for organizations, and in particular professional services firms, to be agile, rather than systematic with their definitions of talent and treatment of talent subjects in order to capitalise on emerging markets.

Talent identification processes, therefore, should contain elements that are both fluid and fixed. The findings indicated that talent identification at PSF was informed by local practices (Burbach & Royle, 2010) and therefore not indicative of a strategic organization-wide approach (CIPD, 2007; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Whelen & Carcary, 2011). Nor were the talent identification processes representative of the heavily promoted systems-based approach (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Jones et al., 2012; Stahl et al., 2007). While organizations must have the capability to be fluid in order to recognise and reward a diverse array of talents, it is also essential that some elements of talent and talent management are fixed. Although the complexity of talent management is recognised, and that executives will frequently profess that the needs of their divisions and/or teams differ to those of others, it is

essential that practitioners communicate with an array of stakeholders in order to proactively address and account for these differences. The challenge for practitioners is to find a way to appreciate diversity whilst maintaining some level of control over the structure and form of talent management.

This study argues, that organizations should be encouraged identify, and subsequently manage talent in ways that are fluid, flexible, customizable to the individual and informed by the organizations current and future strategic ambitions. What's more, there is an important distinction between organizations that adopt an integrated (where various parts are linked and coordinated) approach versus a systematic approach (done in accordance to a fixed plan), with evidence that talent management practices were informed by, and closely aligned to corporate strategy (CIPD, 2008; Guthridge, Komm, & Lawson, 2006; Hewitt's Human Capital Consulting & Human Capital Institute, 2008).

While this paper offers a number of contributions, there are also certain limitations. In adopting a single site case study, there is likely to be criticisms from quantitative researchers, who will argue that the findings are limited in their generalisability. While this research approach facilitates the exploration and examination of a multiplicity of discursive actors and provides a sound basis for theorizing, caution must be applied if seeking to draw wider generalizations from the study as the findings are context specific and indicative of the discursive practices within a single site case study- the organization PSF. Thus, the findings should not be viewed as indicative of the experiences and practice of talent management in others operating in Australia, nor necessarily replicable of those operating in knowledge-based or professional services industry. Although the study extends our understanding of talent management the findings are representative of those in a specific time and place. Notwithstanding this contribution and limitation, studies that aim to generate additional empirically grounded insights represent fruitful contexts for future research, as these continue

to be under-represented in the literature, with the vast majority of publications offering conceptual (Dries, 2013b; Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013; Meyers et al., 2013; Thunnissen et al., 2013a, b), rather than empirical perspectives.

The empirical analysis of talent identification in a professional services firm has shown that the notion of consistency is debated, even within the context of the one organization. Whilst the extant talent management literature directs organizations to enact systematic talent identification processes, and hence advocates for consistency in talent identification, this study calls into question these prescriptive, one-best-way assertions. Rather than allocating resources to the creation of standardised, systemic and consistent processes, our argument is that processes which encompass fluidity, flexibility and dexterity may be of greater benefit.

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