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Talent management

For what, how and how well? An empirical exploration of talent management in practice

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Exploration
of talent
management
in practice

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify and explain what happens in practice in TM, in order to contribute to the building of a broader and more balanced theoretical framework for TM in which the impact of the organizational context and its interrelated actors are taken into account.

Design/methodology/approach – The empirical data were collected in an explorative, longitudinal study on TM policies and practices in five Dutch university departments.

Findings – The two crucial actors in TM – the organization and the talented employee – have a different perception of the intended and actual value of TM. The organization is capable of shaping and implementing a TM system that meets its needs, so from an organizational perspective TM is effective. Since the needs of the talented employees are insufficiently addressed in the intended and actual TM practices, TM has less value for them. Various influence factors at the institutional, organizational and individual level are identified.

Research limitations/implications – The study was a first step in opening the “black box” in TM, but several questions on the TM process still remain unanswered. The author therefore encourages more research on the multiple levels in the TM process, and the factors that cause variability.

Practical implications – Knowledge of the factors which influence the TM process from strategy to outcomes can help practitioners to build a more effective TM approach.

Originality/value – Theoretical approaches from companion academic disciplines are linked to the dominant viewpoints in the TM literature. Moreover, to give counterbalance to the tendency to use universal models to explain TM, this study contextualizes TM. Finally, this study goes beyond a focus on management interests, and investigates to what extent other stakeholders (employees) benefit from TM.

Keywords Talent management, Public sector organizations, Talent, Human resource management, Balanced approach, Employee well-being

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In popular and practitioner oriented literature, internet magazines and on social networking sites there is an intensive debate on the talent challenges organizations are confronted with (Iles *et al.*, 2010). Scholars also have produced a considerable number of publications on talent and TM over the course of the past decade. Yet, the amount of scholarly peer-reviewed literature is lagging behind. This illustrates a gap between the practitioner and academic interest in the subject (Cappelli and Keller, 2014). In the academic field of Human Resources Management (HRM), talent and TM seem to be relative poorly developed research subjects, and to add a lasting contribution to the field of HRM, TM has to overcome some limitations and difficulties. First, the field of TM lacks a stable theoretical foundation. Academic TM literature explores the field in all possible directions – using a broad range of academic traditions, including international HRM, strategic HRM, career management and organizational behavior (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2015) – but theoretical approaches are hardly integrated or linked, and consensus on TM definitions and principles is therefore hard to find (Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Collings and Mellahi, 2009;



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Nijs *et al.*, 2013). According to Dries (2013, p. 3) “vague but appealing rhetoric” even causes critics to question whether TM is not just a management fad.

Second, this criticism is endorsed by the lack of sound empirical evidence for the conceptual models and ideas (Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Dries, 2013). The amount of empirical studies has increased enormously since 2011, yet Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2015) argue that empirical TM studies suffer from theoretical and methodological inconsistencies, and they call for more theoretically and methodologically rigorous research designs.

Third, the current TM literature reflects a narrow and biased view on talent and TM. An instrumental and managerial approach to talent and TM is presented, in which the organizational perspective is emphasized (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013). This emphasis on organizations’ interest is also noticeable in empirical research on TM, in which HR professionals, managers and executives are the commonly targeted research population (e.g. Stahl *et al.*, 2012). Just a few empirical studies examine TM from an employees’ perspective (e.g. Björkman *et al.*, 2013; Dries and Pepermans, 2008). So, even though talent or talented employees are the central subjects in TM, there is little interest in their experiences and opinions.

Fourth, the contemporary TM literature highlights the talent issues of a select category of organizations. There is a strong focus on TM in private sector organizations, multinationals and organizations in the US context (Collings *et al.*, 2011). It is, however, questionable whether the current concepts and assumptions in the TM literature related to this specific Anglo-Saxon context help us to understand and explain TM issues in organizations in other contexts and geographies (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013).

In sum, we notice that many business leaders, practitioners and academics attach great value to talent and TM, but there is still little known about how and how well (and according to whom) TM really works in practice. According to Boxall *et al.* (2007) the academic field of HRM should provide an alternative for the tendency for “best practicism” which is dominant in HRM and TM. They argue for an “analytical approach to HRM” that concentrates on careful descriptive research to address the “what, why, how and for whom” questions that underpin the HRM activity. The authors underline the importance of contextually-based research, the integration of models and theories from related academic subfields in models on the HRM process, and assessing outcomes at multiple levels. In accordance with the principles of the analytical HRM approach, this paper aims to identify and clarify what actually happens in practice, in order to contribute to the building of a broader and more balanced theoretical framework for TM which considers the impact of the organizational context and its interrelated actors.

Theoretical approaches from related academic fields were used to expand the narrow, managerial orientation toward TM. These theories are explained in the next section. Furthermore, this study focussed on TM in a specific context, i.e. publicly funded Dutch universities. In the methodology section the research design is presented. Moreover, outcomes at multiple levels are investigated, since the interests and perceptions of both the organization and talented employees are considered in the study. The results are presented in the third section. The paper ends with a discussion of the theoretical and practical contributions.

TM and the TM process: a theoretical exploration

TM is often described as the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment of talents (e.g. Scullion *et al.*, 2010). Within their TM definitions authors adopt different terms for “talent,” for example

“excellent abilities,” but also terms like “key employees,” “high potentials” or “those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to an organization” are used. The variety of terms used to define talent reflects one of the most central debates in TM, i.e. whether TM is an inclusive approach which focusses on (the talents of) all employees, or an exclusive approach aimed at attracting and retaining a select group of employees (Tansley, 2011). Subsequently, the outcomes of TM and the TM practices necessary to obtain the intended outcomes are key issues. In general, the TM literature provides a rational and instrumental interpretation of the TM process: talents are recruited and developed with a broad variety of TM practices to direct their behavior in a direction that fits the organizational needs, and, as a result, the individual is happy and motivated, and individual and organizational performance increases. The general assumption in this approach is that the effectiveness of TM primarily depends on the strategic alignment of TM. In doing so, the TM process is disconnected from other influences in the external and internal organizational context. However, in the field of HRM it is widely acknowledged that the process through which HR strategy leads to performance is not as simple as the TM literature suggests. The route from HR strategy to organizational performance consists of a set of underlying processes at multiple levels, and in each process different actors and hindering and enabling factors are involved, through which variance can occur at each of those levels. Though, these insights for the field of strategic HRM have not yet entered the TM domain.

In this section we take the HRM-process models of Paauwe (2004) and Wright and Nishii (2013) as our starting point, and elaborate in more detail on: first, the intended TM strategy (i.e. the intended TM objectives and the intended TM practices); second, the implementation of the actual TM practices; third, the employees’ perception of the TM practices and their reactions; and fourth, the outcomes of TM.

The (intended) TM strategy

Intended TM objectives. According to Paauwe (2004) the decisions regarding the (intended) HR goals and the related HR practices are made by the dominant decision makers within the organization, such as top management, supervisory board and HR management. The room to maneuver of this dominant coalition is determined by the overall strategy of the organization – as is recognized in TM literature – but also by internal settings and by external factors (Paauwe, 2004). Moreover, the interests, values and norms of the actors involved in the dominant coalition also have an impact on the choices made regarding the intended HRM strategy (Paauwe and Boselie, 2003).

In contemporary TM literature mainly organizational objectives are emphasized. In general, TM is meant to fulfill the quantitative and qualitative needs for human capital, and to contribute to the overall firm performance (in terms of profit, competitive advantage and sustainability) (e.g. Beechler and Woodward, 2009; Cappelli, 2008). The assumption is that every stakeholder in the organization shares this economic, organizational interest. In doing so, current TM literature emphasizes the rational and economic side of work and organizations. Yet, Collings (2014) argues that the failure to effectively manage and develop talent can be traced to this narrow conceptualization of outcomes in terms of shareholder returns. New institutionalists claim that, besides market pressure, also institutional pressures exerted by other stakeholders in the broader organizational context affect the organization, and create norms for how organizations should be designed, function and manage their human

capital (Suchman, 1995; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). For public sector organizations these institutional pressures are more important than market pressures.

Yet, the interests and well-being of others who have a stake in or a claim on the organization, such as employees or society (Greenwood, 2002), and “non-economic” objectives are largely neglected in the TM literature. Collings (2014) and Thunnissen *et al.* (2013) recommend a broader approach to TM, in which both the economic and non-economic value of TM is considered, as well as outcomes at the level of the organization, the talented employee and society.

Intended TM practices. Now the question arises what practices and instruments are implemented by organizations to achieve the intended TM objectives. However, up until now the majority of publications on TM have lacked a clear description of relevant practices involved in TM (Dries, 2013). A broad variety of instruments regarding recruitment, staffing, development and retention has been presented and prescribed, with no further classification or structuring. To identify and explain what happens in practice the distinction between “hard”-production focussed HRM practices and “soft”-people focussed HRM practices (Truss *et al.*, 1997; Legge, 2005) can be helpful. This classification is based on opposing belief systems on human nature and managing control strategies (Truss *et al.*, 1997). The “hard” approach is based on McGregor’s theory X, and reflects an instrumental and utilitarian perspective on humans: employees are seen as objects (resources) that need to be controlled and managed effectively so that organizational objectives can be met (Truss *et al.*, 1997; Greenwood, 2002; Legge, 2005). HR instruments and practices in this approach focus on measuring, controlling and increasing performance and productivity of employees. Current TM literature seems to promote the “hard” production focussed approach to TM, with its prevalence for high performance (in the exclusive approach) and organizational objectives

Conversely, the “soft” approach to HRM is based on McGregor’s theory Y, and assumed that employees are humans with their own emotions and needs that direct their behavior. The interests and rights of the employee are a concern, parallel to the interests of the organization (Greenwood, 2002). Instead of exerting control by sanctions and pressure, supporters of the “soft” approach believe that managers need to have confidence in the responsibility of the employees themselves, and support and stimulate employees in their development, preferably with practices that enhance commitment and personal and professional development (Truss *et al.*, 1997; Legge, 2005). In TM, the “soft” approach can be connected to the inclusive TM approach that is adopted by some TM scholars, in which the strengthening and developing of the talents of all employees is underlined.

Actual TM practices

Wright and Nishii (2013) acknowledge that the actual implementation of the intended HR practices is often done by other actors than the decision makers in the dominant coalition, and that those practices implemented are often applied in ways that differ from the initial intention. They argue that obstacles at both the organizational and the individual level may interfere with the implementation process. Obstacles at the organizational level refer to a lack of internal consistency of the HRM practices, the absence of adequate and consistent processes and infrastructure to support the implementation and so on (Pauwe *et al.*, 2013; Wright and Nishii, 2013). Obstacles at the individual level are related to the actors involved in the implementation process. In particular the crucial role of line managers in the implementation process is highlighted in the literature. Line managers’

poor HR implementation efforts can result in unfavorable employee attitudes, leading to outcomes that include less job performance and satisfaction and higher turnover intentions (Sikora and Ferris, 2014). Managers might have several reasons to obstruct the implementation of HR practices: they could be unwilling to perform HR responsibilities, or unable due to a lack of time or sufficient HR-related competencies. But also a lack of support and advice from the HR staff on how to perform their HR role, or the absence of clear policies and procedures concerning their HR responsibilities can hinder managers (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013).

There is little conceptual and empirical information in the TM literature on differences between intended and actual TM practices, nor on the factors causing variability. The literature focusses on either a conceptualization of (best) practices (e.g. Groves, 2011), or, but in a lesser extent, on the employees' perception of the implemented practices and their reactions (e.g. Dries and De Gieter, 2014; Höglund, 2012). The latter refers to the next phases in the chain of processes in Wright and Nishii's (2013) model, discussed below.

Perceived practices and employees reactions

The effect of the actual practices does not exist in the practices themselves, but rather in the perceptions individual employees have of those practices (Wright and Nishii, 2013). HRM practices, intentionally and unintentionally, send signals that employees interpret and make sense of, in order to form an understanding of the desired behaviors and related rewards (Guest, 2007). Based on their perceptions employees will react in various ways (Wright and Nishii, 2013).

Referring to employees' perceptions and reactions, we enter the area of psychological contract. This theoretical concept and its relation to employees' behavioral and attitudinal reaction is a rising research topic in TM literature, and in particular the presumed consequences of contract breach (e.g. Höglund, 2012; Festing and Schäfer, 2014). As in other studies on the psychological contract, these TM studies show that non-fulfillment or breach of the psychological contract leads to reduced organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior and job satisfaction and an increased turnover intention.

TM outcomes

The presumed effects of TM on organizational performance are, as mentioned before, discussed in conceptual TM literature, but the actual effectiveness of TM is hardly empirically explored. The study of Bethke-Langenegger *et al.* (2011) on the effectiveness of TM practices of 138 Swiss companies is a rare exception. Their study showed that different sets of TM practices result in different organizational outcomes. Although this study is an important contribution to the field, it focusses only on organizational objectives, and neglects outcomes of other stakeholders inside and outside the organization.

Methodology

In this study we will focus on explaining what actually happens in practice, and in line with the above reasoning, explores the potential and actual value of TM for the organization and the talented employees, and the factors that affect the design, implementation and effectiveness of TM. The empirical data were collected in a specific context: Dutch publicly funded universities. The university is an outstanding example

of a talent organization. The terms “talent,” “highly-gifted” or “genius” are often used to refer to a scientist with extraordinary insights, a great mind who realized critical breakthroughs in his or her academic field. For centuries the university tried to provide an independent intellectual space to nurture and nourish these geni. Today, universities are still looking for the most gifted and committed academics, although the quest for talent seems to be more grounded in economic factors. In particular in Europe, universities are ascribed an important role in the strengthening of the European position in the global knowledge economy (Enders *et al.*, 2011). The production of useful knowledge and relevant teaching necessary to solve societal and economic issues has been emphasized. To improve the competitive position of the European higher education system great value is attached to quality and excellence, which is combined with increasing demands for transparency, accountability and efficiency by local governments (Enders *et al.*, 2011). The presence of highly qualified academic staff is extremely important for the quality of educational programs and academic research, the universities’ reputation and the knowledge condition in a region (Florida, 1999; Enders *et al.*, 2011). A “war for talent” is inextricably bound up with this shift toward competition and excellence. For some academic disciplines this is problematic and they suffer chronic shortages of talented people (e.g. technology and engineering) while other disciplines face a surplus of young academics wanting to pursue an academic career (e.g. humanities) (Gilliot *et al.*, 2002). This raises the question if, and how, this typical talent organization attracts and develops their academic staff. Several studies showed that businesslike elements are seeping into the academic management systems, and that Dutch universities have shifted from a collegial system to manage the recruitment and employment of personnel, to a more managerial model in which practices from private sector organizations are adopted (e.g. Fruytier and Timmerhuis, 1995; Smeenk, 2007). On the other hand, not all signals from outside the academic organization come through. The classic academic norms and values such as autonomy, independence and creativity are still vital in the organizational culture and the professional values and orientations of academics. These professional norms and values have an impact on the academic organization and academic HRM as well (Smeenk, 2007). The managerial and professional pressures co-exist in today’s academic organization and create tensions which affect HRM policy and practice. Whether this is also the case in TM is elucidated in the result section. Before presenting the results, this section describes the case selection, the data collection and analysis.

Case selection

The empirical data were collected in an explorative, longitudinal study on TM policies and practices in five Dutch university departments of five different universities. The selection of the five university departments was based on three criteria. First, each selected department had to represent one of the core academic disciplines: humanities, social sciences, law, medical sciences and science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM). Second, general, technical and smaller universities had to be included. Third, a regional spread was important. Within each case data were collected in 2009 and 2013.

Data collection

The study focussed on the TM policy and practice regarding the academic staff, in particular on the talented academics at the beginning of their academic career. We did not have a predetermined definition of talent and TM at the start of the study, because

we wanted to explore the conceptualizations of the departments involved in the study. We therefore focussed on academics who were identified by their dean as “rising stars.”

The data were collected by interviewing both employees and key figures around HRM and TM. The latter group consisted of members of the university executive board, department’s deans, research directors, managing full professors and policy advisors from the HRM department or the academic affairs office (30 persons; see Table I). Regarding the employees the study focussed on academics with a position as PhD – PhD’s in the Dutch academic system are not students, but have an employee status with a temporary contract – postdoctoral researcher and lecturers (both temporary positions), and assistant professors recently granted tenure or on a tenure track (70 persons in total, see Table I). The selection of the interviewees was based on predetermined selection criteria developed by the researchers – i.e., position and a spread between male and female – but also on the availability of respondents in a specific group. In case of a surplus of respondents in a particular group a selection was made by the researchers.

Data collection 2009. In 2009 we started with collecting and analyzing relevant policy documents on university departments’ strategy, HRM and TM policy to gain an understanding of the intended TM strategy. Second, semi structured interviews were held with key figures around HRM and TM to gather information on the objectives of TM and the intended TM practices, TM in practice, and the opportunities and obstacles concerning the identification, development and retention of talent. Third, with the employees focus groups and individual interviews were held, in which we focussed on their needs and preferences regarding their work environment and employment relation, and also asked how they evaluated the TM practices of their employer in order to gain insight into whether the TM system addressed their needs. In addition, ten telephonic interviews were held with talented scholars who had left the university department to evaluate their perception of the TM approach of their former employer.

Data collection 2013. In 2013 the deans, research directors and policy officials were interviewed again as key figures around HRM and TM. Due to personnel changes we could not interview all interviewees of 2009, which resulted in a lower amount of interviews than in 2009. In the interviews we evaluated the TM objectives and policies investigated in 2009, reflected on the effects in 2013 and on the factors that influenced the effectiveness of the TM system.

| Subfields | Representatives organization | | | | Employees ^a | | | | |
|------------------|--|------|--|------|------------------------|------|---|------|---------------------|
| | Board members/ Research directors/ Full professors | | Policy officials (HR/Academic affairs) | | PhD/postdocs | | Recently appointed assistant professor/ Tenure trackers | | Departed talents |
| | 2009 | 2013 | 2009 | 2013 | 2009 | 2013 | 2009 | 2013 | 2009 |
| Humanities | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 13 | 11 | 17 | 11 | 2 |
| Social Sciences | 3 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Law | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| STEM | 4 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 9 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Medical sciences | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 10 | 6 | 2 |
| Total | 16 | 5 | 14 | 7 | 36 | 27 | 34 | 21 | 10 |

Notes: ^aThe labels of the positions of the employees refer to the position the respondents had in 2009. So, 11 of the 13 postdoctoral researchers interviewed in 2009 also filled in the questionnaire in 2013

Table I.
Overview of
interview
respondents per
subfield

To gather new information on behalf of the talented employees we developed a small online survey, and all interviewed academics of 2009 received an e-mail to participate in the study (excluded the ten “departed” interviewed academics). The survey contained fourteen questions: nine items focussed on their employment position in 2009 and in 2013, two items on their evaluation of the TM objectives of their employer and three items on their opinion on the contribution of their employer’s TM approach to their development. The questionnaire was sent to 73 persons, including three employees who were invited for the interviews in 2009 but did not participate; the e-mail list of all 73 persons were used. In total, 48 questionnaires were returned (response rate 66 percent). Information on the careers of the non-responding 25 talents was retrieved by a search on LinkedIn or personal websites.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview reports were submitted for approval to the interviewees. Only the approved interview reports were used for the further analysis. After both rounds of data collection the analysis were started by scanning and coding the transcribed interviews, using emerging, open codes. IBM SPSS statistics software was used to analyze the quantitative data of the survey.

Findings

Intended TM objectives

In 2009 all five cases (humanities, social sciences, law, medical sciences and STEM) had TM high on the strategic HR agenda, mainly to achieve economic organizational goals (flexibility and efficiency). In particular objectives at the HRM level are relevant: all departments wanted to create a flexible workforce, in quantity and quality, which enables the organization to respond adequately to external demands. Moreover, all departments faced an ageing workforce and one of the key priorities was to attract a new generation of academics to fulfill (now or in the future) the vacant positions of full professor. For the law, STEM and medical sciences departments this was problematic, because they were confronted with a highly competitive, tight labor market and they experienced difficulties in attracting and retaining young academics. The humanities department, on the other hand, had to cope with plentiful junior staff, with limited career possibilities in general and a scarcity of top-level positions due to low mobility in the upper ranks, and a lack of financial resources to create extra positions. Instead of “exploiting” the over-supply in the humanities labor market, the organization took on the responsibility of improving organizational flexibility together with enhancing the overall employability of its academics to strengthen their position at the external labor market. Therefore, the humanities department is the only department in our study which specifically showed consideration for employee well-being as a formal TM objective. None of the university departments has formulated TM goals at the societal level.

TM practices: intended and actual

Now the question arises as to what TM practices were developed and actually implemented by the organization to achieve these goals. Four out of five departments had a well-documented and formalized TM policy developed by the department’s management (dean’s office) in cooperation with the HR advisor. The management of the law department did not feel the need for a very formalized approach, because

applying a recruitment and career policy that is not excessively formalized TM approach provided them with the room to maneuver in a highly competitive labor market of jurists.

A wide variety of instruments and practices are applied, most of them common HR practices. The intended instruments and practices are ordered in two broad categories: selection and recruitment (Table II), and development, performance and promotion (Table III). Although it is well known that approximately 70 percent of the PhD's and postdocs in the Netherlands cannot pursue an academic career at a Dutch university (De Goede *et al.*, 2013), none of the university departments had an explicit policy to support a transition to other work environments.

Selection and recruitment. In TM policy the emphasis is on the selection and development of talents. Most departments have explicit protocols regarding the selection and employment of junior staff, i.e. PhD's (social sciences, humanities and medical sciences). For the recruitment of senior staff protocols are also generally accepted. Talent reviews and assessments are exceptional, but do occur on an incidental basis for senior positions.

In practice, the departments in our study particularly focus on "making talents": attracting young high potentials and developing them toward the senior position of professor. The research master and the graduate school are important "talent pools." In most departments the selection of academics at the beginning of their career is the responsibility of full professors. Regardless of the formal protocols, in practice the full professors involved frequently use their own non-formalized selection criteria and procedure, in which they focus on talents in their professional network who have attracted their attention. For the medium and senior academic positions the protocols regarding an open selection procedure and a selection committee are also sometimes neglected by academic leaders when a top talent can be recruited: "In the battle for talent you sometimes have to take unorthodox measures. You have to respond instantly, and risk your neck" (dean).

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Humanities | Junior staff: standardize procedure for selection and employment of PhD students For senior staff: personnel planning Recruitment of senior staff: Focus on external recruitment of generalist academics Once a year for the entire department In an open, international selection procedure By a selection committee |
| Social sciences | Junior staff: standardize procedure for selection and employment of PhD students |
| Law | Scouting potential PhD students in research master Recruitment protocol for senior positions (including open selection procedure and involvement of selection committee) |
| STEM | Active scouting and recruitment of external talent, e.g. at international conferences Senior positions: Strategic personnel planning Talent review |
| Medical sciences | Honors programs for excellent students as talent pool for PhD trajectories For junior positions: grants offered to excellent master or PhD students to finance their temporary position Senior positions: Strategic personnel planning Talent review |

Table II.
Selection and
recruitment practices
(intended practices)

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| | |
|------------------|---|
| Humanities | Standardized supervision program for PhD's Obligatory teaching skills program for new employees Introduction program for new assistant professors and temporary lecturers (Personalized) HRM-programs for associate and full professors Additional temporary positions for talented associate professors |
| Social sciences | PhD: structured educational and supervision program Senior positions: Structured program for support offered by external grant application Annual performance appraisals Coaching and training Experimenting with tenure track Obligatory academic leadership training for new (associate) professors |
| Law | Educational and supervision program for PhD's Experimenting with tenure track (including pre-agreed performance criteria, performance appraisals and career advancements) Annual performance appraisals Some courses and seminars on academic leadership Support offered by external grant application |
| STEM | Tenure Track for senior staff: Selective entrance criteria Section via open procedure and selection committee Clear, pre-agreed performance criteria and career steps Annual performance appraisals Training program: e.g. obligatory teaching skills program and academic leadership program |
| Medical sciences | Structured educational and supervision program for PhD's and scholarships for junior academics Courses offered by career center Top-talent program for assistant and associate professors: Selective entrance criteria Clear, pre-agreed performance criteria and career steps Annually performance appraisals Training program "Management in Research organizations," incl. talent development assessment Personal budget to spend on training or coaching Additional temporary positions for talented professors Personalized academic leadership program for full professors |

Table III.

Development, performance and promotion practices (intended practices)

Development, performance and promotion. The study reveals a fragmented TM policy regarding development, performance and promotion. First, the formal TM system focusses on the development of either academics in the junior and senior academic positions. The development of employees in medium positions with a fixed-term contract, such as postdoc researchers and lecturers, is hardly an issue in policy documents and the interviews. An exception is the humanities department that invests in developing the overall employability of temporary lectures.

In addition, the departments used different approaches for the junior and senior academics. For the academics at the beginning of their career university departments use an inclusive and "soft" approach to TM. PhD development programs are standard policy (except for the STEM department), and are available to all PhD's in the department. In most of the investigated departments this program consists of a (mutually agreed) plan regarding training and supervision. In practice many supervising full professors devote little effort to the formal PhD programs. There seems

to be disagreement on whether talent can and should be developed and nurtured or not. Many professors use a laissez-faire style with little guidance and control, while others find it important to be actively involved in the development of their staff and to show concern for their well-being: “Active human resources management implies that you know the interests of a person, his drives, so you know what is good for that person and you can help him in his career”(full professor).

The TM policy for the more senior academic positions (assistant professor and up) can be characterized as exclusive and “hard.” Proven performance gains importance, and only the best performers are selected for tenure, or can participate in a talent program with the development opportunities included. Two out of five departments (STEM and medical sciences) had a top-talent program, and two others (law and social sciences) were experimenting with such a program because of the expected positive effects on the departments’ reputation. The competition to get on the program is fierce, and the performance demands are high. Once on the program, the professional development is supported in several ways: coaching, mentoring or leadership training. None of the top-talent programs is the same, even within a department different forms can exist. Unlike the PhD programs, the formal top-talent programs for the senior staff are often implemented with great care. Academic managers and HR are aware of the risks of dissatisfaction and turnover of top talents when the procedures and protocol are not handled with care.

Factors affecting the TM process. The TM strategy was affected by factors at the environmental and organizational level. Differences between the academic disciplines-divergent difficulties on the external and internal labor market, but also difficulties in obtaining the scarce financial resources-compel the university departments to differentiate in their TM strategy. For example, some departments faced a weakened financial position, forcing the dean to take economy measures and terminated some TM activities (e.g. humanities), while others made the acquisition of external funding part of the performance criteria and performance agreements of talents (medical sciences), or invested in coaching programs for academics in writing a grant proposal (social sciences). We also noticed that the dean, as the department’s top manager, has a crucial impact on the intended TM goals and policy. The HR policy advisor of an department argues: “Whether the talent development process turns out well depends on the actions of the dean and vice-dean. They have to carry the load. The problem is, however, that our managers come from the academic community to which they will return again after their period of governance as a dean is terminated. For some this impedes them from carrying out unpopular reforms” (HR policy official). In two departments the new dean was the initiator of major shifts in the TM strategy, while in two other departments the new dean did not bring a wind of change.

The implementation of the TM is mostly influenced by factors at the organizational, and particularly, at the individual level. An organizational fit and an internal fit of the TM practices increase the chance of being implemented as intended. Also being able to adjust to changing environmental and internal circumstances increased the chances for the organization to achieve the outcomes it aspired. However, the implementation is most of all influenced by the intentions, perceptions and actions of the full professors involved in the day-to-day management of a team of academics. They are searching for an acceptable and adequate way to handle the difficulties and challenges they are confronted with in managing their research group and the talents included.

Perceived practices and employees reactions

Now we shift from the organizational level to the level of the individual employee, and discuss what the talented employees find important in TM and their perception of the TM inducements of their employer. The results illustrate a discrepancy between the perception of the organization and the talents regarding the TM objectives. In the talents perception TM is mainly meant to support the professional development of the academic. In contrast to the economic focus of the organization, the talents in our study mostly have non-economic goals they want to see fulfilled with TM. It is their passion for science that drives the academics, and all other job preferences are related to the challenging, creative and accomplishing work that talents want to do. They want to cooperate with the best academics in their field. Salary is not alluring, but the university that offers outstanding research facilities and financial means to provide those facilities is an attractive employer. Moreover, as young academics gain experience and progress in their professional development, possibilities to make career advancements become important, preferably resulting in a tenure as full professor.

The academics are, generally speaking, not satisfied with the inducements made by the organization: "This organization flourishes because of its human resources, but, in my opinion, there is no human resources policy at all" (assistant professor). The university departments' formal TM policy mainly focusses on measuring performance, and does not explicitly invest in the aforementioned work aspects which motivate talents. Some interviewees indicate that they attach more value to informally organized work practices – such as discussion meetings with colleagues and cooperating with a team of researchers – than to the training and courses organized by the HRM department as part of the TM policy.

A major point of dissatisfaction is the uncertainty about career possibilities because of unclear promotion criteria, and the continuing insecurity regarding their position due to a successive series of fixed-term contracts. Academics with a fixed-term contract feel hindered in their professional development and undervalued: "The university does not take temporary lecturers seriously. You put a lot of effort into the things they tell you to do, but management does not show their appreciation" (temporary lecturer).

Moreover, the talents criticize the actual implementation of the TM practices. They detect a great deal of variation in the implementation by the supervising professors, and this causes talents (at all levels) to question whether the treatment has been just and fair. One of the interviewees described it as a "lottery of positions": "I would like some more transparency. It is a kind of mystery if positions are vacant or not. [...] The assignment of positions is arbitrary and that creates confusion" (PhD).

What are the effects of these unsatisfactory working conditions and TM policies and practices? The talents in our study are not easily discouraged when times are rough. Regardless of the talents' dissatisfaction with their employers' TM approach, the data from the online survey shows that most of them (67 percent; $n = 49$) stayed with their employer of 2009. In total, 22 percent of the respondents ($n = 16$) accepted a position at another (inter)national university, mainly to get a permanent contract or a promotion to a higher academic position; 10 percent was unemployed or had left academia. The majority of the respondents who stayed in academia have made career progression; they received a permanent contract and/or have made upward progression, mostly one (25 percent), two (27 percent) or even three steps (10 percent) on the academic hierarchical ladder. The latter is exceptional because on average scholars in the Netherlands need up to five or six years to progress to the next career level (De Goede

et al., 2013). Yet, in the talents' view their development cannot be attributed to the departments' TM practices, but rather to their own efforts and the support of their supervising professor.

TM outcomes

In the second round of data collection, we asked the university departments if they achieved their intended objectives. The interviewees mentioned positive results and effects. In particular objectives at the HRM level – i.e. the replacement of retiring professors – were successfully met. The open job positions were filled with new talents, or would be in the near future by a talented academic currently on a tenure track. The flexibility of the workforce improved through the increased usage of fixed-term contracts, or, in the case of the humanities department, the recruitment of generalists employable in related academic subfields. It is, however, remarkable that none of the departments was able to illustrate their observations on the effects with quantified data. It is not a habit to evaluate and to measure the outcomes of policy intentions.

Discussion

In this paper the HRM-process models of Paauwe (2004) and Wright and Nishii (2013) have provided a more enriched and complete view of the talent challenges organizations have to face, how they deal with these issues in practice and how well they do this, than the one-dimensional and limited TM approach that is dominant in the current TM literature. The findings are interesting for the field of TM in several ways. First, in line with the HRM-process model of Wright and Nishii (2013) the study showed that that implementing TM is not as easy as the TM literature predicts. There is a discrepancy between intended and actual practices, and the perception of the employees of those practices. In accordance with Paauwe (2004) the study identified factors at the institutional, organizational and individual level causing variance in the chain of processes. It is essential to acknowledge this possible variance in developing and implementing a TM strategy, and to anticipate by developing a TM approach that fits the organization and its context (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Paauwe *et al.*, 2013) instead of copying best practices from other organizations.

Second, besides clarifying the multiple underlying processes, the study showed that TM is more than a system. The interests and talent philosophies of multiple actors have a significant impact on TM (Meyers and van Woerkom, 2013). Despite the formal TM policy, the actors involved in the implementation process, specifically line management and the talented employees, can act in a different and unforeseen way. Although this is confirmed in previous studies on management enactment in HR (Sikora and Ferris, 2014; Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013), we are aware that the findings in this study are strongly related to the specific context of universities in which professional autonomy is highly rated and accepted. We therefore see this study as a first step in opening the “black box” in TM, and we encourage more multi-level studies, in particular in organizations in different sectors of industry and/or in other countries.

Third, the study could not prove whether the TM approaches investigated were indeed effective. In the case studies it was not common to evaluate HR policies. We therefore recommend more research of the effectiveness and actual value of TM, preferably using a multi-perspective approach.

Finally, the multi-level design of the study enabled us to compare the perspectives of the organization and the talents, which showed that the two crucial actors in TM have a different perception of the intended and actual value of TM. The economically oriented

needs of the organization collide with the non-economic interests of the talents. They also have a different view on how this value could be created, and this results in an unbalanced employee-organization relationship in favor of the organization (Tsui and Wang, 2002) since the hard and exclusive TM policy and practices are mostly aimed at satisfying organizational needs. According to Tsui and Wang's (2002) an overinvestment relationship in favor of the employee, or at least a mutual investment relationship, would be more useful to retain employees in scarce jobs or with rare and valuable skills, in other words: talents. Yet, in the study the unbalanced relationship did not result in massive turnover. This is not consistent with psychological contract theory, and a clarification is required. Probably contextual factors play a crucial role in this situation, particularly the difficulties for young academics to get another job inside and outside academia, combined with the academics' perseverance to pursue an academic career anyway. Yet, it would be interesting to investigate the employment relationship of talents into more detail, including the factors that explain whether or not contract breach occurs and what happens when it does.

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