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Standing on the shoulders of giants? A critical review of empirical talent management research

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# Standing on the shoulders of giants? A critical review of empirical talent management research

Review of  
empirical talent  
management  
research

31

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to frame empirical literature on talent management (TM), and to provide a clear and comprehensive picture of the topics under investigation, the conceptualization of TM, and under-explored areas.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors adopted a systematic review that covers empirical research on TM which has been published between 2006 and 2014 in academic peer-reviewed journals. A total of 96 articles were included in the review. A bibliometric as well as a content analysis has been carried out.

**Findings** – The results reveal that the Anglo-Saxon context (in particular EU) has a great impact on empirical TM research. Also research foundations and designs are not very rigorous. A slight awareness of context and culture was found. Empirical TM research is predominantly built on an exclusive approach to TM. Yet, how TM works in practice and how well (from the perspective of multiple actors) as well as the role and perceptions of line managers are under-explored areas.

**Practical implications** – The paper gives vision and direction to practitioners in particular on the definition of talent and TM.

**Originality/value** – This study frames the extent and nature of empirical research on TM, and it is the first to specifically and objectively examine the advances made in the field and to identify under-explored areas. By doing so, it helps to avoid presumptions and misguided beliefs, to advance the knowledge of TM issues in organizations and regions, and to better channel future research.

**Keywords** Talent management, Talent, Empirical research, Literature review

**Paper type** Literature review

## Introduction

Despite the global financial crisis talent management (TM) remains a critical agenda item for senior managers (Skuzza *et al.*, 2013). Employers recognize that an engaged, skilled and motivated workforce is the key to growth and to achieve competitive advantage. The crisis, however, impels organizations to be more creative and effective in their TM approach. Yet, academic research in the field of TM does not give much support in finding the right TM solutions. In fact, research on TM has been accused of being lagging behind in offering organizations vision and direction on the matter (Collings *et al.*, 2011; Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014; Cappelli and Keller, 2014). Despite the increasing scholarly attention for TM during the past ten years (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013), and especially over the course of the past two years



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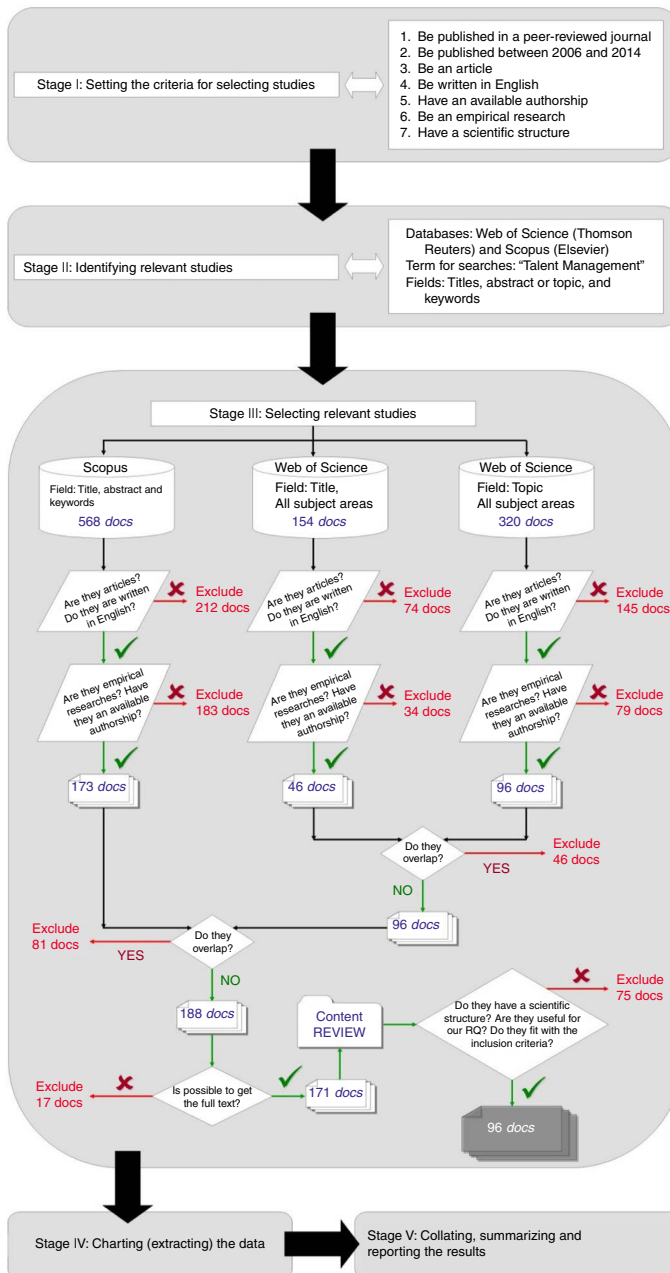
(Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2015), there still is no consensus over its definition, theoretical backgrounds and scope. Besides that, the field has been criticized for focussing on TM issues in a select category of organizations, i.e. US-based organizations, and multinational (MNC's) and private organizations (Collings *et al.*, 2011; Powell *et al.*, 2013). Several authors call for more research on TM in other contexts and advice to contextualize TM in both theoretical frameworks as well as in research design (e.g. Collings *et al.*, 2011; Meyers and van Woerkom, 2014; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013). Also the emphasis on the organizational perspective is mentioned as a limitation (Collings, 2014; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013). Finally, frequently the field of TM has been frequently criticized for a lack of sound empirical evidence (e.g. Skuza *et al.*, 2013). However, the recent literature review of Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2015) shows significant improvement in this matter: since 2010 the amount of empirical publications surpasses the amount of conceptual TM papers published each year. These authors argue that, thanks to the significant progress made in recent years, the relatively young field of TM is going to change drastically and rapidly in the next few years as it shifts from a “growing” to a “mature” field of study.

Although several literature reviews have been published since the seminal paper of Lewis and Heckman (2006) – i.e., Collings and Mellahi (2009), Tarique and Schuler (2010), Thunnissen *et al.* (2013), Cappelli and Keller (2014) and Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2015) – none of these reviews focussed solely on empirical research. In order to support the field in its advancements, we need to avoid departing from presumptions and misguided beliefs, and learn from the facts and achievements in empirical TM investigations so far. Therefore, this paper reports the findings of a rigorous literature review of empirical scholarly articles on TM. We aim to offer a rigorous and up-to-date synthesis of prior insights into TM, to provide a clear and comprehensive picture of the advances made in the field, while shedding light on under-explored areas in TM research. As a result, we believe that this review is important for both (newcomer and active) TM scholars and practitioners. Our central research question is: what is the extent and nature of existing empirical research on TM, and what lessons can be learned from previous empirical TM research?

The paper is organized as follows: The next section details our methodology. Then, in the results section we present the key findings in four separate sub-sections. First, we offer a general overview of the publications in terms of productivity (i.e. “how much has been done up until now, and by whom?”). Second, we clarify the nature of empirical TM research by analyzing research designs, level of analysis and research population (“how is TM studied?”). Third, we shift focus to the content of the papers and present the main topics in empirical TM literature (i.e. “what has been studied and where?”). Finally, in the discussion we explain the main lessons learned as well as the empirical advances on the field, and highlight the under-explored areas that need to be addressed in future research.

## Methods

As Figure 1 shows, we undertook this literature review in five distinct stages drawing on established methods (cf. Booth *et al.*, 2014). We restricted our search to empirical articles that have appeared in international peer-reviewed journals. Therefore, non-empirical studies, theses, interviews, editorial notes, chapters of books and books reviews were not retained. Following a more and more common practice (cf. Arduini and Zanfei, 2014) we also excluded conference proceedings and symposiums presentations. Likewise, research conducted in either a laboratory setting, by mathematical modeling,



**Figure 1.**  
Scoping literature  
review stages

using simulation models or without an available authorship was not retained. These criteria also excluded non-English literature with predominantly national readerships (Boselie *et al.*, 2005) since it has little influence on the international academic debate about a topic.

Following Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2015), we used the ISI Web of Science (Thomson Reuters) and Scopus (Elsevier) databases for article identification and retrieval. Moreover, since these authors did not find any peer-reviewed publication of relevance on TM prior 2006, we established from 2006 to 2014 (both years included) as the time frame for the present study.

In order to provide a credible guarantee of quality for this study – although this is not an area for special attention in scoping reviews (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005) – we considered only those articles with a “scientific structure” (i.e. those with a method section). In total, 45 articles were excluded for that reason. Finally, we ended up not coding 26 articles because they were not useful for our research since they mentioned the term “talent management” only once or twice and without further discussion, or they were primarily dealing with another topic (e.g. organizational learning capability, turnover intentions, different generations' sub-cultures, self-employability). Any issues regarding confusion and uncertainties about exclusion or inclusion decisions were shared and resolved between the authors.

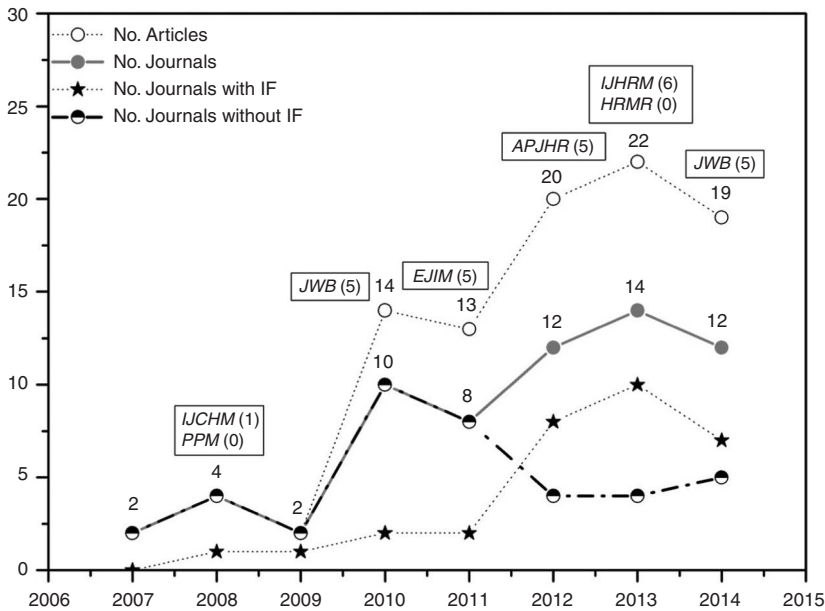
In total, our final database comprised of 96 full-text format articles[1] published from 2007 to 2014. Due to space limitations, the full list can be obtained by asking the leading author. The descriptive data of each article from the final database (i.e. author/s, year, title, journal, volume, issue, keywords and summary) was imported into an Excel file. The main reason for using Microsoft Excel software was the added value of using pivot tables to sort, count and summarize a great amount of data in a worksheet.

In order to analyze the content of these articles and extract the data necessary for the present study, both authors jointly developed a coding template based on the research questions mentioned in the previous section. We first ran a pilot test of our coding template on a randomly selected set of five articles, with the aim of achieving an adequate level of inter-rater reliability. After comparing and discussing coding experiences, we stipulated a coding normative and divided the rest of the sample equally between both authors. Each researcher content-analyzed their allotted articles according to the adjusted coding template. The charting of the content data was done in another Excel file prepared according to the coding template so that at the end we could merge all the information (descriptive and content information from each article). On completion, we discussed any issues of confusion and uncertain classifications in our respective analyses. This careful and rigorous cross-checking ensured consistency and will have reduced the likelihood of error. Quoting Boselie *et al.* (2005, p. 70): “ultimately our analysis is an inherently subjective product of our collective judgment” and “all errors of interpretation are our own.” In the next section we present the results of our analysis, and when necessary we explain some specific method decisions that we took.

## Results

### *General description of TM empirical research*

*Publication volume.* Of the 96 articles included in our review, 92 percent (i.e. 88 articles) were published in 2010 and after, specifically from 2012 onwards (see Figure 2). In fact, up until 2010 empirical scholarly research on TM was almost insignificant. In 2010, the number of published articles rose markedly due in part to the publication of one special issue (SI) on TM – i.e., *Journal of World Business (JWB)*, 2010 – with more than half of its articles being empirical. Between 2011 and 2013 different SIs – sometimes purely empirical ones (*European Journal of International Management (EJIM)*, 2011; *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources (APJHR)*, 2012) – accompanied the gradual increase in publications.



**Notes:** *IJCHM*, *International Journal Contemporary Hospitality Management*; *PPM*, *Public Personnel Management*; *JWB*, *Journal of World Business*; *EJIM*, *European Journal of International Management*; *IJHRM*, *International Journal of Human Resource Management*; *HRMR*, *Human Resource Management Review*. In the graph, SI on TM are designated by the acronym of the journal and within brackets the number of empirical articles they had

**Figure 2.**  
Number of articles  
and journals (with  
and without IF)  
of empirical literature  
on TM

Figure 2 also shows a subtle decline in empirical publications in 2014. Although we should certainly interpret this fall with caution, considering its recent condition, this might be an indication of academic expectancy for some consensus on theoretical frameworks and scope of the field, broadly discussed in the last two years through different conceptual publications (e.g. Dries, 2013; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013; Meyers and van Woerkom, 2014).

*Journals.* Empirical research on TM is scattered over a wide range of journals (52 journals) indicating that the field does not have established outlets for publishing its empirical research. In fact, the number of journals progressively increased over time (see Figure 2). In total, 77 percent of these journals published just one article, 6 percent published two articles, 8 percent published three articles and 2 percent published four. Two journals (i.e. *APJHR* and *EJIM*) published six empirical articles each, of which five were published in a SI. Only two journals published more than nine articles, i.e., *International Journal of Human Resource Management (IJHRM)* (12 articles, 13 percent) and *JWB* (ten articles, 10 percent). In fact, these two journals published the 23 percent of the empirical research on TM to date, which can make them considered to be the magazines of reference.

Impact factor (IF) is usually used as proxy indicator of quality (cf. Adams, 2009), i.e., it is used to evaluate the journal's relative importance compared to other journals in its subject area. Looking at the trends over time, Figure 2 clearly shows how the number of

publications in journals with IF has increased sharply from 2011 onwards, while the number of publications in journals without IF fell sharply since 2010. This can be seen not only as a confirmation of the scholars' interest in empirical TM research, but also as the strengthening of the field in the academic community.

Table I clearly shows that the vast majority of journals with IF belong to the business and management field, although we can find, from 2012 onwards, some journals related to public administration, health policy, education, informational sciences or psychology fields. This might be an indication of the increased legitimacy of TM as a "research topic" manifesting itself in increasingly higher quality research from different disciplines. Without any doubt empirical TM research can be linked to the academic field of HRM, since the great amount of publications are concentrated in journals specifically devoted to this field (e.g. *IJHRM*, *Human Resource Management Journal (HRMJ)*, *APJHR*). Moreover, at present, *JWB*'s leadership in TM research is undeniable: this journal has launched up until now two SIs on the topic, it is the only one that has within its editorial boards a specific editor for this topic and it has published the vast majority of the most cited articles up until now (i.e. Hartmann *et al.*, 2010; Iles *et al.*, 2010; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2010; McDonnell *et al.*, 2010; Tymon *et al.*, 2010).

*Authors and citations.* The majority of the articles (82 percent) were co-authored. A total of 207 different authors[2] from 138 institutions worldwide contributed to the 96 articles of this review. In terms of productivity, 87 percent of the authors only published one article, while 7 percent published two articles and 5 percent published three. So, there is a great diversity in authors and the field consists of a large group of "newcomers" to the field. In fact, only four authors published more than three articles: at this moment Scullion and Dries are the most active ones (six articles each), followed by Preece and Iles (four articles each).

*Geographical distribution of publications.* TM empirical research has been published from 34 different countries. Looking at the country representation based on the affiliation of all authors listed on each publication, the USA leads the ranking (46 articles), followed by the UK (34 articles), Australia (28 articles), the Netherlands (19 articles) and Ireland (18 articles). In addition, we found that US authors are usually the second authors rather than the leading author. If we just consider the location of the leading author's institution, the ranking looks quite similar: the USA continues to rank first (15 articles), followed by the UK (13 articles), Australia (ten articles), Belgium (six articles) and Germany (five articles). So, the data shows that the Anglo-Saxon countries (i.e. institutions) dominate the field, which, as we will see below, does not necessarily imply that Anglo-Saxon regions are the most studied geographies in TM.

#### *Nature of and focus in empirical TM research*

After depicting the academic community and activity on TM, we now shift focus and elaborate on the nature of empirical TM research: the research designs, the level of analysis, research populations and research contexts. Figure 3 presents an overview of the general results.

*Research design.* From our study we can state that empirical research on TM is either qualitative or quantitative. Only 20 percent of the studies use a mixed-method approach. In the early years, qualitative research was most prevalent (59 percent), but since 2011 the amount of quantitative research increased significantly, reaching a peak in 2014 (58 percent of the articles from this year were quantitative). Almost all

Journal	Subject categories	No. special issues on TM	No. empirical TM articles	2008 IF	2009 IF	2010 IF	2010 9.93 <sup>at</sup>	2011 IF	2012 IF	2013 IF	2014 IF	2014 9.535 <sup>a</sup>	Cumulative IF
<i>Journal of World Business</i>	Business	2	10										19.465
<i>The International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	Management	1	12					1.043	2.376	6.336 <sup>a</sup>			9.755
<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>	Industrial relations and labor management	0	3					1.388		1.558	2.423		5.369
<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources</i>	Industrial relations and labor management	1	6						3.25 <sup>a</sup>		1		4.25
<i>MIT Sloan Management Review</i>	Business, management	0	3	1.1					2.826				3.926
<i>Human Resource Management Personnel Review</i>	Psychology, applied management Industrial relations and labor psychology, applied management	0	3	0.93					1.458	1.458			3.846
<i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>	Psychology, applied	0	4						1.65		0.962		2.612
<i>Journal of International Management</i>	Management	0	1						2.36				2.36
<i>International Journal of Project Management</i>	Management	0	1							2.2			2.2
<i>Scandinavian Journal of Public Health</i>	Public, environmental and occupational health	0	1							1.686			1.686
<i>Asian Business &amp; Management</i>	Business, management	0	1				1.487						1.487
<i>International Journal of Operations &amp; Production Management</i>	Management	0	1							1.333			1.333
<i>Knowledge Management Research &amp; Practice</i>	Information science and library science, management	0	1							1.252			1.252
		0	1							1.069			1.069

(continued)

Review of empirical talent management research

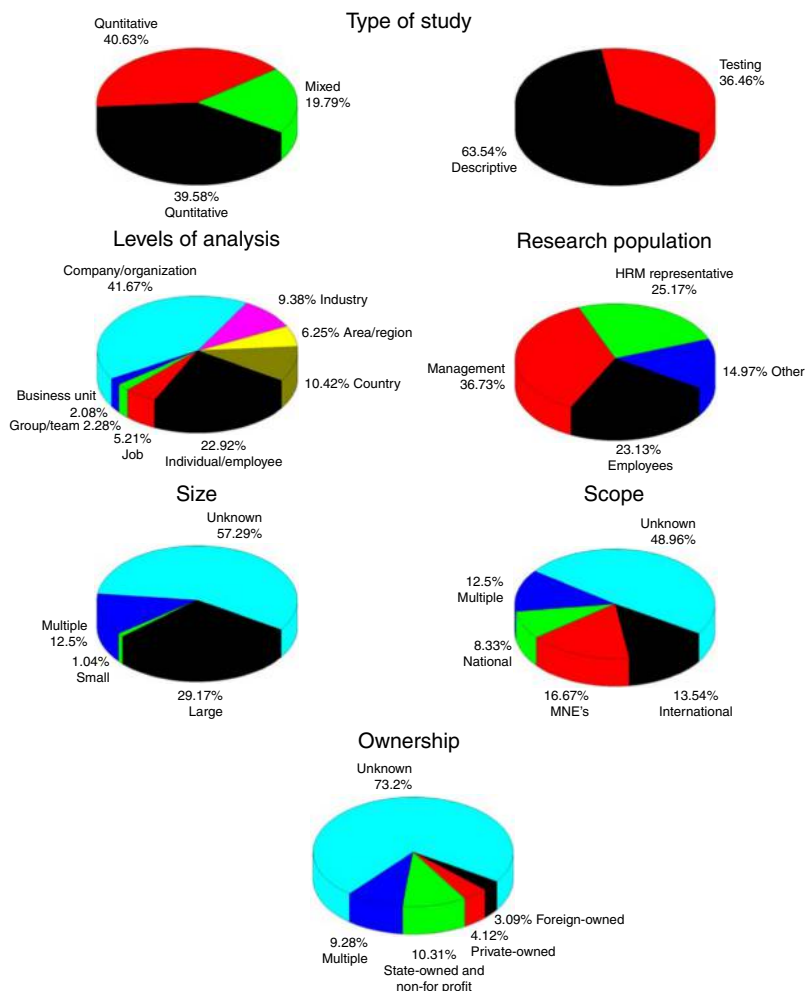
**Table I.**  
Rank of journals according cumulative impact factor



Table I.

Journal	Subject categories	No. special TM issues on	No. empirical TM articles	2008 IF	2009 IF	2010 IF	2011 IF	2012 IF	2013 IF	2014 IF	Cumulative IF
<i>Public Management Review</i>	Management, public administration	0	1					0.989	0.989		0.989
<i>International Journal of Health Planning and Management</i>	Health policy and services, public, environmental and occupational health	0	1							0.971	0.971
<i>European Management Journal</i>	Business, management	0	1							0.817	0.817
<i>Public Money &amp; Management Policy Studies</i>	Public administration	0	1				0.781		0.452		0.781
<i>Higher Education Policy</i>	Public administration	0	1								0.452
<i>Anthropologist</i>	Education and educational research	0	1					0.185			0.185
	Anthropology, social sciences, interdisciplinary	0	1							0.051	0.051

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>The sum of IF affected by a SI. Subject categories were obtained from the journal citation reports database



**Figure 3.**  
Overview of research  
design in academic  
TM research

quantitative studies are based on a web-based survey or a questionnaire (e.g. Tymon *et al.*, 2010). In a handful of studies structured (telephonic) interviews were conducted (e.g. Festing *et al.*, 2013), or databases were analyzed (e.g. Yanadori and Kang, 2011). Qualitative studies relied mostly on semi-structured interviews and focus groups, sometimes supported by analysis of organizational documents or of secondary data (e.g. Van den Brink *et al.*, 2013). In fact, nearly half of the qualitative papers are based on case studies, and most of them even on a single case study (e.g. Huang and Tansley, 2012). The mixed method studies usually combine a questionnaire with interviews, focus groups and/or Delphi technique (e.g. Powell, 2014).

As expected in a young field such as TM, the majority of the articles (63 percent) are based on descriptive research, mainly coming from qualitative research designs. The rest of the articles (37 percent), mostly quantitative studies, are based on testing research (e.g. Gelens *et al.*, 2014).

*Level of analysis.* The data shows the dominance of the organizational perspective. In total, 42 percent of the articles focus on TM issues at the organizational level (e.g. TM practices or the organizational TM outcomes), while only 23 percent of the articles focus on TM issues at the employee level (such as employee well-being); most of these studies (80 percent) have been published since 2012, mainly due to the increasing interest from the psychology field (e.g. Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014). Studies at the organizational level are based on either quantitative (e.g. McDonnell *et al.*, 2010), qualitative (e.g. Wiblen *et al.*, 2012), or a mixed method (e.g. Stahl *et al.*, 2012) research design. The review shows that TM issues at the macro level – i.e., the level of a country region or industry – and in particular TM issues at a group level – such as a business unit, team or job level (5 percent) – are under-explored.

*Research population.* Managers and HR representatives have been the most commonly targeted research group: in 56 percent of the studies management participated in the study, and in 48 percent articles HRM representatives were involved. In most cases the participating managers were senior and/or middle managers, disregarding the perspectives of line managers. Even though more than half of the empirical TM studies explicitly focus on a specific group of scarce and valuable employees – such as managers, managerial talent or people fulfilling executive positions (15 articles; e.g. Preece *et al.*, 2013), high-potentials or highly talented employees (eight articles; e.g. Asag-Gau and Dierendonck, 2011), star performers (e.g. Bish and Kabanoff, 2014) and R&D, technical staff or engineers (eight articles; e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2014) – the data are often not collected directly at the employee level. In approximately one-third of the studies the research population consists of employees (e.g. Dries and De Gieter, 2014).

We found that managers have been the most studied research population (40 percent of the articles). In total, 45 percent of the studies focussed on just one population, whereas 25 percent of the studies included two research groups, in which managers and employees (e.g. Björkman *et al.*, 2013) or managers and HR representatives (e.g. Kim and Scullion, 2011) are the most popular combinations.

*Research context.* We observed that TM issues are studied in a broad variety of countries. When we group these countries into geographical areas, earlier claims of the “US-centric” nature of TM research seem exaggerated, as 40 percent of articles studied TM issues in Europe. It is even remarkable that there are more empirical studies on TM in the South and East Asia region than in North-America. TM issues in Africa, the Pacific region and the Middle East are under-explored, and that there is not even a single article published on TM in South-America or Russia. A considerable number of articles present results from data collected in multiple regions or countries (e.g. Stahl *et al.*, 2012). Taking together authorship and region of data collection, we found that researchers from Europe, Australia, Middle East, South Africa and USA or Canada conduct the studies in their specific region. However, the vast majority of empirical research in Asia is carried out by people from outside the region or, by people from the region in collaboration with people from developed countries. Again, we can conclude that Western scholars (mainly from Anglo-Saxon countries) lead TM research.

In contrast to the national context, the relevance of the organizational configuration for TM is hardly a subject in empirical TM research. Information in the articles about, for example, the size of the organization, the sector of industry and scope (e.g. national vs multinational) is quite limited. This gives us the impression that the selection is often based on chance instead of academic interest in TM in a specific type of organization. However,

when information on the organizations under investigation is described the aforementioned criticism about the prevailing orientation in TM literature toward MNC's and private organizations is valid. Figure 3 shows that research often focusses on large organizations (29 percent), organizations operating on a global scale (31 percent), and on organizations in consumer discretionary (13 percent) or industrial sectors (18 percent). This implies that, research on TM issues in small and medium-sized organizations, and/or in organizations (either private or state-owned) operating in one single country is practically absent.

*Theoretical foundations.* TM literature has been frequently criticized for an absence of sound theory (e.g. Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, TM research is defined by a mishmash of definitions and theoretical assumptions that lead to inconsistent "stories" (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2015). Nonetheless, one could assume that in empirical research this will not happen, since rigorous theory and clear definitions and operationalization are required to build a solid research design. Yet, we found that 62 percent of the articles used one or more theoretical frameworks (e.g. Garavan, 2012)

However, while analyzing the articles we discovered that many authors just used them to accentuate their line of reasoning instead of building on them to explore new perspectives and reinforce TM foundations. Remarkably, 38 percent of the coded articles avoid mentioning any theoretical framework (i.e. do not use existing theory, nor adapt or modify existing theory or develop new theory to justify their study). One would expect that those empirical articles in which hypotheses are tested (i.e. "testing studies") rely on theory. Although in our sample 86 percent of them were built on theory, we still found that 14 percent of those testing studies didn't have any theoretical framework at all, which clearly raise doubts about their quality.

Instead of departing from the theoretical frameworks already identified in this literature (cf. Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2015), we listed each model or theoretical concept mentioned in the articles. This led to a list of 57 different theoretical concepts and frameworks, of which 40 (e.g. Gatekeeper theory, Equity theory) were only used in one article. We found that, in the empirical TM literature, the Knowledge Management framework is the dominant one (nine articles), followed by the psychological contract (five articles), the resource-based view, careers management and cross-cultural management ones (four articles each), and grounded theory, institutionalism and social constructivism (three articles each). When ordering conceptual frameworks by focus of the study we observed some expected results. For example, those articles discussing TM outcomes at the individual level often adopt career management frameworks, such as, boundaryless careers or agility and career variety (e.g. Dries *et al.*, 2012). Likewise, these articles also rely on organizational commitment, motivation, engagement, perceived organization justice or psychological contract (e.g. Gelens *et al.*, 2014). Articles on the role of stakeholders use frameworks such as resource dependency theory, differential access to information and conflicts of interest (e.g. Sparrow *et al.*, 2013). Nonetheless, for the articles focussing on TM at the organizational level (e.g. TM outcomes, relationship between TM practices and outcomes), it is difficult to find a dominant theoretical framework. Although, Knowledge Management is one of the most prevalent frameworks (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2014) the variety is broad, illustrating the academic quest for the meaning and value of TM.

#### *Main topics studied in TM empirical research*

Based on an in-depth analysis of the aims and research questions of each of the 96 articles from our database, and following an iterative process, we composed a list of main topics studied. While coding we noticed a significant difference between the aims

and research questions within some regions (i.e. the location of business of the organizations under investigation). To explore this into more detail, we grouped the different topics around regions of data collection and created one mind-map per region to draw a complete picture which helps us answer: “what has been studied, and where?” Below we discuss the key topics of empirical research, from most to least prevalent.

*TM practices.* By far, “TM practices” is the dominant topic studied (46 articles). We found that academic interest is particularly concentrated on four sets of practices: attraction, recruitment and selection (20 percent of the articles), training and development (19 percent), retention (14 percent) and identification of talent (12 percent). It is worthy to note that scholars’ serious interest in these practices starts from 2012 onwards. Less than 10 percent of the papers focus their attention on staffing/succession planning (e.g. Barkhuizen *et al.*, 2014) or on performance management (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2014). Little interest is devoted to management development, work practices or promotion.

We have found that TM practices have been particularly researched in: Europe (22 articles), in South and East Asia (12 articles) and in a lesser extent in North-America (eight articles). However, depending on the region, the practices under investigation were different. For example, in Europe the main researchers’ concern is to explain talent identification, retention and recruitment, and to a lesser extent the psychological processes behind these practices (e.g. Björkman *et al.*, 2013). The South and East Asia region is known for its shortage of talent, and the problem to develop people on a global scale and to retain them. This is reflected in the articles, since they predominantly focus on talent attraction, retention and development (e.g. Schmidt *et al.*, 2013). In North-America a great variety of issues caught the attention of scholars. Interestingly, some regions limit research to one practice only. For example, Middle East studies centered on assessment, Australian ones on identification, and those articles based on Africa dealt with employees’ perceptions of TM practices.

*TM conceptualization.* The second most prevalent topic found in the empirical research is TM conceptualization. Despite the fact that it can be considered one of the fundamentally controversial issues of the field, surprisingly only 20 articles aim to address the conceptualization of TM within organizations. We have found that attention to this topic was mainly concentrated in European (11 articles) and Asian (six articles) studies.

European studies centered on knowing “the level of awareness of TM” and understanding “how it was carried out” or “how it took shape” in different organizations, as well as, on discussing if TM offers any added value to organizations in comparison with career management (e.g. Dries *et al.*, 2012), or about its challenges when confronting different regions, and types of organizations (Festing *et al.*, 2013). It is worth mentioning that we found some articles on TM conceptualization within the public sector (academia and health sector). In South and East Asian studies the cultural dimension significantly marks TM conceptualization (e.g. Chuai *et al.*, 2008). In Australia, Jones *et al.* (2012) focussed on understanding how TM is conceptualized in the region while in Africa the main concern was: knowing the perceptions of people responsible for TM regarding the status of TM. Finally, Huang and Tansley (2012) based in multiple regions discussed about the rhetorical underpinnings of TM programs in MNC’s.

Now the questions arise if and how TM was operationalized in empirical research. We found that 27 percent of the articles do not present any definition on TM at all. However, as is seen in Table II, when authors give an explicit definition of TM (46 percent) they opted for just quoting other authors’ definitions; or for offering their

TM definition

**Authors quoting other authors...**

"We define strategic talent management as activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organisation's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organisation." (Collings and Mellahi, 2009, p. 304)

'Global talent management includes all organizational activities for the purpose of attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining the best employees in the most strategic roles (those roles necessary to achieve organizational strategic priorities) on a global scale. Global talent management takes into account the differences in both organizations' global strategic priorities as well as the differences across national contexts for how talent should be managed in the countries where they operate (Scullion *et al.*, 2010, p. 106)

Talent management is the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment of those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to an organization (CIPD, 2006, 2008)

[...]talent management referring to an organization's efforts to attract, select, develop and retain talented key employees (Stahl *et al.*, 2007)

GTM defined as: "the strategic integration of resourcing and development at the international level that involves the proactive identification, development and strategic deployment of high-performing and high-potential strategic employees on a global scale" (Collings and Scullion, 2008, p. 102)

"talent management, which is 'the implementation of integrated strategies or systems designed to increase workplace productivity by developing improved processes for attracting, developing, retaining, and utilizing people with the required skills and aptitude to meet current and future business needs'" (Lockwood, 2006, p. 2, 270)

"Global talent management has been defined as 'not only about recruiting the right talent for certain countries' but also about 'identifying good talent and transferring skills and expertise around the world' in the globalized economy (Newhall, 2012: 31, p. 657)

"The definition of talent management as proposed by the SHRM (Fegley 2006), namely 'the implementation of integrated strategies and systems to increase workplace productivity by developing improved processes of attracting, developing, retaining and utilising people with the required skills and aptitudes to meet current and future business needs', served as the reference definition for this enquiry." (p. 43)

"According to NHS Employers (2009), TM is essentially making sure you have the right person in the right place at the right time. It can be defined as attracting and integrating highly skilled workers and developing and retaining existing workers." (p. 291)

"Talent management can be defined as the implementation of integrated human resource strategies to attract, develop, retain and productively utilize employees with the required skills and abilities to meet current and future business needs" (Kontoghiorgos and Frangou, 2009, p.70)

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Asag-Gau and Dierendonck (2011),  
Claussen *et al.* (2014),  
Höglund (2012),  
Jones *et al.* (2012),  
Sidani and Al Ariss (2014),  
Vivas-López (2014),  
Whelan *et al.* (2010)  
Björkman *et al.* (2013),  
Skuza *et al.* (2013),  
McDonnell *et al.* (2011),  
Kim and Scullion (2011)

D'Annunzio-Green (2008),  
Macfarlane *et al.* (2012),  
Poocharoen and Lee (2013),  
Powell (2014)  
Festing *et al.* (2013)  
Mäkelä *et al.* (2010)  
Farndale *et al.* (2014),  
Sparrow *et al.* (2013)

Hausknecht *et al.* (2009)

Sart (2014)

Oosthuizen and Nienaber (2010)

Powell *et al.* (2013)

Barkhuizen *et al.* (2014)

(continued)

**Table II.**  
Overview of TM  
definitions in  
empirical TM  
research

ER  
38,1

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<p>“...the process that focuses on attracting, developing, and retaining the most talented technical and professional workers and transferring their specialized knowledge to less proficient or less experienced workers (Rothwell, 2011, p. 12).</p>	Kim <i>et al.</i> (2014)
<p>“Talent management is a process that ensures that an organisation has the quality and quantity of people in place to meet current and future business priorities. The process covers all the aspects of an employer’s lifecycle, i.e. selection, succession, and performance management” (Wellins <i>et al.</i>, 2004, p. 199)</p>	Chahal and Kumari (2013)
<p>“Applied within the public sector, we can refer to talent management as a concept that includes the attraction, training, development and retention of key employees while also taking into account the strategic goals of the client” (Lockwood, 2005, p. 2223)</p>	Barkhuizen (2014)
<p>“According to Stockley (2005) talent management is a conscious, purposeful approach undertaken to attract, develop and retain people with the aptitude and abilities to meet current and future organisational needs.” (p. 12)</p>	Barkhuizen <i>et al.</i> (2014)
<p>TM definition</p>	References
<p><i>Authors offering their own definition...</i></p>	
<p>“Talent management is the differential management of employees based on their relative potential to contribute to the competitive advantage of their organizations (Lepak and Snell, 1999, p. 271)</p>	Dries <i>et al.</i> (2012)
<p>“[...] a distinctive process that focuses explicitly on those persons who have the potential to provide competitive advantage for a company by managing those people in an effective and efficient way and therefore ensuring the long-term competitiveness of a company.” (p. 527)</p>	Bethke-Langenegger <i>et al.</i> (2011)
<p>“For the purposes of this research, we refer to talent management as the deliberate and organised efforts by firms to optimally select, develop, deploy and retain competent and committed knowledge employees for key positions which bear significant influences on the overall performance of the organisation.” (p. 463)</p>	Chadee and Raman (2012)
<p>“Almost all definitions of GTM encompass the task of identifying, selecting, deploying, developing and retaining talent internationally in order to secure the sustained competitive advantage of the company” (Cappelli, 2008, pp.1-3; Scullion and Collings, 2011, p. 6, 281)</p>	Ewerlin (2013)
<p>“Talent management concerns the way in which organizations recruit, promote, and terminate employees to streamline the workforce and maximize productivity. Recommended practices include active recruitment, performance-based promotion, and the involvement of local leaders in decisions regarding recruitment, promotion and termination.” (pp. 2521-2522)</p>	Funk <i>et al.</i> (2013)
<p>“Talent management may be defined as a core sub-system of an organization’s strategic management system, to develop a human resource asset base that is capable to support current and future organizational growth directions and objectives.” (p. 68)</p>	Hajikaimisari <i>et al.</i> (2010)
<p>“From the perspective of human resources management task as well as particular personnel activities, the concept of talent management does not place any special requirements on the organization. It only involves a careful application of the best principles and approaches that have been proven in practice especially in the field of acquisition and choice, education and development, remuneration, and socio-cultural and welfare activities for employees.” (p. 761)</p>	Horváthová and Davidová (2012)

Table II.

(continued)

Table II.

"In this paper, talent management relates mainly to recruitment and retention of nurses and physicians." (p. 518)	Heilmann (2010)
"UM Talent Management takes a strategic, comprehensive approach to identifying, evaluating, developing and leveraging the talent resources that help UM perform at its best: talent strategy and planning, recruiting, performance management, learning and development, succession planning, and leadership development." (p. 83)	Peet <i>et al.</i> (2010)
"For the purposes of this research, we refer to talent management as top management's deliberate and organized efforts to optimally select, develop, deploy and retain competent and committed employees who bear significant influence on the overall performance of the organization." (p. 336)	Raman <i>et al.</i> (2013)
"[...] there has been little research taking a comprehensive view of talent management in emerging markets – i.e., the best practices for the attraction, onboarding, development, appraisal, motivation, retention and/or redeployment of professional talent." (p. 109)	Tymon <i>et al.</i> (2010)
"Talent management is therefore, defined here as both a philosophy and a practice. It is both an espoused and enacted commitment – shared at the highest levels and throughout the organization by all those in managerial and supervisory positions – to implementing an integrated, strategic and technology enabled approach to human resources management (HRM), with a particular focus on human resource planning, including employee recruitment, retention, development and succession practices, ideally for all employees but especially for those identified as having high potential or in key positions." (p. 1579)	Piansoongnern <i>et al.</i> (2011)

own definition. When analyzing quoted definitions we observed that there are two main approaches to TM conceptualization in the literature: one referring to the strategic side of TM (CIPD, 2006, 2008; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Stahl *et al.*, 2007), and the other that refers to Global TM (Collings and Scullion, 2008; Scullion *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, Collings and Mellahi (2009) and Scullion *et al.* (2010) definitions of TM are the most cited ones in empirical research on TM. Moreover, when analyzing the authors own definitions we found that the vast majority were grounded in a strategic and exclusive approach to TM (i.e. based on the most cited definitions mentioned before). They refer to "differential management of employees," "competent and committed knowledge employees for key positions," "high potentials in key positions." The inclusive approach to TM is definitely not often adopted. Approximately a quarter of the coded articles present either a vague and indirect indication of TM (17 percent) or an overview of multiple TM definitions without clearly advocating for one (9 percent).

*Talent.* Talent is the third most prevalent topic (14 articles) in TM empirical research. Under this label we subsumed all issues regarding the meaning of "talent" and also factors that could affect it. Once again, we found that this topic was mainly addressed by European studies (eight articles), followed by research based on multiple regions (four articles). Within the European context, issues like how talent is defined in specific sectors or regions were addressed (e.g. Valverde *et al.*, 2013). However, understanding the careers and perceptions of "talented people" as well as their contributions to the organization attracted special attention (e.g. Scaringella and Malaeb, 2014). Empirical articles based on multiple regions basically aimed to



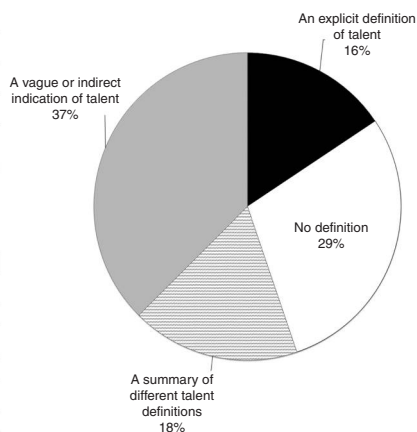
understand talent at a managerial level, in MNC's, or within undergraduates, which clearly define the issues global firms face (e.g. Mäkelä *et al.*, 2010). Two studies done in Australia (Bish and Kabanoff, 2014; Jones *et al.*, 2012) used an exclusive approach to talent (i.e. an individualistic or star perspective of talent), while two articles from South and East Asia paid attention to the conceptualization of talent in their cultural context (Cooke *et al.*, 2014; Poocharoen and Lee, 2013).

Surprisingly, but very much in line with previous findings (cf. Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013), empirical TM scholars are rarely precise about what they mean by talent. They usually take the talent concept for granted (28 articles do not present any definition at all), define it vaguely (36 articles have an indirect indication of talent) or present an overview of multiple definitions without clearly making a choice for any of them (17 the articles). When presenting multiple definitions the one from Michaels *et al.* (2001) is frequently included. Usually, authors that define talent vaguely use expressions such as, "high potentials," "skilled employees," "high performers," "those in pivotal positions," "leadership talent" or "anyone who signals interest in being developed for higher-level work," "the best and the brightest," "high valued/key employees." In short, we found that even referring to talent in a very vague way the exclusive approach is the dominant one.

Only 15 of the articles have an explicit definition of talent (see Figure 4). Usually they conceptualize talent as a person who combines excellent input (high potential/excellent abilities) with an outstanding output (excellent performance and value creation). Despite the slight shift toward presenting a clear definition that can be observed since 2011, it is remarkable that eight out of 19 articles published in 2014 do not have any definition of talent. This raises the question whether defining talent is not interesting and important anymore to TM scholars. It is even more surprising that two out of those five articles whose focus was on conceptualizing talent do not have an explicit definition of the concept.

Talent definition	References
<b>Quoting other authors...</b>	
those employees with the highest potential who also demonstrate a capacity for high performance (Cappelli, 2009)	Hung & Tansley (2012)
"Talent has been defined in organizational studies as 'those individuals who can make the greatest difference to organizational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential' (Tansley & Tietze, 2007)	Tansley & Tietze (2013)
Talent consists of those individuals who can make a difference to organizational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential (Tansley, Timmer & Foster, 2007)	Stewart & Harte (2010)
"the sum of a person's abilities – his or her intrinsic gifts, skills, knowledge, experience, intelligence, judgment, attitude, character and drive. In addition, it includes his or her ability to learn and grow." (Michaels <i>et al.</i> , 2001)	Stadler (2011)
"Talent consists of those individuals who can make a difference to organizational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer term by demonstrating the highest level of performance." (Zenger, 2006)	D'Annunzio-Green (2008)
High potentials "These talented employees are often referred to as 'high potentials' - individuals who consistently outperform their peer groups, while reflecting their company's culture and values, and who show a strong capacity to grow and succeed within their organizations" (Bech <i>et al.</i> , 2010)	Schmidt, Mamonson & Dolter (2013)
"Research in this area typically defines 'stars' as employees who consistently demonstrate superior performance in relation to others and are substantially more productive (Kelley and Caplan 1993) (...). Kelley and Caplan (1993, 10) concluded that the main difference between stars and average workers was not cognitive ability but the way top performers did their jobs: their 'patterns of behavior on the job' - noting that it 'wasn't what these stars had in their heads that made them standouts from the pack; it was how they used what they had'." (Kelley & Caplan, 1993)	Bish & Kabanoff (2014)
<b>Offering their own definition...</b>	
"We build on Collins and Porac's (2009) definition and conceptualize talent in terms of the specific behaviors and/or qualities the organization defines as essential for the achievement of its current and future goals." (p.127)	Högland (2012)
"Talent means a natural ability to be good at something, especially without being taught." (p. 235)	Almouk <i>et al.</i> (2012)
"We propose that 'talent', at least from an organizational-strategic point of view, refers to the human capital in an organization that is both valuable and unique." p. 1818	De Vos & Driess (2013)
"(...) we find that there are four general categories of employee: high-performing talent, managerial talent, hidden talent, and underutilized talent." (p. 36)	Schweert <i>et al.</i> (2012)
"(...) one can define talent as employees who have an above-average performance potential based on their talent and perform their responsibilities (very) well. In addition, it is necessary for them to be 'willing and able to progress further.'" (p.281)	Ewerlin (2013)
"(...) talent are those who are highly educated and (have the ability to be) high achievers performers in the organization" (p. 234)	Cooke <i>et al.</i> (2014)
"One of the most common definitions describes a talented individual as a man who gives both a high performance and shows a high potential. Also authors of the article identify themselves with this definition of a talent concept." (p. 761)	Horvátová & Davidová (2012)
"The term 'technical talent' has been used to describe engineers and science professionals." P. 36	Kim <i>et al.</i> (2014)

**Figure 4.**  
Talent definitions in empirical TM research



It is worthy to mention that articles written by authors working in Europe often conceptualize talent as a combination of input and output, whereas, those articles written by authors coming from North-America center on “managerial talent.” Authors from other regions use a variety of talent interpretations. All in all, the majority of articles approach talent as key people (i.e. “employees with the highest potential or higher performance,” “those who can make the greatest difference to the organization”) or as characteristics of a person (i.e. the sum of a person’s abilities, attitudes, knowledge, etc.); a minority relates talent to functions or specific positions (e.g. managerial positions, engineering positions, knowledge workers).

*Less prevalent topics (n < 10 articles).* GTM is addressed in nine articles in which authors refer to “GTM,” rather than TM *per se*, as their central construct, since they center on helping MNCs to be successful globally. Unsurprisingly, studies from multiple regions are the most prevalent, followed by research based on European and North-American countries. Research based on multiple regions tends to analyze how GTM is conceptualized in MNCs, and the specific challenges these organizations face, for example: “what steps can global companies take to ensure that they recruit, develop and deploy the right people?” (Stahl *et al.*, 2012). Interestingly, in research from European countries on GTM, we found for the first time references to the institutionalism framework when trying to develop a common TM system within different subsidiaries in different countries (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2008).

“Careers” has been addressed in seven articles written by authors mainly from European institutions. The main concerns in European studies were to clarify contradicting assumptions about career and TM literature, understanding how career management policies and models are designed, as well as the manager’s perceptions about career progression. Little interest has been shown in how TM works or can be improved (e.g. Festing *et al.*, 2013), what is TM effectiveness (e.g. Chahal and Kumari, 2013), or in understanding the role “Information Technology” in TM (e.g. Wiblen *et al.*, 2010).

## Discussion

The present study adopted a rigorous review of the empirical literature on TM with the purpose of providing a clear and comprehensive picture of the research done up until now. This offers an opportunity to learn from previous experiences, but also is a useful starting point for new research and TM practice. After discussing the results of 96 empirical articles, the question can be framed: “what do we know about TM by now?”

First of all, we can state that there has been an increased interest in empirical TM research over the course of the last few years, which is in line with findings for TM literature in general (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2015), although the growth tendency is constant and more significant in the empirical literature. This can be explained by the explicit calls for empirical research on TM, and the rise and expansion of a specific academic community. Despite being scattered over a wide range of journals, the *JWB* and the *IJHRM* stand out for their number of empirical publications on TM, showing their willingness to be a hub for this kind of research. As discussed earlier, over 200 authors have contributed to the empirical TM research, showing that this is a broad field in which international collaboration is the norm rather than the exception. However, our study shows that the field is standing

on the shoulders of a select group of influential authors. Without doubt, at present, Scullion, Collings, Iles and Preece are leading participants in the TM debate, contributing specifically to the understanding of TM at a global scale. Moreover, their collaboration with scholars from other regions is noteworthy, and not only helps them to contribute to understanding local issues in other types of organizations (e.g. Valverde *et al.*, 2013; Skuza *et al.*, 2013), but reinforces their “touchstone” position. Collings has an influential role in empirical TM research due to his conceptual paper written with Mellahi (Collings and Mellahi, 2009). Indeed, their definition of strategic TM is not only the most cited one, but it is also the one which many others are based on. Dries is also one of the most productive TM empirical researchers. Her papers mainly help to clarify TM issues at the individual level. So, while the field of TM was being criticized for the dominance of US-based scholars (with their US-based thinking, doing research in US-based organizations) (Collings *et al.*, 2011; Powell *et al.*, 2013; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013), the data shows that most empirical TM research is mainly conducted by EU-based scholars. Yet, as we will discuss later on, this does not imply that a completely different view on talent and TM is displayed.

Second, through the review we gained insight into the research designs adopted in empirical TM research. We can conclude that there still is some work to do regarding the use of definitions and theoretical backgrounds. We echo Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2015) in saying that, instead of agreeing on which theoretical frameworks to use, it is more important that scholars make deliberate choices in terms of theoretical framing and apply these consistently within the project. By doing this, it can help the field to surpass descriptive research designs and to identify and clarify correlations and causality between variables. Often focussing on one sound theoretical framework is more effective than the application of multiple frameworks (or theoretical concepts). The latter is, however, common in empirical TM research.

Another point of attention is the extent to which empirical research takes the organizational context into account. We have found that research questions and aims of empirical TM articles originating from different geographical regions depend strongly on locally-faced TM challenges. The data showed that the national context is considered in a specific set of TM studies, mainly from Asia where they have to “adapt” a Western concept to their culture. The studies conducted in Anglo-Saxon regions (USA and EU) are often more general by nature and do not display academic interest in the institutional context, whereas the studies in the other contexts (e.g. South-East Asia and Middle East) discuss the region-specific TM issues. We posit that it would be valuable to investigate the impact of contextual factors on TM more explicitly and deliberately, since this will help to clarify what organizations aim to achieve with TM (and why), how, and how effective they are in doing that. Indeed, the Institutionalism framework can have added value in addressing these questions. In addition, we also recommend more cross-country comparisons. Although we have found some TM studies focussing on TM in multiple countries, they usually describe TM in general; instead of identifying and explaining differences in TM approaches between the countries involved (one exception is the article from Boussebaa and Morgan, 2008). Moreover, we identified some under-explored or even unexplored regions, which can be addressed in future TM research. They are: Africa, the Pacific region, the Middle East, South- and Central-America, and Russia.

Besides the national context, the impact of the organizational configuration on TM does not receive much scholarly attention in empirical TM research. In fact, as we have discussed before, more than the half of the coded articles offered no information about the size and type of organization studied. If any information was found, and in line with the conclusions of Powell *et al.* (2013), the data illustrate the dominant focus on large, private organizations operating at a global or international level (i.e. MNC's and international firms). We therefore call for more research on TM issues and approaches in small- and medium-sized, non-profit and/or public organizations. Also a comparison between different kinds of organizations would be valuable in identifying the impact of organizational factors on TM.

We found that findings in empirical TM research mainly reflect the managers' perspective, since they were the dominant research population. We posit that multi-level approaches are needed to enlarge our understanding of TM, basically to examine the individual variance and processes that are necessary in order for TM practices to impact organizational performance (cf. Wright and Nishii, 2007). So, a future research avenue would be to include the impact of multiple actors in both research designs as well as in theoretical frameworks, and to compare the different perspectives explicitly. Likewise, our analysis illustrates that the perception, role and impact of the line manager in TM is under-explored, which should also be addressed in future research since findings from the field of HRM shows that line managers play an important role in implementing HRM practices (e.g. Knies and Leisink, 2014).

Third, the in-depth review of the literature revealed a biased approach to research topics in TM. A lot of scholarly attention is paid to describing issues regarding TM practices, TM and talent conceptualization. Less prevalent are studies on GTM, the careers of talents, the effectiveness of TM, and the role of technology; these topics need further exploration. We also need to increase our knowledge of the exclusive TM approach, for example are different TM practices needed to address the specific characteristics of talent?; how effective is the exclusive approach and under what conditions?; what are the effects on the organization, the employees (incl. the "non-talents") and society?. In addition, TM scholars need to invest more effort into understanding "how" TM works (including the underlying processes) and "how well" according to the perspective of multiple stakeholders (at least: managers, HR and employees), principally at the organizational level.

Finally, we posit that the TM field is gaining consensus on the academic interpretation of talent and TM. Indeed, the "war of terms" seems to be settled. When there is a definition of talent in empirical articles, it is approached from an exclusive perspective, and it is regarded as a scarce and valuable combination of excellent input (potential, abilities and willingness) and outstanding output (performance). This equals the definition given by Ulrich and Ulrich (2010): talent = competence × commitment × contribution. Due to the exclusive approach to talent, in some articles talent is limited to a specific group of employees (e.g. managers, professionals, engineers) because of their significance for the organization or their demonstrated potential/performance. However, we acknowledge that in approximately 30 percent of the articles there is not any talent definition at all. The absence of a definition of talent and TM is possibly more related to a weakness in the research design, rather to not having an opinion on that.

Within the empirical literature, one could find two main conceptualizations of TM: strategic TM (led by Collings and Mellahi, 2009), and global TM (developed by Scullion *et al.*, 2010), both with an individualistic approach. Based on the findings

in the paper we can present a comprehensive definition of TM: “TM is aimed at the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment of high potential and high performing employees, to fill in key positions which have significant influence on organization’s sustainable competitive advantage.” Despite the academic emphasis on exclusive TM, Stahl *et al.* (2012) argue that in practice organizations use both the inclusive and exclusive TM approach, although the exclusive conceptualization seems to be most preferred by organizations. Does this mean that organizations adopting an inclusive approach to TM are doing things wrong? Definitely, the answer is no. After all, according to Greenwood (2002) managers have an obligation to attend to all those who are at stake in or have a claim on the organization. This implies the abilities and competencies, commitment and willingness and the performance of all employees (the talents and the employees not (yet) labeled as talent) need to be developed and supported, for example based on the strength-based approach (Meyers *et al.*, 2013), but with different approaches and activities, consistent with the needs and possibilities of these different employee groups. The exclusive orientation implies that TM is aimed at the specific needs and strengths of the talented employees. However, to discriminate exclusive TM from the inclusive conceptualizations and to get more clarity in the TM debate, we recommend labeling the inclusive orientation as HRM or the “Strength-Based Approach.” We believe that the use of clear, distinctive terms and definitions can give scholars and practitioners direction in their “war for talent.”

### Notes

1. The full list of the 96 articles analyzed can be obtained from the first author upon request.
2. We considered all authors of the paper. Moreover, authors’ identification was possible by taking into account the different signatures that identify a given author.

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