

Whither Talent Management? A Contrarian Inquiry

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This conceptual review will take on the tone of a friendly debate between a skeptical presenter and the session audience. The “war for talent” was declared in a McKinsey Quarterly article in 1998 (Chambers, Foulon, Mansfield-Jones, Hankin and Michaels, 1998). In the following 17 years the professional and academic communities have combined to embrace this construct with a fervor and enduring quality not seen in international human resource management since the rebranding of personnel management as human resource management in the early 1980s. For excellent recent reviews of this construct see Iles, (2015); Schuler and Tarique, (2012) and Vaiman and Collins, (2015). A recent google search of the term “talent management” found 56,800,000 results (in 0.47 seconds no less). Academic articles - both theoretical and empirical, book chapters, special issues in prestigious journals and entire new journals focused on this phenomenon have been published. Obviously something is going on. But exactly what?

So what?

The inquiry is based on three areas of concern posed as three questions. A discussion of these questions will facilitate the development of the topic area of talent management as an academic construct, amenable to more effective development for relevance, robustness and general usefulness. First, what is the value added (or

alternately the value proposition) of this new construct? In a recent review of a KPMG web site, a viewing of the topic led to bullets (products) under the headings of diagnostic and roadmap (staffing), workforce effectiveness (critical knowledge, skill and ability gaps), talent solutions (support and acquiring new capabilities) and performance management. In what sense is does this construct consist of more than the traditional HR activities, models, programs, processes and systems of human resource planning, recruitment and selection, training and career development and performance management? Are there new components? Is the value in the way the components are now to relate to each other? Is there an additional value in the underlying philosophy or the direction of the suite of practices? What can we do now in a post Talent Management world, things that we could not do before – as practitioners, theorist and researchers?

Picking a perspective: A deep and wide construct?

Second, what are we to do about clarifying what we in the academic community mean by talent management? If the consultants are to focus on selling the sizzle, what can we do to investigate the nature of the chemistry, biology and physiology of the steak? A 2007 article in *The Economist* reflected some confusion about the term (The Economist, 2007). Is talent the uber-employees at the top of the performance distribution or the wider potential trapped in the entire workforce?

In an effort to better capture this very slippery construct, I present a template inquiring into the meaning domain of the term talent management. Borrowing from Larsen and Brewster's (2000) insightful distinction between emphasizing the human

aspect of the term **HRM** as opposed to the resources side of **HRM**, is talent management seen as a *micro-human* term, emphasizing the inherent untapped capabilities in all persons or a *macro-resources* term, focused on mobilizing, honing and coordinating a group for strategic competitiveness?

Is the construct to be focused upon the top, right macro “resource” quadrant, defining talent in long term strategic terms? This appears to be the default, often unspoken perspective taken in the emerging research. Is the construct to be focused on the top, left macro “human” quadrant, with an emphasis on national or regional development policy, as talent is meant to refer to the human potential in a developing national or regional area?

Is talent envisioned in a more micro, personal perspective? Is it to be focused on the bottom right quadrant, focusing on how an individual’s skills and abilities can be harnessed for a firm’s strategic purposes? Finally, is talent envisioned on the bottom, left quadrant, with a focus on how an individual can enhance his or her capabilities and grow as a person? An issue with the construct of talent management is that there are many different places to look for a working definition of talent. Focus and perspective become a problem.

Is our primary role in assessing talent management one of corporate enabler of what Boselie and Brewster (2013: 5-9) describe as a “hard HRM approach” or as spokesperson for a wider range of constituencies in a social policy “soft HRM approach”? Recent reviews of the perspective appropriate for human resource academicians come into a sharp focus in the development of the construct of talent management, a construct clearly born in the practitioner-consultancy paradigm (Beer,

Boselie and Brewster, 2015; Thunnissen, Boselie and Fruytier, 2013). Are we detached social scientists or more functionalist economic engineers?

Finally, do we have to choose a perspective or can we widen our frame and agree that the four quadrants in their totality legitimately make up the domain of talent management? As long as we explicitly present our quadrant of interest can we agree to pursue different areas of interest? What are the conceptual and empirical disadvantages in allowing such an extensive domain?

Talent, workflow, performance metrics and strategic capability

Third, what does our ongoing fascination and passion for talent management have to do with three forces at work in our modern industrial state:

- a) A movement away from *Job* as the focal unit of analysis in HRM theorizing and a wider interest in *Job Families* “above” jobs in terms of level of analysis, as well as position (person) “below” job in terms of level of analysis (Perlman, 1980)? These alternate levels of analysis may be more appropriate for the mutable, opportunistic forms of work characterizing more and more workflow situations. In tandem with this trend advanced human resource decision support systems give analysts the ability to both aggregate and disaggregate employee information in a way that was unthinkable when job became the primary unit of analysis for personnel activities in the 1920s and 1930s. We can more accurately measure differences in individual performance in a real time manner as never before (Kavanagh, Thite and Johnson, 2012). These capabilities combine to create the

“supply” of sophisticated, accurate and timely performance metrics on the individual, small unit, team, department, shift, work unit and firm levels (Engle, Dowling and Festing, 2008).

- b) Workflow has radically changes to create a “demand” for detailed, nuanced and timely performance information. A complementary changing nature of the workflow, such that in a service and information economy, as well as in advanced manufacturing technology, the limits of performance are no longer set or capped by the systemic productivity parameters of the production line (Jones, 2013).

“Performance discretion” - that is the difference between the highest performance, the lowest acceptable performance and the average performance on a task, duty or position - may vary by several hundred percent and by tens or hundreds of thousands of Euros. What does this discretion in level of performance have to do with the amazing response to the construct of talent management?

- c) To what degree is talent management as an academic idea in any sense new? How does the construct of talent management fit into Lepak and Snell’s (1999) insightful presentation of human resource architecture? Does the high uniqueness, high value human capital configuration of “Quadrant One” these authors present mean the same thing as talent (Lepak and Snell, 1999: 36-38)? Another approach to differences in employee contributions comes from Becker, Huselid and Beatty’s discussion of a “differentiated workforce” (2009). In what sense is talent a necessary and yet not sufficient component in building long term strategic capabilities – as these authors argue? If talent must be applied to only critical jobs or functions of the firm, jobs or areas central to strategic capabilities

(Boudreau and Ramstad, 2007), then how do talent, workflow, strategic capability and performance measurement interact in a macro, strategic focus for the construct of talent management?

Conclusion

I realize I have more questions than answers in this brief review. Ongoing, collegial conversations on what the construct of talent management means and - perhaps more importantly - what the research construct of talent management can evolve into are moved forward by workshops like this one. At the end of this discussion perhaps we will individually and collectively know more about the term talent management and how to proceed forward.

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