

**Title**

Talent management: a critical literature review and research agenda for public sector  
human resource management

**Authors**

\*Dr Foteini Kravariti, University of Portsmouth, School of Business and Law, Richmond  
Building, Portland Street, Portsmouth, PO1 3DE, UK, +44 (0) 23 9284 4832,  
foteini.kravariti@port.ac.uk

Prof Karen Johnston, University of Portsmouth, School of Business and Law, Richmond  
Building, Portland Street, Portsmouth, PO1 3DE, UK, +44 (0) 23 9284 4013,  
karen.johnston@port.ac.uk

\*Corresponding author

# **Talent management: a critical literature review and research agenda for public sector human resource management**

Drawing upon Talent Management (TM) literature from around the globe, we critically appraise the transferability of this human resource management strategy to the public sector. While TM has received scholarly attention in the private sector, it remains under-researched in the public sector. We address this deficit by employing a systematic review of TM research. The original contribution of this article is: (1) a definition of public sector talent and TM; (2) a discussion on TM applicability to public organizations by reviewing internal and external parameters influencing its implementation; and (3) a critical appraisal of TM's transferability to the public sector.

## **Keywords**

talent, talent management, public sector, influential factors, transferability

## **Introduction**

It has been approximately two decades since talent management (TM) research emerged as a way to build human capacity. The extant research conceptualizes talent (Meyers and van Woerkom 2014), discusses how it is managed (McDonnell et al. 2017), investigates factors which impact on TM implementation (Gallardo-Gallardo, Thunnissen, and Scullion 2017), links TM to business issues like expatriation (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry 2013), and to increasing performance (Njis et al. 2014). Although evidence in some of these studies is collected from both private and public sectors, public sector research has remained sparse, highlighting a lack in critical analysis of the relevancy of TM to the public sector. Most of the research on TM in the public sector stems from consultancy reports which provide recommendations, based on the private sector experience, of how and why the public sector could benefit from TM (e.g. Hay Group 2011). A handful of scholars have attempted to investigate TM's possible conceptualization (e.g. Harris and Foster 2010), operationalization (e.g. Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017), success (e.g. Clarke and Scurry 2017), and its mechanisms of overcoming its challenging application to the public sector (see special issue of *Public Personnel Management*, 2008).

The context is significant when conceptualizing TM (Sparrow and Makram 2015), yet current literature still calls for a concise definition about public sector talent and TM, and a thorough investigation of contextual factors enabling or inhibiting its successful adoption by this sector (e.g. Glenn 2012; McDonnell et al. 2017). This article provides a comprehensive review of TM scholarly literature, drawing upon international studies, with a focus on the public sector. It contributes to the field in three ways. First, it provides a clear definition of public sector talent and TM. Second, it enriches our knowledge regarding TM applicability to the public sector by considering the limits to its implementation. As this special issue notes, policy practitioners and human resource (HR)

professionals have been informed by the hegemony of human resource management (HRM) models, strategies, and practices developed in the private sector often influenced by New Public Management (NPM) with negative consequences (Brunetto, Xerri, Trincherro, Beattie, Shacklock, Farr-Wharton, and Borgonovi 2018). Thus, our discussion of the transferability of TM to the public sector, along with TM's potential contribution to the challenges the sector currently faces is a timely and relevant contribution. As such, we formulate a research agenda, proposing new directions for empirical studies in order to progress our scholarly knowledge regarding TM in the public sector. In order to achieve these aims, we conducted a three-stage systematic literature review (SLR) of international TM research as described in the following section.

### **Research methodology**

We employ a three-stage process to conduct a comprehensive review of international TM literature. We adopt a SLR methodology for the three-stage process following the guidelines of Denyer and Transfield (2009) and Macpherson and Jones (2010) for management studies. We agree both with Mallett et al. (2012) and Stumbitz, Lewis, and Rouse (2018) that a SLR methodology enables a focused review objective to be fulfilled by yielding potent answers. Our three-stage-process review complies with the four principles suggested by Denyer and Transfield (2009), i.e. transparency, explanatory, inclusivity and heuristic. It is transparent as we adopt a defined review method (described in this section) and present our grouped findings (see Table 1 and 2) following the example of Ellwood, Grimshaw and Pandza (2017).

### ***Data collection***

### *Inclusion/exclusion criteria*

To establish the inclusion criteria of studies reviewed in this article, we follow Wang and Chugh's (2014) suggestions to set the search limitations, timeframe and terms. The search limitations are the electronic databases, namely ABI/INFORM Complete, ProQuest Business Source Premier, Google Scholar, Ingenta, JSTOR, ScienceDirect and Web of Science. The search timeframe is set from 2000 to 2018 as most scholarly interest in TM occurred after the publication of Michaels, Handfield–Jones and Axelrod's book in 2001. The search terms are the prevailing terminologies adopted by literature attempting to capture TM, i.e. talent AND/OR definition, talent management AND/OR strategy AND/OR system AND/OR framework AND/OR model AND/OR theory, gifted employees, top employees, management of gifted AND/OR top employees, talent AND/OR talent management approaches (OR modes OR categories OR clusters), factors AND/OR parameters AND/OR elements influencing AND/OR driving AND/OR restraining talent management, talent management challenges, talent management advantages AND/OR benefits, talent management AND public management, talent management AND public sector, talent management AND public sector management, talent management AND public sector administration.

### *Search strategy*

We review relevant literature comprehensively, such as studies that have adopted qualitative and quantitative research methods as well as empirical, conceptual and literature review articles. We primarily focus on English-language double-blind peer-reviewed journal publications. We also include in our review practitioner-oriented articles written by consultancy companies, as well as books and book chapters, governmental publications, and working papers. Those additional publications are essential to be

included, first because scholar evidence regarding TM in the public sector is limited, and second, because they enhance our review by discussing and providing an international perspective of our topic. Hence, we contribute to the review by merging a fairly scattered body of literature following the research boundaries approach suggested by Stumbitz, Lewis, and Rouse (2018). Articles are searched by title and abstract as those sections usually include the keywords (Dada 2018) and are assorted by relevance.

### ***Data analysis***

We conduct content analysis to analyze our data as this method has been suggested for systematically reviewing managerial studies (e.g. Cetindamar et al. 2009; Germain and Cummings 2010). Content analysis is employed in this article for two additional reasons. First, it enables us to examine the body of TM literature in the public sector context, to create categories and determine how frequently those appear in studies. Second, it assists us in synthesising both scholar and practitioner-oriented qualitative data and transforming them into a quantitative grid that enhances their analysis (Dixon–Woods et al. 2005; Elo and Kyngäs 2008). This leads to a concise report of the prevailing findings as well as allows for the proposition of a research agenda (Mays, Pope, and Popay 2005).

Initially, we noticed that there has been a constant increase of studies on TM exceeding 100 publications post-2008, with most literature reviews flourishing in 2013-2014 (e.g. Al Ariss, Cascio, and Paauwe 2014; Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, and González-Cruz 2013). In the context of the public sector, there have been sixteen scholarly articles published, four consultancy reports and twenty other studies which make some significant reference to public sector TM and talent.

We then developed the key research themes based on the objectives of each phase of our three-stage review process (Prasad 2008). We ensured reliability of the thematic

categories by initially examining the most cited articles; however, we added a few categories to the final sample after we revised the selected studies (Heeks and Bailur 2007). We control for biases by assessing all selected articles, which enhanced the building of clusters and sub-clusters (Dada 2018). Thereafter, we decided which materials needed to be classified and built principal categories and sub-categories based on their content (Cummings et al. 2010).

### *The three-stage process*

At Stage I, we examine seventy-seven articles by considering the following criteria: year of publication; title; author/s; research focus; methodology; theoretical lens; context of the study and research findings. We observed that evidence regarding TM conceptualization and practice comes mainly from the private sector context. At Stage II we purposely examine all material (twenty in total) that drew upon TM implementation in the public sector. We observe that most evidence regarding TM in the public sector are from consultancy companies. This conclusion led to Stage III where we retain all twenty articles from Stage II and review twenty additional articles that attempt to investigate TM transferability to the public sector. We found that although it is acknowledged that there could be benefits to TM practice in the public sector, TM transferability is challenged by a wide range of factors that are currently overlooked.

## **Results**

### *Talent and talent management conceptualization*

Literature reviews on talent and TM underline the necessity for conceptually developing the terms (e.g. Al Ariss, Cascio, and Paauwe 2014). The problem is that much of the published studies is focussed on the private sector (e.g. Alferaih 2018; McDonnell et al. 2017), whereas only a few of them are located in the public sector (e.g. Clarke and Scurry

2017; Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). Thus, what is the distinction between private and public sector talent and TM? The following section will explore the conceptualization of the terms in both the private and public sector followed by an identification of key differences and similarities.

Studies completed since the new millennium conclude that the definition of talent in the scholarly literature is influenced by authors in scientific disciplines. For instance, in educational psychology, talent is conceived of as giftedness, whereas in positive psychology it is synonymous with strength (Dries 2013). Ultimately, four categories to conceptualizing private sector talent have emerged: (1) talent is the innate capacity individuals hold and which drives them to stand out (Cheese, Thomas, and Craig 2008; Tansley et al. 2007); (2) talent refers to human entities who yield higher outputs than the rest of the workforce in a given business setting (Buckingham and Vosburgh 2001; Williams 2000); (3) talent refers to the specific capabilities certain people develop with the aim to produce more benefit for their organizations (Lewis and Heckman 2006; Silzer and Dowell 2010); (4) talent is a combination of specific employee competencies and their innate drive to accomplish certain working tasks that presuppose the utilization of those capabilities (Ulrich and Smallwood 2012). Drawing from these four categories, private sector talent can be defined here as:

Systematically developed innate abilities of individuals that are deployed in activities they like, find important, and in which they want to invest energy. It enables individuals to perform excellently in one or more domains of human functioning, operationalized as performing better than other individuals of the same age or experience, or as performing consistently at their personal best (Njis et al. 2014, 182).

Unlike private sector talent for which various definitions exist, the conceptualization of public sector talent is in its infancy, possibly because most publications examine TM in



the private sector (Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017), or evidence regarding this context mainly comes from consultancy companies (Al Ariss, Cascio, and Paauwe 2014; Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, and González-Cruz 2013), or because this topic has been relatively new to public sector research (Glenn 2012). Drawing on the limited research output, public sector talent can be: (1) a human entity who contributes to the sector's performance either in the short-term or in the long-term by achieving his/her highest potential (Harrisr and Foster 2010); (2) an individual who possesses a wide range of competences, knowledge and is self-motivated (Rana, Goer, and Rastogi 2013); (3) a person who values equal treatment and transparency as well as other core public sector principles (Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). In contrast to private sector talent which refers to a person's either inherited or developed exceptional capabilities, the conceptualization of public sector talent highlights employees as human entities, but with different values. This could be attributed to the context-specific characteristics that the public sector workforce should possess such as the innate desire to contribute to public service without seeking financial reward (Delfgaauw and Dur 2010). Public sector talent, thus, differs from private sector talent in that its conceptualization is more influenced by the context's fundamental principles or ethos of public service for the common good (see Perry 2000). We, thus, propose public sector talent could be conceptualized as an individual who possesses those competencies, knowledge and values that reflect the public sector's core principles, which enable him/her to use their exceptional abilities to serve the public for the common good.

Moreover, the conceptualization of private sector TM could be broadly divided into three categories: (1) TM is a strategy that enhances the advancement of talented employees so that the latter can positively contribute to high organizational performance (Creelman 2004); (2) TM is a tool that targets career progression by supporting

employees to produce their maximum output (Alferaih 2018); and (3) TM is the implementation of specific procedures including recruitment and selection, career development, and employee retention (Al Ariss, Cascio, and Paauwe 2014; Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss 2016; Rigg 2015; Meyers, van Woerkom, and Dries 2013). Drawing on these definitions, it is proposed that private sector TM is the practices adopted by an organization to facilitate staff development in order to enhance corporate performance.

The conceptualization of public sector TM depends on the definition of public sector talent as well as the implementation of the specific-to-context TM aims (Clarke and Scurry 2017; Garrow and Hirsh 2008; Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). Literature can be divided into four schools of thought, each of which define public sector TM as: (1) the processes adopted to systematically recruit, develop, deploy, retain and engage public sector talent both in the short-term and in the long-term (Glenn 2012; Guo et al. 2011; Harris and Foster, 2010; Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017); (2) a strategy facilitating the sector to face contemporary challenges including leadership development and service improvement (Kock and Burke 2008; Rana, Goer, and Rastogi 2013); (3) a strategy that ensures public sector employees do not solely hold knowledge and capabilities, but also possess core values which fit within the context, and which could address poor governance issues such as corruption and nepotism (Reilly 2008); (4) a process to achieve an appropriate fit to support the implementation of strategic objectives within the institution's philosophy, culture, and structure (Garrow and Hirsh 2008; Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). Thus, we propose defining public sector TM as:

The implementation of key procedures to ensure public sector employees possess the competencies, knowledge and core values in order to address complex contemporary challenges and fulfil public sector strategic objectives for the common good.

Although public sector and private sector TM adopt somewhat similar processes, the first differs from the latter in how they conceptualize talent and in the broader objectives of serving the public.

### *Approaches to talent management's implementation*

Scholars have reflected on the conceptualization of both talent and TM, and have proposed a few taxonomies relevant to TM implementation. For example, Swailes, Downs, and Orr (2014, 534) suggest TM approaches by considering the aim of talent identification and staff inclusion, whilst Meyers and van Woerkom (2014, 193–194) propose TM approaches by considering the impact of the nature of talent on talent philosophies. Nevertheless, the basis of the proposed typologies are the two fundamental approaches to TM implementation: object versus subject TM; and their sub-approaches as outlined below.

#### *Object versus subject talent management*

Object TM refers to the unique qualities people are gifted with and which they develop throughout their daily experiences (Pruis 2011). Talent is conceived of as an individual's characteristics which drives him/her to outperform others. A systematic review of literature demonstrates that scholars who perceive talent as an object link the term to a particular developed skill and/or capability (e.g. Cheese, Thomas, and Craig 2008; Michaels, Handfield–Jones, and Axelrod 2001; Silzer and Dowell 2010; Stahl et al. 2012; Tansley 2011; Williams 2000), to an innate competence (e.g. Silzer and Dowell 2010; Ulrich 2007), or to employee engagement/fit (e.g. Garrow and Hirsh 2008; Ulrich 2007). Therefore, object TM is the management of employee attributes by focusing on competence and knowledge management (Vance and Vaiman 2008).

In contrast, subject TM emphasises individuals who, depending on their talents, could better fit certain working positions (Alferaih 2018). Talents are individuals who hold specific competencies and capabilities (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, and González-Cruz 2013). Thus, TM as a subject refers to the efficient management of people with innate talents so as to enhance their match to a particular job and within a competency framework. Companies adopting this approach, plan and implement procedures that facilitate the positioning of the right employees in the right working positions (Duttagupta 2005), so that each can maximise their output as they utilise their talents in a particular position contributing to staff deployment (Buckingham and Vosburgh 2001).

Drawing on the conceptualization of talent in both sectors, object TM better reflects private sector talent which refers to an employee's capabilities to perform better than others. In contrast, subject TM mirrors public sector talent which facilitates individuals possessing particular competencies and values that enable them to better serve the sector's objectives. Extant research has shown that public sector organizations are favourable towards implementing subject TM (Clarke and Scurry 2017; van den Brick and Fruytier 2013; Harris and Foster 2010; Rana, Goer, and Rastogi 2013). There is evidence that indicates the private sector also implements subject TM because it can facilitate employee segmentation into high and low performers/potentials (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, and González-Cruz 2013). Therefore, talent conceptualization does not necessarily drive the application of a particular TM approach, but contextual factors also play a role (Clarke and Scurry 2017; Garrow and Hirsh 2008). Research on both TM modes demonstrate that object TM assists in the identification of employee characteristics, while subject TM generates discussions around benchmarking (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, and González-Cruz 2013).

### *Inclusive versus exclusive talent management*

Subject TM is further distinguished into inclusive and exclusive TM, also referred as the “soft” and “hard” TM mode, respectively (Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017, 4). Exclusive TM targets the efficient management of high potentials and high performers (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, and González-Cruz 2013). Based on performance reviews, the top 10% of staff (high performers) is considered as those whose achievements are significantly more valuable than the rest of employees (Silzer and Dowell 2010). Through performance assessments employees are also distinguished as high potentials (i.e. employees who are highly likely to significantly contribute to organizational performance at some point) (Silzer and Dowell 2010). Exclusive TM emphasises organizational goals which drive managerial practices to monitor employee performance and to distinguish those individuals that can increase profitability (Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). It is operationalized via executive models that include practices like employee evaluation, performance management, employee development and deployment (Glenn 2012).

Inclusive TM, on the other hand, takes the view that all employees in an organization have special qualities, and each of them contributes to high performance in a unique manner (Gelens et al. 2013). Davies and Davies (2010) add that this becomes possible when each employee holds the position that allows their talent to be exercised. This is achieved when organizations initially identify each employee’s potential and then support its development so that it can be translated into output (Buckingham and Vosburgh 2001). Therefore, this TM approach highlights equal treatment and emphasizes all employee interests through the adoption of practices such as employee development, engagement and retention (Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). It is implemented via the adoption of a strategic model which drives the determination of talents’ needs as well as the development of practices that could satisfy those needs (Glenn 2012).

Private sector organizations mainly implement exclusive TM as it involves less cost and time in order to identify, reward and retain an elite workforce (Gelens et al. 2013; Netessine and Yakubovich 2012). Inclusive TM appears to be a better fit for the public sector since there is an ideological predisposition to principles of egalitarianism (Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). Some government institutions such as the UK civil service adopt inclusive TM to provide equal development opportunities for both mid-career and senior officers (Garrow and Hirsh 2008) since the workforce is considered a vehicle to achieve objectives related to equal treatment (Poocharoen and Lee 2013). Inclusive TM seems to be more appropriate in this context because it supports the integration of all employees towards fulfilling common good goals (O'Reilly and Pfeffer 2000).

Although there is a current inclination towards implementing inclusive TM (Glenn 2012; Poocharoen and Lee 2013), the majority of governments adopt a mix of TM modes (Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). Examples of governments that adopt both inclusive and exclusive TM depending on the context include: Canada (Glenn 2012), the UK (Harrisr and Foster 2010), and Thailand and Malaysia (Poocharoen and Lee 2013). For instance the Malaysian government offers scholarships to students regardless of their background so they can complete studies abroad before being recruited by the Malaysian public or private sector; yet, individuals whose academic performance is higher are fast-tracked and work on high-priority government matters (Poocharoen and Lee 2013). Another example is the UK National Audit Office which invests in junior managers considered more capable of yielding benefits for the organization, but simultaneously manage employees inclusively by providing them with developmental opportunities like mentoring (Garrow and Hirsh 2018). The UK civil service also employs an exclusive approach with the fast-streaming of talent through the graduate leadership development

program (Civil Service Fast Stream 2019). In India, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) forms an elite corp of civil servants, with an exclusive approach to nurturing their talent after completion of highly competitive entry examinations, while at the same time promoting an inclusive approach to address the social discrimination of the caste system (Tummala 2015). These approaches could be attributed to various parameters including the fact that the public sector attempts to sustain a balance between younger entrants and a more experienced workforce (Rana, Goer, and Rastogi 2013) with each generation having different expectations from their employer and varying attitudes (Kock and Burke 2008). The public sector may aim to recruit, develop and appraise talented staff in their attempt to develop key employee skills (Kock and Burke 2008), but face competition from the higher paying private sector (Harris and Foster 2010; Poocharoen and Lee 2013). However, it is argued that the public sector needs to implement an inclusive TM approach so that it recruits the best talents (Thompson 2017) who can serve the values of the public sector (Doughert and van Gelder 2015).

#### ***Talent management: limits to implementation***

Rani and Kumar's (2014) review suggests factors that are likely to drive or restrain TM implementation in the private sector. We develop their taxonomies by considering more recent studies and by grouping them into the two broader categories of internal and external.

Internal influential factors refer either to functions that can facilitate TM such as opportunities for employee development and career progression (Grégoire et al. 2015), monitoring employee retention (Frank, Finnegan, and Taylor 2004), the existence of information systems (Al Ariss, Cascio, and Paauwe 2014), supply of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational practices (Annakis, Dass, and Isa 2014), and recruitment and selection targeting talented individuals (Lewin, Massini, and Peeters 2009), or to

organizational soft elements such as corporate branding (Theurer et al. 2016), the company's strategy (Joyce and Slocum 2012), employee engagement/commitment (Mochorwa and Mwangi 2013), organizational culture/structure (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, and González-Cruz 2013), social environment in the workplace (Kunisch, Menz, and Ambos 2015), and management/leadership support (CIPD 2010; Iles 2008). External influential parameters are linked either to the broader context wherein an organization operates such as demographic deviations (Festing and Schäfer 2014), employee mobility (Collings and Mellahi 2009), financial situation (Nolan 2011), legislation (e.g. Sidani and Al Ariss 2014), political situation (Vlădescu 2012) and national/regional culture (Iles, Chuai, and Preece 2010), or context specificities such as talent shortages in the market (Farndale, Scullion, and Sparrow 2010), industry's/sector's attributes (Burbach and Royle, 2010), and competition/market forces (Ready and Conger 2007).

In a similar vein, the successful implementation of TM in public sector organizations could be influenced by both internal and external factors (Clarke and Scurry 2017; Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). After reviewing published scholar and practitioner-related articles that refer to TM implementation in the public sector, we concluded that the same parameters are likely to influence this context as well (Table 1 and 2). However, we add the factor 'impact to society' as a fundamental principle given the common good goals of the sector. Despite the fact that the internal influential factors outweigh the external in number, the significance of both must be underlined if organizations wish to yield beneficial outcomes when planning and practicing a TM strategy.

#### *Internal factors influencing talent management in the public sector*

Branding or organizational reputation is considered a mechanism for attracting public sector talents (Glenn 2012). Thus, in order for TM application to be beneficial to the public sector and attract talent, activities should be aligned with the organization's



strategic objectives of public value to engage current and potential staff (Garrow and Hirsh 2008). In addition, the highly committed employees could support TM in promoting discussion among employees at various hierarchical levels (Kock and Burke 2008) boosting the unique contribution of each employee to the accomplishment of organizational goals (Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). Given that social justice and equal treatment are core principles of the sector, inclusive TM supports the common good goals through increased involvement of all staff (Glenn 2012). Management and leadership support is important as well because they can either advance or inhibit the implementation of TM (Reilly 2008). Other than the support of main stakeholders, the institution's unique culture can drive or restrain a specific TM mode application. Public sector culture is inherently bureaucratic, which often restricts innovative practices like TM (Troshani, Jerram, and Hill 2011) as the implementation of TM may clash with the sector's culture and possibly fail to satisfy the workforce's needs (Garrow and Hirsh 2008). Regardless of which TM mode is implemented, public sector TM needs to integrate the possible societal impact into its objectives. In other words, TM needs to consider the sector's core scope and common good objectives (Thunnissen, Boselie, and Fruytier 2013).

TM could also support particular HR-related practices such as succession planning, which could ensure talented employees develop and enhance their career progression within the sector (Kock and Burke 2008). A vast supply of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards could also sustain public sector employees' self-motivation to achieve organizational goals (Rana, Goer, and Rastogi 2013). Such practices might enable TM to create a constant internal supply of public sector talents (Harris and Foster 2010). The improvement of information systems linked to core TM practices could also facilitate TM success in the public sector. For example, public sector organizations could advertise on social media to recruit potential talented applicants (Tufts, Jacobson, and Stevens 2015).

An example is the Peace Corps in the City of New Orleans where e-recruitment enabled talent attraction (Llorens 2011). Information systems can be also useful for auditing purposes such as employee turnover rates and thereby ensure the retention of talented employees (Troshani et al. 2011).

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*External factors influencing talent management in the public sector*

External factors such as political (Hudson 2017), legal (Yang et al. 2012), cultural (Poocharoen and Brillantes 2013) and financial parameters (Llorens 2011) are key in the implementation of TM in the public sector. Changes in political priorities, for instance, often mean changes in budgets (Troshani et al. 2011), thus potentially limiting financial resources for supporting TM implementation. Legislation also has an impact on applying TM. For example, the training of talented Chinese civil servants is supported by Chinese civil service law (Yang et al. 2012). Generational attributes could also affect the successful implementation of TM. Given that many baby boomers are now at an age of retirement, public sector organizations should find ways of attracting younger generations and adjust their TM accordingly (Glenn 2012). This becomes difficult when considering that new generations have higher expectations, are more concerned about quality of work and favour mobility (van den Brink and Fruytier 2013). Thus, organizations can no longer depend on loyalty and need to consider ways to attract and retain talents.

Although the recent global recession created more opportunities for attracting talent to the public sector (Reilly 2008), the private sector still has competitive advantage as Poocharoen and Lee (2013) argue that this is due to the time-consuming bureaucracy in the public sector. In addition, TM is perceived as an unfair procedure that clashes with the public sector principles and values of equal treatment (Poocharoen and Lee 2013).

This is a paradox in that there is difficulty in identifying public sector talents, such as individuals who possess those competencies, knowledge and values that reflect public sector's core principles, which in turn creates talent shortages in the sector (Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). For a TM approach to prove successful in the public sector, it has to be contextualized to enhance the sector's ability to manage employees into the future (Kock and Burke 2008) and to address complex societal challenges.

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## **Discussion**

### ***Talent management: a research agenda for talent management's transferability to the public sector***

We have identified internal and external contextual factors, which account for the successful implementation of TM. Consultancy companies have provided insights on how TM could support the public sector to improve human capacity building and staff deployment, which could impact upon public-service delivery, productivity, creativity and innovation (see Australian Public Service Commission 2013; Accenture Consulting 2016; Baxendale 2014). Before implementing TM, the public sector needs to consider challenges regarding the culture and values of the public sector, the nature of the adopted TM practices, and the role of key stakeholders. Hence, a research agenda is proposed regarding these topics.

Since much of TM research and implementation is in the private sector, we argue that the bureaucratic and legal nature of the public sector has to be considered when attempting to recruit and appoint talents when adopting an exclusive approach. Public sector organizations' adoption of NPM type and public sector reforms' impacts upon the attraction of public sector talents, have led to a decrease in both employee engagement

and trust in government (Doughert and van Gelder 2015). NPM reforms and budget cuts have left many local and central government failing to define and attract the talent they needed for the future (Hay Group 2011). There is a need for research on the challenges and the impact of austerity measures on the public sector's capacity to attract, manage and deploy talent so that the latter can contribute to the sector's performance.

Additionally, reforms relevant to human capacity building and in particular to the adoption of TM are perceived to be undermining core public sector values of equal treatment and transparency (Garrow and Hirsh 2008; Harrisr and Foster 2010, van den Brick and Fruytier 2013). For example, Poocharoen and Lee (2013) found that meritorious requirements of entry exams were disincentive to attracting highly talented people in the public sector. Governments face a trade-off between equal treatment principles and effective approaches to attract talented individuals (Poocharoen and Lee 2013) due to the fact that the public sector focuses on virtues rather than talents (Jing and Zhu 2012). TM is a double-edged sword in this context as it could demotivate people not identified as talented and can breed cynicism about mechanisms for identifying those who are talented (Harrisr and Foster 2010). The preferential treatment of talents is contrary to public sector values of equal treatment.

Adopting decentralized TM practices is also a challenge for public sector organizations (Poocharoen and Brillantes 2013) because those organizations function according to a legal-bureaucratic institutional logic rather than a market-managerial logic which reflects NPM (Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). Recruitment and selection processes for example obstruct the engagement with talented individuals considering that in some contexts like France, the UK, Belgium and the Netherlands every candidate without exception has to undertake entry examinations, which is costly and time-consuming (Hudson 2017). Talents are therefore quickly identified and recruited to the

private sector with relatively little bureaucratic legal recruitment and selection requirements. This results in public sector vacancies with key roles not being filled (van den Brick and Fruytier 2013). Thus, to attract and retain talented individuals, the public sector may have to consider varied strategies such as e-recruitment campaigns, as mentioned previously. Future research could examine the effectiveness of these strategies in improving talent capacity building in the public sector.

The private sector's performance is measured against financial targets and outcomes (Hudson 2017). In the public sector, performance measures are more complex with attempts to measure intangible outcomes (Kock and Burke 2008). Public and political pressure for accountability makes the public sector risk averse and the rigidity of bureaucratic rules in terms of salary structures and extrinsic incentives restrict the implementation of TM in the public sector (Delfgaauw and Dur 2010). Hudson (2017) found that salary policy in the public sector is a barrier to the mobility of labour between the public and private sectors as highly talented candidates may have to forgo up to 30% of their salary to work for the public sector.

Hence, there is scope for research on the transferability of TM strategies to the public sector and to understand the barriers and enablers to effective implementation. In particular, to study the impact of internal (e.g. salary structures, examination and selection procedures, bureaucratic institutional logics, etc.) and external (e.g. political cycles and pressures, fiscal constraints, legislative frameworks, public accountability, etc.) parameters to the transferability and implementation of TM in the public sector. Forthcoming research could also investigate the development of performance systems and TM schemes that fit within the public sector context given these parameters.

The successful transferability of TM to the public sector also depends on the contribution of HR professionals, managers and employees. HR professionals serve an

institutional bureaucratic logic with limited power to operationalize TM (see van den Brick and Fruytier 2013). When recruiting new employees, HR professionals rarely have inside knowledge of the political gamesmanship behind selecting favoured candidates (van den Brick and Fruytier 2013). Public managers may not want to be involved in TM implementation for risk of being accused of preferential treatment of certain employees, thus deviating from public sector principles of equal treatment (Harris and Foster 2010). In addition, equal treatment may be considered differently by top management who may lack HR capabilities to endorse talent development (Delfgaauw and Dur 2010; Harris and Foster 2010).

From an employee perspective, staff tend to build their own expectations about TM programmes since public sector organizations often do not communicate TM objectives to all stakeholders (Clarke and Scurry 2017). Expectations are usually not met causing dissatisfaction and scepticism about TM benefits. An evidence-based research agenda is needed which can explain how key organizational stakeholders facilitate TM to improve public sector productivity, efficiency and effectiveness. Future research could assess the impact of public service principles of equal treatment and transparency, drawing upon managers and HR professionals in TM design and implementation to enhance the understanding of TM's psychological impacts. For example, if an exclusive approach were adopted, questions raised include how would it impact upon the motivation of other employees, how could the public sector balance public sector principles such as equal treatment with nurturing talent, or how could attraction, recruitment, selection, career development and reward of talents be more effective for the public sector than an inclusive approach? Furthermore, if an inclusive approach were adopted what are the costs, is there managerial and HR capacity to nurture talents with an

inclusive approach, or does an inclusive approach make the public sector organization more attractive to talents?

Although there are questions and challenges about the transferability of TM to the public sector, there are potential benefits. TM could help the sector to respond to current challenges of delivering services in a period of austerity, a digital economy, changing labour market and demographic patterns, and political uncertainties that necessitate innovative solutions to complex socio-economic and policy problems (see Head and O'Flynn 2015). However, for TM to be effectively implemented in the public sector, some key issues should be considered as part of a research agenda.

### ***Talent management: benefits to public sector organizations***

Currently, public sector organizations place significant emphasis on the value of their workforce, which they wish to strengthen by investing in the implementation of TM (Podger 2017). They could draw lessons from the successful and unsuccessful implementation of TM in the private sector (Reilly 2008) since TM has facilitated these organizations to record increased long-term financial output (Alferaih 2018) in companies such as Coca Cola, Microsoft, and IBM (Vlădescu 2012). In a public sector context, talents could develop innovative solutions to address complex societal challenges and efficiently deliver services in an era of austerity (see Llorens 2011). We do not argue for the adoption of private sector TM strategies into the public sector, as with NPM reforms, rather, we argue that scholars should research the internal and external parameters and their impact on the implementation of TM in the public sector. TM implementation in the public sector could yield beneficial outcomes for organizations, employees (Vlădescu 2012) and beneficiaries of public services, all of which is an area for further research.

Clarke and Scury (2017) argue that there is a looming crisis in the public sector with an increase in retirees and the inability to attract talented staff. TM could assist the public sector recruit Generation Y's talents, particularly in a digital economy, by appealing to their intrinsic social conscious in order to satisfy their expectations and increase their commitment (Garrow and Hirsh 2008; Poocharoen and Brillantes 2013). TM could also support the career aspirations of Generation Y by developing talents who are committed to the public service ethos (Clarke and Scury 2017). The public sector could build internal banks of talents to address competition from the private sector and enhance the public sector's ability to attract talents (Dougherty and van Gelder 2015; Poocharoen and Brillantes 2013). Thus, TM could also address chronic talent shortages in the public sector (Poocharoen and Lee 2013; van den Brick and Fruytier 2013). It could assist the public sector in the filling of key positions and promote talents to leadership positions through career development and reward opportunities (Kock and Burke 2008). TM could be the vehicle that drives effective reform and change (Reilly 2018; Thunnissen and Buttiens 2017). TM could develop public sector talents who are highly committed and socio-politically sensitive to address these many challenges (Dougherty and van Gelder 2015).

TM could also support fair performance management procedures which measure quality and quantity, and which are likely to identify each employee's talent in everyday tasks (Poocharoen and Lee 2013). For example, performance management used to evaluate employee performance based on quantified criteria (e.g. time of response to clients) and by using a quantified scale (e.g. five-point Likert scale); however, today those scales measure qualified criteria as well (e.g. team-skills) by providing particular on-the-job examples that justify the possession of those qualitative competences (Bernardin and Russell 2013). This could lead to increased dialogues among employees, top



management, and HR professionals resulting in better employee morale, relationships and staff deployment (Kock and Burke 2008). TM could also enhance public sector staff move into new positions, which can facilitate succession planning and career development (Glenn 2012). TM could also develop public sector employees by addressing their weaknesses and better foster their potential (Garrow and Hirsh 2018). Another positive result of implementing TM in the public sector is that the sector could satisfy employee needs with personal values, which may not be possible in a private sector working environment (Clerkin and Cogburn 2012). Therefore, the efficient application of TM could advance public sector organizations into becoming an employer of choice (Kock and Burke 2008), able to attract external talented individuals and consolidate job markets (Jing and Zhu 2012). Forthcoming research can shed light on how TM can improve public sector's performance via talent attraction, deployment and retention.

## **Conclusion**

This article proposed a concise definition of public sector talent and TM, as well as explored the possibilities and factors affecting the implementation of TM in the public sector. It was therefore suggested that public sector talent be defined as those individuals who possess competencies, knowledge and values that reflect the public sector's core principles of public service for the common good. Additionally, public sector TM is characterized as the implementation of key HR procedures which ensure public sector talents fit within this context to address complex challenges and fulfil the sector's strategic objectives.

The manner in which public sector organizations function in different countries is complex. Whether inclusive or exclusive, the way TM is implemented very much depends on context. We have discussed both internal and external parameters that are likely to impact on the successful implementation of TM and which need to be considered by

public sector organizations. The internal influential factors were divided into practices that could facilitate TM implementation such as recruitment and selection, and into soft organizational elements that could drive or constrain TM implementation, such as organizational culture. The external influential factors were also divided into those that refer to the broader context of an institution such as national culture, and into those that are more specific to organizational contexts such as shortages in certain talents. Future research needs to explore whether there are better or poorer TM practices, which could lead to a discussion on why and how a specific TM approach works in some contexts and not in others. It may also look at variances in talent and TM conceptualization, as well as at the contribution of TM to more efficient public sector performance management by comparing/contrasting various types of administrative and/or public sector departments/agencies.

Finally, this article found that although TM originated in the private sector, it could bring benefits to the public sector. As argued, there is an interplay of the aforementioned internal and external parameters which impacts upon the implementation of TM in the public sector context, leading to our proposed research agenda for TM in the public sector which draws upon scholar and practitioner-related literature. We concluded by highlighting the potential of TM, if implemented effectively and appropriately, to support the public sector in addressing increasingly complex socio-economic and policy problems, changing labour markets, demographic patterns, the political landscape and its role within a digital economy.

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Table 1. Internal factors influencing public sector talent management

	Source
Internal Parameters	Glenn (2012); Kock and Burke (2008); Clarke and Scurry (2017)
Branding/Organizational Reputation	Clarke and Scurry (2017); Garrow and Hirsh (2008); Kock and Burke (2008); McDonnell et al. (2017); Poocharoen and Brillantes (2013); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017)
Business Strategy/Mission	Clarke and Scurry (2017); Clerklin and Coggburn (2012); Dougherty and van Gelder (2015); Garrow and Hirsh (2008); Harris and Foster (2010); Hudson (2017); Glenn (2012); Guo et al. (2011); Kock and Burke (2008); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Reilly (2008); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017)
Engagement/Commitment	Amann (2006); Garrow and Hirsh (2008); Guo et al. (2011); Harris and Foster (2010); Kock and Burke (2008); Park and Joo (2010); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Tufts, Jacobson, and Stevens (2015); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017); Troshani, Jerram, and Hill (2011)
Organizational Culture/Structure	Garrow and Hirsh (2008); Glenn (2012); Kock and Burke (2008); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017); Troshani, Jerram, and Hill (2011); Tufts, Jacobson, and Stevens (2015)
Social Working Environment	McDonnell et al. (2017); Ng and Sears (2015); Poocharoen and Brillantes (2013); Rangarajan and Rahm (2011); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017)
Impact on Society	Clarke and Scurry (2017); Delfgaauw and Dur (2010); Garrow and Hirsh (2008); Glenn (2012); Harris and Foster (2010); Kock and Burke (2008); McDonnell et al. (2017); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Reilly (2008); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017); van den Brink and Fruytier (2013)
Top Management/Leadership Support	Clarke and Scurry (2017); Clerklin and Coggburn (2012); Dougherty and van Gelder (2015); Garrow and Hirsh (2008); Glenn (2012); Guo et al. (2011); Jing and Zhu (2012); Kock and Burke (2008); Lynn (2001); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Rana, Goer, and Rastogi (2013); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017); Troshani, Jerram, and Hill (2011)
Developmental Practices/Career Progression/Succession Planning/Information Systems/Technology	Dougherty and van Gelder (2015); Glenn (2012); Kock and Burke (2008); Llorens (2011); Reilly (2008); Troshani, Jerram, and Hill (2011); Tufts, Jacobson, and Stevens (2015); Vlădescu (2012)
Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivational Practices	Clerkin and Coggburn (2012); Delfgaauw and Dur (2010); Garrow and Hirsh (2008); Glenn (2012); Harris and Foster (2010); Lyons, Duxbury, and Higgins (2006); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Rana, Goer, and Rastogi (2013); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017)
Recruitment and Selection Targeting Talents	Clarke and Scurry (2017); Clerklin and Coggburn (2012); Cober et al. (2000); Delfgaauw and Dur (2010); Dougherty and van Gelder (2015); Garrow and Hirsh (2008); Glenn (2012); Guo et al. (2011); Harris and Foster (2010); Hay Group (2011); Hudson (2017); Kock and Burke (2008); Llorens (2011); Ng and Sears (2015); Poocharoen and Brillantes (2013); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Rana, Goer, and Rastogi (2013); Rangarajan and Rahm (2011); Reilly (2008); Ritz and Waldner (2011); Thompson (2017); Troshani, Jerram, and Hill (2011); Tufts, Jacobson, and Stevens (2015); van den Brink and Fruytier (2013)
Control of Employee Retention	Clarke and Scurry (2017); Clerklin and Coggburn (2012); Delfgaauw and Dur (2010); Glenn (2012); Guo et al. (2011); Harris and Foster (2010); Hay Group (2011); Kock and Burke (2008); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Rana, Goer, and Rastogi (2013); Rangarajan and Rahm (2011); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017); Troshani, Jerram, and Hill (2011); van den Brink and Fruytier (2013)
<i>Corporate Functions Facilitating TM</i>	

Table 2. External factors influencing public sector talent management

	External Parameters	Source
<i>Broader Context</i>	Demographic Shifts/ Generations' Characteristics	Clarke and Scurry (2017); Dougherty and van Gelder (2015); Glenn (2012); Harris and Foster (2010); Kock and Burke (2008); Troshani, Jerram, and Hill (2011); van den Brink and Fruytier (2013)
	Financial Situation	Glenn (2012); Harris and Foster (2010); Llorens (2011); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Reilly (2008); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017); Troshani, Jerram, and Hill (2011); van den Brink and Fruytier (2013)
	Labour Mobility	Glenn (2012); Hudson (2017); van den Brink and Fruytier (2013)
	Legal/Legislation	Amann (2006); Harris and Foster (2010); Garrow and Hirsh (2008); Jing and Zhu (2012); Poocharoen and Brillantes (2013); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017); Yang et al. (2012)
	National/Regional culture Political Forces	Park and Joo (2010); Poocharoen and Brillantes (2013); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017) Dougherty and van Gelder (2015); Hudson (2017); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017); Troshani, Jerram, and Hill (2011); van den Brink and Fruytier (2013)
<i>Specific Context</i>	Sector's Attributes/ Values/Principles	Kock and Burke (2008); Harris and Foster (2010); Poocharoen and Brillantes (2013); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Reilly (2008); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017); Tufts, Jacobson, and Stevens (2015)
	Competition/Market Forces	Dougherty and van Gelder (2015); Glenn (2012); Jing and Zhu (2012); Ng and Sears (2015); Poocharoen and Brillantes (2013); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Reilly (2008); Ritz and Waldner (2011); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017)
	Talent Shortages	Garrow and Hirsh (2008); Harris and Foster (2010); Kock and Burke (2008); Poocharoen and Lee (2013); Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017); van den Brink and Fruytier (2013)