

Talent Management & Organisational Diversity: A Call for Research

Maura Sheehan and Valerie Anderson

Talent management (TM) represents one of the fastest growing areas of both academic research and HRD practice. Since proclamations of a ‘War for Talent’ in the late 1990s the term ‘talent management’ has become one of the most common terms in the managerial and HRD practitioner lexicon (Minbaeva & Collings, 2013). An increasing array of TM services feature in consultancy offerings. In May 2014, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) re-named itself as the Association for Talent Development (ATD). Professional HRM Associations such as SHRM in the US and the CIPD in the UK have recognized increasing interest in this area and have commissioned extensive research into its use and practice in organizational settings. With the notable exception of Collings (2014), TM has achieved less attention in the HRD scholarly literature. This editorial aims to address this ‘disconnect’. Drawing on Colling’s (2014) call for mature talent management to move beyond an over-emphasis on shareholder value and initial scholarship in the TM arena and contributions to scholarly discourse we encountered at the European University Forum for Human Resource Development (UFHRD) 2015 conference, we pose provocative questions that we hope will stimulate critical and robust examination of TM from an HRD perspective, with a particular emphasis on the implications of TM for organizational diversity.

There are good reasons why scholars have tended towards scepticism in relation to emerging interest in TM. The discourse at its genesis of ‘super-star’ talent; resource scarcity; the dominance of shareholder value and the marginalisation and often neglect of other key organisational stakeholders, in particular employees, and a ‘win/lose warfare’ ethos has done

little to advance critical analysis of the field. Indeed, in many areas of practice TM remains firmly positioned as a normative and exclusive practice that targets the development – both from external and internal sources – of a small proportion of high-performing and high-potential employees in an organisation (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, and González-Cruz, 2013). The mainstream view in the practitioner literature adopts an elitist perspective which implies that about 80 per cent of an organisation's value added derives from about 20 per cent of its employees (Swales, 2013).

For those concerned with scholarly and robust empirical research, the pressing limitation of current TM work is its practice-driven agenda and its under-developed theoretical and conceptual basis (Collings, Scullion & Vaiman, 2015). However, more careful assessments of TM are now emerging. Conceptually, scholars and practitioners have begun to distinguish between talent conceptualized inclusively to recognize the potential value of all stakeholders of an organization (Collings, 2014; Harris & Foster, 2010) or defined exclusively to focus attention on 'A-listers', 'Stars'; or 'High Potentials' (Lubtish, et al., 2007). Scholars have also begun to debate the organisational justice and ethical implications of TM (see, for example, Downes & Swales, 2013; Harris & Foster, 2010; Swales, Downs & Orr, 2014; Swales, 2013) and Collings (2014) argues that it is possible to link talent management, employee motivation and pro-social goals. The importance of aligning talent management with HRD and research from other fields, including Human Resource Management (HRM) - set within the context of wider organizational-level phenomena - has also been recognised as important for future theoretical and empirical development (Collings, 2014; Greenwood & Millar, 2010; Werner, 2014).

Scant empirical and robust research has examined the enactment of TM policies in operational contexts. HRD is an applied field of scholarship and practice; TM is ubiquitous in

practice and so opportunities for empirical examination are not hard to find. TM, therefore, provides fertile topic-ground for engaged HRD scholarship with the potential to contribute to both theory and practice (Tsui, 2013). We take the opportunity of this editorial to issue a ‘wake up’ call to HRD scholars to stimulate a robust examination of important issues associated with TM. We focus on whether TM may be a hindrance to achieving workplace diversity, defined broadly here to include gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, disability, sexual orientation and/or religion (Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015) and argue this is an example of an issue that requires robust empirical examination. While there is a significant literature on both the business and ethical case for diversity (e.g., Bell, 2012; Kulik & Robertson, 2008; Scott, Heathcote & Gruman, 2011), given TMs potential to reproduce existing inequalities and adversely impact decades of struggle to increase organisational diversity, we argue it is critical that scholars engage actively to merge the diversity and TM literatures.

The ‘shadow side’ of talent management?

In making our case for HRD research into TM, we acknowledge the potential for TM practices that result in positive outcomes but we highlight the pressing need to give equal research attention to investigation of the unacknowledged consequences of TM practices – those that may be detrimental and undesirable for the promotion of organisational diversity and the inclusion of multiple internal and external stakeholders (Collings, 2014). We propose that HRD researchers are well placed to examine the effects of exclusive and elitist approaches to TM and the potential for negative consequences at societal, organizational, and individual levels in areas such as equality of opportunity, social inclusion and diversity. In proposing rigorous HRD attention to TM we suggest that the perspective taken on the selection of ‘talent’ within organisations is fundamental. We propose four broad strands of thought regarding the

definition and selection of talent that builds on the work of Iles, Chuai and Preece (2010) and O'Connor and Crowley-Henry (2015, p. 4):

1. Exclusive-elitist *people* view where a 'star' employee's added value to the organisation is used as a form of workplace differentiation;
2. Exclusive-elitist *position* view focuses on differentiating employees according to the importance of their organisational role or position;
3. Inclusive-*people* view reflecting a belief that all employees are talented and whose talent can be developed further to enhance value to the organisation; and
4. A *social capital* perspective which recognises the work context and culture as important for TM.

Our concern, as HRD scholars, is that the first two of these approaches, if grounded in a managerialist and performative paradigm, may have negative consequences for the promotion of equality and diversity which can have significant implications for organisational justice and ethics in both theory and practice (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013). Moreover, the first two approaches are unlikely to address the important issues of workers' values and motives and how these impact employees' performance (Collings, 2014). Organisational leaders and line managers with the power to identify talent are likely to represent the characteristics of dominant groups in their societal context (Harris & Foster, 2010; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). HRD scholars have highlighted how, in other areas of organizational practice, 'the 'mainstreaming' of research, theory and learning education fails to recognise the relationships between management and gender and operates a gender neutral or gender blind approach, promoting an absence of women and reinforcing management and leadership as a man-only place' (Mavin, 2015, p. 8). We argue that similar suggestions can be made in relation to 'mainstreaming' other features of diversity and social inclusion.

TM provides a context for asking and answering a range of curious and probing research questions. For example, how are processes of selection and development of talent undertaken in practice? To what extent are TM decisions open to the critique that they are potentially arbitrary and characterized by inconsistent identification of those with ‘talent’? (Sorcher & Brant, 2002). To what extent might these TM decisions be vulnerable to bias grounded in unacknowledged assumptions about gender, age, ethnicity, race, nationality, disability, sexual orientation and/or religion? We highlight the pressing need for critical attention to the intersection of TM with issues of class, gender, diversity, power, business ethics, and sustainable business practices (Joshi, Liao, & Jackson, 2006; Von Bergen, Soper, & Parnell, 2005; Swailes, 2013). We suggest that empirical examination is required to learn more about the social and organisational justice outcomes of the enactment of talent management policies and practices. In proposing research into the ‘shadow side’ of TM we invite management leadership development scholars to ask research questions about unconscious reflection and promotion of traits held by organisations’ existing leadership teams in TM outcomes (Haddock-Millar & Clutterbuck, 2015; Warren, 2009).

Like much of the HRM literature of past decades the TM literature tends to derive from managerialist and performance-driven perspectives with an over-emphasis on shareholder value (Collings, 2014). However, in identifying a need for attention to the ‘shadow side’ of TM we argue that exclusive TM goes further than the HRM discourse of the late 20th century and early 21st century in its conceptual polarization between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’.

We acknowledge the parallels between the HRM narrative in organizations and the evolution of TM in terms of managerialism and unitarism but argue that HRM stopped short of a general advocacy of exclusive championing of certain categories of employees (the ‘talented’) nor did it champion an elitist cadre within organisations. Indeed, the promotion of

exclusivity that dominates the TM discourse contrasts starkly with both HRD and HRM fields which have remained very cognisant of biases that may arise when policies and practices are designed and implemented (Kuchinke, 2012; Pinnington, Macklin & Campbell, 2007).

Talent Management & Organizational inequalities: Theoretical Lenses

As one illustration of the potentially rich streams of HRD research into the TM phenomenon, we focus our attention here on the potential links between exclusive-elitist approaches to TM and their possible consequences for organizational inequalities. Harris and Foster (2010) argue that "...the implementation of talent management initiatives [in the UK] present specific tensions and dilemmas for public sector managers, which arise largely from well-embedded organisational approaches to equality and diversity" (p. 422-423). We propose that the effect of TM on equality and diversity in organisations of all types, sizes and sectors requires attention.

The forces that give rise to the replication of inequalities are firmly rooted in three important theoretical lenses: social identity (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989); in-group/out group dynamics (e.g., Joshi, Liao & Jackson, 2006); and structuration (e.g., Mor Barak, 2000). These theories have been used widely in diversity (e.g., Joshi et al., 2006) and gender (e.g., Ortlieb & Sieben, 2013) literatures and TM provides a further opportunity for empirical HRD research grounded in these perspectives. We briefly outline the relevance of these theoretical lenses as ways in which HRD scholars can develop future research in which to analyse the relationships between approaches to TM and implications for organizational diversity and justice outcomes.

Social Identity and In-Group/Out Group Dynamics

The social identity perspective, which encompasses social categorization theory and social identity theory (Reynolds, Turner & Haslam, 2003) provides a basis for understanding

how demographic composition of workplaces can influence the behaviours and outcomes of members of a numerical minority or majority. Social identity theory posits that individuals classify themselves and others on the basis of attributes – traditionally demographic ones including gender, ethnicity and age (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Here we assert that being identified as a member of a ‘talent pool’ or being classified as outside the ‘talent pipeline’ represents a further important attribute that follows from the TM narrative in organizations and the implementation of TM processes in work organization contexts. Social identity theory has implications for both the selectors of talent (likely to represent dominant managerial groupings) and the selectees (‘the talented’ with whom the selectors are more likely to identify).

Social identity results in individuals classifying themselves as members of an ‘in-group’ and those with whom such identity is not made, with whom there is perceived dissimilarity, as ‘out-group’. Joshi et al. (2006, p.461) suggests that “the degree of in-group favoring and out-group harming behaviors appears to be contingent on the relative sizes an implicit statuses of the sub-groups involved”. In organisations that practice elitist TM selection, while the size of these elite is likely to place them in a numerical minority, their status and power are likely to be significant. Moreover, all employees are likely to experience the consequences of both in-group favouring (the ‘talented’) and out-group discrimination. Joshi et al (2006) find strong evidence that social identity and the associated in-group/out group status differentials, affect performance differences and earnings inequalities between members of higher status majorities and lower-status minorities. An implicit exclusionary approach to TM is also likely to have significant adverse effects for employee motivation and commitment (Collings, 2014).

Structurational Perspectives

Mor Barak (2000) develops a model that distinguishes between a personal dimension (e.g., individual norms and values associated with diversity or, in our context, being included or excluded as ‘talent’) and an organizational dimension (e.g., the organizational culture and, in our context, the use of TM practices and the type of TM practice used (inclusive or exclusive)). Mor Barak’s (2000) work illustrates the interplay between personal and organizational dimensions and the way that perceived ‘fit’ significantly influences employees’ perceptions of inclusion. The degree of perceived inclusion is found to impact various outcomes such as individual well-being, job satisfaction, organisational commitment and task effectiveness. In a similar approach, Shore et al. (2011) emphasise individual perceptions and collective norms in relation to perceptions of inclusion/exclusion. Inclusiveness is defined as employees’ perceptions of belongingness and uniqueness within the work group (or, in the context of TM, perceptions of exclusion from the ‘talent pool’).

Such work offers a provocative research agenda relating to the antecedents of inclusion. Important questions require empirical attention, focusing on the extent to which an inclusive climate (reflected by an agenda of equal opportunities and diversity practices and implementation); inclusive leadership (expressed by management philosophy and values, strategies and decisions) and inclusive practices (those that promote satisfaction of belongingness and support of unique needs and diversity) influence organizational decision-making. Further work is needed from an HRD perspective to examine the intersections of TM decisions and practices associated with inclusivity.

These brief examples illustrate how, drawing on these theories and other appropriate frameworks such as identity-formation theory (Alvesson, 2010; Brown, 2015) and resource theory dependency (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) important HRD empirical analysis of TM might be undertaken to learn and understand more about the HRD consequences of TM. Utilising

such frameworks would enable both those classified as talented and those who find themselves outside of this grouping in public, private and non-profit sector organizations; in different sizes of organization and in diverse cultural and national contexts to be included within future TM analyses.

Talent management: A HRD research agenda

In this editorial we propose that TM is a phenomenon that requires rigorous empirical and conceptual attention from HRD scholars. We have illustrated the potential tension between TM and HRD outcomes, focusing on the issues arising from policies and rhetoric about equality and diversity management in organizations and the potential consequences of the implementation of TM practices. This example also provides a basis from which to propose different forms and methods of research enquiry that would make an important contribution to the HRD knowledge base and to the emerging scholarship of TM.

First, both ‘big data’ and workplace analytics provide new opportunities for HRD scholars to examine demographic and TM metrics at organizational and societal levels that might link and capture the associations between demography, TM practices; access to training and development; and team and organisational level performance outcomes. There is an opportunity here for HRD scholars to lead the way in investigation of the intersection of TM contingencies and their implications for workplace diversity, organizational performance outcomes and universalist principles related to ethics and organisational justice. Second, to redress the intensive focus of TM practice on ‘the talented’, and building on the work of Swailes (2013), we propose that HRD research address the perspective of those excluded from ‘talent pools’ – and in particular, to systematically examine whether there is an association between those included and excluded from these pools and workplace diversity. Third, we identify the need to compare and contrast patterns of HRD attention and resource allocation to

those identified as ‘talent’ in organizations with those who do not benefit from this attribution. Fourth, in a context of increasing globalization we propose HRD research into global talent management (e.g., Scullion, Collings & Caligiuri, 2010) to examine how ‘talent’ is understood and TM is operationalized in different societal and corporate contexts. Such analysis must be cognisant of implications for diversity, especially within the complex structures of multinational corporations (MNCs) . We urge IHRD scholars to attend to the intersection of corporate global TM policies with diversity and national HRD contexts in their countries of operation.

A range of different research methods and paradigms are appropriate to inform the HRD knowledge base in relation to TM. Multi-level and/or longitudinal analyses, workplace analytics as well as comparative and case study research strategies, have the potential to enable a robust interrogation of the TM phenomenon.

Final thoughts

Since the mid-1990s TM has become established as a management practice and discourse with minimal critique from both practitioners and academics. Initial work in the HRD domain has begun (see, for example, Collings, 2014; Iles, Preece & Chuai, 2010; Nilsson & Ellstrom, 2012) but limited empirical attention has been paid to TM outcomes. In this editorial we argue for research into what we term the ‘shadow side’ of TM. In particular, we propose examination of the consequences of TM for workplace diversity. Without such analysis, the potential exists that efforts by a large number of public and private sector organizations, especially those based in North America and Europe over several decades to promote workplace diversity, could quickly be undermined. Not only does this raise ethical concerns but is also likely to jeopardize organizational performance and sustainability over the long-term, especially in an increasingly globalized work force. Therefore, in this editorial, we pose the question: Should TM carry with it a large print warning for organisations’ pursuit of

workplace diversity? Researchers can embark on answering these questions by drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of social identity; in-group/out group dynamics; and structuration briefly outlined in this editorial. These theoretical lenses can be used as a basis on which to place empirical investigations into the implications of TM policies - in particular, whether the policies are exclusionary or inclusionary for workplace diversity. HRD scholars are well-placed to examine the implications for employees' access to training and development opportunities, including opportunities for management and leadership education and training which can help ensure that existing inequalities are not replicated in the future.

References

- Alvesson, M. (2010). 'Self-doubters, strugglers, storytellers, surfers and others: Images of self-identities in organization studies' *Human Relations*, 63(2): 193-217.
- Ashforth, B.E. and Mael, F. (1989). 'Social Identity Theory and the Organisation' *Academy of Management Review*, 14(1): 20-39.
- Bell, M.P. (2012). *Diversity in organizations*. Mason, OH: South-Western, Cengage Learning.
- Brown, A. (2015). 'Identities and Identity Work in Organizations' *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 17(1): 20-40.
- Cappelli, P. (2008). *Talent on demand: Managing talent in an age of uncertainty*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Collings, D. (2014). Toward mature talent management: Beyond Shareholder Value. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 25(3), 301-319.
- Collings, D., Scullion, H. & Vaiman, V. (2015). 'Talent Management: Progress and Prospects', *Human Resource Management Review*, 25: 233-235.

Downs, Y. & Swailes, S. (2013). 'A capability approach to organizational talent management', *Human Resource Development International*, 16(3): 267-281.

Gallardo-Gallardo, E., Dries, N. and González-Cruz, T.F. (2013). 'What is the meaning of 'talent' in the world of work?' *Human Resource Management Review*, 23(4): 290-300.

Gelens, J., Dries, N., Hofmans, J. & Pepermans, R. (2013). The role of perceived organizational justice in shaping the outcomes of talent management: A research agenda. *Human Resource Management Review*, 23, 341-353.

Haddock-Millar, J. & Clutterbuck, D. (2015). 'Developing and retaining talent in the context of austerity: shifting the paradigms of exclusivity and linearity', Full Paper, University Forum for Human Resource Development Conference. University College Cork, Ireland, June 2015.

Harris, L. and Foster, C. (2010). 'Aligning talent management with approaches to equality and diversity; Challenges for UK public sector managers' *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 29(5): 422-435.

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J. and Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and Organizations: software of the mind: intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival*. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw Hill.

Iles, P., Chuai, X. and Preece, D. (2010). 'Talent Management and HRM in Multinational companies in Beijing: Definitions, differences and drivers' *Journal of World Business*, 45 (2): 179-189.

Iles, P., Chuai, X. and Preece, D. (2010). 'Talent management as a management fashion in HRD: towards a research agenda' *Human Resource Development International*, 13(2): 124-145.

Joshi, A., Liao, H. and Jackson, S.E. (2006). 'Cross-level Effects of Workplace Diversity on Sales Performance and Pay' *The Academy of Management Journal*, 49 (3): 459-481.

Kuchinke, L. (2012). 'Human flourishing as a core value for HRD in and age of global mobility'. In *Human Resource Development as We Know It: Speeches that Have Shaped the Field*, edited by M. Lee, 292-305. Abington: Routledge.

Kulik, C.T. & Roberson, L. (2008). Diversity initiative effectiveness: what organizations can (and cannot) expect from diversity recruitment, diversity training, and formal mentoring programmes. In A.P. Brief (Ed.), *Diversity at work: Cambridge companions to management* (pp. 265-317). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, R.E. and Heckman, R.J. (2006). 'Talent management: A critical review' *Human Resource Management Review*, 16(2): 139-154.

Lubitzsh, G., Devine, M., Orbea, A. and Glanfield, P.(2007). *Talent Management – A Strategic Imperative*. Berkhamsted: Ashridge Consulting.

Mavin, S. (2015). 'Women Performing as Leaders: Gendered Bodies and Appearance', Working Paper, University Forum for Human Resource Development Conference. University College Cork, Ireland, June 2015.

Minbaeva, D. and Collings, D.G. (2013). 'Seven myths of global talent management' *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 24(9):1762-1776.

Mor Barak, M. (2000) 'The Inclusive Workplace: An Ecosystems Approach to Diversity Management' *Social Work*, 45(4): 339-353.

Nilsson, S. & Ellstrom, P-E (2012). 'Employability and talent management: challenges for HRD practices' *European Journal of Training and Development*, 36(1): 26-45.

O'Connor, E. & Crowley-Henry, M. (2015). 'Exclusive Talent Management, Perceived Organizational Justice & Employee Engagement: Bridging the Literature', Working Paper, University Forum for Human Resource Development Conference. University College Cork, Ireland, June 2015.

Ortlieb, R. and Sieben, B. (2013). 'Employment strategies and business logic: Why do companies employ ethnic minorities?' *Group & Organization Management*, 38(4): 480-511.

Pfeffer, J. and Salancik, G. R. (1978). *The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective*, New York: Harper & Row.

Pinnington, A., Macklin, R. and Campbell, T. (2007). *Human Resource Management: Ethics and Employment*, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Reynolds, K. J., Turner, J.C. and Haslam, S. A. (2003). 'Social identity and self-categorization and theories' contribution to understanding identification, salience and diversity in teams and organizations', In J. T. Polzer (ed.), *Identity Issues in Groups (Research on managing groups and teams Vol 5)*, United Kingdom: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Scullion, H., Collings, D. & Caligiuri, P. (2010). 'Global Talent Management: Introduction to Special Issue' *Journal of World Business*, 45: 105-108.

Scott, K., Heathcote, J. & Gruman, J. (2011). The diverse organization: finding gold at the end of the rainbow. *Human Resource Management*, 50(6), 735-755.

Shore, L.M., Randel, A.E., Chung, B.G., Dean, M.A., Ehrhart, K.H. and Singh, G. (2011). 'Inclusion and Diversity in Work Groups: A Review and Model for Future Research'. *Journal of Management*, 37(4): 1262-1289.

Sorcher, M. and Brant, J. (2002). 'Are you picking the right leaders?' *Harvard Business Review* 80(2): 78-85

Swales, S., Downs, Y. & Orr, K. (2014). 'Conceptualising inclusive talent management: potential, possibilities and practicalities' *Human Resource Development International*, 17(5): 529-544.

Swales, S. (2013). 'The ethics of talent management' *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 22(1): 33-46.

Tajfel, H. & Turner, J.C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In S. Worchel & W. Austin (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*: 33-47. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Theodorakopoulos, N. & Budhwar, P. (2015). Guest Editors' Introduction: diversity and inclusion in different work settings: emerging patterns, challenges, and research agenda. *Human Resource Management*, 54(2), 177-197.

Tsui, A. S. (2013). 'Making Research Engaged: Implications for HRD Scholarship' *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 24(2): 137-143.

Von Bergen, C.W., Soper, B. and Parnell, J.A. (2005). 'Workplace diversity and organisational performance' *Equal Opportunities International*, 24(3/4): 1-16.

Warren, A.K. (2009). *Cascading Gender Biases, Compounding Effects: An Assessment of Talent Management Systems*. Available from:

http://www.catalyst.org/system/files/Cascading_Gender_Biases_Compounding_Effects_An_Assessment_of_Talent_Management_Systems.pdf [Accessed 1st July 2015]

Werner, J.M. (2014) Human resource development ≠ human resource management: So what is it? *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 25(2),

Maura Sheehan is Professor of International Management at Edinburgh Napier University. She is an associate editor of Human Resource Development Quarterly and Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance. She has published widely on HRM and performance, international HRM, and labour markets. She was an EU Marie Sklodowska-Curie Fellow, 2009-2012 and is currently heading an EU work package on self-employment under the EU-funded Strategic Transitions for Youth Labour in Europe (STYLE) project.

Valerie Anderson is Reader in Human Resource Development at University of Portsmouth, UK. She is an associate editor of Human Resource Development Quarterly. She has published on a wide range of HRD and Strategic HRD issues including: ethics, managerial coaching, experiential learning and offshore outsourcing. Her current research projects focus on International HRD; 'learning gain'; career and professional identity and doctoral education.