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Talent in practice: an equation of high potential, performance, and mobility

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Abstract

Effective identification of talent is a central element of talent management. Talk of talent often involves two distinct, yet interrelated dimensions: performance and potential. The talent management literature has however provided limited consideration both conceptually and empirically concerning the delimitation between these two dimensions. This paper looks to address this lacuna by examining how the talent construct is operationalised in practice. It considers two key research questions; what indicators of performance and potential are applied by key organisational stakeholders in discerning what talent is? What, if any, other factors impact talent designation? We adopt a multilevel case study design encompassing 73 interviews with senior organisational leaders in three multinational hotel corporations. Our findings demonstrate that the dimensions of high performance and high potential were commonly spoken about when referring to talent. However, there was a substantial lack of clarity around potential with a conflation between it and performance common. Moreover, mobility emerged as a critical contextual factor in being labelled as talent or not. The paper contributes to talent management scholarship by providing a more nuanced approach in understanding how talent is enacted in practice in an underexplored empirical context.

Keywords

Talent, identification, talent management, performance, potential, mobility, hotels, hospitality industry, multilevel case study

Introduction

Talent management (TM) involves significant organisational investment with respect to the processes and practices utilised to identify, develop, reward, and deploy talent (Døving & Nordhaug, 2010). Developing an understanding of what is meant by talent within organisational boundaries and establishing an appropriate process for identifying it thereafter is of great importance to effective TM (McDonnell, Hickey, & Gunnigle, 2011; Mellahi & Collings, 2010).

The TM literature provides little in terms of empirical evidence that illuminates the operationalisation of talent in practice (Church & Rotolo, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015). Indeed, papers often fail to set out how talent is defined (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.,* 2015; Jooss, McDonnell, Burbach, & Vaiman, 2019; McDonnell, Collings, Mellahi, & Schuler, 2017), and where it does, it rarely tends to move away from simply referring to high potentials and/or high performers at an aggregate level without considering individual indicators of potential and performance in detail (McDonnell *et al.,* 2017; Thunnissen, 2016). Too often the literature takes a loose assumption of a shared meaning and consensus on what talent is. Notwithstanding the strong discourse and emphasis placed on needing to possess potential to be viewed as talent, the TM literature has been relatively silent on how organisations pinpoint this (Dries & Pepermans, 2007, 2012; Pepermans, Vloeberghs, & Perkisas, 2003). Performance often appears central to perspectives of potential which appears inherently flawed because high and low performance does not necessarily correspond to high and low potential respectively (Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014). Additionally, performance is current or past, but potential is a future state (Silzer & Church, 2009a). Consequently, if potential is in effect performance, then the validity of this assessment to determine one's talent status must be questioned (Dries & Pepermans, 2012). While some scholars have suggested that TM is now moving from an infancy to an adolescent state (Collings, Scullion, & Vaiman, 2011), we contend that this is premature talk without greater understanding of its most central construct – talent.

Our overarching aim is to examine how the talent construct is operationalised in practice within the hospitality industry. Perspectives of talent in this industry may bring a more low-skilled, value-limiting, less important attitude to mind vis-à-vis high technology or human capital intensive industries (e.g. professional services or biotechnology). However, this depiction is problematic because talent is no less important owing to regular difficulties in attracting and retaining people (D'Annunzio-Green, 2018; Sheehan, Grant, & Garavan, 2018).

As such, one important contribution the paper makes is providing empirical evidence from an un-heralded and under-researched industry. More specifically, the paper addresses two research questions: First, what indicators of performance and potential are applied by key organisational stakeholders (i.e. those involved in talent identification) in discerning what talent is? Second, what, if any, factors impact the talent designation? To adress these questions, we use a qualitative, multilevel case study method consisting of 73 interviews at corporate and business unit levels of multinational hotel corporations (MNHCs). By undertaking an in-depth case approach within the luxury hotel industry, we advance knowledge on how business leaders operationalise the talent construct. The multi-stakeholder perspective is important as meaning may not be as shared and consistent as often believed (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2019). Through depicting the dimensions of performance and potential when constructing talent, we contribute to the literature by providing a more nuanced understanding of how talent is given meaning in practice. We argue that our research identifies the need for scholars and professionals to more closely consider to whom talent refers and what talent means for them.

Human capital theory and deliberating talent

TM has been described as a phenomenon (Hambrick, 2007) with no single theory able to capture the scope of the entire concept (Dries, Cotton, Bagdadli, & Oliveira, 2014). This raises the question of what theory may aid us in understanding the construct of interest here – talent. The central premise of human capital theory is that investing in human resources (HR) can lead to a source of competitive advantage (Wright, Coff, & Moliterno, 2014). While economists often refer to traditional forms of capital such as financial and physical capital, human capital is an additional and intangible form of capital that helps to explain organisational outcomes (Blair, 2011). Human capital can be defined as 'the knowledge, skills, and abilities embodied in a person' (Dokko & Jiang, 2017, p.117). Additional factors such as personality, motivation, and values have also been argued as needing to be included when depicting human capital (Ployhart & Cragun, 2017).

Empirical research shows that human capital contributes to an organisation's performance (Crook, Todd, Combs, Woehr, & Ketchen, 2011), thereby making it a valuable asset (Nahapiet, 2011). Human capital is broken down into general and firm-specific forms (Becker, 1964). General human capital is more inclusive in nature and refers to broad knowledge, skills, and abilities which can be gained through education and professional experience (Wright *et al.*, 2014). In contrast, firm-specific human capital is a more exclusive form in that it is only useful in a particular organisational context and encompasses knowledge

of processes and systems as well as trust and commitment among employees (Collings, 2014; Dokko & Jiang, 2017). This may be gained through, for example, focused training and development in the organisation (Wright *et al.*, 2014). Firm-specific human capital is believed to have a considerably higher impact on organisational performance than general human capital (Groysberg, 2010; Huckman & Pisano, 2006) and given its nature it is not easily tradeable in the market (Wright & McMahan, 2011).

TM scholarship has assigned varied meanings to the term talent. While consensus on a definition of talent is not evident, nor is that a necessary ideal, there appears to be a strong focus in an organisational context as referring to high performers and/or high potentials (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017). Firms often use the traditional nine-box matrix to assess the two dimensions of performance and potential (Jooss, Burbach, & Ruël, 2019; Schuler, 2015). Consequently, talent is often defined as 'those individuals who are currently or have the potential to contribute differentially to firm performance' (adapted from adapted from adapted from adapted from Cappelli & Keller, 2017, p.28). This is in alignment with human capital theory which focuses on the 'capacities for producing outcomes' (e.g. firm performance in this case) as opposed to the knowledge, skills, and abilities as such (Ployhart, Nyberg, Reilly, & Maltarich, 2014, p.7).

The first dimension, performance, is often considered within the context of an organisation's performance management system (Schleicher *et al.*, 2018). High performance usually refers to 'exceptionally high quality and/or an exceptionally large quantity of output' (O'Boyle & Kroska, 2017, p.43), and hence, it is past and present oriented. To assess performance, companies may measure some or all factors of the balanced scorecard which uses several indicators such as financial, customer, internal business, and innovation metrics (Kaplan & Norton, 1992). While the balanced scorecard focuses predominantly on quantitative measures, a discussion of demonstrated behaviours provides details on performance from a more qualitative viewpoint (Boyatzis, 2008). Additionally, a competency framework with both qualitative (discussions) and quantitative (rankings) components can provide further insights on performance (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). A hybrid approach to performance may focus on inputs, actual behaviours, and outcomes (Shield, 2016). While a variety of performance indicators seem required to capture this multifaceted dimension, in practice, performance measures are often too narrow and focus on financial outcomes which ignore the behaviours used to achieve outcomes (Cascio, 2012). From a value creation perspective, high performance is the result of human capital investments made by staff (Kehoe, Lepak, & Bentley, 2018).

The second dimension, potential, appears more vague which must in part be linked to the idea that it is a future-oriented state. Potential has been referred to as 'the promise or possibility of an individual becoming something more than what he is currently' (Silzer & Church, 2009a, p.214), and 'the probable upper bound trajectory of what an individual may achieve during their career' (Finkelstein, Costanza, & Goodwin, 2018, p.4). Individuals with high potential may not yet possess what is needed and as we cannot see into the future, we cannot measure it, but there are indicators that they will develop these components in the future (MacRae & Furnham, 2014). Consequently, this may be particularly relevant for firm-specific human capital which must be developed once an individual joined an organisation (Boon, Eckardt, Lepak, & Boselie, 2018). Within a specific environment, an individual may be viewed more or less able and likely to achieve and deliver more for the organisation. It seems that the dimension of potential necessitates a broad, long-term perspective as opposed to a narrow short-term, performance-based perspective.

Organisations tend to operationalise potential by role (the potential to take on a leadership role), level (the ability to move into a higher position than the current role), breadth (the capability to acquire a broader scope), or record (consistent demonstration of exceptional performance) (Silzer & Church, 2009a). While such approaches are helpful, there still remains a need to determine how decisions are made on who can take on such higher-order roles, a higher position, a broader scope, and so forth. Indicators or measures of potential appear even more limited vis-à-vis performance (Pepermans *et al.*, 2003). The literature subsumes indicators of potential into four main clusters (Dries & Pepermans, 2012): analytical skills, learning agility, drive, and emergent leadership (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

Research suggests that indicators such as intelligence and personality traits will not radically change over time, and thus, could be among the best predictors of future outcomes and might play a central role when discussing potential (Dries & Pepermans, 2012; Schmidt & Hunter, 2004). Finkelstein et al. (2018, p.4) further differentiate between cognitive abilities, social competence, personality, and growth and learning competencies while still acknowledging potential as a 'slippery concept.' Similarly, Silzer and Church (2009b) distinguish between three dimensions. They view cognitive abilities and personality traits as foundational dimensions of potential as they are relatively stable. In addition, they refer to learning and motivation as growth dimensions which are relatively consistent, but can be

strengthened if someone has personal interests (Dries, Vantilborgh, & Pepermans, 2012). Finally, they view leadership, performance, and technical expertise as career dimensions which relate to a specific career path (Silzer & Dowell, 2009). In all of these models, growth and learning factors such as learning agility, developmental readiness, and typical intellectual engagement play a central role of how potential is viewed. This is the most critical distinction to performance indicators and emphasises the future orientation of potential (Finkelstein *et al.,* 2018).

The above outlines key debates around performance and potential and how they feed into the way talent is constructed in practice. To date, contextual factors that may impact the talent designation have barely received mention (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). This is somewhat surprising given that context will likely impact how talent is identified in practice. Organisational contexts such as the industry, HR strategies, internal policies, a learning and development climate, support from supervisors and peers, and systems for feedback may all be expected to impact on talent designation (Finkelstein *et al.,* 2018). Therefore, an individual does not necessarily own or control their talent status in an organisation. Individuals do not possess full agency over this no matter their performance or potential. For example, the industry or HR strategies may determine what type of talent is sought after and support from supervisors and peers may result in increased visibility in the organisation, which in turn may impact one's likelihood of receiving a positive talent status. Other factors that may influence talent designation are the perceptions and prototypes about future leaders and impression management (Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013). These factors might influence the designation in addition or in spite of actual indicators of performance and potential (Finkelstein *et al.,* 2018). In effect, such factors may heavily dominate or have a more indirect impact on one's designation.

Methodology

Research context

The hospitality industry has received exceptionally limited attention by TM scholars (notable exceptions include: D'Annunzio-Green & Teare (2018); Ramdhony & D'Annunzio-Green (2018)). We argue this needs to be redressed given its significant impact on the global economy, while also representing one of the fastest expanding industries with a concurrent high demand for talent (Bharwani & Butt, 2012). For example, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2018) states that in 2017 one out of every ten jobs was provided by the hospitality industry which comes on the back of a record number of international travellers

(1.3 billion) and with a growth rate of seven per cent predicted. The unique nature of this typical business-to-consumer industry is the elevated level of interaction between the guest and staff in providing the service in a 24/7 environment (Grissemann, Plank, & Brunner-Sperdin, 2013; Pizam & Shani, 2009). Ramdhony and D'Annunzio-Green (2018) contend that guest satisfaction is one of the key differences between hospitality and other industries, and hotel organisations frequently claim that talent is the key differentiator in the industry (Bharwani & Talib, 2017). However, most hotel companies continue to struggle to attract, identify, develop, and retain key talent (D'Annunzio-Green & Teare, 2018). D'Annunzio-Green (2018) asserts that hospitality organisations must be more efficient in inter-relating the processes of identification, development, and retention of talent.

Because of a poor industry image, turnover and dropout rates in the hospitality industry are much higher than in other industries (Davidson & Wang, 2011). Studies show that employees in the hospitality industry leave for various reasons including a lack of; compensation, commitment, trust, financial incentives, job security, and career progression. In addition, an excessive workload and work-life imbalance factor in (Deery & Jago, 2015). According to People1st (2015), 47 per cent of the workforce is employed only on a part-time basis and they estimate a global labour turnover cost of £274 million in the industry. Therefore, TM is a concept of importance although it may look differently to other industries given the profile of challenges and operations (Hein & Riegel, 2012).

Research design

The paper draws its findings from three qualitative case studies. The case studies were selected by initially reviewing the TOP 30 World Luxury Index of the most sought-after luxury hotel brands in 2014 (Digital Luxury Group & Laaroussi) which were managed by 18 MNHCs. Our focus was on luxury hotels due to possessing the highest standards of service which requires higher-level skills (Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011). We applied two criteria for case selection: (1) a global presence (defined as operating multiple hotels across continents) in order to enable the wider project examine practice across regions, and (2) a portfolio of at least one luxury brand. This left 14 MNHCs, of which 3 agreed to participate in the study. The participating MNHCs are headquartered in the Americas, Asia Pacific (APAC), and Europe-Middle-East-Africa (EMEA), and thus, referred to in the following as American Hotel Group, APAC Hotel Group, and EMEA Hotel Group.

We undertook 73 semi-structured interviews incorporating 15 countries across the 3 MNHCs. These interviews took on average 52 minutes and were conducted face-to-face (49%),

via Skype (44%), and by phone (7%). Data collection occurred at both the corporate and business unit levels with Table 2 providing key information on all interviewees. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. A senior HR leader at each of the three MNHCs acted as a gatekeeper for access to interviewees. We asked the gatekeeper to provide us with a mix of individuals at different levels, in various functions, and across geographical areas to enable us to develop a comprehensive perspective on the operationalisation of TM in the case organisations. To ensure anonymity, each person was assigned a title rather than utilising names (e.g. Head of HR A1 stands for the first participant at American Hotel Group).

Insert Table 2 here

Data analysis

The interview questions were informed from an extensive review of the TM literature. A semi-structured guide (see Appendix A) was developed around several key themes with a view to obtaining a more nuanced understanding of how talent was identified in practice. This approach allowed interviewees flexibility around matters they felt especially important (Bell, 2014). The interviews were shaped by how the interviewees framed the topic under investigation (Bryman, 2016). However, the researcher regularly asked follow-up questions for clarification and greater elaboration to gain more insights about how talent was given meaning in the organisation (Berg & Lune, 2017). This has been argued as especially important for a construct commonly viewed as considerably subjective in nature (Wiblen, Dery, & Grant, 2012). The primary areas of focus included: an understanding of talent and the TM concept, the development of talent strategies, and the criteria applied to identify talent.

We adopted thematic analysis following the recommended process of Braun and Clarke (2006). To assist this, we utilised a qualitative data analysis software package – NVivo. Our thematic analysis involved six stages (see Appendix B for the codebook which includes the coding framework and the established lists at each stage). Stage 1 consisted of familiarisation with the interview data which included listening to the recordings, transcribing, repeated reading of the data, and taking notes of initial ideas. Stage 2 saw us move to the creation of the initial open codes. This involved consideration of all individual indicators for references to how talent was given meaning and operationalised. This was utilised as a 'start list' for further analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p.58). This first set of codes allowed us to organise extracts and break down the transcripts. Following an in-depth analysis of all trancripts, we refocused the analysis at the broader level to create emerging themes such as 'performance' and

'potential' (stage 3). Then, all coded data extracts were reviewed, which included splitting, combining, and discarding themes. We found similarities and divergences across the three case organisations and within the individual firms which we highlight throughout our findings (stage 4). The fifth stage involved data reduction where we identified the essence of what each theme was about and applied a holistic analysis, i.e. setting each theme in the context of the entire case. Finally, we connected the defined themes which led to the generation of the paper.

Findings

Case A: American Hotel Group

Performance-potential approach

American Hotel Group adopts an exclusive approach to TM in that the focus is firmly on 'top talent' such as heads of departments and above (i.e. directors, hotel managers, general managers (GMs), and corporate roles). During bi-annual talent review or calibration meetings at corporate and subsidiary levels, employees are plotted in a traditional nine-box matrix with two indicators: performance and potential. Officially, *performance* is assessed by analysing key business indicators (financial, customer, quality, and engagement metrics) and by reviewing the established competency framework which consists of five behavioural traits of leaders. These performance measures were consistently referred to by all interviewees. In contrast, no formal process is in place to determine *potential* despite being viewed as vital. The lack of clear terminology around, and indicators for potential led to a broad range of views of what potential may entail, for example, the drive to 'do more' (Rooms-Division Director A12), the ability 'to grow' (Cluster HR Directors A15 and A30; Hotel Manager A24), and the ability 'to learn' (Cluster HR Director A21). Cluster HR Director A15 contended that they 'can only – for the lack of a better word – gamble' to determine potential, and Cluster HR Director A17 argued that potential 'is a sense, an opinion, perhaps subjective.' While the lack of a formal process and clarity of meaning was evident, it did not appear as a concern for many business unit leaders as the view was that employees with potential will 'automatically come on the radar' (GM A23).

> When you have somebody in front of you where you say, look, he is going to make it further, we track those, but there is no formal system. (Cluster HR Director A28)

The Head of HR A1, the Head of TM A20, and the Regional Head of HR A2 attempted to distinguish between performance and potential. Their interpretations display commonalities around exemplifying different attitudes and behaviours, in particular, learning agility and a

growth mind-set, but also demonstrate disunity as to whether, for example, the demonstration of values is part of performance or potential.

> An employee with high performance is someone who regularly exceeds expectations, exceeds goals, and lives the values of the organisation. Potential is more about growth potential. How far can I stretch that person? Has the person a certain learning agility? Is the person interested in learning, can take on additional assignments, is motivated for growth, and is flexible? (Head of HR A1)

> Performance is about 'what', your results and your accomplishments, and potential is a little bit about the 'how.' Do you bring up the best in others? Are you constantly learning? Are you agile in new situations? Do you demonstrate our values? It is a judgement call that I as a leader make on you: Your growth mind-set, learning agility, and responsiveness to development. (Head of TM A20)

> When you look at future potential, you will see that there is no clear cut from performance because if somebody delivers an excellent performance right now and you transmit this into the next role... Future potential is really the ability to do a job on another level. Is somebody ready to be promoted, or does somebody have the potential to be promoted? (Regional Head of HR A2)

The significant overlap between performance and potential raises questions around the validity of the established talent identification process. Some interviewees were unable to distinguish between the two dimensions (e.g. Cluster GM A3; Cluster HR Director A17; Hotel Manager A24). For example, Hotel Manager A24 focused on one of the performance indicators, that is, the firm's competency framework (i.e. values and leadership profile) as a decisive factor as to whether an employee will be able to grow within the company.

> I think that the consistent approach is that there must be a specific leadership profile and that a leader must adhere to the company values. Those values are core principles, who we are and what our DNA is. I think at the end of the day, when you look at the end product of who is a general manager, it is someone that possesses the company culture. (Hotel Manager A24)

Mobility: a central role in talent designation

International mobility was raised as a key factor that impacts the high potential rating and subsequently the 'top talent' designation (Head of HR A1; Regional Head of HR A11; Head of TM A20). According to the Head of HR A22, transferring talent around hotels and regions in the firm is a key component of the organisation's plan to identify and grow talent

strategically. Failure to be mobile was viewed as being hugely detrimental to one's likelihood to gain 'top talent' status. Mobility was also regarded as vital in filling critical positions and to ensure that internal key talent act as role models of the corporate culture across all subsidiaries (Cluster HR Directors A19 and A30).

> It is kind of an expectation now at certain levels if you are going to move up in the organisation, we are going to put you in a different country, role, or brand at least, and that may require you to actually leave where you are and move somewhere else. (Head of TM A20)

> I think mobility is one of the crucial points for our business. If I am hiring wonderful staff but they are not happy to move to open another property, was I successful? No. I will not be able to spread our DNA. (Cluster HR Director A19)

Case B: APAC Hotel Group

Performance-potential approach

APAC Hotel Group assesses all employees as part of their approach to TM and identifies talent based on two key dimensions: performance and potential. In contrast to American Hotel Group, a weighting system for the *performance* dimension is in place. This encompasses a competency framework assessed via an appraisal (50%) and key business indicators such as financial, customer, productivity, and quality metrics (50%). The competency framework consists of 14 leadership competencies and a range of functional competencies depending on the role in the organisation. *Potential* is defined as 'the ability to move into a higher or more complex position' (Head of TM B3). This approach includes three types of potential: 'at potential' refers to employees working at the appropriate level, 'good potential' means employees are able to move up at least one level, and 'high potential' refers to employees who can move up at least two levels. Consequently, the firm focuses on functional competencies required for a particular position and level as determinants of potential. While citing the current definition of potential, the Head of TM B3 also referred to it as 'work in progress' and questioned whether 'that is detailed enough and scientific enough.'

> I think now people rate reasonably well in terms of performance, but we have a lack of clarity on the definition of potential. (Head of TM B3)

Similarly, the Head of HR B11 urged for a 'clear understanding' of what constitutes potential and described current discussions of the term as being 'muddy.' Perhaps unsurprisingly given the Head of TM B3 citing insufficient clarity, we found that other

corporate and business unit leaders varied widely in their interpretations of what potential meant. While the Head of HR Operations B6 referred to it simply as 'growing careers', the Head of HR B11 focused on the importance of cultural 'fit' and 'commitment' towards the organisational plans particularly in an industry like luxury hospitality that requires high-end service.

> I think the more you move into the service sector, and the more you move into luxury certainly, becoming part of the fabric of the organisation to deliver on the organisation's mission and vision and goals is necessary. Those who are motivated to do that, need to be identified. (Head of HR B11)

GM B15 introduced his own approach to classifying potential which at best, appears vague and questionable. In order to identify potential, he shares management books with employees. He asserted that employees who engage with the books tend to have a higher level of drive and interest in growing into a managerial position, and thus show potential.

> I give them books, you know, small books like 'My iceberg is melting', 'Who moved my cheese', and 'The one-minute manager.' You are giving them those books and they are talking about it, whereas other ones are just putting them in their bag and leaving them there and hoping you will never ask a question about them. (GM B15)

While a few interviewees were aware of the official definition as expressed at the corporate level (e.g. Learning and Development Director B1; HR Director B18), they were unable to describe components of potential. GM B23 noted that 'no defined systematic process' was in existence. As a result, several interviewees equated performance and potential or clearly drew decisions of potential based on performance. Others referred to 'developing a skills-set' (Hotel Manager B7), 'offering more' (Hotel Manager B20), and 'demonstrating learning agility' (HR Director B12). Learning and Development Manager B8 emphasised the importance of a cultural fit since APAC Hotel Group has a very strong Asian influence, which the organisation considers as a key brand differentiator. However, descriptions of what cultural fit consisted of may be best described as ambiguous. For example, Learning and Development Manager B8 referred to values such as 'humility and graciousness', Food and Beverage Director B13 discussed cultural fit in the context of 'service culture and standards', and GM B14 contended that it should be assessed based on 'behavioural and personality traits.' This demonstrates the overlap with some of the behavioural competencies used as indicators of performance.

Mobility: a central role in talent designation

With limited properties within country locations, international mobility emerged as a critical component of the talent construct in the firm. The Head of TM B3 asserted that there was a lack of internationally mobile talent as opposed to a lack of people. International mobility has been set as a requirement for a high potential rating because there is minimal scope to move up more than two ranks due to limited higher level opportunities (Chief HR Officer B17). The Head of Operations B18 noted the importance of international mobility particularly at a senior management level and in areas such as the spa and food and beverage.

> We try to move the general managers every five to seven years, and we want different types of experiences. If they run a big city hotel, we would love for them to be in a resort hotel or a smaller intimate high-profile hotel. Food and beverage managers focus on high-volume restaurants versus high-end Michelin-starred restaurants, we try to move them every two years or so. (Head of Operations B18)

The importance of mobility was supported by leaders across business units who asserted that being mobile and flexible regarding location increases the chances of being viewed as someone with high potential and consequently as talent (e.g. Food and Beverage Director B2; Hotel Manager B20; GM B21). Interestingly, Hotel Manager B20 indicated that employees do not seem to be fully aware of this importance:

> Within our destinations there are a lot of areas where people do not want to go, I will give you an example, one would have been my old property. Of course, on a curriculum vitae it is great to see the A tier properties, but where will the growth be coming from in the future? Maybe the talent is not fully aware of the role that they must play in the process. (Hotel Manager B20)

The Head of HR B22 substantiated the importance of 'global talent mobility' when talking through their use of the nine-box matrix:

> We escalate those who have that global capacity and global interest and mobility, they are raising to the surface when we are talking talent globally. You could have somebody who is high performing and has low potential. Fantastic performers but they are not mobile. So, what are we considering them for: a broader role, a cluster role, a global role. We have those discussions, but do they fit in the high potential box? No, because they are not mobile. (Head of HR B22)

Case C: EMEA Hotel Group

Performance-potential approach

At EMEA Hotel Group, all employees are reviewed as part of the firm's approach to TM, and talent is defined as employees who demonstrate 'performance that adds value to the business and have the potential to grow' (Head of TM C15). The organisation uses the nine-box matrix for this purpose. *Performance* is based on a competency framework (100% weighting for line employees and supervisors; 40% for managers) and key business indicators (60% weighting for managers). This framework consists of nine competencies focusing on three areas: values, customers, and innovation. The business indicators are mainly financial metrics but also include customer satisfaction and quality scores. In contrast, *potential* is a less understood factor, but there were explicit attempts to depict it as critical to talent designation. In an effort to provide greater clarity on what potential entails, the organisation developed a toolkit with three levels of potential and a 10-question assessment.

> Potential is defined as the ability to move at least one leadership level higher than their current role within the next three to five years. Potential will be assessed by line managers using a predefined toolkit. The businesses may also include interventions like engagement scores and leadership assessments to identify potential. (Group TM C16)

The Head of TM C15 outlined the three levels of potential: 'low potential' refers to employees who could move to a higher or more complex position in more than three years, 'solid potential' means that employees could move to a higher or more complex position in one to three years, and 'high potential' refers to employees who could move to a higher or more complex position in less than one year. Consequently, the level was important, but so too was the period. This approach appears rather simple with a focus on functional competencies required for those higher-level positions. The question as to what rating someone receives in the nine-box matrix if no potential has been identified arose, i.e. the employee does not want to or is not able to move up at all. It seems that they would receive the same rating as someone who may move up in more than three years. In addition to the definition of potential, engagement scores or leadership assessments may be introduced at the discretion of the individual business units (Group Talent Manager C16). While these additional parameters could be useful in having a more robust construct of what potential entails, it is questionable whether individualised approaches across the various regions lead to an objective and appropriate measurement and to the establishment of a global talent pool in the firm which was so desired.

The corporate office further developed a ten-question assessment that business units ought to use to identify the level of potential. The ten polar questions refer to the following indicators of potential: the ability to take on a higher position (as per definition outlined above),

the existence of a particular useful skills-set for the organisation, learning agility, leadership ability, confidence and communication skills, a holistic business perspective, flexibility to move, and ambition to learn and grow. The number of 'yes' responses determines the type of potential: low (0-3), solid (4-7), or high (8-10) potential. Despite the assessment appearing to be quite straight forward, the implementation of it across subsidiaries seems complicated:

> I do not think business units are following it 100 per cent, it is something that just started last year (2016). Last time it was about presenting the guide, this year we will be more explicit and say, please consider these questions. Business unit managers are very busy people so if you do something that is too complicated with ten questions… (Head of TM C15)

Only one out of sixteen business unit leaders was aware of the corporate approach towards talent (Regional Head of TM C3 based at a business unit) and he criticised how this has been communicated and implemented across the business units. Particularly the difficulty in assessing potential was pointed out:

> Corporate has gone through years of filling out various documents whether that will be a nine-box matrix or a spreadsheet to actually identify whether someone is high potential. I think people tend to just not think enough about it. What criteria you are using to define potential, that is the struggle. (Regional Head of TM C3)

While the Regional Head of TM C3 urged for a more structured approach, Regional Head of HR C5 was not convinced of a formal process believing that 'there is no way of measuring potential. You simply cannot do it.' All other interviewees either presented their own interpretations of what high potential may entail, for example, a willingness or ability to learn (HR Manager C7; GMs C9 and C13) or were not able to clearly distinguish between potential and performance (HR Directors C1, C11, and C14; Hotel Manager C12).

Mobility: a central role in talent designation

Here, international mobility was viewed as an important factor that impacts on one's talent status particularly as some subsidiaries are in remote destinations and in unique cultural contexts (Head of TM C15; Group Talent Manager C16).

> If you ask me what the reason for not having enough internal talent is – the reason is mobility. We have certain markets where it is so difficult for people to get to, Maldives is one example, you can be a hotel manager at the Maldives tomorrow, but if you are

> married and you have kids, you cannot go, there are a lot of restrictions about that. We do not have the internal base to make these transfers easy and fast. (Head of TM C15)

Mobility was an integral element of the organisation's strategy to identify and develop key 'internal talent' who is willing to move internationally (HR Director C6). These employees were viewed as key in acting as brand ambassadors across destinations. However, there also exists a more critical view on the validity of mobility as an indicator for talent designation as individual circumstances significantly affect the level of mobility. This is particularly relevant for employees with spouses, children, or eldery parents.

> People talk about mobility all the time and everybody being mobile. Everybody is not mobile, and that is complete fallacy, I think you are at a certain stage in your life and it suits you personally to be mobile, but once you got perhaps a family or a spouse who also got a wonderful job and you got children in school, mobility is much more challenging. (Regional Head of HR C5)

Discussion and conclusions

This paper examined how talent is operationalised in practice by internal stakeholders involved in the talent identification process in three MNHCs. Specifically, we reviewed how actual talent designation came about. Through the in-depth case study methodology, we were able to unearth that in the organisational context, talent was predominantly viewed as a two-dimensional construct including performance and potential but mobility emerged as a crucial factor in final talent designation.

Insert Figure 1 here

Figure 1 illustrates the talent designation in these MNHCs. Knowledge, skills, and abilities are presented as talent inputs making up the organisational human capital. The dimension of performance tended to incorporate two clear components across organisations, i.e. key business performance indicators and the organisational competency framework. Stakeholders across the three organisations demonstrated a strong awareness of the approach towards these components of performance.

A key finding of this study is the lack of clarity around the second dimension of talent - potential. This is important as on a broad level, interviewees regularly spoke about how important high potential was to being labelled a talent. Yet, vagueness, subjectivity, inconsistency, and a lack of familiarity were present when referring to the dimension of potential. The current study demonstrates a significant divergence between stakeholders at all

levels and across the three organisations in respect to how potential is treated in practice. This is despite APAC Hotel Group and EMEA Hotel Group having official definitions of potential and EMEA Hotel Group presenting official indicators of potential. The established definitions of potential certainly intimated that a long-term, future perspective must be embedded in the evaluation of potential. Silzer and Church (2009a) state that most organisations define potential by role, level, or breadth. This is also borne out at a definitional level in the case organisations with the ability to move into a higher or more complex position. However, these tended to only be corporate definitions with awareness and understanding not easily discernible among business unit leaders and regularly it was difficult for interviewees to move beyond a superficial level of understanding.

A further important finding is the conflation between dimensions of performance and potential. At a subsidiary level, in particular, managers frequently equated potential with components of performance, which confirms the apparent incertitude in the literature concerning the delimitation between the assessment of performance and potential (Dries & Pepermans, 2012). The current study supports Pepermans *et al.*'s (2003) call for a clear demarcation of the two dimensions, but the evidence is mixed as to whether this exists in practice or how feasible it may be. While being evaluated as indicators of potential, the established competency frameworks also represented a key component of the performance dimension in the case organisations. Typical for the hospitality industry, several of these competencies focused heavily on attitudinal and behavioural aspects (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013). For example, drive and motivation were cited as well as a strong commitment to the organisation and a cultural fit by demonstrating the core values of the organisations. We argue that the notion of organisational commitment calls for special attention as there exists a decreasing commitment to specific organisations, particularly in a high-turnover industry such as hospitality (Collings, Scullion, & Dowling, 2009). While the findings confirm research that presents motivation to grow as an important indicator in considering potential for a higher or more complex role (Deal *et al.,* 2013; Silzer & Church, 2009a), it differs from Finkelstein *et al.*'s (2018) view of motivation as a moderator as opposed to a key indicator of potential. Importantly, this also raises the issue of visibility. There is the possible complication whereby those who are more visible to key decision-makers get identified. On the other hand, employees who display great drive but are far removed from visibility may not be considered.

In the three participating organisations, learning agility was the only indicator that was exclusively linked to the dimension of potential, and not to performance. In fact, all three organisations associated potential with the ability to grow. The evidence highlights the

longitudinal future oriented dimension of potential which has also been emphasised in the literature (Finkelstein *et al.,* 2018). In other words, potential ought to be assessed within the context of a talent's current and future development trajectory. This requires a change from traditional short-term selection views towards long-term talent planning for broader and more complex roles. In an industry that is considered low-skill in nature, interviewees believed that it is essential for individuals to expand their functional and behavioural competency set in order to progress their careers.

In the context of the second research question, mobility materialised as a critical contextual factor that had a significant impact on the actual talent designation (see Figure 1). Despite calls for greater integration of global mobility and TM (Collings, 2014), mobility has received little to no attention in the talent literature. We refer to mobility in this empirical context as the ability and willingness to move internationally. Corporate leaders in the case organisations require their key talent to be willing to move across countries and regions, and they are expected to have been exposed to other cultures. Arguably, this factor may be unique or especially important in the hospitality industry. Although not all interviewees alluded to mobility, it was evident that global mobility decisively enhanced an employee's talent designation and for some interviewees it was not possible to have talent status without being mobile. This was especially the case in the organisational set ups in APAC Hotel Group and EMEA Hotel Group which have a global presence but are smaller in nature with some remote destinations. Consequently, they required globally mobile talent. The status of an employee's mobility depends predominantly on variable personal circumstances. Given its prominent role in the talent designation, it seems critical to have accurate information about employees' mobility status. As organisations often lack awareness of individual level factors such as family situations, having a holistic picture of employees' mobility might be challenging.

Implications

From a theoretical perspective, we found support of the talent as capital school of thought. Human capital (i.e. knowledge, skills, and abilities) is required to develop the competencies which considerably impact the performance and potential dimensions. A combination of general human capital and firm-specific human capital is needed to achieve high performance and high potential ratings, and consequently be viewed as talent in the case organisations. Commitment and fit to an organisation were particularly relevant as critical firm-specific human capital. General human capital was closely linked to skills required in a higher or more complex role. On the other hand, the contextual factor of mobility plays a major role

in the talent construct and cannot be readily explained by human capital theory. This demonstrates that the construct of talent is not simply two-dimensional but requires consideration of broader contexts which arguably is difficult to capture with a single theory like human capital. The study contributes to a more nuanced approach to TM by depicting its individual dimensions whilst noting the critical role of mobility when constructing talent. It also highlights the importance of outputs of human capital actions as opposed to the more often discussed inputs of human capital (i.e. knowledge, skills, and abilities).

From a practical perspective, it was evident that a lack of clarity existed around the talent construct. The two-dimensional construct with the traditional nine-box matrix appears to be of little value if stakeholders are not able to grasp the individual components that make up the two dimensions of performance and potential and have some consensus around what is being evaluated. The nine-box matrix per se may not be a problem but the lack of clarity behind the dimensions is. Clarification of what constitutes each dimension and how this can be more objectively measured in a particular context seems important to provide some validity of talent identification. Having clear indicators of performance will assist organisations to identify their key contributors who can then be rewarded accordingly, while having stronger indicators of potential would permit organisations to establish a talent pool and to carry out more effective succession planning. Particularly for the dimension of potential, it seems critical to differentiate between a person's ability (learning agility) and a person's willingness (motivation) to grow in an organisation. Ultimately, 'potential for what?' is a question that companies need to ask themselves and the response should depend heavily on their own operating context and strategic intent. There is no one best way to identify talent, nor is there a singular type of talent. Instead organisations need to develop their own understanding of talent, seek appropriate ways to evaluate this, and aim for high levels of internal consistency in such decision-making. A failure to have greater clarity between relevant internal stakeholders on who is talent may only accentuate the likelihood of unfair talent decisions, investment in wrong employees, and talent being missed out on across operations. Assuming consistency of understanding amongst these stakeholders is also likely to be erroneous as different subsidiaries or units may have their own local strategies or desires that are somewhat removed from the headquarters (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2019). A more aligned communication strategy around the talent construct therefore appears at the very least to be necessary.

In addition, more clarity around who owns TM in an organisation appears vital. Despite their role in the case firms and having associated titles, for example, Head of TM, many spoke about a lack of understanding and greater need for clarity on what talent meant. Given their

role, it appeared ironic that such views were expressed and it was unclear who they were expecting to provide this enhanced clarity.

Limitations and future research

This paper is based on a multiple case study design. While this approach allowed a deep understanding of the dynamics, similarities, and indeed divergences in how talent was constructed in practice, no quantitative measures were collected to validate the approaches towards talent. We also did not capture the impact of different perspectives on individual, team, unit, and organisational outcomes. Moreover, we relied on referral sampling of the three gatekeepers of the study, the Head of HR A1, Head of TM B3, and Head of TM C15. The inclusion of employees as an additional key group of stakeholders would have been valuable to understand their view of the talent construct in the participating organisations.

Our findings point towards the need for caution in studies that oversimplify measurements of talent for the ease of survey administration. Overall, there is a need for additional investigations that tease out how performance and potential are measured and whether they are and can be truly discrete dimensions. Another avenue of further research may involve considering the extent to which the different factors that encompass these dimensions are innate or nurtured (Collings & Mellahi, 2013; Meyers, Van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013) and to what extent they are a function of the internal context in which the individual is employed. For example, an individual's learning agility may be significantly impacted, negatively or positively, by the support and opportunities available. There is also a need for longitudinal research designs to be employed whereby we consider the tracking and progress of talent over time. We ought to understand how accurate or successful such individuals are at different junctures in the future and whether mobility mediates the talent designation at different levels of analysis. The ability to tie different approaches to various individual and organisational outcomes would offer a real advance on our current understanding.

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