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Title	Tensions in talent identification: a multi-stakeholder perspective
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Publication date	2021-09-14
Original Citation	McDonnell, A., Skuza, A., Jooss, S. and Scullion, H. (2021) 'Tensions in talent identification: a multi-stakeholder perspective', International Journal of Human Resource Management, 34(6), pp.1132-1156. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2021.1976245
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2021.1976245 - 10.1080/09585192.2021.1976245
Rights	© 2021 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Accepted Manuscript of an item published by Taylor & Francis in International Journal of Human Resource Management on 14 September 2021, available online: https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2021.1976245
Download date	2026-11-07 03:42:01
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/11924

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Tensions in talent identification: a multi-level stakeholder perspective

Abstract

Research on how organisations identify talent in practice remains limited. Too often it appears that the most core construct – *talent* – is taken for granted in terms of how key stakeholders make sense of and give meaning to it in practice. This paper examines the talent definitions held by multiple organisational stakeholders and the criteria used in the practice of identification. Drawing from content analysis of over 200 interviews, our findings demonstrate substantial discrepancies between senior leaders' and talents' view on the meaning of talent within organisations. Moreover, there was little awareness of the identification criteria used by decision-makers that gives individuals the talent designation. Given the potential impact of this designation on employee attitudes, behaviours, and performance, the seemingly limited relationship between the meaning ascribed to talent and the identification criteria used in practice is likely to raise concerns about fairness and transparency. The findings indicate the absence of a shared and well-defined talent philosophy which we suggest is needed to guide talent management practices.

Keywords: talent; talent management; talent identification; high potentials; high performers; content analysis; internal stakeholders

Introduction

Organisations continue to report that they face recurring talent challenges with the development of a sustainable talent pipeline remaining a strategic priority (Cappelli & Keller, 2014; Collings, Mellahi, & Cascio, 2019). These challenges appear to be especially acute in emerging economies such as Poland which have tended to see some of the strongest economic and organisational growth rates and an especially pervasive talent supply-demand gap (Cooke, Wood, Wang, & Veen, 2019; Skuza, McDonnell, & Scullion, 2019; Vaiman, Scullion, & Collings, 2012). While talent management represents a burgeoning area of academic research (Collings *et al.,* 2019; McDonnell & Wiblen, 2021), surprisingly little empirical attention has been placed on the definition of talent (Jooss, McDonnell, Burbach, & Vaiman, 2019). The seeming ignorance of its importance is highlighted in Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen's (2016) review which identified a mere16 per cent of scholarly papers on talent management had specified how talent was defined. Given the reality that talent is a socially constructed idea meaning that there is no standardised, obvious, and shared meaning likely to be evident (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020) the lack of clarity is highly problematic. For example, the lack of a clear understanding of what talent is or means will limit insights into the nature of talent management and raises serious questions over the utility of research findings. In practice, the failure by organisations to understand what they mean by talent and how to best identify it can have major implications for the inclusion of individuals in the talent pool, and their development and management, alongside the possible implications for those that fail to gain this designation.

While seeking a singular definition of talent may be counterproductive (Collings *et al.,* 2019) understanding the meaning of talent and what talent encompasses within organisational boundaries is important. Where more exclusive talent management approaches are adopted, employees must be able to understand both what it takes to be designated talent

and the explicit requirements of talent pool membership; equally managers should be able to justify their approach to identifying talent (Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale, & Sumelius, 2013; Gelens, Hofmans, Dries, & Pepermans, 2014). In contrast, strategic ambiguity and a lack of transparency and clarity around talent decisions, which involves workforce differentiation, may lead to employees negatively perceiving organisational justice when it comes to promotional decisions and career development (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013; Rofcanin *et al.*, 2019), leading to adverse individual reactions (De Boeck, Meyers, & Dries, 2018). There are increasing calls of the need to go beyond making talent status explicit to employees but to clarify how one gets identified (Sumelius, Smale & Yamao, 2020). The extent to which this occurs in practice remains unclear.

With these issues to the fore, this paper sets out to examine the practice of talent identification from two perspectives. First, we unpack the meaning of talent or the definitions held by key internal stakeholders. Referring to the 'the fundamental assumptions and beliefs about the nature, value, and instrumentality of talent that are held by a firm's key decision makers' (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014, p.192), the underlying beliefs of what talent means can be expected to significantly influence the subsequent talent identification and management practices that are enacted (Meyers, van Woerkom, Paauwe, & Dries, 2020). Second, we examine the degree to which talent meanings are aligned with talent identification criteria in practice. In considering both aspects, we explore the consistency or divergence amongst internal stakeholders centrally involved in talent management.

The contributions of the paper are threefold. First, we add to the body of knowledge on talent management by providing empirical evidence on meaning of talent and the talent identification criteria within an organisational context. While some influential conceptual papers on the topic were published over the last decade (e.g., Dries, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013; Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014), empirical

studies are heavily focused on the management of talent post identification and neglect the fundamental question: 'who is considered talented and why' (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013, p.290). If there is a lack of shared understanding between organisational stakeholders on the meaning of talent, and how talent decisions are made raises legitimate concern on the validity of published research which fails to identify to whom or what talent refers to within a study. This is because 'informed understandings of what talent means (definitions) and is (defining characteristics) are the baselines for talent management practices' (McDonnell & Wiblen, 2021, p.46). In addition, our findings point to the need for more nuanced conceptions of talent which can incorporate multiple factors into how an organisation evaluates individuals.

Second, this is a literature that has placed little attention on the experiences and perspectives of individual talents. The senior managerial respondent has been most dominant despite scholars increasingly recognising and calling for research designs that incorporate a wider set of informants to balance organisational and individual perspectives (Farndale, Pai, Sparrow, & Scullion, 2014; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). In so doing, we are able to contribute to understanding the intended, actual, and perceived perspectives of talent meaning and identification practice through our multi-participant approach which enables potential tensions to be highlighted (McDonnell, Collings, Mellahi, & Schuler, 2017; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). This study draws on interview data from 206 respondents (e.g. senior HR, senior management, functional managers and individual talents) and applies content analysis to highlight similarities and discrepancies among these stakeholders.

Finally, our study helps to redress the relative dearth of research on the emerging economies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Skuza, Scullion, & McDonnell, 2013; Vaiman & Holden, 2011). While scholars have increasingly identified the need to broaden the talent management discourse from developed Western markets to emerging economies

(e.g., Cooke, 2017; Vaiman, Sparrow, Schuler, & Collings, 2019), the focus remains on the large BRIC emerging markets, particularly Brazil (Ahammad, Glaister, Sarala, & Glaister, 2018; Ambrosius, 2018), China (Cui, Khan, & Tarba, 2018), and India (Nayak, Bhatnagar, & Budhwar, 2018). Recent research highlights the rapid political, economic, and social transformation of CEE countries such as Poland (Purta *et al.*, 2020; Skuza *et al*., 2019), and suggests that perspectives of talent and talent practices in the CEE region may not conform with the Anglo-Saxon models (Vaiman & Holden, 2011). Businesses in such volatile market contexts are faced with significantly different challenges in the transformation process (e.g., radical strategic and organisational changes) compared to those in developed economies (Cooke, 2017) and cultural differences potentially have a significant impact on the practice of talent management and how talent is conceived. For example, the literature still tends to have a strong individualistic, Anglo-Saxon focus (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018) which is seen as problematic in contexts with strong collectivist cultures (Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale, & Sumelius, 2017). Similarly, workforce differentiation is less acceptable in regions with more egalitarian cultures such as Scandinavia (Björkman *et al*., 2017) which influences who is defined as talent. Our paper therefore responds to the call for research on how talent is interpreted in different contexts (Thunnissen & van Arensbergen, 2015).

The talent factor

In the early seminal review article on talent management, Lewis and Heckman (2006, p.141) suggest that in many firms, talent was essentially an all-inclusive term, a 'euphemism for people'. However, most researchers now adopt a more exclusive view on talent. For example, Stahl *et al.* (2007, p.4) define talent as 'a select group of employees – those that rank at the top in terms of capability and performance – rather than the entire workforce.' In essence, 'talent management asserts that specific individuals or groups are of greater value by way of

their contribution to the strategic objectives' (McDonnell & Wiblen, 2021, p.32). This often sees the term associated with the possession of specific skills and capabilities, specific individuals, and/or pivotal positions.

In evaluating the literature, the talent concept appears to be one best classified as being dynamic given how understandings are relatively malleable and have changed over time. To develop a more nuanced understanding of 'talent', several papers have reviewed the term from diverse disciplinary perspectives. This has led to the development of several approaches seeking to clarify the meaning of talent at work (see Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013; Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013; Meyers *et al*., 2020; Nijs *et al.*, 2014). For example, from the psychology perspective, Dries (2013) identified six ways to operationalise talent; as capital, individual difference, giftedness, identity, strength, and the perception of being talent. Displaying some similarities with this operationalisation, Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2013) conceptualised talent in the organisational setting using a subject (talent as people) or object (talent as characteristics of people) approach. Our paper draws on this conceptualisation and seeks to build on the insights it provides on the meaning and identification of talent in a non-Western setting.

Object approach

The object approach encompasses four categories: talent as an innate ability, talent as mastery, talent as commitment, and talent as fit. *Innate abilities* refer to inborn or 'gifted' unique abilities that lead to superior performance and are often visible at an early age, while *talent as mastery* highlights the need for systematic development of competencies over time, and thus places significantly more importance on a strong learning and development function in organisations to facilitate this growth (Meyers *et al.*, 2013). *Talent as commitment* refers to the perseverance and discretionary effort to one's work and a strong interest in continuing in

one's role and organisation, thus representing a negative predictor of turnover (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013). *Talent as fit* considers the context of an employee's work with a key focus on the right person at the right time in the right place; this approach provides key consideration of context including alignment to the organisational culture, strategic priorities, and operating environment (Gallardo-Gallardo, Thunnissen, & Scullion, 2020). Within this, there is credence given to the development of talent pools and the identification of pivotal positions (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016; Collings & Mellahi, 2009).

Subject approach

The subject approach is broken down into two categories: an inclusive perspective considering all employees as talents and an exclusive perspective that typically refers to high performers and/or high potentials. In practice, a differentiated HR architecture (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Collings & Mellahi, 2009) may be in place allowing the development and growth of all employees (inclusive), while at the same time investing in specific competencies and roles for strategic impact (exclusive). An inclusive approach argues that all employees have the potential to contribute to the organisation if the required development, support, and opportunities are provided (Swailes, Downs, & Orr, 2014). The inclusive approach is more prevalent in organisations with more egalitarian organisational cultures such as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and voluntary organisations (Festing, Schäfer, & Scullion, 2013; Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). The definition of talent in these organisations is distinctive and reflects the characteristics of SMEs and the egalitarian culture which emphasises aspects such as teamwork, flexibility, co-operative working, and willingness to do more than one job (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017; Valverde, Scullion, & Ryan, 2013). In contrast, the more focused investment of resources in key employees, i.e. a subset of a firm's population, is often viewed as a more core element of an exclusive approach to

talent management in larger organisations which is based on the notion of segmentation and reflects the shift in HR from standardised to differential practices (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007).

In a differentiated approach the identification of high performers, i.e., those with above-average quantity and quality of outputs (Aguinis & O'Boyle, 2014; O'Boyle & Kroska, 2017), and/or high potentials is a key activity for senior managers and HR (Finkelstein, Costanza, & Goodwin, 2018; Silzer & Church, 2009), and the management of employees varies relative to their potential contribution to competitive advantage (Collings, 2017). However, while there has been no shortage of models of 'high potential' in the literature published (e.g., Dries & Pepermans, 2012; Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Silzer & Church, 2009; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997), no consensus exists around its defining characteristics and measurement. For example, Dries and Pepermans (2012) refer to analytical skills, learning agility, drive, and emergent leadership as key components, while Silzer and Dowell (2009) present a three-dimensional model including foundational (cognition, personality), career (knowledge, leadership, performance), and growth (motivation and ability to learn) aspects. Moreover, in practice, performance and potential are oftentimes conflated (Jooss, McDonnell, & Burbach, 2019).

A stakeholder perspective

Applying a stakeholder perspective provides further insights into the complex task of constructing talent meaning and identifying talent within an organisation. In a talent system, key internal stakeholders include the senior leadership team, line managers, HR professionals, and individual employees, all who will have some involvement, whether directly or more implicitly, in determining the organisation's talent construction (Schuler, Jackson, & Tarique, 2011). External influences on talent management may be trade unions,

HR professional bodies, customers, technology vendors, consultants, and academics (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020). The widespread implicit assumption in current research appears to be of a shared meaning of talent within organisational context (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). This has been highlighted as problematic due to its socially constructed nature (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020). Moreover, the perceptions and prototypes of individual stakeholders can have a significant impact on the identification of talent, i.e. when an individual matches one's prototype, they are more likely to be viewed as talent (Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013; Finkelstein *et al.*, 2018).

How different stakeholders talk about talent will shape the reality of how this is given meaning and then operationalised in the form of talent identification practices. Even where an organisation possesses a talent philosophy or sets out a talent framework that incorporates definitions and practices, the intended approach may not always translate into reality (Björkman *et al.*, 2017; Fu, Flood, Rousseau, & Morris, 2018). While similar terminology might be used, it does not necessarily transfer to everyone having the same view on what that means and what a talented employee may 'look like'; in other words, the defining characteristics (McDonnell & Wiblen, 2021; Jooss *et al.,* 2019). Ultimately, 'talent discourses cannot be removed from the context in which they operate' (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020, p.477). As pluralistic considerations are critical to understand the complexity of the talent management phenomenon, it should not be the intention to reconcile divergent perspectives but what is necessary is specifying what talent means in context (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design given the socially constructed nature the talent concept takes (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020) and our key aim being to increase our

understanding of how talent is interpreted and identified, and to assess the level of consistency, or lack thereof, amongst relevant internal stakeholders. Organisations were recruited from a published list encompassing the 2,000 largest companies in Poland ('Rzeczpospolita 2000'). We excluded small and public organisations as talent management programmes and processes are more likely to be found in larger and private organisations (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). By removing these we were left with 1,799 organisations which were contacted via phone and/or email. Out of the 253 organisations that had a talent management programme or process, 45 expressed an initial interest in the study. The overarching reason for organisations not wanting to participate was due to the nature of our multi-respondent study which required views and perceptions from individual talents. Further, we were only interested in organisations who had an established programme or process in place, and therefore we excluded those running for less than two years. Most organisations had a programme or process for 4-5 years (31%) with some up to ten years (7%). This resulted in a final sample of 34 organisations (73% foreign owned; 27% Polish owned).

A total of 206 semi-structured interviews were conducted across these 34 organisations incorporating 34 interviews with HR leaders (e.g., HR directors, HR managers), 70 interviews with managers (e.g., general managers, functional directors), and 102 interviews with talents (e.g., team leaders, specialists, professionals). Initially, HR leaders were contacted in each firm who then nominated other managers and talents. Given our approach it is important that we recognise the potential limitation of selection bias. Each manager needed to participate actively in the programme (i.e. had nominated talent within the past year) and each talent needed to have been in the programme for a year. Where multiple talents were interviewed in one firm, each talent was from a different department or function. An overview of the sample characteristics can be found in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The interviews were conducted in Polish by one member of the bilingual research team in the period 2013 to 2015. For anonymity reasons, we use the following aliases: type of stakeholder (HR leader, manager, talent), company (C1-C34), sector (e.g., automotive, retail, finance). The research team developed an interview template that guided the questioning by offering some degree of structure to ensure the overall research questions underpinning the project were addressed. Questions included, among others: how is talent defined in the organisation, what factors influence the likelihood of an individual being labelled as talent in the organisation, and does the organisation focus on a subgroup of employees, or does it review talent more generally? Interviews were recorded and transcribed into Polish before being translated into English for analysis. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and took place on a face-to-face basis or in a small number of cases through videoconferencing.

We adopted a content analysis approach to identify the commonality of perspectives of talent along with understanding the criteria applied in the practice of identification across interviewees and organisations. This approach enabled us to quantify and assess the presence, meanings and relationships of talent categories that the conceptually focused literature has highlighted. We used NVivo software to assist us in the analysis. Following Krippendorff's (2018) framework for qualitative content analysis, we selected texts relevant to our research questions, and constructed categories aligned with the existing literature, thus fitting theoretical considerations. Specifically, we coded against Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*'s (2013) six approaches to talent to answer what key internal stakeholders associate with the meaning of talent (Table 2 provides indicative quotes for each factor). Given our analysis intimated strong use of the terms higher performance and potential we decided to utilise Silzer and

Church's (2009) approach in aggregating the core components of potential (see Table 4). To understand how key internal stakeholders identify talent in practice, we examined the data for more nuanced patterns and revised the coding frame as part of which we have developed first and second order codes for the various dimensions of talent. Both a member of the research team and a research assistant analysed the transcripts to ensure inter-rater reliability. As a final step in adding to the rigour of our analysis we performed a series of chi-square tests of association to statistically ascertain the presence of important differences between stakeholders' perspectives.

Findings

The meaning of talent

As illustrated in Table 2, the findings evidence all six approaches as proposed by Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2013) in how talent was defined by organisational stakeholders. There was however some considerable variation in respect to the regularity by which interviewees spoke about how they viewed the definition of talent in organisational context. The most cited meaning ascribed to talent was *high potential* (50%), *extraordinary competencies/skills* (48%), and *commitment* (41%), followed by talent as *fit* (24%).

While not a central focus of the research, we did consider the level of similarity or divergence between foreign and Polish organisations in our analysis which may be expected given the institutional context (Skuza, Scullion & McDonnell, 2013); we only report where substantial differences were evident. Except for talents in Polish firms (46%), *high performance* did not emerge as being particularly important, with only 16 per cent of all participants mentioning *performance* when specifically asked how talent was defined and given meaning within their organisational context. We were somewhat surprised by the limited mention of *high performance* or *high performers* overall when asked to defined talent.

However, as we subsequently highlight, this appeared to be somewhat at odds with the criteria used in making talent decision in practice. Talent as equating to *natural ability* and talent as *all employees* were reported by a very limited number of participants. This latter finding was perhaps surprising given the Polish context and recent transition away from being a communist state (Skuza, McDonnell & Scullion, 2019). While we found some singular categorisations such as *a person with high potential to learn and advance at a faster pace than his/her peers* (Manager 2, C15, industrial automation), or *somebody that shows leadership potential* (Talent 2, C12, consumer goods), the overwhelming majority of interviewees unsurprisingly combined several dimensions in the way they defined talent, for example, *a person with high potential, showing above-average skills, aspirations, and a high degree of commitment* (HR Leader, C3, pharmaceutical). In other words, talent was often viewed as straddling more than one of the subject or object approaches (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013).

Insert Table 2 about here

High potential appeared as an especially central aspect of how organisational stakeholders defined talent. Of note was that when potential was noted there often appeared to be a strong emphasis on potential as an inclusive perspective with the following quotation illustrative: e*verybody that has the potential to grow and to take more responsibilities* (Manager 1, C29, food manufacturing). Thus, potential tended not to be defined by many as exclusionary in nature when they first considered how they defined talent. In practice, this provides opportunities for a range of roles within the organisations; for example, *higher positions; junior leader; internal trainer; and expert* (Manager 1, C4, automotive), or at a minimum *two directions – manager or expert (specialist)* (Manager 1, C7, automotive).

However, as we probed interviewees more around how talent decisions were made it became apparent to us that, notwithstanding initial and explicit descriptions of an inclusionary view on potential, in practice it seemed to be a more exclusive perspective dominated. The evidence of potential appeared to be predominately about possessing the ability to be promoted to a higher-level management or leadership position. For example, high potentials *are able to take managerial positions in the future* (Manager 1, C3, pharmaceutical) and *are able to grow the business* (Talent 1, C9, consulting), rather than being about each individual being able to grow.

Our findings intimate a sliding scale being in operation in terms of how different stakeholders defined talent (see Table 2); for example, HR leaders were more than twice as likely as individual talents to report talent as meaning *high potential*. Similarly, a sliding scale in the same order was evident with respect to interviewees defining talent as involving *commitment*. The perspective of individual talents was strongly premised around the possession of *extraordinary or above-average competencies/skills*. A notable difference amongst stakeholder perspectives emerged around the *talent as fit* approach with half of the HR leaders placing importance on this approach but only one in ten talents doing so; *the bottom line is that he or she must fit our culture* (Manager 1, C17, telecommunication) and *talent primarily needs to strongly identify him-/herself with who we are* (HR leader, C14, retail).

Talent identification in practice

We now turn to looking at how talent identification was practiced and whether this was aligned with the meaning of talent as ascribed by stakeholders. Three core dimensions emerged (see Table 3) when interviewees discussed talent identification in practice which included performance, potential, and commitment. Other less frequently mentioned aspects

included mobility (readiness to relocate at any time) and formal criteria (e.g., a minimum of 2 years work experience, a minimum of 10 years tenure in firm, language fluency). These aspects appeared more as qualifiers before one may be seriously considered as a talent or not within organisations.

Insert Table 3 about here

Although high performance and high potential were mentioned by almost the same number of interviewees, the role or impact of these appeared to differ greatly when we explored the talent identification process. There appeared to be something akin to a two-stage process incorporating primary and secondary identification factors across many organisations in terms how organisations established who their talent was and who to subsequently include within their talent management programme. This process was not necessarily mapped out formally as two, sequential stages but was a more subtle (informal) approach. In essence, when the level of fulfilment of the primary factor was deemed appropriate, organisations tended to proceed to then considering the achievement of several secondary factors. Secondary factors, therefore, only came into consideration once the requirements laid down for the primary factor were fulfilled. Importantly, fulfilling only the primary factor was insufficient as talent decisions were made *based on a combination of criteria* and individuals *must achieve an acceptable level of each of these criteria* (Manager, C6, tobacco). Otherwise, these individuals are *not included in the talent pool* (HR leader, C13, pharmaceutical).

The findings intimate that the primary identification factor tended to be an individual's performance which was usually evaluated over a two- to three-year period, though this process differed across organisations. Achieving an appropriate level of performance (typically meaning high performance) was in fact described as mandatory in

almost two-thirds of organisations (see Table 3). In other words, achievement of the expected performance level was seemingly a necessary and immovable condition to possibly being identified as talent in the organisation.

Yet, there were some interviewees (e.g., Manager 2, C31, consumer products; Manager 2, C19, retail) who suggested that a case could be made for individuals with mediocre performance to be viewed as talent if they had high potential, and that objective reasons could be provided for not achieving high performance. For example, *a person may not perform, because this is not what she/he likes and wants to do. She/he might perform much better in other tasks/departments* (Manager 1, C6, tobacco). Thereby, the use of high performance as a mandatory expectation could on occasion be removed where clear contextual factors were raised as reasoning behind the failure to achieve the expected levels.

We sought to better understand what was encompassed when interviewees spoke about performance. Table 4 illustrates an aggregated list of components that were commonly encapsulated within this performance dimension of talent. What this depicts is that performance tends to be primarily evaluated based on business goal achievements/results, accompanied by more qualitative components – behaviours and attitudes regarding teamwork, collaboration, motivation of others, and corporate values. Considering the foci of the three types of internal stakeholders, we found that HR leaders (44%) intimated greater focus on role modelling corporate values compared to only four per cent of individual talents, thus indicating a substantial gap in perceptions of the importance placed across the business. Overall, performance components were less often reported by the individual talents. Thus, there were indications of a gap between what is intended versus what is perceived to be important. The finding that almost six in ten individuals were unsure about what performance components are used in determining their talent designation further exemplifies limited transparency in how talent is identified.

Insert Table 4 about here

In terms of the secondary factors that were utilised within these organisations, high potential (45%) and commitment (38%) were most reported. Commitment tended to be defined through energy, effort, and time committed to tasks and initiatives that go beyond an individual's responsibility, thus carrying connotations of 'going beyond the call of duty.' Notably, commitment was especially highlighted by senior managers and yet considered much less by individual talents. The evaluation of potential was a more difficult and complex task though there was some evidence of it being treated as distinct to evaluations of performance though this was not uniform. The most often cited components of high potential (see Table 4) were regarding motivation and aspirations (23%), and leadership skills (23%). Personality variables and cognitive abilities were less often mentioned, as was learning agility.

What we did establish from our findings was a convergence of viewpoints amongst HR leaders and senior managers, but a significant lack of knowledge amongst individual talents on how high potential was evaluated; almost half of all talents indicated that they did not know what potential entailed in terms of how their organisation made such evaluative judgements. Therefore, there appeared to be some significant degree of disconnect between decision makers and the wider workforce on this.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to unpack the talent meanings (definitions) held by organisational stakeholders and to examine the relationship between these and how talent identification occurred in practice (in terms of the specific criteria applied) within 34

organisations in Poland. Our extensive data collection process involved over 200 qualitative interviews with three groups of key organisational stakeholders. The inclusion of talents as one of our participant groups is noteworthy given this perspective has received scant attention in the literature (Daubner-Siva, Ybema, Vinkenburg, & Beech, 2018; King, 2016; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017). It is something of a paradox that despite the talent concept being a conceptual bedrock of talent management, there are few empirical studies that focus on 'who is considered talented and why' (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013, p.290). Moreover, the definition of talent is often implicit and assumed in research studies on talent management. Our findings demonstrate the problematic nature of this given the ambiguity that regularly emerged between key organisational stakeholders on what talent means, along with the limited nature of alignment between one's talent philosophy and the practice of identification. As such, our findings provide empirical support to Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo's (2019) call for researchers to relay what they specifically mean when they use the term 'talent' in any studies. Our paper highlights that there is the need for greater focus on how talent is understood, defined, and identified given this has significant implications for how talents are included in the talent pool and how they are managed in organisations. Given there is much diversity of this in organisations taking the meaning as a given is problematic.

The research uncovered some strong differences between organisational definitions of talent and the actual identification process and its determinants. Our study suggests that *definitions or meanings of talent* go beyond a single perspective which is often typical in the heavily conceptual talent management literature (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013; Meyers *et al.*, 2013; Nijs *et al.*, 2014). While most prominent in the literature, the notion of talent as high potentials raised questions by interviewees whose main concern was: potential for what? Common perspectives in this respect related to the ability to grow into a higher position (often managerial) and to contribute to specific strategic objectives. This focus is

understandable given that many organisations prioritised the development of a sustainable pipeline of future leaders. However, we argue that there is a need to take a broader view on what high potential may entail and what is required to develop individuals who have the potential to grow in a functional area and/or are at lower levels in the organisation. In addition, the notion of talent representing individuals who possessed high levels of commitment and had above-average competencies and skills emerged as significant. Notably, in terms of elucidating the meaning of talent with interviewees, high performance did not appear prominent among stakeholders.

However, in strong contrast to when talent meaning and definitions were discussed, performance measures played a prominent role when it came to how talent was *identified in practice*. Notably, there was little discussion of the importance of employee inputs (i.e. mastery of skills). Thus, our study provides further support for the often-cited notion that talent is primarily identified through realised outputs, in other words, performance measures (O'Boyle & Kroska, 2017). A possible explanation of this might be that these are more easily measured and focus on present or past achievements (see Meyers *et al.*, 2013; Silzer & Church, 2009). Focusing on these measures instead of the harder to grasp, and delineate, construct of 'potential' may suit management in providing some limits to difficult conversations when having to justify their promotional decisions or talent investments.

These findings therefore suggest a degree of disconnect between how organisational stakeholders defined talent and the criteria they used in making talent designation decisions. This raises concerns given talent designations are known to impact on how individuals experience or feel about their work (Björkman et al., 2013). A lack of clarity and alignment between the higher order talent philosophies or meanings and the practice of identification may lead to negative outcomes around transparency and perceived fairness of decision-making. On a broader level, our findings intimate the need for more nuanced considerations

of the talent identification process. Overall, our data points towards organisational perspectives that are more pluralist and universal in orientation. By this we mean that talent identification appears to be made up of multiple factors and that these often appear to work as a multiplicative equation whereby high scores on one factor (e.g., potential) is insufficient to compensate for lower scores on other factors (e.g., performance) (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012). However, how this works tends to be more informal than part of a clearly transparent and formal system. Similarly, while some factors are viewed as more relevant to whether an employee is identified as talent or not, the actual influence of all factors in the decision-making process often appeared variable and limited in some cases. In other words, there appears to be a hierarchy of factors which are involved in the identification process suggesting the need for conceptualisation and measurement to be more multi-faceted and highlighting the need to go beyond simplistic dichotomies. For example, while rarely elucidated in terms of wider talent philosophies, high performance appeared to be treated as a fundamental factor that one could not get past. In other words, you may be viewed as possessing exceptional potential but if you are not achieving high performance levels you do not get identified as talent. Also of interest was that the often discussed confound of performance and potential (Dries & Pepermans, 2012) was perhaps less evident than reported in other studies (e.g. Jooss et al., 2019) with organisations trying intentionally to differentiate high potential from high performance. However, the validity of the approaches can certainly be questioned.

In considering both the meanings ascribed to talent and how identification was conducted it emerged that talent management was seen in more exclusive than inclusive terms (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013; Meyers *et al.*, 2020) which may be somewhat surprising in the CEE context of Poland. This is however similar to the recent findings of Tyskbo (2019) in a study of a Swedish public hospital who reported that despite a highly

egalitarian and collectivist context, an exclusive approach to talent management was adopted. This is an avenue worthy of further examination in terms of the effectiveness or success of such individualised approaches to managing talent. It reflects the belief in most sample organisations that having better talent at all levels enables outperforming competitors.

Finally, the findings highlight some concerns regarding the absence of shared and transparent understandings between key stakeholders of what it means to be talent and the dimensions or factors used in making talent decisions. While there was largely consistency of terminology defining talent across organisations at senior levels, this was not the case when the perspectives from individual talents were considered. The findings therefore highlight the issue of senior HR and organisational leaders having a particular view of what should happen (intended practice) or what they think is taking place, versus the lived reality of those that are subject to such processes and decisions in talent identification (perceived practice) (Wright & Nishii, 2013). This reinforces the issue endemic in the talent management literature of the failure to clarify what talent means and how talent decisions are made within particular contexts. Indeed, our findings showed that individual talents had considerably less clarity and understanding on how they were identified as talent or the requirements for joining the talent pool. There was a degree of appreciation that their evaluation was based on broader dimensions of performance, potential, and commitment but there was very limited understanding of what exactly was being measured and how they were assessed. When there is no clarity among the 'talent' cohort around those criteria, one may argue that the discrepancies between senior leaders and 'non talents' are likely to be even greater.

On one level, these results are unsurprising given the socially constructed nature of talent which means talent meanings are embedded within specific micro, meso, and macro contexts (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020; McDonnell & Wiblen, 2021). Ultimately, the dispersion of stakeholders (different levels, functions, locations) does mean that 'talent' is

constructed in distinct contexts. In that regard, agency and bounded rationalities (Eisenhardt, 1989) are likely to impact how talent is interpreted and identified. For example, self-interests and goal conflicts between stakeholders may also impact what talent decisions are made and on what basis; which potentially could even lead to marginalisation of some talent (Cappelli & Keller, 2014). These issues will likely be reinforced if clarity and transparency on the approach to defining and identifying talent is not adequate. In other words, the dissemination of information (Mellahi & Collings, 2010) related to talent meaning and talent identification can play an important role in overcoming agency conflicts. Our paper seeks to contribute to debates which explore the influence of multiple competing logics in how HR and talent management practices are understood and enacted in organisations (Grant, Garavan, & Mackie, 2020). We highlight that the implementation of policy can be very different from that reportedly mandated.

The lack of a shared approach in organisations raises concerns over fairness and transparency in decision making (De Boeck *et al.*, 2018). We argue that transparency around talent identification is an ethical issue and a necessary condition to improving perception around procedural and distributive justice amongst employees who are not identified as talents (Dries, 2013; Gelens *et al.*, 2013). This may be accentuated when decisions appear to be subjective particularly where more qualitative components such as behaviours and attitudes are key elements in decision making. Such evidence is inherently subjective and is especially susceptible to a range of biases (Finkelstein *et al.*, 2018; Silzer & Church, 2009). These issues become more problematic when talent management takes on global dimensions (Björkman *et al.*, 2017).

Implications for practice

On an applied level, we call for organisations to pay closer attention to the extent to which there are shared views on how talent is defined and identified within their own organisational context. This requires organisations to have open discussions around the meaning of talent involving a diverse group of stakeholders (Grant et al., 2020). Once the meaning of talent and criteria to identify talent are established, organisations should ensure communication of this 'talent construct' to the wider workforce. This is important given research indicates positive outcomes can be realised through individuals being aware of their talent status (Sumelius *et al*., 2020). This will also enable employees to better understand what it takes to be considered 'talent' and the requirements needed to achieve talent pool status and receive the associated benefits and appreciate the obligations to be met.

In addition, organisations need to carefully consider the composition and connotations of their talent construct. For example, talent meanings might have a more exclusive or inclusive connotation. In terms of the composition, organisations need to decide on the weighting of individual dimensions (and accompanying factors) of talent and whether the talent construct consists of a multiplicative equation and/or a hierarchical order. In other words, organisations must consider whether some factors are weighted higher than others, and whether some factors are considered pre-qualifiers or foundational factors of the talent construct. For example, the prevailing tendency to have high performance as a pre-condition to being viewed as talent can be a limitation to talent management practice as failure to achieve high performance may be linked to contextual factors outside the control of an individual. Failure to address these issues may lead to concerns such as bias in the identification process, and a lack of consistency and transparency in decision-making. There is also a need to consider the potential impact that the criteria used have upon the diversity of talent within organisations. Particularly as organisations seek the development of a more diverse talent pipeline, a too narrow list of criteria may be counterproductive in achieving this

objective. On the other hand, a too broad list of criteria will hinder a focus on core functional and leadership competencies which are relevant across the wider organisation, which, in turn, can become a barrier to talent sharing across the organisation. Moreover, adding a substantial number of criteria will increase the complexity of the talent construct and might lead to diminishing results in terms of consistent talent identification across levels. While corporate HR leaders might understand such complex talent constructs, middle and line managers might not fully grasp the construct and then make their judgement based on other components. Therefore, organisations need to carefully review the complexity of the talent construct, finding a balance between too simplistic views on talent and too sophisticated measures of talent.

Limitations and future research avenues

While this paper has provided much needed empirical insights into how talent definitions or meanings are translated (or not) into the practice of identifying talent, we recognise some limitations. While we adopted a considerable data collection approach, we are conscious of claims around the generalisability of our findings. While we incorporated multi-level participants in each case, the extent to which there is consistency or variation amongst internal stakeholders may alter when a larger and more representative sample per organisation is used. Future research could collect large-scale survey data to develop and test hypotheses around how talent is defined, how talent is identified, the degree of consistency between both processes, and the degree of alignment across different organisational stakeholders. This would be useful in obtaining a more complete understanding of whether the intention behind practices from organisational leaders is viewed similarly amongst those in receipt or at the behest of these decisions. We are conscious that firms in the sample engaged in self-selection. This raises a question as to whether those that indicated they were

not engaging in talent management based their view on unfamiliarity with the concept and practices; talent management policies may have been applied, but perhaps through a different name. In addition, future research might consider including unions as another stakeholder group, particularly where talent is perceived as an exclusive construct.

Our study was unable to engage with the effectiveness of the approaches used and we were not able to consider how 'non-talents' felt about why they were not identified as talent and what level of understanding they possessed on the reasons for this. While recent papers on talent status (see Sumelius *et al*., 2020; Wikhamn, Asplund, & Dries, 2021) have discussed the role and impact of 'talent status' awareness on talents or non-talents, we still know relatively little around the awareness of 'talent constructs' among the wider workforce beyond senior HR leaders. In other words, an interesting future research angle would be to consider whether it matters if talent and 'non-talent know' specifically why they are included or excluded in a talent pool. In addition, the commitments expected from those included in the talent pool require further investigation. One positive development is the relatively recent focus on individual talent perspectives to balance the dominant focus on organisational goals and the recognition that effective talent management approaches need to balance organisational and individual goals (Farndale *et al.*, 2014).

In conclusion, this study suggests the need for caution regarding assumptions that stakeholders agree on the meaning of talent and talent identification. Our paper addresses the failure of many studies to set out how talent was portrayed in empirical research (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019) and we argue that such an approach limits more informed understandings of how talent management practices are understood and enacted in organisations.

Data availability statement: Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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