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Is Talent Manager the New Job Title for Human Resources Manager?

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Abstract

Talent management has become a central managerial concern, particularly in human resource management. Skillfully mixing HR and marketing functions, the talent manager is increasingly present in human resources job offers. However, “talent” as well as talent manager assignments are less clear and less precise. In this paper, we try to focus on the sense of “talent” given by talent managers themselves and on how they implement talent management in organization. Through a qualitative approach, we mobilize primary (semi-structured interviews) and secondary data (job offers) in a French context. The results show that organizations use “talent” as a rhetoric in order to improve their employer brand. The respondents indicate that talent management practices are so close to those of human resources management functions. What distinguishes the two functions the most is the proximity management.

Keywords

Talent manager, Human resources managers, rhetoric, career development

JEL classification:

J53, M12, M54

Introduction

Talent management (TM) is a growing topic in human resource management (HRM) literature (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier 2013). How an organization identifies and manages talent will enable it to develop a competitive advantage and ensure its survival (Schuler, Jackson, & Tarique 2011). It was against the backdrop of a growing US economy and global competition for skilled employees that McKinsey consultants developed the concept of talent in the 1990s (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod 2001). Talent is then considered as highly qualified populations or people with high potential (Iles, 2013).

TM helps optimize the human resources (HR) function by enabling the identification and management of employees with strategic human capital (d'Armagnac, Klarsfeld, & Martignon, 2016). TM is 'the process by which employers anticipate and meet their human capital needs' (Cappelli 2008, p. 1).

One of the issues that have emerged in the HRM literature is to define the concept and identify its evolution. It is clear that the subjectivity of this concept contributes to a wide variety of definitions and each author can give it the meaning he wants (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012). However, two conceptions of talent can be identified: subject and object.

The subject approach consists of focusing on the individuals who contribute to the organization's objectives and thinking about the practices that allow them to be differentiated. The object approach refers to talent as a set of knowledge and skills. This perspective is called inclusive because it addresses a more generalized part of the population (Daubnet-Siva et al., 2017). The literature is replete with work on TM practices and their organizational effects, but there is little work on the meaning of the concept (Tansley, 2011). This research focuses on how the word talent is understood from a managerial perspective. This research highlights the rhetorical aspects of the use of the word talent in organizational settings. While practitioners use careers as a TM tool, the academic literature does not study these elements together. From a theoretical point of view, this makes this field particularly interesting (McDonnell et al. 2017).

Furthermore, some studies have looked at the relationship between TM and HRM and show that the two fields can be frictional. Dries (2013) research shows, for example, that the boundaryless career model may be unsuitable for TM. This leads practitioners to question the possibilities of integrating the practices of the two fields. The development of TM practices within organizations justifies the importance of addressing them by studying TM concepts and practices and by using reflective evaluation (Painter-Morland, Kirk, Deslandes, & Tansley, 2019).

This research mobilizes the literature on talent and TM integrated with HRM. We investigate the missions of TM actors, the representations and practices articulated around talent, and their articulation with HR practices. In the first part, we present the literature on talent and TM in HRM by introducing a theoretical framework for understanding the missions of talent managers. In the second section, we present the methodology used and the research results.

1. Literature review

1.1. Talent: a variety of definitions and approaches

The literature does not provide a consistent definition of talent and TM (Thunnissen et al., 2013). It may be understood as a rare set of rare competencies. TM is therefore defined as the detection, attraction, selection and recruitment, development, and retention of individuals who create value (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012).

Two main approaches emerge in the literature: substantive and intersubjective (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). The substantive approach echoes the meaning given to talent in antiquity, which represented an equivalent of gold used as currency (Picoche, 2006). Contemporary research emphasizes the links with this conception to explain exceptional physical performance and, and intellectual performance. Talent is then a set of natural and rare abilities that a minority of people have. This perspective is the most widespread in management science, both in terms of research and practice (Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). In view of these characteristics, talent can be a source of competitive advantage according to the resource-based theory (Barney, 2001).

In the intersubjective approach, talent is a dynamic object since it refers to individuals who interact continuously with their environment. This dynamic approach refutes the concept of accumulation of knowledge and skills in favor of the social dimension (Araújo & Davids, 2011). The role of practices that allow people to develop their own talents on the basis of exchanges with others is widely emphasized (Swales, Downs & Orr, 2014). Talent is then the ability to show agility, audacity, and intellectual and professional curiosity.

Another perspective is to look at talent through an inclusive/exclusive spectrum. The exclusive approach considers talents as high-performance or high-potential people (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012). It is also understood as having a strategic position in the hierarchy. Pivotal or critical talents are the central elements in the development of the organization. Talent can also be found outside the company through its ability to meet personnel needs (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). While the latter approach is more inclusive, the other approaches are considered more exclusive. They are also tools for making a typology of talents and the identification of talent-type-specific practices. The literature highlights the interest in these discussions through the implications for HRM (Luna-Arocas & Danvila-del-Valle, 2022). For example, exclusive TM practices and related communication can lead to a perception of unfairness by employees (Peterson et al, 2022). These phenomena are important because they can lead to counterproductive behavior by non-talented people. It emerges that one of the definitional issues is whether we consider talent as an object or a subject (Thunnissen et al., 2013).

The literature tends to define talent through the subject approach by designating them as ‘competent incumbents’ (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 304), ‘key employees’ (Festing & Schäfer, 2014, p. 263), or ‘employees who are considered talented’ (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014, p. 193). Other research views talent as personal attributes or scarce social resources (Crane & Hartwell, 2019).

The literature shows that associating talent with human capital is not incongruous (Tansley, 2011). The literature shows that talent and human capital must be studied jointly, and even interchangeably. Some authors agree that the ‘object’ approach of focusing on skills may be incomplete in capturing the reality of TM (Carne and Hartwell, 2019). This perspective neglects the core processes of selecting, integrating, developing, and retaining this human capital (Farndale, Scullion & Sparrow, 2010). While the concept of talent seems to be limited to the issue of human capital management, TM includes social dimensions such as socialization and leadership (Dries, 2013).

1.2. The place of talent management in the human resources function

The literature mobilizes the word as a synonym for HR (Iles, 2013). TM is then seen as an optimized tool for the HR function (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). In this framework, talents are considered as individuals with useful resources or high potential. Unlike the notion of talent, which refers to individual expertise in a key area, high potentials are those destined to occupy strategic positions in the hierarchy (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012).

TM is one of many fields in HRM. Talent is an accumulation of human, political and social capital (Farndale et al., 2010). This approach is largely based on the observation that resources that are useful to the firm are those that have the most value (Pocztowski, Pauli, & Miś, 2020). Another strand of the literature considers TM to be a shared function (Lysenko & Sereda, 2018). It is a pivotal field in HRM and ensures its transformation. This new conception leads to the appearance of new functions and specific job titles. The emergence of this new field has consequently raised questions of alignment, but also a reorganization of missions within relational HRM models. Managers have seen their prerogatives reoriented toward TM practices (Farndale et al., 2010).

The literature does not highlight a univocal configuration of TM (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Three trends emerge. The first stream proposes that HRM practices are universally TM, viewing talent as an accumulation of human capital. The second one views TM as a workforce management tool by contributing to the appropriate flow of people into the organization. The third-stream views TM as a meta-function of the organization, as these practices permeate all of its processes. It focuses on the inclusive perspective by identifying and developing talent and high potential, and on the inclusive perspective by underlying the importance of providing personal development for all employees. These elements lead to the observation that TM refers to the processes, cultural norms, and devices aimed at capturing and developing key individuals in view of the company's objectives.

Some authors are critical of the interests behind TM. While some see it as a mere label for HRM to renew itself, others see it as a lever for optimizing HRM in order to propose exclusive practices and mobilize employees with particular potential (Iles, 2013). The latter authors emphasize the desire to propose an individualized HRM based on the segmentation of the employed population. The work of Painter-Morland et al. (2019) shows that discussions on the articulation of HRM and TM are still relevant. They suggest that the complexity and size of the organization as well as the chosen perspective (individual or collective) could explain the intertwining or dissociation of the two fields. Moreover, these approaches are not static as they evolve over time and according to the context (Thunnissen et al., 2013).

Despite these conceptual differences, TM focuses on individuals who are identified as high performers, and possible current or future leaders (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006). TM is therefore about acquiring, developing, and retaining these target individuals. When resources are not available internally, practices

can look externally, relying on the employer branding, for example. This restrictive and monolithic approach, however, has been decried and appears limited in explaining the organizational reality of TM (Stahl et al., 2012). For these reasons and because the literature is still embryonic, we propose to study actors' representations of talent and TM. Our work also focuses on the place of talent management in HRM.

2. Methodology

An inductive qualitative, interview-based methodology was used in line with the guidelines for qualitative methodology set out by Miles & Huberman (1994). The selection of respondents is based on a mixed-use of non-probability sampling and snowball techniques. Initial participants were recruited first on LinkedIn and on the authors' professional networks.

We interviewed 13 French talent practitioners (talent managers, talent developers, talent acquisition specialists...) from different functional areas and industries (Consulting, Digital, Energy, ...) to ensure a certain variety of understanding about how TM was practiced. Each interview lasts between 31 and 52 minutes. The respondents' mean tenure was 5 years. The average age is 35 years. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the sample.

Table 1: Demographic information of the sample

Identification	Job title	Age	Gender	Tenure	Sector
Respondent 1	Talent Manager	36	Female	3 years	Digital
Respondent 2	Talent acquisition specialist	34	Female	7 years	IT
Respondent 3	Talent Manager	32	Female	1 year	Digital
Respondent 4	Talent Manager	36	Female	5 years	Digital
Respondent 5	Talent Manager	33	Female	4 years	Consulting
Respondent 6	Talent acquisition recruiter	37	Male	4 years	Energy
Respondent 7	Project talent management	43	Male	3 years	Energy
Respondent 8	Talent Manager	38	Male	3 years	Energy
Respondent 9	Talent acquisition specialist	33	Male	4 years	Telecommunications services
Respondent 10	Senior talent manager	37	Male	3 years	Textiles, Clothing
Respondent 11	Talent Developer	34	Male	3 years	Media; culture; graphical
Respondent 12	Talent acquisition recruiter	45	Female	5 years	IT

Respondent 13	Talent Developer	42	Female	3 years	Energy
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Following the interview guide, we present an overview to the respondents about the research purpose emphasizing the confidentiality of their statements. The first questions concern the participants' professional career, the positions they held, and their tenure in the organization. This is followed by more specific questions regarding TM practices.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and loaded into Nvivo 12 software in order to perform content analysis. This latter was conducted manually and built on the anchored theory, as presented by Corbin & Strauss (2015). The coding process was performed iteratively as researchers ran back and forth between the transcripts and the evolving codes. The process is in three steps. Primarily, the purpose of the first-order analysis is to faithfully translate the Respondent's words in a way that makes no attempt to reduce the number of categories. Afterward, similarities existing among categories made it possible to decrease their number. Second-order themes were then linked to clustered dimensions. Codes have been set up using categories of conceptualization that make sense to the rubric.

3. Results and discussion

Drawing on 13 in-depth interviews, we investigated how TM is conceived and practiced by French organizations. Findings reveal that each employee is considered a talent by organizations. Being talented may not always be a technical ability, even if respondents did refer to employees with experience as well. *'As far as I'm concerned, it is almost as unique to the person as what they do best, it doesn't need to be a technical skill, it could be a problem-solving skill and a conflict resolution skill'* (Respondent 4). Otherwise, talent should necessarily satisfy an organization's needs. *'Match talent to the requirements that will suit our goals'* (Respondent 6).

Talent refers to various features such as technical expertise, social and personal qualities, learning willingness, and employer's values fit. *'We had a candidate who is technically very good, but his personality was not good enough to be part of the company'* (Respondent 3). TM aims to create a proximate relationship with employees identified as talents. Consequently, organizations could attract and retain the best workers. Retaining them is expected to lead to a significant competitive advantage for the organization. *'At the heart of this is the willingness to drive value and commitment among employees in order to create value for the company'* (Respondent 7). Furthermore, TM also serves to manage workforce plans. *'Organizations are changing, and we constantly need more resources, so we must be proactive. It is essential to get ahead of the curve'* (Respondent 4).

Talent identification processes are focused on developing employees' potential, in line with the company's goal to promote career mobility, as well as focusing on more behavior-based considerations. *'The two classic criteria for identifying talent are organizational performance and developmental potential. This is our foremost talent reserve'* (Respondent 9). For the organization, developing potential is about preparing the employee for executive roles. *'This is our foremost talent reserve'* (Respondent 1).

When exclusive practices are implemented, though, the company makes no reference to it as such. *"That the organization does not take a stand on talent identification lessens any frustration for those not identified as such"* (Respondent 4). The existence of proprietary TM is not being explicitly communicated by talent managers, which makes it an organizational taboo. Rhetorical language appears even in inclusive TM approaches and there are examples of "talent acquisition specialists" or "talent developers" being used as "empty titles" (Respondent 10). Results indicate in fact talent practitioners are in charge of employees' career management and recruitment process.

The key elements of TM that emerged were training, skills development, and internal mobility. *'I strive to customize training courses with a high added value instead of general seminars'* (Respondent 4). In practice, TM is intended to maximize the return on investment, both for the talent and more particularly for the organization.

As a result, mobility is often mentioned. It's about enabling talent to evolve within organizations. *'There are folks who have moved from consultant to project manager in less than a year'* (Respondent 10). In addition, specific actions can be taken in TM practices: *'The same philosophy is applied to all employees, but in special cases, other approaches are needed to retain the best talent'* (Respondent 12).

Concerning TM and the HR function relationship, the research findings highlight that the missions of talent managers encompass three main categories. Above all, it involves managing the whole recruitment process, starting with talent sourcing to onboarding; tasks include identifying talent ('school relationships', 'partnership building', 'employer brand', etc.).

Participants reported working under the direct control of the HR department, which may have similar assignments. In this situation, the HR department may have a sub-department responsible for TM. Talent managers operate in tandem with HR managers. *'When it comes to identifying and developing talent, we work closely with HR managers'* (Respondent 11).

Talent managers' assignments seem alike to those of HR managers. *'It is all about the job title'* (Respondent 4). The results agree that the usage of TM will differ whether an inclusive (object) or (subject) exclusive approach is adopted. Respondents insisted on proximity management as a distinguishable feature of TM and career management. *'Talent manager roles have evolved into something narrower than what used to exist, which was called career management'* (Respondent 13). More emphasis is placed on accompanying specific individuals in managing and developing their careers.

Our results highlight the rhetorical use of talent by practitioners. They use it to refer to the entire internal or external pool of talent that can meet the organization's challenges. TM seems to be an integrated HRM area. Its creation is motivated by the goal of optimizing the HR function by providing improved career management systems.

Talent in practice is defined in many ways. A talented employee possesses both technical and non-technical competencies and is able to fulfill a particular organizational need. Once the talent has been identified, the organization ceases to use the 'talent' term among employees.

A major concern in the literature is whether or not to communicate talent identification. Indeed, as the talent pool is made known to all, it is possible that those excluded from selection may lose motivation. Likewise, without communicating the identification, frustration may also arise among top performers who do not feel sufficiently recognized as a talent (Björkman et al., 2013). Thus, and in accordance with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), they will adapt their behavior to how they believe the organization considers them competent and reliable

While some organizations use inclusive and equality discourse, they nevertheless adopt exclusive talent identification practices that de facto exclude an entire segment of the workforce (Daubnet-Siva et al., 2017). What could happen is that some employees are confused about the meaning of the term 'talent' and therefore the identification of talent becomes more complex (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). Organizations adopt informal and hidden forms of TM by developing discrete support programs. We found that these approaches are inherently inclusive. Indeed, organizations open up the door for all employees to be 'talent', while building privileged relationships and individualized career development plans for those employees identified as essential.

Talent practitioners seem to be under the responsibility of the HR department. Still, most of the respondents stressed the shift from career management to TM. Ventolino & Mercier (2012) pointed out that the career manager's tasks are currently changing, due to internal and external constraints. Thus, for these researchers, TM should be more strategic in terms of managing talent careers. Specifically, what our study demonstrates is that talent management's presence is a clear message to both employees and candidates alike that employers are considering their aspirations. At the same time, these findings illustrate the difficulty talent managers face in dealing with these evolving expectations.

How Thunissien et al.'s (2013) view of TM as a top-down artifact to implement corporate mindset, corroborate our findings. As it fully or partially ignores the individuals' real insight, it fails to accurately assess their real agenda and adversely impacts their self-concept. It seems that using the term 'talent' to recruit, engage or activate HR appears to be unproblematic insofar as it reflects a good and valuable image for the target people. But then this mental connection tends to make it harder for managers to anticipate or detect potential deception or deception-related repercussions.

Conclusion

Whether in literature or in practice, the term talent is a notion that gives rise to many uses and understandings, sometimes giving the impression that the field remains poorly mastered. The purpose of this research was to shed light on practitioners' understanding and practices of the term.

TM is an important part of HRM because of its propensity to optimize operations. The authors who have been interested in this field have invested a lot of effort in trying to propose a stable definition. These discussions seem to lead to the observation that practices are based on an 'object' approach that considers talent as an accumulation of capital useful to the company, and a 'subject' approach that places at the center of the reflection the individuals holding the target competencies or likely to do so. In this research, we have highlighted the rhetorical uses of the term talent and its consequences on the managerial level.

The literature offers a discussion of the place of TM within the organization and specifically in relation to HRM. This research finally shows that TM practices are fully integrated into the HR function. The rhetorical use of the term 'talent' is used to enhance the role of HR managers and to promote a positive image with both internal clients and candidates. In fact, it appears that practitioners face tension between enhancing the image of the organization and making it attractive, while creating the conditions for fairness and equity. These problems are indeed observed when the system of identification and valorization is perceived as unfair or when a gap exists between discourse and practice. This research shows that this balancing act manifests itself in the promotion of an inclusive vision of TM while maintaining close and privileged relationships with talent. This ambidexterity relies heavily on HR practitioners mobilizing an informal structure. Finally, this research shows the importance of a concerted effort among the company's stakeholders to propose a commonly accepted definition of talent and to foster the perception of an inclusive approach by employees.

This research has some limitations that should be made clear. In terms of the scope of the results, it should be noted that the level of generality is limited by the fact that we mobilized a limited number of interviews. This research highlights the role of rhetoric in gaining acceptance for TM practices while maintaining fairness and perceived equity. It would be interesting to study contexts where this ambivalence is detected by employees and to study the consequences it may have on their attitudes and behaviors. This research mobilizes only the perspective of managers, who are responsible for TM. Identifying the views of the populations to whom these practices and communications are directed would help to identify their effectiveness. Finally, this research essentially mobilizes interviews with managers and is therefore based on the discourse of these respondents. It would be useful to cross-reference this data with institutional information or direct observations in order to study more deeply the elements of rhetoric.

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