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### Original Citation

Handley, Janet (2012) Talent management: the construction of talent. Working Paper. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield. (Unpublished)

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**Working paper 11.09.2012**

**TALENT MANAGEMENT:  
THE CONSTRUCTION OF TALENT**

Janet Handley 11.09.2012

## **TALENT MANAGEMENT: construction and performative effect**

### Introduction

The focal research project will consider the nature and lived experience of 'talent management', a concept which has ascended the ranks of human resource management (HRM) practice over the last decade, through a gender and communications lens. The phrase 'talent management', however, is neither simple nor uncontentious to define or explain. Moreover, whilst the concept is much cited by HRM practitioners, there is a relative paucity of credible academic literature in the field.

This paper will evaluate the nature and meaning of 'talent management', specifically the two opposing claims that it is a revolutionary approach to ensuring a good supply of 'talent' (itself crucial to organisational success) as opposed to the stance that it is not a new HRM approach at all but merely a case of re-packaging and re-labelling of existing approaches. The position adopted here is that talent management embraces many of the traditional aspects of HRM, but within a talent 'culture'. Moreover, it is suggested that a strategic and contingent perspective of the concept and its operationalisation is warranted and, most significantly, that talent management policy and practice at the very least influences the lived experience of managers and the construction of 'talent'.

### Talent Management: ascendance

Despite a global recession on an unprecedented scale (CIPD, 2009) and consequential high unemployment rates, evidence suggests that organisations continue to face recruitment difficulties (CIPD, 2012). In fact, CIPD (2012) report that the recession is creating a perfect recruitment and retention storm, with 82% of organisations finding it difficult to recruit and retain suitable staff, particularly the UK public sector with its double-bind of pensions cuts and pay freezes. Against a backdrop of a confirmed UK double-dip recession, the eurozone crisis, a 12-year high for unemployment and the highest recorded level of underemployment (individuals accepting part-time work because they cannot find full-time jobs) (CIPD, 2012):

*"... competition for talent is rife in many industries"* (CIPD, 2012, p. 2).

In addition to recessionary effects, a number of enduring environmental shifts are creating a climate in which competition for talent is increasingly intense. Demographic changes are predicted to be amongst the key factors likely to influence business over the next 30 years. All major research councils and future work commentators (such as Donkin, 2010 and Gratton, 2010) agree that an ageing population - combined with the recent abolition of the default retirement age in the UK - will create particular challenges for organisations attempting to fill key strategic roles. As the nature of work continues to shift away from manufacturing, through service and then to an increasing centrality of a pool of 'knowledge workers' (Handy, 2001; Williams, 2007; Goede, 2011) in a knowledge economy, this similarly creates a competitive pressure on organisations to recruit and retain these knowledge workers. There is also evidence to suggest that employee values are morphing over time, with arguably less organisational loyalty (Parry & Urwin, 2011), which again serves to render resourcing and talent management key strategic priorities (Carmichael et al., 2011; Iles et al., 2010), some two decades after the inception of the phrase 'talent management' following research at McKinsey (Michaels et al., 2001).

Marchington and Wilkinson (2012) suggest that effective talent management is essential for '*competitive edge and future survival*' (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2012, p. 200), specifically relating to leadership talent (the original focus in the work at McKinsey) in a global workplace. Of course, a depressed economic context tends to render talented leadership even more crucial to organisational success. CIPD (2012) similarly identify the crucial role of talent management in filling managerial, professional and technical vacancies, with a growing problem of limited specialist and technical skills in the labour market. The CIPD 2012 annual survey of resourcing and talent planning (CIPD, 2012) identified several strategies that organisations are now deploying in the fight for talent, including growing use of apprenticeships and professional networks (e.g. LinkedIn). There is also some evidence to suggest that talent management is increasingly focused on talent development and redeployment rather than recruitment (CIPD, 2012), although both strands continue to be fundamental in the current recessionary climate. Indeed, CIPD (2012) predict that specific skills shortages are likely to increase in the short-term in the UK. Thus:

“.... organisations across the UK are faced with a fundamental challenge to attract and retain top talent.”  
(CIPD, 20112, p. 2)

Given the current apparent escalation of the ‘war for talent’, both male and female leadership talent might be deemed central to organisational success. However, previous research suggests that female leaders continue to be disadvantaged, with a continuing notion of ‘leadership as male’, despite evidence indicating that female leaders might actually be better suited to lead in the brave new global workplace (see, e.g. Powell, 2011). There is also a considerable body of research suggesting a link between language, communication and how gender – and leadership – gets ‘done’ in organisations.

This paper will, therefore, outline in further detail existing literature on talent management, as part on ongoing research into the *construction of talent*. Specifically, the current research project will add to the talent management knowledge base, furthering understanding of how such an approach is constructed and lived out within organisations – particularly significant given the current research gap in this area. In subsequent papers and empirical work, a gender lens will be used to explore the lived experience of those identified as talented and also the ‘non-talented’, with an anticipated forthcoming rich understanding of the process of ‘doing’ talent and the implications of such for leader identity construction.

### Talent management: an understanding (construction and performative effect)

Notwithstanding its increasing prominence, there is still considerable ambiguity around the exact meaning of talent management. As Lewis and Heckman (2006) indicate:

*“A review of the literature focused on talent management reveals a disturbing lack of clarity regarding the definition, scope and overall goals of talent management.”* (Lewis and Heckman, 2006, p. 139)

In this context, *“..the field would benefit from a clear and comprehensive definition of the concept.”* (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 304)

Some would contend that talent management is simply a case of old wine in new bottles (see, e.g., Mellahi and Collings, 2010), whilst others would suggest that talent management is clearly distinct from other HR practices and approaches (both practitioner and academic).

Lewis and Heckman's (2006) analysis identifies three current perspectives on the possible definition of talent management: firstly, a suitable bundle of HR activities, practices or functions such as recruitment, selection and career planning; secondly, the development of a suitable talent pool, through (largely) internal processes; and finally a highly generic approach to talent and the management thereof, with talent perceived as something to be developed, almost irrespective of organisational strategy, direction or key success areas. The first two add little to traditional connotations of HRM while the latter is arguably one of the most fundamental problems with many approaches to talent management – it pays no heed to *which* talent should be developed, alignment with the organisation's strategy or effective resource deployment. Tarique and Schuler's (2010) re-working of Lewis and Heckman's third perspective improves the position slightly, through incorporation of a strategic imperative, but suffers from a highly generic conceptualisation of talent per se. Collings and Mellahi (2009) add an emergent fourth perspective whereby key positions (with the potential of having a significant impact on the organisation's performance) are identified prior to any attempt at filling such positions. Collings and Mellahi's approach is thus exclusive and seeks neither to embrace all employees in the talent pool nor to manage poor performers, which is seen as the remit of other imperatives and practices.

Collings and Mellahi's model of 'strategic talent management' clearly identifies an HR architecture (an internal and external labour market feeding into a talent pool, combined with the identification of pivotal positions) and consequential outcomes (e.g. motivation, organisational commitment), though it is interesting to note that this does not, prima facie, differ significantly from current HRM practices and could be deemed to be simply a re-packaging of traditional concepts. However, a useful call here – focusing on the importance of identifying talent with a range of broad competencies (given uncertainty over future role requirements) - is for a contingency approach to the deployment of HR practices.

Thus, a critical perspective would suggest that talent management is essentially nothing new, but rather a repackaging of certain aspects of existing human resource management practice. Indeed, *“.....some argue that TM (talent management) is potentially the “new HRM”....”* (Stewart and Harte, 2010, p. 506). Carmichael et al. (2011), for example, suggest that talent management may essentially be a 're-wrapping' of a range of related activities and Ford et al. (2010a) conclude that, within several Yorkshire and Humber SHA trusts, an incremental approach to implementation is resulting in the retrospective 're-labelling of existing practices' and little or no development of a strategic talent management approach in practice. CIPD's own definition appears to add little of value to the debate, essentially conceptualising the approach as a 'bundle' of HRM activities and as:

*“..... the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement, retention and deployment of those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to the organization.”* (CIPD, 2009)

Torrington et al. (2011) similarly focus on perceived core aspects of talent management, including: recruitment and retention (through the use of differential offerings for 'talent'); identification and placement of talent (with a focus on current staff); management and support of engagement (ensuring opportunities for risk taking (but with 'freedom to fail') and space to 'grow' (with appropriate resources and opportunity)); talent development (inclusive, but 'focused'); promotion and succession planning (which involves development of a 'talent pipeline'); and valuing employees' perspectives and meeting needs (of *all* staff, not just 'talent'). However, closer analysis of this approach suggests a continuing focus on traditional HRM, albeit with specific inclusion or mention of 'talent' and an inclusive (thus not differentiated) approach.

Torrington et al. (2011) review a number of difficulties with the talent management concept – notwithstanding limitations with their own definition. Firstly, as suggested above, there is the notion that talent management is simply a case of old wine in new bottles. Essentially, there is nothing new to talent management - rather a more rapid and systematic approach to standard HRM practices such as workforce planning. Thus, there has been a tendency to include almost all of the activities inherent to the broader scope of human resource management (HRM) within talent management, hence weakening its differential base. Secondly, some cultural perspectives on talent management (likening this to a cultural ‘mindset’) reveal the gap between reality and rhetoric in many cases (confirmed by Ford et al., 2010a, above); this is compounded by an extremely weak evidence base to support talent management. Moreover, identification and differential treatment of talented staff may have several undesirable, negative, consequences, such as rendering the organisation vulnerable to claims of discrimination, increasing competition and ignoring the multitude of ‘the rest’ of the workforce. Ford et al. (2010a) similarly posit that talent management – particularly in the current economic climate – may have detrimental consequences for those staff *not* identified as ‘talent’. This is a significant point given Ford et al.’s research with practitioners in the field.

An emergent pattern within prior research and credible academic literature is one, therefore, of considerable ambiguity and confusion. In part, this may reflect one of the potential differentiators of talent management – a contingency approach. This is advocated by several commentators, including Ford et al. (2010a; 2010b) who suggest that:

*“...organizations are advised to develop their own talent management strategies and programmes that complement their culture, market and unique circumstances.”* (Ford et al. 2010b, p. 3)

Moreover, it is suggested here that a credible and differentiated definition of talent management should also include a strategic focus, as posited by Torrington et al. (2011). Essentially, this approach requires senior management sponsorship, integration across the organisation *and* with the organisation’s strategic objectives, values and other HR practices. Similarly, Lewis and Heckman (2006) suggest that a strategic focus is central to the relevance of talent management. In an analogous manner, Zuboff (1988) cited in Lewis and Heckman (2006) depicts a strategic approach to managing talent, akin to other strategic management models. According to Zuboff, organisations should pay heed to labour market conditions and product/service market relevance when determining talent pool strategy – thus also supporting a contingency perspective. This concept is further developed by Farndale et al. (2010), who call for a more strategic role for the HR function in organisations which are seen to require global (as opposed to national or regional) talent management strategies. Although Farndale et al.’s central focus is multinational corporations (MNCs), thus naturally gravitating towards a global concept of talent and talent management, this global dimension is absent from many of the approaches thus far considered.

Interestingly, Mellahi and Collings’ (2010) definition assumes a cultural perspective and also introduces the concept of ‘*global*’ talent management as a distinctive approach:

*“Broadly defined, global talent management involves the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organisation’s sustainable competitive advantage on a global scale, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles which reflects the global scope of the MNE (multinational enterprise), and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with the best available incumbent and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization.”* (Mellahi and Collings, 2010, pp. 143-144)

However, whilst attempting to introduce a global perspective, this definition ultimately reverts back to ‘human resource architecture’ or a traditional ‘bundle’ of HRM policies and practices, albeit within a multinational organisation, thus reinforcing the traditional definitional approach. This is similar to several other papers reviewing the relevance of talent management, for example Hartmann et al. (2010).

Fundamental to the entire talent management debate is the interpretation and lived experience of talent. For some, talent is to be sought out at all levels and the organisation staffed by ‘A’ players, with ‘C’ players being removed from the organisation. Talent here is a resource and an exclusive approach is warranted. Collings and Mellahi’s (2009) approach suggests that *the* differentiator of talent management as opposed to strategic HRM is an *exclusive* focus on “*high potential and high performing employees operating in key roles and not all employees in the organisation*” (Collings and Mellahi, 2009, p. 306). Moreover, it is suggested that the focus should be on ‘talent’ in roles that are pivotal to organisational success. This becomes problematic, however, if one considers the limitations of exclusive approaches: overemphasis on the individual and risks of excessive competition and poor teamwork; a negative impact on motivation due to over-emphasis on

external (not internal) talent in some cases; over-emphasis on talent at the expense of identifying process and cultural problems; and the development of an elitist culture (see, e.g., Mellahi and Collings, 2010). In contrast, inclusive approaches suggest that *all* employees can be managed up to 'be' talent and that an organisation's culture should reflect this. Indeed, this distinction is central to the focal research topic, since it might be expected that less inclusive approaches might be more prone to bias, including gendered interpretation and implementation. However, many critics argue that an inclusive approach lacks strategic focus (at the extreme becoming little more than training), whilst others suggest that the *exclusive* connotation is equally non-strategic since, for some jobs, 'acceptable' performance is 'good enough'. Ford et al (2010b) consider that talent and its definition will surely vary with organisations' circumstances (suggesting that inclusive may be more relevant to the public sector, for example) and the key priorities at any point in time. Ulrich and Smallwood (2012) take this further and identify four categories of talent, although these appear to simply mirror organisational levels rather than embed strategic focus. Lewis and Heckman (2006) similarly identify a two-by-two classification matrix, suggesting that the treatment of employees should reflect their added value in addition to the ease or difficulty of replacing. The implication here is that talent management might become different things to different employees, thus again suggesting a contingency perspective.

In conclusion, one might agree with Lewis and Heckman (2006) that:

*"It is apparent from the above that the term "talent management" has no clear meaning. It is used in too many ways and is often a means to highlight the "strategic" importance of a HR speciality .... without adding to the theory or practice of that speciality."* (Lewis and Heckman, 2006, p.141)

That notwithstanding, the conclusion here (following, for example, Ford et al. 2010b) is that talent management builds upon some of the more traditional HRM concepts such as management development and resourcing, but that it also adds a unique focus and a fresh perspective – i.e. a talent 'culture' (see, e.g., Carmichael et al., 2011). As Beardwell et al. (2010) suggest:

*"There is nothing particularly new about the individual activities that comprise talent management but what is different is that these activities are 'bundled' together...."* (Beardwell et al., 2010, p. 162)

This analysis aligns well with practitioner understanding of the meaning and operationalisation of talent management (see, e.g., Davis et al., 2007) and continued use ensures that the 'talent tsunami' (Gordon, 2010) does not overwhelm HRM in the field. Moreover, a contingency perspective of the interpretation and implementation of talent management would appear to add most value and enable organisations to focus on the key strategic priorities at any one time.

An acceptable definition and research framework for talent management, therefore, should include typical activities (the 'bundle') within a talent culture, but with a contingent frame of the possible meaning and treatment of 'talent'. Ultimately, categorisations such as those provided by Collings & Mellahi (2009), Mc Donnell et al. (2010), Iles et al. (2010) and Stewart and Rigg (2011) are helpful in summarising the potential variations on a theme. Thus, the position adopted here is that talent management can be *either* inclusive *or* exclusive, can focus on the individual *and/or* the pivotal nature of the role and can have a global, national *and/or* regional focus.

Finally, one key notion deemed central to the focal research project and hitherto undeveloped in any empirical work or talent management literature is that suggested by Alvesson and Karreman (2007). Notably, that one common element of *all* talent management practice is that it at the very least influences the lived experience and social construction thereof. In other words, people are developed / created / produced *through* talent management and, indeed, HRM strategy. This position is fundamentally consistent with the ontological and epistemological position to be adopted in the focal research project and will be explored further in forthcoming empirical work.

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