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Troubling some assumptions: A response to "The Role of Perceived Organizational Justice in Shaping the Outcomes of Talent Management: A Research Agenda"

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Highlights

Comments on the special issue paper on organizational justice and talent management.

Argues that much of the rhetoric around ‘talent’ is unchallenged and self-serving.

Identifies theoretical bases for talent management

Abstract

This article is in response to the paper by Gelens, Dries, Hofmans and Pepermans in this Special Issue on the development of a theoretical framework for talent management. Their central argument and hypotheses are untroubled here as this article instead engages with a central assumption of their paper which is commonly taken for granted in the talent literature; that talent is in shortage. In addition, suggestions for theory development are given and a more critical approach to the assumptions on which talent management is based is advocated.

Keywords: talent management, shortage, workforce differentiation

By drawing on perceived organizational justice theory Gelens et al (2013) develop a series of testable hypotheses as a contribution to a better understanding of the ‘theoretical foundation’ for talent management. In this response I will not consider their hypotheses directly, as that is best left to those who will someday put them to test. Instead, the present paper comments on some substantive issues raised by Gelens et al. (2013). that they, along with many other commentators on talent management, leave largely untouched.

The first issue surfaces in their opening comments with the claim that ‘talent shortages are increasing’. This claim and the rhetoric surrounding it has been largely unchallenged since the ‘war for talent’ leitmotif captured the imagination of HR managers and subsequently academics in the 1990s. There is certainly no shortage of consultants' reports based on surveys of senior executives to back-up this claim although hard evidence is more elusive. There are two reasons why the research community should be suspicious of the shortages discourse. The first is that it is just as convincing and just as plausible that it is the inability of organizations to spot talent in their workforce and in the labour market that lies at the heart of the rhetoric of scarcity rather than a true shortage of 'talented' people in any empirical sense. Local skills shortages in regions and sectors do occur of course, but the global easing of labour mobility which catalyses the movement of the 'talented' must at the same time make it easier for other organizations to attract those talents. The second reason is that the rhetoric of shortages is self-serving such that it helps to sustain an impoverished view of workforce capabilities which, in-turn, helps to secure the influence and the positions of consultants and senior managers along with their reward packages. After all, a narrative that implies that, 'our workforce is full of duffers so we must sift for gold' helps to keep a particular managerial elite in positions of influence and must surely help to perpetuate a particular kind of social capital in high places.

Another assertion in the paper, one connected to the shortages discourse, is that, because of the current economic crisis and globalisation, organizations need to improve their HRM practices to retain their 'talented' employees. This makes practical sense of course and would doubtless attract support from managers keen to see business improvement; the tougher the conditions the more responsive our HR practices must become. But if this is happening, as seems likely, then it supports and legitimises the view that many organizations see their employees as resources that are measurable, trainable and dispensable rather than as people whose innate abilities should be allowed to flourish regardless of economic conditions. Developing people is a good thing to do in itself, and should not be proportionate to economic conditions (for an extended treatment of this argument see Downs and Swailes, 2013) although there are practical restraints on how far organizations can do this. Nevertheless, the HRM community should ask, what is the better principle for organizations to follow – look after employees to the extent that economic conditions force us to, or regardless of economic conditions help employees to get the best out of themselves? This question takes us back to the notion of hard and soft HRM, one emphasising the Resource and the other the Human (Legge, 1995).

Gelens et al. (2013) are particularly concerned with what they see as a 'lack of theoretical foundation for talent management'. While it is true that the field suffers from the lack of an integrative theory there are plenty of theoretical perspectives that explain why organizations pursue talent management and I feel that this angle is overplayed in the paper. Indeed, after claiming that talent management theory is lacking, the authors then mention several theoretical frameworks over and above organizational justice. Sure, there are initial problems defining what talent management is but in order to move us forward most authors seem to agree, as Gelens et al. (2013) do, that for the purposes of theorising and researching something distinctive it means an ‘exclusive’ approach in which a small proportion of a workforce is singled-out for special treatment on the basis of perceived high potential. Exclusive approaches have a seductive logic – identify the ‘best’ people and invest in them and are a logical extension of managerialist thinking that measures, labels, categorises and stratifies employees and organizations according to contribution, quality and worth.

Indeed, the alternative inclusive approach is so fundamentally different that it is hard to separate the inclusive approach from good HRM. Where it exists, and examples of it are hard to find, the inclusive approach to talent management sees talent as something in each employee such that it falls on the organization to bring their individual and idiosyncratic talents to the surface. If this is achieved, then organizations running with the inclusive view may have to confront the possibility that the talents of some employees may be of little or no use to the organization. It seems logical in this eventuality that the socially responsible employer would then face the challenge of helping to move these employees on to jobs, possibly with other organizations, that offer a better fit with their talents and which will allow them to flourish. In the mainstream, exclusive, view talent is seen differently – not as something that is in everyone but as a pool of high potential employees possessing rare skills that are valued by the organization.

Any future attempt to produce a comprehensive theory may well start at a macro level with understanding how talent management is shaped by resource dependence theory (see Garavan, 2012); how talent management fits into SHRM particularly around workforce differentiation and HR architecture (Huselid & Becker, 2011; Lepak & Snell, 1999); how talent management connects to the ability, motivation, opportunity model and HR outcomes (Jiang et al 2012); and the role of ‘talent’ in contributing to rare and valuable social resources (Wright and McMahan, 1992). At the micro level, theoretical perspectives include the role of positive psychology through its link to virtuous behaviour (Avey et al 2012; Peterson and Seligman 2004), Pygmalion effects (Eden, 1984) and the ways that individuals build and use their personal brand in the context of their career development (Vitberg, 2010). Further theoretical insights will doubtless come from unravelling and integrating the subjectivity of performance appraisal and the validity and value of competence frameworks that attempt to encapsulate the 'talents' valued by organizations.

Workforce differentiation is central to elitist talent management and Gelens et al. (2013) usefully highlight the lack of attention given to the impact of workforce differentiation on employees. In doing so it is important to consider effects on the minority of included people as well as, and in contrast to, the majority of excluded people. Some research is emerging on this topic (which they cite) yet the core hypothesis is well known; people who are singled out for special treatment will outperform those who are not. Indeed, this hypothesis deserves a central place in the further development of any theoretical framework around exclusive talent management. The reason it should come as no surprise is because running exclusive talent management programmes in organizations is a variant of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Pygmalion) effect first noticed in educational settings (Eden, 1984, 1992; Tierney & Farmer, 2004). Here, organizations witness and benefit from a 'feel good' or bounce factor arising from an employee's identification as a high performer with future potential. The creation of talent pools and specifically the selection of people to fill them signals raised expectations from top managers about an employee's future potential and performance. It is reasonable to consider, therefore, that elevation to a talent pool will, other things being equal, raise participant feelings over and above those not selected in accordance with the prophecy. The mechanism for enhanced feelings and performance relies on supervisors being better leaders to the talented than to outsiders. Because of the better treatment, which might occur as small differences in encouragement or action but which have large effects on people, talent insiders develop higher self-expectations which act as a motivating force (Eden, 1984). As and when higher performance is reached, the higher performance reinforces and validates both the individual's self-expectations and the supervisor's expectations and so the cycle continues. Although originally noticed with individuals, Eden (1990) showed that group effects can occur so we can expect the effect to operate across entire talent pools. At the same time as the feelings of employees in talent pools are inflated, an opposing, Golem, effect may also operate such that if employees perceive low expectations from their supervisors then their feelings and performance will fall.

Gelens et al. (2013) argue that workforce differentiation promotes inequality which would form part of the explanation of any Golem effects noted above. However, it could also be argued that differentiation on the basis of contribution is not unethical. Indeed, failing to differentiate employees on this basis could be seen as failing to give different groups the attention and resources that their contributions would suggest they deserve (Swailes, 2013). This question reduces to beliefs about whether organizations should prioritise treating everyone equally and increasing the risk of not allowing everyone to maximise their potential, or treating them unequally but putting in place a climate where individual potential can be realised, at least for those in the talent pools. This underlying trade-off between equality of treatment and providing opportunities to realise individual potential may explain the different approaches to talent management seen across organizations. The traditions of public service organizations (Orr & Vince, 2009), for instance, appear to be more concerned with and sensitive to differentiation appearing to shy away from elitist talent programmes. Where this occurs, the relatively high performers are denied the full freedoms to function. This reluctance to differentiate and run with a discourse of ‘talent’ may stem from concerns about the potential for divisiveness in a sector that has strong traditions of collective behaviour. Such sensitivities may, however, be under pressure given the context of retrenchment that confronts many public organizations as governments demand greater productivity from their public servants in times of austerity. In contrast, the profit motive in private organizations and a greater acceptance of the view that different jobs and different people are not equal in the value they add to the business, such that diversity of individual performance and contribution is another legitimate way of seeing workforce diversity, appears to sit more comfortably with the differential treatment of employees and its consequences.

In conclusion, Gelens et al. (2013) provide a useful contribution by linking organizational justice to talent management. They begin to tackle a fundamental question about the feelings of talent insiders and outsiders and importantly contribute to understanding the organizational conditions in which potentially adverse reactions by outsiders can be alleviated. In doing so, they rely on some fundamental assumptions that need much more critical examination. These include discourses of shortage which play to the interests of consultants and top managers and heighten anxieties about recruitment and succession processes and which shape the social construction of ‘talent’ in different sectors.

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