

Strategic talent management scholarship: a review of current foci and future directions

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to review strategic talent management (STM) research with the aim of providing major insights into the under-explored themes, issues, theories and methods.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The method included a systematic review of studies from 2007 to 2019 in five reputable academic databases. In total, 51 studies met the inclusion criteria and were analysed.*

Findings – *STM can be leveraged to achieve several positive employee, organisational and macro-level outcomes. However, the realisation of these positive outcomes can be threatened by several challenges, which need to be addressed through the creation of conditions critical for the success of talent management strategies. Moreover, effective talent management strategy regime does not lie on the shoulders of just one individual but a collective responsibility of multiple stakeholders. The study also highlighted the digitalisation of STM, integration of ethical and responsible management principles into talent management strategies, and strategic management of unconventional of talent pools as key trends. Finally, several major weaknesses in the current STM scholarship from theoretical, content, context and methodological perspectives are discussed.*

Research limitations/implications – *Although the studies included in the analysis may not include all studies published during the study period, it is assumed that they provide a good representation of such studies.*

Originality/value – *Since no systematic study was conducted specifically on STM, this study contributes to the talent management literature by identifying several research issues and gaps while defining future directions of the field. It can, therefore, enrich STM debates, practices and policy making.*

Keywords Systematic review, Strategic talent management, Talent strategy

Paper type Literature review

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Introduction

The concept of strategic talent management (STM) has recently provoked a “significant research interest, as both large multinational enterprises (MNEs) and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are competing at attracting and retaining top-performing employees” (Cui *et al.*, 2017, p. 9; Selmer *et al.*, 2002). This development is underpinned by the notion that effective design and implementation of talent management strategies can be a key source of firms’ sustainable value creation (Scullion *et al.*, 2010; Sparrow and Makram, 2015; Tiwari and Lenka, 2015; Tymon *et al.*, 2010; Whelan and Carcary, 2011), leading to their long-term competitiveness in the global market space and their overall survival and growth.

In their review of empirical talent management research, Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen (2016) found STM and global talent management as two key sub-fields of talent management. According to Collings and Mellahi (2009), STM refers to “activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organisation’s sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource (HR) architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organisation” (p. 304).

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Based on the literature reviewed so far, we are yet to see systematic reviews that exclusively focused on STM. It is essential to indicate that some reviews (e.g. Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017) were conducted on talent management. Although some of these reviews were general reviews on theoretical and conceptual clarification of the concept (e.g. Collings and Mellahi, 2009), others focused exclusively on empirical research (e.g. Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016). Recently, Anlesinya *et al.* (2019) have provided a comprehensive review of the thematic and methodological domains of empirical global talent management. However, there is no comprehensive systematic review of STM research. Hence, the aim of this paper is to perform a systematic review on STM research (both theoretical and empirical papers) in order to map-out theoretical, methodological, contextual and issue gaps in the field with the aim of providing major insights for researchers in the area to examine the under-explored themes while adopting research methods that can provide robust findings that practitioners can rely on. Consequently, the main questions guiding this study are as follows: what are the main research methodological issues in STM studies? What theories are used to frame STM issues? What are the main themes in STM research?

The paper makes two important contributions to the talent management literature: first, as no systematic study was conducted with particular focus on STM, this study contributes to the talent management literature by critically reviewing and identifying key STM issues such as outcomes and practices of STM, digitalisation of STM, strategic management of unconventional talent pools, role of stakeholders in talent management, ethical issues in talent management, challenges of STM, amongst others. Collectively, the findings provide rich insights into various stakeholders like talent managers, senior managers, business owners and policy makers to improve their STM systems. Second, the study discussed several contextual, theoretical and methodological research gaps and provided clear agenda for future research in the field. We believe the proposed research directions would contribute significantly towards enriching STM debates, practices and policy making for the betterment of societies and sustainability of organisations locally and globally.

The rest of the paper is organised in four sections. The first section discussed the research methods. The second section presents results (covering summary of the articles included in the review, methodological reviews and an analysis of key research themes). The third section discusses future research agenda and managerial implication, whereas the final section presents the conclusion.

Methodology

The study adopted systematic literature review method in order to provide critical analysis of STM. A systematic literature review is a means of identifying, evaluating and interpreting all available research studies relevant to a particular research question, topic area or phenomenon of interest (Kitchenham, 2004). A systematic literature review approach was chosen because it is a more rigorous and accountable research method (Ham-baloyi and Jordan, 2016). The data collection followed predefined protocols. The study searched for STM, talent management strategy, talent management strategies, talent strategy, strategic talent development and strategy for talent management in the papers. No restriction was made to search these words in any specific journals (Briner *et al.*, 2009). As a result, the search was conducted in multiple renowned research databases. Specifically, five databases were searched and they are Emerald Insight, Taylor and Francis Online, Wiley & Son Online Library, Sage Journal and Science Direct. Following Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen (2016), the keywords were searched in the titles or topic, abstract and keywords of the papers.

Prior to the search activities, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined. Only papers published in international peer-reviewed journals, written in English, have an available authorship (Boselie *et al.*, 2005; Bouncken *et al.*, 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016), and full-text articles available (Knipschild, 1995) were included. As a result, theses, interviews, editorial notes, book chapters and reviews, brief communications and commentaries, symposia and presentation slides were excluded from the retained papers. Also, following Arduini and Zanfei (2014), conference

proceedings, unpublished masters or doctoral theses and working papers were not included. As indicated earlier, no limitation of time frame was used for the present study as that could limit the ability to capture all the literature available on the topic (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2017). We also reviewed the titles in the reference section of the retrieved articles with the aim of identifying more articles. Besides, we conducted a focus search in some journals considered relevant for this kind of thematic study. Using the inclusion and the exclusion criteria, 51 of the articles were retained for analysis. A template was developed to summary and extract relevant information from the text of the papers. A copy is available from the corresponding author upon request.

Findings and results

Publication trends

A total of 51 articles were published between 2007 and April, 2019. The general trend (see Figure 1) indicates that the volume of research articles are increasing but at a low rate. It is also evident that in the 13 years of STM research, 80.39 per cent (41) of the articles were published in the last seven years (i.e. 2013–2019). This recent slight increases in publications on the topic could be due to constant calls for more studies on the topic (see Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Farndale *et al.*, 2014) as well as publication of special issues on the topic.

Sources and types of articles included

Studies on STM are scattered across several journals. The 51 articles included were published in 33 different journals (see Table I), indicating that academic conversation on STM is dispersed and currently taking place in various publication outlets and, thus, suggesting that the STM sub-field cannot boost a single established journal or publication outlet. However, on the basis of publication volume, one can infer that out of the 33 different journals, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* has clearly established itself as a leading publication outlet for STM research.

Contextual assessment

The findings revealed that STM studies have been limited to just a handful of countries across the world, with the highest concentration on Europe and Asia. The geographical distribution of the studies was analysed based on the authors' affiliation and where the data were sourced for

Figure 1 Trends of strategic talent management research

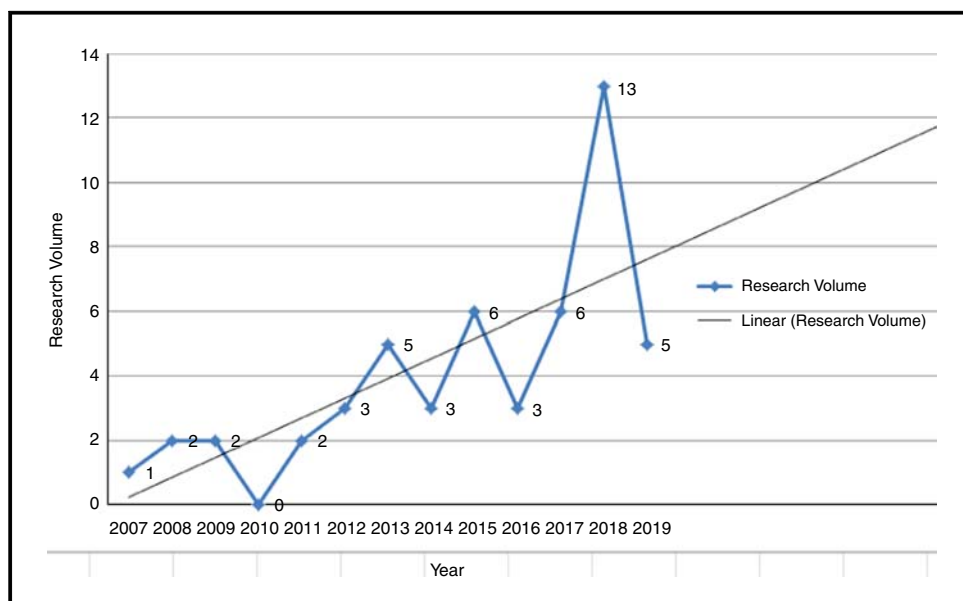


Table I Sources and types of articles included

<i>Journal</i>	<i>Number of articles</i>
<i>International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management</i>	2
<i>Employee Relations</i>	2
<i>Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance</i>	2
<i>Industrial and Commercial Training</i>	3
<i>Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes</i>	4
<i>International Journal of Organizational Analysis</i>	1
<i>Human Resource Management International Digest</i>	1
<i>Strategic HR Review</i>	3
<i>Management Decision</i>	1
<i>Development and Learning in Organisations: An International Journal</i>	1
<i>European Journal of Training and Development</i>	1
<i>Education + Training</i>	1
<i>Journal of Global Mobility</i>	1
<i>Advances in Developing Human Resources</i>	1
<i>Industry and Higher Education</i>	1
<i>Journal of World Business</i>	2
<i>International Business Review</i>	1
<i>Human Resource Management Review</i>	1
<i>Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences</i>	1
<i>Procedia – Computer Science</i>	1
<i>The International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	6
<i>Human Resource Development International</i>	1
<i>Technology Analysis & Strategic Management</i>	1
<i>Policy Studies</i>	1
<i>Journal of Human Ecology</i>	1
<i>The Anthropologist</i>	1
<i>Knowledge Management Research & Practice</i>	1
<i>Cogent Business & Management</i>	1
<i>Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management</i>	1
<i>Thunderbird International Business Review</i>	3
<i>Global Business and Organizational Excellence</i>	1
<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources</i>	1
<i>European Journal of International Management</i>	1
Total	51

empirical papers. Our results indicated that 112 authors from 18 different countries globally published the 51 articles. Majority (43.75 per cent) of the scholars were based in Europe, followed by Asia (33.93 per cent), Australia (10.71 per cent), USA and Canada (8.04 per cent) and Africa (1.79 per cent). Also, 1.79 per cent of the scholars were based in both USA and European institutions. Furthermore, the results revealed that out the 33 empirical papers, 18 used data from Asian countries, 10 from European countries and 4 collected data from Australia. Also, three empirical papers each sourced data from Latin and South America and Africa, whereas two were collected data from the USA and Canada. It is important to note that multiple data collection is possible in the above classification. From the above, it is evident that STM scholarship is being led by Europe and Asia. Although scholars based in Europe are leading STM discourse generally, the Asian context has emerged as the leading region in empirical research in terms of where data are sourced. This means that the popular notion that the talent management literature is US centric is a bit exaggerated, at least, for the STM sub-field. STM research is rather spearheaded by scholars based in and data from European and Asian contexts, whereas Africa is severely underrepresented. Consequently, we argue that the literature on this sub-field of talent management is European and Asian centric.

Methodological assessment

Table II below summarised the methodological domain issues in STM scholarship. From the results, 64.71 per cent (33 papers) of the 51 articles were empirical, whereas conceptual/non-empirical papers constituted 35.29 per cent (18 papers). Studies in talent management in general have been criticised for its lack of empirical research. This could have motivated the higher number of empirical

Table II Paper type and method of choice by year of publication

<i>Methodological domains</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Type of paper</i>		
Theoretical/non-empirical	18	35.29
Empirical	33	64.71
Total	51	100.00
<i>Research approach</i>		
Qualitative	18	54.55
Quantitative	11	33.33
Mixed	4	12.12
Total	33	100.00
<i>Research design</i>		
Longitudinal	3	9.09
Cross-sectional	30	90.91
Total	33	100.00
<i>Population and sample used</i>		
Employees	6	18.18
Managers	13	39.39
Students	2	6.06
Multisource/samples	9	27.27
Not known/not explicit	3	9.09
Total	33	100.0
<i>Level of analysis</i>		
Micro-level	10	19.61
Organisational-level	27	52.94
Macro-level (industry, national, regional and global)	10	19.61
Multilevel	4	7.84
Total	51	100

papers as against the theoretical ones. However, due to the fact that the field is young, increases in all type of papers will be required to advance its development. Besides, more than half (18 papers: 54.55 per cent) of the empirical studies on the STM employed qualitative approach, 33.33 per cent (11 papers) adopted the quantitative approach, and only 12.12 per cent (4 papers) adopted the mixed research approach. Overall, most of the studies were descriptive, utilising a case study technique in qualitative studies and descriptive analysis in quantitative studies. This implies that the empirical literature is generally lacking rigour and can, in turn, limit our understanding of STM issues. Relatedly, most (90.91 per cent: 30 papers) of the empirical studies adopted cross-sectional data, whereas just a few (3 papers: 9.09 per cent) used longitudinal data. This suggests that there is overreliance on cross-sectional data in the field, implying that empirical STM research is limited as it is difficult to infer causality based on cross-sectional data.

Moreover, the analyses revealed that more than half (27 papers; 52.94 per cent) of the studies examined organisational-level phenomenon (e.g. financial performance, organisational-level HR outcome), followed by macro- (i.e. industry, national, regional and global levels) and micro-levels with 10 papers (19.61 per cent) each. Multilevel analysis constituted just 7.84 per cent (4 papers), whereas team level is non-existent. It is essential to point out that 75 per cent (3 out of the 4 articles) of the multilevel papers were non-empirical. These few multilevel studies without empirical support imply that there is generally a lack of complexity in majority of the studies, which also does not augur well for multilevel theory development in the field. Finally, majority (13 papers: 39.39 per cent) of the empirical STM research used managers only as their sample. This was followed by multisource sample (9 papers: 27.27 per cent) and employees (6 papers: 18.18 per cent). Students or graduate trainees were only used in two studies representing 6.06 per cent. Also, three papers representing 9.09 per cent did not explicitly indicate their target population. Overall, it can be argued that as about 63.53 per cent of the empirical articles used homogenous population, there is limited multi-sample studies on STM; hence, more holistic view of issues of the issues examined are generally lacking.

Thematic assessment

STM practices. Practices of STM examined included training and development (e.g. Baum, 2008; McCracken *et al.*, 2016; Sheehan *et al.*, 2018), leadership or management development (e.g. Dunnagan *et al.*, 2013; Sablok *et al.*, 2017; Tajuddin *et al.*, 2015), career planning and career advancement opportunities (e.g. Bhatnagar, 2007; Ambrosius, 2018; Cui *et al.*, 2017), attractive/competitive compensation (e.g. Cui *et al.*, 2017; Sheehan *et al.*, 2018), employee engagement and organisational culture (e.g. Bhatnagar, 2007), organisational support (e.g. Ambrosius, 2018; Bhatnagar, 2007), organisation's talent mindset (e.g. Sharma and Bhatnagar, 2009), succession planning (e.g. Sablok *et al.*, 2017; Sharma and Bhatnagar, 2009), organisational climate (e.g. Cui *et al.*, 2017; Singh and Sharma, 2015), competency learning (e.g. Rana *et al.*, 2013), performance management, diversity-inclusive commitment (Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss, 2018) and mentoring and coaching (McCracken *et al.*, 2016; Dunnagan *et al.*, 2013).

Although these STM practices generally can make positive contributions at various levels, the reviews showed that some, for example organisational culture, and training and development, can have both positive and negative impacts on talent retention. Besides, the above results suggest the lack of consistency in the use of STM practices. These numerous practices could create problems by resulting in conflicting strategies, thereby creating problems for effective STM. Moreover, the distinct talent management challenges and opportunities in the regions or countries in which these studies were carried out could have informed the selection of these talent management strategies. We, however, suggest that more works are needed to reach consensus on some effective core strategies that can be employed and if necessary adapted to enhance STM effort.

STM outcomes. Studies looking at the outcomes of STM mainly focused on employee and organisational-level variables, although few have examined macro-level outcomes. Employee-level outcomes like talent turnover/retention (e.g. Ambrosius, 2018; Anand, 2011; McCracken *et al.*, 2016; Pandita and Ray, 2018), social and economic exchange behaviours (e.g. King, 2016), psychological contracts fulfilment (e.g. Clarke and Scurry, 2017; King, 2016; Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014), perceived fairness in talent management and career outcomes (e.g. King, 2017), employee value proposition (e.g. Tajuddin *et al.*, 2015), employee commitment, job satisfaction (e.g. Mahjoub *et al.*, 2018; Pamela *et al.*, 2011; Pandita and Ray, 2018), graduates' innovation potential, flexibility, self-confidence and achievement drive (e.g. Sart, 2014). Most of these studies showed positive employee outcomes of STM. By far, although still very under-researched, psychological contracts fulfilment and turnover/retention are employee-level outcomes of STM with relatively high articles. Besides, sustainable talent outcomes such as employee wellbeing, quality of work life, satisfaction with work-life balance, creativity, amongst others were not investigated or were examined conceptually. This clearly indicates that there is dearth of studies generally on employee-level outcomes.

At the organisational level, STM outcomes examined include employer brand/brand advantage (e.g. Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss, 2018; King, 2017; Sheehan *et al.*, 2018), organisational competitiveness (e.g. Sheehan *et al.*, 2018), project success (e.g. Mahjoub *et al.*, 2018) and organisational performance (e.g. Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Makram *et al.*, 2017; Panda and Sahoo, 2015). Some have also examined HR outcomes at the organisational level (e.g. Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss, 2018; Hsieh *et al.*, 2019). According to Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss (2018), organisations invest over the long term in talent management strategies for skilled migrants are more likely to receive long-term HR outcomes. At the industry level, Sheehan *et al.* (2018) found that STM practices offer an important avenue for managers in the hospitality and tourism sector to improve their employer branding and competitiveness. Recently, some researchers (e.g. D'Annunzio-Green and Teare, 2018; Sheehan *et al.*, 2018) suggest that hospitality firms use talent management processes to facilitate organisational cultural change and behaviours and strengthen the employer brand. Earlier, Baum (2008) argued that training and development, and attractive compensation can help hospitality sector managers to attract and retain talented employees. Thus, STM can make strategic contributions to various organisational and macro-level outcomes. However, like employee-level, organisational and macro-level (industry, country and regional) outcomes are under-researched. Besides, the few

industry-level studies mostly focused on the hospitality sector. Insights into STM outcomes into other sectors, national and regional levels are, therefore, limited. Moreover, a sizeable number of the studies on outcomes of STM in all categories were conceptual in nature and likely to be influenced by erroneous assumptions and subjective interpretations of the researchers. Hence, “empirical studies are better positioned to provide more useful insights by highlighting what pertains in practice and reality” (Anlesinya *et al.*, 2019, p. 2).

Stakeholders in STM system. The role of various stakeholders in ensuring the effectiveness of a STM system is highlighted in a handful of the papers (e.g. Bratton, 2018; D’Annunzio-Green and Teare, 2018; King, 2016, 2015; Clarke and Scurry, 2017; Sheehan *et al.*, 2018; Ford, 2017; Sparrow *et al.*, 2013). According to the evidence, supervisors and leaders can play a significant role in shaping the attitude of talented employees towards organisations’ talent management strategies (Bratton, 2018; King, 2016). Similarly, Clarke and Scurry (2017) found that line managers play a crucial role in continuous development and fulfilment of graduate trainees’ psychological contract in talent management programme. Also, CEO/owner-managers’ commitments are essential for effective implementation of talent management strategies through the creation of talent mindset/culture at all levels within the organisation (Sheehan *et al.*, 2018). Relatedly, Sparrow *et al.* (2013) and Ford (2017) also reechoed the role of HR development professionals in effective STM implementation, whereas Cardenas-Navia and Fitzgerald (2019) highlighted the role of higher educational sector/institutions in creating digital talents for industry utilisation.

From the above, it is argued that the effective STM systems do not lie on the shoulders of just one individual, for example, HR or talent managers. However, it is a collective responsibility of multiple stakeholders. Specifically, senior management, owners, HR/talent managers, higher educational institutions, talented employees, line managers and supervisors all must work hand in hand to ensure the effectiveness of STM systems and outcomes.

Challenges of and critical success factors for STM. Challenges to the effective implementation of STM are one of the main issues examined in the reviewed articles. The review indicated that weak labour market (Baum, 2008), poorly integrated talent management system, weak structure (Fang *et al.*, 2015; Jones *et al.*, 2012), absence of formal talent management (e.g. Jooss *et al.*, 2019; Makram *et al.*, 2017), unclear definitions of talent, exclusive talent approach, lack of necessary infrastructure, culture and data (Powell *et al.*, 2013), lack of qualified talent managers/professional (Meyer and Xin, 2018; Rudhumbu and Maphosa, 2015), nature of international business strategy, degree of corporate centralisation, the context of the business (Sparrow *et al.*, 2013), economic and operational pressures (e.g. D’Annunzio-Green and Teare, 2018) and lack of congruence between organisational environment and its structure and culture (Naulleau, 2018) can undermine the development and success of the STM system.

In the light of the above, a significant number of studies have focused on critical success factors for STM (e.g. Ambrosius, 2018; Beamond *et al.*, 2016; D’Annunzio-Green, 2018; Fang *et al.*, 2015; Hughes and Rog, 2008; Mahfoozi *et al.*, 2018; Neri and Wilkins, 2019; Schreuder and Noorman, 2019; Sparrow *et al.*, 2013; Tatli *et al.*, 2013). These studies have identified a range of conditions critical for effective development and implementation of talent management strategies including: organisational support, strategic talent climate, talent development culture, strategic talent mindset, positive relationship, alignment of organisational environment and structure/culture, fit between business strategy and talent strategy, giving talent managers recognition at the board level, contextualisation of talent strategies, effective management of various pressures (economic, local institutions, etc.), amongst others. For instance, Dunnagan *et al.* (2013) found that to develop local talents, firms need to reinforce a culture of leadership development, identify and codify leadership talent, enhance high potentials’ visibility and develop pervasive mentoring relationships. These challenges and critical success factors are useful in enhancing stakeholders understanding of how talent management strategies can be made more effective, particularly, in practice.

Ethical and sustainability dimensions of talent management. The link between ethics, sustainability and STM has been discussed in two of the papers. According to Downs and Swales (2013), talent management programmes based on narratives of scarcity and metaphors

of war ignore important social and ethical dimensions, to the detriment of both organisations and individuals. Based on the idea of freedoms not resources, they argued that the capability approach avoids discourses of scarcity and restores vital social and ethical considerations to ideas about talent management. Recently, Bratton (2018) revealed that the inclusive strategic talent development approach significantly facilitates pro-environmental culture and long-term environmental sustainability of organisations. The above findings suggest important future trend in the STM literature but requires more works on how managers can incorporate ethical and sustainability practices into their STM systems.

Digitalisation of STM. The link between technology and STM has been highlighted in few articles (see Cardenas-Navia and Fitzgerald, 2019; Garavan *et al.*, 2012; Hills, 2012; Hughes and Rog, 2008; Nayak *et al.*, 2018; Powell *et al.*, 2013; Walford-Wright and Scott-Jackson, 2018). According to Hills (2012), neuroscience (i.e. the science of how brain works) can improve the effectiveness STM system by helping in the adoption of talent mindsets that support effective talent development. Similarly, Walford-Wright and Scott-Jackson (2018) found that organisations are increasingly employing new technology and analytics to attract talents, particularly, millennial candidates. They concluded that social media can play critical roles in talent branding and attraction. Likewise, Nayak *et al.* (2018) showed that organisations are increasingly using social networking sites (SNSs) as part of the organisational HR strategy to build attractive employer branding, to source, acquire and retain talents while reinforcing stronger relationship with their employees. They added that HR professionals are leveraging SNSs for networking that can generate more information on the applicants before closing an employment offer. However, many firms are not leveraging analytics to generate actionable insights into their talent acquisition strategies as less than half of HR leaders link their data to key business and financial data (Walford-Wright and Scott-Jackson, 2018). Majority also lack data management infrastructure (Powell *et al.*, 2013). Prior to this, Garavan *et al.* (2012) observed that organisations face challenges regarding how to develop technologies to support self-directed development. This challenge may, however, be resolved if there is a complementary strong digital talent acquisition strategy and talent development strategies in the organisation (see Cardenas-Navia and Fitzgerald, 2019).

STM of unconventional talent pools. Few papers (three articles) focused on the STM of unconventional talent pools or disadvantaged workforce groups such as veterans transiting into corporate world, skilled migrants and women. According to Ford (2017), HRD professionals should endeavour to create and sustain alignment of veteran initiatives with the organisational talent management strategies in order to facilitate their transition and retention in corporate world. Similarly, Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss (2018) maintained that organisations that are willing to invest over the long term in talent management strategies for skilled migrants are more likely to receive long-term HR benefits from their efforts, resulting from the inherent competences of this workforce grouping. Early, Tatli *et al.*'s (2013) gender quotas can be used as part of talent management strategy to leverage untapped female potential to address the talent shortages.

Theoretical assessment

The theoretical assessment of STM scholarship revealed that 27.45 per cent (14 papers) used known theories, 19.61 per cent (10 papers) used conceptual frameworks/models, 3.92 per cent (2 paper) used both a theory and conceptual framework), whereas the rest used neither a theory nor conceptual framework in framing their studies. In all, 13 different established theories were employed: resource-based view, signalling theory, AMO theory, human capital theory, neo-institutional theory, social exchange theory, psychological-contract theory, expectancy theory, agency theory, ethical theories, system theory, contingency theory, strategy-as-practice perspective and social capital and network theories.

Resource-based view was used by Bhatnagar (2007) to examine how employee engagement can affect talent retention. It was similarly used by Ambrosius (2018) to investigate how different STM practices affect employees' intention. The resource-based view and neo-institutional theory were also employed by Beamond *et al.* (2016) in their examination of how corporate talent management strategies can be translated to subsidiaries in emerging economies by balancing

resource-based and neo-institutional views. Thus, theory was applied to examine both employee-level and organisational-level issues. Based on the signalling theory, King (2017) concluded that employee' interpretations of talent practices as signals of organisational priorities will influence the effectiveness of talent strategy implementation. From strategy-as-practice perspective (e.g. Makram *et al.*, 2017) and system theory (e.g. King, 2015), respectively, the roles of various strategic actors in the conceptualisation and definition of talent management and the practices that are used to construct and deliver their strategy were examined. Similarly, using system theory, Fang *et al.* (2015) argued that systematic talent programmes should be integrated into a unified system to improve performance and facilitate the achievement of the objectives of the national science and technology talent strategy.

Using social exchange theory, Sonnenberg *et al.* (2014) argued that although the increased use of talent management practices is related to higher psychological-contract fulfilment, this relationship is negatively affected by incongruent talent perceptions. In a related study, the psychological-contract theory was utilised by Clarke and Scurry (2017) to examine how talent management programmes can shape individual expectations and impact the development of graduates' psychological-contract. Ethical dimension in talent management was introduced using the agency theory and ethical theory (Kantian duty ethics, Utilitarian ethics) by Downs and Swales (2013). The researchers noted that talent management programmes based on narratives of scarcity and metaphors of war ignore important social and ethical dimensions to the detriment of both organisations and individuals. From the perspectives of contingency theory, McCracken *et al.* (2016) argued that the conceptualisation and novel talent management practices of employers in managing their Graduate talent management strategies should be driven by contingencies.

From the above, in most cases, these theories provide useful insights into the issues examined, but the parodic and low application of theoretical lens by most studies cannot effectively facilitate the development of sound theoretical bases for framing STM research. This result is similar to the findings of prior systematic studies in the general talent management field (e.g. McDonnell *et al.*, 2017) that only few studies are premised on relevant theory.

Discussion of future research agenda and managerial implications

Although few reviews were conducted in the general area of talent management, they focused on the theoretical and conceptual clarification of the concept (e.g. Collings and Mellahi, 2009). Besides, systematic reviews focusing on both theoretical and empirical nature of STM research simultaneously are scarce. Consequently, this study performed a systematic literature review with a particular focus on STM. Findings of the review showed that a trend in STM is increasing but at a slow pace. It also revealed that studies on STM are scattered across several publication outlets or journals, indicating that the field cannot boost of a single established journal or publication outlet. Besides, studies in the area have been limited to just a handful of countries across the world, with the highest concentration being on Europe and Asia, and are spearheaded by scholars based in western and developed countries' institutions. Moreover, the results suggest that STM practices are the major source of employee outcomes (e.g. psychological contract fulfilment and retention) as well as organisational and macro-level outcomes (e.g. performance and competitiveness). The study also highlighted interesting and important trends in STM such as the integration of technology, ethical and socially responsible management principles and practices into the design and implementation of talent management strategies, as well as STM of minority groups or unconventional sources of talent pools. Several weaknesses were further lighted the presented STM scholarship. These findings have important implications for managers' as well future research agenda for the advancement of the field of STM.

Gaps and future research agenda

The review of the present state of STM research has revealed several gaps and issues for future research agenda (see the list "Summary of gaps and issues for future research directions"). First, we are surprised at the scanty number of studies (two papers) on ethical and sustainability

dimensions of STM given the recent increases in corporate misconducts globally at various levels of society and the need to create supportive ethical work climate (see Puni and Anlesinya, 2017) as well the increasing calls for organisations to incorporate sustainable and socially responsible management practices into people management (see Ehnert *et al.*, 2016; Kramar, 2014). However, ethical and sustainability dimensions of talent management practices have been heavily under-researched. Due to the potential importance of perceived ethical work climate, social justice and social responsibility to talent outcomes, future studies on the ethics and responsible management practices of talent management strategies have potential to make important contributions to theory and practice.

Moreover, the roles of multi-stakeholders in STM effectiveness are fertile research areas, particularly for empirical studies. These studies should provide deeper insights into the specific roles of multiple STM stakeholders and potential problems that may arise in their interaction, for example, role conflict and their impacts on the design and implementation of talent management strategies. Furthermore, the sporadic and low application of theoretical lens by most studies on the topic will not facilitate the development of sound theoretical bases for framing research within the field. It is also important that notable theories such as social identity theory, resource-dependence theory, job demands – resource theories, amongst others were conspicuously missing in the articles reviewed. These theories can be employed in future studies in framing talent management strategies and outcomes at various levels of analysis. Besides, as the field of STM is developing, opportunities exist for more theory driven studies in order to produce acceptability and validity of potential theories for the field. Integration of theories and testing them empirically in the examination of STM issues has the potential to advance the field.

Moreover, although the literature is skewed towards the European and Asian context with low representation from several regions, the dearth of studies generally in various countries call for more future research in developing context-specific theories to promote effective design and implementation of talent management strategies. This is important as some prior findings indicate that culture (e.g. Powell *et al.*, 2013) and unique business contexts and complexities (Sheehan *et al.*, 2018; Sparrow *et al.*, 2013) can serve as impediments on successful execution of talent management strategies. Besides, the challenges and critical success factors highlighted earlier are useful in enhancing stakeholders' understanding of how talent management strategies can be made more effective, particularly, in practice. Nonetheless, more interrogation of the challenges and critical success factors highlighted in varied sectors and context can better equip managers for effective measures to put in place to make talent management strategies achieve desired results.

Summary of gaps and issues for future research directions:

- Talent management of minority workforce groups such as skilled migrants, women, veterans and others needs more research attention.
- Future studies on digitalization of STM, its challenges and opportunities.
- More understanding of unconventional talent pools are needed. Similarly, studies on STM of minority workforce groups are under-explored.
- Ethical and sustainability dimensions of talent management practices have been heavily under-researched.
- Empirical studies overly relied on cross-sectional, single source while multilevel studies are limited. Robust methodological approach utilising multiple samples, longitudinal, multilevel designs and complementary mixed research method is needed.
- Studies at cross-country and team levels need urgent research attention.
- Future studies in both developing and developed economies are needed, specifically, in developing context. Similarly, insights into STM outcomes in other sectors, national and regional levels are, therefore, limited.
- The sporadic and low application of theoretical lens by most studies on the topic will not facilitate the development of sound theoretical bases for framing research within the field of STM.
- Future studies on the role of various stakeholders in STM effectiveness are fertile research area.

In addition, there are major methodological weaknesses in the current STM literature: first, most of the studies were descriptive, utilising the case study technique in qualitative studies and descriptive analysis in quantitative studies. This weakness in empirical literature needs to be addressed in future studies by leveraging the strengths of both research approaches to deepen our understanding of STM issues. While recommending mixed method research, we urge future researchers to bear in mind Alheiji *et al.*'s (2016) recommendation that a mixed research approach is useful provided both the quantitative and the qualitative approaches are complemented in addressing a particular research purpose. Second, there is overreliance on cross-sectional data. Unfortunately, issues such as employee attitudes and behaviours can change over time. Similarly, organisational performance is not static. Hence, future empirical studies should aim at using longitudinal data in order to track changes in organisational performance and employee attitudes and behaviours over time as well as to facilitate inference of causality. Third, most of the studies collected data from homogenous samples. According to Cascio (2012), the use of single source in collecting perceptual data on issues that border on people's attitudes and behaviours and firm-level performance data are more likely to be contaminated by random error. Similarly, the dominance of managerial perspective in empirical studies in our view can bias the current state of empirical STM research. Given the importance of the use of multiple samples in the validity of research findings such as providing more holistic view of issues, future empirical studies should source for their data from multiple stakeholders or participants (e.g. employees, line managers, HR rep, and senior management, academics). This is also in line with the findings that the effectiveness of STM initiatives is dependent on multiple stakeholders. Fourth, our review has revealed that although some articles examined organisational, employee and industry-level outcomes, no study has performed team and cross-country analysis and multilevel studies are very limited. Meanwhile, Konrad *et al.* (2016) observed that organisations increasingly are utilising team structures as a critical aspect of their work processes. This can have implications for STM outcomes. Relatedly, the few multilevel studies that are also are mostly conceptual (three out of the four papers) imply that there is generally the lack of complexity in majority of the studies, which also does not augur well for multilevel theory development in the field. In particular, fruitful avenues for significant contributions exist for studies performing multilevel analysis and team or group level analysis.

Managerial implications

The scarcity of talented employees will continue to heighten competition amongst organisations. Organisations that can succeed are likely to be those that have employed innovative methods to broaden and cultivate talents from unconventional sources of talent pools. In this regard, minority groups such as skilled migrants, veterans and women can constitute useful pool of talents for organisations. We, therefore, urge managers to institute mechanisms to anticipate, identify and develop their potential to benefit their organisations. More so, technology is likely to be a major decisive factor in winning the talent war. Organisations that are proactive in developing talent analytic capability and developing effective data management infrastructure will be better positioned to ensure effective design and implementation of talent management strategies.

Furthermore, ethics and sustainability issues in the workplace have become a major issue lately, and we foresee organisations being held responsible for how they have been effective in integrating ethical standards and sustainability principles into the design and implementation of their talent strategies. This is, particularly, important given the claim that exclusive talent management approach that seems to dominate the STM literature raises several ethical issues for discriminating other workers with respect to their development and welfare. Organisations should, therefore, audit their current STM systems from ethical and sustainability perspective and identify ways by which they can integrate create ethical talent management climate that support the progress of their organisation and the workforce simultaneously.

Moreover, our findings clearly showed that the effectiveness of talent management strategies does not lie on the shoulders of just one individual, for example, HR or talent managers. However, it is a collective responsibility of multiple actors. Organisations should, therefore, create an STM system, where various stakeholders such as senior management team, owners, HR or talent managers, higher educational institutions, line managers and supervisors and organisation's

talented employees to work hand in hand to ensure the effectiveness of STM systems and outcomes. Finally, STM can contribute towards improving employees' behaviours and attitudes, organisational and other macro-level outcomes. However, the realisation must be supported by a robust STM architecture that is able to overcome or minimise various challenges that often hinder success. Hence, organisations and their managers are encouraged to pay a particular attention to the various critical success factors discussed earlier in the study.

Conclusion

In spite of the potential strategic contributions of talent management, there is paucity of systematic reviews on STM. We, therefore, critically reviewed STM research with the aim of providing major insights into the under-explored themes, issues, theories and methods. Its findings provide rich insights to managers and policy makers to comprehensively design and implement STM initiatives to achieve desired outcomes by eliminating potential barriers to its effectiveness through the creation of supporting conditions necessary for success. Additionally, the key STM challenges and critical success factors highlighted can enhance managers' understanding of how talent management strategies can be made more effective in practice. Besides, winning the talent war in the near future is likely to be dependent on the ability to leverage technology, ethical and responsible management practices, as well as utilisation of unconventional talent pool. This is an important insight for managers and policy makers. Similarly, these trends of digitalization of STM, unconventional talent pools and ethics and sustainable management of strategic talents are fertile grounds for new theory building on how organisations can strategically manage their talented employees in the wake of ethical challenges and talent scarcity. Furthermore, the study has brought to the fore key issues within the thematic, theoretical, contextual and methodological domains of STM and consequently, several future research directions proposed. The research agenda we discussed can potentially enrich STM debates. Finally, the inclusion and the exclusion criteria used could limit the findings.

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