Talent Management: Issues of Focus and Fit

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Talent management has dominated management literature for several years but organizations approach implementation in many different ways. This article suggests that the two key dimensions that require careful consideration are those of "focus" and "fit." "Focus" relies on a clear strategy for how talent management will contribute to organizational objectives, what parts of the organization and which job roles will be priorities and where talent pools will be sourced. "Fit" ensures that talent management processes support the strategic objectives, resonate with but possibly also challenge the organizational culture, take into account the psychological contract between employer and employee and sit well with existing HR processes.

The *alent management* has been high on the agenda of HR professionals in the United Kingdom for the past few years. This high level of interest is reflected in a number of recent case study-based research reports that describe a broad range of organizational practices and highlight some of the tensions and dilemmas that arise as employers try to come to grips with the idea of talent management. Some of the most useful summaries have come from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)[1,2] Ashridge[3,4] Roffey Park[5] and Incomes Data Services (IDS).[6] Between them, these studies give a fairly comprehensive overview of how large organizations in the UK are facing the talent management challenge.

This article draws on published research and also on the considerable practical experience of the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) in supporting organizations in implementing their own talent management strategies. Much of the work IES work has done has been with public sector organizations, particularly with national government departments and agencies and local government authorities of varying size and sophistication.

Talent Management: Upsides and Downsides

The idea of talent management is attractive for several reasons. Managers and HR professionals feel they should be doing more about developing their organization's workforce for the future, and talent management is assumed to be just about this. The term can also encompass career development, which has been difficult to position in organizations for a while, since individuals have been left to sort out their own careers.[7] Talent management is about positive things—doing things for your best people, investing in developing them, building on potential and, therefore, helping people

==make the best use of their strengths and improve on their weaknesses.== The term talent management can also has the potential to apply both to meeting the needs of the organization and of the individual, which is in tune with the current sense of what HR professional should be trying to do.

The phrase *talent management* also sounds a bit important, rather strategic, and even exciting. As one HR director commented at an IES conference on this subject, "It plays well as a term in the boardroom."

However, there is no clear, shared definition of talent management. CIPD defines talent management as "the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention, and deployment of those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to an organization."[8] This definition explicitly includes the term potential, but it also includes the much more general term *particular value*, which can mean just about anything.

Attempts to define talent management tend to get confused on two fronts. First, the parts of the workforce to which the term *talent* might apply can range from a small number of potential senior leaders to the whole workforce. Second, the HR profession has extended the core ideas of attracting and developing talent into every *-ing* imaginable—retaining, motivating, rewarding, and so on. So at one extreme, talent management can be taken to encompass the whole of human resources management for the whole of the workforce, which is not very helpful when trying to narrow down what one means when one talks about talent management. Why call it "talent management" when what is being done is simply normal, proper workforce management and development of all the organization's people?

This confusion means that the term *talent management* does not always play so well outside the boardroom. We have found that mentioning talent management in many organizations makes people rather nervous. They start to wonder, "What do we mean by 'talent?' Talent for what? If I am talent, what will 'managing' me mean? What if I am not talent? And if I am a manager, will I need to tell some people that they are not as talented as they thought they were?"

Especially in the public sector, people often fear that talent management will cut across equality of opportunity and the transparent processes that allow people to apply for higher-level jobs in order to further their careers.

Partly because of these tensions, we have noticed a lot of hot air being spouted about talent management strategies but seen much less useful action.

Reframing the Debate: Focus and Fit

So how do we help organizations move forward with using the positive ideas of talent management, clarifying what talent management will entail, and making talent management something that is of benefit to both the organization and the organization's workers?

The authors of several research reports have advocated defining what a particular organization means when it uses the term *talent*.[9] However, this makes it sound as though talent is an abstract commodity and will only have one definition in a given

organization. IES has found it helpful to slightly reframe this question as, "Where do you need to focus your talent management effort?" The *focus* an organization originally chooses need not be not fixed for all time, and several areas of focus can be defined, as will be illustrated below.

The second idea which IES finds useful in practice is that of *fit*, which is finding a way to meet the objectives of talent management by doing things that mirror or complement the other things the organization does in terms of human resources management.

Focus: For What, Where, and When and Development Goals

Having a clear talent management strategy provides focus by addressing three types of questions. The first type involves questions about what part of the organization—what kinds of job roles, such as senior manager—would be better served by taking a more purposeful approach to developing potential job holders.

The second type includes considerations of where in the organization—or outside of it—can the right kinds of people be found for the target roles and how far ahead—that is when—the organization needs to start developing those people so that they will be good candidates by the time they compete for the target roles. So, for example, an organization with a strong pool of middle managers might be looking at a number of current employees who have the potential to become skilled senior managers. If, however, an organization has a weak group of junior managers, it may do well to start talent management interventions earlier in career and to improve its recruitment.

The third type of question concerns what development outcomes the organization is looking to achieve. If an organization doesn't know what its goals are in terms of employee development, there will be no point in launching any HR initiatives or identifying potential participants in such initiatives. Goal-setting is essential to talent management programs because the goals will guide the identification of talent pools and recruiting to avoid resourcing difficulties. If an organization want to develop senior managers from within its ranks, then, it might seek to give some of its good middle managers broader career experiences outside their own functions or business divisions. This will make the middle managers stronger candidates for a range of future senior management vacancies and also equip them to perform better if they attain such a position.

Common Types of Talent Focus

Different organizations have different resourcing challenges, draw on different labor markets, and operate on different time frames. So they may well need different types of focus for their talent management efforts.

There are many situations in which organizations attract recruits of quite good quality who can grow fairly naturally into more senior roles when they are provided appropriate learning and development experiences. In such cases, it is reasonable to

describe the whole of those organizations' workforce development efforts as "talent management." Organizations that take this approach include parts of the UK National Health Service (NHS), where positive learning strategies are well-structured for many of the professional groups. Professional development is less available for those in more junior support and administrative roles, however (see for example North Wales NHS Trust).[10]

1. Step-by-Step Focus

In organizations where career paths work fairly well to supply more-senior or more-skilled jobs, a light touch to talent management can involve all managers looking for employees with the potential to take another career step and what could be called step-by-step development to prepare people for their next career move. In many organizations, for example, administrative supervisors are prepared this way by giving personal development support to the most promising individuals within groups of administrative staff if those people are interested in becoming supervisors.

Talent management as a more proactive approach to both skill and career development has the most to offer when there are more specific types of role that are hard to fill, either because recruitment is difficult or because career paths require very different skills and experience at different levels in the organization. In such cases, we see several kinds of focus within the organization.

2. Leadership Focus

The most common focused talent strategy addresses the future supply of leaders, often called the leadership pipeline.[11] An organization needs to consider carefully where in that pipeline it needs to act and with what outcomes. If an organization leaves it until too late to develop future leaders, it will find it difficult to give people the range of career experiences that might equip them well.

The examples of Panasonic[12] and of Lloyds TSB[13] show the common focus large companies have on the future supply of leaders. In the public sector, for example, the UK Civil Service is currently engaged in the positive development of midcareer people who may have potential for to serve in its senior levels either in the short-term (one or two years) or the longer term (say five years). The outcomes the Civil Service wants to achieve are improving leadership skills and, when there is time, exposing talented midcareer people a broader range of business experiences inside the Civil Service and, sometimes, outside of it.

The Civil Service is also investing in the development of people who are in the later stages of their careers who may already be senior civil servants or who are very close to being so. These professionals, especially those who deal with the public, are offered coaching as a way of enhancing skills. In several parts of the UK public sector, intensive development support is often provided for a period of time to individuals who will be taking on a very senior role for the first time, such as a new member of a health trust board or a local authority.

Programs have also been implemented for early-career civil servants in the UK. The UK Civil Service Fast Stream is a long-standing example of a high-potential

university graduate entry scheme. Its two objectives are to bring young people of high ability into the Civil Service and to give those individuals accelerated and broad career development for their first five years or so of government employment. Without this scheme, the national Civil Service would probably lose many of its best recruits to private sector companies such as professional service or consultancy firms. Many current senior civil servants were originally recruited through the Fast Stream.

A relatively common talent management strategy combines a step-by-step approach for the workforce in general with more specific and centralised interventions for those with senior leadership potential. CIPD researchers found this combination of two strategies to be quite common. The first has the short-term broad purpose of "attracting and retaining individuals to meet the immediate business needs at all levels". The second arm of strategy has a longer-term focus on those people with "the most potential to progress to more senior roles."[14]

As Tansley et al. showed, the professional services firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, recruits graduates of high quality and needs to give all of them positive career and development attention to retain them and to develop and deploy their skills. The company also looks for *key talent* among it employees—defining key talent as people with the skills and attitudes to fill the most senior roles in future—and provides extra opportunities and resources to the best people as they emerge in mid- and later career.

In a similar way, the Kent County Council[15] combines a light touch to step-by-step development within departments with a more centralized focus on developing people in a senior management talent pool via assignments, work shadowing, and projects to increase their experience.

3. Functional, Level, or Workforce Group Focus

Talent management does not have to be about developing either the whole workforce or selected candidates for senior leadership positions. In many organizations, there are other parts of the workforce that need positive attention in order to meet future resourcing needs.

Functional or professional groups are often hard to recruit and retain. Skills shortages often limit the effectiveness of such groups as accountants, information technology professionals, and engineers, and focusing on someone from their early professional formation through to a group leadership role or a senior specialist role can benefit many organizations. The examples of account management in Fujitsu[16] and of attracting and developing creative chefs in Gordon Ramsey's restaurant chain[17] illustrate how private sector organizations succeed by keeping their functional talent pipeline primed. In the public sector, the BBC has undertaken several initiatives in recent years to strengthen its supply of people with the right skills in its critical needs areas of journalism, production/commissioning, and audio/music production.

Sometimes it is difficult to make the transition from one level of an organization to the next level. The Derby City Council, for example, is concerned in the long term about developing top managers, but it is currently focussing its talent management efforts on employees who may have potential to fill the 100 or so head of service jobs across the council. These are not the very top leadership posts, but having a strong

pool of managers will make it easier for the council to fill its top leadership jobs in future. So the council is looking to develop future heads of service as a starting point and giving people with potential for that level up to three years of development.

The National Audit Office (NAO) similarly chose as an early focus for its talent management activities rather more junior managers in the organization. Again, the logic is to focus on the area or level where proactive attention is likely to yield the biggest gain for the organization. Taking such an approach does not preclude attending to the career development needs of other groups at a later date, and, indeed, the NAO intends to move higher up the leadership pipeline with its talent management initiatives in due course.

Often a combination of level and function defines a suitable focus for talent management. For example, IES and the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (the IDeA) worked with a county council that had persistent shortages of good supervisors in the finance function. A modest but focused program helped those employees with the potential for, and interest in, such posts to develop the specific skills and gain the experience they needed.

Such examples also show the need to think about how many people must be in talent pools and how many an organization can afford to develop. The fact that such questions arise indicate that talent management initiatives need to be designed and carried out in conjunction with workforce planning.[18] The finance supervisors development program described above involved quite a small group, and the council only needed to find five or 10 quality candidates to make a real difference in easing its problem. This figure was based on a careful analysis of turnover patterns over several years.

4. Specific Critical Posts

A less common talent management strategy is to focus on individual posts that are hard to fill and present a risk to the business if they cannot be filled. Virgin Holidays, for example, combines a focus on leadership positions with a focus on hiring individuals who will eventually be able to rise to specific critical posts that are hard to fill.[19] When focusing on specific posts, an organization often needs to understand the external labor market very well because it is likely that the best candidate for a critical post will not be someone who has spent his or her entire career with the organization.

Finding the Right Fit

Having looked at how organizations might focus their talent management strategy, it is necessary to describe how to find which talent management approaches are the right fit for an organization seeking to support and develop its people to meet its business needs. For an approach to fit, it must be appropriate to the organization, which means it must not clash with the organization's culture and it must meet the needs of the workforce.

A talent program can take many different forms and might involve a major investment or be cost-neutral. The word *program* is used broadly in this article to

denote both development activities and the architecture that supports those activities. Most talent programs offer a range of activities, from formal external programs to on-the-job coaching and corporate projects or career moves into new areas of work. Some activities are for all talent pool members, and some are tailored to employees' specific needs. At the NAO, for example, activities for all employees include an external assessment center, mentoring, master classes, action learning, and personal development planning. Tailored activities include carefully selected secondments or temporary assignments to developmental roles, further education, challenging projects, and new job roles.[20]

How a program is put together largely depends on fit, bearing in mind that the introduction of talent management efforts may signal a more general culture change in response to the operating environment.

There are several dimensions to getting the fit right. These include

- *Fit to Focus:* How will the process achieve the strategic objectives?
- *Fit to Culture:* Will the process reflect the organization's values, purpose, and underpinning philosophy?
- *Fit to Workforce and the Psychological Contract:* What do employees want talent management to do for them, and how far will the psychological contract have to shift to work for both the employees and the organization?
- *Fit to Other HR Practices and Policies:* How will talent management integrate and be supported by other HR practices?
- *Fit to Management Capability and Roles in Managing People:* Does the current workforce and management have the capability and capacity to make talent management work?

Fit to Focus

The focus of talent management as it relates to organizational needs for different types of workers, organizational gaps in capability and capacity, and the time frames in which those issues need to be addressed has already been discussed.

The way talent program architecture and activities are developed and implemented has to support an organization's strategic focus and engage both senior managers and the workforce. A recent article in *Harvard Business Review* identifies "deep-seated commitment from senior executives" as a critical success factor in talent management.[21] The more a talent program is aligned with an organization's strategy, the more likely senior managers are to remain engaged. These leaders' visible commitment sends out an important public signal of the importance of developing people in the organization.

Additionally, linking the talent program to the organization's strategy means that the program will never be static and will remain future-oriented. Bristol-Myers Squibb, for example, holds talent reviews every four to six months to determine both who is in its talent pools and how high-potential employees are being developed. The NAO also

monitor the progress of staff in its talent pools and review whether development activities are meeting organizational needs.[22]

As the nature of work changes, with more collaborative, cross-boundary working and more global and virtual working, models of leadership are also shifting. So talent programs have to flex to accommodate new organizational needs and new approaches to organizational and individual development.

A final reason that the talent program should be tied to organizational strategy is that the attainment of strategic goals will dictate the pace of employees' development. Knowing what it wants to accomplish will help an organization decide whether it should take the steady pipeline approach to talent management, where leadership skills are developed in a staged and incremental way, or whether it should foster fast-track development by giving its high-potential employees access to an intensive development package in order to move those individuals more quickly into hard-to-fill or new posts.

Fit to Culture

As noted earlier, the meaning of the term talent management is neither clear nor comfortable in many organizations in the UK. Some organizations use a talent management approach but decide not to describe it as such. UK public sector organizations have found the whole concept of talent to be culturally difficult, as they place great emphasis on equality of opportunity and open HR processes. Initially in the NAO, a talent program was felt to be elitist and difficult to reconcile with equal opportunities and the high standards for all entrants. In one county council, there was reported discomfort at what people felt to be an old boys' network.[23]

Cultural challenges also arise from structural issues such as whether the organization operates in a centralized or devolved way, particularly in terms of corporate or global versus unit or local talent markets. The organizational structure tends to dictate what is done more readily at the corporate center and what can be more devolved.

There are also cultural dimensions to how decisions about people are made and the degree of transparency and objectivity involved in selecting candidates for a talent program. Organizations that do not gather or use people metrics very much tend to struggle with talent approaches based on elaborate databases and very formal methods of assessing potential. Such organizations can do better by adopting a lighter-touch process in which talent conversations can be more informal, or at least rely more on management judgement backed by examples. Smaller organizations often operate their talent programs in this way.

The degree of openness in an organization, such as transparency of pay scales and succession plans and opportunities for employee involvement in decision making, is an important contextual factor for getting the talent program fit right. First, the degree of openness needs to be reflected in the talent process, as it is difficult to introduce a transparent process in a secretive organization, and vice versa. Second, the degree of openness will dictate the degree of involvement that individual employees have in the talent program, determining whether they are able to self-nominate, whether

managers nominate them anonymously, or, indeed, whether they are spotted by the HR staff or by senior managers. Third, it will inform how a new talent program is communicated inside the organization and how people relate to the program.

Having achieved some kind of cultural fit, an organization would do well to heed the salutary warning from Gladwell[24] that, taken to extremes, talent management can generate overconfidence and an inappropriate culture of risk-taking. Gladwell based his warning on lessons learned from the demise of Enron, which had been described as the "ultimate talent company" where high-flyers were rewarded disproportionately and not held accountable for their actions.

Fit to Workforce

Ensuring that talent management processes fit the workforce requires an understanding of the psychological contracts between the organization and its employees employees' career paths and their contributions to the organization. Professional cultures are challenging in this regard, as the employees' loyalty tends to be towards their profession rather than one organization. Examples include clinicians in the NHS and information technology professionals and accountants in all sectors. Well-targeted and -communicated talent management processes may help build stronger employer–employee relationships and promote greater engagement among these professional groups.

A new talent program can either enhance or breach the psychological contract with regard to how individuals expect their careers to progress. Acceptance into a talent program usually shifts the balance of what an individual gives to the organization and what the individual gets from the organization. Talent approaches that simply give a lot more to those in talent pools and are seen as taking away attention from other employees can cause discontent. It often seems fair, both to those in the talent pool and those outside it, that the extra development attention given to selected employees should be balanced by expecting those in the select group to show extra commitment through the way they perform, the range of assignments they are willing to accept, and their willingness to undertake development activities partly on their own time.

Individual Perspective

Once he or she is in a talent pool, an employee will closely monitor how the organization delivers on its side of the deal. The organization is often less diligent in doing the same. For example, if an individual coping with an intensive talent program finds there are no promotional opportunities, the employee is likely to see the organization as having broken its promise—to have, in other words, breached the psychological contract. Therefore, it is important to manage expectations realistically from the outset.

Another key issue, of course, is managing applicants who fail to gain a place in a talent program, which can be a real blow to the employee's confidence and self-esteem. The UK Legal Services Commission has built into its talent process a launch event during which potential candidates are encouraged to consider the implications of joining the program and how they will react if they are accepted or turned down.[25]

Occasionally people make the talent pool but derail later on. Being talent-managed brings its own stresses, strains and expectations. Royal and Sun Alliance ensure that there is a development process and support mechanisms in place for employees who fall out of its talent pool, and the company also encourages people to take sabbaticals from the talent pool when needed or if their personal circumstances change.[26]

Many organizations encourage open competition for promotion opportunities with employees who are not in talent pools so that the talent management process does not close down career opportunities for employees who have not been spotted.

Organizational Perspective

Many organizations worry that investing in the development of high-potential employees is risky. With the passing of the so-called "old" psychological contract in the 1990s, the new deal between employers and employees is supposedly less about loyalty and long service and more about self-managed careers and chasing the better deal. It is currently a widely held belief that Generation Y workers are a fickle bunch with high expectations and little sense of loyalty.

Building talent management into the psychological contract and the performance management process is an important way for organizations to ensure they reap the benefits of their investment. By openly discussing the expectations and obligations of both parties (the organization and the individual), line managers and employees are able to monitor their respective levels of satisfaction with the talent program. For example, has the participant had adequate opportunities to share learning and transfer it back to the workplace, to move to challenging posts or developmental roles, or to be part of a project team where they can hone and share their new skills?

Fit to Other HR Policies

Talent management is sometimes supported by a dedicated team in an organization's HR department, but responsibility can sit with business partners or in learning and development. The talent program is usually seen as supported by the HR staff but owned by line managers. Wherever it is positioned in the organization, the talent program needs to fit with other HR processes and policies. This aspect of fit is both about mechanics—how the processes align and work strategically together—and about style—the degree of transparency and involvement. The HR processes that need to considered in conjunction with the talent program include

- Workforce planning and labor market intelligence, which provide the focus for talent management.
- Recruitment and assessment processes, which feed the talent pipeline and link to the employer's brand.
- Performance management, which is a core activity for talent spotting and development; its level of sophistication in discriminating between high, good, average and poor performance is vital to the success of talent management.
- Training and development, which supports employees in talent pools.

- Relevant and up-to-date competency frameworks such as Professional Skills for Government (PSG), which provide the basis for professional development.
- Reward and recognition, which have to align with both the organization's and employees' expectations for the talent management approach.
- Promotion and deployment processes, which need to be informed by talent information; there needs to be clarity about whether individuals apply for new opportunities or are assigned career moves.
- Succession planning; this has traditionally related to coverage of key posts, but some organizations such as Proctor & Gamble are described as "talent factories[27] because they can identify a strong field of candidates for important business within minutes through their global databases of talent profiles.
- Diversity management; in many cases this works alongside talent management to avoid elitism and increase access to poorly represented groups.

A growing number of organizations have actively built diversity into their talent management approaches. Standard Chartered Bank has used the talent process to encourage a greater representation of women. The NAO involves two board members in the talent interviews, one of whom is responsible for functional diversity while the other serves as a diversity champion.[28] Against a backdrop of an aging workforce, talent management also needs to be pragmatic and examine nontraditional pools of high-potential employees, such as older and migrant workers.

Fit to Management Capability

Making a talent program work in an organization requires commitment and capability from many stakeholders. A key question is, "Who will deliver a talent program?" A plethora of talent management roles and functions have been established over the last few years, but success depends on developing what is often referred to as a *talent mind-set* throughout the organization.

Senior Managers

As noted above, senior management commitment is a critical factor for the success of talent management efforts. Senior managers should be prepared to give their practical support, which might be as a champion, member of a talent panel or board, or mentor or coach. They need to role-model appropriate behaviors such as not hanging on to talented employees to the detriment of other parts of the organization, not showing favoritism or solely selecting people "in their own image" and dedicating time and energy to identifying and developing talented individuals.

Line Managers

Probably the most important people are the line managers, who play pivotal roles in talent spotting, providing development opportunities, managing performance, giving feedback, and coaching and supporting employees who carry the burden of expectations once they are labelled as "talent." Organizational readiness for

introducing talent management often depends on the people management skills of the line managers and their experience in coaching, developing and managing the performance of their staff. This may be a particular issue in the early years of a talent program, when there is a generation of line managers who have achieved success the hard way and may resent fast tracks and easy access to professional development opportunities.

Line managers need access to good HR support and development in order to fulfil their role as talent managers successfully and must understand the business logic behind the talent program. They need clear guidance on where to look for talent and what they are looking for. They also need to be clear about how they will talk to their people about perceived potential, as well as an understanding of whether the talent approach changes any of their established people management practices.

Line managers can also be extremely powerful in blocking the talent pipeline by hanging onto to individuals who boost their own department's performance. Unblocking "silos" requires a firm top-down commitment to the mobility of talented employees for the benefit of the whole organization.

Assessors

Another group of people who require particular skills are members of the panels that do the formal assessment of talent, if this is done internally. Talent panels made up of senior managers and corporate board members, HR and development professionals, and, occasionally, line managers that weigh up the evidence of employees' potential and performance are tasked with making important decisions about the future of individuals, and panelists require access to a full range of tools and measures. Assessing potential and future skill requirement, particularly in the field of leadership, calls for a high degree of sophistication.

Summary

In summary, having a clear focus can turn talent management from an abstract idea into something more practical. It is important that areas of focus are ones in which proactive attention to attracting and developing talent will make a real difference to the organization, usually by creating a better pool of people from which suitably experienced and trained candidates can be drawn in future. Any one organization may need several areas of focus for its talent management effort. It is also important that the size of a talent pool is appropriate, and that the time frame for developing people reflects the organization's needs and the current workforce supply situation. Determining an appropriate focus requires an organization to define what outcomes it wants to achieve by developing high-potential employees, specifically which skills and experiences people in a talent pool will need to have so they are equipped to assume high-level positions in the organization in the future.

Equally important is the ability to engage the whole organization in developing a talent mind-set. While the introduction of talent management may be a response to a changing business environment and signal a shift to a more proactive culture of

employee development and performance management, it also needs to fit with other people management practices and support the core values and purpose of the organization.

Notes

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