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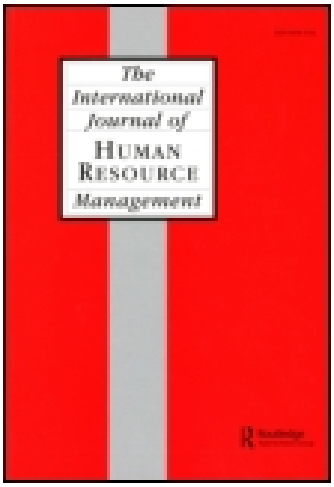

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A review of talent management: 'infancy or adolescence?'

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A review of talent management: 'infancy or adolescence?'

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The aim of this paper is to provide a critical review of the academic literature on talent management in search of alternative perspectives. We found three dominant themes: the exploration of the concept of talent (definitions), the intended outcomes or effects of talent management and talent management practices. These themes are explored in more detail, and we discuss possible limitations of the current points of view on talent management. Our main finding was that the current talent management literature has a too narrow and one-dimensional approach. It can be characterized as managerialist and unitarist and has a limited view of the practices and activities of human resources. To broaden this view to a more balanced or pluralistic approach to talent management, we added new perspectives, such as stakeholder theory, multiple goals and an extended consideration of practices. The new perspectives are not only valuable for the development of the field of talent management in general but also essential for a broader theoretical framework for talent management in different contexts.

Keywords: balanced approach; literature review; strategic human resource management; talent; talent management

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Introduction

In the past ten years, talent management has become a key management issue. Several studies showed that business leaders consider finding talented people to be the single most important managerial preoccupation for this decade (e.g. Paauwe 2007; Guthridge, Komm and Lawson 2008; Deloitte 2010). These authors expect that the intensifying competition for talent will have a major effect on companies. Despite the recession, many business leaders are adjusting their talent strategies to meet the upcoming talent shortages (Deloitte 2010).

The increasing attention for talent and the expected talent shortages are affected by several trends and factors, such as demographic changes caused by ageing and increasing mobility and globalization (e.g. Basri and Box 2008; Beechler and Woodward 2009; Tarique and Schuler 2010; Schuler, Jackson and Tarique 2011a, 2011b). Transformational changes in business environments also affect the quantity, quality and characteristics of the talent needed (Ashton and Morton 2005; Guthridge et al. 2008; Beechler and Woodward 2009; Schuler et al. 2011a, 2011b; Vaiman, Scullion and Collings 2012). This refers to developments such as the shift from product-based to knowledge-based economies, the need for employees who can handle more complex occupations, the changes in organizational structure (for example teamwork and network arrangements) and the growing importance of building and sustaining relationships. Blass and April (2008, p. 48) state that 'the highly educated employee is a less malleable source for the company and a more mobile investor of his/her intellectual, social and emotional capital'. Schuler et al. (2011b) claim that the success of firms today is dependent on how effectively they identify and manage the (global) talent challenges they

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are confronted with and adapt to these challenges as they evolve and develop. The question is whether the organization is able to get the right people in the right place at the right time.

These talent challenges have been debated extensively in popular and practitioner-oriented literature, internet magazines and on social networking sites. Since 2001, academics have also produced a considerable amount of literature on talent management. In 2006, Lewis and Heckman concluded that despite the volume of academic literature, talent management was still in its infancy; it lacked a clear and consistent definition and scope as well as a conceptual framework based on empirical research. In 2009, this was again confirmed by Collings and Mellahi. Just two years later, Collings, Scullion and Vaiman (2011) concluded that the field had moved from infancy to adolescence, thanks to the contribution of many, mainly US-based, scholars using North American thinking and research. The consequence is, in their view, that the US context has a dominant influence on the debate. In addition, Powell et al. (2012) state that there is also a strong focus on talent management in the private sector and in multinationals. This is comparable to the general field of human resource management (HRM) (Keegan and Boselie 2006). In the field of HRM, there is a growing awareness of the relevant impact of contextual factors in the shaping of the employment relationship and HRM (Paauwe 2004). Therefore, the current concepts and assumptions in talent management literature related to the context of US-based, private and multinational organizations are probably less than adequate to describe and study talent management in organizations in other contexts, such as public or non-profit organizations or small and medium enterprises.

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In order to frame talent management in more novel ways, Collings et al. (2011) called for a counterbalance from different perspectives and traditions. In this article, we offer a review of the academic literature on talent management and add alternative perceptions and new insights. The aim of this article is to contribute to the development of a broader theoretical framework for talent management in different contexts. We reviewed academic literature on talent management to present the dominant themes and the leading points of view and assumptions in the current talent management literature. We will also discuss possible omissions and limitations in the literature reviewed. To contribute to a more balanced approach to talent management, we will add new perspectives based on lessons learned from developments in the field of HRM. The Paauwe (2004) and Boselie (2010) approaches in HRM, for example, suggest a more balanced approach, taking into account institutional factors related to the organizational context, the inclusion of multiple stakeholders beyond the usual suspects (for example, shareholders and managers) and a balanced view on performance, including organizational effectiveness, employee well-being and societal well-being. These new perspectives offer opportunities for an agenda for future research on a broad range of organizations, including multinational and private companies, small and medium enterprises, public sector organizations and not-for-profit organizations. Our central research question is what has been achieved until 2012 in the field of talent management and what lessons can be learned from prior research and literature?

Research method and analysis

We started our search for academic literature on talent management with a query in the Google Scholar search engine. The number of hits was too large to review (over 170,000 hits for publications on talent management between 2001 and 2012). But this first search gave an insight into the broad range of publications and sources on the subject. For a more

detailed search, we used the 'Academic Search Premier', 'Science Direct', 'Web of Knowledge' and 'Scopus' databases to collect academic literature on talent management published between 2001 and Spring 2012. These databases were chosen because they are multidisciplinary and are supported by different publishers. They give access to a broad variety of academic journals and publications.

'Talent' and 'talent management' were the keywords in our search. We restricted the literature review to publications in English. Only publications whose content entirely focused on talent and talent management were selected. We included the most cited publications according to Google Scholar, Web of Science and Scopus. The field is relatively young, with many recent, not-yet-cited publications; so, it would be inappropriate to restrict ourselves only to the most-cited articles. Furthermore, we focused on peer-reviewed literature such as articles in peer-reviewed journals. In addition to the query in search engines and databases, we used the reference lists of the assembled publications to gather interesting documents that did not appear in our search in the databases. We limited the number of publications on global talent management. Analyzing all these articles would overemphasize the international or multinational context. We did, however, include the publications that appeared in the summaries of the most cited articles (for example, articles in the special issue of Journal of World Business (2010) on global talent management). We also restricted the number of books, conference papers, etc, although we could not exclude all these non-peer reviewed documents. Some appeared in the list of most cited publications or in other reference lists.

In total, we collected 62 documents on the subject. They are marked with an '*' in the reference list. Forty-three of the documents are (peer reviewed) articles from international journals (Table 1). The other documents are conference papers, dissertations and books (or book chapters) on talent management. The number of publications is sufficient to accomplish the aim of the paper, i.e. a description of the dominant themes, leading points of view and omissions. We cannot give a definitive, all inclusive review of every publication published in the field between 2001 and Spring 2012.

The publications were analyzed in a number of ways. First, we wanted to attain an understanding of the general characteristics of the publications. We classified the nature (whether it had a conceptual nature or was based on empirical research) and the focus of the publication (strategic talent management, global talent management or (single) practice oriented based on the HRM subfields distinguished by Boxall, Purcell and Wright (2007)). Information on the backgrounds of the authors was obtained as well. Subsequently, the dominant themes in the publications were addressed. We examined the publications for their definitions of talent management and talent, the description of the intended outcomes and effects and the talent management practices discussed. The dominant viewpoints and assumptions within the themes were explored. We also checked whether the authors paid attention to the stakeholders involved in talent management, such as the role of human resources (HR), management or employees. Finally, we considered whether the authors discussed the link between talent management and the internal and external organizational context (Paauwe 2004; Boselie 2010). The results of these analyses will be discussed in the next section.

Results

Mapping the field of talent management

Before discussing the central themes and dominant views in the talent management literature, we will give a broad outline of the 62 publications we analyzed. Approximately

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Table 1. Journals and literature analyzed.

	Number of publications
International Journals	
• *Develop*	1
• *Harvard Business Review*	5
• *Human Resource Planning*	3
• *Human Resource Management Review*	2
• *Employment Relations Today*	1
• *European Journal of International Management*	3
• *Health Care Management Review*	1
• *Industrial and Commercial Training*	1
• *International Journal of Business Management and Economic Research*	1
• *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*	1
• *International Journal of Education Management*	1
• *Journal of Business and Psychology*	1
• *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly*	1
• *Journal of International Management*	1
• *Journal of Knowledge Management*	1
• *Journal of World Business*	5
• *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*	1
• *Management Decision*	1
• *Mc Kinsey Quarterly*	2
• *MIT Sloan Management Review*	1
• *Organizational Dynamics*	1
• *Outlook. The Journal of high-performance business*	1
• *Personnel Review*	3
• *Public Personnel Management*	1
• *Strategic HR Review*	1
• *The Journal of Quality and Participation*	1
• *Transfusion*	1
Books or sections of books	9
Papers	4
Publications of institutes and universities (e.g. INSEAD, OECD, CIPD, DELOITTE)	6
Total	62

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two-thirds of these documents were articles published in peer-reviewed journals. The wide variety of journals is remarkable (Table 1). We not only found articles in typical HRM journals (such as *Human Resource Management Review* and *Human Resource Planning*) but also in international management journals (e.g. *Journal of World Business*), business journals (e.g. *Harvard Business Review*) and journals for specific sectors of industry (e.g. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* and *Health Care Management Review*). The wide variety of journal outlets highlights the relevance of the talent management theme for a wide audience, including an HRM audience, an international management audience (for example related to expatriate management), a general business audience (for example those potentially interested in succession planning and leadership development) and sector-specific talent management themes such as health care. A query in the academic databases showed a large increase in the number of publications and citations since 2010.

A wide variety of authors is also prevalent. The majority of scholars is situated in USA (also noted by Collings et al. (2011)). Scholars from the fields of strategic HRM (for

example Cappelli, Boudreau, Becker, Huselid and Stahl) and international HRM (e.g. Schuler and Scullion) are active in the field of talent management. In other words, the talent management literature is built on a broad range of academic traditions, including international HRM (for example closely related to expat management), strategic HRM (for example linking strategy and managing valuable talents) and organizational behaviour (for example related to career development and management development). These different traditions bring in multiple lenses and approaches. In the field of HRM, there is little consensus on the concept of HRM (Boselie, Dietz and Boon 2005). Based on the findings presented above, we expect even less consensus in the talent management domain given the diversity in approaches (for example strategic HRM, organizational behaviour and international management).

Lewis and Heckman (2006) and Collings and Mellahi (2009) concluded that talent management lacks empirical research. This is confirmed by our literature review. One-third of the articles in our literature study presents the results of empirical research. Nevertheless, the number of empirical research papers has increased since 2010. The scope of the empirical research papers is broad. We found several case studies, which describe practices in a single organization or in a certain region and country (e.g. Ready and Conger 2007; Kirkland 2009; Burbach and Royle 2010; Makela, Björkman and Ehrnrooth 2010). Other studies focus on sub-functions of talent management; examples are the studies of Dries and others on the careers of high potential and on the effects of the high potential label on performance, career success and commitment (Dries and Pepermans 2008; Dries 2011; Dries, Van Acker and Verbruggen 2011) and the study of Höglund (2012) who applied psychological contract theory to explore the direct and indirect linkages between skill-enhancing HRM and human capital. Finally, we came across (mainly quantitative) studies presenting talent management challenges and factors in success experienced by CEOs, HR departments or talent specialists (e.g. Guthridge et al. 2006, 2008; Stahl et al. 2007, 2012; Powell et al. 2012).

Two-thirds of the analyzed academic papers on talent management is conceptual, exploring the field of talent management. The focus of the publications is diverse. All the HRM subfields – strategic HRM, international HRM and practice-oriented HRM (Boxall et al. 2007) – are discussed. Approximately half of the conceptual papers address the link between talent management and strategy and discuss how talent management can contribute to organizational performance and competitive advantage (e.g. Cappelli 2000, 2008a; Boudreau 2005; Farley 2005; Ready and Conger 2007; Somaya and Williamson 2011). Scholars like Pfeffer (2001), Martin and Schmidt (2010) and Burkus and Osula (2011) make critical remarks on the link between talent management and strategy. They describe misguided assumptions or the negative effects of talent management.

The challenges in managing global talent, talent management in multinationals and talent management in key or emerging economies are addressed by multiple publications (e.g. Beechler and Woodward 2009; Mellahi and Collings 2010; McDonnell, Hickey and Gunnigle 2011; Schuler et al. 2011b). Most of these articles were published in the special issue on global talent management in the *Journal of World Business* (2010) and in a book on global talent management (Scullion and Collings 2011).

Third, single HR practices, such as recruitment and selection, talent pools and development, are covered in conceptual papers as well (e.g. Blass and April 2008; Jansen and Van der Pool 2009; Kirkland 2009). Finally, we found articles focusing on one aspect of talent management, for example the definition of talent (Tansley 2011; Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and González-Cruz 2012) and the role of the HR function (Farley 2005; Farndale, Scullion and Sparrow 2010). It should be noted that the talent management

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literature does not enter upon new or unknown matter. The issues are similar to the ones in the field of strategic or international HRM, but now use excellence or the management of (scarce) talents as a starting point.

In summary, Lewis and Heckman already concluded in 2006 that the international empirical research on talent management is underrepresented. Until now, the majority of the academic literature is still conceptual, trying to respond to the question of what talent management is. The scope of this exploratory expedition has been broad, considering the wide variety of journals, authors and subjects discussed.

Dominant themes in talent management literature

After we established a general picture of the literature on talent management, we started the detailed exploration of the concept of talent and talent management (definitions). In their review of talent management literature, Lewis and Heckman (2006) pointed out that it is difficult to come to an unambiguous definition and conceptualization of talent management. They identified three streams of thought regarding talent management. The first stream labels regular HRM practices as talent management with some minor differences ('doing it faster or across the enterprise'). This stream is related to the concept that talent equals human capital; so, talent management equals HRM. According to Lewis and Heckman (2006), the second stream of the talent management literature focuses primarily on the concept of talent pools and regards talent management as a process to ensure an adequate flow of employees throughout the organization. They see a great deal of resemblance with succession planning or human resource planning intended to fill specific, mainly management, positions. The third perspective on talent management, as identified by Lewis and Heckman, focuses on talent generically without any regard to specific positions or organizational boundaries. Within this perspective, there are two different points of view: the first focuses on high-performing talent or talent with high potential (the recruitment and development of 'A-performers') and the second view states that everyone has their own talents and HR should help everyone achieve high performance. These three perspectives show a tendency to concentrate on one single aspect of talent management. Collings and Mellahi (2009) sought a multiple aspect approach of talent management to overcome the deficiencies of other perspectives. They based their definition of talent management on a combination of several theories on human capital and talent management. The definition given by Collings and Mellahi, and some other authors, is presented in Table 2.

Many of these interpretations of talent management present talent management as a transformation process (input, process and output), i.e. we use talent(s) as input, 'process' and develop it (them) with HR practices in order to get the desired output. In accordance with the three elements of the transformation process, three central issues emerge in publications on talent management: the definition of talent (theme 1), the intended effects and outcomes of talent management (theme 2) and the talent management practices (theme 3) necessary to obtain the intended outcomes. In the next section, we will discuss the three dominant themes in more detail.

Theme 1: The definition of talent

Half of the articles we studied for this paper contain a definition of talent. The other publications lacked a clear description of talent. According to Tansley (2011) and Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2012), the conceptualization of talent has become increasingly relevant for scholars and practitioners to make advances in the study of talent

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Table 2. Examples of definitions of talent management.

– "Talent management is the process through which employers anticipate and meet their needs for human capital"(Cappelli 2008b, p. 1).
– "Activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization'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 architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization" (Collings and Mellahi 2009, p. 304).
– "Talent management is the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/ retention and deployment of those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to an organization" (Davies and Davies 2010, p. 419).
– "Global talent management includes all organizational activities for the purpose of attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining the best employees in the most strategic roles (those roles necessary to achieve organizational strategic priorities) on a global scale" (Scullion and Collings 2011, p. 7).

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management. Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2012) made a literature review of definitions of talent in the business context and concluded that two dimensions are of importance in defining talent. They found a distinction between a subject approach (talent as people) and an object approach (talent as characteristics of people, such as abilities, knowledge and/ or competencies). The second dimension relates to differentiation of the workforce. Definitions can be divided into an inclusive (all employees) or an exclusive (a select group) approach (see also Powell et al. 2012; Stahl et al. 2012). According to Sparrow et al. (2011) and Stahl et al. (2012), organizations use both the inclusive and exclusive approach, although the exclusive conceptualization seems to be most preferred. In their study on global talent management, Stahl et al. (2012) found that many companies used a combination of both. Stahl et al. (2012) claim that 'a hybrid approach allows for differentiation and skirts the controversial issue of whether some employee groups are more valuable than others' (p. 26). Collings and Mellahi (2009) also highlight the importance of a differentiated HR architecture.

Taken together, the two dimensions of Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2012) represent different typologies of talent definitions. We will discuss these typologies, building on the publications included in our literature review. The first typology based on Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2012) concerns the *inclusive approach* on talent as a *subject* and is addressed by authors who understand talent as the entire workforce of an organization. The terms talent and people or human capital are interchangeable, as in, for example, the definition of Cheese, Thomas and Craig (2008) 'Talent, therefore, is used as an all-encompassing term to describe the human resources that organizations want to acquire, retain and develop in order to meet their business goals' (p. 46). In this view, talent management is equal to HRM. This typology has been criticized for being too broad and as completely meaningless (Lewis and Heckman 2006; Gallardo-Gallardo et al. 2012). The second typology, the *inclusive approach* and talent as an *object*, allows every employee to reach his or her potential (Ashton and Morton 2005; Gallardo-Gallardo et al. 2012). It can be characterized as a positive approach to HRM in which the development and training of the exceptional abilities (i.e. talents) of all employees is emphasized. This approach shows a great deal of resemblance with human resource development or competency management. The third interpretation of talent, the *exclusive approach* to talent as a *subject*, is based on segmentation or differentiation of a small segment of the workforce (Gallardo-Gallardo 2012). In this approach, talent refers to those employees who rank at the top in terms of

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capability and performance and who make a significant difference to the current and future performance of the organization (e.g. McCauley and Wakefield 2006; Stahl et al. 2007; Davies and Davies 2010; McDonnell 2011). These employees are often called A-players, high performers or high potentials. One can differentiate the workforce by (excellently performing) individuals, positions or functions. A commonly used differentiation is based on executive functions; talent management equals management development. This is not sufficient for some authors; so, they offer a more profound description of the positions talent management should focus on (Boudreau and Ramstad 2005; Lewis and Heckman 2006; Becker, Huselid and Beatty 2009; Collings and Mellahi 2009; Whelan et al. 2010). These authors state that talent management should concentrate on key (or pivotal) positions, namely those positions that differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage. The focus should be on strategic jobs or jobs that can provide an above-average impact over non-strategic jobs and jobs with marginal impact (Collings and Mellahi 2009). Lepak and Snell (2002), Lewis and Heckman (2006) and Collings and Mellahi (2009) apply the concepts of value, rareness, inimitability and uniqueness based on the resource-based view (Wright, Dunford and Snell 2001) to determine which jobs are strategic and have an above-average impact. Whatever distinction is made, based on person or on position, the third interpretation of talent ('exclusive-subject' approach) emphasizes selection and output in terms of (potential) performance. This typology has attracted adverse comments. Pfeffer (2001) claims that an exclusive approach to top performers, 'the happy few' (Keegan and Boselie 2006), will lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in reverse, as in, those labelled as less able become less able because they are asked to do less and get fewer resources (training, mentoring, et cetera); so, they will not be able to develop themselves. Another point of criticism is the overemphasis on individual performance. Pfeffer thinks it is hazardous for the organization because it diminishes teamwork and creates a destructive internal competition that hinders learning and the spread of best practice across the organization. Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2012) criticize the defining of talent through its output. High performance is not a talent. It is an output obtained from applying one's talents to a specific task. The fourth typology of talent, the *exclusive approach* to talent as an *object*, concentrates on those employees in the organization who have exceptional, above-average abilities, and who are able to apply those abilities to achieve excellent performance. According to Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2012) and Tansley (2011), one cannot separate the exceptional abilities from performance. In order to achieve exceptional results, employees must apply their above-average, differentiated competencies. They also have to be willing to put their energy and effort into doing their job; a talented employee is a committed employee. Moreover, scholars like Collings and Mellahi (2009), Ulrich and Ulrich (2010), Boudreau and Ramstad (2005), Martin and Schmidt (2010), Tansley (2011) and Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2012) stress the importance of elements such as (job and organizational) commitment, engagement and aspiration to put up an extraordinary performance now and in future positions. This 'exclusive-object' interpretation of talent is related to the AMO-framework (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg and Kalleberg 2000), which proposes that employee performance (P) is a function of the employee's ability (A), motivation (M) and opportunity (O) to perform. Talent management should give talented employees, with outstanding abilities, and who are highly motivated, the opportunity to develop themselves and to achieve a high performance.

In summary, scholars are divided on whether or not to differentiate the workforce, and if so, on what basis (talent as an object or a subject). Despite different interpretations of talent, scholars agree on the impact of the context on the exact and precise description of talent. Talent is not absolute, it is relative and subjective. The mix of differentiating competencies

and abilities varies according to the organizational environment (e.g. sector, labor market, customer orientation), the type of work, the internal and external circumstances of an organization and across time (Ashton and Morton 2005; Lewis and Heckman 2006; McCauley and Wakefield 2006; Tansley 2011; Gallardo-Gallardo et al. 2012).

Theme 2: Intended effects and outcomes of talent management

Nearly 60% of the publications in our review refer to the intended effects and outcomes of talent management. In the literature, different levels of outcomes and effects are distinguished. According to some authors, the purpose of talent management is to attract, develop, motivate and retain talent (McCauley and Wakefield 2006; Ready and Conger 2007; Christensen Hughes and Rog 2008; Beechler and Woodward 2009; Davies and Davies 2010). Talent management is mainly meant to fulfill the needs for human capital and to narrow the demand-supply gap. Cappelli (2008a) criticizes this, 'Talent management is not an end in itself. It is not about developing employees or creating succession plans, nor is it about achieving specific turnover or any other tactical outcome. It exists to support the organization's overall objective, which in business essentially amounts to making money' (p. 3). Cappelli argues that the output of the organization as a whole, rather than the HR-subsystem, must prevail. But in this view, firm performance is narrowed down to meeting shareholder and financial needs. More than half of the scholars who make a remark on the intended effects share Cappelli's opinion and state that talent management should contribute to the overall firm performance (e.g. Frank and Taylor 2004; Clake and Winkler 2006; Collings and Mellahi 2009; Ulrich and Ulrich 2010; Bethke-Langenegger, Mahler and Staffelbach 2011; Groves 2011; Moczydlowska 2012) or to an increase in the competitive advantage of the organization (Ashton and Morton 2005; Stahl et al. 2007; Lewis and Heckman 2006; Cheese, Farley and Gibbons 2009; Mellahi and Collings 2010; Schuler et al. 2011b). On account of the talented human capital and their outstanding performance, the organization will be able to 'outperform the competition as the economy turns around' (Cheese et al. 2009, p. 2).

Boudreau and Ramstad (2005) challenge the traditional shareholder value paradigm by the argument that organizations should strive for a societal goal: sustainability. Sustainability, besides financial viability, includes goals such as diversity, social responsibility, supporting human and employee rights, protecting the environment and contributing to the economy (Boudreau and Ramstad 2005, p. 294). They point out that sustainability rarely appears in strategic HR plans or in talent management. In their paper about 'Marshalling Talent', Ulrich and Ulrich (2010) link talent management to community results. An increased community reputation enables organizations to attract better employees (Ulrich and Ulrich 2010; Stahl et al. 2012). However, even in the article of Ulrich and Ulrich, general societal well-being is not mentioned as an equal outcome of talent management; it is all for the benefit of the organizational performance and, as Cappelli puts it, 'making money'.

Collings and Mellahi (2009) argue that effective talent management will have an indirect positive relationship with organizational performance mediated by work motivation, organizational commitment and extra-role behaviour. These aspects have a positive impact on individual performance. To enhance organizational performance, an organization should focus on individual performance by means of increasing motivation, commitment and extra-role behaviour (Collings and Mellahi 2009; Höglund 2012). Moreover (work and organizational) engagement and alignment are mentioned as indirect objectives of talent management (Cheese et al. 2008, 2009; Christensen Hughes and Rog

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2008; Martin and Groen-in't Woud 2011). Highly engaged workers produce better business results than disengaged workers, measured in terms of higher productivity, improved customer satisfaction and better employee retention (Cheese et al. 2009).

In summary, various levels of output and effects are detected: the individual level, the level of the HR-subsystem and the organization as a whole. Within the organizational level, there is no unanimity on the intended objective: profit, competitive advantage or sustainability. However, the main objective of talent management is firm performance, which can be influenced by increased employee well-being.

Theme 3: Talent management practices and activities

Nearly 70% of the publications in our literature review refer to talent management practices and activities. The main focus is on (1) recruitment, staffing and succession planning, (2) training and development and (3) retention management. In their research on global talent management, Stahl et al. (2007, 2012) present a set of best principles or important elements of successful talent management. We will discuss those elements and add remarks of other scholars.

Regarding recruitment, staffing and succession planning, Stahl et al. (2012) found in their study that most companies follow a talent pool strategy. Employees, the talented ones, in this pool get 'special treatment' in order to accelerate their development and performance. This pool develops talent with a particular succession or career path in mind or within a broader organizational context (Stahl et al. 2007; Collings and Mellahi 2009). This entails a shift from vacancy-led recruitment towards 'recruiting ahead of the curve' and is preferred by several scholars such as Cappelli (2008a), Stahl et al. (2007), Collings and Mellahi (2009) and McDonnell and Collings (2011). According to Stahl et al. (2007), companies must see their recruits as customers and apply sophisticated marketing models and tools for the recruitment of talents. They also remark that there should be a cultural fit between the organization and the recruited employee. Stahl et al. (2007), as well as Christensen Hughes and Rog (2008), Jansen and Van der Pool (2009) and Martin and Groen-in't Woud (2011) identify branding as an essential element in talent management. Martin and Groen-in't Woud (2011) assume a relationship between employer branding and engagement, but also remark that this relationship needs further research.

Concerning training and development, Stahl et al. (2007, 2012) point to the importance of line management involvement, the use of open job posting systems and internal talent marketplaces. They also discuss the promote-from-within policy many companies adopt. The authors warn of the risks of this policy such as the tendency towards excessive inward thinking. Other scholars also make remarks about make or buy talent (Cappelli 2008a, 2008b; Collings and Mellahi 2009; Ulrich and Ulrich 2010; Burkus and Osula 2011; McDonnell and Collings 2011; Pfeffer 2001). McDonnell and Collings (2011) advise getting the correct balance between internal and external talent. Cappelli (2008b) developed a 'talent on demand' framework to control the demand-supply gap based on supply chain management. He refers to the optimal equilibrium between recruiting on the external labor market and the training and development of internal candidates. Ulrich and Ulrich (2010) come up with six strategies to invest in talent. The 'buy' and 'borrowing' strategies refer to the recruitment of talents on the external labor market. The 'building', 'bounding' (promoting the right people to the right place), 'bouncing' (removing poor performers) and 'binding' of top talent concerns the development of internal talent. Pfeffer (2001) sees some shortcomings with buying talent and warns about the glorification of the talents of those outside the company while playing down the talents of insiders. Outsiders

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have the advantage of mystery and scarcity value, and an organization has to put effort in catching the big fish. But it is uncertain if they are able to meet the high expectations (Groysberg et al. 2004). Finally, with regard to retention, Stahl et al. (2007) claim that creating and delivering a compelling employee value proposition, personalized career plans, highly competitive compensation and a healthy balance between personal and professional lives are elements of successful talent management.

Stahl et al. (2007, 2012) emphasize the importance of the alignment of talent management practices and activities with the internal and external environment of the organization. 'Practices are only "best" in the context for which they were designed' (Stahl et al. 2012, p. 26). Most companies in their study consider benchmarking a useful tool, but do not imitate policies of other companies. Several scholars in our literature review stress the importance of a 'best fit' model as well (e.g. Cappelli 2000; Pfeffer 2001; Boudreau and Ramstad 2005, 2006; Collings and Mellahi 2009; Sparrow et al. 2011; Vaiman et al. 2012). This is based on the assumption that an organization is a social system that interacts in its own way with one's environment (Nadler and Tushman 1980). Many scholars do not prescribe specific practices and activities, but refer to, for example, recruitment or training in general.

We can conclude that the dominant practices and activities in the talent management approaches are activities to attract, develop and retain talent. Common HR practices and activities are now applied to the field of talent management or to the management of excellence and talent. The majority of scholars remark that context matters and do not prescribe specific practices but promote a 'best fit model'.

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Discussion: limitations and alternative perspectives

In the first section of the paper, we paid attention to the dominant topics in the literature about talent management and leading points of view. We found that the academic literature can be characterized as conceptual, exploring the field in all its elements. There is still a limited amount of empirical research on talent management. The academic literature on talent management contains three central themes: the definition of talent, the intended outcomes or effects and talent management practices and activities. Talent management seems to be considered as a transformation process; talents are used as inputs in order to achieve outputs strongly related to organizational objectives. Talent management practices and activities serve to manage (recruit, develop and retain) talents so that the goals of the organization are met. There is no unanimous definition of talent. Opinions differ on whether or not to differentiate the workforce (inclusive or exclusive approach) and on what basis (talent as an object or as a subject).

Limitations and omissions in talent management literature

Our main critical comment on the contemporary talent management literature is that it has a narrow and one-dimensional approach. First of all, the 'mainstream' talent management literature has a managerialist orientation. The managerialist orientation can be recognized in the definition of talent. Every typology as described by Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2012) is based on the assumption that the person (subject approach) or competencies (object approach) have to meet the requirements of the organization. The description of the intended effects of talent management also show a managerialist orientation. Firm performance and the achievement of organizational goals prevail. Other goals, such as employee well-being and societal well-being, are left out of the equation. Furthermore, talent management is presented as a tool to improve the performance of employees

(mainly job performance) with the ultimate goal of improving organizational performance, for example, in terms of productivity, quality and profitability. This could be the result of the US-based character of the mainstream literature on talent management (as noted earlier by Collings et al. (2011)), with the more dominant short term shareholder approach as the starting point.

The dominant viewpoints on talent management can also be labeled as unitarist. Multiple actors are identified. Top management or CEO, line management and HR have a role in the practice of talent management (e.g. Stahl et al. 2007, 2012; Guthridge et al. 2008; Collings and Mellahi 2009; Farndale, Scullion and Sparrow 2010; Ulrich and Ulrich 2010). But the main focus is on how management can achieve the organizational strategic goals. The implicit assumption is that all actors serve this general organizational interest and do not have their own needs, views and goals. Although some authors describe an active role for the employee (for example Ready and Conger 2007; Garrow and Hirsh 2008; Stahl et al. 2012), the responsibility of the employee for his or her own career and development is not made more explicit. The talent management approaches therefore mainly represent a classic top-to-bottom manageralistic approach with little leeway for employee involvement or employee agency. The approaches are also implicitly based on the mutual gains assumption, in which all the stakeholders inside and outside the organization have the same goals and interests (Susskind and Movius 2009). The leading assumption also seems to be that all stakeholders share the same definition of talent. Divergent opinions on the differentiated competencies are not taken into account. From this point of view, what is good for the employer is also good for the employee and vice versa. In practice, this is often not the case. The consequence of this unitarist approach towards conceptualizing talent can be that only firm specific talents or competencies are developed. Competencies useful in the external labor market, which can increase the external employability of an employee, are not developed. This is a disadvantage for the employee and for society as well. Another limitation of the approaches presented above is the focus on talents and the lack of attention on the non-talented and drop-outs. The latter two groups may suffer from the exclusive 'happy few' approaches to talent management causing diminishing employee well-being for these groups in terms of, for example, job satisfaction, and also negative effects on societal well-being if the non-talented and drop-outs lose their jobs. What is good for the organization and talent is not necessarily good for the non-talented and drop-outs of the organization.

Besides a managerialist and unitarist view of talent and talent management objectives, the academic literature on talent management emphasizes a limited range of practices and activities. A great deal of attention is paid to the attraction, development and retention of talents. Discharge and turnover are not issues. Only one article discusses the benefits of turnover (Somaya and Williamson 2011). All other authors try to convince organizations to prevent turnover and keep talented employees indoors, taking control over their investments. However, in view of the increased mobility of employees, it is not realistic to assume that talented employees will never leave the organization as long as you take good care of them. Somaya and Williamson wrote that inter-company mobility has become the career path norm for employees: 'Perhaps it is time to declare that the war for talent is over . . . talent has won!' (Somaya and Williamson 2011, p. 75). They think organizations should accept and embrace turnover and use it for their own benefits. Former employees can be a strategic asset if ties to them are developed and utilized appropriately. By maintaining the relationships with the departing employees, the social capital of the organization increases. They see several benefits: client access, human capital access and generation of goodwill.

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The second comment on mainstream talent management practices and activities is that it has a one-sided point of view on people management practices, i.e. it emphasizes the importance of employment practices (Boxall and Macky 2009), but neglects practices beyond the management of people such as work practices like work design. Although many scholars attach great value to commitment, engagement and motivation, none of the articles include a discussion of which practices are most suitable for this purpose. Studies on engagement and commitment in general show the importance of a resourceful job environment, which is facilitated by job design (Hakanen, Schaufeli and Ahola 2008; Bakker and Bal 2010; Gruman and Saks 2010). Examples of job resources are autonomy, supervisory, coaching and opportunities for development. The importance of job design is rarely mentioned in the talent management literature. According to Stahl et al. (2007) job rotation and challenging assignments are seen as useful instruments, but are seldom used because of the strong tendency of management to focus on their own unit rather than on the whole organization.

Our final comment on the mainstream literature on talent management practices and activities concerns the relation between talent management and the internal and external context. As noted in a previous section of the paper, most scholars prefer a best fit model and suggest that talent management practices and activities should be adjusted to the internal and external organizational context. Boselie (2010) distinguishes four types of fit: (1) a fit with the organization's strategy (strategic/vertical fit); (2) a fit between individual HR practices (internal/horizontal fit); (3) a fit between the HR strategy and other organizational systems, such as the production system, communication and information system, financial system and legal system (organizational fit) and (4) the link between the HR strategy and the institutional environment of an organization (environmental fit). In the talent management literature, the main focus is on the strategic fit and, to a lesser degree, on the internal fit of the talent management practices and activities (e.g. Ashton and Morton 2005; Stahl et al. 2012). Organizational fit, besides an occasional remark on alignment with organizational culture (Stahl et al. 2007, 2012; Garrow and Hirsh 2008; Davies and Davies 2010), is seldom discussed. Current talent management literature overemphasizes the importance of human capital or talents and do not take notice of other systems and resources that affect firm performance as well. Finally, the talent management literature rarely refers to environmental fit. In the case of the external environment and environmental fit, Paauwe's contextually based human resources theory (2004) makes a distinction between a product-market-technology dimension (competitive mechanisms) and a social-cultural-legal dimension (institutional mechanisms). The focus in the talent management literature is on a single aspect of the environment, i.e. the labor market. Authors examine the general impact of developments and trends in the labor market on talent management and the effects of the supply-demand gap on the availability of human capital for the organization. The impact of other competitive and institutional mechanisms is underexplored.

Towards a pluralist view of talent management

In the field of HRM, 'critical' theorists tend to have a more balanced and pluralist view of the workplace (Greenwood 2002). They are aware of the various stakeholders in a workplace. Acknowledgement of multiple stakeholders also results in the acknowledgment of multiple goals or outcomes. According to Greenwood (2002), referring to stakeholder theory, managers have an obligation to attend to all those who are at stake in or have a claim on the organization. A company has the potential to affect its stakeholders, but the stakeholders have the capacity to affect the company. Adopting the pluralist view

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of the workplace in the field of talent management has several consequences. The managerialist and unitary orientation on the achievement of organizational goals need to be expanded. The orientations, needs and goals of stakeholders other than management need to be considered as well. According to Boselie (2010), HR in general involves management decisions aimed at achieving individual, organizational and societal goals. In the case of talent management, individual and societal goals must be added as equivalent objectives of talent management. Employee well-being is no longer a means to achieve organizational goals, but a separate objective. However, only few studies discuss the preferences of talented employees, for example the studies of Dries and Pepermans (2008) and of Dries et al. (2011), on the careers of high potentials. What is new in this pluralist approach to talent management is the introduction of societal well-being as a goal or effect of talent management. Only Boudreau and Ramstad (2005) referred to these goals as an aspect of sustainability. Acknowledgement of a pluralist view also implies that it is not just management that has a say in the typical features of talent (definition of talent), but also other stakeholders such as employees, colleagues, peers and society as well.

Organizations should bear in mind that the needs and interests of multiple stakeholders may conflict with the organizational goals. The war for talent is not fought outside the organization with competitors on the labor market, but inside the organization as well. Managers, HR and employees are all warring powers fighting for their own honor and virtue. Some authors address the conflicting goals. In their article on failures in talent management, Martin and Schmidt (2010) warn us not to delegate talent development to line managers. Talents are a long term corporate asset and should be treated like one. Line managers are short term focused and not willing to share their talents (Martin and Schmidt 2010). A diversity of (conflicting) interests and goals can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of talent management if talent management is still focusing primarily on organizational performance and organizational effectiveness.

As far as talent management practices and activities are concerned, a more extended, multi-aspect scope is necessary. Talent management should be regarded as a 'people management system'. This term was used by Wright et al. (2001) to discuss the resource-based view and is still useful: 'By using the term *system*, we turn focus to the importance of understanding the multiple practices that impact employees rather than single practices. By using the term *people* rather than HR, we expand the relevant practices to those beyond the control of the HR function, such as communication (both upward and downward), work design, culture, leadership and a host of others that impact employees and shape their competencies, cognitions and attitudes' (Wright et al. 2001, p. 705). This view entails that talent management should be a system, a complete and interrelated set of practices and activities as well. The set of practices and activities to attract, develop and retain talent must be expanded with activities on turnover and exit. The expression 'people' in the definition of Wright et al. (2001) implies that talent management is about managing people and work (see also Boxall and Macky 2009). Work practices must be included. We also advocate a greater awareness of contextual fit, beyond the usual focus on strategic or cultural fit.

Conclusions and recommendations

In the past ten years, talent management has received a great deal of attention in academic literature. The field of talent management has evolved in the past decade, but there is still only a limited amount of empirical research. The current academic literature is conceptual, exploring the topic in all its elements. We can conclude that the field is at least partly in its

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infancy (Lewis and Heckman 2006) with some progress towards adolescence (Collings et al. 2011). The important lesson we have learned from prior research is that academic talent management literature has a narrow and one-dimensional approach. We argue that it is necessary to broaden this view to a more balanced or pluralistic approach to talent management. New perspectives are essential for a theoretical framework for talent management in different contexts, for example in different branches of industry or in public or private organizations.

Several areas of research must be pursued for talent management to grow to maturity and to gain a firm position in the field of HRM. The talent management literature is already built on a broad range of HRM and organizational behaviour theories. This does not, however, imply that all scholars speak the same talent management language. Consensus on talent management principles is therefore hard to find. In the literature, the academic traditions are hardly integrated or linked. To add a lasting contribution to the field of HRM, talent management must strengthen its theoretical foundation by building on and integrating HRM and organizational theories, for example the AMO-model, Resource Based View, Human capital, HR Architecture, career management, contingency theories, socio-technical systems theory and decision-making theories.

In this paper, we have presented dominant themes and assumptions regarding talent management. We concluded that a managerialist and unitarist view is dominant in the talent management literature. In future research, it is necessary to be more explicit about the talent management assumptions and perspectives.

We have added some new perspectives, such as stakeholder theory, multiple goals, an extended consideration of practices and activities, and stressed on a contextual fit beyond strategic fit. It is necessary to test the relevance and impact of these new perspectives on talent management in empirical research. We also recommend enlarging the knowledge of talent management in contexts other than (large) for-profit organizations and multinationals. Empirical research should focus on talent management in public and non-profit organizations or small and medium enterprises.

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