

What do we mean by the term “talent” in talent management?

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this article is to consider the ways the notion of “talent” has developed over many years, both historically and linguistically, in a number of European and non-European languages and in use in organisations, and its use in talent management.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The information was gained from a literature review of key reports on talent management and a major review of ten organisations across sectors and by interviewing over 100 individuals involved in talent management programmes in the UK and abroad. Holden and Tansley also conducted a philological analysis of the word “talent” from both an historical and a linguistic-comparative perspective analysing publications by consultancies and articles in the management press considering both literal (denotative) definitions and metaphoric (connotative) associations of the term talent in English, noting contrasting usages of the word in other languages.*

Findings – *There is no single or universal contemporary definition of “talent” in any one language; there are different organisational perspectives of talent. Current meanings of talent tend to be specific to an organisation and highly influenced by the nature of the work undertaken. A shared organisational language for talent is important. There is high level of influence of management consultants in the development of the term in managing people with unique knowledge and skills.*

Practical implications – *Organisational talent, in order that it can be identified and developed, must be visible, stimulated and nurtured, and the first step to this is to have an agreed organisational definition of talent.*

Social implications – *Talent management that only recognises a narrow definition of talent negatively impacts on the full utilisation of a nation’s talents.*

Originality/value – *There are no other articles currently published which attempt to define talent from such a historical, linguistic, organisational and individual perspective.*

Keywords *Talent, Talent management, High potential, High performance, Strengths, Human resource development, Skills*

Paper type *Conceptual paper*

1. Introduction

While there has been substantial research undertaken on talent management as an HR initiative (Scullion *et al.*, 2010), as Howe *et al.* (1998, pp. 399-400) note, people are rarely precise about what they mean by the term “talent” in organisations and the implications of defining talent for talent management practice (Tansley *et al.*, 2007).

This is disappointing because a “working” definition of talent is important for robust talent management policies and practices that are shared across the organisation and vital for the employee development specialist designing and planning training and development interventions. However, choosing a definition of talent is no easy task, not least because there are a number of ways in which talent may be defined within a particular organisation. For example, a common notion of organisational talent refers to those who are identified as having the potential to reach high levels of achievement.

It is clear that certain pitfalls have to be avoided in settling on a definition of talent (Howe *et al.*, 1998, p. 399). For instance, we must beware of having a restrictive definition as this could make it impossible to find evidence to characterise talent. But then, some definitions of talent are so vague that one is forced to ask what the point is of using the term “talent” at all. Why not use any other human resourcing term, such as “skills” or “knowledge” or “competencies”?

In this paper I consider the historical, linguistic and organisational development of the notion of talent and derive lessons for developing talent in organisations.

2. “Talent” – etymologically speaking . . .

The word “talent” is thousands of years old, and lexicologists have identified how the term has varied greatly with time, people and locality (that’s etymology). For example:

- The first dictionary definition of “talent” refers to “a denomination of weight, used by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greek, Romans, and other ancient peoples”.
- A talent became a monetary unit when value was attributed to one talent of silver. The word “talent” entered English via the Bible. In Matthew 25: 14 there is a reference to a man who, about to go on a journey, entrusts his property to his servants, giving each five talents, two and one respectively “according to his ability”.
- The Greek version of this verse uses the word “talent”, whereas the New English Bible translates the Greek word “talent” with the word “capital”. Today, HR people also use the term “human capital”, which in some contexts could be seen as synonymous to “talent”.
- By the thirteenth century the word “talent” was related to an inclination or a disposition.
- In the fifteenth century it related to treasure, riches, mental endowment and natural ability.
- In the seventeenth century “talent” related to a special natural ability or aptitudes and faculties of various kinds (mental orders of a superior order, mental power or abilities).
- By the nineteenth century, talent was viewed as embodied in the talented – hence, a person of talent and ability.

So throughout the ages, the word “talent”, which started life as a unit of weight and then a unit of money, acquired new meanings in Europe in the Middle Ages. This changed to mean special ability or aptitude, with those seen as talented able to demonstrate outstanding accomplishments in mental and physical domains. The motivation here was certainly to distinguish talent from “mere” skill. We see this in contemporary dictionaries, where talent is defined as “a natural ability to do something well” (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2006) and “a special aptitude or faculty; high mental ability, a person or persons of talent” (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1990).

3. Contemporary debates about talented individuals

In current debates about talent, several types of talent are taken to exist in certain people from birth. This is termed having “innate talent” and is usually discussed with regard to musical or sporting talent. For example, Tranckle and Cushion (2006) in the sports arena and Gagné (2000) and Heller *et al.* (2000) focus on gifted students in education. There are several common propositions about talent being innate (Sloboda, 1985), namely that:

“ . . . some definitions of talent are so vague that one is forced to ask what the point is of using the term “ talent ” at all. ”

- Talent originates in genetically transmitted structures, so is at least partly innate.
- Early signs of talent can be used to predict future success. However, others argue that taking talent to be based on an inborn ability resulting in the person excelling in the future is too strong a criterion (Howe *et al.*, 1998).
- Others take the position that even though its full effects may not be evident at an early stage, there will be some advance indications, allowing trained people to identify the presence of talent before exceptional levels of mature performance have been demonstrated. These early indications of talent, they argue, provide a basis for predicting who is likely to excel.
- Only a minority are talented, for if everyone was, there would be no way to predict or explain differential success.

According to Gagné (2000), talent exists in the few individuals who have the necessary capabilities to make a difference in a given field of human endeavour, whether it is academia, arts, leisure, sport, social action, technology or business. Gagné (2000) argues that talent emerges from ability as a consequence of an individual's learning experience. Our own favourite definition of talent is from Gagné (2000), who notes that the term talent designates the superior mastery of systematically developed abilities and knowledge in at least one field of human endeavour (see also Heller *et al.*, 2000, p. 67).

4. The international perspective; a philological perspective of talent . . .

Philology, the branch of linguistic science which studies relationships among languages and chronicles the history of words, can provide valuable insights into contemporary understandings of talent and its management in diverse socio-cultural contexts by analysing the word "talent" from both a historical and a linguistic-comparative perspective (Holden and Tansley, 2008).

Holden and Tansley (2008) conducted a philological analysis of the word "talent" from both an historical and a linguistic-comparative perspective, analysing publications by consultancies and articles in the management press considering both literal (denotative) definitions and metaphoric (connotative) associations of the term talent in English, noting contrasting usages of the word in other languages.

As we can see from Table I, the word "talent" in various European languages shows a high degree of common meaning.

4.1 Talent taken as innate characteristics across languages

As well as the English versions of talent, dictionaries of other European languages (German, Russian, French and Danish) also generally take the position that talent is an innate giftedness that manifests itself in a particular field of endeavour and is linked to outstanding performance in some way. So, an innate quality or ability is one that you were born with, not one you have learned. They also relate the word "talent", as in English, to talented persons. In the German language talent is regarded as innate disposition to good achievements in a particular field ("*eingeborene Anlage zu guten Leistungen auf einem bestimmten Gebiet*"; Brockhaus, 2003). This quality is seen as a "gift" which enables someone to achieve a conspicuously exceptional or above-average performance in a particular field, especially in the arts (*Begabung, die jmdn. Zu ungewöhnlichen bzw. Über den Durchschnitt hinausragenden Leistungen auf einem bestimmten, bes. auf künstlerischem Gebiet, befähigt.*; Duden Deutsches Universalwörterbuch, 1996).

In non-European culture we see a different approach. In Japan, for example, the Japanese word for "talent" i.e. "*sainō*", is based on two characters from Chinese: "*sa*", meaning ability, and "*nō*", meaning "skill" or "accomplishment". Compound nouns that incorporate "*sa*" suggest resourcefulness, while "*nō*" is better known in English (as it were) as "*noh*", being the classical Japanese dramatic form. The Japanese word does not suggest the notion of innateness. In Japanese culture the emphasis is on talent as an accomplishment acquired and is seen as the product of often years of striving to attain perfection. So this is a

Table I Talent in other languages

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Danish	The Danish language is consistent with these definitions: "innate abilities for a specific field"; "a person who has talent" (Politikens, 2000); "innate abilities" (Politikens, 2000).
French	One authoritative French dictionary refers to a given disposition, given by God (<i>Grand Robert</i> , 1991). This is a rare occurrence of lexicologists attributing talent to divine inspiration. The same dictionary also suggests that talent, however endowed, serves "to succeed in something" (" <i>pour réussir en quelque chose</i> "), noting that talent is also "a particular aptitude" which is "appreciated by social groups". This reminds us that talent can only be recognised as such by people capable of appreciating it
Russian	Definitions in Russian also relate to "outstanding innate qualities, especially natural gifts" (Ozhegov, 1984) and "outstanding capabilities in a given field (artistic, scientific, political), giftedness and being a gifted person" (Leikhin, 1955)
Polish	In Polish we not only see similarities with these other definitions, but also an important expansion of the term. In a Polish-English dictionary we find a distinction between the singular (<i>talent</i>) and plural (<i>talenty</i>) in Polish. The singular word is translated by "talent" and "gift"; the plural by "accomplishments" and "endowments" (Stanisławski, 1994). In a Polish business dictionary the entry is: "A person endowed (lit. gifted) with unusual ability; innate or acquired (learned) ability to do something in an outstanding, creative way"

Source: Holden and Tansley (2008)

position of setting aside talent as an innate quality and taking it more as resourcefulness in practice that can be acquired and developed.

5. Defining talent in organisations

How organisational talent is defined for talent management purposes is a tricky issue, with no consensus in practice as to what such talent is (Tansley *et al.*, 2007). Some argue that "companies do not even know how to define 'talent', let alone how to manage it" (*The Economist*, 2006, p. 4). There are marked differences in the extent to which the term talent is in use in organisational practice. This can range from:

- no use of the term talent in policy or processes and an absence of an organisational definition;
- some limited use in policy and processes and an emerging understanding of an organisational definition at certain levels of the organisation; or
- a widespread use of the term in strategy, policy and processes and common understanding of an organisational definition.

What emerged from the findings of the 2007 CIPD research, in common with other studies, is that how talent is defined is generally:

- organisationally specific, being highly influenced by the type of industry and the nature of its work;
- having group-level implications;
- mainly focused on the individual; and
- dynamic and so likely to change over time according to organisational priorities (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007).

So we can usefully take three levels of explanation about talent in organisations.

5.1 Considerations about talent at the organisational level

Organisations find greater value in formulating their own meaning of what talent is than accepting universal or prescribed definitions. So there will be considerable differences in how talent is defined in a local authority, a trans-national organisation and a small enterprise. For example, researchers for the CIPD found that:

- At Gordon Ramsay Holdings, talent is essentially viewed as the creative flair of chefs.
- At Google, those regarded as talented are referred to as being a “Googler”, which is described as being confident, an “ideas person” and “a challenger who thinks outside the box”.
- At PricewaterhouseCoopers talented individuals are those who possess “drive, energy, an applied intelligence, a willingness to take on challenges and demonstrate the ability to make a distinctive difference to the business”. These may be leadership- or management-based or in a different function or discipline (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007).

Different parts of the organisation will invariably draw on many different talents in the shape of skills, knowledge and that individuals’ competence levels in them may not be highly inter-correlated. Another aspect of defining talent is consideration of the levels of responsibility necessary within a particular organisational context.

5.2 Talent at group level

The paradoxical nature of the way that organisations group their talent is that it has both positive connotations (being of value and recognising strengths and having access to organisational resources) but also negative connotations (of marginality of “the brightest and the best” with resentment of co-workers impacting on performance/production and potential). There are a number of elements to this conceptualisation:

- “Leadership talent” can be described as those individuals whom “the competition would hire within seconds” and they are indispensable because of their ability to “see the future”. Typically, an expanded definition includes “high potentials for leadership”, and also specialists, thought-leaders and individuals with niche (and scarce) skills.
- “Key talent group” typically represents 2-5 per cent of the employee population. Individuals in this group may often be targets for headhunters.
- “Core talent” comprises individuals who perform the core business processes, and execute what is important within the short term (6-12 months) without too much focus on the future. These constitute a majority of the employees within the workforce. They are the “production” staff, mainly responsible for delivery. Though the skills of individuals in this talent group are not very difficult to replace, new hires would undergo a learning curve that can be equated to loss of productivity.
- “Peripheral talent” comprises contractors and third party providers who provide services that are essential but not necessarily core to the organisation. Replacement of these individuals could be a matter of weeks.

5.2.1 Talent pools. Most organisations group their talent into talent pools. A talent pool describes a collective of talented employees who have been identified as talented. They can take different forms, have different memberships and be used for example as a means of resourcing project work, secondments and internal recruitment. In some organisations we encountered the practice of classifying different talent pools; one such example is exceptional talent for executive-level roles, rising stars, emerging leaders and local talent.

5.2.2 The paradoxical nature of organisational talent. The paradoxical nature of the way that organisations define their talent in this way is that it has both positive connotations (being of value and recognising strengths and having access to organisational resources) but also negative connotations (of marginality of “the brightest and the best” with resentment of co-workers impacting on performance/production and potential.)

“... how talent is defined is generally organisationally specific, being highly influenced by the type of industry and the nature of its work.”

5.3 Talent as individually specific

Individual talent in organisations is generally taken to be “special” or “unique”. Thorne and Pellant (2006) argue that a talented individual is “someone who has ability above others and does not need to try hard to use it. They excel with ease and grace. A talented person has a certain aura in their ability that others wish to emulate and from which lesser mortals draw inspiration”.

Gagné (2000) suggests that talented people have the ability to perform an activity to a degree that places their achievement within at least the upper 10 per cent of their peers who are active in that field. In his study, Goleman (2006) noted that in professional jobs, top performers who were capable of adding value to their organisation are worth ten times as much as their co-workers, although it is not clear how this performance is measured.

With regard to specific perspectives of talent in organisations, these are defined from a number of different standpoints, for example:

- behavioural aspects (such as having a “can-do” attitude);
- knowledge;
- skills (having enough creative flair to create new realities and experiences and thus new knowledge); and
- competencies and cognitive capability (having diversity of thought or flexibility in producing a particular state of mind which matches organisational requirements, irrelevant of job role).

Some see organisational talent as a complex amalgam of employees’ skills, knowledge, cognitive ability and potential. Talent in an individual needs to be recognised as a complex and dynamic mix of such key characteristics. As well as those cited above they can also include diversity of thought. As one European HR Director at a food processing company argued:

I think ... from a business performance perspective, diversity of thought and how people operate is probably the most important talent in the sense that that will drive the business forward. Whether that diversity of thought comes from a male or female or someone who is a Christian or a Muslim ... to me it doesn't really matter.

Others take behaviours as a key element.

5.3.1 Talent as certain behaviours. Although in the talent management research leadership behaviours are widely seen as particularly important, we came across senior managers who favoured an ethical stance on behaviours, related to standards of conduct:

I put a lot of store by behaviours ... I think that the way you go about conducting yourself and achieving those targets is a key talent. I think behaviours from an HR point of view are the things that are more difficult to change within people. ... and I think [talent management] is about understanding the behaviours that people bring to the business and where you can really use them to develop the business and move the business forward.

Such considerations are important, particularly in the area of ethical leadership. In the 2009 *Sunday Times* Best 100 Companies report, the data shows a clear link between faith in the leader and concerns about the future. In companies where there is a great deal of trust in the leader, 54 per cent of employees say the economic climate makes them worried about their

firm's future, compared with 74 per cent in firms where staff lack faith in the man or woman at the top.

5.3.2 Individual talent as a combination of high performance versus high potential. In their 2007 research report of nine case study organisations, the CIPD provided a useful definition of talent that enables the amalgamation of all of these elements in a framework:

Talented individuals are those who can make the greatest difference to organisational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007).

Here, we see the bringing together of the notions of high potential and high performance. This is becoming a common feature in those organisations operating talent management, with a box matrix being used to show how the two come together.

5.3.3 Talent as high potential. In most large organisations talent is associated with those individuals who demonstrate the most potential to progress to more senior roles, particularly leadership positions. These may be leadership- or management-based or in a different function or even discipline. This is not to suggest that this was the universal interpretation. For example, attracting and retaining talented individuals to meet the immediate business needs is the priority at Google, with the potential to progress being based on personal performance and observed behaviours.

We might usefully define a high potential employee as: someone with the ability, engagement and aspiration to rise to and succeed in more senior, more critical positions. It can be useful to deconstruct the different elements in terms of ability, aspiration and engagement. One organisation we studied produced a guide that were using (see Table II).

5.3.4 Talent as high performance. One talent manager said, "We see talent as a recurring pattern of behaviour which is associated with successful performance in a role", but we can argue that this is only part of the picture as far as talent is concerned. Successful performance can also be linked to other characteristics most frequently associated with talented individuals, such as:

- high levels of expertise;
- leadership behaviours;
- creativity; and
- initiative stemming from a "can do attitude" based on self belief.

The levels of performance required from individual talent will naturally depend on the needs of the organisation and the nature of the work. For example, in the public sector, due to the dominance of the modernisation agenda, organisations in this sector may see talented individuals as those who demonstrate high performance in leadership behaviours by those who draw upon high levels of expertise in a specialist area. This contrasts with the focus on

Table II The high-potential employee	
Ability	A combination of the innate characteristics and learned skills that an employee utilises to carry out their day-to-day work, including innate characteristics, mental/cognitive ability, emotional intelligence, learned skills, technical/functional skills and interpersonal skills
Aspiration	The extent to which an employee wants or desires prestige and recognition in the organisation, advancement and influence, financial rewards, work-life balance, and overall job satisfaction
Engagement	Emotional commitment: the extent to which employees value, enjoy and believe in their organizations Rational commitment: the extent to which employees believe that staying with their organizations is in their self interest Discretionary effort: employee willingness to go "above and beyond" the call of duty Intent to stay: employee desire to stay with the organisation Passion and motivation

initiative and creativity to be found in organisations in the private sector, such as Google and Gordon Ramsay Holdings, where the emphasis is on high levels of expertise and creativity.

5.3.5 Talent as individual strengths. Some organisations take a strengths-based view of talent, as evidenced by Dr Tim Miller, Director, People, Property and Assurance and a Director of Standard Chartered Bank:

There are as many definitions of talent, it seems to me, as there are grains of sand on Brighton beach! There's a lot of confusion around the place and one of the things that we're trying to sort out here are the boundaries, such as "Is there a definition that we can all be comfortable with?" and it's still not right. I define it as a positive psychology – it's a pattern of thought, feeling and behaviour that is associated with success on the job and that's a bit esoteric for many people, but that's basically where we're moving towards. Then we worry about skills and knowledge and experience as a subset. So have people got a talent for the job, yes or no, if they have, then how can we develop and grow them in the context of that talent?

6. Conclusions

Talent management is still in its infancy as a field of study and whilst the practitioner community has long recognised its value, the academic community has been slow in addressing the theoretical and practice gaps, with few considering the field of training and development. In this paper I have highlighted one particular area of concern which I think is the starting point before talent management begins – the terminological ambiguity around working definitions of talent. This has serious implications for those in organisations attempting to design and implement talent management programmes. For one thing, we need a balanced view of talent as both innate and learned, with the introduction of "creativity" as a specific element of talent and the importance of the environment seen as having an influence on the development of talent. There are many in organisations who are not included in talent management programmes and we need to be cognisant of this. For example, organisational talent management schemes tend not to consider those in low skilled roles and they miss certain demographics, such as older workers. This can be linked to the gap that companies need to value domain expertise. In other words, there is a dire need for organisations to recognise and appreciate the importance of those with deep knowledge in their specific field as talent the organisation can utilise. There also needs to be a suitable appreciation of the "raw" amount of time required for people to attain mastery of a topic. It has been estimated that those who have attained mastery in their field take around ten years to develop. This is demonstrated in organisations such as GE, where the most successful parts of the company were where leaders have stayed in place a long time and the places where they "churned" people like re-insurance are where GE was found to have failed.

It also quite rare that functional talent as a group are taken into account, although it is not unknown, as evidenced by one executive director from an industrial organisation explaining how, after he designed and implemented talent management to take account of the senior leadership and middle management levels, he then constructed a talent management programme for those in his HR function.

Talent, so that it can be developed and consolidated, "must be visible, stimulated and nurtured" (Penc, 1997, p. 446).

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