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Talent management: context matters

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ABSTRACT

There is little doubt that the attraction, development, and retention of talent are nowadays one of the most critical challenges faced by companies worldwide. Despite the increasing scholarly attention during the last years many questions remain, particularly, those related to how (and why) talent management (TM) is conceived, implemented and developed within organizations, not to mention about its outcomes or effectiveness. We argue that organizational context has been underappreciated in TM research, which is an omission since context affects the occurrence, meaning and implementation of TM. Therefore, we edited a special issue which seeks to contribute to advance our knowledge of how contextual factors affect the conceptualization, implementation and effectiveness of TM. In this opening article, we offer a brief overview of how context is integrated in previous TM research. We then introduce the four articles in this special issue and their contributions which addresses gap in TM research and, finally, we offer some suggestions on how to improve contextualized TM research.

KEYWORDS

Talent management; internal context; external context; contextualized research

1. Introduction

There is little doubt that the attraction, development and retention of talent has emerged as one of the most critical issues faced by companies worldwide. Talent management (TM) can be described as the activities and processes that involve the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement, retention, and deployment of those talents which are of particular value to an organization to create strategic sustainable success (e.g. Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Scullion, Collings, & Caligiuri, 2010). The unprecedented complexity of

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today's business context – marked by globalization, technology, and broader socio-economic, geopolitical and demographic changes – even increases the necessity to focus on identifying, attracting, recruiting, developing and retaining talent to navigate the challenges of it (Claus, 2019; Reiche, Lee, & Allen, 2019; WEF, 2016). Talents are seen as unique strategic resources, central to achieving sustained competitive advantage (Dries, 2013a), and organizations use TM to capture, leverage and protect these resources (Sparrow & Makram, 2015). Talent-related issues are a major concern of many CEOs (Bhalla, Caye, Lovich, & Tollman, 2018; Groysberg & Connolly, 2015), and more than 75% of CEOs highlighted the scarcity of essential skills and capabilities as a key threat to the growth prospects of their organizations (PWC, 2017). In fact, sourcing and retaining the quality and quantity of talent has been a continual challenge for organizations (Vaiman, Collings, & Scullion, 2017). Thus, there is a need for answers for practitioners' practical TM questions.

A critique of TM research has been the suggestion that is has lagged behind in offering organizations vision and direction in this area. (Al Ariss, Cascio, & Paauwe, 2014; Cappelli & Keller, 2014; Cascio & Boudreau, 2016), more than a decade after it emerged as a 'hot topic' in practice, (Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015; McDonnell, Collings, Mellahi, & Schuler, 2017). Yet, over the last decade TM is has emerged as one of the fastest growing disciplines in the management field (Collings, Scullion, & Vaiman, 2015). However, many questions remain, particularly those related to what happens in practice, and, above all, why (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2017). Surprisingly, there is little knowledge about how TM is conceived, implemented and developed within organizations, not to mention about its outcomes and effectiveness. It has been suggested that this can be explained by the fact that TM is usually designed and implemented as a rational and instrumental process disconnected from its organizational context and the interrelated actors (Thunnissen et al., 2013). In a recent review of the empirical literature on TM (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019), the authors found that although research has been conducted in a broad variety of contexts (i.e. countries and organizations), the impact of contextual factors as well as the role of actors in a specific context on the conceptualization and implementation of TM has been largely neglected. The evidence suggests that despite the growing consensus on a 'best fit' approach to TM (e.g. Garrow & Hirsh, 2008; Stahl et al., 2012) and the consensus on the contextual relevance of TM (e.g. Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; Khilji, Tarique, & Schuler, 2015; Thunnissen, 2016), there has been disappointing progress in capturing contextual issues in empirical TM research. TM research has been limited by a predominantly

narrow, universalist, profit-driven perspective on studying TM, largely driven by Anglo-Saxon institutions as the leaders of this research stream (Collings, Scullion, & Vaiman, 2011). The strong focus on TM in large MNC organizations (see Collings, Mellahi, & Cascio, 2019; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2017) raises questions about whether current assumptions in the TM literature related to this specific context help us to understand and explain the TM issues in other contexts such as public sector organizations, SMEs, and organizations based in emerging market context. TM research is still focused at the meso (organizational) level of analysis, with limited attention being paid to individual-level research or more macro-level factors (Sparrow, 2019). The need to address these critiques will be central to the future development of the field.

TM has been previously characterized as a phenomenon that is trying to shift from a 'growing' to a 'mature' stage (Dries, 2013b; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). Cappelli and Sherer (1991) describe context as 'the surroundings associated with phenomena which help to illuminate that phenomena, typically factors associated with units of analysis above those expressly under investigation' (p. 56). Thus, studying the impact of contextual dynamics in TM will shed light on its conceptualization, implementation and effectiveness. In short, it will help us to identify and explain how and why TM works in practice, which is in line with 'the fundamental mission of the academic discipline of HRM' (Boxall, Purcell, & Wright, 2007, p. 4). Additionally, having better-contextualized TM research will help to better understand its applications, since contextualization identifies boundary conditions or limitations surrounding the generalizability of the research findings (Teagarden, Von Glinow, & Mellahi, 2018). In summary, we argue that contextualizing TM research will help researchers to build the bridge between academia and practice by both enhancing research rigor and practical relevance (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). This is increasingly important and timely due to the relative neglect of context in TM research. Through the contributions to this SI, we aspire to expand the boundaries of rigor and relevance in TM research through our focus on contextualization.

In this introduction to the SI, we seek to offer an overview of how context is integrated in current empirical TM research and provide suggestions on how research can be better contextualized.

In the next section we critically examine the role of context in TM research. We then introduce the four articles in this special issue, highlighting their main contributions. Finally, we briefly discuss some key research gaps, and make some suggestions on how to better contextualize TM research.

2. TM research in context

TM cannot be understood as a stand-alone phenomenon since it is designed and implemented within an organization, which, in turn, is part of broader society/operating context. This statement is in line with the contextually based HR models (e.g. Paauwe, 2004; Paauwe & Farndale, 2017), which argue that internal and external factors influence SHRM systems and performance. Strategic HRM (SHRM) is externally determined by 'competitive' market mechanisms (i.e. market forces; demands arising from relevant product-market combinations and appropriate technology aimed at achieving organizational efficiency, effectiveness, flexibility, quality, innovation, and speed), and 'institutional' mechanisms (i.e. pressures derived from prevailing social, political, cultural, legal, and regulatory aspects of the environment in which the firm is operating). Likewise, SHRM is internally determined by the organizational/administrative/cultural heritage of a firm (i.e. its unique configuration: its history, strategy, structure, culture and human capital). Additionally, these models introduce the role of the 'dominant coalition' (key decision makers in the employment relationship, such as top management, supervisory board members, and HR management) in shaping the SHRM system. In other words, they include an actors' perspective, indicating the leeway for strategic choice within firms. According to Paauwe and Boselie (2003), the interests, values and norms of the actors involved in the dominant coalition have an impact on the choices made regarding the intended HRM strategy. Moreover, several new conceptual models (e.g. Vandenabeele, Leisink, & Knies, 2013) reinforce the continuous impact of not only the organizational context but also, its interrelated stakeholders on each phase of the HR process, which increased the dynamics in the HR process significantly. A key issue for TM researchers is: how much attention have (external and internal) contextual factors received in TM research? Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo's (2017) review concluded that most of the empirical TM research was not designed to explicitly identify contextual factors of influence, and suggested that where contextual factors were identified its significance was limited as a side effect. Moreover, they argue that where the impact of the external and internal context on TM is studied, the primary focus was on the intended TM strategy, and to a much lesser extent on the impact on the actual implementation or the employee reactions.

External context

Recently, interest in TM in the national context has increased significantly to more fully comprehend the complexities of managing talent in

today's globalized world, where 'organizations are not only competing with each other, but governments and their societies have also joined the talent race' (Khilji & Schuler, 2017, p. 400). Recently emerging empirical and conceptual TM research (e.g. Khilji et al., 2015; Vaiman, Sparrow, Schuler, & Collings, 2018) draws attention to the complexity of the macro (or country) environment within which organizations develop their TM systems and individuals make career choices. These studies focus on cross-border flow of talent, diaspora mobility, and government policies to attract, develop and retain talent for increasing the country's global competitiveness by facilitating TM activities within organizations. Some countries have a stronger record in developing talent than others (see, Evans & Rodriguez-Montemayor, 2019), and some countries are making huge investments in the education and human development of their citizens with the aim of upgrading local capabilities (Lanvin & Monteiro, 2019). Notwithstanding, the growing recognition of the importance of macro and regional factors, the actual influence of this broader organizational context on the definition and implementation of TM within an organization is still limited and requires further research (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; Sparrow, 2019).

Global TM show some consideration for the impact of broader organizational factors since multinational enterprises (MNE) operating at an international scope, need to adapt their talent strategies to the diverse and dynamic conditions that characterize the global environment. Several studies offer conceptual frameworks (Collings et al., 2019; Schuler, Jackson, & Tarique, 2011; Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Tarique & Schuler, 2018) for advancing and guiding further research in the field highlighting exogenous and endogenous drivers of GTM challenges. Some studies have examined how factors on the national or the sector of industry level have an impact on the MNEs TM approach at the head office or local subsidiaries (e.g. Sidani & Al Ariss, 2014; Tatoglu, Glaister, & Demirbag, 2016), whereas others showed how institutional mechanisms (e.g. labor legislation, politic developments, and national culture) have an impact on the degree of flexibility available in TM decision making in the local context (e.g. Boussebaa & Morgan, 2008; Cooke, Saini, & Wang, 2014). Also, the impact of market mechanisms seems to be crucial when developing a TM strategy. In particular, the circumstances of the (local) labor market and the position of the organization as a preferred employer on that labor market seem to affect the decisions regarding the intended TM strategy (e.g. D'Annunzio-Green, 2008; Ewerlin & Süß, 2016; Van Balen, Van Arensbergen, Van der Weijden, & Van den Besselaar, 2012). Even, some studies focus on analyzing the appropriateness of having a locally based TM approach as MNE (e.g. Hartmann, Feisel, & Schober, 2010; Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010; Kim, Froese, & Cox, 2012).

The vast majority of TM research has focused on large MNCs (Collings et al., 2019), but emerging research on SMEs, who play a key role in the global economy, highlights the unique characteristics of SMEs such as the liability of smallness, scarcer resources and informality (Festing, Schäfer, & Scullion, 2013). Therefore, established research on TM in MNCs cannot be transferred to the SME context. For example, notions of strategic pivotal positions which dominate the discourse on TM in large firms (Cappelli & Keller, 2014), has little relevance in SMEs (Festing, Harsch, & Schäfer, 2017; Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). Emerging research on SMEs highlights the distinctive definitions of TM in the SME context and the distinctive nature of TM issues and challenges in SMEs which are strongly linked to the informal organizational culture in SMEs (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). SMEs generally favor inclusive approaches to TM which fit with the organizational culture of teamwork rather than adopt systems of formal talent identification (Festing et al., 2013; Valverde et al., 2013). We need more empirical research on TM practices in the unique specific context of SMEs, a context relatively neglected by TM research.

A review of empirical TM research by Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo (2017) shows that only a small minority of TM publications is focused on public sector organizations. Education and healthcare seem to attract the most academic interest (e.g. Erasmus, Naidoo, & Joubert, 2017; Day et al., 2014; Groves, 2011; Paisey & Paisey, 2016). The popularity of these two public sector contexts can be explained by the fact that both universities and hospitals employ professionals (scientists and medical specialists) that can be considered as core employees or talents that play a strategic role in the organization's success. Research on TM in public sector organizations follows the mainstream TM research and mainly focuses on the organizational perspective (see, Boselie, Thunnissen, & Monster, forthcoming). However, in contrast to the usual interest on intended TM strategy, TM research in the public sector is focused on the experiences of key actors – managers, selection committee members, HRM, and/or employees – in the actual implementation of TM in the organization. Despite the fact that the inclusive TM approach is closely related to 'the good employer notions' in combination with 'equality' fundaments that are characteristic for many public sector contexts (Boselie & Thunnissen, 2017), the studies on TM in the public sector highlight that exclusive talent approaches are not uncommon, and they investigate the challenges of attraction and retention of an elite group of employees in the public sector context (e.g. Groves, 2011; Heilmann, 2010). This does not imply that in practice also the exclusive approach is dominant, since both the inclusive as the inclusive

approaches to talent are adopted in public sector organizations. The academic attention for the impact of TM on performance in public sector organizations is limited. Those studies that focus on outcomes or performance show a tendency toward the measurement of performance according to private sector standards, i.e., a focus on organizational well-being or on employee wellbeing in the light of the importance for organizational performance (Boselie et al., forthcoming), neglecting the (public) contexts in these approaches.

Internal context

The impact of the internal organizational context is relatively neglected in TM research. Some studies highlight the importance of the industry sector (nature of the services/products, organization size, profit and returns, budgetary constraints, location, ownership, and the composition of the workforce) on the choices made regarding the intended TM policy. For instance, Cooke et al. (2014) show that homogeneity of the workforce and the type of jobs and the egalitarian culture makes it necessary for firms to adopt an inclusive TM approach in China and India. Similar findings were reported by Buttiens (2016) on TM in Flemish governmental organizations. Few studies go deep into specific organizational context when examining talent recruitment and selection practices (e.g. Van den Brink, Fruytier, & Thunnissen, 2013). Although the effect of the organizational characteristics on the other stages of the TM process is under researched Thunnissen (2016) shows how the actual implementation of TM strategies in Dutch academia was affected by key actors, such as the role of academic line managers. In fact, line managers are the link pin between intended policy and practice. Ulrich and Allen (2014) refer to line managers as the 'owners of talent' since they should be primarily responsible for taking decisions and making investments in talent due its critical impact on business performance, however, the role and perceptions of line managers are underexplored in current research. To get a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the scope and nature of the TM approach in an organization, we need to understand the perceptions of multiple stakeholders including HR, management, line managers, employees and trade unions. We suggest the need to adopt the broader approach where wider stakeholder perspectives need to be assessed in future TM investigations.

Aligning TM policies and practices, organizational strategy is a key challenge for organizations (e.g. Groves, 2011; King, 2015; Stahl et al., 2012; Silzer & Dowell, 2010; Schuler, 2015). Schuler (2015) poses that the talent available in the company has a great impact on the strategic

directions and paths the company takes. Research on TM indirectly shows that the soft and social aspects of the organization are essential for a successful implementation of TM; a talent- and learning-minded culture which supports creativity, open communications, effective knowledge management, and is built on core values as respect and integrity has a strong effect on effective talent attraction and retention (e.g. D'Annunzio-Green, 2008; Kontoghiorghes, 2016). Successful companies make great efforts to integrate their core values and business principles into TM processes, such as employees' selection, socialization and training or leadership development (Kontoghiorghes, 2016; Schuler, 2015; Stahl et al., 2012). According to King (2015), leadership is central to organizational climate, and results in a 'talent climate' perceptible by employees. In particular a servant or transformational leadership style supports a match between the organization and the talented employee based on shared values and respect (e.g. Asag-Gau & Van Dierendonck, 2011; Jones, Whitaker, Seet, & Parkin, 2012). However, to date empirical support for these arguments is limited and needs further investigation. Likewise, to the best of our knowledge, the linkage to 'hard' or technical enablers such as organizational structure, systems and processes has not been yet empirically investigated in TM research.

3. Contributions to the special issue

As mentioned before, the aim of this SI was to assemble a high-quality set of papers which improve our understanding of how contextual factors impact the conceptualization, implementation and effectiveness of TM. Thus, we sought submissions for this SI that explored the impact of contextual factors for the conceptualization, implementation and effectiveness of TM. Additionally, we sought submissions that demonstrated novel methodological approaches for integrating context into TM theory building. The research presented in this Special Issue responds to the questions we have raised. The analysis of the internal context at the micro- and meso-level of analysis dominates in the contributors to this Special Issue focused on the internal context. Ultimately four papers were accepted and we now summarize those papers.

The opening paper by Wiblen and McDonnell (this issue) argues that talent 'radiates within organizations' and can only be examined within a specific context, at a specific point of time, from specific individual perspectives. The study presents an original analysis of talent discourses within an Australian subsidiary of a multinational professional services firm. By means of discourse analysis, the paper focus on studying how various contextual factors (e.g. workforce composition, ownership

structures and individual perceptions) influence talent meanings within an organization. The article differentiates between multiple forms of conceptualizating talent – potential partners (individuals), valued skilled based roles, top talent (individuals) and everyone is talent – relevant to the professional services case organization at different levels, and illustrate how several contextual factors shape these meanings. The need of caution in assuming that shared understandings of talent exist within a single organization is emphasized. Moreover, the article reinforces the idea that talent discourses are not mutually exclusive (i.e. exclusive and inclusive approaches can coexist), highlighting the need to adopt a more pluralistic consideration of what talent means.

The second article by Sumelius, Smale, and Yamao (this issue) advances our understanding of the effects of an organizational context feature in employees' reaction to talent pool inclusion. Drawing on signaling theory, the authors focus on examining the reactions of both talents and 'B' players on finding out about their status in the context of a company that adopts 'strategic ambiguity' (i.e. intentionally maintaining an element of secrecy and information asymmetry) in its communication about talent. They carried out a qualitative study within a Finnish subsidiary of a large, US-based multinational corporation. They found that the effects of strategic ambiguity in talent communication on employees' reactions are markedly different for talents and 'B' players, although in both cases had few long-term positive consequences on their attitudes and behaviors. They also found that ambiguity can surface at different points in time and in different ways for different employee groups. This research enables these scholars to present important theoretical and practical implications for the role of communication as part of the organizational context in employee reactions to talent pool inclusion, and for TM more generally. This context-specific research demonstrates that culturally rooted reactions can pose major challenges to both the implementation and effectiveness of exclusive TM.

The next paper by Asplund (this issue) explores the role that a professionalized public-sector context plays in shaping employee reactions to TM decisions. Specifically, she centers in analyzing the mediating role of felt obligation in the relationship between talent ratings and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) in an organization dominated by a strong profession (i.e. teachers). Further, she tested whether professional identification moderates the relationship between talent ratings and felt obligation toward the organization. The results revealed that talent ratings are positively associated with OCB, and that felt obligation mediated the relationship between talent ratings and OCB. Moreover, professional identification moderated the relationship between ratings of potential

and felt obligation: the relationship was strongest at low levels of professional identification. The findings of this study are in line of the previous study, and are particularly useful to reinforce the TM context-dependency. So, conventional exclusive TM practices (i.e. talent ratings and designations) might be less effective for increasing favorable attitudes and behaviors among employees in highly professionalized groups, such as teachers, marked by egalitarianism, autonomy and expertise.

The final paper by Meyers, van Woerkom, Paauwe, and Dries (this issue) allows us to advance our understanding on the practice of TM by exploring the talent philosophies (i.e. those different beliefs about the nature, value and instrumentality of talent) held by key actors in TM, i.e., HR managers. Grounding on cognitive psychology, they reason that talent philosophies are similar to mental models that influence how HR managers interpret and implement TM practices within their organizations. Thus, these authors focus on how four different talent philosophies (exclusive/stable; exclusive/developable; inclusive/stable; inclusive/developable) relate to three organizational context factors (size, ownership form, and multinational orientation) as well as to HR managers' perceptions of their organization's TM practices. They found that all four talent philosophies were represented almost equally often in their dataset. Furthermore, they also found that HR managers of relatively smaller organizations were more likely to hold an inclusive talent philosophy, whereas HR managers of larger organizations were more likely to hold an exclusive talent philosophy. They have also found significant associations between managers' talent philosophies and their perceptions of the exclusiveness or inclusiveness of the organization's definition of talent, and its degree of workforce differentiation.

4. Final reflections

Making the connection between TM definition and implementation highlights the need to understand the setting in which an organization is operating to know what approach to TM will be most effective. TM is highly context-dependent, as the articles in this Special Issue have shown. Contextual dynamics explains the immense variations in the occurrence, meaning, implementation and effectiveness of TM processes. Although some progress has been made, the incorporation of context still needs our attention. Below, we identify and discuss some limitations of research in this area.

First, as we have previously discussed, despite the call for more comprehensive contextual TM insights (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; Sparrow & Makram, 2015; Sparrow, Scullion, & Tarique, 2014), context

in TM research is still limited and context in TM often continues to play a marginal role. Moreover, Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo (2019) found in a recent review of 174 peer-reviewed empirical TM studies that methodology sections often lack information about the organizational context (even, about some basic descriptive information). This disjointed consideration of the contextual variables is unhelpful and needs attention. The lack of such information in TM studies limits the reliability of the study and makes it more challenging for practitioners and scholars alike to fully understand the findings. In short, 'a-contextual packaging' can lead to a lack of relevance (Johns, 2006). To overcome this flaw, we suggest the need to explicitly address how context is operationalized in the research that means focus on this question: 'How do we identify and integrate context into our TM research? Second, due to the increasing involvement of organizational psychologists in TM research (see, Gallardo-Gallardo, Arroyo Moliner, & Gallo, 2017) there is an increasing tendency to focus on micro-level TM – i.e. employee reactions to TM–, which marginalizes context in academic TM research. While these studies have contributed to our understanding of the micro-level issues in TM, to get a more rigorous understanding of what actually happens in practice and why, we echo Boxall et al. (2007) who claim that the impact of the organizational context has to be considered fully in both theoretical and empirical research.

Despite the hype about TM, we still need more understanding on what happens in practice, which will help to offer more relevant research. Therefore, we recommend to not only use context to frame the relevance of the study or to interpret results in the discussion, but to use research questions and theoretical frameworks in which the contextual factors and variables are incorporated. A more comprehensive and holistic approach to TM is required to explore the dynamics in TM. Several theoretical perspectives from other domains can help to clarify the complexity of the TM process in practice, such as models from the fields of Strategic Management, Organizational Theory and Strategic HRM (see, the Integrated and Dynamic TM Model of Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2017). An integrated and holistic approach to TM can be helpful as a force field analysis tool, allowing simultaneous consideration of different contexts, which is in line with previous advices (e.g. Farndale & Paauwe, 2018; Khilji et al., 2015; Thunnissen, 2016). Applying the knowledge from the Macro TM studies to the TM studies on the organizational level studies would be a first (and a quick-win) step. Also, multilevel research, explicitly addressing and confronting the perspectives of actors involved in different stages of the TM process, is valuable. It should be noted that few recent studies acknowledge context at multiple

levels (e.g. Harsch & Festing, 2019; Muratbekova-Touron, Kabalina, & Festing, 2017).

Our point with this special issue was not that context had never been considered before. Rather, as Johns (2017) suggest, that 'it should be incorporated more mindfully and systematically into our research' (p. 577). We hope that it will enable TM scholars to think more critically and carry out their studies in a more sophisticated manner regarding the role of context in their research design, execution and analysis. Context matters, and its acknowledgement will be central to the future development of the field.

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