

# Economics and Business Review

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# Who is talent? Implications of talent definitions for talent management practice<sup>1</sup>

*Agnieszka Skuza<sup>2</sup>, Habte G. Woldu<sup>3</sup>, Shawn Alborz<sup>4</sup>*

**Abstract:** Although talent is considered imperative for gaining a competitive advantage, talent management programs' effectiveness is unknown. It is believed that consensus on a strong theoretical underpinning for identifying talent and its general definition is yet to be achieved among academia and practitioners. This lack of integration and agreement on a single definition among scholars lead to more confusion which inhibits the advancement of talent management scholarship. The notion also requires renewed attention in the post-pandemic era because everything may not go back to normal as pre-pandemic. This study addresses the gap and focuses on reviewing the existing scholarship on talent definitions and its conceptualization in one place. The study also aims to present the potential implications of talent definition on talent management practices. Among the various implications discussed, it is argued that a single approach to talent definition makes the company vulnerable as it is not using the full potential of talent management. Finally, based on this in-depth review, the study will highlight potential critical research areas towards which the scholarship of talent may be extended.

**Keywords:** talent management, human capital, human resource management.

**JEL codes:** M12, M54.

## Introduction

In the past couple of decades, organizations have been increasingly adopting various TM programs to attract, retain and develop top talent. This is happen-

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ing because of the drastic changes in the work-life where work has become more complex, changeable and unsecure (Nilsson & Ellstrom, 2011). The shift from a commodity-based economy to a knowledge-based economy has also changed the status of human resource management and its role in organizations. Therefore, organizations have become more focused on highly talented individuals. TM has thus become a top priority and more strategic for organizations worldwide (Kusi, Opoku-Danso, & Afum, 2020; McDonnell, Collings, Mellahi, & Schuler, 2017). A recently published report by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) states that due to the impacts of COVID-19, sixty percent of organizations are taking a more strategic approach to their TM. Similarly, another survey of Global Talent Trends (2020–2021) by Mercer reports that because of COVID-19 coupled with technological improvements, talent now has the option to work digitally. This statement is supported by a study that estimated 25% of employment was generated in digital sectors (Fanna, Tolan, Torrejon, Urzi Brancati, & Fernandez-Macias, 2020) and till May 2020, 76% of companies asked all or most of their employees to work from home (McKinsey, 2020). It is also estimated that the leadership of 43% of organizations believe that the lack of proper management of human capital in their organizations has inhibited its growth and profitability (Pandita & Ray, 2018) in the pre-COVID era. Post-COVID, this situation would further worsen and bring more challenges for HR, such as what type of work arrangements would work to attract and retain the best talent?

In the face of these challenges, the conceptualization and operationalization of TM require renewed attention because there is already a lack of consistency in its operationalization in the organizations (Gallardo-Gallardo, Thunnissen, & Scullion, 2020). Furthermore, existing talent identification practices and effectiveness are among the grey areas that need further exploration (Ready, Conger, & Hill, 2014; McDonnell & Skuza, 2021). It is, therefore, no wonder that a survey of CIPD in 2013 reported that only 6% of the organizations consider their talent recruiting practices as effective. This study argues that for organizations to practice TM and extract its associated perks, they first need to understand what talent is. However, confusion exists in the conceptualization of talent as there are several definitions and views about this concept in the existing literature (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013; Wiblen, 2016). Today the situation regarding the talent definition remains the same as pointed out by Ashton and Morton (2005, p. 30) that there “isn’t a single consistent or concise definition”. For example, existing literature on talent conceptualizes it from a human-centric view or who should be termed talented (Crane & Harwell, 2019; Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). Some authors describe talent as “generic” (Lewis & Heckman, 2006), whereas others term it as “unique” (Lepak & Snell, 1999).

It is believed that consensus on a strong theoretical underpinning for identifying talent and its general definition is yet to be achieved among academia and practitioners. This lack of integration and an agreement on a single defini-

tion among scholars lead to more confusion which inhibits the advancement of TM scholarship (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). To address these gaps, this study focuses on reviewing the existing scholarship on talent definitions and its conceptualization. The study also aims to present potential implications of talent definition on TM practices. Finally, based on this in-depth review, the study will also highlight potential critical research areas towards which the scholarship of talent may be extended. Hence a synthesis of the existing talent scholarship will be presented with a road map for further research.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: in the next section, a discussion on the methodology is presented for the selection of the articles for this review. This section is followed by a detailed discussion of the findings related to different definitions of talent. The future research directions section makes the last part of the paper.

## **1. Search strategy**

In line with previously adopted methodologies (e.g., Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2013; McDonnell et al., 2017) this study relied on refereed journals for downloading relevant papers published in the last two decades (since 2001). The Business Source Complete database was chosen as the departure point to search for articles that cover the themes of talent identification and definition in the organizational context. The search was limited to English-language publications in peer-reviewed academic journals that mentioned “talent identification” (talent ident\*), “talent definition” (talent defin\*), and/or talent conceptualization (talent concept\*) in their title, abstract or keywords. It was decided to exclude a range of documents such as editorial notes, symposia, proceeding papers, letters, notes, presentation slides, editorial materials, and book reviews. Our search procedure generated 72 articles.

Further, to better contribute to a theoretical understanding of talent definition and identification, the search was expanded to the APA PsycInfo database (as recommended by Nijs et al., 2013). APA PsycInfo is the premier index for researching psychological literature and indexes psychology journals, book chapters, books, and dissertations. The search resulted in retrieving 204 relevant articles; however, it must be stressed that the vast majority of articles focused on educational psychology and sports psychology. Since the interests lay in talent identification, definition and conceptualization in the business context the publications that are loosely associated or lack focus on organizational talent were excluded. As a result, our search narrowed to 42 publications, of which 30 overlapped with articles identified in the Business Source Complete database. A total of 84 publications were left. The list of journals with the number of publications is included in Table A1 in the Appendix.

## 2. Approaches to talent definition and their implications for TM

The review demonstrated that the definitions of talents are primarily context-specific and therefore, variations can be found while comparing them. Selecting one definition over another is linked to a different TM process. Table 1 can be referred to for some of the examples of talent definitions in the extant literature. All these definitions can be combined into several approaches that can be extracted from the extant literature while defining talent. The first approach mainly focuses on selected few employees, also known as the elite approach, or all employees, which is called the egalitarian approach.

**Table 1. Different definitions of talent**

No.	Authors	Definition
1	Epicurea's Leadership Model's definition (in Huang & Tansley, 2012, p. 3680)	individuals who can demonstrate high levels of potential to make a distinctive difference to the business, combined with proven capability for high performance in any role
2	Wiblen (2016, p. 96)	talent is indicative of certain individual employees; valuable skills and capabilities; pivotal roles and positions; or its entire workforce
3	Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and González-Cruz (2013, p. 293)	the ability, capacity, capability, commitment, competency, contribution, experience, knowledge, performance, and potential, patterns of thought, feeling or behavior, and skills that are related to the characteristics of people
4	Meyers, van Woerkom and Dries (2013)	defined talent through five approaches, i.e., giftedness, strength, competencies, high potential, and high performance
5	Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson and Younger (2007, p. 3)	talent equals competence (able to do the job) times commitment (willing to do the job) times contribution (finding meaning and purpose in their work)
6	Tansley and others (2007, p. 8)	talent consists of those individuals who can make a difference to organizational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer-term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential
7	Collings and Mellahi (2009, p. 307)	the pool of high potential and high performing incumbents that the organization can draw upon to fill pivotal talent positions
8	Boudreau and Ramstad (2005)	the key roles within organizations that differentiate performance
9	Cooke, Saini and Wang (2014)	talent are those who are highly educated and (have the ability to be) high achievers/performers in the organizations

No.	Authors	Definition
10	Meyers and others (2013)	a natural ability to be good at something, especially without being taught
11	Cheese, Thomas, and Craig (2008, p. 43)	essentially, talent means the total of all the experience, knowledge, skills, and behaviors that a person has and brings to work
12	Silzer & Dowell (2010, p. 14, 18)	in some cases, 'the talent' might refer to the entire employee population an integrated set of processes, programs, and cultural norms in an organization designed and implemented to attract, develop, deploy, and retain talent to achieve strategic objectives and meet the future needs of the company
13	Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod (2001, p. xii)	the sum of a person's abilities—his or her intrinsic gifts, skills, knowledge, experience, intelligence, judgment, attitude, character and drive. it also includes his or her ability to learn and grow
14	Hinrichs (1996, p. 11)	(...) a unique mix of innate intelligence or brainpower, plus a certain degree of creativity or the capacity to go beyond established stereotypes and provide innovative solutions to problems in his everyday world, plus personal skills which make him effective in his relationships with his peers, his superiors, and his subordinates
15.	Tlaiss (2021, p. 64)	talent has been operationalized as human capital, which can be assessed in terms of value and uniqueness
16.	Thunnissen and Arensbergen (2015, p. 195)	talent is a bundle of interrelated components of outstanding abilities, interpersonal characteristics and excellent performance
17.	Peterson, Tahssain-Gay and Laila (2022, p. 121)	individuals who can make a difference to organizational performance either through their immediate contribution or in the longer term by demonstrating the highest level of potential (...) the focus of talent management therefore centers on identifying employees who constitute key human capital resources

Source: Extracts from the reviewed articles from Business Source Compete and APA PsycInfo databases.

The second approach is associated with the trait or skills approach. Gagné (2000) calls it high order innate abilities or acquired competencies. The third approach is talent identification based on the current performance or the potential to achieve exceptional results in the future. The fourth approach, as discussed by Gallardo-Gallardo (2013) in their review paper on TM is the object (talent as people's characteristics) versus subject (talent as people) approach. A detailed discussion on this fourth approach can be found in (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2015). This paper is limited to an in-depth discussion of the first three approaches.

## 2.1. Approach 1: Egalitarian versus elite approach

When one thinks about talent from the angle of this approach, the first question that comes into mind is whether differentiation should be made between the talent and the non-talent. This approach revolves around the premise that every individual is talented and can create value for the organization. Therefore, an organization must invest in all employees to develop those talents (Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001). This approach is considered the egalitarian approach (Tetik, 2016) or the inclusive approach (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Indeed, offering developmental opportunities to all employees will affect employee motivation and commitment to the organization. That is why Leigh (2009) reports that nearly half of the studied organizations believed in this approach. This approach is also helpful in reducing the risk of identifying the wrong people. In support of this approach, authors like O'Reilly and Pfeffer (2000) also stressed focusing on the value of the entire workforce instead of just fewer and selected ones. Service industries around the world have adopted this approach. For example, the hotel industry considers their frontline and room service staff equally essential to give satisfying customer service which generates more revenue for the organizations (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). The egalitarian approach also ensures the equal distribution of resources across all employees instead of just focusing on a few selected ones, which intrinsically brings the fair treatment of all employees. Hence, their morale gets boosted despite not being in the elite group (Groysberg, Nanda & Nohria, 2004). On the other hand, critics of the elite approach believe that exclusive talent identification and selection leads to injustice and inequality (Harris & Foster, 2010).

As far as the critics of this approach are concerned they have termed it as a costly and ineffective proposition (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013). Furthermore, the term TM which has replaced the name of human resource management also becomes questionable if the egalitarian approach is believed to be valid. Another main criticism of this approach is that it makes the boundaries between strategic human resource management and TM blur and the differentiation between the two becomes more problematic. It is argued that TM stems from focusing on a few people with specific skills and competencies (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). Therefore, the term TM may lose its rationale if one focuses on the egalitarian approach. On the other hand, the elite approach can be justified when the needs of selected employees are different than those of the average employees (Peterson et al., 2022).

Extant literature is dominated by the Elite approach to TM, though there are different interpretations of how employees should operate in a group. For example, authors like Chuai, Preece, and Iles (2008) underscored the importance of focusing on the unique and valuable employees in an organization. Here valuable means developing relevant skills and competencies for effectively performing a job, whereas uniqueness means that there is a degree of diffi-



culty in copying an employee or replacing him/her. Tansley and others (2007, p. 8) describe them as “those individuals who can make a difference to organizational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer-term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential”. Similarly, other authors like Collings and Mellahi (2009) vow for such an approach that can identify vital positions in the organization, giving leverage over other organizations and identifying high-performers and high-potential individuals who can be prepared for those positions in the future. Stahl and others (2007) defined talent as those people who have outstanding performance and are the toppers in the list in terms of current performance and future potential. Authors like Festing and Schafer (2014) define talent as people who have above-average skills, abilities, knowledge, experience, intelligence and potential. Williams (2000) describes talent as people who possess exceptional abilities and can demonstrate outstanding performance in different activities and circumstances. Silzer and Dowell (2010) consider talent as a group of people who have exceptional abilities to perform in a specific area, competency, or more general performance. However, Silzer and Church (2010) hint towards individualizing and distinguishing talents based on their needs, scope, and the type of activities. Studies conducted by authors like Sonnenberg, van Zijderveld and Brinks (2014) and Bjorkman, Ehrnrooth, Makela, Smale and Sumelius (2013) argue that TM programs lead to improve motivation, commitment, willingness to learn and intent to stay with talented individuals, which is translated into positive financial performance. Their study further emphasizes the need for proper communication about the talent program to all employees to avoid ambiguity and make the programs more successful.

Although the elitist approach enjoys dominance in theoretical and practical domains, the method is not free from criticism. For example, doubts are being raised on the potential cost of leftover employees’ motivation and commitment from the talent pool. According to Gagné (2000) only 3 to 5% of employees fall in the domain of top talent, which begs the question of what will happen to the remaining 95% of the employees. So far there is a lack of empirical evidence on the negative impacts of TM programs on the remaining employees. To this end theorists are using Adam’s theory of justice (1965) highlighting the need for a conducive environment for minimizing the negative emotional responses of the non-talents. Studies suggest that this theory may help initiate the discussion on how to keep the non-talent engaged and minimize their emotional breakdown in response to a TM program (Gelens et al., 2013).

The theory of justice assumes that employees compare the outcome of their performance appraisal with other peers and how much their say was included in the same. It also distinguishes how people perceive justice based on observing the allocation and distribution of organizational resources (distributive justice), what procedures are adopted for the distribution of these resources (procedural justice), how the organization informs/communicates the deci-

sions of distribution (informational justice), and how the relationship between an employee and supervisor are built on openness, trust and mutual respect (interpersonal justice). Increased transparency, open communication and integrity of available information may play a critical role in mitigating the negative consequences of those groups that are not considered as talent in a TM program of the organization. Furthermore, Golik and Blanco (2002) add that transparency and consistency help avoid psychological disruption, while Lai and Ishizaka (2020) believe that their absence in an organization may lead to the divergence of social identity. Similarly, the organization can also communicate the conditions and requirements about how those groups can join the TM program in the future, which will also create hope in their minds and therefore further mitigation may occur. Studies have found that if an employee has an open, respectful and trustworthy relationship with a line manager, his/her perception of injustice will be mitigated (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Therefore, having a good relationship with the line manager along with clear communication of the requirements for inclusion in the talent would play a key role in reducing the negative impacts on their motivation and commitment.

While elitist and egalitarian approaches are two opposite sides of the continuum, companies around the globe are striving to create a balance between the two extremes and are increasingly looking for solutions. Although the inclusive approach might be realistic it is often limited to just lip service with no actual implementation (Kaczmarek & Sienkiewicz, 2005). While on the other hand investing in a small, selected group that is often no more than 10% of the total employees, is also a risky proposition. Such talented people are always the target of competitors and can be lured at any time; therefore, the organization's investment in the development will be lost. Consequently, organizations strive to expand this talent pool and enrol other groups such as experts or fresh graduates. A distinctive set of tools and procedures are adopted for the identification and development of talent in each of such group. Among some of examples for such initiative is job enrichment, giving additional responsibilities, putting them on diverse projects and rotating them between different departments to have a flavour and understanding of all key sections of the organization, offering them mentoring and coaching (a relatively cost-effective way) for their development and bring tangible results for the organization (Garavan, Carbery, & Rock, 2012).

## **2.2. Approach 2: Talent as innate abilities or acquired competencies?**

The second approach to identifying talent is based on the premise that whether a person is a talent by birth (innate abilities), also called trait approach, or based on their competencies acquired through education, practice, and behaviour. The first approach, i.e., innate abilities, is concerned with the set of internal abilities

such as cognitive abilities, personality traits and motivation that are not highly susceptible to change over time (Tyskbo, 2019). This approach can be linked with the elitist approach, which refers to the limited supply of talented people. The acquired competencies approach identifies individuals who possess above average competencies and the will to develop these competencies further.

Extant literature on innate abilities mainly derives from the education domain focused on identifying students who perform outstandingly in their exams, sports, and other competitions (Meyers et al., 2013). Scholars and practitioners from the field of HRM believe that talented people are gifted and have innate abilities. For example, Hinrichs (1996, p. 11) argues that “a unique mix of innate intelligence or brainpower, plus a certain degree of creativity or the capacity to go beyond established stereotypes and provide innovative solutions to problems in his everyday world, plus personal skills which make him effective in his relationships with his peers, his superiors and his subordinates”. Studies suggest that investment in the development of selected few would lead to significant and disproportionate financial benefits for the organizations as well as helping in retaining high performers (Becker, Huselid, & Beatty, 2009).

Conceptualizing talent as innate abilities has significant implications for TM in an organization. For example, more attention and sophisticated approaches may be needed to identify and onboard a talent involving several staged psychological tests to identify their cognitive abilities, interpersonal abilities, personality types, or intellectual abilities (Miś & Poczowski, 2008; Meyers et al., 2013). Furthermore, individuals with innate abilities are not available in more significant numbers therefore the talent pool is very small. Studies suggest that organizations which believe in this approach place talent on senior positions. They also have focused on leadership development programs, including intensive and on and off-the-job training programs including interactions with the top management.

Such an approach is not immune to risks due to the changing nature of work because of the technological developments and the COVID-19 pandemic. Already scholars and practitioners were questioning the loyalty of Generation Z and Millennials. This situation could worsen post-COVID, which, combined with further technological developments, will encourage work arrangements in which an individual does not permanently associate with any organization. This situation poses a greater risk of financial losses on the development of talent by the organizations. On the other hand, employees who are not identified as talents do not have the opportunity to develop their skills, knowledge, and abilities, which may hamper their growth, motivation and commitment.

In contrast to the first approach the conceptualization of talent as competencies focuses on planned learning and development. Identification of talent in this approach includes testing their above-average competencies, i.e., knowledge, skills, and experience that create significant value for the organizations (Meyers et al., 2013). Ericsson, Prietula, and Cokely (2007) argued that experts

across all domains, such as sports, dance, chess, medicine, etc., are always made through training and development. Under this approach the criteria for identifying talented people include the assessment of their ambitions, skills, and willingness to learn. Similarly, Ericsson and others (2007, p. 117) stressed that talent should be “demonstrated by measurable, consistently superior performance”. Underlying the importance of evidence for talent, De Haro (2010) notes that in the absence of evidence to achieve exceptional performance, innate abilities and not competencies should be considered. The same practice of believing in evidence is prevalent in organizations too. For example, a study conducted by Dries and Pepermans (2008) on thirteen organizations expressed unwillingness to identify someone as a talent before they perform exceptionally well over two to three consecutive years of performance. Likewise, the performance evaluation process is a detailed, evidence-based assessment supported by examples, multi-directional (360-degree feedback), and meeting with line managers to carry out in-depth discussions on their performance. More complexities emerge in this approach when it comes to the development of talent. Organizations in this approach mostly rely on on-the-job training, such as job enrichment, job enlargement, job rotation, putting them on specialized projects, mentoring, coaching, and meeting with top management.

Furthermore, in this approach, the role of managers in talent identification is increased, which has an associated risk of subjective bias and selection of the wrong people for the job. This issue is highlighted by Silzer and Church (2010) by associating it with the lack of skills of the managers to identify the right people for the right positions. They further stressed the development of managers for similar responsibilities to make the TM program more effective and successful. Three particular areas of development for managers were highlighted by Silzer and Church (2010), i.e., 1) what to observe, 2) the process of categorizing these observations, and 3) knowing their limitations and weaknesses that may affect the categorization process. Another area for managers to develop is a broader understanding of the role of TM and their role in talent identification. Although the HR department plays a vital role in developing management's skills in TM in general, one tool that particularly stands out from all others is the calibration meetings held at various levels of organizations. Such meetings enable the managers to discuss and compare different candidates and their lucidity for appointments. They also assist in standardizing the assessment standards across the organization.

There are several benefits of the competency-based model for organizations. First, since the assumption is that everyone can be trained and developed, it allows all people to participate and develop their competencies, thereby boosting their careers. Secondly, this approach encourages individuals to take the initiative and responsibility for their development, capitalize on the opportunities to be more involved in existing job roles, take additional job responsibilities, become part of strategic initiatives and work on diverse projects to

expand their knowledge, skills and abilities. These initiatives not only keep the employee more engaged and motivated, but they also help the organization reduce the cost of hiring, increase retention, and improve employees' performance, ultimately translating into financial benefits for the organizations (Gelens et al., 2013).

However, more recent studies indicate that, there is a need to find a balance between innate and acquired talents in an organization which intends to explore talent in a holistic approach. While innate talent is necessary to achieve high performance in a dynamic organization, it is not sufficient by itself, when the acquired component of talent is ignored (De La Calle-Duran, Fernandez-Alles, & Valle-Cabrera, 2021; Tyskbo, 2019).

### **2.3. Approach 3: What to measure—past results or potential**

The third approach to talent is also reflected in two schools of thought i.e., whether talent is identified through one's past performance or whether he/she should be identified by assessing future potential. Tansley and others (2007, p. 8) explained the identification of talent through this approach as "those individuals who can make a difference to organizational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer-term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential". McDonnell and others (2017) argued that high performers must fill key positions and that lower performers must be filtered out. This approach sees talent as a resource that should be managed within an organization based on their performance level, hence focusing on coercive performance, something Jack Welch of General Electric was famous for (Michaels et al., 2001). Even though there is no evidence to support that a high performer today will also be a superstar tomorrow, in essence, organizations take results as a precursor for talent identification (Dries & Pepermans, 2008; McDonnell & Skuza, 2021). The reason for so doing is that performance is more objective and easier to justify. This approach was more prevalent in the early stages of TM, which was mainly adopting the succession planning approach. A clear understanding of the targeted position and expectations from the employees make this approach more effective.

However, questions have been raised in the extant literature of TM for identifying talent mainly based on past results. More and more focus is shifting towards identifying talent through the future potential and expected value generation for the organizations. This assessment is not based on moving talent to a specific position or future job roles as their career progress (Sears, 2003; Skuza, 2018). Scholars argue that talent identification should be based on the individual's potential to become a key player in organizational performance (Chamorro-Premuzic, Adler, & Kaiser, 2017). Potential means the future possibility that an employee can become more than her/his current position (Silzer & Church, 2007). Potential can be interpreted as the "probable upper-bound tra-

jectory of what an individual may achieve during his/her career (Finkelstein, Constanza, & Goodwin, 2018). Generally, the potential is understood as a scarce commodity, and only a few people get identified as high potential individuals (Meyers et al., 2013; Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012).

Despite the widespread use of the term high potential, understanding its exact meaning remains unclear (Silzer & Church, 2009). Besides, several other challenges can also be noted in talent identification via potential. For example, the list of potential components for different talent groups would vary, so its identification would be a daunting task. Furthermore, no agreement exists in the extant literature on the components of high potential (Dries & Pepermans, 2012; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Silzer & Church, 2009; Player, Randsley de Moura, Leite, Abrams, & Tresh, 2019). Similarly, external factors that influence some potential components, such as motivation and aptitude toward learning, may depend on the organizational environment. This would further complicate the assessment of potential components. Therefore, a broader assessment of the potential components from various angles and perspectives, such as through 360-degree assessment, would help effectively identify talents in the organization.

Potential is not reflected solely on somebody's action and demonstrated behaviour but also on the managers' ability to perceive that those traits are indicative of potential and to nurture them into future performance (Dominick & Gabriel, 2009; Golik & Blanco, 2021). However, it is believed that some managers may not be skilful enough to comprehensively understand the definition of potential and its assessment or rely solely on their subjective judgement (Blanco & Golik, 2021). Therefore, a more centralized approach would be needed for talent identification through the potential to overcome this challenge. The centralized approach would consider the direct manager's recommendations as an initial stage, followed by a series of calibration meetings to help establish consensus across the organization.

### **3. Discussion and implications**

Despite TM being an important field of study, conceptual clarity and agreement on a single definition of talent are still absent. There are diverse opinions about what talent is and how it can be conceptualized. Scholars and practitioners have developed their definitions and conceptualizations, keeping their contexts and needs. Similarly, there is also a lack of clarity in academia as to how the understanding of the notion of talent can be developed (McDonnell & Skuza, 2021). As a result, organizations are forced to make intuitive assumptions and develop their own models and definitions.

The assessment here indicates that there is no single best approach to define talent and therefore, organizations may choose a definition that best suits

their situation, hence context matters (Thunnissen et al., 2013). For instance, Meyers, van Woerkom, Paauwe and Dries (2020) found that small and medium size organizations tend to use more inclusive talent identification approach when compared to larger organizations. It must be noted that this reality is not always mentioned in the theory of talent management. Hence the authors call for more consistency and clarity of definition between theory and practice (Dries, 2013).

These findings suggest that there are different approaches to talent definitions, each with its own merits and demerits as well as differential influence on the practice of TM. For example, the elitist approach (i.e., focus on 3–5% of employees only) has several distinct implications. Under this approach, TM is centrally controlled with the keen involvement of top management and HR departments. In this approach, the line manager role also becomes more imperative to identify top talent. Hence, they are developed to the extent of having a keen eye and making distinctions between talented and non-talented people. Similarly, TM mainly focuses on preparing tomorrow's leaders; therefore, their leadership development remains a priority. This approach also influences organizational culture. A study conducted by Mayers and others (2020) indicates that an elitist approach to talent is usually associated with a firm's instrumental HR strategy, which is focused on increasing performance, while an egalitarian approach is associated with soft HR strategy, which emphasizes on employees' development and well-being. Therefore, the elitist approach is aligned with the private sector, which manifests performance-focused culture, while the egalitarian approach works better in the case of the public sector, as the latter intends to protect workers' interests (Tyskbo, 2019).

On the other hand, in the egalitarian approach, organizations may adopt a more decentralized approach. The organization focuses on identifying everyone's hidden talents and placing them based on those talents. Similarly, training and development are for all the employees of an organization and not just for a selected few.

Similarly, different consequences can be noted from the second approach, i.e., talent as innate abilities or learned competencies. Either of these approaches would require a different method of talent identification. For example, talent as innate abilities would require more sophisticated cognitive and personality tests at hiring. Whereas talent as a competency would need different assessment tools to test the required competencies in an individual thereby becoming more complex with multiple tools and techniques for assessment and evaluation. Furthermore, objective measures or tools can be used to assess an individual's innate abilities. However, knowledge and skills assessment need more observation and demonstration. Likewise focusing on innate abilities would hinder the path for other people to join the talent pool. Consequently, additional organizational efforts would be needed to foster a sense of fairness by promoting transparency and objectivity while identifying talent.

While taking the approach of past performance versus high potential, several other implications can be noted. For example, the high potential approach would require the line managers to be experts in identifying future potential, which is highly complex and challenging. Identification of high potential may be influenced by context and is subjective in nature. Studies suggest that managers often follow their intuition during evaluations (Silzer & Church, 2009). Sometimes managers' personal bias may make things cloudier and influence their judgment. Therefore, calibration meetings would be required during talent identification process and appraisals. This would help in standardizing the procedures across the organization.

On the other hand, the definition of talent would require a significant revision in the post-COVID era coupled with the technology boom. In the aftermath of COVID-19 and rapid technological developments, the availability of talent has become more difficult because of several reasons. First, organizations made several redundancies at the pandemic, affecting their trust level of talent over the commitment from the organizations (Frankiewicz & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020). Second, technological developments have blurred the boundaries across countries and talented people can easily switch jobs to different sites while staying at their original location. Third, the Gig economy has also empowered talent even more because they can now work from anywhere in the world for any organization they want while enjoying the freedom of time and place. Their jobs have become more entrepreneurial in nature (Castrillon, 2021). Therefore, organizations must change their corporate culture and offer flexibility in terms of time and place. Similarly, more sophisticated and multi-staged techniques may be adopted to identify and acquire talent.

The authors believe that scholars and practitioners need to understand better who the talent is and how one can identify talent in the organizations. The lack of evidence-based techniques and their effectiveness, along with the varying approaches, leave the organization in limbo about the outcomes of TM programs. Moreover, post-pandemic and rapid technological developments make it significantly challenging for the organization to acquire the right people for the right roles. Hence understanding talent and its definition is important for making distinctions and informed decisions (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). Although all the approaches are context-specific, extant literature with empirical evidence about the effectiveness of each approach is largely silent. Hence more empirical studies are needed to test the effectiveness of each approach and its consequences for the organizations to extend the TM scholarship further. Table 2 provides a summary of the discussion.



**Table 2. Summary of different approaches to talent and their influence on TM practice**

	Approach	Pros and cons	Implication on TM practice
Egalitarian vs elitist	<p>egalitarian</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- equal distribution of resources among all</li> <li>- positive effect on motivation and commitment of many</li> <li>- limited risk of identifying the wrong people</li> <li>- focus on all is effective for service sector, e.g., hotel industry</li> <li>- focus on all is expensive and ineffective</li> <li>- risk of losing high performing individuals</li> <li>- the difference between the egalitarian approach and strategic HRM is blurred, and the usefulness of TM is questionable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- TM is decentralized</li> <li>- “talent” is a synonym of “employee,” and tm implementation is limited</li> <li>- while the egalitarian approach is based on equality and fairness, organizations need to categorize positions/jobs based on their value and uniqueness to capitalize on TM</li> <li>- talent management is closely associated with a “soft” approach focused on facilitating employees development</li> </ul>
	<p>elitist</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the elitist approach helps retain high performers</li> <li>- more effective allocation of resources; cost-effectiveness/efficiency</li> <li>- focus on a few affects the motivation of a non-talent group negatively</li> <li>- most resources are spent on a selected few, which brings a risk of losing investment if talents leave</li> <li>- create inequalities in a workforce that has been rhetorically encouraged to work together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- TM is centrally controlled</li> <li>- high involvement of top managers and HR</li> <li>- the role of line managers is imperative for talent identification and development</li> <li>- the selection of people under the elitist approach must be transparent and fair to dispel rumors and demotivation.</li> <li>- opportunities must be given to all employees to participate in the selection process</li> <li>- proper communication about the talent program to all employees must be secured to avoid ambiguity</li> <li>- organizations strive to expand the talent pool and enrol other groups such as experts or fresh graduates</li> <li>- a distinctive set of tools and procedures are adopted to identify and develop talent in each such group</li> <li>- an exclusive approach to talent is associated with “hard” instrumental approach focused on performance</li> </ul>

	<b>Approach</b>	<b>Pros and cons</b>	<b>Implication on TM practice</b>
Talent as innate abilities or acquired competencies	talent as innate abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- talented people (innate) have outstanding abilities and skills</li> <li>- innate talent requires less investment in talent development</li> <li>- limited people with innate abilities/small talent pool</li> <li>- since an organization focuses on small talent groups, there is a risk of losing high performing individuals</li> <li>- retaining people with innate abilities is challenging for organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- more attention will be needed for onboarding and engaging talent having innate abilities</li> <li>- highly sophisticated selection techniques are required</li> <li>- efforts may be needed to minimize/eliminate the subjective bias of managers during the time of identifying talented people</li> </ul>
talent as acquired competencies	talent as acquired competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- more people are included in the talents' pool, and potentially everybody can be a talent</li> <li>- employees are motivated to achieve above-average performance</li> <li>- employees take the initiative and responsibility for their development</li> <li>- talent identification is decentralized involving managers of all levels</li> <li>- acquired competencies approach may be used to boost the careers of all the employees</li> <li>- limited resources may inhibit the implementation of this approach in letter and spirit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- more complex with multiple tools and techniques for assessment and evaluation: assessment needs more observation and demonstration</li> <li>- calibration meetings are necessary to standardize the understanding of talent</li> <li>- managers need to be trained to be able to identify talents effectively</li> <li>- a message of fair treatment across the organization can be promoted through this approach</li> <li>- employee should be offered additional job responsibilities, participation in strategic initiatives, and diverse projects</li> </ul>

<p>Past results or potential</p>	<p>past results</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- identification based on past results is more objective and easier to justify</li> <li>- judging past performance does not require specialized training of line managers.</li> <li>- majority of people can be judged by past results whereas potential is a scarce commodity</li> <li>- past results may not guarantee future success</li> <li>- judgement on past performance is questionable and may not be effective for future roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- since performance may not determine future performance in different roles, a more balanced approach of past results and future potential may be needed</li> <li>- this approach requires the determination of future roles and an understanding of the target position responsibilities</li> </ul>
<p>potential</p>	<p>potential</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- future potential assessment can help make better talent planning and resource allocation</li> <li>- meaning/conceptualization of potential is subjective and up for debate</li> <li>- external forces may affect the future potential/performance of the employee</li> <li>- judgment of future potential is a challenging task and may not be 100% accurate</li> <li>- needs high involvement and the ability of line managers to identify potential effectively</li> <li>- subject to managers' personal biases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- training of line managers is needed to identify high potential individuals</li> <li>- the concept of high potential needs agreement on a single definition</li> <li>- calibration meetings are necessary for discussing and agreeing on the potential of an individual</li> <li>- a broader assessment of the potential components from various angles and perspectives, such as through 360-degree evaluations</li> <li>- the future potential may be suffered due to external forces, and hence they must be kept in mind while making TM programs</li> </ul>

Source: Based on the reviewed articles from Business Source Compete and APA PsycInfo databases.

## 4. Future research directions

### 4.1. General research directions

This study has explored several conceptualizations of talent. Therefore, the logical next step would be to develop such TM models or frameworks that can help explain the challenges identified above. Furthermore, as recommended by previous studies (e.g., Meyers et al., 2013), discourse analysis may be conducted to understand the current status of the definition and understanding of talent by organizations.

Similarly, various approaches to talent management have been discussed in this study. Based on this review it is understood that consensus on a single definition can neither be achieved nor desirable. However, researchers and practitioners can agree on the commonalities to define the boundary conditions of this term (McDonnell et al., 2017). Furthermore, in line with the previous reviews on TM (e.g., Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013), the term talent itself has not been proven as a standalone construct. As discussed earlier, the term is sometimes considered as either egalitarian or elitist, innate abilities or acquired competencies and its identification is based on current performance or future potential. Therefore, further studies are needed to establish its standalone position and the value it can bring to the field of human resource management beyond strategic HRM, succession planning, etc. (Chuai et al., 2008).

While considering the elitist approach, one research avenue is to bring empirical evidence of the negative impacts of TM programs on those employees who are regarded as talent. Although theoretical studies propose that it may hamper the motivation and commitment of left-out employees (Gelens et al., 2013), little if any evidence is available to support these claims. Besides, studies on how to reduce/mitigate these negative reactions from non-talent employees are also needed to understand the notion better.

Regardless of the above discussion, after a thorough review of the existing literature on talent potential, several areas remain unanswered and therefore, require the focus of future studies. Those studies may respond to the following: whether the components of potential vary based on the organization, location, culture, gender, or functional levels of the companies; which components are essential at what stages of an employee's career?; what are those contextual factors that are affecting the components of potential such as determination, enthusiasm, and willingness to work?; to what extent, the potential can be developed?; what is a dominant set of components that affects the potential more significantly than others? And what components of potential are impacting the effectiveness of a TM program?

Furthermore, future studies should also adopt a more pluralistic approach to talent management by including the perspective of different internal actors (Tyskbo, 2021). Most empirical studies rely on HR or top managerial perspec-

tive, while much less attention has been placed on gaining insights from other stakeholders, such as talents or line managers (McDonnell, Skuza, Jooss, & Scullion, 2021; Farndale, Pai, Sparrow, & Scullion, 2014).

Finally, it is important to highlight that although the search process of this study encompassed only publications that were conducted in the English language, it has global perspectives in its contents. As the study covers diverse geographical areas, including Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, and the USA, it is believed that the study's outcome will apply to global researchers and organizations that focus on talent management for HRM strategy. However, future review studies should include research studies conducted in other languages, which would give a more in-depth understanding of the talent selection and identification challenges in the global and local contexts.

#### **4.2. Research directions in the aftermath of COVID-19**

A *Harvard Business Review* article by Frankiewicz and Chamorro-Premuzic (2020) argued that talent had left the building in the face of rapid technological developments and COVID-19. Because of both of these factors, people have started working from home through various online platforms; therefore, it is unlikely that everything would return to normal anytime soon. Hence new rules for TM are required. Organizations would need to develop a new working culture based on equality and fairness to both the employees and employers. Likewise, the same article also highlights the opportunity of access to global talent. Since technology has enabled people to work from anywhere in the world, geographic boundaries have become blurred, so the talent pool has become bigger and better. Researchers now need to develop models that can attract this global talent. An international talent attraction would mean acting as a global organization that embraces diversity, inclusion, and a level playing field for all.

Similarly, technological developments have further opened new opportunities for the talent to work in the Gig economy without keeping a permanent or long-term association with any organization. Platforms like Upwork, People per Hour, Guru, Freelancer, Fiverr, etc., have enabled talented people to work as freelance consultants. Companies are also now increasingly relying on these platforms to procure the services of individuals without committing them to any additional benefits such as healthcare, insurance, or other well-being initiatives. Under such circumstances, researchers need to understand how and under what circumstances organizations can win the war for talent or should they even fight this war anymore? The pandemic has further accelerated this work approach for both employees (now as freelancers) and employers (called as clients over the Gig economy). This also gives people a sense of being their boss and working in their time and place of choice, which is a significant motivating factor.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has also affected economies around the globe. Studies suggest that the US economy has dropped by over 35% and the Eurozone by an average of 12.1% (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). Because of this global situation, organizations had to freeze hiring and implement layoffs. Similarly, those who kept their jobs had to “face pay freezes, cancelled bonuses, and pay reductions (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021, p. 234). Under such circumstances, TM remains a challenge for all organizations despite its potential role (see Aguinis, 2019 for details). Hence, further studies are needed to explore the potential of TM in crises, as highlighted by Aguinis and Burgi-Tian (2021).

## **Conclusions**

In concluding this study, it is essential to point out that the study is vital for researchers as it adds an additional dimension to the existing limited literature that relates specifically to talent management (TM). The study, which is based on a literature review from various human resource publications, persuades readers and researchers to acknowledge that organizations that aim at optimizing human capital need to define TM broadly and diversely. It is suggested in the paper that three important TM selection categories/approaches are discussed and recommended for an organization that aspires to optimize the benefit of human capital. Firstly, organizations, in their quest for the selection of talent, ought to balance the need for egalitarian and elitist TM. Such an approach is inclusive in nature and undoubtedly helps organizations adopt effective HRM strategies. Such organizations are expected to be more dynamic and sustainable in their business operations. An organization that adopts a comprehensive/inclusive TM strategy will benefit from both high performance-focused culture and the well-being of their employees. Secondly, organizations may search for talent by focusing on innate abilities or acquired competencies during talent selection and identification. The authors of this study caution against the strategy of selection being solely based on a single selected factor. Our recommendation for organizations is to appreciate both approaches and to avoid discriminating one from the other or giving preference to one over the other. Finally, in evaluating talent, using time factors (past, present, and future), this research acknowledges that TM can be viewed based on the role and effectiveness of an individual observed in his/her past. However human resource management strategies may need to be cautious about overplaying the past to predict the future. The past performance of individuals should be identified by assessing future potential. For instance, Tansley and others (2007) explain that the identification of the talent of individuals should be evaluated based on his/her actual contributions at a given time (past and present) or/and should be supplemented by considering the potential to make a difference in an organization that seeks growth and dynamism in the longer-term. The latter ob-

jective requires the organization, in their selection, to approach TM be based on individuals' past/present "effectiveness/performance" but also by considering individuals' highest levels of potential. In the current global environment, which is full of uncertainty due to the current global political instability, fast technological changes, and outburst of epidemics, such as COVID-19, as well as the disruptive environmental changes, it makes the prediction about the future more challenging if not impossible. Hence, organizations in their search for selecting talent should be flexible and inclusive, as adopting one model or school of thought may always be risky in the dynamically changing future.

## Appendix

**Table A1. List of journals with number of published papers that included talent identification, talent definition, and/or talent conceptualization in their title, abstract or keywords**

Journal Name	Number of TM papers
<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	7
<i>Talent Development &amp; Excellence</i>	6
<i>Personnel Review</i>	6
<i>Industrial and Organizational Psychology</i>	4
<i>Employee Relations</i>	4
<i>Annals of Operations Research</i>	2
<i>European Journal of Training &amp; Development</i>	2
<i>Global Business &amp; Organizational Excellence</i>	2
<i>Human Resource Management</i>	2
<i>International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management</i>	2
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	2
<i>Journal of Management Development</i>	2
<i>Journal of World Business</i>	2
<i>Strategic HR Review</i>	2
<i>Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice &amp; Research</i>	1
<i>Agricultural Management</i>	1
<i>Annals of The University of Oradea, Economic Science Series</i>	1
<i>Annual International Conference on Enterprise Marketing &amp; Globalization</i>	1
<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources</i>	1
<i>Asian Academy of Management Journal</i>	1

<b>Journal Name</b>	<b>Number of TM papers</b>
<i>Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences</i>	1
<i>Career Development International</i>	1
<i>Educational Management Administration &amp; Leadership</i>	1
<i>European Management Review</i>	1
<i>Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal</i>	1
<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	1
<i>Global Business &amp; Management Research</i>	1
<i>HFM (Healthcare Financial Management)</i>	1
<i>Human Resource Development International</i>	1
<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>	1
<i>Human Resource Management Review</i>	1
<i>Intangible Capital</i>	1
<i>International Journal of Construction Management</i>	1
<i>International Journal of Economic Perspectives</i>	1
<i>International Journal of Productivity &amp; Performance Management</i>	1
<i>International Journal of Public Administration</i>	1
<i>International Journal of Training &amp; Development</i>	1
<i>Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business &amp; Government</i>	1
<i>Journal of Management Policy &amp; Practice</i>	1
<i>Managing Leisure</i>	1
<i>MIT Sloan Management Review</i>	1
<i>Organization Development Journal</i>	1
<i>Personality and Individual Differences</i>	1
<i>Polish Journal of Management Studies</i>	1
<i>Psychological Science</i>	1
<i>Research in Economics</i>	1
<i>Review of General Psychology</i>	2
<i>Scandinavian Journal of Management</i>	1
<i>Social Science Quarterly</i>	1
<i>Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia</i>	1
<i>Strategy &amp; Leadership</i>	1
<i>The Journal of Positive Psychology</i>	1
	84

Source: Business Source Complete and APA PsycInfo databases.



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