
Talent management: practical issues in implementation

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The term 'talent management' is clearly a big hit with HR people, but will the recent talent craze yield real business value? If talent management does help, it will do so by shifting our thinking and/or by helping us to act more effectively.

The term 'talent management' can act a useful reminder that all businesses need to:

- think about 'potential' – a positive, strengths-based way of approaching people
- focus on the future – talent management is, to a large extent, a re-named combination of workforce planning, succession, and career development. It emphasises investing in people over the medium term and for future roles. The language of talent 'pools' and 'pipelines' can help us think about which groups of people and jobs we need to plan for.
- attend to both individual and organisational desires in a balanced way, linked with ideas of the psychological contract and the employer brand
- integrate resourcing activities (recruitment, deployment and career movement) with development activities (leadership development, learning, coaching etc.)

These are all positive shifts in thinking, but the term 'talent management' is also problematic. There are at least three big 'buts' to the impact of talent management on our thinking:

But 1: the term 'talent management' has often been defined as a list of '~ings': attracting, retaining, developing. This has grown to include motivating, rewarding, measuring etc. If we are not careful we are simply renaming the whole of people management, which is irritating'. Sensible employees and managers might rightly ask 'isn't talent management just a new name for all the things HR has to help us do?'

But 2: the 'management' word in the phrase may be a delusion. We do not so much 'manage' talented people as get to know them, support them and negotiate with them to meet both business needs and their own preferences.

'The employee is less a malleable resource for the company and more a mobile investor of his or her own human capital.'

Gratton and Ghoshal (2003)

But 3: the most serious 'but' is that if we call some people 'talent' then a lot of others are 'not talent.' The recent CIPD research shows that employees and line managers are deeply concerned about being in, or managing, the 'not talent' pool. It is foolish in any

event to speak as though 'talent' is a single commodity – the question 'who is talent?' is simply not a sensible one without defining the broad kind of work and the development timeframe one is talking about.

So although the term 'talent management' can bring useful thoughts to mind, it can also arouse confusion and anxiety.

Acting more effectively

IES has observed five action areas which are often the weak spots in implementing an effective talent management strategy.

- **Talent management interventions should be clearly focused** on groups of jobs or people which, without pro-active attention, will put the business at risk. So the key first question is not 'who is talent?' but rather 'where does the business need to focus its talent management effort?' This may need to be on people with executive potential in early career, mid-career or near the top. It can also be on particular groups of jobs or people, defined by their level or function or geography. Sometimes individual critical posts may need attention. An organisation will often need several target areas for talent management activity. Such focussed interventions must complement active development of the whole workforce, not substitute for it.
- **Individuals need dialogue about their careers and development.** The conversation needs to be two-way and about future direction, not just a potential rating. Talent and succession processes need to be woven in with the normal processes for managing individual performance and development.
- **Managers need to act collectively in identifying and developing talent.** To do this they need a clear and regular choreography for their collective information-sharing, decision-making and action. Discussions between managers need to link up down through the organisation, reaching down into talent pipelines, and facilitating action across divisional and geographical boundaries.
- **People are developed through both career and skill development activities.** Active career development is essential to developing and deploying talent. 'Talent programmes' are too often just short bursts of skill training or coaching. Getting access to the right range of work experiences is the key to generating credible successors at any level.
- **HR needs to give sustained attention to supporting talent management,** including managing information, facilitating and training the line. Central teams need to help local business partners work with the business to identify and develop potential at lower levels and in early career.

So on the thinking side we need to hang onto ideas of the future, potential and pro-active development but maybe ditch the 'T' word. If this seems too radical, we should

at least always explain 'talent for what?' whenever the 'T' word is used. On the action side we need stronger alignment with real business needs; effective conversations between managers and with individuals; positive career development and sustained support from HR.

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