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TALENT MANAGEMENT CONTINGENCIES: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH RESULTS

Tomasz Ingram
University of Economics in Katowice, Poland
tomasz.ingram@gmail.com

Abstract:
Talent management gained significant research attention in previous 15 years. While lots of researches focused on the nature (composition, shape, timing, and other features) of talent management programs, there are few, if any studies dealing with talent management contingencies. The paper aims at exploring organizational level and external contingencies of talent management programs. Basic research questions are: what are organizational level and external contingencies of talent management and how do they influence talent management programs. After short theoretical background, author tries to answer posed questions on the basis of grounded theory research results carried on in 3 large (1000+ employees) companies located in Poland. Research results reveal there are numerous internal contingencies and four main external contingencies; the latter are of lesser importance. Study suggests that "best practice" approach characteristic for human resource management does not necessarily work well for talent management programs and that the same talent management programs may be differently effective in diverse organizational settings. Thus, the paper comprises of a call for contingency or configurational studies on talent management.

Keywords: talent management, grounded theory, empirical research results

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1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The end of XX and beginning of XXI century is a period of intensive and extensive technological development. The speed of new technology commercialization, sheer number of new products that arise every month highly exceed individual capabilities to follow and track them. However, they are not new technologies that dominated the management science in XXI century. In the era of information, paradoxically, they are employees' competencies that became the focus of researchers' attention (Ulrich, 1997). It is an employee, characterized by the set of competencies (understood as knowledge, skills, abilities and others – KSAO's (Motowidlo, 2003)), who create and maintain competitive advantage over competitors (Boxall & Steeneveld, 1999) and guarantees "the edge" to the company performance (Bloom & Milkovich, 1998). There are many approaches to managing the most valuable assets of a company, including human resource management (i.e.: Cunha & Cunha, 2004), human capital management (i.e.: Ployhart, Weekley & Baughman, 2006), personnel management (Storey, 1989), and other. However, within recent 15 years significant attention has been paid to the idea of capitalizing on competencies of the companies' best employees – talents (Bhattacharya & Sen Korschun, 2008; Garrow & Hirsch, 2008; Piansoongnern & Anurit, 2010; Ready & Conger, 2007; Tansley, Stewart, Turner & Lynette, 2006).

Within recent 15 years talent management has grown from unstructured phenomenon to the conception that is relatively well known and described in the literature (see: Berger & Berger, 2004; Borkowska, 2005; Garavan, Carbery, Rock, 2011; Pocztowski, 2008; Zheng, Soosay & Hyland, 2008). Although there are different premises of talent management, its focus remains mostly unchanged. It emphasizes special programs created for the purpose of employees' potential development (Ashton & Morton, 2005). The emphasis of talent management is on the process (Catlin & Matthews, 2002; Burke, 1996; Heinen & O'Neill, 2004) of developing exceptional employees (talents) (Lewis, 2004; Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod, 2001). While the focus is on the processual nature of talent management, relatively little attention has been paid to study its organizational level contingencies (Garavan, Carbery & Rock, 2011). Therefore, this study aims at filling this gap by trying to explore organizational level and external (for the organization) contingencies of talent management programs. There are two main research question of this paper: what are organizational level and external contingencies of talent management? And how do they influence the nature (understood as a form, timing, scope and other characteristics) of talent management programs? Hence, it concentrates rather on the organization level and external factors influencing programs/processes of talent management then on the talent management itself. In order to fulfil the aim and answer two abovementioned questions I will use grounded theory research methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This paper presents only a part of research results carried on in 3 companies, two of which are international and one is a large Polish company (all companies employed far more than 1000 employees in Poland each). At the time of research (2011-2012) one of them has just closed talent management program, one was continuing on using the program and numerous of its employees were engaged in it, and one was just preparing to introduce the idea into life. On the basis of grounded theory research of talent management programs in these three companies I formulate theoretical propositions, draw conclusions and prepare theoretical implications.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Is talent management "an old wine in new bottles"?

Most of talent management researchers agree that the beginning of talent management concept is the study of Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod (2001), however weak signals of growing importance of most valuable employees of a company can be observed in the literature much earlier (Derr, Jones & Toomey, 1988; Northcraft, Griffith & Shalley, 1992). The term "talent management" has become popular in late 90-ties, but "high potential employees" or simply "high potentials" were studied in management literature much earlier (i.e. Burke, 1996). Earlier ideas didn't become popular because of the wrong time they appeared at. Beginning of the twenty first century was characterized by high industrialization of China, and the need of exceptionally good workers became apparent at that time. Thus, the work of three practitioners (Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod, 2001) became the research trigger and started to attract more and more attention.

The theory in the beginning of XXIst century did not bring too many answers to the question how organization should effectively manage their talent pool. However, in recent years numerous

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publications on that topic began to appear (de Bettignies & Chemla, 2008; Frank & Taylor, 2004; Romans, Frost & Ford, 2006; Stahl, Bjorkman, Farndale, Morris, Paauwe, Stilles, Trevor & Wright, 2012). These publications concentrate on "best practices" and this tendency seems to come from predominant approach to human resource management (Ulrich, 1997). Rynes, Brown and Colbert (2002), Colbert (2004), as well as much earlier Delery and Doty (1996), in most influential management journals, have broadly criticised the "best practice" idea because of the inability of idiosyncratic practices to create and maintain competitive advantage (Lado, Boyd, Wright & Kroll, 2006). To summarize abovementioned it can be argued that the dominant talent management paradigm, based on "best practices" is built on unstable and dubious ontological, epistemological, and methodological background. The search for competitive edge through idiosyncratic capabilities cannot lead to anything better than brief (short) advantage over competitors who are creatively imitating actions. It also provokes another question, how different from known conceptions of managing employees within organization talent management actually is?

In order to answer the question literature review was performed. To be able to compare talent management models to conception of managing employees within organization two choices had to be made. First was about the object of comparison – I decided to compare talent management models to Michigan HRM model (Tichy, Fombrun & Devanna, 1982) as one of the most popular and comprehensive approaches to human resource management (most popular approach to people management in companies). The second was about choosing talent management models for comparison. I used Ebsco Host Database and located papers by searching for "talent management" in reviewed articles and scientific journals (except for Burke (1996) work, that was located searching for high potential employees). All located papers were analysed and these containing models (graphical representations) were included into review. The comparison of talent management models with Michigan Human Resource Management model (Tichy, Fombrun & Devanna, 1982) is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of chosen talent management models to Michigan HRM model

Talent management Model \ Elements of Michigan model	Ashton & Morton, 2005	Berger & Berger, 2004	Burke, 1996	Ensley & Ensley, 2011	Frank & Taylor, 2004	Heinen & O'Neill, 2004	Mucha, 2004	Romans & Frost, 2006	Oehley & Theron, 2010	Stahl et al., 2012
Internal contingencies	+/-	-	+/-	-	-	+/-	-	-	-	+
External contingencies	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+/-
Selection	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Assessment	-	+/-	+	+	-	+	-	+	+	+
Compensation	+	+/-	+/-	-	+/-	+	-	+	+	+
Development	+	+	+	+	+/-	+/-	+	+	+	+
Elements not enclosed in Michigan model	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+

Source: Self-prepared.
Legend:
+ - the element is included in the model;
- - the element is not included in the model;
+/- - the model refers to an element to some extent or the element is differently called.

The table 1 shows that authors, intentionally or unintentionally fail to differentiate significantly from one of the main HRM model. The analysis of talent management models also reveals that they are not teleological – while the Michigan model is. Models analysed above are structural, but these conceptions contain elements of a process embedded into structural frames and authors refer to processuality or project nature of talent management. They clearly refer to selection of best employees (i.e. Ashton & Morton, 2005), assessment of their performance (Burke, 1996). Models stress to

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compensate talents fairly (Oehley & Theron, 2010) and invest in their development (Mucha, 2004). Thus, they are highly utilitarian and practical in nature.

The talent management theory tries to develop its own, distinguished position in the management field (Garavan, Carbery & Rock, 2011; Reilly, 2008), but until theoretical models fail to strongly differentiate from HRM conceptions researchers attempts are doomed to failure.

2.2. Talent management contingencies: Factors that matter

Although a lot has been written on talent management few efforts has been done to present factors affecting these issues in organizations. Different authors present diverse sets of contingencies that shape talent management, but these factors are not a crucial aspect of their work. I will concentrate only on presented previously talent management models to illustrate how contingencies are presented and how their influence on talent management is explained. These contingencies will be identified in ten works (examined in previous part, presented in table 1).

Ashton and Morton (2004), in their conceptual model draw attention to several contingencies, among others: organizational climate (culture), values, leadership, structures, policies, processes, strategies and international environment. Although Authors present long list of factors, they just restrict to the statement that these contingencies influence talent management. The model itself is addressed rather to practitioners than researchers. Its operationalization would be hard because it was meant to be exhaustive. Stahl et al. (2012) presents similarly impressive list of contingencies. Their wheel of talent management, while concentrating on the definition of talent, emphasizes 5 factors influencing talent management practices. They are: organizational strategy, culture, manager involvement, organization brand (enlisted as branding activities) and balance between local and global needs. The sixth contingency is comprised by internal consistency of processes/practices that create talent management. Berger and Berger (2004), in turn, restrict to only one factor affecting talent management – all employees of the company. Such approach, in the light of Ashton and Morton (2004) conception, is scarce and not exhaustive. Burke (1996), within the model indicates two important contingencies: they are organizational strategy and leadership. Organizational strategy is also emphasized as the most influential contingency in Heinen and O'Neill (2004) study. Oehley and Theron (2010) list only one important factor, which is talent management mindset. Frank and Taylor (2004), Mucha (2004), Romans and Frost (2006) as well as Ensley and Ensley (2011) present their models either as processes, unaffected by organizational and environmental conditions or as a psychological construct (Ensley & Ensley, 2011). Table 2 summarizes literature review research results.

Table 2: Talent management internal and external contingencies

Talent management model	Internal contingencies	External contingencies
Ashton & Morton, 2005	Organizational climate, values, leadership, structures, policies, processes, strategy	International environment
Berger & Berger, 2004	All employees	-
Burke, 1996	Strategy, leadership	-
Heinen & O'Neill, 2004	Strategy	-
Oehley & Theron, 2010	Talent management mindset	-
Stahl, et al. 2012	Managers involvement, strategy, culture, brand, balance between local/global needs, internal consistency	-

Source: self-prepared.

Neither presented list is meant to be exhaustive, nor the literature review, thus it is only to illustrate how the extensive talent management literature approaches the issue of contingencies. Authors prefer to concentrate rather on the process or project itself, than factors that shape it. This tendency can be explained by: practical orientation of presented models and their practical roots and lack of carefully designed empirical studies on talent management. Presented models are difficult to operationalize and constructs used within them are hard to measure. While there is no solid theoretical background it is rational to use qualitative methods of research to explore the unexplored. In the next part of the paper methodology of research is explained.

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3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research procedure

In order to obtain the aim of the paper and answer research questions I will use a part of my empirical research results from the study carried on between September 2011 and November 2012 in three companies located in Poland (2 headquarters were located in Warsaw, 1 in Tychy). In that research project I used grounded theory approach as suggested and described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). I decided to study only large companies, since in such companies talent management programs may appear and work. The only criterion of differentiation of the companies was if the company has the talent management program (or not) and at what "stage" the program is. The basic question here was if the organization has the program functioning or the program has been just closed. I managed to locate three companies willing to participate in the program (they are characterized further in the text), among which one was preparing introduction of the talent management program (case 1), one had program introduced and working (case 2), one had just decided to close the program (1 year before the research) (case 3).

Talent management managers or high-level human resource managers were initially chosen as sources of information (additional information were gathered through company documents analysis). In the companies that had the program (case 2 & 3) respondents were talent management managers (and talent management teams members) and in a company that was preparing for the introduction of the program it was HRM Director and members of the HRM department.

In the first step I interviewed respondents asking open-ended questions (there were 13 open ended questions in the beginning of each interview), and they were constructed in such a manner not to suggest answers. Each interview lasted for 1,5-2 hours. Then interviews were transcribed and coded (using traditional coding methodology – transcription to word file, open coding followed by axial coding and category development). When the first step of research was finished additional questions arose, and next meetings, focused on problematic issues were set (and then the procedure of transcriptions and coding was repeated). Apart from formal meetings phone interviews, documents analyses, and e-mailing respondents were also used to gather deeper understanding (and theoretical saturation) of talent management issues. In total, over 200 pages of transcripts (and document pages) were gathered and became a background for the theory development.

The study was carried on in Polish language and presented as grant research report (it was financed by the Program of Development of Young Researchers). All the analyses were carried on in Polish language as well. For the purpose of this paper necessary research results and excerpts from the interviews were translated into English.

3.2. Participants characteristics

Due to space restrictions I will limit the amount of information on participants. These are basic information about companies that were sources of information.

Case 1. The company preparing for the introduction of talent management program
It was the smallest and the youngest of companies. The company is present for 12 years in Poland, the headquarter is located in Tychy, and operates in the field of loans and credits. It has more than 200 agencies all over Poland. It offers "fast" loans (given for a period of 1 week to 1 month as well as credits for consumption needs). Company employs 1500 employees and its structure is flat. Most problematic issue for the company is retaining employees – there is constant recruitment carrying on.

Case 2. The company that has the talent management program running
The company is one of the world leading producers of the FMCG branch. The company is well known all over the world and its roots are in XIX century. It gives a job to 3400 employees in Poland and has been perceived as one of the best employers in the market for many years now. The company has the talent management program for many years and offers its employees multiple advancement and development opportunities. The headquarter for Eastern Europe is located in Warsaw.
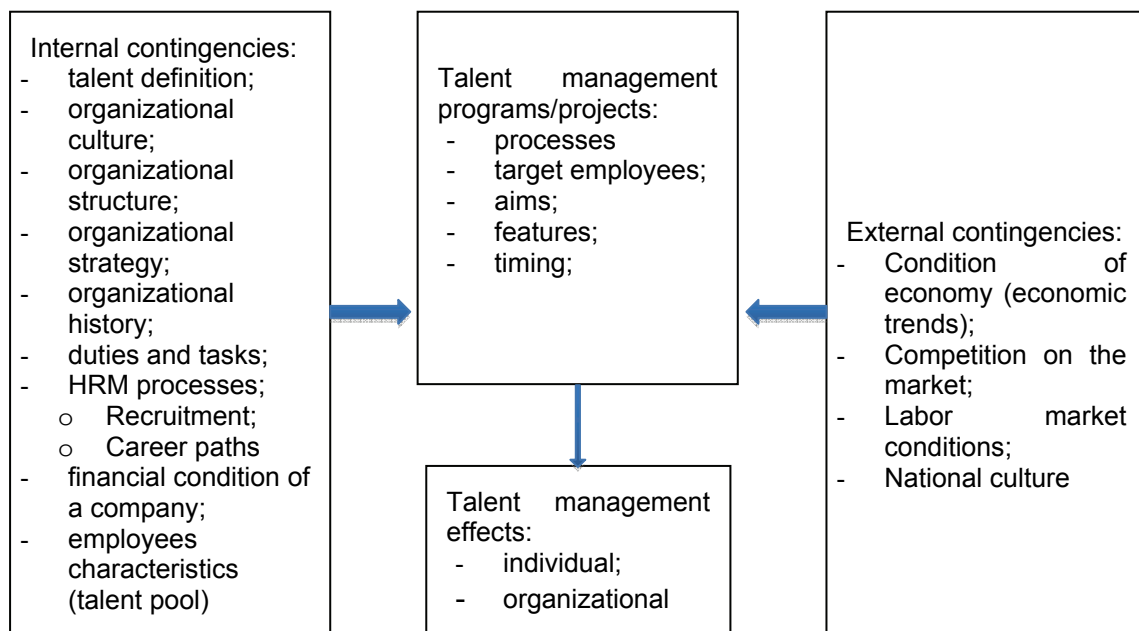*Case 3. The company that cancelled the talent management program*

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This world wide banking company started to operate in Polish market in 1990 and nowadays employs nearly 5.000 employees (in Poland). The headquarter is located in Warsaw (and some aspects are carried on in Cracow). The bank is considered one of the best employers in Poland and has a reputation of a premium one. All over the world it gives a job to over 100.000 employees. It cancelled the program because of financial aspects in 2011.

4.   RESEARCH RESULTS: TALENT MANAGEMENT AS CONTINGENT PHENOMENON

Talent management, according to respondents and statements embedded in organizational documents is a phenomenon highly affected by internal and external contingencies. Figure 1 presents talent management and its contingencies on the basis of carried research results.

Picture 1: Talent management as contingent phenomenon

| Internal contingencies: |
| - talent definition; |
| - organizational culture; |
| - organizational structure; |
| - organizational strategy; |
| - organizational history; |
| - duties and tasks; |
| - HRM processes; |
| ○ Recruitment; |
| ○ Career paths |
| - financial condition of a company; |
| - employees characteristics (talent pool) |

Talent management programs/projects:
- processes
- target employees;
- aims;
- features;
- timing;

Talent management effects:
- individual;
- organizational

External contingencies:
- Condition of economy (economic trends);
- Competition on the market;
- Labor market conditions;
- National culture

Source: self-prepared on the basis of empirical research.

Talent management, characterized by respondents by referring to processes – or modules (identification, recruitment and selection, training, lateral transfers, assessment of performance and communication), target employees, aims, features and timing generates both individual and organizational effects. However, since it is not the scope of the paper to develop this part of a model, I focus on internal and external contingencies. Both of these types of contingencies strongly influence the way talent management programs work in organizations. It is further developed and explained in the next part of the text.

4.1.   Internal and external contingencies

The most important internal contingency is talent definition. Its importance is reported by Respondent 1 (Case 1). He says what follows:
"(…) firstly, I really liked the question about the definition of a talent. It is very funny, because I never started with such conception that we are to define it. As far as I understand, its not about definition who is talented and who is not, but who we do perceive as talented. Who will be talented and how we are going to know it (…)"
And respondent 2 (case 2) says further:
"(…) this is a very interesting observation. We should be able to tell who is and who is not a talent (…). High potential employee, thus (…) we got such an evaluation method that is called leadership development tool. There are nine boxes, matrix, that help us to assess if a person behaves as a talent, and how well does he or she perform his or her job, considering competencies and results (…)"

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All respondents underlined the necessity of defining talents accurately and considered it as a key aspect. Apart from this issue the second factor influencing talent management were employees and talent management pool – quantities and qualities of employees that could be defined as talents. Since it is strictly connected to the previous issue, it confirms the role of talent definition. Third element highly influencing talent management is history and time. It is perceived broadly, both as an experience flowing from the history, and previous programs records (case 3).

"(…) if we say about a fit, how we choose the right person, we knew, in next editions (2nd and further) of talent management programs, that it is going to be intensive and engaging. Talents engaged in a program told us, during the program, "you told me it is going to be tough. And it is". We knew that having too many aims does not make sense. In a certain point of time we started to discourage people through informing so that only these, who can pass it, took a part in a program (…)"

According to respondents not only the history, but also the age of the organization, and cultural issues influence the way talent management looks like in organization (respondent 2):
"we got different programs dealing with taking young people, just after graduation, and advancing them in a blink of an eye to managerial positions. Not in all cultures in world it works. Even here, in Poland, it is perceived bad, not to mention Japan – when you have grey hair, you are considered worthy manager (…)"

Apart from culture, strategy and structure influence talent management programs as well. It is broadly discussed by respondents 2 and 3 respectively:
"(…) if we look at 50+ employees, there are only several such managers here now. And it results from two things. The strategy of the company was to employ lots of young people at the beginning (…)"
"(…)there are three things that influence talent management programs: they are a business strategy, we got a clear aim, and this is a long term aim, and we exactly know what we want (…)".
Similarly to organizational strategy, structure influences the way talent management functions. While it is not as clear in respondents statements, however the division of talents into groups depending on organizational level, is an evidence of the relationship between organizational structure and talent management programs (respondent 2)
"(…) I would say, on every level of management there is a group of talents. They are called high potentials. Since this organization is based on work levels, there is a managerial 2nd level, director 3rd level and vice president 4th level. (…) we always search for (successors) a level below, that means, if we look for future managers, we start searching on the level of specialists (level 1st).(…)"

Apart from these issues also tasks and duties and influential groups within the organization (TMT, groups of managers, etc.), and among others, human resource management, by recruitment and promotion activities, change the nature of talent management. The last, and possibly the most influential contingency of talent management is financial performance and perceived performance of previous talent management program editions (respondent 3).

"(…) currently the program does not run, and the most probable reason for suspending it are costs. It is not the matter of lack of talented people (tears in respondents' eyes), the reason may be in changes at the level of headquarter that arouse the revolt. There is a lack of visible career possibilities, however they can appear in every single moment (…)".

Among the exogenous factors influencing respondents focus on labor market conditions and competition (that is buying best employees offering them better financial conditions) (respondent 3):
(…) among the people, that took part in talent management programs only several left the organization for better positions in other banks. Employees who stayed with us are at managerial or higher positions right now. (…)"

The next issue that gathers significant attention comprises of cultural aspects. It is observable in case 2, where respondents clearly declares:
(…) such strong promotion of younger people does not work well on every labor markets, while demography is different and different people come to work for us. This is a very negative side of all global programs, within which we don't have too much of a freedom to adjust it to local conditions. Such programs are adjusted to organizational culture as a culture that company is willing to have, not to local cultural characteristics (…)."

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To summarize all the above stated, despite numerous endogenous contingencies there are also exogenous contingencies that, to some extent, moderate the way talent management programs look like. However, exogenous factors are lesser important, according to respondents. It results from the very delicate, subtle nature of talent management.

5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of presented research results at least three propositions may be posed. They relate directly to previous works on talent management, especially these disregarding the influence of contingencies on projects (i.e. Ensley & Ensley, 2011; Romans, Frost & Ford 2006):
Proposition 1: Internal and external contingencies modify talent management processes, target employee group, program aims, program features, and timing, changing the nature of talent management within the organization.

This proposition leads to the statement that un-contextualized talent management studies carried on by different authors lack significant part that might explain programs' effectiveness or the lack of it.

Proposition 2: Internal influences, due to subtle nature of talent management (organization based), will impact talent management processes, target employee group, program aims, program features, and timing, much stronger than external contingencies.

Stronger pressure should be put on researching internal contingencies, since they modify talent management programs to higher extent. Thus, especially age/history related, strategic and cultural contingencies should be considered when preparing research projects. Apart from this, also significant attention should be paid to the way organizations understand and define talent.

Proposition 3: The relation between talent management programs and its effect is moderated by internal and external contingencies.

The third proposition suggests that two similar talent management programs can be differently successful in different organizational settings. Thus, there should be nothing like best practices in talent management. It supports Colbert (2004) and Delery and Doty (1996) theoretical papers. Talent management, as relatively new approach to dealing with people will most likely attract further attention. In the light of this study further researches should be organized following configurational approach indications.

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