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## Talent management: a systematic review and future prospects

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### Anthony McDonnell\*

Queen's Management School,  
Queen's University Belfast,  
185 Stranmillis Road,  
Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK  
Email: a.mcdonnell@qub.ac.uk  
\*Corresponding author

### David G. Collings

Dublin City University Business School,  
Dublin City University,  
Dublin 9, Ireland  
Email: david.collings@dcu.ie

### Kamel Mellahi

Warwick Business School,  
The University of Warwick,  
Coventry, UK  
Email: Kamel.Mellahi@wbs.ac.uk

### Randall Schuler

School of Management and Labor Relations,  
Rutgers University,  
Piscataway, New Jersey, USA  
Email: schuler@smlr.rutgers.edu

**Abstract:** This paper employs a systematic and comprehensive review to trace the evolution of talent management scholarship and propose a research agenda to move the field forward. Two primary streams of literature dominate: the management of high performers and high potentials, and the identification of strategic positions and talent management systems. The topic of global talent management has received significant attention; however, much of this literature tends to incorporate the two streams heretofore identified but on a global scale. The review also demonstrates that there has been limited attention placed on individual talents as the unit of analysis. Early criticisms of the disjointed nature of the field remain and we call for greater clarity around the conceptual boundaries of talent management. Our analysis highlights that most papers draw, to some extent, on primary research. There is however considerable need and scope for more comprehensive and nuanced methodological approaches.

**Keywords:** talent management; literature review; high potential; global; HRM; stars.

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**Biographical notes:** Anthony McDonnell is Reader in Management at Queen's Management School, Queen's University Belfast, and Adjunct Senior Research Fellow, University of South Australia. He is (Joint) Editor-in-Chief of *Human Resource Management Journal*. His primary research interest is on the HRM and employment relations practices of multinational companies across different host contexts, and talent management.

David G. Collings is Professor of Human Resource Management at Dublin City University. He is also a Visiting Professor of HRM at King's College London. He is the Editor (joint) of the *Human Resource Management Journal* and permanent Chair of the EIASM workshop on talent management. His research focuses on the management of human resources with a particular focus on talent management and global mobility issues.

Kamel Mellahi is Professor of Strategic Management at Warwick Business School. His current primary research interests lie in the areas of corporate political strategy, strategic talent management, and business strategies in emerging markets. He has published over 70 scholarly articles on these, and other, topics in leading journals including *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Strategic Management Journal*, and many others.

Randall Schuler is Distinguished Professor of Strategic International Human Resource Management and Human Resource Management Strategy and Past Director of the Masters in HRM Program. He is also a Visiting Fellow at Lancaster University Management School. He has authored or edited over 50 books and published over 150 articles in professional journals and academic proceedings.

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## 1 Introduction

Almost two decades have elapsed since studies specifically focused on talent management (TM) first appeared in management literature. During this time, TM has become a topic of considerable debate in the academic literature and a central element of managerial discourse and organisational practice (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2007; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Groysberg, 2010; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; McDonnell, 2011). Special issues have been commissioned by a range of journals on European (Collings et al., 2011), Asia-Pacific (McDonnell et al., 2012) and Global Talent Management (GTM) (Scullion et al., 2010) topics. Its growing significance appears premised on the assumption that superior TM is a key source of competitive advantage. This coupled with changes in worldwide demographics that have reportedly led to talent supply issues, have been key driving forces of interest in TM (Tarique and Schuler, 2010).

In view of the escalating interest in the topic, a comprehensive and systematic critical review of scholarship is timely and appropriate in order to allow us to analyse the state of the field. A systematic review retrieves, appraises and summarises all the available evidence on a specific topic of enquiry. If a review is not systematic there is an increased danger of bias whereby the author(s) have greater scope to select papers that are more supportive of his/her viewpoint. While there have been reviews that have significantly assisted researchers, these have been strongly focused on practitioner-oriented journals (Lewis and Heckman, 2006) or on a specific segment of the literature (e.g. Tarique and Schuler's [2010] GTM review). These papers were, however, neither systematic nor comprehensive in reviewing the wider field. While finalising this paper, we became aware of a welcome and useful piece by Thunnissen et al. (2013). This appears to be the most encompassing review thus far but the paper excluded at least one significant area in that they 'limited the number of publications on global talent management' (p.1746). We did not seek to delimit or pre-empt the potential scope of what could emerge in the review so as to allow us discern the current state of scholarship in more acute detail than previously undertaken. In other words, our endeavour allows us to grasp more comprehensively the state of the field. Of particular interest is exploring how far this field has developed and whether suggestions of it being overly US-based and non-empirically derived stand tall post a systematic analysis (Collings et al., 2011).

The objective of this paper is to conduct a systematic review of peer refereed, published research investigating TM issues. In so doing, the paper captures the breadth of research that has been published on the topic of TM, identifies the key themes and debates in this literature, and highlights impediments to progress in the field. Furthermore, we identify some of the most critical directions for future research enquiry. The paper provides insights into those approaches that have been used to date in exploring TM and further those theories and methods that present the best opportunities for building the theoretical and empirical foundations of the field. Consequently, this paper represents a valuable addition in synthesising this important, and quickly expanding, literature base and providing a more coordinated, coherent roadmap for researchers in developing TM research agendas.

Drawing from high quality, refereed journals the review provided for a total of 88 papers all of which were published between 1998 (the year in which the 'war for talent' term was coined) and May 2013 (the search date). This incorporates a larger range of published works than other reviews although it is important to note that different search criteria were used. For example, Thunnissen et al.'s (2013) review drew on 62 papers, of which 43 were refereed journal articles with 19 conference papers, dissertations, books or book chapters. Therefore, our review doubled the number of refereed articles. Our analysis was initially focused on obtaining an understanding of the range of publications in terms of where research is published, the focus or themes of papers, the methods used (empirical or conceptual), the contexts that have been covered and the key findings that emanated. After summarising the literature, we move to discussing some key gaps that we feel are significant and seek to kick-start research-informed discussion and debate in these areas. The papers encompassed in our review are marked by an asterisk in the references list and a summary of the aims, literature, underlying theories methodology and key findings of the papers are provided in Tables 2–4. A detailed exposition of the methodological procedures adopted in the systematic review can be found in the Appendix.

## 2 The growing importance of talent management

The emergence of TM is a relatively well-trodden discussion in the literature with many ascribing its rise to the McKinsey Group tabling the war for talent agenda (Chambers et al., 1998). McKinsey expressed great concern about the supply of human talent, the most valuable corporate resource, with pressing issues faced by organisations in the attraction and retention of key staff. Since then, there has been a wave of consultancy reports that talk up talent shortages and which place strong emphasis on the role of talent management in organisational success. For example, a survey of 418 international executives found that eight in ten viewed an effective talent management strategy as key to competitive success, with more than half of these reporting that it would become more strategically important in future years (KPMG, 2012).

The supply concerns are strongly premised around the changing nature of demographics which includes an ageing workforce and falling birth rates in many developed economies. These reasons coupled with the continued onset of globalisation and rise of the 'knowledge worker' (Guthridge et al., 2008) are all central factors in the emergence of talent management. The increasing internationalisation of small to medium-sized enterprises further increases the competition for talent, particularly for individuals with global business acumen (Tarique and Schuler, 2010). With global mobility seemingly at levels not previously witnessed the working populations tend to be increasingly diverse which raises many opportunities, alongside challenges in being able to effectively attract, manage and retain individuals. When this is combined with the range of generations that now exist in the workforce, doubts are very much evident around whether traditional people management approaches will prove effective in the long run.

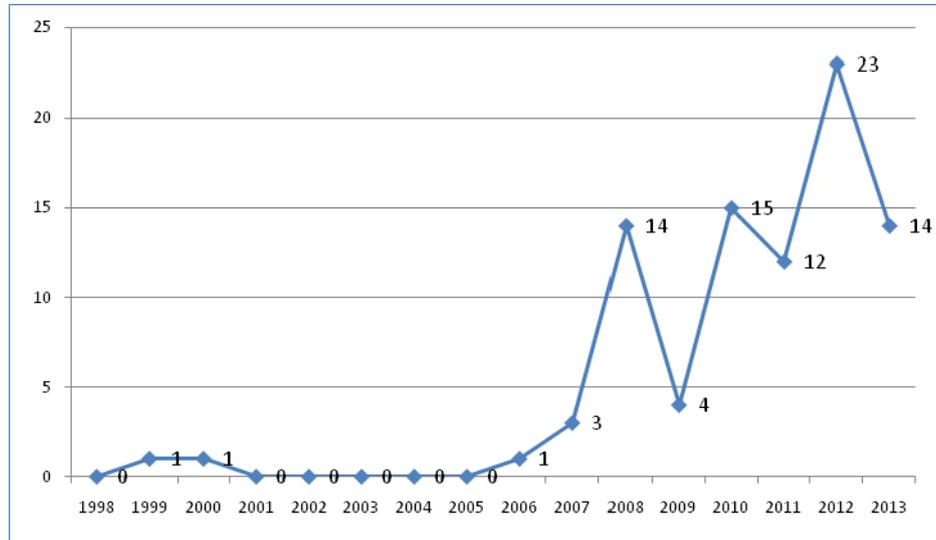
In summary, there are a range of macro- and micro-factors that have led to the emergence of, and which are likely to remain for some time, TM as an area of interest and importance to both practitioners and the academic community. We now turn to the findings of the systematic review performed.

## 3 Findings

### 3.1 A publication explosion

Figure 1 vividly illustrates how TM scholarship has exploded over the past six years. Our analysis clearly demonstrates that 82 papers (93%) were published post 2008. In other words, there were a mere six refereed journal articles on the topic of TM between 1998 and 2008. This impressive growth trajectory does not appear to be slowing down as there were 14 papers published on the topic in the first five months of 2013. The field is therefore best characterised as one of recent vintage. In time we will learn if this is a sustainable level of scholarship. It is likely that a time will come as the field becomes more advanced that a plateau will be reached in terms of the development of new insights.

The overwhelming majority of papers were multiple authored pieces with the mean being 2.38 authors. Overall, 69 papers had more than one author meaning that 22% were sole-authored. The mean value for the number of authors in 2008 was 1.86, increasing to 2.8 in 2010 but then fell to 1.59 in 2011 before rising to 2.61 in 2012.

**Figure 1** Number of published articles per year\* (see online version for colours)

Note:  $N = 87$ .

\* 2013 figure to the end of May 2013.

*The International Journal of Human Resource Management* (15 papers), *Journal of World Business* (nine papers) and *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* (eight papers) were the three most popular publishing outlets. The prevalence of journal special issues is noteworthy. In the review period, there have been special issues of the *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources* (McDonnell et al., 2012), *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* (D'Annunzio-Green et al., 2008), *International Journal of Human Resource Management* (Vaiman and Collings, 2013), and the *Journal of World Business* (Scullion et al., 2010). We are also aware, at the time of writing this paper, of three additional special journal issue call for papers in circulation or which have just been published. The use of special issues can therefore be argued as having a disproportionate impact on TM scholarship in that if the special issues are removed, the quantity of papers is significantly reduced. Specifically, we found that 31 out of the 88 papers (35%) were accounted for by the four special issues identified earlier. These papers are highly cited with eight of the nine papers in the *Journal of World Business* 2010 special issue in the top 25 most cited papers of that journal (based on Scopus data since 2009). In some of these issues, the guest editors authored more than one paper. The impact of special issues in the long run may be something worthy of consideration and debate among scholars in the field.

The review illustrated that a wide array of academic outlets have been used for dissemination. 41 (or 47%) of the papers were published in what can be described as HRM-focused journals. International business (primarily the *Journal of World Business*) appears as an especially important area in terms of publication outputs in the area (see Table 1). The variety of journals that have published articles demonstrates the widespread interest and applicability of the concept and points towards the evolution of the field of TM at the intersection of HRM, strategy, international business and other related fields.

**Table 1** List of journals with number of published talent management papers

<i>Journal Name</i>	<i>Number of TM papers</i>
<i>The International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	15
<i>Journal of World Business</i>	9
<i>International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management</i>	8
<i>Harvard Business Review</i>	6
<i>Human Resource Development International</i>	6
<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources</i>	5
<i>Human Resource Management</i>	4
<i>MIT Sloan Management Review</i>	4
<i>Advances in Developing Human Resources</i>	3
<i>Personnel Review</i>	3
Journals published two TM papers: <i>Human Resource Management Review</i> , <i>Journal of Business Strategy</i> , <i>Journal of Knowledge Management</i> , <i>Organizational Dynamics</i>	
Journals published one TM paper: <i>Business Ethics: A European Review</i> , <i>Business Strategy Review</i> , <i>Employee Relations</i> , <i>European Management Journal</i> , <i>Health Care Management Review</i> , <i>Human Resource Management Journal</i> , <i>International Business Review</i> , <i>International Journal of Logistics: Research and Applications</i> , <i>Journal of Business and Psychology</i> , <i>Journal of International Management</i> , <i>Journal of Manufacturing Technology Management</i> , <i>Journal of Service Management</i> , <i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i> , <i>Leadership and Organization Development Journal</i> , <i>Public Money and Management</i> , <i>Scandinavian Journal of Management</i> , <i>Thunderbird International Business Review</i>	

### 3.2 Empirically light or heavy?

The majority of papers draw on some form of empirical evidence. In other words, it is not conceptual/theoretical/review type papers which are the most prevalent. This finding is noteworthy because it is in contrast to suggestions made by scholars that empirical enquiry on TM is particularly uncommon (e.g. Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Lewis and Heckman, 2006). Such conclusions may relate to the fact that most of the papers have been published since 2007/2008 meaning they were published after earlier conclusions had been drawn on the level of empirical work. However, the recent review article by Thunnissen et al. (2013, p.1748) also suggested that empirical papers were in the minority: 'one-third of the articles in our literature study presents the results of empirical research'. The finding that close on six in every ten papers possess some empirical component may demonstrate the benefit and need for systematic and comprehensive reviews to more accurately depict the state of fields of research.

The percentage of works classified as empirical would have been higher if we had included many of the *Harvard Business Review* and *Sloan Management Review* papers which tend to draw on examples from industry but fail to provide any details on the methodology behind the paper (e.g. Cappelli, 2000; Cappelli, 2008; Erickson and Gratton, 2007). Consequently, papers were excluded that pointed to practise or some level of data but which did not provide some information on the methods used.

Methodologically, approximately 20% of empirical papers were found to utilise a mixed methods approach, consisting of both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Moreover, 42% of empirical papers drew solely on quantitative data and if we combine

the mixed method papers that had a quantitative element we find that 56% of all empirically based papers drew upon quantitative data. There was, therefore, a slightly higher proportional use of quantitative data. Given the recent nature of the field, it may be somewhat surprising that there wasn't a greater use of qualitative data. The reported response rates in the quantitative papers ranged from 5.6% to 100%, while 11 papers did not report a response rate. Thus, there is a significant variation in response rates and the number of papers that fail to report this figure could be viewed as disappointing and concerning. There was significant use of case study investigations which tended to be based on single cases (nine papers). There also appeared to be papers where TM is used as a framing exercise post data collection rather than being a study set up to specifically explore particular aspects of TM. This is particularly the case where papers adopt a perspective that TM is a collection of typical HRM practices.

The evidence supports the conclusion of Thunnissen et al. (2013) that TM scholarship is overly unitarist and managerialist in orientation. Study participants are most commonly from the management (typically senior HR personnel or the top management team) viewpoint. There are few studies which have incorporated the actual 'talents', i.e. those individuals whom are classified by the organisation as talent or the 'untalented'.

The increasing influence of the Asian context was apparent as it was the region most commonly focused in current empirical efforts. Of the 50 empirical papers, 14 are based on Asian countries, with a particular focus on China and India. Perhaps surprisingly, only six were based on the US context although there were papers that focused on US multinational corporations (MNCs) but which were not necessarily based on the home context. In some of these cases it was difficult to determine a very accurate picture of where the research was undertaken. Our analysis on the context in which primary research was undertaken stands in contrast to the posited dominance of North American scholarship in the evolution of TM. Yes, there is a strong body of US affiliated scholars publishing in the field but again they do not appear in the majority as there appears to be a strong network of scholars operating, in particular, across a range of European countries.<sup>1</sup> It is also very evident that the overwhelming focus has been on larger, private sector organisations with MNCs being a central focus. Little consideration has been given to the small to medium-sized enterprise sector, while the public sector is almost non-existent in the reviewed papers.

Overall, our review of the methods used and the empirical papers suggest that the empirical settings and data collection methods and analysis are in need of significant improvement. While not seeking to downplay the value of the rich and informative research undertaken, it is quite apparent that small scale studies based on convenience sampling dominate. Thus, there is considerable scope for more comprehensive research designs to be adopted.

#### **4 Themes and intellectual origins of talent management**

A particularly disconcerting observation emerging from the review was the high number of papers that lack a clearly specified theoretical foundation to frame their empirical efforts. Less than 30% of papers used, most of them superficially, a theoretical framework to tackle their research question. In addition to lack of sound theoretical underpinnings, it is also clear that the field of TM is highly fragmented. Theoretical framing of TM ranged from Resource-Based View (RBV) (five papers), social exchange

and dependency theory (two papers), institutional theory (three papers), learning theory (two papers), and brand equity and signalling theory (one paper). Like other business and management concepts/practices that have evolved along a similar path, TM continues to search for sound theoretical underpinnings. The lack of theoretical cohesion in the TM literature makes it extremely difficult to discern an overarching grand theory to guide research in the area. It is very apparent that there is considerable scope for greater theorisation and conceptualisation in the field. A key constraint on the development of such a grand theory appears to be a lack of conceptual boundaries as to what TM actually encompasses (and does not). The lack of a unifying theoretical paradigm is therefore understandable given the different fundamental questions examined by scholars. For instance, papers that examine the association between TM and competitive advantage tend to draw on RBV, while papers that look at recruitment and retention of talented individuals draw on social exchange and dependency theory.

In line with Thunnissen et al. (2013) and Lewis and Heckman (2006) we find that one of the most dominant themes of publications is around how TM is defined. This has been the subject of review articles and conceptual papers, and some empirical work (e.g. Jones et al., 2012). Although there was strong evidence to suggest that the field is hampered by the lack of an agreed definition of TM, owing to a lack of space we do not engage in a case-by-case analysis of each definition that has been proposed by researchers. Rather, we focus more on the classification of the literature approaches. It remains apparent almost a decade on from the pioneering paper of Lewis and Heckman (2006) that the TM literature can be broadly classified into two categories: *management* of talent focusing on how organisations attract, recruit, retain and reward high performers, and the *talented* individuals focusing on what constitutes talent and behaviour of talented individuals. In the following section we discuss the papers that are subsumed under these two categories. We also separate articles that encompass GTM (see Table 4) which overwhelmingly focuses on how MNCs attract, recruit, retain and reward high performing and high potential employees. Thus, there is very much a crossover with the aforementioned themes but given that there appears to be a distinct body of scholars working under the umbrella of GTM we felt it was appropriate to separate these papers. While the focus was typically on the management of talent from the managerial perspective there have been a select few, more recent, papers that consider the individual talents within the MNC context (e.g. Bjorkman et al., 2013).

Before we proceed to this discussion in detail it is important to note that a small, yet growing number of papers, or part therein, challenge the distinctiveness of the concept of TM from earlier conceptualisations of HRM. This body of literature views TM as essentially the same as HRM. Thus, TM amounts to little more than rebranding. The repackaging view argues that TM engages in the same activities as HRM – recruitment, selection, development, retention and ensuring the supply and demand for people is managed effectively – and it does not embody any novel ideas for HRM scholars (see Iles et al. [2010a] and Preece et al. [2011] for a discussion). This line of argument often draws on Abrahamson's (1996) thesis of fads and fashions to explain why and how TM has caught on in recent years. Iles et al. (2010b) based on a small number of case studies of MNCs in China found examples of TM being essentially similar to HRM with key similarities being that both involved the same functional areas of people management, both emphasised integration with corporate strategy and the recognition of how important role allocation was. The differences were essentially that HRM had a somewhat broader scope and that HRM promoted egalitarianism, whereas TM emphasised segmentation

because of its focus on a specific, i.e. talented, pool of the workforce. Similarly, Macfarlane et al.'s (2012) study of a public sector organisation equated TM to 'leadership'. Jones et al. (2012), drawing on a convenience sample representing a range of sectors, found different spectrums of thought on TM varying from where it was little more than traditional HRM to where there was a more strategic, systems-level approach. Even where seemingly more strategic, TM in practice, they argued, tended to be 'ad hoc, unstructured and fragmented' (Jones et al., 2012, p.399).

Several papers have discussed the gaps between rhetoric and practice of TM (e.g. Cappelli, 2008). The idea of TM being merely rhetorical can be linked to the initial perspective highlighted by Lewis and Heckman (2006) in that there may be lots of discussion about TM but it is not necessarily something particularly different. Iles et al. (2010b) found that rhetorical obfuscation was a vital strategy in hiding the limited legitimacy of TM, in addition to institutionalising it within organisations. The key ingredients of this obfuscation were using credible language to selectively set out the company's agenda so as to gain the right sort of commitment and behaviour from key stakeholders. We now turn to the main categories of TM scholarship which emerged from the review.

## **5 Management of talent**

The majority of the reviewed scholarship focuses on the *management* of talent and its implication for the identification, management, development and retention of talented individuals and organisational outcomes. In line with earlier work we classify this literature as considering three distinct approaches.

### *5.1 Managing high performers and high potentials*

The first approach focuses on the management of high performing staff regardless of their position in the organisation. This view promotes the classification of individuals by their performance and advocates, sometimes implicitly, that all roles should be filled with 'A performers/players' and that 'C players', or consistently poor performers, should be managed out of the organisation (Michaels et al., 2001). This perspective views talent as an unqualified positive resource that should be managed according to performance levels, hence the emphasis on forced performance distribution. This approach was premised on differentiating performance among employees and was popularised by Jack Welch at GE (Michaels et al., 2001). This approach prioritises the recruitment, retention and differential compensation of top performers regardless of the particular role or on occasion specific organisational requirements (Lewis and Heckman, 2006). Schuler et al. (2011, p.507) surmise that the major focus of this work was on 'corporations obtaining and managing a sufficient number of highly talented individuals (... including high level executives, those with high managerial potential, and those with rare technical skills) to deal with the challenge of the global talent shortage'. A key focus of this literature is on defining and effectively measuring high performance.

**Table 2** Summary of articles focusing on the management of talent

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Barnett and Davis (2008)	Considers how succession planning can be made more successful in assisting organisations increase performance outcomes	–	No empirical data	Proposes a five-step process to facilitate improved succession planning consisting of preliminary planning, preparing for succession planning & talent review, the talent review meeting, providing feedback & facilitating developmental action planning, & measuring effectiveness
Barron (2008)	Examines how best to attract & retain talented people in hospitality education & hospitality industry	–	No empirical data	Argues that education providers need to be more cognisant of reducing the practical & vocational elements of hospitality programs. The industry needs to look at improving its image as viewed by the potential job seeker
Baum (2008)	Discusses the key features & developments of tourism & hospitality labour markets & their impact on TM	–	No empirical data	Proposes three scenarios for TM which are inclusive, developmental & aligned with a firm's external environment: (1) blue environment: strongly aligned with executive talent, where technical & leadership talent are readily identifiable; (2) green environment: related to the welfare state where the firm seeks to meet individual needs; and (3) orange environment: apt to hospitality & tourism where TM is inclusive with staff engaged at all levels & functions
Bhatnagar (2007)	Investigates how TM is related to employee engagement	Resource-based view	272 employee questionnaires from four business process outsourcing firms in India (78% response rate), along with focus groups of 30 male team managers, project heads, technical heads followed up with 72 exit interviews within one of the four organisations	Low engagement found at the beginning of an employee's career & after 16 months with the organisation which were linked to high attrition. High engagement found at intermediate employment levels which reflected in higher loyalty for a limited time. Dissatisfaction with career paths & incentive schemes were linked to higher attrition

**Table 2** Summary of articles focusing on the management of talent (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Bhattacharya et al. (2008)	Discusses the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in effective TM	–	In-depth interviews & eight focus groups (five to eight people) with staff of a major consumer goods firm. The focus groups involved participants at the US HQ, manufacturing operation, sales office & a non-US operation. Two online surveys gaining 481 employee responses from ten manufacturing, retail & service sector organisations also took place (no response rate provided)	CSR can be a useful internal marketing level for TM but CSR strategies need to be set on a clearly articulated & contingent input–output perspective. These strategies need to be co-created & ideally enacted by employees, in addition to meeting employee needs
Bird et al. (2010)	Explains how firms can take immediate steps to build the right teams & can lay the foundations for a long-term effective TM approach	–	No empirical data	Organisations need to quantify their leadership gap, deploy their existing talent more effectively & reduce their talent demand as the first three steps to building a talent-rich firm
Cappelli (2000)	Argues that firms need to focus on a more market-oriented approach to talent retention	–	Draws on examples from companies but there were no details provided on the methodology	Traditional retention strategies are no longer suitable. Retention practices should be customised according to how important it is to retain particular employees. Approaches to compensation, job design, job customisation, social ties, location and hiring practices all need to be considered with a different emphasis depending on supply and demand
Cappelli (2008)	Discusses TM in the context of being effective in the 21st century	–	Draws on examples from companies but there were no details provided on the methodology	Argues that firms can borrow lessons from operations and supply chain management research to develop a more effective TM model
Chabault et al. (2012)	Identifies good TM practices that are being used in French clusters & highlight the benefits of inter-organisation TM as well as the challenges in doing so	–	No empirical data	Argues that management of talent between organisations is fundamental for successful clusters. However, as competition increases within these clusters talent remain a resource to be fought over. Suggests that firms in the clusters need to change their culture to focus more on the retention of knowledge rather than retention of individual talents
Chadde and Raman (2012)	Investigates the role of TM on the performance of knowledge-intensive organisations	–	68 online questionnaires (8% response rate) from executives in Indian-based offshore IT service providers (OSPs)	External knowledge & TM have positive impacts on performance of OSPs. TM mediates the effects of knowledge on performance by acting as a mechanism through which knowledge is transformed into performance

**Table 2** Summary of articles focusing on the management of talent (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Collings and Mellahi (2009)	Seeks to define TM and develop a conceptual model of strategic TM	AMO framework, HR architecture literature	No empirical data	Develops a conceptual model of strategic TM incorporating the identification of pivotal positions, developing talent pools & differentiated HR architectures for the talent pools
Deery (2008)	Examines the literature on retaining talent and the role work–life balance has on turnover intentions and the implications for TM	–	No empirical data	The hospitality management literature is strongly focused on the role of job attitudes (e.g. job satisfaction & company commitment), personal attributes such as positive and negative affectivity, and the role of work–life balance in alleviating high turnover
D'Annunzio-Green (2008)	Examines managerial views on what TM is, how it's operationalised & how it contributes to business success	–	Interviews with senior managers in the tourism & hospitality industry	Great enthusiasm for TM & perceptions of how it's important to the business. There is a commitment to TM with particular concern expressed over development & retention of talent rather than attraction
De Vos and Dries (2013)	Examines how the composition of the workforce in terms of their strategic value & uniqueness affect how career management policies are designed & implemented	HR architecture literature	Questionnaires of 306 organisations in Belgium using a convenience sample with the majority of respondents being HR managers/directors. No response rate provided	Threats of talent shortages with respect to value & uniqueness were key determinants of the importance organisations place on career management
Downs and Swales (2013)	Proposes that a more radical approach to TM is required that incorporates key social and ethical dimensions	Duty ethics, utilitarian ethics, distribute justice, agency theory, virtue ethics, capability approach	No empirical data	Propose five principles that the authors contend add social & ethical considerations to the concept of TM. It is argued that current views represent a 'dark side' of TM potentially will be to both individuals & organisations
Erickson and Gratton (2007)	Considers the factors separating the good companies to work for and the not so good	–	Draws on examples from companies but there were no details provided on the methodology	Organisations should not attempt to be all things to all staff. They should look to communicate the firm's distinctive practice that best conveys what it is really like to work there and what makes the company different to others
Festing et al. (2013)	Examines how German small-medium firms are addressing changing demographics & talent shortages through TM	–	Telephone interviews using self-report surveys with 700 chief executive officers and owners/founders of German small-medium firms. No response rate provided	German small-medium firms were found to prefer an inclusive TM approach whereby all employees are targeted to the elitist or exclusive approach

**Table 2** Summary of articles focusing on the management of talent (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Groves (2011)	Examines how nationwide healthcare systems address the challenges of managing talent due to difficult economic conditions & changing workforce trends	–	Qualitative case studies of 15 nationwide healthcare systems in the USA with semi-structured interviews completed with 30 executives as well as document analysis of TM materials from each organisation	Proposes a model of TM best practices based on results suggesting exemplary healthcare organisations operate a multi-phased TM system that has six sequential phases along with associated success factors that assist implementation
Guerci and Solari (2012)	Investigates the TM system implemented in four Italian companies	–	Four case studies of Italian companies where there was one semi-structured interview held with the person responsible for TM in each	Suggests the TM approach was consistent with the literature in that an exclusive focus was adopted whereby TM was concerned with individuals with the ability to make significant contributions to the organisation. A differentiated approach to training was provided for those identified as 'talent'
Harris et al. (2011)	Discusses the role of human capital analytics in improving the role of the HR function in organisations	–	No empirical data	A more analytical HR function can bring improved business outcomes. This requires integrating data, analyses and processes throughout the entire organisation rather than it being localised to a particular part
Hiltrop (1999)	Explores how organisations attract and retain talent, which practices are most effective & what else could be done	–	Questionnaire of HR managers & personnel officers from 115 MNC and 204 domestic companies in Western Europe. No response rate provided	The results don't provide resounding evidence of the link between HR practices & ability to attract & retain talent. Organisations need to understand what they are aiming for in attracting talent and then tailor their recruitment process & HR practices accordingly to meet the needs & expectations of that group
Höglund (2012)	Analyses the direct & indirect links between HRM practices & human capital through a TM framework	Resource-based view, human capital theory	17 interviews with the head of HR in 17 Nordic MNCs along with a web survey of 126 employees in these firms (5.6% response rate)	Skill-enhancing HRM practices are positively related to human capital. Talent inducements mediate the skill-enhancing HRM & human capital relationship. Partial support was found that employee obligations to develop skills mediate the talent inducement–human capital relationship

**Table 2** Summary of articles focusing on the management of talent (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Hughes and Rog (2008)	Investigates the meaning of TM & why it's important for hospitality organisations	–	No empirical data	TM is viewed as a multifaceted strategic management activity championed by HR which if effectively done may assist in dealing with the labour market challenges faced by the industry
Iles et al. (2010b)	Considers whether TM can be argued as displaying features of a management fashion	Institutional theory & management fashion	Bibliometric count	The literature suggests that TM has many features that are akin to management fashion which allows opportunities to extend the popularity & diffusion of the concept despite ambiguity over its meaning & scope
Jones et al. (2012)	Investigates the meaning ascribed to 'talent' & TM & whether this is more akin to an individualist 'star' approach or a systems-level strategic approach	–	22 semi-structured interviews, using a convenience sample, with senior HR practitioners & executives from a variety of industries in Australia	TM was typically defined as the identification, attraction, development & retention of a segment of the workforce but there was clear difficulty in articulating what 'talent' meant. Execution of TM tended to be unstructured, ad hoc & not in line with a strategic perspective
Lawler and Worley (2012)	Discusses the role of TM in developing sustainable, effective organisations	–	No empirical data	Argues that effective TM is critical to sustainable management firms & that such organisations need to move beyond traditional TM practices. In such organisations, you may not want individuals to stay for long periods of time, you want those that have the right skills and capabilities at that particular time
Lehmann (2009)	Examines the content & direction of the talent development process & the impact of social, organisational & managerial practices on this	Human capital, social capital	15 interviews with individuals from eight firms in Thailand & 11 interviews from seven firms in Malaysia representing an array of industries	New HRM practices have been initiated to improve attraction, development & retention of talents particularly in the area of performance management and IT systems. There needs to be greater adaptation of social and firm structures to fit with the new HRM practices that have been implemented
Lewis and Heckman (2006)	Reviews the TM practitioner-oriented literature to establish how TM is defined, operationalised & supported	Resource-based view & HC Bridge Framework	No empirical data	Argues that there is no clear meaning to TM with three approaches common, ranging from a rebranding of HR to a more discrete, strategic managerial activity. They suggest the field can be developed through greater integration with strategic HRM

**Table 2** Summary of articles focusing on the management of talent (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Macfarlane et al. (2012)	Investigates how TM processes have evolved in the UK National Health Service (NHS)	Hard & soft HRM	Single case study of the UK's NHS using a documentation review	There appears to be a move towards a 'harder' model of TM in the last five years. TM is strongly focused on 'leadership' and encompasses a highly rationalistic, bureaucratic & centralised process
Martin et al. (2011)	Discusses the role of employer branding on innovation, corporate governance & reputation & HR practice	Intellectual capital, VRIO framework, institutional theory	No empirical data	Proposes a conceptual model of employer branding & how it may articulate with corporate governance, innovation & organisational reputations & how this may contribute to HR strategy in action
Maxwell and MacLean (2008)	Explores the operational implications & strategic actions involved in TM	–	One focus group incorporating board members of the Scottish Tourism Forum	TM is perceived as offering substantial potential to improve the employment image of careers in the hospitality & tourism industry
McDonnell (2011)	Identifies the main issues faced by organisational practitioners in undertaking TM	–	No empirical data	Proposes a series of research questions that should be used to inform future research in breaking down the science versus practice gap in TM
Oltra and Vivas-Lopez (2013)	Analyses whether TM practices linked to teamwork design & dynamics improve organisational learning	Organisational learning	167 questionnaires of large firms in Spain using a convenience sample (14% response rate)	Team-based TM can positively impact organisational learning especially when teams of talented individuals are given the scope/autonomy to be creative
Ryan (2012)	Discussion on building a team of A players in Gilt Groupe	–	Practitioner viewpoint article	TM is a more important role for the CEO than any other aspect of his/her role because it brings the greatest returns. Argues that there is no science in effective recruitment & that CVs & interviews are over-valued, while reference checking is under-appreciated
Scholz (2012)	Examines whether culture impacts the talent management process	National culture	180 questionnaires from video games development team members of the International Game Developer Association (18% response rate). The majority of respondents were in the UK, USA, and Canada, while job roles varied widely	Culture has a positive influence across various roles in video game development teams. It is recommended that firms consider cultural diversity & those with the best fit for roles in the industry when attracting & recruiting staff

**Table 2** Summary of articles focusing on the management of talent (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Schweer et al. (2012)	Examines how TM practices can improve collaboration in firms & how employee networks increase individual & firm performance	–	Online survey of 76 talent managers in global firms (specific contexts not provided), interviews with talent experts, 15 in-depth focus groups applying social network analysis & semi-structure interviews. No response rate provided	Firms looking to leverage their talent & TM programs can benefit substantially through a collaborative network approach. It is important that organisations look at their high performers with respect to making collaborative contributions in addition to more traditional contributions
Scott and Revis (2008)	Reviews developments in career management & notions of talent from an organisational & hospitality graduate perspective	–	No empirical data	Identifies three themes in the literature: (1) the graduate as talent; (2) managing & developing talent for the hospitality industry; (3) hospitality graduate career management
Swales (2013)	Considers the ethical issues surrounding organisational approaches to TM	Duty ethics, virtue ethic, distributive justice theory, stakeholder theory	No empirical data	Proposes a framework to influence the enactment of TM in organisations that may lead to more ethical approaches
Tatli et al. (2012)	Discusses whether the use of gender quotas would assist TM in the Asia Pacific Region	–	No empirical data	Many Asian economies are suffering from significant talent shortages but despite this are failing to draw on an unused talent pool – high potential females. Suggests that integrating TM with gender equality may provide options to organisations in this region to address some talent shortages
Thunnissen et al. (2013)	A review of the talent management literature	–	Structured literature review	Argues that the talent management literature is too one-dimensional and narrow and overly unitarist and managerialist. Suggests that there is a need for a more pluralist approach that would involve additional approach such as stakeholder theory

**Table 2** Summary of articles focusing on the management of talent (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Valverde et al. (2013)	Examines TM in Spanish small-medium-sized firms	–	Six case studies of small-medium firms in Spain. Semi-structured interviews with the owner of the company along with the HR manager took place along with one to two employee level interviews (talents & non-talents where these were identified) in each case	Little awareness of either the term, TM, or the rhetoric surrounding the concept was found even where practices that are often construed as TM were being used
Wang-Cowham (2011)	Explores the connection between talent development & knowledge sharing mechanisms	Social exchange theory & knowledge sharing	Semi-structured interviews with 20 Chinese HR practitioners	Knowledge sharing socialisation mechanisms integrated with talent development can facilitate organisational knowledge sharing & support individual & organisational-led talent development
Watson (2008)	Reviews the components of management development & factors influencing it & how these fit with TM in the hospitality industry	–	No empirical data	Presents a framework of the management development issues affecting TM in the hospitality industry. These encompass external & internal factors along with skills & competencies, career issues & development practices
Whelan and Carcary (2011)	Considers how the principles of TM can be used to enhance knowledge management (KM) initiatives	–	One focus group of three KM practitioners	Five KM concerns around TM can be leveraged to improve KM: (1) identifying knowledge workers; (2) knowledge creation; (3) knowledge sharing; (4) developing knowledge competencies; (5) knowledge retention. These KM concerns can benefit from the integration of TM but they are not of equal value/importance
Whelan et al. (2010)	Examines how external knowledge reaches staff with the ability to exploit such knowledge for innovation purposes & the specific talents these individuals exhibit	Technological gatekeeper theory	Single case study of a medical devices R&D group in Ireland that included social network analysis based on a questionnaire, as well as ten semi-structured interviews	Gatekeeping roles are vital to an effective R&D operation but it is rare for a single individual to have the talents required for the acquisition & dissemination of external knowledge

**Table 2** Summary of articles focusing on the management of talent (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Wiblen et al. (2012)	Investigates the role of that technology plays in identifying talent	–	Single case study of a large professional services firm in Australia involving 42 semi-structured interviews of managers involved in talent identification	Decisions on whether an employee was a 'talent' were commonly based on subjective evaluations although, on occasion, this was combined with more objective, formal measures facilitated by IT
van Rooij (2012)	Analyses the training literature to establish the inclusiveness of older workers through the lens of systematic instructional design	Instructional design literature	No empirical data	HR managers need to appreciate age-inclusive training design & integrate these principles into the firm's TM strategy
Yanadori and Kang (2011)	Analyses compensation systems for R&D staff and administrative employees in US high-technology organisations	HR architecture literature	Individual employee compensation rates from 100 US high technology public and private firms gathered through an annual compensation survey carried out by a Boston consulting firm from 1992 to 2002. Compensation for 988, 223 employees – of which roughly one-fourth were administrative staff. No response rate provided	If firms deviate from market rates too much then this may have a negative influence on the attraction & retention of talent by underpaying staff or increasing rewards. The findings endorse criticisms from TM on unnecessary maintenance of a monolithic approach to HRM across employee groups although other literatures note the dangers of pay differentiation too
Yamall (2011)	Reviews the case study literature for the potential implications of selecting & developing specific talent pools within firms	–	No empirical data	Seven factors emerged as important in effectively using talent pools. The first two refer to establishing an effective approach around segmentation & the nomination process. The remaining are categorised as maintenance which include being cognisant of changing business needs, changing individual circumstances, providing developmental opportunities, senior level commitment & success measures
Yoon and Lim (2010)	Discusses virtual learning & technologies & how systemisation can occur through managing firm competency & talents	Blended learning	No empirical data	Managing firm competency assists in prioritising learning & technologies, while TM helps develop a system to develop & retain talents. TM should be part of HRD practices

The review reveals that scholars of the management of talented individuals are more interested in understanding the broader concerns facing organisations rather than individual TM practices such as succession, recruitment or compensation issues. As a result there is a serious gap in our knowledge regarding how talented individuals are managed, especially regarding the processes organisations use to recruit, motivate and reward talent. Talent retention, however, is an exception. For example, Cappelli (2000) suggests that organisations need to adopt a more market-oriented approach in retaining talent. He argued that the idea of adopting a long-term strategy, across the enterprise, craving employee loyalty as being neither desirable nor achievable. This perspective challenges organisations to reconsider the perspective that employee turnover is always negative with a more nuanced understanding by focusing on who is leaving and where they are taking up new roles. Consequently, he argues that there needs to be tailored retention programs for different talent which should tie in with the level of demand for them on the external labour market.

Tymon et al. (2010) using large scale survey evidence from India found that employee perceptions of the company as being socially responsible were related to organisational pride, which directly impacted satisfaction with the organisation; this satisfaction was associated with reduced intention to leave and improved perceptions of career success. A later paper from the same data set (Doh et al., 2011) found that responsible leadership was another critical factor in retention.

Other papers have sought to be more holistic in covering recruitment and retention together. For example, Hiltrop (1999) analyses some of the strategies and practices that firms utilise in attracting and retaining talent. A key conclusion is the need for tailored strategies and practices to meet the expectations and needs of particular target groups in attracting them to the organisation and subsequently motivating and retaining them. Zheng et al. (2008) found that manufacturing firms in Asia had to be particularly aggressive in attracting and retaining highly skilled managerial and professional staff with organisations in the Tiger economies of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. Remaining in the emerging markets, Ready et al. (2008) proposed a set of principles for attracting and retaining talent, built around the organisation's purpose, culture, brand and opportunities provided to individuals. These authors urge caution to organisations that view their domestic talent strategies being effective in emerging markets with the development of a core of local talent vital to business success in these countries.

## *5.2 Identifying strategic positions and talent management systems*

The second approach to the management of talent focuses on strategic positions and TM systems in organisations. A growing body of research emphasises the identification of strategic or pivotal *positions* which have the potential to differentially impact the competitive advantage of the organisation (e.g. Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005; Collings and Mellahi, 2009). The point of departure is the identification of key positions rather than talented individuals per se. Thus, the point is made that not every position in the organisation needs to be filled with the highest performers. Collings and Mellahi (2009) argue that the starting point for any TM system should be the systematic identification of the key positions which differentially contribute to an organisation's sustainable competitive advantage. This approach reflects the evolution of the strategic HRM literature which increasingly recognises that there should be a greater degree of differentiation of roles within organisations, with more emphasis on strategic over non-strategic jobs (Becker and Huselid, 2006), or between those organisational roles which

promise only marginal impact vis-à-vis those which can provide above-average impact (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2007). This is in contrast to the situation in many organisations where overinvestment in non-strategic roles is commonplace (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2007; Huselid et al., 2005). This approach diverges from the traditional focus of strategic HRM research, which adopted a bottom-up focus in theory development, emphasising the idea that employees can contribute to the firm's strategic objective simply because of their value and uniqueness (Becker and Huselid, 2006). In contrast, this perspective advocates a top-down approach and recognises that '... not all strategic processes will be highly dependent on human capital' and hence not all roles require 'A players'. Thus, the differentiating factor in explaining strategic value becomes the *job* not the individual. These 'A positions' are distinguished by their 'disproportionate importance to a company's ability to execute some parts of its strategy and second ... the wide variability in the quality of the work displayed among the employees in these positions'. Human capital is of little economic value unless it is deployed in the implementation of the organisation's strategic intent, or in the pivotal roles within the organisation (Boxall and Purcell, 2011).

Our review suggests that more recently there has been an evolution of thought with an increasing realisation that 'great systems are often more important than great people' (Beechler and Woodward, 2009, p.277). Reflecting this argument Collings and Mellahi (2009) draw upon the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) framework to highlight that performance is more complex than simply employing great talent. The AMO framework proposes that employee performance (P) is a function of the employee's ability (A), motivation (M) and opportunity (O) to perform. Thus, assuming that ability is taken as a given, seeing as an organisation's key talent are the focus of the system, it is important that the organisation has systems which ensure these individuals have the opportunity to perform (through supporting development opportunities and ensuring they are deployed effectively) and are highly motivated (through appropriate HR policies and supports) to maximise performance.

In the vein of systems, several papers explored the use of information technology (IT) in the identification and management of talent. This theme reflects the increasing search for more evidence-based decisions around talent (see Vaiman et al., 2013). For example, the issue of analytics is considered by Harris et al. (2011) who discuss how analytical methods can be used to better argue that investing in human capital leads to a return on financial capital. To be effective, data (bedrock of effective analytical approaches), analyses and processes throughout the organisation need to be integrated. Inherent in this is the need to move away from static reporting of convenience data to using more outcome-focused predictive measures. However, Wiblen et al.'s (2012) study challenges the extent to which the data from systems actually inform talent decisions. Drawing on the social construction of technology literature, the authors found that the role of IT was contested and marginalised by decision-makers as they preferred to make both individual and collective sense of their environment. Decisions on whether an individual was a talent or not were typically based on subjective interpretations. It was clear that there were significant variations in understanding of what constituted talent and how to identify it with the authors suggesting that the potential of IT to facilitate better talent identifications decisions was very much under-realised. The paper points to the limited use of analytics even where they exist.

Given that the common focus appears to be on a small and exclusive group of employees, attention has been drawn to the ethical implications of TM and focusing on particular individuals with high potential. Swailes (2013) argues that while a

differentiated, exclusive approach may make intuitive sense, there are ethical issues and challenges. Swailes (2013, p.41) develops a useful evaluation framework encompassing four stages that organisations can consider in determining the ethical standing of their approach to talent management. The first imagines talent where views are free of bias and exemplify virtue. Key questions that are raised include, is an elitist TM program needed and how can it be effectively communicated to the workforce? Further, to what extent is the program free of bias (e.g. gender) and does it effectively differentiate between talent and popularity? Second, in identifying talent there are ethical issues if not all individuals are provided with just opportunity to be considered. Consequently, central considerations are whether all staff receive a fair opportunity to be considered as a talent and what efforts have been made to remove bias from the identification stage. The third element of the framework is developing talent. This raises the issue of how 'non-talents' will feel about being excluded from an exclusive TM program and what resources are made available to these vis-à-vis those classified as talent. The final stage is that on evaluating the program and considering how it benefits those excluded from it. A key point put forward is that duty and virtue ethics promote the idea that TM should be ethical, and drawing on the distribute justice literature, stakeholder theory and utilitarianism argues that excluded individuals still benefit in some form. Similarly, Downs and Swailes (2013) argue that current focus on talented individuals and high performers represent a 'dark side' of TM which is likely to be detrimental to both individuals and organisations. The topic of ethics and TM is something that we feel warrants greater attention and as a result, we return to this later in the paper.

## **6 Individual talent perspectives**

While our review identifies a strand of research focusing strongly on the individual talents, this theme has received considerably less attention. One illustrative exception is Bjorkman et al.'s (2013) study. Their research found significant differences between individuals who were identified as 'talent' and those who were not and those who did not know. Specifically, individuals who perceived they had been identified as talent compared to those who were not had lower turnover intent were more committed to increasing their performance levels, more actively supportive of their employer's strategic objectives, identified to a greater degree with the focal organisation and were more committed to developing competencies of value to the firm. Broadly similar findings emerged for those who perceived they had been identified as talent compared to those who did not know if they were regarded as talented or not. Consequently, there appears to be a motivational impact on informing individuals of their talent status. Dries et al. (2012a) considered whether the traditional view of careers still had resonance in the case of high potentials and average performing staff. Their findings indicated that high potentials reported higher levels of job security and salary increases than average performers. It appeared that attitudes and inducements associated with traditional careers were clearer in the case of high potentials. The findings led the researchers to conclude that the traditional organisational career remains relevant among the highest performing individuals. Related to the articles around ethical issues (e.g. Swailes, 2013), Bjorkman et al. recommend that organisations should ensure that they 'consider the potential long term implications of identifying talent, and to counterbalance the focus on top talent' with approaches that encompass diversity and are more inclusive than very elitist systems (2013, p.210).

**Table 3** Summary of articles focusing on talent/talented individuals

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Bjorkman et al. (2013)	Examines what effect talent identification has on employee attitudes	Social exchange theory	Online survey of 930 managers & professionals in 106 subsidiaries of 11 Nordic MNCs (76% response rate)	The results indicate that informing talented staff of their status will have a motivational effect that matches the predictions of social exchange theory and supports the logic of TM
Dries and Peppermans (2012)	Analyses the literature to arrive at a model of how to more effectively identify leadership talent	–	A literature review led to the development of 77 criteria of leadership potential. These criteria were sent to 32 subject experts (students of a Masters of Industrial & Organisational Psychology & senior HR professionals) in Belgium who were asked to put them into structured piles according to meaning & relevance & label them	Analytical skills (incorporating intellectual curiosity, strategic insight, decision-making & problem-solving); learning agility (willingness to learn, emotional intelligence & adaptability); drive (results orientation, perseverance & dedication); & emergent leadership (motivation to lead, self-promotion & stakeholder sensitivity) represent a four-quadrant model of identifying leadership potential
Dries et al. (2012a)	Examines whether the careers literature that argues that the traditional organisational career is dead is closer to the truth than the TM literature that suggests they remain significant particularly among the best people	Boundaryless career, job security, organisational support, career orientation, loyalty preference, organisational commitment, career satisfaction literatures	Online survey of 941 high potentials & average performers (control group) from 12 Belgian, internationally active firms operating in the banking, insurance, business consulting, ICT, energy & automotive sectors (49% response rate)	High potentials & those identified as key experts reported higher job security & salary increases since joining the organisation than average performers. High potentials also reported more organisational support, more promotions & higher organisational commitment. Inducements & attitudes associated with traditional careers were typically more obvious in the case of high potentials
Dries et al. (2012b)	Examines how learning agility is able to predict whether an individual is identified as high potential	Learning agility	A survey was conducted of high potentials and non-high potential staff (n = 63) in seven TM best practice firms (as identified by a consultancy firm) stemming from four industries (financial consulting, distribution, ICT, telecom). No response rate provided	Learning agility was a better predictor of an individual being identified as a high potential than job performance. Career variety is positively associated with one's learning agility. Firms should consider incorporating learning agility into their talent identification systems and consider how they may enhance the variety of high potentials' careers

**Table 3** Summary of articles focusing on talent/talented individuals (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Groysberg et al. (2008)	Considers whether a star in one job & organisation remains a star when they move elsewhere	–	A comparison of the performance of star, US, National Football League (NFL) wide receivers & punters who switched teams with their counterparts who did not move	Hiring star individuals can be risky in that they may not achieve their previous levels of performance & that it may impact the performance & morale of existing staff. Managers would be advised to try to minimise the portability of those in particular star positions so as to retain those individuals which provide competitive advantage
Hausknecht et al. (2009)	Examines why high performers stay with their employer	Theory of organisational equilibrium	Annual (2003) employee opinion survey of employees in a large hospitality/leisure company in the USA. A response rate of 87.7% was achieved equating to 30,356 individuals. The paper draws on open-ended question responses from 24,829	High performers & non-hourly staff cite advancement opportunities & organisational prestige as the most important reasons for staying with the firm. Hourly and low performing staff were more likely to cite extrinsic rewards as why they stay. The findings emphasise the need for firms to differentiate their retention practices
Kim et al. (2012)	Analyses the effects of individual values on applicant attraction among Vietnamese students towards working in Japanese companies	Person–organisation fit theory & attraction–selection–attrition framework	Survey of undergraduate university students in three prestigious Vietnamese universities consisting of 326 responses (82% response rate)	Recruiting talents in Vietnam requires close understanding of individual dispositional factors because the research shows that work-centric, money-oriented & collectivistic job-seekers were more attracted to Japanese MNCs. Moreover, individual values moderate the relationship between firm characteristics & applicant attraction
Tansley and Tietze (2013)	Examine how TM is experienced and responded to by individual talents at different junctures & consider how identity work impacts the transitional process of individuals as they advance through a TM program	Rites of passage	Case study of a major accountancy consultancy in the UK incorporating six semi-structured interviews with staff responsible for management talent, along with two focus groups of staff at different career stages & which were regarded as talent	Technical ability is important but not sufficient on its own to successfully progress through the talent advancement process. Identity work, with respect to developing specific work orientations & dispositions to assist individuals cope with increasing ambiguity & change, is central to advancement
Wallace et al. (2012)	Examines the brand attributes that graduates place most emphasis on & considers how organisations with a weak brand can engage in TM	Brand equity & signalling theory	352 surveys of final year engineering students from five universities & a technical/further education college in five Australian states (86% response rate)	Graduates failed to view rail as having a brand position. Weaker profile industries should consider the attributes that their target labour pool feel are important to them in building an attractive brand

How talent is defined is a question that is widely identified as needing greater attention by researchers. Linked to the issue is the ability to effectively define and identify high potential – a term often used interchangeably with talent. Dries and colleagues have produced some of the most noteworthy research here. Dries and Peppermans (2012) utilise a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in considering how to identify leadership potential. They developed a four quadrant model of analytical skills, learning agility, drive and emergent leadership which received significant consensus (albeit from a limited sample) and addressed some of the issues that often impede the assessment of leadership potential (e.g. the performance versus potential conundrum). Dries et al. (2012b) evaluate, from the perspective of the rater, the ability of learning agility to predict whether an individual employee will be identified as high potential. They found that learning agility was a more effective predictor of an employee being labelled as a talent than job performance and that career variety had a positive association with an individual's learning agility.

## **7 Global talent management**

About one-third of the reviewed papers focused on the management of talent within MNCs, labelled as GTM. The review reveals that GTM suffers from similar issues to that of the overarching literature in that there is limited consensus on its meaning from a theoretical and conceptual perspective. Broadly defined, GTM refers to the activities of attracting, selecting, developing and retaining those best employees in the most strategy roles (those roles necessary to achieve organisational strategic priorities) on a global scale. It takes into account the differences in both organisations' global strategic priorities as well as the differences across national contexts of how talent should be managed in the countries in which they operate (Scullion et al., 2010). Stahl et al. (2012) reiterates some of the issues already discussed around defining and assessing performance and potential but when one considers the global nature of MNCs the challenges are accentuated.

Tarique and Schuler (2010) identify a range of exogenous and endogenous GTM challenges, as well as discussing the major international HR activities that should be incorporated within GTM systems. Schuler et al. (2011) further consider several global talent challenges and the opportunities that these can present for MNCs. They develop nine propositions that integrate external forces and shapers, global talent challenges, practices and expected results. Kim and McLean (2012) consider why GTM is necessary and the key challenges in developing global talent in which they focus strongly on three main challenges, namely concerns about global mobility, the use of an ethnocentric strategy, and barriers between the headquarters and subsidiaries. They propose four Human Resource Development (HRD) roles for GTM which are balancing centralised and decentralised strategies, developing global competencies, creating structured global talent development, and global team building. McDonnell et al. (2010) provided large scale survey evidence on the use of different mechanisms by MNCs in Ireland encompassing some of the roles raised by Kim and McLean (2012). They further note they found contextual factors as important predictors of GTM with the larger MNCs and the provision of standardised products and services between subsidiaries particularly significant.

Minbaeva and Collings (2013) reiterate a point long-made in the international HRM literature about the additional challenges that management on a global rather than domestic scale inevitably involves. They consider seven myths which, though more focused on the MNC context, could also be proposed for TM itself. We outline these here and integrate other research where they resonate with the myth. The first myth proposed is that TM is not an HR responsibility. They note that while the top management team are critical in effective TM, the corporate HR function must keep a central role in how GTM is operationalised across subsidiaries. The key issue is the HR function's capacity to demonstrate and convince senior management that they have the capabilities to manage the MNC's global talent pool. The role of the corporate HR function in MNCs has received some attention by way of proposing different roles that the function plays in GTM (Farndale et al., 2010; Sparrow et al., 2013). Specifically, the four roles proposed that facilitate GTM effectiveness are being guardians of culture, champion of processes, managing receptivity, and network leadership and intelligence. Based on two cases, Sparrow et al. (2013) found support for the four roles and the interdependencies between them. It was also shown that external factors, like the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), impacted on the role played. Garavan (2012) similarly noted GTM was viewed as strategically important by stakeholders of pharmaceutical MNCs and that the GFC perpetuated greater control over talent coupled with increased involvement of the corporate and regional headquarters in subsidiary level talent decisions.

The second myth is that TM is all about people and this is counterpoised with the notion that it is pivotal positions which are the bedrock of any effective system. The third myth is that all positions require A players instead suggesting that the focus should be on improving the positioning and retention of A players in the MNCs' pivotal positions. The portability of talent is the source of myth number four. The fifth myth debunks the idea of employee turnover as always negative. Calling for a more nuanced approach and drawing on the work of Somaya et al. (2008) they suggest that investing in the maintenance of relationships with departing staff may be a beneficial strategy in the long run. The penultimate myth is that there is a clear line of sight between GTM and MNC performance. Demonstrating cause and effect between HR and firm performance is notoriously difficult to establish with the MNC context adding to this challenge. A more holistic return on investment measure is suggested that incorporates multiple stakeholders and quantitative and qualitative measures. Finally, they suggest that TM decisions are not necessarily fair due to the limitations of standardised evaluation instruments in culturally distant contexts. This was something centred on by Mäkelä et al. (2010) in examining the factors that influence the likelihood of being classified as talent within MNCs. They propose that the higher the cultural and institutional distance between where individuals are located and where the primary decision-makers are based, the less likelihood she/he is viewed as talent. The greater the degree of similarity between candidate and decision-maker will increase the likelihood. Finally, the more central an individual is within the MNC's internal network, the more likely she/he will be included in a talent pool. Zander et al. (2010) also consider such issues using intersectionality theory as a new means of considering how social interaction impacts the interplay between an MNCs' talent identification and individuals' identification processes. Further, Mellahi and Collings (2010) in a conceptual piece suggest that subsidiary management may attempt to circumvent their most talented staff being identified as talent in the MNC because the subsidiary may be perceived to gain little from doing so. They also point to the challenge of completely understanding talent resources in the MNC and suggest that it may go beyond the capability of managers at the corporate HQ.

**Table 4** Summary of articles focusing on global talent management

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/ literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Burbach and Royle (2010)	Explores how talent is managed in MNCs, the role of HR IT systems & the factors which mediate the TM process	–	Single case study of Irish & German subsidiaries of a US, medical devices MNC	TM practice diffusion was contingent on stakeholder involvement, top level support, micro-political exchanges and integration with a global HR IT system
Doh et al. (2011)	Examines the perceptions of professional talent towards their firm's TM efforts	–	Stratified random sample of employees was taken with 4891 participating in an online survey (54% response rate). 28 companies in India encompassing 32 operating sites consisting of foreign MNCs, Indian MNCs and Indian domestic firms were included	Companies providing meaningful & responsive approaches to developing and managing talent will be in a stronger position in retaining their professionals. The employee value proposition offered to professional staff is important as it can give the company an edge over its competitors in attracting & retaining talent
Farndale et al. (2010)	Examines the role of the corporate HR function in GTM	–	No empirical data	Suggests that there are four key roles that the corporate HR function can play in GTM, namely champion of processes, guardian of culture, network leadership & intelligence & managers of internal, receptivity
Garavan (2012)	Investigates how actors view a firm's strategic priorities during the GFC & how these align with GTM	Resource-based view, best-fit (contingency) & resource dependency theories	None case studies of pharmaceutical MNCs in Ireland incorporating 120 semi-structured interviews with informants from different levels of the organisation hierarchy	GTM was a key strategic activity during the GFC through assisting management in downsizing, expansion & re-aligning structures. GTM was viewed as an enabler to future growth
Hartmann et al. (2010)	Examines TM in western MNCs in China and the influence of institutional & cultural factors in diffusing practices from the HQ to subsidiaries	–	Seven case studies of US & European MNCs in China (manufacturing & services industry) consisting of interviews with (senior/middle level HR managers and 'talents')	The TM system is transferred from HQ without much change & is focused on developing 'talents' & building an organisational culture. Integrated, strategic TM was not particularly evident
Harvey et al. (2011)	Proposes a series of hypotheses around the role of trust in improving global relationships including the impact on GTM	Reference point theory	No empirical data	The development of trust between in-patriates and headquarters staff will facilitate global mobility which will positively impact on the ability to develop global talent
Huang and Tansley (2012)	Investigates how an MNC used rhetorical underpinnings in implementing TM	Rhetoric theory	Single US MNC case study encompassing 62 interviews from six regions including HQ consisting of executives & managers from across functions. Three focus groups were also held from non-managerial, operational staff	Management rhetorically emotionalise their staff about there being a 'talent war' outside the factory to accommodate changing agendas & circumstances. This assisted the MNC to cover up inconsistent practices & legitimise TM

**Table 4** Summary of articles focusing on global talent management (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/ literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Iles et al. (2010a)	Analyses how MNCs in China define TM & whether it is viewed as discrete management activity different to HRM	–	Seven case studies of US & European MNCs (IT, education, healthcare, consultancy sectors) in China involving 22 semi-structured interviews with individuals at different organisational levels & within different functions	TM was not viewed as essentially different to HRM though HRM is viewed as having broader scope. TM promotes segmentation, whereas HRM promotes egalitarianism
Kim and McLean (2012)	Identifies the necessity & challenges of TM in a global context & proposes roles for HRD	–	No empirical data	Proposes a framework of the necessity, challenges & HRD roles for GTM
Li and Scullion (2010)	Develops a conceptual framework for developing expatriate managers' local competence in the emerging markets	Socialisation, Externalisation, Combination, Internalisation (SECI) theory of knowledge acquisition	No empirical data	The developed framework argues that traditional strategies for developing local competence may be ineffective in developing global managers to work in the emerging markets
Mäkelä et al. (2010)	Considers the factors that influence the likelihood of an individual being classified as 'talent' within MNCs	Strategic search & choice	Single case study of a Finnish, process manufacturing MNC involving semi-structured interviews with 45 key informants, along with document analysis	Develops a theoretical framework of the determinants of talent identification incorporating cultural & institutional distance between locations of potential talent pool members & the decision-makers, homophily between decision-makers & the individual, & the network position of the individual
McDonnell et al. (2010)	Explores the extent to which MNCs engage in GTM and the factors predicting the use of GTM practices	HR architecture	Representative survey of the most senior HR representative in 260 foreign and domestic owned MNCs in Ireland (63% response rate)	Significant numbers of MNCs do not appear to be engaging in GTM. Global HR function structures, the largest MNCs and where MNCs service global markets significantly predict GTM engagement
Mellahi and Collings (2010)	Examines the barriers talents face to corporate advancements in subsidiaries	Agency & bounded rationality theories	No empirical data	Self-serving interests of subsidiary managers & the inability of HQ managers to process the complex nature of understanding their organisation's talent resources may negatively impact the identification of talented individuals
Mellahi and Collings (2010)	Examines the barriers talents face to corporate advancements in subsidiaries	Agency & bounded rationality theories	No empirical data	Self-serving interests of subsidiary managers & the inability of HQ managers to process the complex nature of understanding their organisation's talent resources may negatively impact the identification of talented individuals

**Table 4** Summary of articles focusing on global talent management (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/ literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Mimbaeva and Collings (2013)	Unpacks some of the key myths that surround global TM	–	No empirical data	Proposes seven myths that if minimised should assist the development of TM practice. The myths identified are: (1) TM is not an HR responsibility; (2) TM is all about people; (3) all positions should be filled with A players; (4) talent is portable; (5) talent turnover is always bad for the firm; (6) there's a clear line of sight between GTM and firm performance; (7) talent decisions are 'fair'.
Preece et al. (2011)	An analysis of whether talent management can be considered akin to a new management fashion	Institutional theory & management fashion	Seven case studies (five US, one UK, one Canadian) of MNCs in China involving 22 semi-structured interviews with HR specialists, senior & functional manager & non-managerial employees	TM did exemplify characteristics of management fashion but this theory was unable to entirely interpret TM. There was evidence of companies engaging in TM as a means of addressing challenges of talent attraction, motivation & retention
Preece et al. (2013)	Identifies the TM issues with establishing regional MNC structures in the Asia Pacific	–	Single case study of a Japanese MNC focused on establishing a regional headquarter in Asia. Five interviews with senior managers at the regional level followed by three interviews with senior managers at a second visit with one being a follow-up interview	Found a regio-centric staffing approach to be in place. The small pool of experienced leaders in the region causes significant challenges for the MNC. A key issue is developing subsidiary level individuals to take on more complex regional HQ roles. Getting subsidiaries to take TM seriously was a significant challenge
Ready and Conger (2007)	Examines how Procter & Gamble & HSBC are prime examples of talent factories allowing them to develop and retain key employees and fill positions in line with the evolving business requirements	–	Draws on examples from two leading MNCs but there were no details provided on the methodology	Companies striving for business growth have little hope without being able to put the right people in the right jobs when the time arrives. To do so, firms need to coordinate functionality, comprehensive TM practices that support strategic objectives, with vitality consisting of a strong managerial commitment to TM
Ready et al. (2008)	To identify how companies can be successful in attracting and retaining talent in the emerging markets	–	Draws on examples from large MNCs in the emerging markets but there were no details provided on the methodology	Firms need to be cautious on transferring domestic talent strategies to the emerging markets. It is critical to develop a core of local talent to guide the firm in these markets & relying on English as the official business language may be detrimental to identifying talent

**Table 4** Summary of articles focusing on global talent management (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/ literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Schuler et al. (2011)	Highlights the global talent challenges faced by organisations and the opportunities that these present	–	No empirical data	Develops a framework of global talent challenges & GTM initiatives along with proposing nine propositions related to this
Shi and Handfield (2012)	Examines the causes underlying the challenges of HR managers in recruiting and retaining Chinese employees	–	Interviews with three groups: (1) 11 Western logistic MNC representatives with operations in China; (2) professors & administrators from five Chinese universities with logistics/supply chain programs; (3) 11 highly qualified Chinese managers working for MNCs in China. Also participant observation in one MNC	There is a major gap between Chinese employee expectations & the perceived reality of foreign managers around expected terms & conditions. MNC logistic roles are not viewed particularly attractive by Chinese job candidates
Skuzza et al. (2013)	Exploratory study of the talent challenges faced by foreign MNCs and Polish owned companies	–	Six focus groups involving a total of 58 lower, middle and upper managerial level participants from 28 foreign and 30 domestic firms in Poland followed up with a telephone survey of each (100% response rate)	Little to no evidence of similarity between Polish firm & 'Western' practice. There were greater TM challenges perceived by Polish firms. TM is likely to challenge the traditional practices as Poland becomes a more open, market economy
Sparrow et al. (2013)	Explores the corporate HR function role in GTM	–	One UK (international banking & financial services) & one US MNC (professional services) which have centralised & decentralised approaches to global TM respectively. 26 interviews took place across the case studies involving multiple HR personnel from the MNC	Evidence was found of the corporate HR function having a champion of process, guardian of culture, manager of internal receptivity and network leadership & intelligence role although these differed somewhat between whether it was the centralised or decentralised GTM approach
Stahl et al. (2012)	Investigates how MNCs develop and sustain their talent pipelines	–	20 case studies incorporating 312 interviews with professionals at the corporate, regional & country level followed by a web survey of 263 HR professionals from the Americas, Asia-Pacific, European, Middle East & African regions. No response rate provided	Competitive advantage results from effective internal alignment of the practices which encompass the MNC's GTM system, along with being embedded in the corporate values system and linked to business strategy. It is not about designing & implementing 'best practices'
Tarique and Schuler (2010)	Reviews academic work on GTM and proposes an integrative framework for advancing research	Institutional theory	No empirical data	Develops an integrative framework of the exogenous & endogenous drivers of GTM which impact upon the GTM system and that directly affect GTM effectiveness/outcomes

**Table 4** Summary of articles focusing on global talent management (continued)

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Paper aim/TM focus</i>	<i>Theoretical/literature framing</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Tymon et al. (2010)	Analyses the role of intrinsic rewards and retention, career success and organisational satisfaction	–	Stratified random sample of 4811 individuals from 28 companies, some of which were MNCs, in India (54% response rate)	Employee perceptions of the firm as socially responsible are strongly associated with pride in the firm which directly impacts satisfaction with the firm & reduces intention to leave. It also enhances perceptions of career success
Vance et al. (2013)	Examines perceptions of training fit in China among Korean expatriates and local staff and discusses the implications for GTM	Convergence, divergence, crossvergence & training literature	A survey, using a convenience sample, of 67 Korean expatriates in MNCs operating in China along with 202 non-managerial local Chinese staff from Chinese and US MNCs in a range of cities in China. All respondents were working in manufacturing companies. No response rate provided	Korean MNCs tend to transfer their headquarters training approach in their Korean subsidiaries. There is much similarity between trainers & learners in respect to career development & trainee ownership in the development process suggesting GTM as a means to developing future leaders is firmly embedded in training expectations in the Chinese labour force
Zander et al. (2010)	Examines career patterns & talent identification within MNCs through an innovative theoretical lens	Intersectionality theory	No empirical data	Argues that the intersectionality approach may be a useful means of exploring who makes it to the top in MNCs & can assist in building greater awareness of how different socially and culturally constructed categories interact across the different levels within MNCs
Zheng (2009)	Examines how HR practices & talent impacts service delivery & organisation growth	–	Survey of 281 service sector MNCs in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan & Singapore. Respondents were CEOs, financial controllers & HR managers. No response rate provided	Significant linkages were found between HR practices, talent retention & service delivery. Skills training & development programs are viewed as significant impacts on capacity to deliver high quality service and increase company growth
Zheng et al. (2008)	Examines the issues MNCs in six Asian countries face in recruiting highly skilled managerial & professional staff	–	Survey of 529 MNCs in two Dragon (Singapore, Taiwan) & four Tiger (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand) economies. Respondents were CEOs, financial controllers & HR managers. No response rate provided	MNCs operating in the Tiger economies are more aggressive in battling for talent. Manufacturing MNCs are finding it particularly challenging to attract the right mix of talent & need to become more strategic in their recruitment & selection approach

## **8 Looking to the future – progressing the field**

A number of papers have drawn attention to key challenges that ensue in the TM literature (e.g. guest editorials of special issues). We utilise and build upon some of this discourse, while also drawing on the findings of this systematic review and bring our own recommendations to play in proposing some especially pertinent research trajectories for the field. Our discussion is not meant as all-encompassing but rather we point to what we, as researchers in the field, consider especially important themes and questions that empirical research and enhanced conceptualisation have the greatest potential to advance the field of TM from adolescence to maturity.

### *8.1 Boundaries of TM*

A consistent finding for reviews of the field is that a multitude of meanings and definitions (where provided) exist. While we contend that a single definition of TM is neither desirable nor required, there needs to be greater consensus on the boundaries of the field. We argue, as do others (e.g. Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; McDonnell, 2011), that without the development of some parameters development of a mature field will prove challenging. Moreover, the lack of basic boundaries was reflected in the exclusion of articles from our review despite our initial inspection suggesting inclusion. In practice, on reading some papers it became obvious that there was no engagement with the TM literature despite the term being used in the title (e.g. Levenson, 2012; van den Brink et al., 2013). Despite the strong focus of extant published works on exploring the meaning of TM and the different perspectives taken by organisations in various business contexts it remains apparent that more thorough empirical research is required on the area. It is evident that some doubt exists as to whether TM really equates to a new and discrete strategic management activity that moves beyond HRM or HRD. Until there are much more comprehensive research studies undertaken and enhanced theorisation then question marks over the extent to which this is a discrete concept will continue. As field scholars and gatekeepers, we need to be clear in articulating how TM is defined in published work.

We argue that TM is a discrete field that stands in contrast to mainstream HR in a number of important ways. In particular, we propose that TM should be concerned with understanding where value is added in organisations by human capital, how talented individuals influence organisational performance, and also how talent practice can maximise the contributions of those individuals. We see the ultimate goal of TM as contributing to sustainable organisational performance. The basic premise underlying TM is that effective management of talented individuals requires alternative practices that are qualitatively different than the baseline HR practices within the organisation. However, as yet we do not have a clear understanding of what those TM practices are and the contexts in which they are not (in)effective. While arguing that TM is a discrete field, it is also very evident that there are potentially key links with a range of areas such as supply chain management, strategy and employer branding. There are aspects within each of these areas that have potential utility in the context of talent management.

Indeed, our review shows that a central focus has been on the systems and processes of TM and management of star employees (e.g. Groysberg et al., 2008). As Schuler et al. (2011, p.2) surmise, the major focus of much of this work was on ‘corporations obtaining and managing a sufficient number of highly talented individuals (... including high level executives, those with high managerial potential, and those with rare technical skills) to deal with the challenge of the global talent shortage’. A key gap in our understanding of TM is what determines high performance? Most studies ignore this question and jump straight into considering how such talents should be managed, implicitly presuming a straightforward linear association between talent and outstanding performance. We argue that this is a key limitation in our understanding of how best to manage top talent. In other words there is a significant degree of ambiguity about the interaction of factors that result in high performance. Without knowing the precise antecedents of high performance it is difficult to understand how best to deliver it. Thus, a key objective of future research efforts should be to consider the antecedents of high performance of the so-called talent. The lack of understanding of the association between talent and high performance will otherwise preclude a clear understanding of how talent contributes to organisational performance.

Moreover, there is the issue of how talent is identified by organisations. In particular, what do organisations look for in individuals when determining whether they are key talent or not? It is likely that achieving a high level of performance will be important but does this equate to talent or are there additional factors/characteristics that one needs to display. Similarly, commitment is likely to be a key ingredient to any ‘talent recipe’ but is unlikely to be the main, or certainly not the only, component. The review demonstrated much use of the term ‘high potential’ but we are typically left wondering when it comes to understanding what is viewed as potential. Clarity over how talent is identified in practice is of key importance because there is danger that if decisions taken are not viewed as relatively objective and transparent that employee dissatisfaction (particularly amongst those not classified) may become an issue (Bjorkman et al., 2013). Consequently, it is clear that scholars perhaps need to take a step backwards in focusing on the key foundation of effective TM – how is talent defined and how is it identified in practice?

These questions give rise to the issue of needing to consider TM in contexts beyond the large, private sector firm. The public sector has been subject to much more intense scrutiny in the developed world during and post GFC. There have been attempts in countries such as Britain, Ireland and Australia to introduce key reforms but reports are beginning to now emerge that raise concerns about the potential for these to succeed as a result of major TM concerns skills gaps are a particular worry (e.g. Hay Group, 2011). There must be some concern, for example, as to what extent the public sector has thought strategically about their talent needs and whether they are equipped to deliver on reforms and future strategy in the context of less resources and greater expectations for improved service delivery and transparency.

## 8.2 Equity, ethics, and justice

One of the more controversial aspects of TM is that considering high performing talents as a *sui generis* group has the potential to polarise individuals in organisations. Despite the ubiquity and the potential consequences of the norms of equity (Adams, 1965), fairness (Festinger, 1954) and justice (Blau, 1964), they have largely been overlooked

(bar some notable exceptions as discussed earlier; Downs and Swailes, 2013; Swailes, 2013). This is a key oversight given fairness, justice and equity are considered cornerstones of healthy organisations (Bloom and Michel, 2002). Indeed, Cosier and Dalton (1983, p.311) argue: 'it is something of an understatement to suggest that concepts such as justice, fairness, and equity are of fundamental importance in the workplace. The consequences of the organization's mishandling of these concepts can be dramatic'.

The issues of equity and fairness are of significant importance here given that many TM systems place considerable onus on A performers and/or talented individuals performing in A positions, thereby creating an employment structure characterised by extreme wage dispersion, and differentiated treatment of employees within the organisation. Groysberg (2010, p.3) argues that one of the roots of inequitable distribution of rent is the fact that in knowledge companies 'where it is virtually an article of faith that settling for 'B' players is a recipe for mediocrity, managers work hard to attract the best and the brightest'. When firms find such talent they essentially offer what it takes to attract and retain them. However, the performance of star performers is contingent on the input of a large number of supporting individuals many of whom may be B or even C players. This could create psychological tensions within the organisation and potentially exacerbate perceived inequalities and perceptions of unfairness. The fact that our review demonstrates limited attention on the perspectives of individuals classified as talent is an issue surrounding this.

A large body of research shows that perceptions of equity and discrepancy are two of the strongest determinants of employees' satisfaction or lack thereof in organisations (c.f. Bloom and Michel, 2002). This is because individuals often compare their compensation to that of referent others (Nosanchuk and Erickson, 1985). The relativity of rewards compared to those who employees consider comparators is often more significant than the absolute level of rewards in evaluations of equity (Bloom and Michel, 2002). Perceptions of relative underpayment have negative repercussions. Zenger (1992) found that the emphasis on rewarding best performers resulted in moderately high performers leaving the organisation because of feelings of inequity. Similarly, studies on the impact of wage dispersion (c.f. Siegel and Hambrick, 2005) demonstrated that it diminishes cooperation (Pfeffer and Langton, 1993), increases managerial turnover (Bloom and Michel, 2002), lowers group cohesion (Bloom, 1999) and negatively impacts firm performance (Siegel and Hambrick, 2005). Bloom and Michel (2002) noted that while extreme pay dispersion enabled firms to retain key star performers, it resulted in a high level of turnover among managers.

Additionally, the issues of equity, fairness and justice may unfold differently across cultural contexts. There is general acceptance of the view that the effectiveness of compensation practices varies across societies (Gomez-Mejia and Werner, 2008). In particular, cultural values and norms, such as how people relate to one another as a group, influence cultural preferences for different compensation systems. For instance, individuals in collectivist cultures, where individuals are tightly bound together, prefer group-based compensation practices to maintain and strengthen in-group harmony (Hui et al., 1991). Therefore, the individualised reward structures inherent in many talent systems may disrupt in-group harmony and as a result may be resisted as illustrated by the Japanese maxim 'the nail that sticks out will be hammered down – *Deru kugi wa utareru*'.

In brief, the issues of equity, justice and ethics are acutely felt in organisations embracing TM. Managers are pulled in opposite directions. TM's simultaneous advocacy for retaining and rewarding star performers on the one hand, and team work, organisational citizenship and motivation on the other may seem contradictory. If these contradictions are not effectively resolved, TM may impede, rather than facilitate, sustainable high performance. Research exploring the ethics of different aspects of talent management across a variety of contexts would greatly add to knowledge and potentially bring fairer, more equitable approaches and enhanced outcomes.

### 8.3 *TM as a contributor to individual, group and organisational outcomes*

Establishing the contribution of TM to individual, group and organisational level outcomes is central to the evolution of the field. While some practitioner reports (e.g. Ernst and Young, 2010, p.4) point to a positive correlation between superior TM and 'enhanced business performance', academically rigorous studies have yet to engage with this. There has been a strong corpus of research that has focused on high performance work systems and how they can lead to positive organisational outcomes (e.g. MacDuffie, 1995). If TM is a truly discrete activity then we need to gain evidence on how different approaches impact performance. Here we caution an approach which becomes overly focused on outcomes such as stock-market performance, which although clearly important may mask the longer-term impact of talent practices owing to the short-term focus of stock-market trends. For example, one of the most prominent exemplars of TM in the original McKinsey study was Enron, a company which clearly was performing very well on the stock market at the time. However, this masked underlying issues with the talent systems underpinning the organisation's performance. Thus, we call for more innovative organisation performance outcomes which look at performance in a broader sense than simply stock-market returns, and which include the perceptions of a wider range of stakeholders.

Davenport et al. (2010) provided a cautionary note around the common mistakes organisations make in utilising talent analytics. These include using analytics as an excuse to treat employees like interchangeable widgets; over relying on a small number of metrics to evaluate performance, risking employees learning to play the system; using inappropriate metrics or keeping metrics live without ongoing business requirements; failing to adopt metrics and analysis to changes in organisational priorities; and using metrics for lower level employees only and focusing on aspects of performance which are easier to quantify. Similarly, Pfeffer (2001) cautions the dangers of fighting the talent war. In particular, he notes the danger of the inevitable individualisation which TM systems assume which diminish the importance of teamwork and can prevent learning in an organisation. Hence, it is a mistake to assume that high levels of individual performance automatically aggregate to organisational performance (see Pfeffer, 2001). So individual performance outcomes need to be contextualised within the teams and organisations in which it unfolds. All in all this calls for a more nuanced approach to measuring the impact of TM on performance outcomes.

This concern around the relationship between TM and individuals and teams is taken up by Tarique and Schuler (2010), albeit in a different context, when talking about how MNCs coordinate their subsidiaries worldwide. They argue that as a result of the pressures or desire to coordinate activities that the importance and reliance on global teams as opposed to individuals is likely to increase. They consider the impact in a cross-

cultural sense that such developments may have on HRM and raise the question, 'Does GTM shift from an individual-based IHRM issue to a team-based IHRM issue?' (Tarique and Schuler, 2010, p.131). This leads to key research questions including: do organisations focus solely on individual performance and potential? Do organisations incorporate the impact of others on an individual's performance and if so, how? Research that focuses on these questions and, more generally, how organisations integrate the team and wider organisational context into TM systems, is needed.

Boudreau (2010) calls for a retooling of HR to utilise adaptations of the same consistent logical frameworks that other organisational leaders use (e.g. net present value, market segmentation) to analyse where to invest, maintain or cut resources in talent. Significant research efforts are required to bridge the knowledge divide between the analytics that are quite commonly used and the analytics that could make a substantial improvement on decision-making around talent. Viewing TM as a decision science offers potential for moving organisational practice beyond the three-by-three performance-versus-potential matrices which appear common in TM processes. As Davenport et al. (2010, p.54) argue 'if you want better performance from your top employees – who are perhaps your greatest asset and your largest expense – you'll do well to favour analytics over your gut instincts'. The deployment of these tools should enhance communication between HR leaders and other stakeholders by reframing HR issues in language and frameworks that these other stakeholders are comfortable with (Boudreau, 2010).

## **9 Conclusion**

This paper provides a comprehensive review of the state of the art in TM scholarship through employing a systematic review. In addition, we have engaged with, as interested scholars, how we feel that the field might usefully develop over the coming years. While there have been reviews on this topic undertaken in previous years we have illustrated that the approach adopted here has surfaced a range of caveats not previously highlighted (e.g. greater quantity of papers, higher proportion of empirical papers). We adopt a view that the field is moving towards adolescence and it has a long, windy road to travel before it reaches maturity (Scott, 1987). The trajectory so far can be viewed as overwhelmingly positive, in terms of advancing our knowledge of TM and how organisations are dealing with the inherent challenges. However, there is a need for caution because it is a term that appears to be used on many occasions in very a loose way that may have negative repercussions for conceptual and theoretical advancement which is the bedrock of establishing a critical research field. In addition, scholars need to push the intellectual boundaries and focus on making this a sustainable field of research that adds not only to academic understanding and theorisation but which also helps bridge the often-highlighted practice gap (McDonnell, 2011). If the field is to advance to maturity there is an acute need for the rather fragmented nature of the literature to be brought closer together towards a more common paradigm and it is this to which we urge scholars to pay most attention.

To do so most effectively will likely require greater levels of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research which are much talked about in academic circles but appear to be relatively uncommon. There are literature bases that in our view have clear resonance with TM but which don't tend to 'talk to one another'. For example, there is a

considerable body of research on ‘stars’ in the psychology journals (e.g. Aguinis and O’Boyle, 2014). We contend that there is potentially greater benefit in greater alignment between scholars in both fields. A limitation of our search methodology is that these potentially significant areas of research which are relevant to TM are not incorporated in the paper.

We contend that not only is there a need to improve from a conceptual and theoretical perspective, but also there needs to be significantly increased empirical investigations that can greatly assist in addressing the aforementioned fragmentation. While our review contradicted previous suggestions that this was a field dominated by conceptual work, there is no room for complacency about the quality and quantity of primary research. We retain the call for increased empirical research but we wish to especially emphasise the need to make significant inroads in terms of the quality, depth and breadth of the methodologies employed. The use of single case studies has been, and can continue to be, useful in enhancing the depth of understanding. However, it is clear that the level to which some of these case studies delve could be deepened. There needs to be a greater inclusion of different stakeholders which pushes forward the idea of multi-level designs. For example, in addition to HR managers and the top management team, we need to hear the voices of middle and line managers, consultants, recruitment agencies, employees and their representatives. Further, there is a need to move towards conducting more generalisable studies. There is much scope for quantitative work in this area; however, a key challenge is the lack of boundaries that exist in the literature. Without the development of constructs it will be very difficult to undertake research with high levels of reliability and validity.

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## Note

- 1 It must be acknowledged that making interpretations on affiliations of authors is problematic given global mobility of academics.

## Appendix – Systematic review methodology

In order to identify relevant peer reviewed articles we utilised the two most comprehensive databases in management and organisation studies, namely *ProQuest* and *Scopus*. The term ‘talent management’ was used as the search criterion. The objective was to identify all theoretical and empirical journal articles addressing talent management from 1998 until May 2013. The year 1998 was selected as the starting point on the basis that it is commonly cited as the year in which talent management became popularised due to the McKinsey report coining the phrase the ‘war for talent’ (Chambers et al., 1998). Peer reviewed, English language scholarly journals were used as key filters in our search. Hence, conference papers, editorials, monographs, books, book chapters and unpublished works were excluded in our review due to lack of a consistent quality assurance mechanism. In other words, it was too difficult to determine if there had been any peer review process undertaken in these mediums.

The initial *Scopus* search returned 209 papers, while the *ProQuest* search returned 265 articles. As a means of focusing on high-quality publications, journals were only included if they were ranked as a two or higher in the Association of Business Schools (ABS) (UK) academic journal quality guide (2009, version 3) and/or a A\*, A or B in the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) academic journal rankings (2010). This provided a baseline quality threshold beyond a paper just having to be peer reviewed. For example, in the ABS 3\* outlets publish ‘original and well executed research papers and are highly regarded’. It is important to acknowledge that these journal ranking lists are not adopted universally and that other journal ranking lists also exist; however, there is a strong degree of overlap among the different sources. We also considered other quality benchmarks but felt that these rankings were most suitable and more inclusive because of the relatively recent development of talent management scholarship. For example, the use of citation records, sometimes used in systematic reviews, did not make sense because of how recent research appears to have emerged. Consequently, while the objective criteria utilised here are not without potential criticism we argue that our approach is more comprehensive than many review pieces in the field of management which tend to focus strongly on a very small number of leading, typically US, journals.

After the initial scanning and exclusion of articles took place (i.e. those that did not meet the criteria set out thus far), we read through each remaining article to more effectively determine whether there was a strong focus on talent management as opposed to the paper merely paying a fleeting reference to the topic. For example, the use of the talent management terminology in the title or keywords but the paper paying absolutely no attention to the topic was not uncommon. On completion of this task, we were left with a total of 88 papers.