

Future-proofing talent management: Organisational implications and practical considerations



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Orientation: The study investigated the organisational level factors that impact the sustainable operationalisation of talent management.

Research purpose: The study explored the impact and interplay of internal realities and talent choices in determining a fit-for-purpose talent management approach.

Motivation for the study: The changes that organisations face have given rise to the need to re-evaluate talent management practices, which remain largely devoid of the potential impact of contextual factors and realities.

Research approach/design and method: The qualitative study was conducted in two phases. During the first phase, data were collected from 13 talent management professionals using purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews. During phase two, the Delphi method was used to validate the findings with an expert panel ($n = 8$).

Main findings: The four broad themes identified through the research relate to: (1) the interplay between organisational factors and internal realities, (2) congruence between the organisational context and talent philosophy in talent management execution, (3) clarity on defining talent and (4) challenges in translating talent philosophies into practices.

Practical/managerial implications: Organisational factors and internal realities impact the talent choices that the organisation must make and is reflected in who is defined as talent and how talent is believed to add value. These factors must be considered in talent management execution, by using this as input into the talent management strategy and the basis for prioritising talent management practices.

Contribution/value-add: The study makes a contribution to talent management theory and practice by focusing on organisational factors that impact the successful execution of talent management.

Keywords: talent management; talent philosophy; talent execution; talent choices; adaptive talent management practices.

Introduction

Organisations are being challenged to quickly adapt to survive in the current global economic climate (Prouska & Psychogios, 2018). For organisations to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) while remaining relevant and sustainable, a proactive approach to transitioning into the future world of work is required (World Economic Forum, 2018). While technology drives disruption and creativity, the ability to manage the supply and demand for talent in accordance with organisational strategy is what truly distinguishes successful organisations (Cascio & Aguinis, 2019). Forecasting and preparing for future skill requirements not only provide an advantage to organisations that have access to talents when they need them, but it also reduces the risks of expected negative business outcomes associated with skill gaps (World Economic Forum, 2016).

Effective talent management is a business necessity that influences the success of organisations (Raheem & Kahn, 2019). Within the context of the 4IR, talent management has the potential to combine technology, the employee experience and the work environment in a manner that generates sustainable value for individuals and organisations (Claus, 2019).

However, talent management practices have not sufficiently evolved beyond the war for talent, as first conceptualised in the late 1990s. The focus of talent management was on remaining ahead of

the competition, by discovering talented individuals and ensuring that this talent is managed, developed and retained within the organisation (Claus, 2019). This indicates that talent management strategies have concentrated mostly on employees filling specified jobs and calibrating development and advancement within an inclusiveness or exclusivity talent approach (Meyers et al., 2019).

The changes that organisations face have given rise to the need to re-evaluate talent management practices, which no longer serve the needs of organisations or employees (Claus, 2019). Current talent management practices and research within this domain are largely devoid of the potential impact of related contextual factors and realities (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Sparrow, 2019). A more adaptive approach to talent management is therefore required, to take these complexities and realities into account and deliver fit-for-purpose talent management practices that unlock business value.

While there is research that highlights the important role that talent management plays in driving organisational outcomes as well as various individual outcomes, very little is understood about the exact ways in which talent management affects these outcomes (Mensah, 2019; Thunnissen, 2016). In particular, very little research is focused on the factors that underpin adaptive talent management practices, in response to the changes brought about by the 4IR and the changing world of work.

Research purpose

The aim of the research was to explore and address some of the aforementioned gaps and challenges within talent management, by specifically focusing on the factors that underpin the effectiveness of talent management. Firstly, the research investigates the dominant organisational level factors that impact on talent management execution. Secondly, the research explores the talent choices that organisations must intentionally make, to effectively implement adaptive talent management practices.

Literature review

The literature review provides the theoretical foundation for this article, by firstly providing a definition of talent management that addresses the realities of the changing world of work, as well as its boundaries. Secondly, emphasis is placed on the organisational perspective of talent management, including the role of talent philosophies, to shape an understanding of how talent management is operationalised. These highlight the critical contextual factors that impact talent management practices in the changing world of work.

Defining talent management and its boundaries

The research and definition of talent management has been, similarly to human resource management, fragmented over time (Sparrow, 2019). Throughout the literature, talent management is often used synonymously with general

human resource practices, through simply relabelling activities associated with human resource management (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Claus, 2019).

Despite varying definitions of talent management, all definitions share an underlying belief that managing talent successfully is critical to organisational success (Al Ariss et al., 2014). Most definitions also acknowledge the role that the organisational environment plays to enable successful talent management practices (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Ulrich, 2015). Talent management is also defined within the individual context (management of talented employees) (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Claus, 2019; Meyers et al., 2019) or as an organisation asset (a talent supply chain management approach) (Makarius & Srinivasan, 2017).

Talent management therefore starts by identifying roles within the organisation that are key to the sustained success of the organisation (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Mensah, 2019). When considering the economic pressures and demands placed on organisations within the 4IR, this proactive approach is critical to ensure sustainability and success. Talent pooling and recruitment efforts should therefore be focused on filling these roles through external sourcing or internal development (Al Ariss et al., 2014) and are not standalone activities, devoid of strategic context. This definition of talent management also emphasises the need to foster motivation, organisational commitment and performance from employees, to ensure maximised contribution to the organisation (Al Ariss et al., 2014). This considers the organisational and individual factors which impact the success of talent management practices, which is of relevance in the changing workforce strategies and workforce composition in the 4IR. This definition of talent management therefore forms the basis and point of departure for a fit-for-purpose talent management approach, which is explored and expanded on within this article.

The organisational talent management perspective

From an organisational perspective, talent management is a key strategic activity that enables organisations to reach their objectives, through various talent practices and processes (Shahi et al., 2020). One of the reasons why talent management remains high on the executive agenda is that it provides insight into answering the long-term strategic question around the talent supply necessary to deliver on strategic intent (Ibrahim & Zayed, 2018). It is the conduit through which organisations can articulate what is required from employees or human capital to achieve high levels of performance, now and into the future (Ibrahim & Zayed, 2018). Therefore, the consistent overarching aim of talent management is to drive organisational performance through engagement (higher levels of motivation, job satisfaction and commitment of employees), ongoing development of skills and knowledge within the organisation and retention of talented employees (De Boeck et al., 2017; Shahi et al., 2020). This means that at its core, talent management is focused on integrating the

activities, practices and processes that manage talent across different life cycles, business phases, geographies, employment arrangements and industries, to enable organisational success (Schiemann, 2014).

Talent philosophies

Talent philosophies refer to the underlying beliefs held about talent, its interpretation and ultimately the value and instrumentality that it holds within organisations (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014). Therefore, talent philosophies impact the way in which organisations operationalise talent management in the business and how its effectiveness is measured (Meyers et al., 2019). Sparrow and Makram (2015) further propose the use of ‘talent architecture’ (which refers to the systems, processes and activities included in talent management practices), as an overarching concept that underpins how value is created through talent management practices. This concept expands on and reconciles the talent philosophies and beliefs that organisations hold about talent management, which is further expanded on in the sections that follow.

Although many tensions exist in how talent is understood, the tension between inclusivity and exclusivity of talent, as well as the tension between innate and attained (developable) talent are seen as the most salient tensions which also have the biggest impact on how talent management is operationalised within organisations (Dries, 2013; Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014; Meyers et al., 2019; Sparrow & Makram, 2015). These tensions are also closely linked to the object versus subject definition of talent, which fundamentally impacts the underlying talent philosophies (Schiemann, 2014). If talent is viewed as an object, the associated tension arises out of the question whether talent is then inherent or attained. If talent is viewed as a subject, the extent to which talent practices are inclusive or exclusive is impacted by this (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014; Meyers et al., 2019; Schiemann, 2014). Ultimately, the value of talent philosophies lies in their ability to assist in managing the tensions that exist within the field of talent management (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014; Meyers et al., 2019).

Research design

Research approach

The research problem is viewed through the lens of social constructivism, meaning that reality is constructed through people’s perceptions and the meanings ascribed to interactions and external phenomena (Tracy, 2013). A generic qualitative approach was followed to gather data from research participants and create a detailed understanding of talent management and how it is influenced. This provided access to meanings and an in-depth understanding of the way that things happen, in line with the underlying beliefs of the research paradigm (subjectivism) (Spencer et al., 2014). It provided an understanding of the meanings and relationships between concepts which was utilised to develop a practical and theoretical contribution (Saunders et al., 2016).

Research method

The research was conducted in two phases, to clearly align the data collection to the research purpose. The study was cross-sectional in timeframe, studying a specific phenomenon at a specific point in time (Saunders et al., 2016). Non-probability, purposive sampling was used to select participants for data collection, across the various research phases (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lune & Berg, 2017).

During the first phase of the research, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The sample was selected from a target population of talent management professionals (in South Africa), who: (1) are currently working as practitioners within talent management and have insight into current and future talent requirements and (2) are representative of various organisations, to ensure a heterogeneous sample. To achieve the objectives of the study, a small sample comprising 13 selected participants was included in the study, as detailed in Table 1.

During the second phase of the research, the initial findings were presented to an expert panel to validate through consensus agreement during two rounds. An overview of

TABLE 1: Overview of the interview participants according to inclusion criteria.

Participant code	Industry	Level of experience overall	Level of experience in talent management	Educational background
Participant 1	Financial services	Expert (10+ years)	Expert (10+ years)	Master’s degree, IOP, PhD candidate
Participant 2	Financial services	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Master’s degree, PhD candidate
Participant 3	Transportation and financial services	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Master’s degree, IOP
Participant 4	Airline	Expert (10+ years)	Expert (10+ years)	Master’s degree, IOP, PhD
Participant 5	Technology	Expert (10+ years)	Senior (5–8 years)	Master’s degree
Participant 6	Food delivery	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Master’s degree, IOP
Participant 7	Mining and financial services	Expert (10+ years)	Senior (5–8 years)	Master’s degree
Participant 8	Logistics	Expert (10+ years)	Expert (10+ years)	Master’s degree
Participant 9	Transportation (government)	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Master’s degree, IOP
Participant 10	Financial services	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Master’s degree
Participant 11	Investments	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Master’s degree
Participant 12	Healthcare	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Honours degree
Participant 13	Financial services	Expert (10+ years)	Expert (10+ years)	Master’s degree, IOP

Note: IOP refers to professional registration as an Industrial and Organisational Psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa.

the statements presented to the expert panel is detailed in Table 2.

The Delphi method was used during this data-collection phase. After each round, the level of agreement was determined by listing the extent of agreement of each statement or insight shared (Avella, 2016). The input rounds were completed until themes were narrowed down to an acceptable level of consensus. Although agreement between 55% and 70% is generally deemed as acceptable (Vernon, 2009), 80% agreement was used as the threshold for majority consensus in the study to ensure nuances and dynamics were incorporated in the findings. This approach to data saturation is different than in thematic analysis as the level of consensus was the primary consideration for finalising the themes.

The success of the Delphi method for data collection is largely dependent on the selection of the panel of experts (Avella, 2016); therefore, experts in the field of talent management were carefully chosen for this phase of data collection (see Table 3). For the Delphi method, eight participants were included in the sample, to ensure adequate validation of the findings. These participants did not form part of the practitioners included as participants in the semi-structured interviews conducted in phase two of the research.

Thematic analysis was used as the primary data analysis technique within the study, breaking down data into its smaller units and elements and then ascribing meaning to the data gathered through a coding process (Lune & Berg, 2017; Saunders et al., 2016). The themes and subthemes identified during this process were integrated into the overall findings.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Trustworthiness ensures research legitimacy and usability (Nowell et al., 2017). Several criteria were followed to ensure research quality (Gray, 2019; Saunders et al., 2016). Firstly, transferability refers to the research's comparability to other research and contexts (Gray, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2016). In this study, transferability was ensured by documenting the research process to allow other researchers to conduct the study in other contexts and research settings. Secondly, dependability means providing a reliable research account that others can understand and evaluate (Gray, 2019; Saunders et al., 2016). This was done by carefully documenting the research process as it evolved. Thirdly, credibility refers to how well the findings represent the data collected from participants (Nowell et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2016). Sufficiency of data (gathering enough data to draw specific conclusions), triangulation of data (making connections between the literature and participant-collected data), member checking (testing data and interpretations with participants) during interviews and validation through the Delphi method during data analysis all contributed to ensuring this. Finally, confirmability involves linking data and interpretations in a way that others can understand. It

involves showing how data are interpreted and conclusions drawn (Gray, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2016). Confirmability in the study was achieved through the documentation and in-depth integration between the findings and the literature, as well as clear reasoning for theoretical, methodological and analytical approaches throughout the study (Nowell et al., 2017).

Results

The main findings across the two phases of the research have been categorised into four broad themes, which are further expanded on within each. A summary of the broad categories is indicated in Table 4.

Theme 1: Interplay between organisational factors and internal realities in the context of talent management

The first broad theme identified is linked to the important interplay between organisational factors and internal realities that the organisation has to consider and address in their talent management strategy and execution.

The ability of the organisation to adapt and respond to change, and its tolerance for volatility was identified as a salient theme during the participant interviews, specifically the ability of HR to anticipate and plan for various scenarios and how this may in turn impact on talent and the broader workforce. During the expert panel validation, workforce planning, scenario planning and responsive organisational design were validated and highlighted as key dependencies for embedding and adopting adaptive talent management practices.

'We are dabbling in the context of digitisation. It is a little bit slow, because you have mindsets that you need to change. And it is people who actually started the processes and they are reluctant to change and to adapt or adopt something new, that they actually become the barriers to that process.' (Participant 1, Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

'I think it also provides opportunity to look at people through new lenses and say, people can easily adapt, and they can be optimised in a different way.' (Participant 13, Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

Interview participants indicated that the access that the organisation has to the skills that they need, both internally and externally, as well as the availability of these skills in the talent market also has a direct influence on where talent management efforts are focused.

'It's almost every skill shortage in asset management. There is a small market generally.' (Participant 11, Investments, 10+ years of experience)

'Trying to find the right skill sets or capabilities within a specific role has been quite challenging.' (Participant 3, Transportation and Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

'You will struggle to build the skills that are required, and you have to follow a bit of a buy strategy.' (Participant 7, Mining and Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

TABLE 2: Overview of the statements presented to the expert panel for validation.**Organisational factors**

Organisational factors refer to organisational attributes and organisational decisions that have an impact on talent management in the organisation.

- The organisational identity affects how the organisation expresses itself through its strategic choices, its culture and ultimately the way that it is perceived in the market.
- The organisational strategy defines the longer-term ambition and strategic priorities of the organisation to remain sustainable and competitive in the longer term.
- The organisational purpose articulates the organisation's reason for existence and sets the tone for the strategic priorities and the brand messaging of the organisation (both internally and externally).
- The workforce composition of the organisation (demographics, skills, tenure and diversity) affects the internal realities to be considered in talent management.
- The workforce strategies of the organisation refer to the longer-term planning and forecasting of the organisation to manage skills demand and supply.
- The workplace strategies of the organisation (where and when work takes place) are strategic decisions made by the organisation driven by both organisational and individual factors.
- Workplace strategies affect the access that the organisation has to attract and retain skills.
- The skills demand of the organisation refers to the skills required to deliver on its strategy.
- The skills supply of the organisation refers to the skills that the organisation has access to – either through internal skills or the external skills market.
- The balance of skills demand and skills supply of the organisation affects its longer-term sustainability (viability to exist).
- The organisational factors (as described) and the contextual factors in which the organisation operates in effect to the internal realities that the organisation has to consider in talent management.

Internal realities

Internal realities refer to the circumstances and implications of the organisational factors that have to be considered and accommodated in talent management.

- Geographies and location of the business affect the access to talent.
- High levels of turnover (inherent to industry or as a result of external factors) affect the way that the organisation invests in talent.
- The organisational culture affects the success of talent management efforts.
- Certain specialist or niche skills are most effective when built internally and require time and effort to mature.
- Employer brand and reputation in the talent market affect access to talent.
- Diversity and inclusion in the organisation may support or hamper talent management efforts, and vice versa.
- Overall organisational digital readiness and adoption affect the organisational capabilities and types of skill that the organisation would need to invest in.
- The extent to which the organisation is able to identify the skills needed (for example, robust strategy and workforce planning processes) affects talent management maturity and sustainability.
- Legislative and economic constraints may affect what is prioritised in talent management.

Organisational capabilities and skills segmentation

Organisational capabilities refer to the processes, systems and skills that the organisation invests in to deliver on strategic intent. Skills segmentation refers to the process of translating organisational requirements into the types of skill required, and the type of investment in these skills required to deliver on strategic intent.

- Organisational capabilities play an important role in translating the organisational strategy into skills required to deliver on strategic intent.
- Skills segmentation plays an important role in making strategic choices around the investment required in certain skills sets to sustainably deliver on strategic intent.
- The two main considerations that form the basis for skills segmentation are criticality (how critical the skill is for the organisation's core delivery) and scarcity (how easy or difficult it is to access and acquire the skills).
- Skills segmentation is closely aligned with the organisational strategy and the strategic workforce plan that translate skills into roles and headcount requirements.
- Skills segmentation is separate to talent segmentation or talent identification, which considers attributes of individuals in addition to their skills.
- Talent architecture (the competencies and skills required across various levels) is essential to define requirements of individuals to deliver on organisational capabilities and strategic intent.
- An output from organisational capability mapping and skills segmentation is a clear strategic workforce plan and talent architecture that support talent management and align it with the organisational strategy.

Talent philosophy

Talent philosophy refers to the underlying beliefs about what talent is in the organisation, the purpose that it serves, and the most effective ways to manage talent. Ultimately, philosophical beliefs drive the alignment of talent management practices in a coherent way.

- The underlying belief about who/what talent is should be aligned closely with the organisational reality.
- The talent philosophy affects how talent is defined in the organisation.
- The talent philosophy determines the extent to which talent management practices are inclusive or exclusive in nature.
- The talent philosophy should not reflect personal beliefs and preferences of what talent is and how it should be managed.
- The three biggest organisational factors that affect the talent philosophy of the organisation are the: (1) organisational size, (2) current internal talent capacity, and (3) organisation's access to skills.
- Talent can be considered as the inherent/innate attributes of people; therefore, they are managed with exclusivity (identify the existence of talents in a small group of individuals and manage differentially).
- Talent can be considered as the attainable/developable attributes of people; therefore, they are managed with exclusivity (identify potential in a small group of individuals and manage differentially).
- Talent can be considered as the inherent/innate attributes that all people possess; therefore, they are managed with inclusivity (align people with opportunities to display their talents).
- Talent can be considered as the attainable/developable attributes that everyone can achieve; therefore, they are managed with inclusivity (everyone is talent).
- The way in which talent is defined is largely dependent on the criticality and scarcity of the skills required in the organisation.
- Where the dominant skills required are highly scarce, talent may be defined as innate/inherent that has to be sought.
- Where the dominant skills required are less scarce, talent may be defined as attainable/developable that can be built.
- In larger organisations with more access to talent (internally or externally), a more exclusive approach to talent management is likely fit for purpose.
- In smaller organisations with less access to talent (internally or externally), a more inclusive approach to talent management is likely fit for purpose.
- The underlying talent philosophy determines the extent to which talent management practices are either self-directed or organisationally directed.

TABLE 3: Overview of the expert panel participants according to inclusion criteria.

Participant code	Level of experience overall	Thought leadership/conceptual model development experience	Level of experience in talent management	Educational background
Expert 1	Expert (10+ years)	Expert (10+ years)	Expert (10+ years)	PhD, IOP
Expert 2	Expert (10+ years)	Expert (10+ years)	Expert (10+ years)	PhD, IOP
Expert 3	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Master's degree, IOP
Expert 4	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Expert (10+ years)	Master's degree, IOP
Expert 5	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Expert (10+ years)	PhD, IOP
Expert 6	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Expert (10+ years)	Master's degree, IOP
Expert 7	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Expert (10+ years)	Master's degree, IOP
Expert 8	Expert (10+ years)	Advanced (8–10 years)	Expert (10+ years)	Master's degree

Note: IOP refers to professional registration as an Industrial and Organisational Psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa.

TABLE 4: Overview of the broad themes identified during phase one and phase two of the research.

Theme 1: Interplay between organisational factors and internal realities in the context of talent management

Theme 2: Congruence between organisational context and talent philosophy in talent management execution

Theme 3: Clarity on what is defined as talent within the organisation, to operationalise talent management

Theme 4: Challenges in translating talent philosophies into talent strategy and talent management practices

'But what we saw, what we do experience, from a talent perspective, we do experience a high turnover rate.' (Participant 12, Healthcare, 10+ years of experience)

This was validated by the expert panel where access and availability were further distinguished. In this case, the access to skills refers to the pools and pipelines that the organisation has, the attractiveness of the organisation in the talent market, the effectiveness of internal mobility and talent acquisition strategies and value proposition of the organisation to access the talent that they need. Availability within this context refers to the scarcity of the skills in the market, how easy or difficult talent is to find and the level of ease with which talent can be tapped into through the value proposition and offerings of the organisation.

In addition to the access to and availability of skills, the workplace strategies of the organisation were identified by interview participants as one of the biggest impacts on the talent management practices that are feasible and effective for the organisation to adopt. This specifically refers to when, where and how work gets delivered.

'So definitely, I think from that point, we've seen talent that have come in, who've actually re-evaluated what their priorities are.' (Participant 1, Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

'And then again, we are offering them, you know, flexibility in their work arrangement, so they can be better at work-life balances.' (Participant 2, Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

'It does seem from a talent perspective it is a challenge in this new sort of era where people don't have full flexibility work from home and that precludes us from those individuals who are looking for a fully remote life career experience. And so that is limiting. From a talent perspective.' (Participant 6, Food Delivery, 10+ years of experience)

The above quotes reflect how the workplace is defined, the level of flexibility with which work can be delivered and the

nature of the work being delivered. The expert validation confirmed that the extent to which the organisation can meet talent expectations related to flexibility not only has a direct impact on access to talent but also impacts the adaptive talent management practices that are considered fit for purpose within various organisational settings.

Similarly, the workforce composition of the organisation was highlighted as an organisational factor that impacts talent management practices. Interview participants specifically emphasised the differences in approach depending on employment type and related expectations. The type of skills within the organisation in relation to the work being delivered was also seen to impact the talent management practices of the organisation.

'It's 15 000 full-time employees and then we have in excess of 100 000, delivery couriers who are ... have differing relationships with the business contractually.' (Participant 6, Food Delivery, 10+ years of experience)

'So mostly permanent workforce, we're looking at a highly skilled workforce. So, a big portion of probably 40%, maybe even 50% of our workforce is deep tech specialised.' (Participant 5, Technology, 10+ years of experience)

'I think the two that we've got two main groups, the one group, which you would call your white-collar environment, or professional services ... and then there's a different group, which is typically your so-called blue-collar people ... and those two different areas have very different needs from a talent perspective.' (Participant 8, Logistics, 10+ years of experience)

'The biggest investment goes, obviously, to the investment professionals.' (Participant 11, Investments, 10+ years of experience)

During the expert validation phase, this was confirmed to be related to the ways in which different skill sets are attracted, developed and engaged within the organisation. It was also related to various expectations that are held by different employee groupings on the level of direction and involvement that is expected from the organisation in managing, supporting and enabling their careers.

Theme 2: Congruence between organisational context and talent philosophy in talent management execution

In addition to the organisational factors and internal realities, the importance of congruence between this organisational context and the talent philosophy of the organisation as a

basis for the operationalisation of talent management practices emerged as a theme. The talent management philosophy adopted by the organisation and the extent to which this reflects the organisational factors and internal realities of the organisation are seen to have a direct influence on adaptive talent management practices.

In particular, the inclusivity or exclusivity of talent management practices is seen to have the biggest impact on the operationalisation of talent management practices. Through the expert validation, this was validated as the extent to which talent management practices are applicable to a selected few (exclusively) or all (inclusively) and reflects the organisation's underlying belief about what talent is and how it is believed to add value to the organisation. Although there is no agreement on which approach is most appropriate, interview participants highlighted the importance of both the organisational and the individual impact of both approaches. Where exclusivity of practices is closely linked to broader organisational strategy and outcomes, the value of inclusive practices is seen in their ability to engage and empower individuals.

'I think it's detrimental in your business to put out exclusionary programmes. And I think it has a negative impact, more so today than has in the past on, on your culture and on engagement. So, I don't I don't think it serves the business to have to have a very exclusive approach.' (Participant 6, Food Delivery, 10+ years of experience)

'I think you will treat people the way you see them. And if you see some people as being less than others, you actually treat them in that way. So, for me, I think it was more around the cultural shift, are the cognitive shift that needs to take place, that actually will have resulted in how you see how you think about people, how you perceive them, and then ultimately, how you treat them.' (Participant 1, Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

'[A]nd I think that the executive team were comfortable that from acquisition, if they feel that there is no fit, there would not be a lot of great people ... so they are comfortable that it's exclusionary to a point.' (Participant 11, Investments, 10+ years of experience)

'I guess, as a starting point, our performance management system is applies advice about talent management, because if you've got good talent, you should see it in performance. And, and so what we use our talent manage performance management system for is to segment our talents, into terms of their performance. So, we know exactly who our lower performers are, guys, people that are either not performing or struggling to perform, you know exactly where our heart formers are. And we know where everybody sits in the middle. And so, at the moment, our current strategy is programmes developed for each one of those categories. So, I'd say we segment, I start there, and then we have programmes for each one of those segments. It's not intended to be exclusionary, but it's intended to get the best for each of those groups.' (Participant 2, Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

Interview participants identified a number of factors that seem to affect the underlying talent philosophy adopted by the organisation. Although these factors do not always clearly translate into a defined philosophy, they are seen to

affect the underlying belief around what talent is and how talent should be managed implicitly or explicitly. Table 5 summarises the factors described in this subtheme which are seen to affect the underlying philosophical belief of talent in organisations and the ways in which they could affect the talent philosophy.

Through the expert validation it was determined that talent management is an integrated practice in organisations. Even at a philosophical level, it must be understood both in the context of the organisation and its realities, as well as in the context of individual careers and the experience of talent in the organisation.

Theme 3: Clarity on what is defined as talent within the organisation, to operationalise talent management

The underpinning talent philosophy (as outlined in Theme 2) reflects an organisational approach and belief around how talent management translates into value for the organisation. Another broad theme identified through the participant interviews and supported by during the Delphi validation is that the definition of talent within the organisation has a direct impact not only on what demarcates talent management practices but also on the translation of this into the talent strategy and talent management practices within the organisation.

Interview participants had varying views and beliefs around how talent is defined or what is considered talent in their organisations.

TABLE 5: Overview of the factors that impact the talent philosophy as identified through participant interviews.

Factors that affect the talent philosophy	How does it affect the talent philosophy?
Organisation size, workforce composition and strategic purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practical considerations for managing talent. Speed of acquiring talent. Talent as a market differentiator. Feasibility of longer-term investments in talent.
Legacy/inherited beliefs in the organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dominant view of how talent is defined and managed. Overemphasis of past successes and failures. Reluctance to let go of tried and tested beliefs. Overreliance of personal beliefs.
Talent management maturity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on how philosophy is operationalised through talent management practices and processes. Overreliance on personal beliefs about talent. Limited consideration of organisational context. Focus on transactional talent management practices.
Mobility and career management practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maturity and effectiveness of talent mobility and career management practices. Congruence between talent management and career experiences.
Adoption of employee experience/human-centred practice design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consideration of the experience of employees in talent management. Congruence between philosophical talent management beliefs and career experiences in the organisation.

'So certainly, some talent we can develop. And then there's definitely talent that we look for that is innate to people, particularly the soft skill side of things: leadership skills, management skills, relationship building skills, you know, those things are all things that, you know, more than opinion, I guess, in fact, I guess you can develop those things, but let's face it, some people are just better at dealing with customers and others, you know. So, we look at it from both perspectives.' (Participant 2, Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

'...[P]eople bring certain strengths, experiences, skill sets, and that they can offer those up in the business. And it's about finding the right the optimal place for those people in the business.' (Participant 6, Food Delivery, 10+ years of experience)

'I think while everyone is considered talent, I think that in terms of the organisation, you do really need to focus on those very, very critical positions.' (Participant 9, Transportation [Government], 10+ years of experience)

'We believe everybody's talent' (Participant 5, Technology, 10+ years of experience)

'We see each and every person working for us as talent, and each and every person wanting to work for us as talent.' (Participant 8, Logistics, 10+ years of experience)

'I think the predominant view is that you can hire for potential.' (Participant 7, Mining and Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

Although the distinction is much less explicit than simply subscribing to a definition of inherent or attained, the underlying beliefs around what talent looks like and how to capture value from it in the organisation can be categorised under the themes of 'something to uncover and keep' (inherent) and 'something that can be developed' (attained). In most cases, the definition of talent was closely related to the inclusivity or exclusivity of talent management practices, which were often used interchangeably to describe what talent is and, therefore, how it is managed.

In describing their philosophical belief around what talent is, some participants referred to talent as an inherent attribute of individuals that is considered elite or rare and has to be identified or sourced because it is important to the organisation. For these participants, everyone is seen as having some skills or attributes that can be developed over time. However, where a particular set of skills is critical to the business through skills segmentation, those with these attributes are sought after and described as talent. These attributes are also used as shared criteria that individuals possess when identifying talent in the organisation. Accordingly, talent management clearly refers to identifying and matching specific skills and talents to the business requirements with less of a focus on developing these skills or attributes over time.

'And because it's a larger organisation, you have many more layers and many more senior management levels.' (Participant 9, Transportation [Government], 10+ years of experience)

'And we said that as a business, we can't afford certain leaders being at a higher level than other leaders. So as a business, our promise is that every single leader in our business will go

through a leadership development programme.' (Participant 3, Transportation and Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

'And we will support them in terms of the development irrespective if they are in those clusters.' (Participant 3, Transportation and Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

'We need to career manage them (critical and scarce talent) so that we don't lose them.' (Participant 10, Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

From the participant interviews as well as the expert validation, the definition of talent varies and may differ between organisations, industries or practitioners. Being a largely philosophical orientation, differing views are not unexpected, but the importance of the underlying talent definition in driving talent practices cannot be underestimated. To some extent, there seems to be misalignment or disjointedness about who or what constitutes talent; the extent to which talent practices are inclusive or exclusive and how this translates into value for the organisation.

Theme 4: Challenges in translating talent philosophies into talent strategy and talent management practices

From the participant interviews, several challenges emerged in translating talent philosophies into their talent management strategy, practices or processes. These were expressed as various dependencies that currently affect the way that talent practices are prioritised in the organisation. These emergent challenges are important to consider and resolve through the talent strategy as they affect operationalisation through talent management practices. In relating these challenges back to the underlying beliefs around talent, themes emerged that are largely centred around balancing the organisational needs with the individual needs and experiences of talent management in the organisation, the assumed contradictions between talent identification and development and challenges in identifying potential where this is an underlying belief. Each challenge is related back to dominant philosophical beliefs in the organisation in Table 6.

Disjointedness between 'what is said' and 'what is done' affects the translation of the talent philosophy into talent practices and the extent to which these can be sustained in the organisation.

'How do we bring in a set of values that will navigate ... because we're very clear on what we need to do; we're not always so clear on how we need to do it.' (Participant 13, Financial Services, 10+ years of experience)

'I'm definitely of the mindset that it's better to customise for your own culture and your environments. But also, in that design process to make sure that you are aligned to some global best practice.' (Participant 12, Healthcare, 10+ years of experience)

'Eventually building a high-performance culture and just make sure that there is some form of alignment to how you show up.' (Participant 11, Investments, 10+ years of experience)

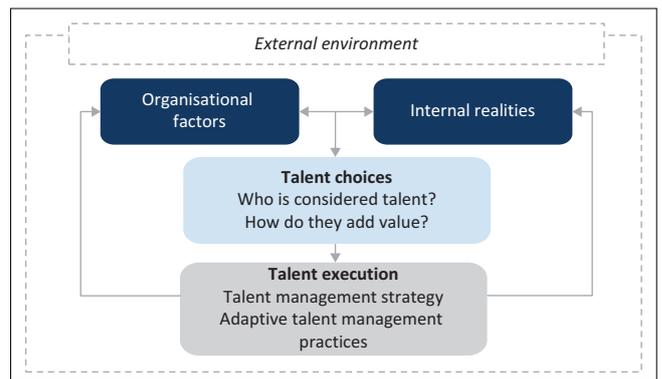
TABLE 6: Challenges in translating philosophical beliefs into talent management strategy and practices.

Philosophical beliefs	Emergent challenges in
Talent management practices are inclusive of all employees, no one is excluded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which practices are prioritised for the benefit of the organisation? • Misalignment between what is good for the organisation and what is good for the individual. • Practicality and feasibility of a blanket approach to talent management.
Talent management practices are exclusive and should only be focused on those identified as talent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robustness of talent identification that is free of biases that affect success. • Alignment of identified talent and talent management practices with the organisational strategy. • How to communicate inclusion to identified talent and how this is managed? • How to ensure the rest of the workforce remain engaged and are not alienated from the process? • Distinguishing talent management and career management activities.
Only some are considered talent and display distinct characteristics that we need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we identify these characteristics accurately in relation to the organisational needs? • What is the role of development in the organisation? • How to measure characteristics that have been identified? • Communicating talent status to talent pools. • Organisationally driven or individually driven career experiences of talent.
Everyone has the potential to be talent or is viewed as talent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is potential defined in the organisation? • How is potential measured and managed effectively? • What is the role of development in the organisation? • Organisationally driven or individually driven career experiences of talent. • Showing value or return on investment in talent. • Proactivity to manage and deploy talent in changing contexts as a result of large fluid talent pools.

Discussion

Based on the findings of the study and the broad themes identified, there are various organisational level factors that impact the execution of the talent management strategy. Aligned with the research question of this study, the interplays and impacts between these factors are outlined and visualised through Figure 1.

Organisational factors organisational factors and internal realities are seen to jointly impact the philosophical views that the organisation holds about talent. One of the biggest challenges identified is the impact of incongruency between the organisational context, internal realities and talent execution. Therefore, the underpinning talent philosophy is positioned as certain talent choices that the organisation must intentionally make, which reflects what is believed about talent. The talent choices relate to (1) how talent is defined (who is considered to be or have talent) and (2) how talent is best managed to add value to the organisation (inclusivity or exclusivity in approach). These three factors culminate into the execution of talent management practices (i.e. talent execution). To address some of the challenges

**FIGURE 1:** Overview of the interplay of organisational level factors that impact talent management execution.

identified in the translation of the talent philosophy into practices, this includes both a defined talent management strategy and value-based talent management practices that reflect these considerations. Value-based talent management practices include practices that focus on value creation, alignment, leverage and protection, in response to the talent management strategy and context. Each of these three components will be discussed in the upcoming section.

Organisational factors and its relevance

Organisational factors refer to the unique organisational attributes and organisational decisions that have an impact on talent management in the organisation. These are often impacted by external and contextual factors but are usually somewhat more within the control of the organisation or could be changed over time (Jooss et al., 2022). These factors also represent the opportunities and limitations that are inherent to the organisation, at a point in time (Kafetzopoulos et al., 2022). The organisational factors of relevance can be clustered or grouped together to describe the organisational 'why', 'what', 'how', 'who' and 'where', as depicted in Figure 2.

The impact of the internal realities on talent management

Internal realities refer to the circumstances and implications of the organisational factors that have to be considered and accommodated in talent management. Internal realities also present opportunities and constraints for talent management and are the culmination of external and contextual factors, the organisational responses and impacts of these, as well as those organisational factors that are unique to the organisation at a particular point in time.

The consideration of internal realities is critical in ensuring that the resultant talent management strategy and practices are aligned with the internal realities of the organisation. While best practices around talent management or external trends might be useful to benchmark and compare the talent management approach of the organisation to others, internal realities ensure that talent management approaches are appropriately prioritised and feasible within the organisation. This is consistent with research conducted by Alziari (2017),

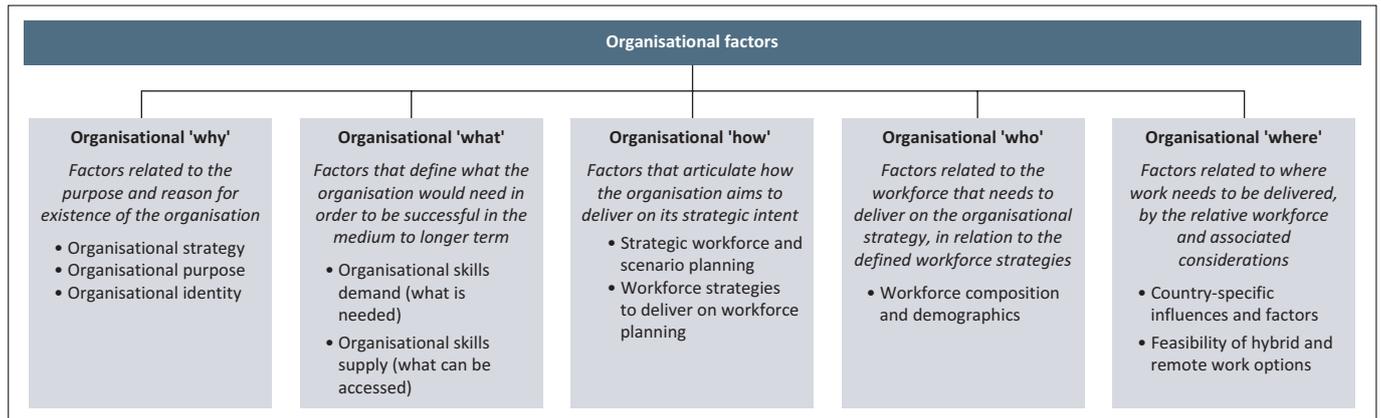


FIGURE 2: Overview of organisational factors of relevance to the study.

which emphasises the setting in which talent management takes place as a key consideration for identifying and managing talent.

Internal realities are important considerations that impact the talent management strategy of the organisation, its underlying talent philosophies, and the feasibility and practicality of its talent management practices (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2019). Internal realities signal the relative impact and importance of certain external and organisational factors, by reframing it to provide context to the realities that are likely to impact talent management efforts.

Talent choices that inform talent management execution

The literature review, participant interviews and expert panel inputs highlighted varying beliefs regarding talent – some were explicitly stated while others were not actively considered by participants. These beliefs impact the organisation's talent philosophy, which in turn influences the operationalisation of talent management (Meyers et al., 2019; Wiblen & McDonnell, 2019). The aim of the research is not to derive a single set of beliefs, but rather to highlight the underlying dynamics that may exist and how to consider these in talent management through deliberate talent choices.

Given their philosophical nature, talent philosophies are inherently subjective and influenced by specific worldviews (Sparrow, 2019; Wiblen & McDonnell, 2019). To reduce subjectivity and promote congruence, the research proposes an objective approach to determining and defining talent philosophies using two key questions: (1) how is talent defined within the organisation (inherent or attained)? and (2) how is talent believed to contribute value to the organisation? Following this approach also addresses the seemingly contradictory or paradoxical nature of talent management, calling for either inclusion or exclusion of certain individuals as a way to drive business outcomes. By adopting a paradox lens, as proposed by Daubner-Siva et al. (2017), both perspectives can be considered and lead to better practical decision-making, in particular where complexity or ambiguity is present (Aust et al., 2015).

The first question deals with the extent to which talent is deemed as innate or attained in how it is defined, identified and measured. This question is best framed through determining 'who is believed to have talent?' Within organisations, there is agreement that talent enables and supports the attainment of organisational goals and strategy. However, there should be clarity around whether only some people have talent or talent is only relevant at a point in time versus whether everyone is considered to have talents. Talent can therefore be defined as either a natural ability or developable potential. There are various factors that might impact who is believed to have talent, including leadership belief and organisational culture. Applying the paradox lens, there is acknowledgement of the value of both approaches (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017; Thunnissen et al., 2013). This reframing ensures that the way in which talent is defined relays the organisational factors and culture, considers the internal realities of the organisation and will ultimately guide how talent is managed. It also helps to acknowledge the fact that talent may in some cases be scarce and in other cases more abundant, depending on how it is defined.

The second question deals with the extent to which talent management practices are inclusive or exclusive in nature. The question that is posed is 'how does the organisation derive value from their talent?' This question acknowledges that there is a pre-existing definition that exists within the organisation that is clear about who is considered to have talent, but that there are various approaches that could be fit for the purpose for the organisation to adopt, which unlocks value for them (Aljbour et al., 2021; Wiblen & McDonnell, 2019). Again, utilising a paradox lens, the benefits and limitations of both approaches are considered, and its subsequent competing tensions are understood, to inform practical decision-making (Aust et al., 2015; Daubner-Siva et al., 2017). On the one end, a specific approach may be deemed as more appropriate, where talent management practices apply to only a few. In this case, talent management practices and programmes are deemed to be more differentiated, and criteria for excluding individuals are aligned to how talent is defined. On the other end, a broader focus may reflect a more fit-for-purpose approach, where talent management practices apply to many. In this case, talent management practices are more encompassing and the criteria for inclusion reflect the definition of talent.

Figure 3 provides a visual outline of these two questions in context, to derive the talent philosophy of the organisation in a practical and sequential manner.

This approach aims to remove some of the subjectivity associated with talent philosophies and aligns it closely to the organisational factors and internal realities faced by organisations. This approach leads to the identification of the relevant and resultant talent philosophy applicable to the organisational context; however, the process is considered as guided and adaptive, through asking pertinent questions that underpin talent philosophies.

By explicitly defining what the talent philosophy is, and the subsequent ways in which it impacts talent management practices, it can be tested for feasibility, the extent to which it is fit for purpose, as well as what is gained or lost through such an approach.

Talent execution through strategy and practices

The talent management strategy forms the basis for decisions around talent management execution. A well-defined talent management strategy reflects the key decisions made by the organisation, related to the management of the demand and supply of talent (Whysall et al., 2019). It should therefore reflect the organisational context, as well as the philosophical beliefs of the organisation, as well as how this is enabled or

supported through the talent management practices. The talent management execution, through adaptive and context-specific practices, should be encapsulated in the talent management strategy.

Value-based adaptive talent practices provide a good indication of the ways in which talent management can add value in the organisation. Being adaptive in approach, organisations may leverage some or all of these practices in the execution of its talent management strategy, reflecting a fit-for-purpose approach. However, the underlying talent philosophy of the organisation has to be considered in its execution as this sets the tone for the extent to which talent management practices are exclusive or inclusive in the organisation, or less self-directed or more self-directed (King, 2017). Based on the value-based approach to talent management practices (Sparrow & Makram, 2015), the following clusters of practices are highlighted in Table 7.

Practical implications

To deliver organisational value, talent management execution should reflect the organisational context and internal realities of the organisation. These factors are reflected in the talent choices of the organisation, which defines who is talented (some or all) and how they add value to the organisation. This provides the boundaries of talent management execution. To ensure alignment between philosophical beliefs

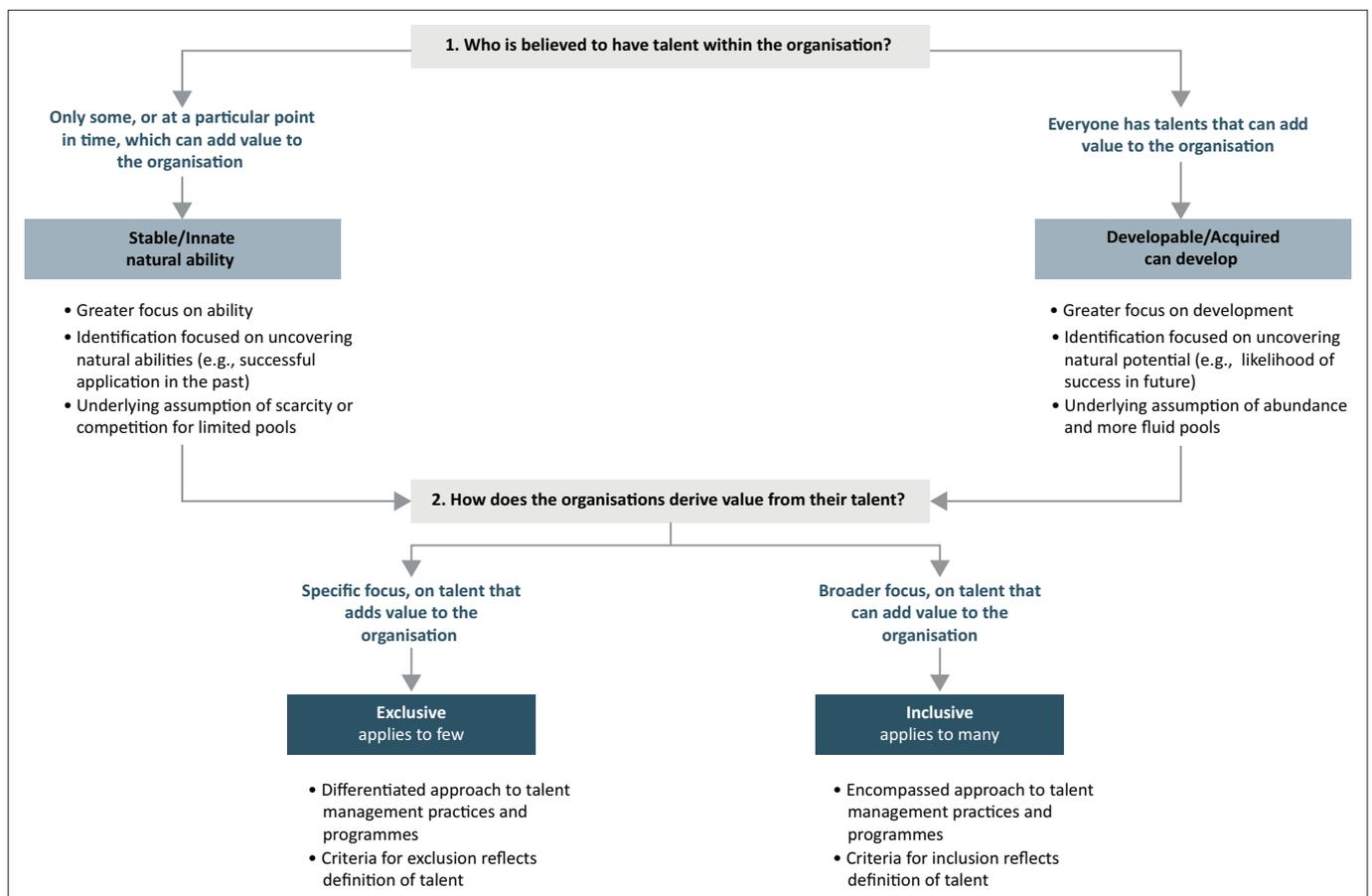


FIGURE 3: Outline of talent philosophy decision-making considerations and implications.

TABLE 7: Value-based adaptive talent management practices.

Value creation refers to the way that talent is *accessed or used* that creates value for the organisation. This includes the ways in which talent is attracted to the organisation, as well as the identification of talent both internally and externally to the organisation.

Value alignment refers to the way talent is *harnessed and utilised* where it adds the most value to the organisation. Practically, this includes the ways in which talent is developed as well as the visibility of available skills throughout the organisation to be utilised.

Value leverage refers to the way in which talent is *deployed, amplified and aligned* based on considerations around criticality, scarcity and return on investment. This includes ways in which talent is moved across the organisation to tap into skills and expertise, as well as assignments that add organisational value while increasing employability for individuals.

Value protection refers to the way that talent is *retained, sustained and guarded*, based on considerations around criticality, scarcity and return on investment. This includes retention mechanisms as well as directed efforts towards employee experience and engagement of talent.

Source: Adapted from Sparrow, P.R., & Makram, H. (2015). What is the value of talent management? Building value-driven processes within a talent management architecture. *Human Resource Management Review*, 25(3), 249–263. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2015.04.002>

and talent management execution, the talent management strategy must be clear about the inclusivity or exclusivity of talent management practices. Adaptive talent management practices provide a practical approach to implementing value-based talent management practices that are aligned to the talent management strategy and unlock mutual value.

Limitations and recommendations

The research is specifically focused on organisational level impacts. However, there is a need to also consider the changing nature of careers or the talent management experience. This is an important contextual factor which impacts how talent management is operationalised within organisations. Similarly, the impact that talent management execution has on the psychological contract is an important factor to further investigate, to manage emergent tensions which are likely to be experienced between organisational talent management practices and individual careers. Additionally, most participants were from the financial services industry, which may not be a representative sample.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the organisational level factors that have an impact on the successful implementation and adaptive talent management practices. Employing a qualitative research design, the findings revealed the significance of organisational factors, internal realities and the talent choices of organisations at a philosophical level and their alignment with adaptive talent management practices. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on talent management, specifically focusing on organisational factors influencing talent management execution in the future world of work and the need for value-based adaptive talent management practices.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

M.v.d.M., P.N. and C.H. contributed equally to this article.

Ethical considerations

This research project received ethical clearance from the University of Johannesburg Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management as part of a doctoral study under supervision of Prof. Crystal Hoole and Prof. Petrus Nel (Ethical clearance number: IPPM-2020-462(D)).

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.v.d.M., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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