
HR Directors' Understanding of 'Talent': A Cross-Cultural Study

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1 Introduction

As no currently available theory has enough scope to capture its different elements or cause-and-effect relationships, and no methodological approach is considered superior to others, talent management fits the criteria of a 'phenomenon' (Hambrick 2007). Looking at the bibliometrics of the field, we see that although there currently still is a huge discrepancy between practitioner and academic interest in talent management—over 7,000 articles in Human Resource (HR) practitioner journals since 1990 compared to only around 100 'real' academic publications—this gap is closing slowly but surely (Dries 2013). Academic interest in talent management has grown exponentially since 2008—especially in global talent management.

Interestingly, talent management and global talent management seem to be evolving into two separate literature streams. Where the global talent management literature borrows heavily from the international HRM literature (e.g., Farndale et al. 2010; Schuler et al. 2011), the talent management literature has its roots mainly in the strategic HRM literature (e.g., Boudreau and Ramstad 2005), typically adopting human capital and resource-based view (RBV)-type frameworks (e.g., Cappelli 2008). A major aim of our chapter is to contribute to the discussions

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in the global talent management literature by building on what we know from the talent management literature whilst placing our findings within a cross-cultural framework.

Specifically, we aim to advance understanding of the meanings attributed to ‘talent’ by HR directors across the world, and how their talent mindsets translate into the ways in which talent is identified and managed in their organizations. To date, hardly any data seems to be available about the different meanings attributed to ‘talent’ across cultures and how these might affect talent management in multinational corporations (MNCs). Considering the increasing international expansion of many large enterprises, it seems important to fully grasp how organizational decision makers (i.e., HR directors, line managers, CEOs), especially from subsidiaries of the same corporation in different cultures, see talent. MNCs need to understand cross-cultural differences in terms of shared mental models about talent before they can formulate a viable global talent management strategy (Farndale et al. 2010). As a response to this gap in the literature, in this chapter we examine the extent to which HR directors from different countries: (a) believe that everyone has talent (vs. believe that talent is a rare commodity); (b) believe that talent is innate (vs. believe that it can be developed); and (c) believe that they recognize talent when they see it (vs. rely on standardized assessment). These three ‘tensions’ were derived from a recent literature review on talent management (see Dries 2013), and are further discussed below.

1.1 Inclusive vs. Exclusive Approach to Talent Management

Talent management is typically defined in two major ways. ‘Exclusive’ definitions of talent management refer to the differential management of employee groups with differential value, for example: “Activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization’s sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potentials and high-performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization” (Collings and Mellahi 2009, p. 304). On the other hand, we find definitions that are more ‘inclusive’, for instance that of Buckingham and Vosburgh (2001): “Talent management refers to the art of recognizing where each employee’s areas of natural talent lie, and figuring out how to help each employee develop the job-specific skills and knowledge to turn those talents into real performance [...] elevating each person’s performance to its highest possible levels, given the individual’s natural talents” (p. 22).

Although strong opinions are held on either end, to date it remains unclear which definition of talent management offers the most accurate representation of how the phenomenon plays out in the field. While an inclusive approach to talent management is believed to lead to a more pleasant working environment characterized by openness, trust, and overall employee wellbeing (Warren 2006), the exclusive

approach is assumed to generate higher return on investment in terms of profit and productivity, brought about by increases in the achievement motivation of pivotal employees (Boudreau and Ramstad 2005). In this chapter, we will argue that rather than being an 'either-or' story, talent management can actually be implemented in different ways depending on the culture and mission of an organization—and possibly even the national culture in which it resides. Rather than prescribing as academics 'what talent management is (or should be)' it might be more useful to research the different approaches to talent management found in organizations worldwide, systematically mapping beliefs and mindsets about talent held in specific contexts, and examining why these beliefs and mindsets persist. An intended contribution of our chapter is thus that it offers a cross-cultural perspective on this 'best fit' approach to talent management (Garrow and Hirsch 2008).

1.2 Selection vs. Development Approach to Talent Management

This second 'tension' refers to the important discussion about the extent to which talent can be taught and learned (Meyers et al. 2013). Innate perspectives on talent imply a focus on the selection, assessment, and identification of talent. In an era of increasing talent scarcity, this means aggressively searching, recruiting, and selecting highly sought-after profiles—which is expected to become more and more challenging as scarcities become even more tangible (Cappelli 2008). Acquired perspectives on talent, on the other hand, imply a focus on education, training, experience, and learning as tools for talent development (McCall 1998). Although this latter perspective seems particularly attractive considering the changing demand-supply dynamics in labor markets worldwide (cf. the discussion on 'making or buying' talent), research has shown that most organizational decision makers tend to believe that talent is, for the largest part, inborn (e.g., Tsay and Banaji 2011).

Beliefs about talent being innate or not are influenced by a number of factors. A first factor is the implicit person theory that prevails in the organization. Whereas some organizational decision makers will believe that people 'are who they are', and that the odds of people changing over time are low (i.e., 'fixed' or 'entity' mindset), others will believe that people are determined primarily by the lessons they learn from experience, and that people can change even at a later age (i.e., 'growth' or 'incremental' mindset) (Heslin et al. 2005). Whether a manager, or a group or managers, believes in one or the other will affect the extent to which an organization's (or a department's) talent management practices focus more on selection, or development of talented employees. It also has 'path dependency' implications, in that an entity theorist who does not see the potential of a particular employee at one point in time, is not likely to change his mind at a later time (Heslin et al. 2005). A second factor is culture. In her philological analysis of the word 'talent' from both a historical and a linguistic-comparative point of view, Tansley (2011) found that while European languages such as English, German and French

stress the innate nature of talent, in Eastern languages such as Japanese talent is seen as the product of many years of hard work and striving to attain perfection.

1.3 Standardized vs. Subjective Approach to Talent Identification

Research indicates that a surprising amount of HR practitioners believe that valid identification of talented employees does not require formal assessment policies or even a formal definition of talent—i.e. “I know talent when I see it” (e.g., Tulgan 2001). The main reason for this type of assumption (also referred to as ‘X-factor’ or ‘right stuff’ thinking; see McCall 1998) is the fact that organizational decision makers commonly overestimate the validity of intuitive judgment, whilst simultaneously underestimating the validity of paper-and-pencil tests, structured interviews, and assessment centers. These pervasive beliefs lie at the heart of what Highhouse (2008) calls a “stubborn reliance on intuition and subjectivity” (p. 333). The idea that personal judgment can be more valid than formal testing as long as the assessor is experienced enough is referred to as ‘the myth of experience’. That is because different sources of rater bias limit the validity of subjective judgment (Highhouse 2008)—e.g., anchoring (i.e. the general tendency of people to interpret new data in light of an existing impression), halo bias (i.e., a form of bias whereby raters do not distinguish their evaluations of candidates among relevant dimensions but rather, attribute either a positive or a negative global score to candidates), and similar-to-me bias (i.e., a preference for candidates more similar to oneself). In the current chapter, we will examine the extent to which HR directors around the world have a preference for standardized assessment or subjective judgment, and how this relates to their beliefs about the inclusive-exclusive and the selection-development divide.

2 Methods

2.1 Sample and Procedure

An online survey was launched through the authors’ global network of corporate contacts, using snowball sampling. Multinational companies were asked to have the survey completed by their HR director, and to forward the survey to other potential respondents. The final sample size was 410, with each response being unique to an organization for that local subsidiary.

To obtain a cross-cultural sample, we aimed to collect data for each of the cultural clusters described in the GLOBE [Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness] study, commonly recognized as one of the most important cross-cultural research projects in the management field to date. The GLOBE study was founded in 1993 by Robert J. House and studies leadership across 62 societies. To allow meaningful interpretation of its findings, ‘cultural clusters’ have been

identified as a meaningful level of analysis beyond the individual country level (for more information, see House et al. 2004). In our study, sufficient data was collected from the Anglo, Eastern European, Germanic, Latin American, and Latin European GLOBE clusters to warrant statistical analysis—unfortunately, we did not end up with enough data for the African, Confucian, Nordic, and Southern Asian clusters. The majority of respondents overall came from the US, Belgium, Brazil, and Italy—the home countries of the authors. We clustered our data based on the location where the HR directors were based, rather than their nationality or ethnicity.

Most respondents came from privately owned companies (81 %), from industries such as finance (9.5 %), manufacturing (15.4 %), and professional services (10.2 %). The remaining 19 % of respondents worked for government-owned organizations, mostly from the educational (8.3 %) and scientific sector (11.2 %). The participating organizations were mostly hierarchically structured (with an average of 12.88 hierarchical levels at the subsidiary level), with a moderate degree of formalization, centralization, and performance orientation on average (see Table 1). The majority of the participating organizations (36.6 %) were large organizations, with a global headcount of over 10,000 employees. Most respondents were women (65.6 %) and their average age was 55.59 ($SD = 13.66$), of which 11.36 years ($SD = 8.97$) spent in an HR management function.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Associations with 'Talent'

After completing a list of demographic questions about themselves and their employing organizations, respondents were asked to list 10 spontaneous associations evoked by the word 'talent'. They were instructed not to overthink their list, and to keep in mind there are no right and wrong answers. After completing the association exercise, they were asked to rank order their list of ten so that the first association would be the most salient one for them, and so on.

2.2.2 Growth (Incremental) vs. Fixed (Entity) Mindset About Talent

In order to measure whether respondents had a growth (incremental) versus a fixed (entity) mindset, we used Levy and Dweck's (1997) eight-item 'Beliefs about Human Nature' scale. The scale includes four items that measure entity beliefs (sample item: "Everyone is a certain kind of person and there is not much they can really change about that") and four items that measure incremental beliefs (sample item: "People can substantially change the kind of person they are"), on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 6 = Strongly agree. The four 'incremental' items were reversed so that a higher score on the scale indicates a more fixed (entity) mindset. Internal consistency (α) for the scale—and for all other scales in the survey—is indicated on the diagonal of Table 1.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and scale reliabilities

Study variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Organizational characteristics												
1. Ownership (0 = public, 1 = private)	–	–										
2. Number of hierarchical levels ^a	12.88 (17.90)	–.05	–									
3. Degree of formalization ^b	3.43 (.79)	–.19**	.15**	(.72)								
4. Degree of centralization ^b	2.45 (.93)	–.12*	.11	.13*	(.90)							
5. Degree of performance orientation ^c	4.73 (.99)	.31**	–.06	–.01	–.46**	(.62)						
Talent 'mindset' variables												
6. Fixed (entity) mindset about talent ^d	3.64 (.94)	.06	.01	–.07	.07	.02	(.88)					
7. Belief that talent is innate ^a	57.03 (22.64)	–.08	.04	.06	.07	.02	.22**	–				
8. Belief that everyone has talent ^a	52.79 (32.59)	–.09	–.07	–.01	–.17**	.20**	–.04	.04	–			
9. Exclusiveness of TM approach ^b	2.66 (.64)	–.02	.09	.07	.35**	–.36**	–.07	–.08	–.41**	(.67)		
10. Reliance on personal judgment ^b	2.84 (.74)	–.05	–.03	.04	–.12*	.01	–.05	.03	.00	.02	(.60)	
11. Reliance on first impressions ^b	2.35 (.78)	–.01	.13*	.06	.20**	–.10	.23**	.15**	–.34**	.20**	–.10	(.61)

Notes. *p < .05; **p < .01; Cronbach's alphas are listed between brackets on the main diagonal

^aSliding scale from 0 to 100

^bFive-point Likert scale

^cSeven-point Likert scale

^dSix-point Likert scale

2.2.3 Belief that Talent Is Innate

In addition to the 'Beliefs about Human Nature scale', which is about the malleability of human nature more generally, we also added an item more specifically about talent. The exact item read: "To what extent do you believe that talent is something people are born with? Please indicate the extent to which you believe talent is innate, on a scale of 0 to 100". Responses were given by sliding a bar to indicate a certain percentage.

2.2.4 Belief that Everyone Has Talent

Similarly, we constructed an item asking about the extent to which the HR directors believed that everyone has talent, i.e. "What percentage of the employees within your organization do you, personally, consider 'talented'?". Again, respondents were asked to indicate their response on a sliding scale from 0 to 100.

2.2.5 Inclusive vs. Exclusive TM Approach

In order to measure whether respondents' organizations had adopted an inclusive versus an exclusive approach to talent management, we developed a six-item scale based on the descriptions of the exclusive versus the inclusive approach found in Iles et al. (2010). Sample items are: "A talent is not something that everyone possesses, but just the lucky few" and "Everybody has a certain talent" (R). All items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not at all the viewpoint of my organization to 5 = Completely the viewpoint of my organization.

2.2.6 Reliance on Personal Judgment Rather than Standardized Assessment

Reliance on personal judgment in the identification of talent was measured using a self-developed scale based on the work of Highhouse (2008). The scale consisted of 3 items, i.e. "In evaluating the talent of employees, personal judgment is the best standard"; "Standardized tests are better to evaluate the talent of employees than personal judgments" (R); and "In evaluating the talent of employees, more and better information can be obtained from an unstructured interview than from a battery of standardized tests" (R). Respondents were instructed to reply on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Do not agree at all to 5 = Completely agree.

2.2.7 Reliance on First Impressions

Reliance on first impressions in the identification of talent was also measured using a self-developed scale, again based on the work of Highhouse (2008). This scale consisted of 4 items, also scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Do not agree at all to 5 = Completely agree. A sample item is: "If I don't consider a person talented at a first evaluation, the odds of me considering him or her talented at a next evaluation are low".

2.2.8 Organizational Characteristics

In order to rule out alternative explanations, a range of organizational-level variables were included in the analyses (see Table 1): Company ownership

(0 = Government-owned, 1 = Privately owned); Number of hierarchical levels (at the level of the subsidiary for which the HR director works) on a sliding scale from 0 to 100; Degree of formalization of HR practices within the organization [6 items developed by Ferris et al. (1992), e.g. “The organization keeps a written record of nearly everyone’s job performance”, rated on a scale from 1 = Totally disagree to 5 = Totally agree]; Degree of centralization in decision making within the organization [5 items developed by Ferris et al. (1992), e.g. “In this company even small matters have to be referred to someone higher up for a final answer”, rated on a scale from 1 = Totally disagree to 5 = Totally agree]; and performance orientation climate within the organization [4 items developed by House et al. (2004) for the GLOBE study, e.g. “In this organization, employees are encouraged to strive for continuously improved performance” rated on a 7-point scale from 1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree].

3 Results

Table 1 provides an overview of the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the study variables.

In Table 2, we present an overview of the outcomes of our qualitative analyses on the ‘associations’ data. As can be seen in the Table, we found meanings of talent that were universal (i.e., dominant in all cultures in our sample) and prototypical (i.e., consistently high-ranking), and meanings that were more culture-specific (i.e., only occurring in some cultural clusters but not others) and peripheral (i.e., consistently lower-ranking).

One-way ANOVAs were conducted in order to determine whether HR directors from different cultural clusters hold different mindsets about talent (see Fig. 1 for the means plots). Significant differences were only found for the variables ‘belief that everyone has talent’ ($F(4, 287) = 11.54, p = .00$), ‘exclusiveness of talent management approach’ ($F(4, 289) = 4.25, p = .00$), and ‘reliance on first impressions’ ($F(4, 287) = 3.94, p = .00$). We discuss our findings in more detail below. In Fig. 1, we grouped together the variables that were found to be highly correlated in Table 1.

4 Discussion

The present chapter set out to advance understanding of the meanings attributed to ‘talent’ by HR directors across the world, and how their talent mindsets translate into the ways in which talent is identified and managed in their organizations. In so doing, we aimed to contribute to the global talent management in two major ways: (1) by integrating knowledge from the general talent management literature into the global talent management debate; and (2) by offering a cross-cultural perspective on the ‘best fit’ approach to talent management.

Table 2 Associations with 'talent' categorized according to GLOBE cultural cluster

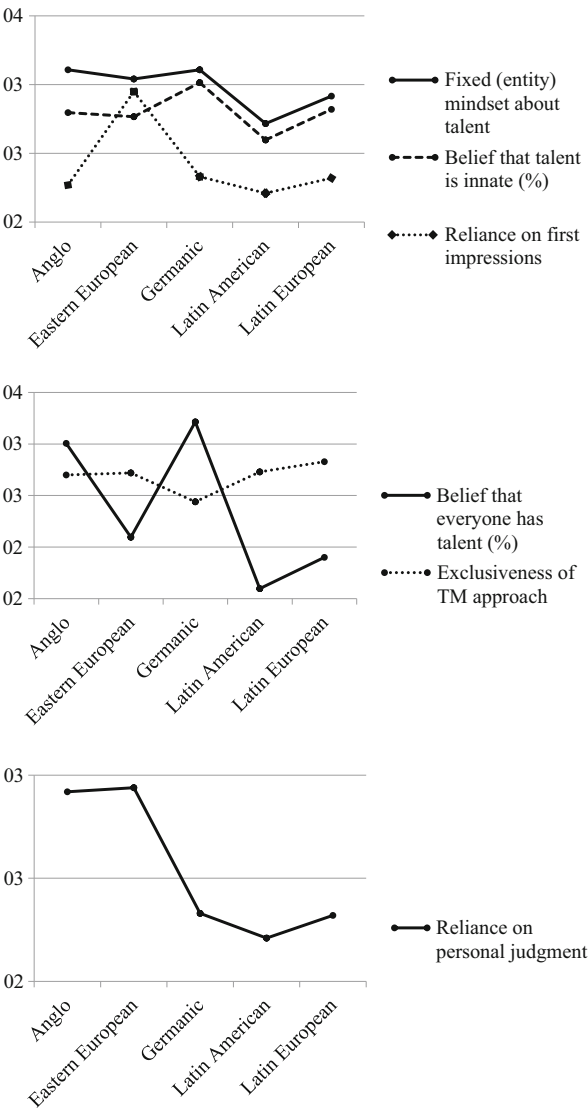
Universal/ Prototypical	Culture-specific/peripheral				
	Anglo	Eastern European	Germanic	Latin American	Latin European
Ability	Performance	Hardworking	Innate	Calling/ Vocation	Innovation
Skills	High potentials	Strong-minded	Giftedness	Career	Creativity
Knowledge	Exceptional	Learning ability	Excellence	Success	Artistic
Potential	Human resources		Passion	Ease	Learning

4.1 Key Findings

Unsurprisingly, respondents from all cultural clusters mentioned ability, skills, knowledge, and potential as high-ranking associations with talent. In fact, our qualitative analyses revealed that the differences between the different clusters were not too great—in that there seems to be a high number of associations with talent that are universal and prototypical. As Table 2 shows, we did find a number of meanings associated with talent that were more culture-specific and less consistent across the countries in our sample. Where respondents from the Anglo cluster stressed the exceptional nature of talent, and take a more 'instrumental' approach in that they associate it with performance, potential, and talent being a resource to the organization, Eastern European respondents emphasized components of talent relation to effort and willpower (i.e., hardworking, strong-minded, and willingness and ability to learn); Germanic respondents related talent to inborn giftedness of abilities that lead to excellence, but also mentioned passion; Latin Americans stressed the fact that talent reflects a person's calling or vocation, and that it leads to career success, but also, that it manifests in a certain ease with which certain activities are undertaken; and respondents from the Latin European cluster associated talent with innovation, creativity, and art, as well as learning.

Surprisingly, in our quantitative analyses we found no significant differences between cultures as concerns having a fixed (entity) versus a growth (incremental) mindset about talent, nor for percentage to which HR directors believe talent is innate. In fact, on average, respondents from each cultural cluster indicated that they believe that talent can be developed for over 50 %. Post-hoc tests revealed that respondents from the Anglo and the Germanic cultural cluster believed to a significantly higher extent that everyone has talent than respondents from the Latin American and the Latin European cluster (with the Eastern European cluster 'somewhere in the middle'). As for the exclusiveness of an organization's talent management approach, this was significantly lower in Germanic countries than in the other countries of study. This finding stands in stark contrast to the qualitative data, where the Anglo and the Germanic clusters were the two clusters in which most HR directors wrote down associations related to 'excellence' and 'exceptional performance'.

Fig. 1 Cultural differences between the GLOBE clusters as concerns beliefs about (how) talent (should be identified) (*Note: All variables were standardized into a five-point scale prior to plotting the graphs*)



Possibly, this finding indicates that using exceptional performance as a criterion for talent identification does not necessarily imply that only a very small proportion of the workforce is to be considered talented. Two alternative explanations are conceivable. First, that Anglo and Germanic countries engage more in ‘topgrading’—i.e., the practice of hiring only the very best performers for every single job in the organization (Smart and Smart 1997)—and therefore that the beliefs that talent is something exceptional versus omnipresent in one’s organization, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Second, that Anglo and Germanic

respondents may have more multidimensional conceptions of talent—talent domains that have been identified in the literature include academics, arts, business, leisure, social action, sports, and technology (Gagné 2004)—which heightens the odds of ‘everyone being talented at something’. These are just hypotheses, however—further research is necessary to back these claims.

Finally, as for reliance on first impressions, our findings indicate that HR directors from the Anglo and the Eastern European cluster scored higher than respondents from the other cultural clusters, implying that they have a lower preference for continuous assessment (and potentially, a higher belief that “either you have it or you don’t”) than HR directors from Germanic, Latin American, and Latin European countries.

4.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Our study had some limitations, from which avenues for further research can be deduced. First of all, the majority of our respondents came from the US, Belgium, Brazil, and Italy—the home countries of the authors. Future research might do well to strive for a more balanced representation of countries within each GLOBE cluster. The GLOBE clusters in themselves are also not undisputed, however. Countries such as Israel, Malta, Turkey, and South Africa, due to their cultural complexity, have proven difficult to cluster. In addition, the practice of cultural clustering in itself implies making generalizations—for instance, the Anglo cluster includes the US, the UK, Australia and New-Zealand, which makes sense in some respects but does not imply that these countries have identical cultures. Cultural clusters remain ‘rough measures’ of culture (House et al. 2004). Future studies might focus on more specific cultural contexts (i.e., countries or regions) to counter this specific limitation.

A second limitation is that the survey was only administrated at the HR director level. Although HR directors can be expected to play a central role in the talent management strategy of their organizations, they are not necessarily the key decision makers (Boudreau and Ramstad 2005). Moreover, chances are they have different ‘talent mindsets’ than the line management and top management within their own organization. It is conceivable, for instance, that HR directors have a stronger belief in the malleability of talent because employee development is one of the core functions of HR (Meyers et al. 2013). Further research might adopt multilevel designs, where not only HR but also line management, top management, and individual employees are surveyed about their talent mindsets as well as the talent management climate within their organizations (Garrow and Hirsch 2008). Such designs might reveal differences in terms of intended, enacted, and perceived talent management practices (Dries 2013). In addition, the data of our study could be coupled to other international databases to come to more solid conclusions as to differences in talent management practices between countries. The CRANET [Cranfield Network on International Human Resource Management] database, for instance, might be a useful source of information to expand on our study’s findings.

Table 3 Five key GTM challenges, strategies, and future opportunities

Five key points regarding global talent management challenges	Five key points regarding strategies to overcome these challenges	Five key points regarding future opportunities in global talent management
1 Normative positions taken in the GTM literature (e.g., inclusive versus exclusive approaches) may not be most conducive to do 'good' TM research and distill adequate implications for practice	More 'phenomenon-driven' research is necessary to lay theoretical foundations for further GTM research; inductive research first, deductive research should follow later	There is a significant need and opportunity for more theory building and hypothesis development about GTM. Promise might lie in integrating what we know from other literature streams (e.g., the giftedness literature, the strengths literature, the assessment center literature)
2 Little is known about mental models of talent across cultures, although such knowledge might help MNCs to formulate their GTM strategy	We need more research and more knowledge exchange among international HR practitioners about how talent is conceptualized across cultures, and whether or not this implies that an 'ethnocentric' approach to GTM, with decision making centralized in headquarters, is (im)possible and (un)desirable	If we can dissect the mindsets underlying important talent management decisions (such as the allocation of resources across employees), we can help HR practitioners make better (or at least more advised) GTM decisions
3 Little is known about talent mindsets and TM approaches of choice in non-Western regions such as Africa, Confucian Asia, and Southern Asia	We need more research and more knowledge exchange among international HR practitioners about how talent and TM are perceived in non-Western regions, and the extent to which this differs from beliefs held in the West	Learning more about talent mindsets and TM approaches in non-Western regions can provide inspiration for TM in Western countries. In a truly global world, knowledge and expertise about management practices should not only travel from West to East, but also the other way around
4 Most writings about GTM are from the US or the UK; it is unclear to what extent an 'Anglo-Saxon bias' is present in the literature and to what extent Anglo-Saxon TM models can be generalized across cultures	We need more research and more knowledge exchange among international HR practitioners to examine the extent to which Anglo-Saxon beliefs about talent and TM can be 'exported' to other countries, especially other subsidiaries within the same MNC	Knowing which aspects of TM are more 'universal' and which are not can help MNCs decide which of their GTM processes should be governed centrally and which are best left up to the local level

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Five key points regarding global talent management challenges	Five key points regarding strategies to overcome these challenges	Five key points regarding future opportunities in global talent management
5 GTM may not be a matter of best practices, but of best fit. To date, we do not know much about which approach to TM fits better with which type of organization	We need more research and more knowledge exchange among international HR practitioners measuring the effects of GTM interventions to desired outcomes over time, taking into account the specific organizational context. What works for one organization, may not work for another	The ‘best fit’ approach, combined with a stronger focus on measurement (i.e., baseline measures, follow-up measures, and outcome measures—all depending on an organization’s specific strategy), offers much promise in the way of making the outcomes of GTM measurable, so that HR practitioners worldwide can demonstrate the return on investment in TM to their boards

Notes. *TM* talent management, *GTM* global talent management

Finally, further research might examine the relative effects of ‘culture’ on talent management strategy at different levels—i.e., national culture, organizational culture, occupational culture. It is conceivable, for instance, that strong occupational cultures (e.g., marketing, consulting) may ‘override’ cross-cultural differences, and thus represent a more meaningful level of analysis (Table 3).

4.3 Practical Implications

How can organizational decision makers make sense out of our findings? It is important to understand that, when it comes to talent management, no single perspective on talent is objectively better than another. As Garrow and Hirsch (2008) assert, talent management is not a matter of best practices, but rather, of best fit—i.e. fit with strategic objectives, fit with organizational and national culture, fit with other HR practices and policies, and fit with organizational capacity. Consequently, the different approaches to talent management described in this chapter may all be equally viable and can subsist in a myriad of configurations, each with its own merits and drawbacks. For example, an exclusive and highly standardized approach to talent management is more likely to fit well in an organization with a meritocratic, competitive culture and an up-or-out promotion system than in an organization that promotes egalitarianism, diversity and teamwork.

As for individual employees, they are often oddly unaware of the talent management dynamics operating within their employing organizations—even though these are likely to have crucial implications for the further course of their career (Dries 2013). Part of the explanation is that talent management procedures are often quite intransparent, with crucial information being withheld from employees (e.g., not being identified as talented). In addition, employees (even

‘high-potential’ ones) are often naïve, and somewhat reactive, when it comes to managing their own careers (McCall 1998). Advances in the academic literature may help both organizations and individual employees make more sense of how strategic talent management decisions may or may not affect them.

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