Introduction

Academics argue that the field of talent management has moved out of its infancy state into a relatively more mature state. On the back of a series of influential practitioner publications (Michaels et al., 2001, , Creelman, 2004, Heinen and O'Neill, 2004, Ashton and Morton, 2005, Tucker et al., 2005,), academic research subsequently developed both rapidly and broadly after 2008, guided by a series of academic special issues (Scullion, Collings & Caliguri, 2010; McDonnell, Collings, Scullion & Vaiman, 2011, McDonnell, Collings & Burgess, 2012, Al Ariss, Cascio, & Paauwe, 2014). There has also been a widening range of theoretical research, stemming from traditions as various as human capital management (Lepak and Snell, 1999, Wright and McMahan., 2011), strategic human resource management (SHRM) (Lado and Wilson, 1994, Becker and Huselid, 2006, Wright et al., 1994), the Resource-based View (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991, Barney and Wright, 1998, Bowman and Ambrosini, 2000), marketing perspectives such as brand equity and signalling theory (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005), supply chain management (Cappelli, 2008), and more recently, social exchange theory (Wang-Cowham, 2011), resource dependency theory (Garavan, 2011), institutional theory (Iles et al, 2010; Martin et al, 2011) and learning theory (Yoon & Lim, 2010; Oltra & Vivas-Lopez, 2013). There has been a process of rapid contextualisation taking place, understanding important variations in practice or philosophy. These contributions have all shaped the field, but they have also led to much debate about the assumptions and philosophies defining 'talent' and 'talent management', and underpinning its practice (Collings and Mellahi, 2009, Meyers et al., 2013, Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013, Dries, 2013). The recent burst of academic interest has led to the development of many - one might argue over-sophisticated - claims about and critiques of talent management. We are at risk of creating a disconnect between our academic analysis, and the field of practice. Let us

understand the mindset of the actors involved before we attempt to guide them to what we might see as better courses of action.

In a recent systematic review of studies in leading journals (capturing studies until 2013), McDonnell, Collings, Mellahi & Schuler (2017, p. 90) concluded that the field has evolved "at the intersection of HRM, strategy, international business and other related fields" with research conducted in two main contexts: the management of high performers and high potentials, and the identification of strategic positions and talent management systems. Although most papers draw, to some extent, on primary research, there remains a need for greater clarity around the conceptual boundaries of talent management, and more comprehensive and nuanced methodological approaches. Despite 60% of studies having some empirical component, 56% of this was survey based, much with convenience samples and limited information on response rates, and 18% was based on single case studies, drawn from widely different geographies. Less than 30% had any theoretical framing, and in many instances such framing was superficial. In order to move the field forward (McDonnell, Collings, Mellahi & Schuler (2017) concluded an overriding need was that "…talent management should be concerned with understanding where value is added in organisations by human capital" (p. 117).

The research question examined in the study is: how does talent management add value to organisations, as perceived by strategic actors in multinational organisations? To address this question, we argue there is a need to understand how organisations define talent management and to explore the perceptions of strategic actors of talent management. We do this by drawing upon interviews with 50 strategic actors across five MNEs. At the managerial level, strategic actors may be defined as those managers who have the requirement to reason and act strategically, who are able to formulate goals that they wish to attain and to make a hierarchy among those goals, and who are actually performing in the role actively. They

differ from managers who are pragmatic re-actors (those who may execute strategy, but have no agency to shape the strategy or how it is enacted), or those who represent a passive pole or position (those individuals who have the capacity to use their voice or resources to argue a position, but who practice a passive role).   In relation to talent management, we identify and interview two different types of strategic actors that both perceive degrees of agency:

- talent system designers; and

- talent system implementers.

We adopt a strategy-as-practice perspective. We argue that before we attempt to develop broader perspectives on how talent management may or may not add value to organisations, we need to understand the realities and views of the key actors involved. It is important that before we impose any theories or models of value on talent management, or enter what might just be self-interesting debates, we must first understand how these actors understand the phenomenon they are tasked with managing, and ideally see if we can differentiate between those views that are primary in their logics, self-generated and explanatory of their practice, and those deeper constructs that can perhaps be entertained and surfaced, and therefore have the potential to move them beyond their primary practice. From a strategy-as-practice perspective (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale & Sumelius, 2014; Dick & Collings, 2016), we need to understand the views not only of these key practitioners (or strategic actors as we term them) but also the flows and streams of activities of individuals and groups involved in their talent work, and the practices involved (the tools processes, procedures and norms that are adapted and combined to construct and deliver their strategy). Paraphrasing Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale and Sumelius (2014), who introduced the notion of "HRM-as-practice", mirroring the "strategy-as-practice" (SAP) movement in the strategy field, as a conceptual lens and research shift, from the traditional focus on either HRM practices or the HR function

to a more comprehensive approach incorporating the practices, practitioners and praxis of HRM (a shift from "HRM practices" to the "practice of HRM") we need to move from understanding talent practices, to understanding the practice of talent management.

It is not our intention to examine the micro-processes through which system designers and implementers work, but it is important to interview both communities because non-senior managers or senior managers tasked with executing a pre-formed strategy can sometimes have a better understanding of whether strategies are realistic or not, and their interpretations can be an important source of organizational learning. However, we shall comment on the interpretations both communities make. However, the study is therefore designed to capture the potentially complex, or indeed simplified, views and meanings that these strategic actors assign to talent management, how these actors define talent management (what does it mean to them in the absence of a formal definition), and how they perceive the value of talent management in its totality. We are in essence examining talent management through the meanings that actors see as influencing the development of their practice, and the contextual rationales they draw upon in attributing such meaning. We argue that only once we have such understanding should we attempt to examine the value of talent management and understand how it may add value to organisations, thereby helping to resolve the definitional debates around talent management.

Literature Review

Talent management has gained mainstream interest among academics, yet despite the substantial number of academic publications produced on talent management in the last decade or two (Thunnissen, 2016) one can still argue that it is consultant and practitioner research that has aggressively driven the discourse on talent management (Al Ariss et al., 2014). Despite the recent burst of activity, there remains a limited amount of peer-reviewed literature to showcase the gap between academic and practitioner interest in talent

management (Cappelli, 2014). The field is yet to reach its maturity stage. Little progress has been made to resolve some of the shortcomings that hindered the development of the field. For example, there remains a definitional problem to explain the meaning and scope of talent management (Vaiman and Collings, 2013), there is insufficient theoretical development of the concepts and ideas of talent management (Collings and Mellahi, 2009) and this is made more difficult through a scatter-gun broadening of potentially useful theories. There is a lack of sound empirical research which closely examines the configurations of talent management practices (i.e. attraction, identification, development, retention) and their effectiveness and value-add to organisations (Festing et al., 2013). The majority of research focuses at the macro-level with only limited attention to individual-level research (although this is now being addressed, see for example: Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Sels, 2014; King, 2015, 2016; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). Finally, there is a dearth of empirical evidence to support the many implicit value claims (detected in both academic and practitioner literature) which suggests that talent management is a source of sustained competitive advantage and value add (Barney, 1991, Becker and Huselid, 1998, Lepak and Snell, 1999, Wright et al., 2001, Lewis and Heckman, 2006, Collings and Mellahi, 2009).

The definitional problem of talent management is evident by the number of views that endeavoured to define talent management in the literature. For example, Lewis and Heckman (2006) identified three different streams of thoughts to describe talent management as (1) a collection of typical HRM practices/activities such as recruitment, selection, development, career management and succession planning (Olsen, 2000, Hilton, 2000, Byham, 2001, Heinen and O'Neill, 2004, Mercer, 2005, Chowanec and Newstrom, 2011), (2) a process to ensure the flow of talent in organisations and adapts concepts from succession planning and HR planning (Jackson and Schuler, 1990, Rothwell, 1994) to emphasise the development of talent pools and projecting staffing needs, (3) a performance management process where

talent are classified as "A, B, and C" players (Smart, 1999). The link between talent management and performance, assumed line of sight between the two systems, and the assumptions this rests upon, have been discussed in the literature (Sparrow, Scullion and Tarique, 2014; Collings, 2014; Dick and Collings, 2016). One of the most common definitions that concretely describes talent management is by Collings and Mellahi (2009); the "activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organisation's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential 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 organisation" (p. 305). Another strand of research - referred to global talent management (GTM) – applies notions of talent to the specific issue of attracting, developing and retaining talent into strategic positions on a global scale (Scullion and Collings, 2011). The confusion around what talent management is remains in the literature and this has no doubt hindered the development of the field, but does seem to have led to an implicit consensus that talent management is fundamentally about attracting, retaining and developing a unique group of people who are of particular value to their organisations.

With talent management being viewed as a source of competitive advantage and a source of added value, there is a need to pause and understand 'what is the value of talent management?'. Most academic study reflects the assumptions made in the resources based view (RBV) of the firm. The RBV helped us recognise the unique value creating resources organisations have, to cite Barney (1986, 1991) a resource is deemed valuable if it: exploits opportunities and/or neutralise threats in a firm's environment, enables a firm to implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness, and satisfies the needs of both customers and organisations. Having said that, the RBV leaves two important questions

unanswered (a) What does value mean and what makes a resource valuable to begin with? (b) How can organisations manage and transform their resource to enable them to create value and achieve competitive advantage?

Thus, to understand the strategic value of a firm's resources more specifically the strategic value of talent resources (human capital) we need to first answer the important question, what is value? Despite contributions by leading scholars on issues pertaining to value, value creation and value capture (Lepak, Smith and Taylor, 2007) there is again little consensus in the literature around the meaning of value, and the interrelationship of the strategies of value creation and its impact on a firm's sustainable competitive advantage (Pitelis, 2009). The lack of consensus is perhaps a result of (a) the multidisciplinary nature of the field illustrated in the plurality of perspectives about the sources of value creation, (b) the lack of differentiation between the content of value and the process of value creation (i.e. what is value, who values what and where does value reside) and (c) the confusion between the processes of value creation, value capture and value retention (Lepak et al., 2007).

Those scholars who have attempted to define value, have described its meaning in relation to valuable resources (be it tangible, human capital or other resources) (Barney, 1991, Amit and Schoemaker, 1993, Peteraf, 1993). Others such as Bowman and Ambrosini (2000) distinguished between two types of value, 'use value' and 'exchange value'. They refer to 'use value' as "the specific qualities of the product perceived by customers in relation to their needs" (p. 2). Conversely, 'exchange value' is "the monetary amount realised at a single point in time when exchange of goods takes place." (p. 3). In retrospect, both definitions suggest that: the meaning of value is subjective; is predominantly dependent on individual perspectives; and is realised when target users are willing to exchange a monetary amount for the value they receive.

On the other hand, in the HRM literature, value is defined in relation to human capital and the assumption that employees have the capacity to add value to their organisations, an assumption very much entrenched in the RBV of the firm (Dries, 2013). Arguments in the RBV suggest that human capital are strategic assets that have the potential to create and capture value for their organisations (Barney and Clark, 2007). In their HR architecture model, Lepak and Snell (1999) argue that the value of human capital is dependant mostly on its potential to contribute to the competitive advantage and core competencies of a firm. In their definition of value, they describe value "as the ration of strategic benefits to customers derived from skills relative to the costs incurred" (p. 35). Sparrow and Makram (2015) attempted some theoretical framing of talent management by articulating a theory of value. They drew upon the literature on strategic management, value and value creation, the RBV and the dynamic capabilities literature to argue that organisations need to organise their internal processes and practices to exploit the potential of their talent resources if they are to create value and sustain competitive advantage. Theoretically, we might think of talent management practices as serving four processes: value creation, value capture, value leverage and amplification, and value protection, preservation and retention.

Taking into consideration how value is defined in both the strategic management and HRM literature, we can argue that on an organisational level: (a) the value of talent management is very much dependent on its ability to contribute to the organisation competitive advantage and core competencies; (b) the perceived use value of talent management is directly related to the perceptions of those players to which talent management is intended to create value for, be it organisations, individual talent or stakeholders; and (c) the exchange value of talent management is recognised when the outcome from executing its practices exceeds the amount invested to develop and implement these practices (i.e. when the contribution of talent resources exceeds the amount invested to identify, develop and retain them). Since

judgments about value are subjective and very much dependent on perceptions this begs the need for us to first examine how do organisations – and more specifically the strategic actors around the talent management system - perceive the value of talent management?

Methodology

The research adopts multiple case study design. In previous talent management case-study research (Iles et al., 2010, Hartmann et al., 2010, Preece et al., 2011) the sample size has ranged from four to seven cases. This study draws upon five case studies; each company was targeted using information available through their company website data and coverage in the media.

In order to capture such sophistication, a degree of maturity of practices was required to provide rich and detailed accounts to inform the research problem. Purposeful sampling was used to select information-rich cases. To assess the sophistication of the multinational organizations an informal interview was undertaken to establish the existing HRM practices and the extent of identifiable talent management strategies in place. The primary author, as a Director of Talent in the Middle East within the airline sector, was able to draw upon professional networks to negotiate the detailed and high-level access needed in the five case studies (see Table 1). The focus of the study was at the regional level covering predominantly the Middle East and Africa (MEA) operations but has also included a few Asia-Pacific and European countries. Case studies were selected against the following selection criteria: (a) size: large multinational companies (i.e. more than 15,000 employees) (b) presence: has a global presence with a strong regional presence in the Middle East, in particular Dubai, UAE, (c) strategy: has designed and implemented a talent management strategy to enable the identification, development and retention of talent. Four case studies are in the IT sector and one in the healthcare sector. All five case studies are US or UK owned, again bringing a degree of comparability across the case studies, but also of course

limiting the generalisation to Anglo-Saxon MNCs. One case study is designated as the principal case study on the basis of the largest number of interviews, and the others are coded as Comparative case studies 1 through 4.

< INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE >

A total of 50 strategic actors were selected for interview on the basis of two purposive sampling strategies: (a) criterion sampling with participants selected because they met certain criteria, and (b) maximum variation sampling with participants selected because they covered a spectrum of relevant positions and perspectives. Each case study provided interview access to two types of strategic actor:

- *HR or talent management directors (system designers)* – to provide a holistic view and a detailed illustration of the talent management practices, how they are designed and implemented in the organisation. As system designers, they were expected to help in understanding whether talent management is thought of in relation to value (i.e. in particular the value-driven model) or not.

- *Line Managers (system implementers)* – to provide a realistic view of how a talent management strategy is translated into action and implemented in the organisation, and whether they see value in implementing such practices.

Semi-structured (face-to-face or Skype) interviews were then used to interview strategic actors within each MNC (see Table 1). Although those actors were selected to represent either system designers or system implementers, individuals were also asked to categorise themselves. Moreover, to understand how these actors understood the phenomenon they are tasked with managing, we needed to initially capture the self-generated logics that were explanatory of their practice, rather than imposing a structure through the probes used, in

order to see if there were deeper constructs that had the potential to move them beyond their primary practice.

The interview questions (see Appendix 1) were therefore first focused on understanding how organisations define talent management and what is the approach they implement (i.e. inclusive: including everyone, or exclusive: differentiating and categorising talent). The discussion then moved to introduce the concept of value, the objective is to explore how value is defined and created in organisations and whether organisations perceive talent management to add value to them or not, and if they do, what does this value look like. The value questions moved us to a more structured discussion around how organisations perceive talent management contributing to four value processes: value creation, capture, leverage and protection. The interviews generated 60 hours of recorded material. They were transcribed verbatim and read in three modes: literally, reflexively, and interpretatively before coding on the base of the predetermined and then emergent codes. During this process the researcher sought to engage with each interview as a whole and to gain an understanding of the key issues that emerged at the initial stage of the data analysis. This provided a lengthy list of potentially important themes. In order to 'test' out these themes, in an iterative process, a thematic analysis was employed (Ritchie et al., 2014).

The thematic analysis approach enabled the researcher to break data down into chunks and link between its chunks using codes and themes to describe the category under which the data best fits (Rossman and Rallis, 2003). The researcher used two levels of coding, first cycle and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009). In the first cycle coding two types of codes were used (a) provisional codes – these were predetermined codes derived from both the research propositions and interview questions, and (b) emerging codes – these were other codes that have emerged from the datasets themselves. To this point, it is important to note that the first data source, principle case (Org.X) played a significant role in determining the ideas carried

throughout the data analysis, and generated the majority of the codes or themes that made-up the thematic framework (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). These codes were then used across all the other cases. In the second coding cycle, the researcher broadly brushed over the remaining data sets (4 cases) to capture any other possible codes/themes that might emerge, make sense of the codes/themes that have already emerged and redefine and organise the thematic framework hierarchical structure.

A draft index was constructed to help manage these themes and sub- themes, providing conceptual clarity whilst remaining open to any additions/removals of themes as the analysis progressed. All of these themes were taken from the empirical data provided by the interviewees, drawing on their language and terms used.

Using NVivo these themes and sub-themes were then applied to the raw data, the transcripts. Segments of texts were read and re-read and relevant themes were applied. During this process some themes were disgarded as they did not relate clearly to the empirical data and some themes were added. Table 2 shows the most dominant themes that emerged from the data, used by participants to describe their views about the definition of talent management, value and the value of talent management.

< INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE >

In total 98 nodes were identified, and relevant parts of the data strung together to logically build chains of evidence that illuminated and explained how the actors considered that talent management added value to their organisations. A thematic chart was then created for each of the case study organisations (Ritchie et al, 2014). The thematic chart enabled the author to summarise the key pieces of text for each interviewee in relation to the relevant theme/sub-theme. Through this charting a broader picture of the data was established, for example, highlighting dominate themes, demonstrating patterns of similarities and contradictions

between both interviewees and case study organisations (Ritchie et al, 2014). This Framework enabled the researcher to keep sight of the rich detailed empirical data and simultaneously apply a thematic interpretation. This allowed us to draw inference and cross-case conclusions and build plausible arguments and interpretations that are supported by the data.

Findings

We present the findings in the following categories: first the meaning of talent management (the definition of talent management, as defined in organisations), and second the value of talent management as perceived by the strategic actors in organisations. If we are to try to understand how talent management adds value to multinational companies, then research must cope with the observed reality that strategic actors (be it system designers or system implementers) struggled to understand and articulate what talent management means in their organisations (see Table 3, Column 1). When actors were asked to describe how talent management is defined in their organisations (if defined at all) they appeared confused and unsure, and instead they attempted to provide definitions based mostly on their own perceptions rather than being guided by a common organisational view. This made it difficult to identify a precise definition of 'talent management' because of the many assumptions and different interpretations made by organisations and their strategic actors.

The case findings indicated that organisations implemented talent management without properly defining its scope and boundaries. When probed to understand why there where limited attempts (if any at all) from organisations to define talent management it became clear that the absence of a more strategic thinking around the definition of talent management and the design of talent systems is attributed to the temptation for managers to operate from the assumption that talent management is just another HR process (Mercer, 2005, Olsen, 2000, Hilton, 2000, Heinen and O'Neill, 2004, Chowanec and Newstrom, 2011, Byham, 2001). And

hence, they approach it pragmatically without giving thought into how it should be defined and how its implementation may add value and contribute to organisation success.

At a surface level, strategic actors might appear to have no strategy. They struggle to find easy answers about the value of talent management.

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Despite talent management meaning different things to different organisations (even within the same organisation), we detected from the findings that talent management was broadly viewed as a bundle, or set, of management ideologies manifested in all HR-related practices, this included four key areas: hiring the right talent, performance management, succession planning, and development and retention.

The one key theme that consistently emerged in all 50 interviews was performance management and its strong relationship with talent management. For strategic actors, performance management seemed to be the cornerstone of talent management. The link between both was evidenced throughout the analysis; organisations strongly believed that it is through the performance management process that employees are discussed, reviewed in order to identify, not only, those performing from those not, but also to identify those with high potential (whilst it is not the intention of this paper to delve into a discussion of potential, it is worth noting that potential was commonly viewed as the ability to grow). Performance and talent management systems were both seen as being hand in hand and not capable of being separated as such. In this there is a disjunction between academic critiques of the talent management-performance link (Sparrow, Scullion & Tarique, 2014; Collings, 2014; Dick & Collings, 2016), and the working assumptions made by the strategic actors. While explaining how performance management is critical to talent management, strategic actors also made reference to succession planning. In their views, high potential employees

are purposefully identified to take on more critical and senior roles in the organisation. This is to ensure that organisations have a pipeline of successors being developed and groomed to become their future leaders. While discussing succession planning, we detected how talent development played an important role in extending the capabilities of high potentials and how organisations used their development offerings as a mechanism to retain all their employees but with more emphasis on the retention of high potentials. In these organisations developing the careers of high potentials was perceived is instrumental to the development of future leaders. What we detected from the data is the inclusion of a wide range of development offerings, such as: formal learning, social learning (i.e. mentors, coaches), networking events, stretch assignments and talent mobility.

Moving on from understanding how organisations define talent management, we directed the discussion towards the concept of value. Our objective was to explore how organisations think about value (how they define and create value). This on its own provoked interesting insights and provided a more focused view and a clearer perspective about the meaning and scope of talent management. When the question of value was raised, we instantly noticed that the language of value is uncommon and not widely used by organisations to describe how they think about their business value, let alone how they perceive the value of talent management. To this point we recognised the importance of guiding strategic actors to think and reflect on how their organisations create business value, this subsequently generated rich and insightful discussions. We detected from this discussion that value is created through business outcomes – such as by generating revenue and increasing market share, creating value to customers, and creating value to the people and the community. Although the language of value is uncommon, organisations are very clear about how and for whom they create value. This provided us with a great opportunity to bring back the discussion to talent management and pose our first research question (what is the value of talent management).

We recognise that the trigger word of business value has provoked strategic actors to think differently about talent management and encouraged them to walk away from perceiving it as another HR process to perceiving it as an enabler to value creation. Subsequently, when we asked participants to elaborate and describe the value of talent management; we noticed that the ideas behind business value were guiding their thinking and their attempts to bridge between it and between the value of talent management.

From our data, we detected four areas, commonly perceived across cases. First, organisations believed that talent management should enable them to translate the corporate and business strategy into talent capabilities, or in other words understand what type of talent and capabilities they might need to enable them create business value. Second, enable organisations to capitalise on the potential of their talent. This was an interesting insight, hence, there was a need for us to probe further to surface the common beliefs underpinning this insight. This helped us realise that organisations invest a lot of effort and time to identify their top talent or high potentials yet they do not necessarily know how to leverage this potential and capitalise on it so they can get a return on their investments. We then alluded to the management of high potentials to understand in their views what do strategic actors think their organisations should do to capitalise on the potential of talent and this is where the third and fourth values of talent management were detected. The third value of talent management is extending talent capabilities to acquire and institutionalise new knowledge and skills. Here, organisations believed that for talent management to add real value it should not only develop high potentials to become better at what they already know or do, but instead to extend their capabilities into learning new skills. Essentially, engage talent in a process of learning and unlearning, a continuous learning process to ensure developing internally the talent capabilities required to meet its future needs. The fourth and last value of talent management emphasised the importance of developing the right culture in the organisation. The cross-case

analysis indicated that there is a strong correlation between talent management and culture. In fact, it was observed that having the right culture which can enable the organisation to nurture, develop and grow its talent and high potential is critical for talent management to add value. Whilst these four areas might appear on the surface to be similar to the way that strategic actors initially thought about talent management (prior to any value discussions), the value discussion provoked debates through which strategic actors could then articulate their thoughts about talent management in a more strategic and more business aligned views. In addition, we recognised that in organisations, people (talent) were viewed as the key value creating resources they have, hence why, talent management was believed to be of value to the organisation. Whilst the third value of talent management seems like it is all about development, there was more depth to it.

Discussion

The findings in our study show that researchers face a double challenge if they try to impose ideas about value on the study of talent management. On the one hand, the continued difficulties that organisations and their strategic actors face in defining talent management serves to limit our own academic understanding of what talent management is, or should be. On the other hand, an increased amount of academic research has focused on conceptualising talent management in order to provide a conscious definition that describes what talent management is (Collings and Mellahi, 2009, Nijs et al., 2014, Tarique and Schuler, 2010, Scullion and Collings, 2011, Ashton and Morton, 2005, McDonnell, 2011). Although this study has not been designed to directly assess management cognitions, the methodology for it does tap the logics of action of strategic actors. Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale and Sumelius (2014) argued that adopting a strategy-as-practice perspective makes it possible to understand from a cognitive perspective the kinds of reasoning and logic that HR professionals and other practitioners tend to use, both individually and collectively. More

importantly, it becomes possible to see what proportion of the cognitive reasoning of professionals' is based on strategic and business logic, verses driven by precepts of organisational behavior or employee-based logic, or on emotive logics, and so forth.

The findings show that researchers need to reflect on the best ways to capture the way that strategic actors consider the question of value in their talent management practice.   Our dichotomy between system designers and system implementers with regard to talent management reflects a classical strategy and managerialist perspective. In reality we found the distinction is not as clear-cut as might be assumed from role and title. Perhaps this is of no surprise, as research on strategic actors in MNEs has shown that senior subsidiary managers in MNEs often struggle to justify their roles as strategic actors as opposed to passive pawns in the implementation of corporate strategies (Dick and Collings, 2016).   The strategy as practice literature has drawn attention to the tensions involved in assumed participation in strategy (Mantere and Vaara, 2008) and found that amongst those involved in strategy work, three discourses worked against and impeded strategic participation: mystification (strategy as an abstract direction and destiny, preached upon by a small community of experts); disciplining (language to naturalise obedient execution, such as deployment, leaders and followers, and the making of good citizens); and technologization (the adoption of tools that portray a sense of quantification and measurement and downplay the need for interpretation).   At the same time, more substantive participation could be brought about through processes of self-actualisation (changes in response to critical thinking and a constant search for meaning), dialogization (a clear dialogue between top-down strategies and bottom-up planning), and concretization (the emergence of clear and transparent rules, the crafting of practical solutions and problem solving).   We can use this framework to interpret the findings outlined above.

The study shows that managers have different levels of strategic involvement in decision

making in organisations. However, the question 'how is talent management defined in your organisation?' came as a surprise to many (be it talent systems designers or senior managers involved in the implementation of systems). At a surface level, strategic actors might appear to have no strategy. They struggle to find easy answers about the value of talent management.

The talent management strategies often displayed little participation for both system designers and implementers. There were distinct patterns of mystification (with neither system designers nor implementers being too concerned about the definition of talent management and being accepting of its generic value) and technologization (with most case studies adopting performance-potential tools and downplaying the need for interpretation about the labelling of talent beyond this, and most interviewees viewing existing concepts of performance management and succession planning as being the cornerstone of their talent management practice). At the same time, there was much reliance on concretization (with both types of strategic actor collating in their minds practices concerned with attracting, developing, motivating and retaining the "right" employees, then expanding the capabilities, skills and mindsets of such employees).

This leads us to believe that the components of a talent management architecture (system) are usually designed by organisations without generating new thinking or new ways to definite between talent management and traditional HR practices. This does not come to us as a surprise, we have seen similar findings in the work of Iles et al. (2010) and Preece et al. (2011, 2013) where they found (based on a small number of MNCs in China) that talent management was perceived to essentially involve the same functional areas of HR. We then argue that the thinking around talent management (in practice) has advanced little beyond what has already been proposed a decade ago in the literature, and beyond the initial 9-Box model of performance-potential, which Hird, Whelan and Hammady (2010) traced the ideas

back to an article by Odiorne (1984), where he recommended utilising the Boston Consulting Group strategic portfolio matrix as the basis for constructing what he termed a "Human Resources Portfolio", consisting of stars, work horses, problem children and deadwood.

The struggle to contextualise and describe the meaning of talent management, made it clear to us that there is a lack of clarity among organisations about the objective and the intended outcome of talent management. Whilst there is an implicit belief among system designers that talent managements contribute to organisational performance and competitive advantage, the reality is, such belief is rarely taken into consideration when talent management systems are implemented. This misconception is perhaps attributed to the fact that talent management is implemented through other actors than system designers or decision makers. We have seen organisations invest in their talent management practises but with little efforts to educate the implementers of the talent systems on how to use these systems in order to manage, identify and develop their most talented employees. There was little evidence (if any at all) to explain how organisations measure the effectiveness of their talent systems. This explains the failure to create a shared understanding on an organisational level of what is talent management.

Understanding the value of talent management is a key objective of this study. When questions of value were first positioned, it was difficult for strategic actors to articulate their understanding of what value is, and it was clear that this is not a common language that they use on daily basis, let alone to think about it in relation to talent management. However, once this dialogue was opened in interview, it served in Mantere and Vaara's (2008) terms as a form of self-actualisation, where actors upon probing were capable of adopting a more critical form of thinking and articulating their interpretation of value in the context of business outcomes – such as by generating revenue and increasing market share, creating value to customers, and creating value to the talent themselves, or the community. It is important to note that the internal structures and processes within the talent management

functions did not serve to generate such insight or dialogue, either amongst system designers or executors. But there was evidence that the practitioners could engage with this more critical thinking, and in turn this generated four component dialogues: the need to translate the corporate and business strategy into talent capabilities; to know how to leverage identified potential and capitalise on it so they could get a return on their investments; to extend the capabilities of existing talent so that they could learn, acquire and institutionalise new knowledge and skills; and developing the right culture in the organisation to nurture, develop and grow its talent.

Not surprisingly, joining up one bundle of ideas – the basic functions and processes that together constitute talent management – to another diffused bundle of ideas – the nature of value and the organisational capabilities that talent management architectures might engender – might at first sight seem to be a futile venture. Having said that, the research approach showed that the discussion of value could trigger interesting insights amongst the strategic actors into how talent management might be alternatively thought of. Although they themselves would not proffer arguments about, or make distinctions between, issues such as value creation, value capture, value leverage or value protection, the discourse created by their pursuit of talent management – their talent-as-practice - seemed to equip them with foundations of more strategic perspectives on value. The discussion of value provoked them to think about talent management in a different way. They no longer view talent management as just another label to describe HR, rather, they now view it as a strategic approach to enable the organisation create business value, be it to itself, shareholders, customers or whoever they aim to create value for. This strategic approach should then be strongly aligned to where the organisation wants to be – and to what value it wishes to create.

Through a combination of what Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale and Sumelius, (2014) referred to as their praxis (the flows and streams of activities of individuals and groups

involved in talent work, the patterns of action and networks involved, situated in the necessary collective and social context), the practices involved (the tools processes, procedures and norms that are adapted and combined to construct and deliver the talent strategy), and the practitioners involved (the agency exerted by and actions of the strategic actors i.e. those with direct or indirect influence on the strategy making), they had a mindset that was not blind to questions of value. There is evidence that in the minds of strategic actors, despite the inevitable gravitational pull back to the core issues of attraction, development, performance and retention, there is a bed of learned sophistication since the original performance-potential frameworks. Talent management is now viewed as a value creation enabler and is not only about recruitment, but is more about understanding and predicting what types of talent and capabilities the organisation needs and makes sure those talents are attracted and brought in. It is no longer about traditional approaches to development, but instead is a continuous process of learning and un-learning, a process where capabilities are extended and new skills are acquired to prepare for the future. It is no longer about getting the best out of people but instead capitalising on what they are good at, their potential, their skills, and their expertise and to make sure that these are utilised in ways that would enable the organisation to create value. It is a custodian of the culture and the way the organisation should be treating and looking after its talent.

Implications for practice

Given that talent management value is to a large extent, just in the eye of the beholder, one of the dangers we face is imposing theoretical models and frameworks over the evolving logic and understanding that exists in practice in the minds of strategic actors. Interesting and important though the academic discourse has become, the challenge is to help organisations (through the actors involved) move towards a more useful and constructive talent management architecture (Sparrow and Makram, 2015).

By adopting a strategy-as-practice perspective, the study has shown that despite the seniority of strategic actors often involved in the implementation, if not always the design, of talent management systems, there is a lack of critical thinking amongst actors and very little real participation in strategic thinking. Existing practice, and the assumptions it seems to be based upon, suggest an over-reliance on mystification, with individual definitions of talent management abounding and any notion of talent management strategy reflecting a rather abstract direction and destiny, reflected upon by only a small community of experts. There was also an over-reliance on technologization, with the adoption of tools that portrayed a sense of quantification and measurement but that downplayed the need for interpretation. Practitioners should also beware the disjunction between academic critiques of the talent management-performance link, and their assumption that the two systems are, and should be, inherently linked. But it would be a fallacy to be over-critical of these tendencies, for at the same time, where forums inside the organisation or talent management function might allow, practitioners could happily engage with this more critical thinking, and use it to hone in on crucial debates around the translation of strategy into capabilities, the leverage of potential, the link between talent management and knowledge management, and the role of culture.

Research Implications and Limitations

There are some clear research implications. In relation to talent management strategies, research methods need to reveal the implicit assumption, and often contended debates and dialogues that are shaping practice and policy within talent management. This study has surfaced four of these: the translation of corporate and business strategy into talent capabilities; the leverage of identified potential and the return on their investment; the extension of individual capabilities and talent systems to enable the learning, acquisition and institutionalisation of new knowledge and skills; and the role of organisational culture in

nurturing, developing and growing talent. However, if we are to use more directive methodologies – we must beware imposing external models and frameworks and asking actors to tell us how value might be created – we shall risk either disappointment in the vagueness of their answers – or false verification as these actors attempt to please or impress through answers that are far from the mainstream of their praxis and practice. Attempts at engineering more valuable talent management architectures may be destined to fail. A more fruitful approach for researchers will be to help articulate the new dialogues that the bundle of practices brought together under the label of talent management can generate, and to then demonstrate the different ways in which such dialogues contribute to models of value. There is an opportunity for future research to focus its efforts by exploring in more detail how different types of value might be engendered through such activities

There are some clear limitations to the study. It is limited to five MNEs, and is broadly picking up the logics of strategic actors who operate at a regional level within these MNEs. It would be useful to apply the same form of analysis to corporate centres of expertise, where these might exist. However, from the seniority of interviewees, we feel that we can generalise and assume similar findings in other companies with the same context, business system and economic situation.

Conclusions

In this paper, we explored how organisations define talent management and how the language of value has provoked alternative ways to think about talent management.

Based on the empirical findings of our study, we argue that the practice of talent management has developed little beyond the initial 9 box model of performance and potential. Whilst the concept of talent management is widely used by organisations, there was a clear lack of

understanding and an absence of a concise definition to describe what does talent management mean to these organisations. Instead, by default, talent management was perceived as another label to describe the traditional HR practice, with hardly any recognised differences. We recognise that this common understanding is problematic and hinders the development of talent management, thus, we suggest that introducing the concepts of value to talent management should help us address the existing definitional problem. Our findings showed that, it is through this value discussion that we can differentiate between talent management and traditional HR practices. Defining talent management in relation to its value brings new perspectives into the discussion of talent management and makes it easier for organisations to shift their default common views from a traditional HR practice to a more strategic, well scoped practice. It can help us address the current definitional problem we face in academic research, and it can also help inform and guide future research agenda.

With regards to the first research question "what is the value of talent management?" the results of our paper illustrate four strategic opportunities for talent management to add value in organisations. As an enabler to value creation, first, talent management should enable the articulation and translation of corporate and business strategies into talent capabilities. Thus, acquiring talent is no longer a process of hiring the best talent in the market, instead, it is a strategic process designed to acquire the types of valuable talent needed by organisations to create value. Second, talent management should enable organisations capitalise on the potential of their top talent, make use of those talent and align their potential to the execution of value creating strategies. Third, to enable this alignment, talent management should also help organisations extend the capabilities of their key talent to acquire and institutionalise new knowledge and skills. Finally, creating a culture which enables the engagement of talent to continuously add value.

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Case Studies	*Interviews conducted*
Principal Case Study: American multinational technology company (one of the world's largest software makers famous for its software products as well as its flagship hardware products) based in the US with a worldwide global reach.	19 interviews (12 HR leaders and 7 Business leaders) located in 7 countries (Turkey, UK, Egypt, South Africa, Israel, UAE and KSA).
Comparative Case 1: American multinational computer technology corporation known for its integrated offerings of cloud solutions, applications, database, and middleware.	10 interviews (4 HR leaders and 6 Business leaders) in 4 countries (UAE, Italy, Netherland and Australia)
Comparative Case 2: American multinational technology conglomerate. Well known for being the largest producer of networking hardware and telecommunication equipment.	7 interviews (2 HR leaders and 5 Business Leaders) 7 interviews in Dubai, UAE
Comparative Case 3: British multinational specialised in the telecommunications services known for its offerings of telecom services to government and corporate customers worldwide.	10 interviews (3 HR leaders and 7 Business leaders) in 4 countries (UAE, South Africa, Singapore and Australia).
Comparative Case 4: American	6 interviews (2 HR leaders and 4

multinational medical device, pharmaceutical and consumer packaged good manufacturer. 120,000 employees worldwide.	Business leaders) conducted in Dubai, UAE

Table 1: Case study profiles and numbers of interviewee

Key Themes	*Subthemes*
Talent Management (defintion) Describes how talent management was defined by participants	▪ **Having the right people** (describes how the process of attracting and acquiring the right and best talent in the market is a critical part of talent management) ▪ **Performance management** (describes how performance management is used to differentiate between employees based on their performance in order to identify high potentials) ▪ **Succesion planning** (describes the process in which organisations build a pipeline of future leaders) ▪ **Talent development** (describes how talent are developed by organisations) ▪ **Capatalising on talent** (describes the important of talent management in enabling organisations to capitalise on the potential of their talent.)
Value Describes how value is	▪ **Meaning of value** (describes how value is defined bu participants)

defined in organisations and the process of value creation	▪ **Value created (how)**
	
	(describes the process of value creation in organisations – how particpiants think about value creation and who is value created for)
	
	    ▪ Creating value to people
	
	    ▪ Customers satsifaction and product offerings
	
	    ▪ Increase market share

Value of Talent Management Describes the four key ways in which talent management adds value to organisations	▪ **Impact on organisation** (describes the impact on organisation performance, success and bottom line) ▪ **Attracting and acquiring the right people** (describes the value of attracting and acquiring the talent required by organisations) ▪ **Talent development and retention** (describes how talent management may contribute to developing talent and managing their careers to support their retention) ▪ **Capitalising on potential (talent)** (describes how the value of talent management is to capitalise on the potential of talent)

Table 2: Key themes emerged (sample)

How is talent management defined	*Perceived value of talent management*
"Wow, that is a big question, I am surprised you even asked. To be honest I never thought about it and I would be very curious to see what sort of responses you get from others in the organisation." [Regional HR Manager, principle case]	"Achieving the targets, yes they look at the customer satisfaction but if you look at what the highest focus is, sales, how much are we selling, how much are we achieving, how much are we growing. It is numbers it is a number driven by default. The whole market." [Regional Sales director, comparative case3]
"I do not think you will ever get an answer to this question. There is no such thing as a talent management definition in our organisation." [HR Director, comparative case1]	"Creating value to our customers, to our stakeholders and our entire ecosystem…you know we are a sales organisation, it is all about the numbers, the revenue, the dollar and so on…" [Global Director of HR, comparative case4]
"Talent management as such I don't think that we define it; I don't think we use that expression as talent management. Ask HR but I am not sure they even define it." [Regional sales director, comparative case2]	"Value is about usage. Is about producing products that customers use. It is about generating money from increasing the usage of products development by the company. Offering customers what they will buy and use." [General Manager, MEA, principle case]
"It is about the ongoing management of those people in terms of their objectives, the succession planning and the performance management of people against that as well as thinking about	"Because if you look on the real value of talent management it will have a major impact on the business." [Sales Business Manager, comparative case2]

their own development needs." [Sales and Marketing director, comparative case 3]	
"The words that I said to you are about making sure that we have the right people, with the right capabilities and in the right jobs to be able to grow within the organization." [HR Lead MEA, principle case]	"I don't think we can be successful without proper talent management. It enables succession planning, leveraging on the quality of people you have, developing people and growing them." [Talent Management Head, comparative case3]
"My definition of talent management is how you design your organisation processes to attract, develop, retain and motivate talent, right employees ultimately and manage their performance and careers to grow and become your future leaders." [Head of Sales, Asia Pacific, comparative case3]	"It is not about bringing in talent it is more to do with understanding what type of talent we need, what does our future look like, what sort of people we need" [Senior HR Director, principle case]
"People are reviewed and talked about as part of the annual performance management process which includes providing feedback to people, differentiating between employees to identify talent and discuss development options." [Sales and Marketing Lead,	"The value of talent management is preparing us for the future, understanding what type of talent we need and make sure we have them" [CFO MEA, comparative case3]

MEA, principal case]	
"Succession planning is a very key strength of talent management; it is about ensuring we have successors for all our critical roles and who are your successors; your high potentials mostly." [Commercial and Operations Manager, comparative case4]	"…the idea is if I can take those high potential, it is like you know in electricity there is potential and current right so if I can get this potential with current that can actually light my bulb so for me that is the value I am after. So, from a talent management perspective is finding ways to translate potential to current, see what I am saying." [Business General Manager, principle case]
"Our succession planning is called the slating for potential roles. And what we are trying to do is with various levels of success is trying to align our key talent and high potential community to various slates in the organisation." [HR manager, principle case]	"It should prepare our talent for the future, develop them not for today but for tomorrow…they should remain in this process of continues learning" [Head of marketing, comparative case4]
"but we feel like we have a pool of skilful people and we define talent management by keeping them engaged and retained, giving them the opportunity to expand their capabilities, mind-set, their skillset so they may contribute to a greater extent wherever this is - be it in management roles or career roles." [Head of research,	"Talent management should help us develop our culture, you know if you don't have the right culture to support such initiatives you are setting yourself for failure" [Director of Commercial Sales, comparative case3]

principle case]	
	"It should underpin everything that we do, it should be part of our culture, our DNA…no no it should drive our culture, that is how it adds value to us" [HR Lead, principle case]

Table 3: Illustrative quotes on the definition and value of talent management

Appendix 1: Interview proforma

Q.1 How is talent management defined in your organisation? How do YOU define talent management?

Q.2 What is your organisation approach to talent management – is everyone in the organisation considered a talent/Hipo or only a selective few.

Q.3 Who is a (how do you define) 'Talent'/High potential in your organisation?

Q.4 Do you have a common talent management strategy across your organisation, or does it vary? How does it vary?

Q.5 What do you think drives the design of your talent management strategy/practises globally?

Q.6 Tell me more about your talent management strategy/ processes – how do you

- Identify talent/HiPo

- Develop talent/HiPo

- Retain talent/HiPo

Q.7 In your organisation, how is business value defined and created?

Q.8 Do you think talent management adds value to your organisation?

- What value does it add?

- What other value you expect talent management to add?