



## What is the meaning of ‘talent’ in the world of work?

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### ABSTRACT

The ongoing confusion about the meaning of ‘talent’ within the world of work is hindering the establishment of widely accepted talent management theories and practices. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the literature on talent management by offering an in-depth review of the talent concept within the specific context of the world of work, and proposing a framework for its conceptualization. We group different theoretical approaches to talent into ‘object’ (i.e., talent as natural ability; talent as mastery; talent as commitment; talent as fit) versus ‘subject’ approaches (i.e., talent as all people; talent as some people) and identify dynamics existing within and between them, as well as implications for talent management theory and practice. Finally, we discuss different avenues for further research aimed at developing the talent—and consequently, the talent *management*—construct further.

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### 1. Introduction

Ever since 1998, when a group of McKinsey consultants coined the expression ‘war for talent’ and posited that a fundamental belief in the importance of talent is needed to achieve organizational excellence (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001), talent management (TM) has been an increasingly popular topic (Chuai, Preece, & Iles, 2008). In recent years, a notable increase in the number of articles and books relating to TM is observed as it is seen more and more as a high-priority issue for organizations worldwide (Iles, Preece, & Chuai, 2010). Proper talent management is considered a critical determinant of organizational success (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010), and imperative for the livelihood and sustainability of organizations (Lawler, 2008).

In spite of its growing popularity and more than a decade of debate, however, the construct of TM suffers from conceptual confusion in that there is a serious lack of clarity regarding its definition, scope and overall goals (Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Tansley et al., 2007). The lack of theoretical foundations and conceptual development in the TM literature can be attributed in part to the fact that most of the literature in this field is practitioner- or consultancy-based (Iles, Chuai, et al., 2010; Preece, Iles, & Chuai, 2011). This latter finding also accounts for the literature’s focus on practices (the ‘how’) rather than on ‘who’ is considered talented and ‘why’.

An increasing number of authors (e.g., Garrow & Hirsh, 2008; Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Reilly, 2008; Tansley et al., 2007) attribute the ambiguity inherent to the TM construct to the inadequate operationalization of the underlying construct talent. Quite surprisingly, TM scholars are rarely precise about what exactly they mean by talent, probably because there are widely held implicit theories about what talent is (Barab & Plucker, 2002). In fact, in many articles (e.g., Collings & Mellahi, 2009; O’Reilly & Pfeffer, 2000) and books (e.g., Cappelli, 2008; Lawler, 2008) about TM, talent as an underlying construct is taken for granted and thus not defined explicitly.

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**Table 1**  
Different definitions of talent in the world of work.

Source	Definition of talent
Gagné (2000)	"(...) superior mastery of systematically developed abilities or skills" (p. 67)
Williams (2000)	"describe those people who do one or other of the following: regularly demonstrate exceptional ability – and achievement – either over a range of activities and situations, or within a specialized and narrow field of expertise; consistently indicate high competence in areas of activity that strongly suggest transferable, comparable ability in situations where they have yet to be tested and proved to be highly effective, i.e. potential." (p. 35)
Buckingham and Vosburgh (2001)	"Talent should refer to a person's recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied." (p. 21)
Jericó (2001)	"The implemented capacity of a committed professional or group of professionals that achieve superior results in a particular environment and organization." (p. 428; <i>translation ours</i> )
Michaels et al. (2001)	"(...) the sum of a person's abilities—his or her intrinsic gifts, skills, knowledge, experience, intelligence, judgment, attitude, character and drive. It also includes his or her ability to learn and grow." (p. xii)
Lewis and Heckman (2006)	"(...) is essentially a euphemism for 'people'" (p. 141)
Tansley, Harris, Stewart, and Turner (2006)	"Talent can be considered as a complex amalgam of employees' skills, knowledge, cognitive ability and potential. Employees' values and work preferences are also of major importance." (p. 2)
Stahl et al. (2007)	"a select group of employees – those that rank at the top in terms of capability and performance – rather than the entire workforce". (p. 4)
Tansley et al. (2007)	"Talent consists of those individuals who can make a difference to organizational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer-term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential." (p. 8)
Ulrich (2007)	"Talent equals competence [able to do the job] times commitment [willing to do the job] times contribution [finding meaning and purpose in their work]" (p. 3)
Cheese, Thomas, and Craig (2008)	"Essentially, talent means the total of all the experience, knowledge, skills, and behaviours that a person has and brings to work." (p. 46)
González-Cruz et al. (2009)	"A set of competencies that, being developed and applied, allow the person to perform a certain role in an excellent way." (p 22; <i>translation ours</i> )
Silzer and Dowell (2010)	"(...) in some cases, 'the talent' might refer to the entire employee population." (p. 14)
Silzer and Dowell (2010)	"In groups talent can refer to a pool of employees who are exceptional in their skills and abilities either in a specific technical area (such as software graphics skills) or a competency (such as a consumer marketing talent), or a more general area (such as general managers or high-potential talent). And in some cases, "the talent" might refer to the entire employee population." (pp. 13–14)
Silzer and Dowell (2010)	"An individual's skills and abilities (talents) and what the person is capable of doing or contributing to the organization." (p. 14)
Bethke-Langenegger (2012)	"we understand talent to be one of those worker who ensures the competitiveness and future of a company (as specialist or leader) through his organisational/job specific qualification and knowledge, his social and methodical competencies, and his characteristic attributes such as eager to learn or achievement oriented" (p. 3)
Ulrich and Smallwood (2012)	"Talent = competence [knowledge, skills and values required for today's and tomorrow's job; right skills, right place, right job, right time] × commitment [willing to do the job] × contribution [finding meaning and purpose in their job]" (p. 60)

It appears that talent can mean whatever a business leader or writer wants it to mean, since everyone has his or her own idea of what the construct does and does not encompass (Ulrich, 2011). In fact, many different definitions of talent can be found in the academic human resource management (HRM) literature (see Table 1). In addition, in the HR practitioner literature we find a great deal of organizationally specific definitions of talent, highly influenced by the type of industry or occupational field (Tansley et al., 2007). As we will discuss throughout this paper, a number of important discussions arise from the wide variation found in the literature about the meaning of talent—does talent refers to people (subject) or to the characteristics of people (object)? Is talent more about performance, potential, competence, or commitment? Is talent a natural ability or does it relates more to mastery through practice? Is it better to take an inclusive or an exclusive approach to talent management?

The ongoing confusion about the meaning of talent is hindering the establishment of widely acknowledged TM theories and practices, thus stalling scholarly advancement. In addition, the lack of construct clarity might lead to a lack of confidence in the conclusions that can be drawn from the existing literature. Therefore, the aim of the current paper is to contribute to the theoretical literature on TM by offering an in-depth review of the talent concept within the specific context of the world of work, and proposing a framework for its conceptualization that organizes and dissects the different viewpoints found in the existing literature in a straightforward manner. In order to accomplish this aim, we have carried out an in-depth review of the literature on talent and TM.

An online search was conducted across several databases—i.e., Science Direct, Business Source Complete, Emerald, and Google Scholar. 'Talent' and 'talent management' were the keywords used. Although our focus was on scholarly peer-reviewed articles, we also included some HR practitioner publications that are frequently cited in the academic literature. Ultimately, our review included 170 peer-reviewed articles, 9 doctoral dissertations, 3 conference papers, 40 books, 6 working papers, and 20 HR practitioner reports. We supplemented our review of the academic literature with a search into the linguistic origins of the term talent, using 10 different reference books published by Oxford University Press (see further down).

In what follows, we first offer a discussion of the etymology of the term 'talent' and its linguistic evolution over time, with the purpose of shedding light on contemporary usage of the term in organizational settings. Subsequently, we discuss different approaches to the conceptualization of talent within the world of work, organizing these within a basic framework (i.e., 'object' versus 'subject'). We then move on to discuss the implications of these different approaches for talent management theory and practice. We conclude this paper with avenues for future research, aimed at developing the talent—and consequently, the talent management—construct further.

## 2. The etymological history of the term ‘talent’

The term talent is everywhere. One needs only to take a look at the headlines of newspapers, journals, and magazines, to see how often the term is actually used—a Google search reveals nearly six hundred million hits. Moreover, there is a growing number of shows on television that showcase talent, such as “Britain’s Got Talent” and its international counterparts (Pruis, 2011). In everyday parlance, talent is typically associated with athletes (e.g. Olympians, exceptional coaches, extraordinary teams), musicians of extraordinary ability, singers with incredible voices, and gifted children. Asking for a clear definition, however, is like “opening a can of worms” (Honey, 2004, p. 11). As for talent in the work context, the situation is quite the same. One possible explanation for this conceptual ambiguity is the history of the word talent—considering the different meanings it has had throughout its over one thousand years of existence.

The term talent in Old English (used up until 1149) was *talente*, which originated from the Latin term *talentum* (Knowles, 2005; Stevenson, 2010). The Latin term, in turn, originated from the Greek word *tálanon* [τάλαντον], which means “balance, weight, sum of money” (Hoad, 1996). Originally, a talent denoted a unit of weight used by the Babylonians, Assyrians, Greeks and Romans (Cresswell, 2009). In Ancient Greece, one talent was the equivalent of 25.86 kg (Darwill, 2008; Howatson, 2011). According to Howatson (2011), before proper coinage, Greek units of money carried the same name as units of weight since the weights of precious metals (mostly silver, occasionally gold) were used to represent a sum of money (Howatson, 2011; Knowles, 2005). This is how, ultimately, a ‘talent’ became a coin. One talent corresponded to 60 minas or 6000 drachmas (Howatson, 2011). This was an enormous amount of money at that time as 3.5 drachmas was the normal wage for a week’s work (Darwill, 2008), and 50 minas (i.e., less than one talent) was seen as the amount one would pay for a very large house—an ordinary dwelling could be bought for three minas (Howatson, 2011). Hence, talents were exclusive; only rich people had them.

The Parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament (25: 14–30) attests to the value attributed to talent. The parable talks about a wealthy man who, before going on a long journey, gives his three servants one, two, and five talents respectively—based on his perception of each of their abilities—for safekeeping. The servants who received five and two talents both use their coins well, doubling their value through hard work and trading. The servant who was given only one talent, however—afraid to lose his coin and anger his master—buries his coin in the ground. After an extended absence, the master returns, commending the two servants who doubled their talents as good and faithful (and rewarding them by letting them keep their profits), whilst calling the servant who had buried his coin wicked and slothful, and ordering him to hand over his one talent to the servant who has most. According to Tansley (2011), since the New English Bible translates the Greek word *talent* into the word *capital*, this parable can be seen as one of the causes for HRM scholars using the term *human capital* as synonymous to *talent*.

In the thirteenth century, talent was seen either as the feeling that makes a person want to do something (i.e., an inclination), or the natural qualities of a person’s character (i.e., a disposition). Similarly, in Old French talent was seen as *will* or *desire*. Although Hoad (1996) considers this latter definition of talent obsolete, this type of operationalization highlights the behavioral aspect of talent, which is becoming increasingly important again in today’s business environment—as we will discuss in more detail later.

In contrast, in the Late Middle Ages (i.e., the fifteenth and sixteenth century), talent came to mean a person’s mental ability or particular abilities, divinely entrusted to them for their personal use and improvement (Hoad, 1996; Knowles, 2005). This meaning of talent was strongly influenced by Christian interpretations of the Parable of the Talents, which did not only stress the innate nature of talent, but also the fact that it is a person’s duty to use and improve the talents gifted to them by God. As Michaels et al. (2001) assert, “talent is a gift that must be cultivated, not left to languish” (p. xiii). Since only few people were believed to be divinely entrusted with specific talents, the Parable, as well, contributed to exclusive interpretations of the term talent. In this interpretation lies the origin of talent being conceptualized as an inborn gift or natural aptitude (e.g., Gagné, 2000). A similar view of talent was held throughout the seventeenth century—i.e., talent as inborn aptitudes and skills possessed by special people—but without referring to divinity (Knowles, 2005).

By the nineteenth century, according to Tansley (2011), talent “was viewed as embodied in the talented—hence, a person of talent and ability” (p. 267). Here, we encounter for the first time a ‘subject’ approach to talent (i.e., talent as people), rather than an ‘object’ approach, which conceptualizes talent as characteristics of people. Over the course of the twentieth century some new terms arose. For instance, since the 1930s, ‘talent scout’ (or spotter) is used to designate a person searching for new talent (Cresswell, 2009). The emergence of this term might explain why up until today many people connect talent to sports or music. Another use of the term talent can be situated in the 1940s among British servicemen, who quite commonly used the term ‘local

**Table 2**

Definitions of talent in contemporary English dictionaries.

Dictionary	First meaning	Second meaning
Stevenson (2010), Stevenson and Lindberg (2010)	Natural aptitude or skill	People possessing talent [natural aptitude or skill]
Adrian-Vallance et al. (2009)	A natural ability to do something well	A person or people with a natural ability or skill
Barber (2004)	Special aptitude or faculty	A person possessing exceptional skill or ability; people of talent or ability collectively
Deverson and Kennedy (2005)	Special aptitude or faculty; high mental ability	A person or persons of talent

talent' to refer to the good-looking people of a certain area (Cresswell, 2009). In modern British English, talent is still used (be it informally) to refer to people regarded as sexually attractive. One might say that, even in this form, talent refers to the segmentation of the population in 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

### 3. Approaches to talent in the world of work

When looking up 'talent' in Contemporary English Dictionaries we see that in this day and age 'object' and 'subject' approaches to the conceptualization of talent coincide (see Table 2), which possibly contributes to the confusion about what talent is, exactly.

Taking into account the linguistic evolution of the term talent, described earlier, we infer that the original meaning of the term talent refers to personal characteristics (*talent as object*). In English, as well as in other European languages, talent is typically described as an innate ability that manifests in a particular field (Tansley, 2011). It is commonly understood as above-average ability for a specific function or range of functions. Rather than corresponding to 'normal' ability, talent is considered a special ability that makes the people who possess, develop, and use it rise out above the rest of their age peers in the specific area of their talent (Gagné, 2000). Consequently, talent is often equated to excellent performance in a given performance domain.

The second meaning of talent found in contemporary English Dictionaries refers to a person or persons of talent (*talent as subject*)—i.e., people possessing special skills or abilities. In fact, it is very common to see job advertisements in which talent refers to potential applicants (e.g., "talent wanted"). Likewise, managers frequently refer to their workforce as the talent of the organization, so as to stress the fact that people are the organization's most important assets (Ashton & Morton, 2005). The subject approach to talent—which is historically 'newer' than the object approach (see also Tansley, 2011)—currently coexists with the object approach, also in the HRM literature. In what follows, we discuss the tensions between these two approaches to the conceptualization of talent.

#### 3.1. Object approach—talent as characteristics of people

Many peer-reviewed publications conceptualize talent as exceptional characteristics demonstrated by individual employees. In Table 3, we provide an overview of the different terms commonly associated with the notion of 'talent-as-object' in the academic literature.

Within the object approach to talent, we further distinguish between approaches that conceptualize talent as natural ability; approaches operationalizing talent as the mastery of systematically developed skills; approaches that associate talent with commitment and motivation; and approaches that stress the importance of fit between an individual's talent and the context within which he or she works (i.e., in terms of organization and/or position).

##### 3.1.1. Talent as natural ability

The nature-nurture debate is a longstanding one when it comes to individual differences, and it is pertinent to discussions about talent as well (For a more in-depth discussion of the nature-nurture debate in talent management, see Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013—in this issue). Most HRM scholars and practitioners seem to believe that talent is innate, at least to some extent. Hinrichs (1966), for instance, defines talent as a native ability: "(...) a unique mix of innate intelligence or brain power, plus a certain degree of creativity or the capacity to go beyond established stereotypes and provide innovative solutions to problems in his everyday world, plus personal skills which make him effective in his relationships with his peers, his superiors, and his subordinates" (p. 11).

Conceptualizing talent as a natural ability has important repercussions for how talent can (and cannot) be managed. Buckingham and Vosburgh (2001), for instance, assert that whilst skills and knowledge are relatively 'easy' to teach, talent pertains to characteristics much more enduring and unique. Therefore, according to these authors, talent is quasi-impossible to learn or teach. Similarly, Davies and Davies (2010) conclude that, given its innate nature, talent cannot really be managed—and

**Table 3**

Terms commonly associated with 'talent-as-object' in the literature.

Associated terms	Sources
Ability	Gagné (2000), Hinrichs (1966), Michaels et al. (2001), Silzer and Dowell (2010), Tansley et al. (2006), Williams (2000)
Capacity	Jericó (2001)
Capability	Stahl et al. (2007)
Commitment	Ulrich (2007)
Competence/competency	Bethke-Langenegger (2012), González-Cruz et al. (2009), Silzer and Dowell (2010), Ulrich (2007), Williams (2000)
Contribution	Ulrich (2007)
Experience	Cheese et al. (2008)
Knowledge	Bethke-Langenegger (2012), Cheese et al. (2008), Michaels et al. (2001), Tansley et al. (2006)
Performance	Stahl et al. (2007), Tansley et al. (2007)
Potential	Tansley et al. (2006), Tansley et al. (2007), Williams (2000)
Patterns of thought, feeling or behavior	Buckingham and Vosburgh (2001), Cheese et al. (2008)
Skills	Cheese et al. (2008), Gagné (2000), Hinrichs (1966), Michaels et al. (2001), Silzer and Dowell (2010), Tansley et al. (2006)

suggest that organizations should focus on the *enablement* of talent instead. In spite of the important implications of the nature-nurture debate in talent management, however, Silzer and Dowell (2010) claim that the distinction between innate and malleable components of talent is seldom made in HR practice—which tends to take a more pragmatic approach to managing talent.

### 3.1.2. Talent as mastery

In contrast to the natural ability approach are conceptualizations of talent that focus on deliberate practice and learning from experience. Ericsson, Prietula, and Cokely (2007), for instance, conclude from their research across a wide range of performance domains (i.e., chess, medicine, auditing, programming, dance, and music) that talent—which they operationalize as expert performance—is nearly always made, not born. According to Pfeffer and Sutton (2006), in spite of all the myth, talent is always a function of experience and effort. Although, clearly, not all people have the same amount of ultimate potential, there seems to be some agreement in the literature on deliberate practice (e.g., Ericsson, 2006) and learning from experience (e.g., Briscoe & Hall, 1999) that at least 10,000 h of focused and deliberate practice are required for reaching 'talented' levels of performance.

The mastery approach to talent also implies a need for evidence. According to Ericsson et al. (2007), talent should be "demonstrated by measurable, consistently superior performance" (p. 117). De Haro (2010) states that if no evidence for exceptional achievements is available, we are not talking about talent but about giftedness. Talent, then, refers to the mastery of systematically developed gifts (Gagné, 2000). Here, we detect an overlap with the literature on competence (e.g., Boyatzis, 1982; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). According to Gagné (2000), the difference between competence and talent is that competence corresponds to levels of mastery ranging from minimally acceptable to well above average—i.e., below the threshold for 'talented' or 'expert' behavior, which he operationalizes as belonging to the top 10% of performers in a certain domain. The need for behavioral evidence for talent is also witnessed in HR practice. In their study of the talent management programs of 13 organizations, Dries and Pepermans (2008) found that most of them were unwilling to label employees as talented before they had two or three years of organizational experience, because they wanted to observe how people performed within the specific setting of the organization first. A possible issue with this type of approach is that it defines talent *by its outcomes*, which can be seen as creating a tautological problem (i.e., a conceptual loop; see Priem & Butler, 2001).

### 3.1.3. Talent as commitment

A third approach to talent focuses on commitment, operationalized both as commitment to one's work, and to one's employing organization. In the former meaning, talent is conceptualized as something intrinsic to a person that directs focus, attention, and dedication (Pruis, 2011). Nieto, Hernández-Maestro, and Muñoz-Gallego (2011), for instance, state that talent is determined mainly by perseverance in that it implies the successful completion of projects that most others would abandon or never even start. In addition, the talent construct is seen as being related to will, perseverance, motivation, interest, and passion (e.g., Weiss & MacKay, 2009). In the second meaning, talent as commitment refers to employees' willingness to invest discretionary energy into their organization's success—thus aligning personal with organizational goals (e.g., Ulrich, 2007). As Jericó (2001) posits, commitment implies not only giving one's best to the organization, but also functions as a barrier to leaving the organization (i.e., as a negative predictor of turnover).

The conceptualization of talent as commitment is to be seen as a complementary, rather than a supplementary approach to talent (i.e., in addition to the natural ability and/or mastery approach). In our review, there were no publications stating that talent equals commitment. Rather, different elements of talent are seen as multiplicative—e.g., "talent = competence × commitment × contribution"—such that high scores on one element (e.g., commitment) cannot compensate for low scores on another (e.g., competence) (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012).

### 3.1.4. Talent as fit

A final 'object' approach to talent refers to the fit between an individual's talent and the context within which he or she works—i.e., the right place, the right position, and/or the right time. The fit approach is essential to the discussion of talent management as it emphasizes the importance of context, implying that the meaning of talent is relative rather than absolute, and subjective rather than objective (González-Cruz, Martínez-Fuentes, & Pardo-del-Val, 2009; Jericó, 2001). It is said that in a given organizational setting, talent should be defined and operationalized in light of the organization's culture, environment (i.e., industry, sector, labor market), and type of work (Pfeffer, 2001). The organizational context is critical since people can be expected to perform above or below their normal level depending on their immediate environment, the leadership they receive, and the team they work with (Iles, 2008). As Coulson-Thomas (2012) puts it, "individuals who shine in one context may struggle in another" (p. 431). Research on the transferability of star performance (e.g., Groysberg, McLean, & Nohria, 2006) has demonstrated that talent, indeed, is not always transferable from one organizational context to another—in some cases, performance might even 'plummet' when a so-called star performer changes organizations.

Fit plays a prominent role in the AMO (ability–motivation–opportunity) framework, which posits that in addition to skills and motivation, employees also need opportunities to perform (Boselie, Dietz, & Boon, 2005). Therefore, talent is not just about the quality of an individual's skill set—it also depends on the quality of his or her job. In this respect, some authors in the talent management literature stress the importance of matching people to positions (e.g., Collings & Mellahi, 2009). The allocation of the most talented employees to the positions of highest strategic value in the organization (i.e., 'A positions') whilst placing good performers in support positions (i.e., 'B positions') and eliminating bad performers is called the portfolio approach to workforce management (Becker, Huselid, & Beatty, 2009). Approaches such as these advocate the identification of 'pivotal positions'—i.e., positions of above-average

impact on organizational outcomes—rather than the identification of talented individuals in se (e.g., Ashton & Morton, 2005; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005a, 2005b). Or as Boudreau and Ramstad (2004) put it, “Rather than asking, ‘who is our A talent?’ we should ask, ‘in which talent pools does A talent matter most?’” (p. 4).

### 3.2. Subject approach—talent as people

Within the subject approach, we find both inclusive (i.e., talent understood as all employees of an organization), and exclusive approaches to talent (i.e., talent understood as an elite subset of an organization's population) (Iles, Preece, et al., 2010).

#### 3.2.1. Inclusive subject approach: talent as all people

The inclusive approach to talent-as-subject sees the term talent as including everyone in the organization. According to this approach, every employee has his or her own strengths and thus, can potentially create added value for the organization (Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001). In a study reported by Leigh (2009), almost half of the companies interviewed defined talent this way. According to Peters (2006) there is no reason not to consider each employee as talented. Similarly, O'Reilly and Pfeffer (2000) posit that organizational success stems from “capturing the value of the entire workforce, not just a few superstars” (p. 52). Despite being quite vague, the inclusive approach to talent is commonly justified in the literature using the argument that in knowledge-based economies companies cannot achieve profits (or succeed otherwise) without their people (Tulgan, 2002). In today's business environment, it is mostly employees—i.e., not technology, not factories, not capital—that are believed to create value for organizations, in that they are now the main determinant of organizational performance (Crain, 2009).

Especially in the services industry, the whole business model is defined by and around the people employed—and thus, defining talent as the entire workforce is not such a far stretch. In companies such as luxury hotels, for instance, frontline and behind-the-scenes employees play an equally important role in delivering the high-quality service expected of this type of company (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005b). Acknowledging the importance of context, Silzer and Dowell (2010) state that, “in some cases, talent might refer to the entire employee population” (p. 14).

An inclusive definition of talent is typically found in strength-based approaches to talent management—i.e., “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”—rather than in gap-based approaches focused on the remediation of ‘development needs’ (i.e., weaknesses) (Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001, p. 22). Inclusive, strength-based approaches to talent are believed to benefit from what is called the ‘Mark Effect’—i.e., by treating everyone in the organization as equals, a more pleasant, collegial, and motivating work climate is created (Bothner, Podolny, & Smith, 2011). An inclusive approach guarantees an egalitarian distribution of resources across all employees in an organization rather than a focus on a small subset of elite performers, this way avoiding a drop in the morale of loyal employees who are not considered ‘superstars’ (Groysberg, Nanda, & Nohria, 2004). Yost and Chang (2009), for instance, argue that organizations should try to help all of their employees fulfill their fullest potential since focusing investments (in terms of time, money, and energy) on only a few people, within a limited set of roles is a risky strategy looking at projected labor market scarcities.

The main criticism of the inclusive subject approach to talent is that it makes differentiation between talent management and strategic human resource management (SHRM) more difficult. If talent refers to the whole of the workforce, managing talent ‘simply’ implies proper workforce management and development of all the organization's people, which is not particularly helpful in specifying how TM is different from SHRM (Garrow & Hirsh, 2008). In fact, according to this approach, TM is a collection of typical HR processes such as recruitment, selection, development, training, performance appraisal, and retention (Iles, Chuai, et al., 2010; Silzer & Dowell, 2010)—although some authors might add that TM refers to doing them faster and/or better (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Lin (2006) argues that adopting an inclusive approach to TM might create unnecessarily high costs in terms of HR investments. In that sense, the assumption of the strength-based approach creating a win–win for both individuals and organizations may be flawed, in that gap-based and exclusive approaches to talent management are often the more cost-effective and efficient solution (Collings & Mellahi, 2009).

#### 3.2.2. Exclusive subject approach: talent as some people

In stark contrast to the inclusive approach to talent, the exclusive approach is based on the notion of segmentation of the workforce, and understands talent as an elite subset of the organization's population—i.e. “(...) those individuals who can make a difference to organizational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer-term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential” (Tansley et al., 2007, p. 8).

**3.2.2.1. Talent as high performers.** More often than not, the subject approach to talent equates the term talent to high performers—i.e., “the best of class” (Smart, 2005). Stahl et al. (2007), for instance, define talent as a select group of employees who rank at the top in terms of capability and performance; Silzer and Dowell (2010) as a group of employees within an organization who are exceptional in terms of skills and abilities either in a specific technical area, a specific competency, or a more general area; and Williams (2000) as those people who demonstrate exceptional ability and achievement in an array of activities and situations, or within a specialized field of expertise, on a regular basis. The threshold for being considered an ‘exceptional’ performer, across studies, seems to lie at belonging to the top 10% of age peers in one's specific area of expertise (e.g., Gagné, 2000; Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012). As mentioned earlier (in the discussion of A and B positions in the section on ‘Talent as fit’), this category of employees is commonly referred to as ‘A players’ (e.g., Becker et al., 2009).

According to Smart (2005), high performers are the single most important driver of organizational performance, since they “contribute more, innovate more, work smarter, earn more trust, display more resourcefulness, take more initiative, develop better business strategies, articulate their vision more passionately, implement change more effectively, deliver higher-quality work, demonstrate greater teamwork, and find ways to get the job done in less time and at less cost” (pp. 5–6). Advocates of *topgrading*—i.e., the practice of trying to fill 75% (and preferably 90%) of all positions in the organization with high performers—argue that the best way to outperform competitors is to hire top performers at all levels in the organization (e.g., Michaels et al., 2001).

**3.2.2.2. Talent as high potentials.** Some authors operationalize talent as a select group of employees who demonstrate high levels of potential. According to Silzer and Church (2009), potential can be defined as “the modifiability of unobservable structures that have not as yet become actual, or exist in possibility, capable of development in actuality (...) the possibility that individuals can become something more than what they currently are (...) it implies further growth and development to reach some desired end state (...) In work environments, potential is typically used to suggest that an individual has the qualities (e.g., characteristics, motivation, skills, abilities, and experiences) to effectively perform and contribute in broader or different roles in the organization at some point in the future” (p. 379). High potential employees, then, are those employees believed to have the potential to advance at a faster pace than their peers, whilst demonstrating different needs, motivations, and behaviors than ‘regular’ employees (Pepermans, Vloeberghs, & Perkisas, 2003). In practice, we find that the high potential label is often given based on past performance data, which might be seen as a form of Halo bias—i.e., the invalid generalization of certain personal characteristics to other characteristics that might not be as highly correlated as they appear at first glance (e.g., Martin & Schmidt, 2010).

Either way, both the high performer and the high potential approach to talent imply exclusiveness. No matter how appealing the inclusive approach to TM may sound—i.e., “TM should be aimed at developing all employees to the best of their abilities” (Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001)—more arguments are found in the literature in favor of the exclusive approach (Iles, Chuai, et al., 2010). In fact, the exclusive approach is not only defended widely in the literature; it is also the most prevalent approach to talent management found in HR practice (Ready, Conger, & Hill, 2010). Specifically, the exclusive approach to TM is said to benefit from what is called the ‘Matthew Effect’—i.e., the effect whereby the allocation of more resources to the better performers in the organization leads to higher return on investment, since more resources are allocated there where more returns can be expected (i.e., in improving the performance of the best-performing employees even further; Bothner et al., 2011). According to Netessine and Yakubovich (2012), as long as employees’ performances can be accurately evaluated and ranked, the fact that better workers get better assignments and more privileges may in fact encourage low performers to quit or to do better, leading to a higher-performing workforce overall. Similarly, Höglund (2012) argues that differential treatment of employees based on their differential talents can create a ‘continuous tournament’ in which employees are motivated to develop and apply the skills and qualities the organization requires.

The allocation of resources according to merit, sometimes referred to as ‘winner-take-all’, works particularly well in industries populated by low-wage workers, such as restaurants, retail companies, and call centers. An individual employee’s contribution to organizational performance is not necessarily related to his or her position in the hierarchy, however. For instance, a lower-level sales representative can be of pivotal importance to the profits of a retail company (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005b).

The literature identifies a number of critiques on the exclusive approach, as well. First of all, evaluations of performance and potential are usually not based on objective indicators alone, but rather reflect judgments made by top and line management (Pepermans et al., 2003). Hence, the process of identifying talented employees is inherently subjective, and thus susceptible to bias (Silzer & Church, 2010; Walker & LaRocco, 2002). Second, the assumption that talented employees are inherently different from less talented employees might be flawed in that it fails to take into account the fact that ‘A players’ might look like ‘B players’ under certain conditions and vice versa (Netessine & Yakubovich, 2012; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Third, the assumption that past performance predicts future performance, which often underlies the identification of talented employees, is a controversial point (Martin & Schmidt, 2010). In addition, the causal relationship between performance levels before and after being identified as a talent is distorted by the fact that identification, in itself, leads to increased support for performance improvement (Walker & LaRocco, 2002). Fourth, identifying an elite subset of the organization as talents can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies such as the Pygmalion effect—i.e., the effect whereby expectations of performance (high or low) determine actual performance (in a positive or negative way) in that they impact on motivation and self-esteem (e.g., McNatt, 2000). This raises questions as to the validity and utility of identifying only a small number of employees as talented since Pygmalion effects have the potential to be beneficial to all employees—also mediocre performers (Eden, 1992). Fifth, labeling a small group of employees as talented has also been demonstrated to lead to negative effects as it can lead to increased sensitivity to feedback and fear of failure among those identified as ‘exceptionally promising’ (e.g., Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2012). And sixth, allocating a large proportion of the organization’s resources to a small number of ‘superstars’ might damage organizational morale, embittering loyal employees and causing resentment among peers (DeLong & Vijayaraghavan, 2003). It is said that an overemphasis on individual performance discourages personal development organization-wide, undermines teamwork as a result of the zero-sum reward practices (i.e., practices whereby only some team members are rewarded, causing an overall negative or neutral effect whereby the positive effects of some receiving a reward do not outweigh the negative effects of most not receiving a reward), and runs the risk of creating an atmosphere of destructive internal competition that retards learning and the spread of best practices across the organization (Pfeffer, 2001; Walker & LaRocco, 2002).

## 4. Discussion

Based on our in-depth historical review of the literature on talent management, we can only conclude that there is a fundamental lack of consensus as to the meaning of ‘talent’ in the world of work. Another conclusion is that the literature on talent management, although diverse in terms of underlying concepts, is rather normative. In fact, the assumptions underlying the different approaches to talent discussed in this paper are often ‘sold’ as objective facts, even though little empirical evidence of their accuracy has been provided by academics and/or HR practitioners to date. With the aim of integrating the viewpoints found in the existing literature in a straightforward manner, in Fig. 1 we offer a framework for conceptualizing talent within the world of work.

### 4.1. Implications for HR practice

As we have discussed throughout this paper, within the world of work talent is conceptualized in two broad ways—i.e., talent as object versus talent as subject—which can, in turn, be further subdivided (see Fig. 1). Within the object approach, talent is conceptualized as exceptional abilities and attitudes demonstrated by an individual. It is important to note that the different sub-approaches of the object approach identified in the present review (i.e., talent as natural ability, talent as mastery, talent as commitment, and talent as fit) are to be seen as complementary, rather than supplementary. Commitment and fit, specifically—no matter how high—will never be used as sole indicators of talent, but always as complimentary to measures of ability (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012).

As discussed earlier, organizations will not commonly distinguish between innate and acquired elements of talent, but rather, focus on proven achievements in their assessments of talent (Silzer & Dowell, 2010). Pragmatists might even argue that the nature–nurture debate comes down to semantics (Tansley, 2011). Implicit beliefs held by organizational decision makers about the degree to which individual characteristics are fixed as opposed to malleable, have repeatedly been demonstrated to have a very strong impact on their assessments of talent, however (Heslin, Latham, & Vandewalle, 2005). Therefore, it seems pivotal for organizations to explicitly take a position as to the extent to which they want to focus their talent management efforts on talent identification (i.e., ‘buying’ talent), versus talent development (i.e., ‘building’ talent) (see also Meyers et al., 2013—in this issue).

Although the object approach to talent exhibits better fit with the etymological meaning of talent (Tansley, 2011), the subject approach (i.e., talent as people) seems to be much more prevalent in organizational practice (Iles, Preece, et al., 2010). More specifically, a talent management strategy grounded in workforce segmentation (Becker et al., 2009), based on the identification of select pools of high performers and/or high potentials, seems to be the most common approach (Dries & Pepermans, 2008). Although many advocates can be found for a more inclusive, strength-based approach to talent management, as well (e.g., Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001), it remains unclear to what extent an inclusive approach to talent makes sense, considering that the term ‘talent’, inherently—considering its etymology—implies above-average ability or performance (e.g. Gagné, 2000). As discussed in our review, the inclusive and the exclusive subject approach to talent each both have their own merits and drawbacks. Which approach is ‘better’

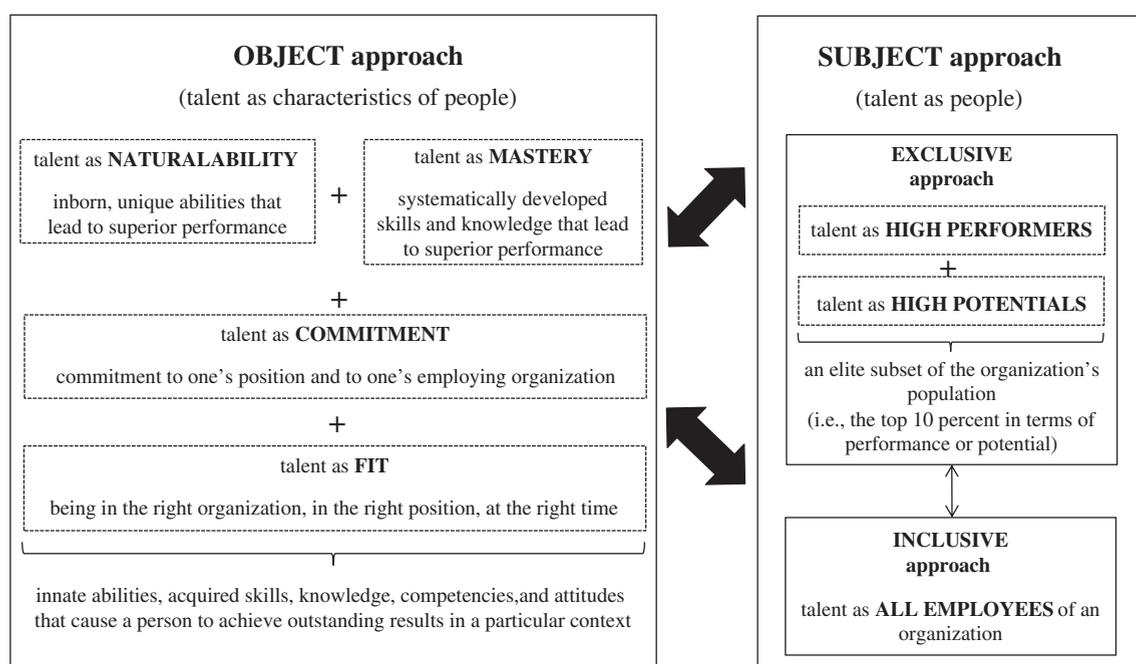


Fig. 1. Framework for the conceptualization of talent within the world of work.

is likely to be determined by an organization's mission and culture (Garrow & Hirsh, 2008)—see the examples of the luxury hotel industry versus the call center industry, discussed earlier in this paper.

Importantly, we propose that the subject and the object approach to talent can inform each other in that the object approach specifies which personal characteristics to look for in identifications of talent, whereas the subject approach provokes important discussions about cut-offs and norms (e.g., Gagné, 2000; Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012).

#### 4.2. Avenues for further research

One of the aims of the current paper was to offer specific suggestions for what we see as the most pressing topics for future research on the topic of talent in the context of the workplace. Below, we discuss different avenues for future research aimed at developing the talent—and consequently, the talent *management*—construct further.

What the field needs first and foremost is more theory (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006), both in the way of in-depth literature reviews (that might borrow from a range of disciplines—see also Dries, 2013-in this issue) and conceptual development. More theory development is a necessity if we ever want to come to a nomological network for talent, and demonstrate 'once and for all' that talent is a construct in its own right that adds value over related constructs such as strengths (e.g., Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001), gifts (e.g., Gagné, 2000), ability (e.g., Michaels et al., 2001), and competence (e.g., Boyatzis, 1982; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). This, in turn, will help the field pinpoint the specific added value of talent *management* above and beyond more established concepts such as SHRM, succession planning, and workforce differentiation (Chuai et al., 2008). Findings from the literature might be complemented with findings from critical discourse analysis of interview data or HR practitioner publications (Huang & Tansley, 2012), and by in-depth case studies (Preece et al., 2011). In addition to a nomological network, we need process models describing the antecedents and outcomes of talent, both in the way of the 'actual' emergence of talent and the 'perception' of talent by relevant others in the work setting (Silzer & Church, 2009).

A second avenue for further research is to examine differences in the conceptualization and implementation of talent management. Differences might be examined at the organizational, departmental, sectoral, country, and/or cultural level, using multilevel designs. In doing so, researchers would respond to calls for more evidence of how talent management is implemented across different contexts (see also Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013-in this issue), and which approaches are more prevalent. Interviews with HR managers and CEOs complemented by organizational-level surveys across a range of contexts might help unveil the organizational rationale underlying specific talent management decisions (Dries & Pepermans, 2008; Iles, Chuai, et al., 2010). In addition, comparative research designs such as these will allow for a critical examination of the TM frameworks dominating the existing literature, which is very US/UK-centric (Tansley, 2011).

Third, future research might aim to contribute to the discussion about the link between talent management and specific employee- and organizational-level outcomes (see also Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013-in this issue). Although there is a strong level of conviction in the literature that strategic talent management decisions predict important outcomes such as organizational performance, productivity, profits, and market position (e.g., Ashton & Morton, 2005), empirical evidence of such relationships is lacking (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2004, 2005a, 2005b). Multilevel research designs, possibly combined with pre- and post-intervention measurement (e.g., in organizations implementing a change in their approach to talent) are well suited to tackle this particular research gap, as are comparative case studies.

A fourth and final topic for further research is the reliability and validity of various approaches to the identification of talent in organizational settings (Silzer & Church, 2009). Although HR practitioners look to the academic world for guidelines as to how to validly assess talent—especially seeking evidence for the long-term predictive validity of different types of measures—hardly any empirical evidence can be found. The literature on the identification of gifted children (e.g., Gagné, 2000), as well as the literature on personnel selection (e.g., Cappelli, 2009) offer interesting points of departure, however. In order to advance talent management as an academic field of research, it seems imperative to explore what we can learn from other disciplines first, before we attempt to 'reinvent the wheel' (e.g., Höglund, 2012).

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