

Talent management and boundaryless career orientation: A strategic fit and flexibility perspective*

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Abstract

Talent management (TM) is of increasing priority to organisational leaders, who struggle to develop and implement effective programmes or practices for managing talent. Despite the given emphasis on organisational talent management, changes in workforce preferences have altered the way employees approach their careers. Many are more likely to take proactive roles in formulating their career plans in pursuit of inter- and intra-organisational transition. This being the case, what is aimed at in the execution of organisational TM practices and efforts to implement these initiatives may not necessarily be aligned with individuals having boundaryless career orientations. Accordingly, this paper is aimed at investigating the challenging issues to be considered in formulating organisational TM practices at the time of managing boundaryless employees. In doing so, we will simultaneously try to address how organisational talent management practices might be reconciled with boundaryless career orientations through the lens of strategic fit and flexibility in human resource management (HRM).

Key words: Talent management (TM), boundaryless career orientation, strategic fit and flexibility, human resource management (HRM).

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1. Introduction

In today's intense competition under volatile, uncertain and complex market environments, managing talent has become one of the most important considerations for companies and business leaders as they try to align their strategies with continuous changes to maximize their business performance and achieve sustained competitive advantage (Dries, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013; Meyers, *et al.*, 2013; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013a; McDonnell; *et al.*, 2017; De Boeck, *et al.*, 2018; Botella-Carubi and Tudela-Torras, 2020), The reasons for this increased emphasis on talent can be attributed to many influences, such as the changing demographics due to increased diversity caused by international mobility (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013a; Collings, 2014), the demand for talented employees taking precedence over supply (Schuler *et al.*, 2011), and the differentiating and volatile career perspectives of the younger generation entering the labor market, i.e. demanding further professional development, more autonomy at work (De Hauw and De Vos, 2010; Botella-Carubi and Tudela-Torras, 2020),

The central tenet of managing talent in organisations is to find the best ways to recruit, develop and retain high performers in order to realize strategic organisational goals. A considerable number of scholarly papers have highlighted that talent management (TM) can help improve organisational performance via its alignment with strategic business goals, thereby creating and sustaining competitive advantage (Cappelli, 2008; Hughes and Rog, 2008; Schuler *et al.*, 2011; Vaiman and Collings, 2015; Harsch and Festing, 2020),

Investments in employees with more and better TM initiatives make a positive impact in achieving organisational success (Narayanan *et al.*, 2019), In this respect, TM activities should be aligned with the strategic orientation of an organisation and its culture, covering internal organisational systems and external environmental factors (Lewis and Heckmann, 2006; Vaiman *et al.*, 2012; Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014),

Having made great efforts to produce insightful publications on talent and its management for about two decades, the academic field regarding this management today is characterized by a variety of definitions (Lewis and Heckmann, 2006; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013a; Nijs *et al.*, 2014; Meyers and Van Woerkom, 2014), TM remains of great interest to many researchers, who have urged the development of different theoretical frameworks by linking it with research on global mobility (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014; Cerdin and Brewster, 2014; Collings, 2014), strategic management (Collings and Mellahi, 2009), and managing the talent of different workforce generations (Meister and Willyerd, 2010),

Another research area that scholars are interested in is the association of TM with the careers literature (Iles *et al.*, 2010; Dries *et al.*, 2012; De Vos and Dries, 2013; Claussen *et al.*, 2014; Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014), The realities of today's

competitive environment, being subjected to broad societal and economic shifts, have influenced the way individuals approach their careers and establish relationships with their employers (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). In particular, diminished job security and increased employment volatility (Farndale *et al.*, 2014; Wiernik and Kostal, 2018) have given rise to a range of adaptive behavioral patterns, called ‘new’ or ‘contemporary’ careers (Briscoe and Hall, 2006; Sullivan and Arthur, 2006; Tlaiss, 2014; Babalola and Bruning, 2015:346). Several metaphorical concepts have been developed in the related literature (Tlaiss, 2014; Kattenbach *et al.*, 2014), such as the boundaryless (Arthur, 1994, 2014; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), the protean (Hall, 1976, 2002), the kaleidoscope (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005), and the post-corporate (Peiperl and Baruch, 1997) career. The boundaryless career, among all these definitions, refers to a career that transcends boundaries through movement across the boundaries of separate employers and organisations (Tlaiss, 2014) and has become central for comprehending contemporary career paths, where employees are increasingly becoming more mobile and self-directed in their career development (Gerli *et al.*, 2015). The notion of boundaryless careers gives rise to a tendency, namely boundaryless career orientations, among some individuals who desire a career pattern where they can pursue work-related mobility across departmental and organisational boundaries (Verbruggen, 2012; Wiernik and Kostal, 2018).

Despite the different flows of research arguing that the organisational career is dead as a consequence of the arrival of new career patterns (Arthur and Rousseau; 1996; Hall; 1996; Peiperl and Baruch 1997; Mainiero and Sullivan 2005), such a career is still alive and valued by individuals (Clarke, 2013). Many studies have found that managers continue their careers in a single organisation or two and they can still prefer traditional forms of organisational support (Smith and Sheridan, 2006; Donnelly 2008; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010). In addition, many researchers have argued that, even in contexts where boundaryless careers are preferred by employees, substantial groups of workers apparently still experience organisational ones (Donnelly, 2008; Inkson *et al.*, 2012). In particular, long-term employment and linear career progression are typically seen in public sector organisations and large financial institutions (McDonald *et al.*, 2005). Bearing this in mind, the organisational career can still be viewed as a living model, which is evolving into a new hybrid form, with a capacity to adapt and change. As Clarke (2013:696) has put forward, “Rather than discarding the bureaucratic model of organisational career, there may be benefits in developing an integrated model more suited to the current environment, a model that reflects its more positive qualities while recognizing the need for greater flexibility, adaptability and individual responsibility.”

To this respect, this paper addresses the discussion about the concept of TM and changing career orientations. What is aimed at in the execution of organisational TM practices to achieve organisational goals may not necessarily be aligned with the career orientations of employees. Accordingly, the aim is to discuss the challenging issues to be considered in formulating organisational TM practices at the time of managing boundaryless employees. In addition, the paper addresses how organisations might reconcile their TM practices in order to make them more suitable to manage those employees with boundaryless career orientations under the lens of strategic fit and flexibility in human resource management (HRM). The strategic fit and flexibility is one of many different forms of 'fit', as stated by Paauwe and Farndale (2017:39), being defined as "the degree to which the needs, demands, goals, objectives and/or structure of one component are consistent with the needs, demands, goals, objectives, and/or structure of another component" (Nadler and Tushman, 1980:40). Strategic flexibility, on the other hand, refers to a firm's abilities to respond flexibly to the various demands of dynamic competitive environments in terms of modifying current practices (Wright and Snell, 1997),

This paper contributes to the TM and careers field in two ways. First, the rising challenges that may take place between organisational TM initiatives and individuals' boundaryless career orientations are illustrated. The second contribution relates to the theoretical approach taken towards TM as to whether and how some, if not all, TM systems and policies and boundaryless career orientations can be aligned. The literature has previously addressed issues on TM by taking various theoretical approaches, e.g., social-exchange theory (Dries, 2013; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013), psychological contract theory (Festing and Schaefer, 2014; Dries and De Gieter, 2014; Gelens *et al.*, 2013) and the strength-based approach (Meyer, 2016). Taking a different perspective, this paper calls for the strategic fit and flexibility approach which can help align the rising challenges taking place between TM practices and boundaryless career orientations of employees by providing viable recommendations. This perspective can provide a new avenue for reaching an understanding between TM and boundaryless career orientations and can lead to more effective TM implementation, one that satisfies both organisational goals and individual aspirations.

2. Talent management: The conceptual framework

The concept of TM became salient in 1997, especially after the expression the 'war for talent' was coined by a group of McKinsey consultants in a research project, which led to the publication of 'The War for Talent' report (Hughes and Rog, 2008; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013, De Boeck *et al.*, 2018; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017). Since then, the issues of talent and TM have become situated within and widely

discussed in the HRM literature (Nijs *et al.*, 2014), However , there is still a lack of consensus on the definition of talent among scholars (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013a; Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; O'Connor and Crowley-Henry, 2019; Holland and Scullion, 2019; Narayanan *et al.*, 2019),

Given “the lack of consensus of what talent is” in the scholarly literature (Holland and Scullion, 2019; Pandita and Ray, 2018), the accurate identification and management of talent is very important for organisational performance and competitive advantage. Talent management is considered “as an architecture”- a metaphor used by several scholars (Wright and McMahan, 1992; Lepak and Snell, 1999; Becker and Huselid, 2006), A TM architecture is defined as “the combination of systems, processes and practices developed and implemented by an organization to ensure that the management of talent is carried out effectively” (Sparrow and Makram, 2015:2), Possessing talented individuals, with a unique set of knowledge, capabilities, contributions and, competencies, allows for organisations to execute value creating strategies and attain sustained competitive advantage. This brings forth the importance of the efforts to attract, develop, and retain talent in organisations (Schuler *et al.*, 2011; Nijs *et al.*, 2017; Lawler, 2017; Holland and Scullion, 2019) while offering a strategic perspective that makes the concept one that adds ‘value and uniqueness’ (Lewis and Heckmann, 2006:143; Lepak and Snell, 2002), Nijs *et al.* (2014) assert that TM practices are implemented in order to identify those talented individuals, who can deliver excellent performance and hence improve the organisation’s success and competitive position.

A variety of approaches on TM exist both in the academic HRM literature and professional arenas, which has given rise to different debates. One such approach pertains to whether talent is determined by innate factors or acquired via learning and experience (Meyers *et al.*, 2013),

For another approach, a distinction is made between inclusive (i.e., all employees) and exclusive (i.e., a specific employee group) perspectives on TM. Inclusive TM emphasizes all employees in an organisation, perceiving that everyone has special qualities and that each of them contributes to high performance in a unique manner (Gelens *et al.*, 2013), In contrast, the exclusive approach refers to the efficient management of those deemed to have high potential and who are high performers (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013), whose achievements contribute more to attaining organisational goals than others.

A further approach to talent management has been developed by some scholars who have considered whether talent is defined in terms of the ‘characteristics of people’, namely, the object approach, which contrasts with focusing on the ‘people themselves’, termed the subject approach. The former involves concentrating on the characteristics of talent found in high-performance

and high-potential employees (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013; O'Connor and Crowley-Henry, 2019), having an innate competence (Ulrich, 2007) as well as a particular developed skill and/or capability (Stahl *et al.*, 2012),

In contrast, the subject approach to TM focuses on individuals, who, depending on their talents, could be a better match with particular jobs or positions (Kravariti and Johnson, 2019). The subject approach to TM can involve both the inclusive (i.e., talent regarded as all employees of an organisation) and exclusive approaches (i.e., talent taken as a top performing elite subset of an organisation's population) (Iles *et al.*, 2010). The exclusive-subject approach involves focusing on a select group of high-performing and/or high-potential employees. These people are the human capital rated with high value and high uniqueness (Lepak and Snell, 1999; 2002). They have been called the '*A players*' (Becker *et al.*, 2009) or '*high performers*' (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013a) in an organisation, who can contribute exceptionally to the firm's overall performance. The other perspective refers to a broadly defined TM model (inclusive-subject approach) that considers every employee as talented with her/his own strengths and thus, can potentially create added value for the organisation (Tulgan, 2004; Leigh, 2009). With this approach every employee is encouraged to fulfil her/his potential. That is, this model considers the entire workforce as being talented, whereby they are all believed to create value for their organisations. Treating everyone as talented creates an egalitarian environment in organisations, which will not only serve to reinforce a satisfactory working climate with good morale among employees (Groysberg *et al.*, 2004), but may also reduce any risk of making investments in an elite pool of employees with volatile labour market dynamics (Yost and Chang, 2009),

3. Organisational career management

The organisational career perspective, also called the traditional career perspective, was based on the view that employees' careers were bound to a single firm or a particular job (Sullivan, 1999). Once employees joined the business environment, traditionally, the main criterion for having a successful career was being able to move upward in an organization or two that operated with rigid and hierarchical structures (Baruch, 2004; Lochab and Mor, 2013). The hierarchical linear upward career progression could be attributed to the reality that organisations were embedded in highly stable environments until the early 1980s (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Arthur, 1994), which thus enabled employees' careers to be secure, predictable, and linear (Baruch, 2006). However, with the rise of globalisation from the early 1980s onwards, the business environment began to face much less stability due to organisational restructuring and downsizing initiatives in the search for better organisational performance and competitiveness (Clarke, 2013; Arthur and

Rousseau, 1996), The tall, multi-layered functionally organized structures (Sullivan, 1999:457) began to diminish and this gave rise to flatter organisational structures as well as to a new employment relationship, with “a sharp reduction in job security” (Cappelli and Associates, 1997), In the meantime, employees developed an orientation towards less bounded career alternatives outside the one single organisation and less secure careers.

4. Boundaryless career orientation: A contemporary career perspective

Scholars for long have been asserting that the hierarchical and tall structures of many large companies are transforming into more flexible and lateral organisational forms in response to environmental changes (Ashkenas *et al.*, 1995; Sullivan *et al.*, 1998), In the meantime, employees have started considering their careers becoming more “boundaryless” and less dependent on organisation-oriented career management (Arthur, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), The concept of boundaryless career has been under discussion by various authors (Ashkenas *et al.*, 1995; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), It has been defined by DeFillippi and Arthur (1994:307) as the “sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of single employment settings” and refers to career paths where individuals search for opportunities from within or outside their current organisation in response to unmet individual career objectives.

In the meantime, boundaryless career encompasses transitions across different boundary types; i.e., organizational, relational, hierarchical, work-life, and psychological. Finding alternative employment opportunities or developing an external professional network are examples of this career path (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Arthur, 2014; Wiernik and Kostal, 2018), Two dimensions of boundaryless careers have been proposed by Sullivan and Arthur (2006), namely psychological and physical mobility. The physical mobility dimension is defined as actual career movements and transitions across physical boundaries, i.e., jobs (hierarchical or lateral), organizations, industries, geographical locations, occupations, and employment patterns (e.g., full-time employment, part-time employment, self-employment, unemployment), In other words, the psychological mobility dimension refers to one's psychological attitude of freedom, self-direction (Briscoe and Hall, 2006:6) towards making those movements.

Employment no longer is defined as holding a permanent job with an indefinite term employment contract which allows for job security being guaranteed by the employer. Instead, employment today means making such an employment contract through which employees are encouraged to develop marketable skills and competencies in order to increase their employability (Rodrigues, Butler and Guest,

2019) - an individual's perception of capability of gaining employment when necessary (Hogan *et al.*, 2013) - and employee responsibility (Sullivan, 1999; Baruch, 2004), Therefore, employability is an important antecedent to boundaryless career orientations. The more employees develop marketable skills, become employable, are willing to learn, the more self-directed and psychologically mobile they become for planning and management of their own careers and are physically likely to move across positions, functions, employers, industries (Van der Heijden, 2014) and develop boundaryless career orientations (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2019), Furthermore, frequent organisational restructuring, delayering, and downsizing realities of today's competitive environment (Van der Heijden, 2014) can intensify employees' feelings to invest in themselves in terms of developing their competencies, occupational expertise, and self-confidence so as to be competitively situated in today's labor market.

5. Strategic fit and flexibility in SHRM

Strategic HRM (SHRM), as defined by Wright and McMahan (1992), refers to "the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable the firm to achieve its goals" (p. 298), which means there should be a fit between business and HRM strategies (Wright and Snell, 1998), Strategic-fit is actually considered under the 'best fit' approach, which assumes that the effectiveness of HR practices is context-specific. Accordingly, HR strategies should be contingent on the context, type, and circumstances of the organization (Crowley *et al.*, 2019; Brewster and Bennett, 2010) The functioning of careers in some industries, occupations, and organization types can be very different from those of careers in others, which also can account for the differences in the boundary orientations of individuals (Crowley *et al.*, 2019), Hence, a strategic-fit perspective under the 'best fit' approach enables organizations to consider the degree to which TM practices need to be coincided with career orientations.

In addition to the discussions on fit, the concept of flexibility in SHRM is also emphasized, owing to the fact that organizations need to adapt to the changing requirements in the current volatile and competitive environment, which has various threats and opportunities (Wright and Snell, 1998), Flexibility in SHRM refers to the extent to which the necessary HR practices- such as TM practices in this case- can be clarified, formulated, and implemented with agility to maximize the flexibilities inherent in those human resources. In addition, Paauwe and Farndale (2017) termed "flexibility" as "dynamic fit", arguing that today's organizations, as dynamic entities, face change and turbulence both internally and externally, which requires them to develop HRM systems focusing on both strategy and flexibility in order to achieve sustained competitive advantage.

Two perspectives of fit and flexibility are evident in the strategic HRM literature (Milliman *et al.*, 1991), the first being the “orthogonal” perspective, which holds that fit and flexibility cannot exist simultaneously. In stable, predictable, and less competitive environments, the orthogonal perspective can serve to provide organizational effectiveness. The second view, the “complementary” stance, focuses on the co-existence of fit and flexibility. According to Wright and Snell (1998) and Milliman *et al.* (1991), while fit involves taking a snapshot of an organization and examining the relationship between two variables (business strategy and HR strategy, in this case), flexibility comprises organizational characteristics; i.e., heterogeneous workforce competencies, organic managerial systems, etc. that help a firm accommodate some change in the environment. Hence, flexibility is an internal feature of the firm to ensure fit under a variety of environmental demands at any point in time and sustainable fit can be achieved as long as flexibility in organizations is facilitated (Wright and Snell, 1998),

As Nijssen and Paauwe (2012) put forward, dynamic environments propel, if not encourage, organizations to act with the agility to organize their resources in line with the uncertainties. That is, organizations need to make agile strategic manoeuvres; i.e., developing employee skills and competencies by assessing the “whole person”, rather than simply focusing on immediate task performance needs (Sparrow and Makram, 2015) which can help improve individuals’ commitment (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014; Lawler, 2017). In this regard, a complementary perspective can facilitate firms in developing organizational capability and flexibility when these firms have changing strategic needs and have to cope with the dynamic external environment (Pauwee and Farndale, 2017; Ketkar and Sett, 2009; Wright and Snell, 1998). Based on these arguments, it is proposed that both strategic fit and flexibility, termed as ‘dynamic fit’ (Paauwe and Farndale, 2017), can be adopted by organizations, providing harmony between individuals’ aspirations and organizational goals for employees’ career development investments in order to develop and retain the talent. In other words, it is important for TM practices to be both strategically aligned with corporate strategy (strategic fit) and to have flexibility the organization requires to cope with change by continually aligning itself with the external environment.

6. Challenges for talent management and boundaryless career orientation

This section of the paper discusses the challenging issues considered in formulating organisational TM practices at the time of managing boundaryless employees together with recommendations for reconciliation. Table 1 depicts a summary of the issues pertinent to both.

Table 1
Challenging Issues Pertinent to TM Practices and Boundaryless Career Orientations

Challenging Issues	Talent Management	Boundaryless Career Orientations	Recommended Approach
<i>The issue of accountability</i>	Organisational accountability	Individual accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving more emphasis to individualized career counselling for realizing employees' career aspirations.
<i>The issue of HRM practices / work practices</i>	Organisationally induced formal HRM practices	Individual initiated informal work practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementing informal work practices as well as formally designed HRM practices.
<i>The issue of the economic / non-economic value of TM</i>	Economic value orientation	Non-economic value orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating more dynamic and flexible non-economic tools. • Allowing individuals, a degree of autonomy for their further development and commitment
<i>Long-term / short-term approach</i>	Long-term	Short-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconciling the short and long-term interests of employees and employers, respectively. • Providing employees with opportunities for career development
<i>The dilemma between exclusiveness / inclusiveness</i>	Exclusive	Inclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursuing a more inclusive perspective to TM during employees' early careers. • Making deliberate follow-ups over the years rather vague for selecting outstanding individuals.

6.1. Individual accountability versus organizational accountability

The literature on talent management in the recent decade has contended that the main objective is to achieve organizational goals (Nijs *et al.*, 2017; Lawler, 2017; Holland and Scullion, 2019; Schuler *et al.*, 2011; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013b). To this end, many firms have devoted huge efforts into designing and implementing

a company-wide pool of talent management practices via systematic utilisation of their HRM activities to attract, develop, and retain ‘talented’ individuals (Meyers *et al.*, 2013), Despite the fact that organizational TM programs with predefined career paths focusing on a group of elite employees seem to be outdated in today's dynamic environment (Cappelli and Tavis, 2018), there still exists organizations and employers who rely on their long-term organizational TM strategies so as to improve the level of retention of talent within the firm, with the ultimate objective of attaining organizational goals and staying competitive in the market (Seopa *et al.*, 2015), Given today's work and workers, talent models which used to be benchmarks look outdated or not relevant due to the new technological developments and the need for organizations and employees to be agile and flexible.

Looking at the employee side of the employment relationship, many individuals have begun to take more ownership of their careers with the new careers approach (Peters *et al.*, 2019), Therefore, they try to find and maintain employment within or outside the organizational contexts (Heijde and van der Heijden, 2006) and need to focus on developing competencies needed in the labour market even beyond their specific-expertise areas (Peters *et al.*, 2019), In this respect, organizational strategy-driven TM practices may not fit with the individual's career choices, which may go beyond organisational boundaries and hence, organisations do not achieve the aim of retaining their talent as they have planned.

To be effective, TM practices need to be aligned with individuals' boundaryless career orientations which can help an organisation to respond strategically and with agility to changing labour markets (Lawler, 2017; Denning, 2018; Martin, 2015), Organizations can be better off if they focus on developing those competencies that are both in alignment with organizational strategy and also with individuals' career aspirations, which will enable organizations and employees to reach their ultimate objectives. Employees might be allowed to develop general competencies that will help them be more flexible and manage multiple tasks (Peters *et al.*, 2019) benefiting not only employees' career goals but also those of organizations. In this respect, there should be a continuous balance between employees' current and future-oriented goals and their employers' interests (Heijde and van der Heijden, 2006). Deliberate TM policies, such as developing individualized career counselling, putting on seminars, and in-house workshop activities can provide a variety of choices and flexibility that cater for the different preferences of the individuals concerned. In this way, it is possible to stretch the implementation of TM to employees with boundaryless career orientations (Akingbola, 2013; Farndale *et al.*, 2014), In Paauwe and Farndale's (2017) terms, ‘dynamic fit’ can be achieved in organisations. Such TM policies and practices encourage employees to learn and grow, enabling workforce agility and retention (Harsh and Festing, 2020).

6.2. *The issue of HRM practices versus work practices*

Scholars have put forward that TM should not be limited to a set of formally designed HRM practices (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013b) (i.e., practices such as recruitment, orientation, performance appraisal, compensation, and rewards), but should also apply to work practices. Work practices are those that focus on the people in the organisation; i.e., “what people say and do in their social interaction” (van der Brink and Benschop, 2012:182), such as engaging in teamwork, peer learning, networking with transparency, creating problem-solving opportunities, engaging in challenging assignments, and job rotation (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013; Harsh and Festing, 2020). Pure formal TM inducements, which are deemed important by the organisation, are not necessarily considered so from the perspective of all employees. For instance, the results of a study by academics found that employees appreciate informally organized work practices, such as having discussion meetings with colleagues, engaging in cooperative projects with researchers, performing challenging and creative work more than HRM policies, such as pure training courses or attractive salary packages organized by the HR department (Thunnissen, 2016).

Employees, as well as managers, possess different goals and aspirations as they can focus on the interests of their own unit other than the whole organisation. Managers are more likely to look after their departments’ interests than to apply work practices - due to several reasons; i.e., lack of time or interest, too much workload, and lack of support from HR members (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013b; Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo, 2017). If and when top management fails to provide employees with more flexible and informal work practices and opportunities other than formally designed and strategically-driven TM practices, this might lead to a misalignment between an organization’s and individual’s career aspirations. Not only the top management but also managers might devote less attention to these work practices, which can result in unfavourable employee attitudes, such as lower job satisfaction, lower motivation, and higher turnover intentions (Sullivan, 1999; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013b; Thunnissen, 2016; Bolander, *et al.*, 2017). In this respect, it is essential that employees are supported by their supervisors/managers about their career aspirations (Bolander *et al.*, 2017) who take a flexible and proactive role in shaping the employees’ careers (Biemann *et al.*, 2012; Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). Given the flexibility and autonomy to ‘craft’ their jobs or even to make small adjustments- such as switching a task with a colleague or collaborating with a particular person will provide employees with the opportunity to optimize their abilities, skills, and competencies for their career progress. These practices can fulfil employees’ needs for advancement, which might

help lead the retention of today's new workforce with boundaryless career aspirations.

6.3. Long-term versus short-term approach

TM, by definition, focuses on those individuals who either immediately or in the long-term contribute to organisational performance (Tansley *et al.*, 2007; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2019). Drawing on some evidence in the literature, Collings (2014) reported that TM programmes in the oil and gas multinational enterprises (MNEs) in Nigeria were mainly oriented towards recruiting talented staff and assigning them to the management development programme, thus implying long-term careers. Similarly, according to Osegha *et al.* (2018) various global TM practices adopted by MNEs have been aimed at attracting, developing, and retaining a highly skilled workforce in the long-term. Hence, such organisations are devoting themselves to investing in their talent in order to maintain their retention in the long run.

In contrast, there are also increasing number of employees with boundaryless career orientations in today's workforce who try to make a living in a job market where they are often employed by an organisation not for long periods, but rather working on short term projects (Greenhouse and Kossek, 2014). This is not to deny that career boundaries can differ between occupations and industries (Joseph *et al.*, 2012). For instance, while occupations such as accounting are more likely to lead to bounded and stable careers, employees in the film industry and IT employees have a tendency to engage in boundaryless careers (Crowley *et al.*, 2018). A principle focus on employees in occupations and industries that are more boundaryless than others brings out a misalignment situation between TM and boundaryless career orientations. That is to say, financial and/or non-financial investments in TM activities for employees might be as good as wasting money if the individual employee is either ready to leave or is only taken on by the company on a short-term basis.

Some strategic manoeuvres can be taken to enable the reconciliation between the short- and long-term interests of employees and employers, respectively. One of those strategies can be to induce talent engagement, defined as the "emotional and intellectual commitment to the organisation or the amount of discretionary efforts exhibited by employees" (Oseghale *et al.*, 2018). One of the avenues to engagement is to provide employees with training and career development programmes to help them achieve their career aspirations (Tarique and Schuler, 2012). A second avenue would be getting employees involved in the decision-making process, thereby enabling them to voice their ideas freely (Oseghale *et al.*, 2018). Engaged employees can develop more favourable perceptions about their organisation, reciprocate

through positive attitudes. and are less likely to leave voluntarily. Referring to individuals' reciprocative attitudes, we enter the social exchange view (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), Provided with opportunities for career development, employees pay back by developing high engagement levels and investing resources to attain their company's goals, which might lead to their retention in the longer run.

6.4. The issue of economic versus non-economic value of TM

The main orientation of TM is deemed to be an economic and instrumental one, as put forward by many scholars. TM dwells upon achieving goals and organisational objectives representing the economic side of work, such as high firm performance, efficiency, and effectiveness (Cappelli, 2008; Stahl *et al.*, 2012), Salary packages, rewards, incentives, and providing job security can be considered as relevant economic tools that are deemed important by firms for employees' organisational commitment. This narrow conceptualisation of TM in terms of organisational returns can lead to ineffective management and poor development of talent (Collings, 2014), as other stakeholder requirements, such as those of employees, are not sufficiently taken into consideration, even though they also have a claim in the organisation. Scant attention has been paid to the non-economic interests of talent such as development needs (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013b; Thunnissen, 2016), As Oldham and Hackman (2010) pointed out, an individual not only has economic needs, for she/he also has growth needs, including personal accomplishment, meaningful and challenging work, promotion opportunities, and challenging work conditions. Moreover, she/he has social needs in terms of the desire for significant relationships and interactions with others at work.

The issue of non-economic value reminds us of the distinction between objective and subjective career success. This differentiation can be traced back to the very early conceptualisations of Hughes (1937) in his article "Institutional Office and the Person", in which he considered the objective career as consisting of "... a series of status and clearly defined offices in a highly and rigidly structured society" (p. 409) that are interpretable and observable by other people, with offices being defined as "a standardized group of duties and privileges devolving upon a person in certain defined situations" (p. 404), Whilst the subjective side of career was defined by the author as the person's conceptualisation and interpretation of one's actions or achievements throughout life on the basis of his or her unique and personal career-related experiences. On the basis of this distinction, recently scholars have classified different achievements a person may get from his or her own career. Objective career success includes indicators that can be evaluated by others, such as salary, bonuses, and promotions. Subjective career success, on the other hand, involves those variables that measure intrinsic career success or an

employee's individual subjective judgments about her or his career, such as job satisfaction (Judge *et al.*, 1995). Some scholarly work have depicted that both objective (i.e., salary) and subjective career success (i.e., individual growth and job satisfaction, opportunities for new learning, and competence development, as well as meaningful and challenging work) are pursued by individuals with boundaryless career orientations (Enache *et al.*, 2011; Volmer and Spruk, 2011),

Relatedly, another reconciliation point might be the alignment of organisational economic goals with employees' non-economic interests (Mellahi and Collings, 2010). Under the lens of strategic fit, organisations are expected to align their TM strategies with the firm's strategy, usually with the objective of pursuing economic aspirations. In the meantime, individuals today may feel the need to shift their career orientations beyond organisational boundaries, if and when their personal interests and career expectations are insufficiently appreciated. So, sole consideration of strategic fit falls short of organisational sustainability, unless flexibility in organisations is facilitated. It has also been noted by Seopa *et al.* (2015) that current human resources strategies should be realigned to bring flexibility into the central HRM practices, such as benefits and career paths. This entails organisations extending their managerialist understanding of TM towards facilitating more dynamic, more flexible non-economic tools, which allow individuals a degree of autonomy for their further development and commitment. For instance, consideration of employee well-being and treating them fairly (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013), offering mentoring programmes (Ambrosius, 2016; Holtbrügge and Ambrosius, 2015), establishing an ongoing constructive coaching and feedback culture (Schiemann, 2014), fostering work-life balance (Ambrosius, 2016; Yamamoto, 2011), enabling meaningful and challenging work opportunities (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013a; 2013b) all of which may enhance employees' positive feelings and goodwill towards the company. Providing these opportunities will enhance employees' perceptions of organisational support and give rise to a win-win situation for both parties, because the perceived organisational support will strengthen the bonds between employees and employer. Based on the norm of reciprocity, employees may develop positive associations with the organisation and feel obligated to contribute to its attainment of goals (Ambrosius, 2016). In sum, the reconciliation of economic and non-economic tools enables mutual satisfaction of organisation and employees. This alignment could help enhance individuals' commitment and personal and professional development and hence may better keep them away from navigating different career choices outside the organisation.

Referring to the recommendations given in section 4.2., "the Issue of HRM versus Work Practices", under the lens of strategic fit and flexibility in SHRM, reconciliation can be maintained between economic and non-economic rewards to employees with a boundaryless career orientation. Economic rewards can be

accompanied with non-economic tools; i.e., providing meaningful and challenging work, meeting employees' growth and social needs, as well as treating them justly and fairly (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013; Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo, 2017). By designing reward packages that include both economic and non-economic rewards organisations will be able to attract, develop, and retain the talent they need, in spite of some of their employees making boundaryless career choices.

6.5. *The dilemma between exclusiveness versus inclusiveness*

Becoming one of the solutions to current HR challenges, TM has been regarded as the key to organisational efficiency (Collings and Mellahi, 2009), In particular, after the economic recession of 2008-2009, it came to be seen as more critical by many firms, which thus decided to re-examine their TM approaches (Majeed, 2013; Scullion *et al.*, 2014), Organisations have sought to align their business strategy with a TM strategy focused on workforce differentiation through the attraction, selection, development, and retention of highly valuable and unique employees- namely *high potentials*. Such employees are argued to make up the greatest return on investment (Lepak and Snell, 1999; Gelens *et al.*, 2013), Investment in high potentials can generate higher productivity, and consequently, higher returns, than what can be attained through investment in non-high potentials (Lepak and Snell, 1999; Morton, 2005; Collings and Mellahi, 2009), The skills and capabilities of high potentials underpin competitive advantage for organisations (Wright, McMahan and McWilliams, 1994; Collings and Mellahi, 2009), This is in contrast to the inclusive approach, which considers all employees as having the potential to demonstrate talent. The underlying rationale supporting the exclusive approach to TM resides on the argument that organisations suffer unnecessary high costs when they invest equally in all employees (Gelens *et al.*, 2013; Becker and Huselid, 1998).

Many scholars have put forward that taking an exclusive approach for the sake of pure fit between organisational and TM strategy may give rise to negative individual and organisational outcomes regarding TM (Marescaux *et al.*, 2013; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013b; Gelens *et al.*, 2013; Mc Donnell *et al.*, 2017), Considering contemporary careers, employees with boundaryless orientations are found to be more likely to display lower organisational commitment (Enache, *et al.*, 2013; Bravo *et al.*, 2017) and to transcend their inter-organisational as well as their occupational, industrial, geographical, and/or intra-organisational boundaries. Due to the higher mobility risks, the cost of talent loss with “low-road employment practices” (Collings, 2014: 306) can give rise to lower productivity, diminishing profits, and lower organisational commitment (Briscoe and Finkelstein, 2009).

In another study (Mc Donnell *et al.*, 2017), it was found that many organisations pursue an exclusive approach to TM, focusing on a select group of individuals known as the “sui generis group” (p. 117). This approach to TM will induce the glorification of high performers for the sake of cost efficiency, which may result in undervaluation of other ‘moderately high performing employees’ (Collings, 2014, p. 313), thus causing them to develop perceptions of inequity and to experience loss of self-esteem (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013; Painter-Morland *et al.*, 2019). The issue as to whether an act is just and fair or not depends on how individuals perceive it, which can influence employee job satisfaction, commitment, and performance (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013b). From an organisational justice perspective, exclusive TM practices have been found to lead to lower perceived organisational justice among employees, who consider themselves as ‘talented’ but are labelled as ‘non-talented’ or ‘moderately performing’ by their organisations. This can end up in employees displaying disengagement and withdrawal behaviors (O’Connor and Crowley-Henry, 2019). The performance of A players is very much dependent on this supporting group of individuals, who may be considered as B or C players (McDonnell *et al.*, 2017). In sum, TM systems focusing on a group of best performing individuals can give rise to the perceptions of unfairness and inequity by the rest of the organisational members.

Changes in the workforce dynamics towards more self-initiated and boundaryless career orientations necessitate organisations taking a strategically flexible approach to TM practices. Leveraging TM activities may enable effective and efficient strategy execution in organisations (Sparrow and Makram, 2015). Organisations could pursue a more inclusive perspective regarding TM and invest in all employees in both formal and informal ways during their early careers. Moreover, an organisation could engage in follow-ups of its employees and select outstanding individuals for further investment in their development. Furthermore, providing opportunities for employees, such as involvement in strategically prominent projects and interaction with important stakeholders (i.e., clients, suppliers), not only will enable organisations to adapt their capabilities and respond to future talent shortages (Sparrow and Makram, 2015) for it will also, most likely, result in a more committed workforce (Balassiano and Salles, 2012).

7. Discussion

The aim of this paper has been to address the challenging issues taking place between organisational talent management practices and employees’ boundaryless career orientations by illustrating specific assumptions pertinent to each and how these are often not in alignment. Under the lens of strategic fit and flexibility,

recommendations have been made as to how TM practices can be better employed for employees with boundaryless career aspirations.

Given the volatile competitive environments, many organisations are relying on organisational practices for investing in their human capital in order to achieve their corporate objectives. However, changes in the workforce preferences have altered the way employees approach their careers and develop relationships with their employers. Many are more likely to change departments, occupations, or organisations, and are taking more active roles in achieving their career goals in pursuit of inter- and intra-organisational transitions.

The simultaneous employment of strategic fit and flexibility in HRM is considered vital, as they complement each other in facilitating firms developing organisational capability and flexibility under strategic change requirements and the dynamic nature of the external environment. Several studies have stressed the importance of ensuring strategic fit between corporate strategies and HRM practices such as TM (Miles and Snow, 1984; Wright and Boswell, 2002; Akingbola, 2013). In the meantime, achieving fit requires a constantly moving target in a changing environment. Hence, in addition to sustaining strategic fit, there is an increasing need on the part of organisations to promote the flexible development of adaptive capabilities in a dynamic operating work environment. Flexibility in SHRM refers to the extent to which the firm's human resources possess skills and behavioral repertoires that can allow for it to pursue strategic alternatives in the competitive environment (Wright and McMahan, 1997). Developing employees with a variety of skills and implementing adaptable HR practices, such as TM practices, will provide the organisation with alternatives in order to sustain their flexibility.

The strategic fit under the 'best fit' approach to TM practices is recommended here, as it considers the occupation and industry-specific structures that will account for whether or not that occupation or the industry allows for and fosters boundaryless careers. It is the degree of allowance which guides organisations in their efforts to tailor TM practices. Taking the strategic fit under a "best fit" view stresses the importance of adapting TM practices to the industry, organisational, and occupational context (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Al Ariss and Sidani, 2016),

One of the basic inferences drawn from this study is that organisationally focused TM practices taking economic value into consideration may not fit with the boundaryless career orientations pursued by employees who are concerned with improving their employability in the entire job market. Consequently, in this paper, in line with the acknowledgement of the different organisation, occupation, and industry contexts, the need for more individualized, if not customized, TM systems that are flexibly designed so as to be able to fit in with employees who have boundaryless career aspirations have been emphasized. Tailored talent programmes, including such as mentoring, coaching, customized training, and meaningful work

assignments, rather than financial rewards or job security aimed at developing individuals' subjective career concerns, can provide satisfaction and organisational commitment. In addition, inclusion of any specific employee groups in the talent pool can negatively influence an employee's organisational commitment, to the extent that he or she can be more ready to give up the idea of belonging to the firm. Hence, careful attention should be paid to those left out of any such talent pool, such as providing them with further training and development opportunities to enhance their growth and thus, try to ensure affinity within the organisation.

This paper provides insights for both academics and practitioners. From an academic perspective, by illustrating some challenging issues to be considered at the time of developing TM practices and managing boundaryless workers, the paper aims contribute to the literature by explaining how the two seemingly opposing poles can be reconciled via consideration of employees' dynamic career preferences and organizational goals under the 'best fit' approach. From a practical point of view, a TM approach can be effective as long as it is aligned with an organisation's mission, vision, and strategy, as well as with the organisational, industry, and national contexts (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013; Sidani and Al Ariss, 2014; Thunnissen, 2016), The strategic fit and flexibility approach will enable managers to appreciate the importance of both strategic fit and adaptability. It is anticipated that this study could also convince top management and line managers to reconsider their sole focus on realising organisational and departmental objectives, respectively, at the expense of losing their talent with boundaryless career preferences. Organisational overemphasis on TM can lead to managerial lack of insight regarding how the aspirations of individuals with boundaryless career preferences and TM practices can be aligned. In this regard, the fit and flexibility approach by providing a more compromised understanding may guide managers to consider TM both from an organisation-based and individual-based angle for the achievement of organisational goals and the fulfilment individual aspirations.

8. Conclusion and avenues for further research

According to the strategic fit and flexibility approach, what successfully works in one organisation may not do so in another, due to diverse perspectives, varying cross-cultural contexts, and/or the actors being both employees and employers. This approach offers important insights in relation to organisations being unique entities, having different dynamics, internal strengths and weaknesses, with external opportunities and threats. Hence, it is important to give consideration to the context in which TM is implemented. These conceptualisations can guide organisations in terms of the degree to which they take a tailored perspective and adapt their TM practices to employees with boundaryless career orientations.

The future research implications of this study should be viewed in light of its limitations. This paper addresses some of the challenges for organisational TM and boundaryless career orientations by illustrating specific assumptions pertinent to each and how these can be better aligned. Different avenues for future research are proposed here to contribute to the understanding of the link between TM practices and boundaryless careers. Hence, the challenging issues discussed in the paper can be tested to provide supportive empirical evidence. In addition, future research could focus on how other contemporary career orientations (i.e., protean and/or post-corporate) can be converged under TM. Another topic that would benefit from further research is to examine whether and to what extent these assumptions can be compatible and applied across a range of contexts, including occupations, organisations, industries, countries and/or regions as well as across employee groups, such as blue-collar workers and/or various groups of knowledge workers. It would be a sound contribution to the literature if these efforts were applied to the aforementioned contexts under the lens of strategic fit and flexibility in SHRM.

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Özet

Yetenek yönetimi ve sınırsız kariyer yönelimi: Stratejik uyum ve esneklik yaklaşımı

İşletmelerde yetenekleri belirlemek ve yönetmek amacı ile etkili programlar veya uygulamalar geliştirmek ve uygulamak için mücadele eden liderler ve yöneticiler için Yetenek Yönetiminin (YY) önceliği giderek artmaktadır. Kurumsal yetenek yönetimine verilen öneme rağmen, çalışanların işgücü tercihlerindeki değişiklikler, kariyerlerine yaklaşımlarını da değiştirmiştir. Birçok çalışan, kurum içi ve kurumlar arası geçiş arayışında kariyer planlarını formüle etmede proaktif roller üstlenmeye çalışmaktadırlar. Bu koşullarda, kurumsal YY uygulamalarının yürütülmesi ve bu girişimlerin hayata geçirilmesine yönelik çabaların hedefleri, sınırsız kariyer yönelimlerine sahip bireylerin hedefleri ile her zaman uyumlu olmayabilir. Dolayısıyla bu makale, sınırsız kariyer yönelimli çalışanların yönetilmesi için kurumsal YY uygulamalarının formüle edilmesinde dikkate alınması gereken karmaşık konuları araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma aynı zamanda insan kaynakları yönetiminde (İKY) stratejik uyum ve esneklik perspektifi aracılığıyla örgütsel yetenek yönetimi uygulamalarının sınırsız kariyer yönelimleri ile nasıl uzlaştırılabileceğini ele almaya çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yetenek Yönetimi (YY), sınırsız kariyer yaklaşımı, stratejik uyum ve esneklik, insan kaynakları yönetimi (İKY),