

IMPLICATIONS OF TALENT MANAGEMENT: IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES ON THE WORK ENGAGEMENT OF TALENTED EMPLOYEES

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Purpose: There is a shortage of satisfactory empirical evidence confirming unequivocally that companies' efforts in the field of talent management have a positive impact on the attitudes and behavior of organizations' members. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to determine the impact of talent management practices on the work engagement of talented employees. Furthermore, the study verifies the role of perceived distributive justice as a mechanism explaining analysed relationship, as well as the role of perceived procedural justice as a factor determining the level of work engagement.

Design/methodology/approach: Conclusions were drawn based on a survey involving 730 participants of talent management programmes from 33 companies.

Findings: The conducted analyses showed that talent management practices have a direct and indirect impact on the work engagement of talented employees and that perceived procedural justice moderates the relationship between perceived distributive justice and work engagement.

Research limitations/implications: There are a number of factors that can affect employees' reactions to talent management, including company policies, business strategies, and leadership styles of supervisors. It was beyond the scope of this study to investigate such factors, but this would be an interesting direction of future research.

Practical implications: Managers can implement the talent management programmes with the confidence that they will enhance the work engagement of talented employees. It is important that the process of nominating and selecting employees for such a programme is objective and transparent, and that all candidates have equal opportunities. In addition to fostering talents, managers should show concern for other employees. In this way, organizations can stimulate a feeling of organisational support in the entire staff, while making disproportionate investments in human resources.

Originality/value: The paper contributes to management science by deepening the understanding of employees' reactions to talent management and, consequently, extends knowledge about the results of this process at the individual level. This type of study seems necessary in the face of the growing number of authors who take for granted the positive impact of talent management on the attitudes and behavior of employees.

Keywords: talent management, work engagement, organizational justice.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Contemporary economic realities, characterized by intense market competition, high dynamics of changes in the business environment and declining demand caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to a significant increase in risk and uncertainty in organisational management. These tendencies have contributed to the weakening of bonds between employees and employers who, facing difficult market conditions, are unable to provide their employees with stable, long-term employment. This causes employees' dissatisfaction, lower work engagement and willingness to change employers. In response to the economic challenges of the 21st century, managers decide to implement talent management (TM) programmes to reduce the loss of talented employees and meet the present and future human capital needs of the organisation.

Currently, TM is perceived by business theorists and practitioners as one of the priorities in organisational management (Dries, 2013). This is primarily due to the intensified competition between companies for a limited pool of talented employees, referred to in the literature as the 'war for talent' (Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod, 2001). Despite the discussion on TM that has been going on for over four decades, this issue has still not reached theoretical maturity and requires further development (Collings and Mellahi, 2009). In particular, there is a shortage of satisfactory empirical evidence confirming unequivocally that companies' efforts in this area have a positive impact on the attitudes and behavior of employees. Some studies (e.g., Björkman et al., 2013) confirm that such a relationship exists, while others suggest that TM causes negative reactions of employees, such as a feeling of stress and insecurity (Dries and Pepermans, 2008) or also identity struggles at work (Tansley and Tietze, 2013). Owing to the existing research gap, managers lack scientifically proven grounds to make decisions about talented employees.

Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to determine the impact of TM practices on the work engagement of talented employees. The article contributes to management science by deepening the understanding of employees' reactions to TM and, consequently, extends knowledge about the results of this process at the individual level. This type of study seems necessary in the face of the growing number of authors who take for granted the positive influence of TM on the attitudes and behavior of employees (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). The research results described in this paper are also useful for organisational decision-makers who invest more and more funds in TM, not being sure whether this process will bring the expected results.

2. Talent management in scientific literature

The idea of TM is considered to have been developed in 1997, when the American consulting company McKinsey published research results showing clearly that the most successful companies were strongly focused on their talented employees (Michaels Handfield-Jones and Axelrod, 2001). On the wave of growing interest in TM, much more was written about this issue, including articles and reports by consulting companies and business practitioners. The growing number of utilitarian works was accompanied by a disproportionate development of scientific achievements in this area. Scholars (e.g. Fegley, 2006) pointed out that most of the publications dealing with the subject of talented employees were not of a scientific nature, and so the concept of TM lacked a solid theoretical foundation and empirical evidence.

In the last decade, there has been significant progress in the development of the theoretical foundations of TM due to the growing number of scientific studies on talent in the organisation. The efforts of researchers focused primarily on defining the concept of talent in an organisational context, identifying factors shaping human talent, conceptualising TM and identifying and analysing practices in this area (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnisen, 2015).

Although organisations adopt various approaches to TM, business practitioners and theorists agree that: (1) TM is a process as well as a set of processes and activities (Armstrong, 2007); (2) TM refers to talents in an organisation, that is, exceptionally gifted employees (Blass, 2007); (3) TM covers a variety of human resource management practices, including talent acquisition, development and retention (Wellins, Smith and Rogers, 2006); (4) the processes and activities implemented as part of TM are integrated with each other (Kock and Burke, 2008); (5) TM processes lead to specific outcomes, such as meeting the needs of an organisation and achieving business goals (Silzer and Dowell, 2010).

3. Theoretical relationships between TM and work engagement

The literature review suggests that TM practices shape the attitudes of employees, increasing their work engagement. According to the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), employees negotiate exchanges with the organization in which actions of one party evoke reciprocation by the other. As a consequence, each employee adjusts their behavior to how, in their opinion, they are perceived by the employer in terms of the value brought to the company and the potential possessed. Applied to TM, such a social process would imply that, when the employer invests in talented employees (e.g., by funding their development or enabling quick promotion), and employees – feeling obliged to reciprocate these investments – demonstrate the attitudes and behaviors desired in the organisation. Employees who see the

employer's efforts are willing to increase their engagement in important and priority issues of the company (Swales and Blackburn, 2015). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that:

Hypothesis 1: TM practices positively influence the work engagement of talented employees.

Implementation of a TM programme is associated with workforce differentiation, that is, investment of disproportionate resources where one expects disproportionate returns, in those specific people that help create strategic success. This differentiation is based on the assumption that organisations suffer unnecessary costs by investing equally in all employees (Becker and Huselid, 1998). The limited resources of an organisation should be invested primarily in attracting, developing and retaining talented people, i.e. those who are of high value to the organization, and most difficult to replace (Lepak and Snell, 1999). Differentiation creates inequalities in the distribution of resources, which affects the perceived distributive justice of employees, which refers to assessing the degree of fairness in the distribution of resources in an organisation. Employees who are considered as talented experience greater distributive justice when given greater resources. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 2: TM practices positively influence the perceived distributive justice of talented employees.

Scientific literature (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2001) postulates that the feeling of distributive justice translates into specific attitudes and behaviors of employees. This view is confirmed by the results of empirical research on organisational justice. For example, J. Mohammad, F.Q.B. Habib, and M.A.B. Alias (2010) have proved that employees who perceive that the distribution of resources as fair are characterised by higher work engagement. Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 3: Perceived distributive justice positively influences the work engagement of talented employees.

Based on the considerations made so far, it can be assumed that TM practices shape the distributive justice perceived by talented employees, which in turn affects their work engagement. Noticing the opportunities for development and promotion offered to them, talented employees consider the distribution of resources in the organisation as fair. The feeling of justice they experience causes a desire to reciprocate the investments made by the employer, which manifests itself in their greater work engagement (Godkin, 2014). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 4: Perceived distributive justice mediates the relationship between TM practices and the work engagement of talented employees.

As N. Dries (2013) points out, the TM process is not always fully transparent since companies are unwilling to disclose the status of talented employees. This reluctance is caused by fear of the reactions of colleagues (e.g., jealousy, demotivation), who can stigmatise their talented peers as *Primus*. A lack of transparency in TM may negatively affect the feeling of procedural justice relating to the subjective assessment of the fairness of the rules and

procedures by which resources are allocated in an organisation (Greenberg and Folger, 1983). If employees included in the talent pool find the information they receive about TM to be incomplete, out of date or lacking in detail, they will feel unfairly treated. The perception of procedural injustice could evoke negative reactions aimed at restoring the balance in the relationships with the employer (Ghosh, Rai and Sinha, 2014). Given the above, the following hypothesis was proposed:

Hypothesis 5: Perceived procedural justice moderates the relationship between perceived distributive justice and the work engagement of talented employees in such a way that the relationship is stronger when talented employees perceive the rules and procedures of resource allocation in an organisation as fairer.

In summary, it is assumed that TM practices significantly affect perceived distributive justice of talented employees – and indirectly – their work engagement. Moreover, it is postulated that perceived procedural justice is a factor moderating the impact of distributive justice on work engagement. These relationships are illustrated in the conceptual model presented in Figure 1.

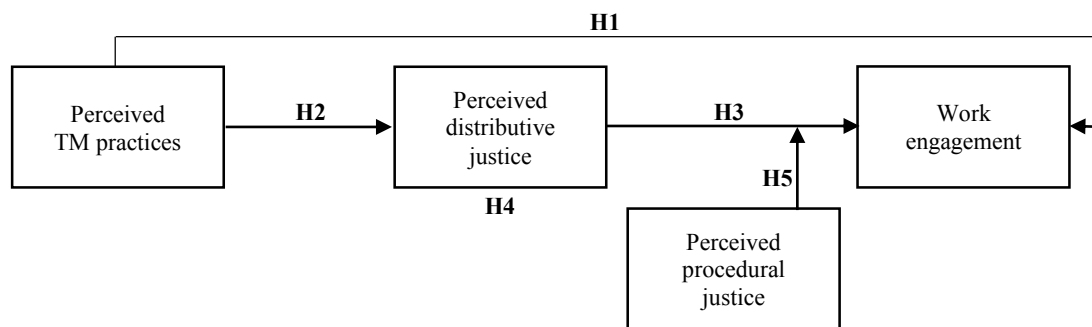


Figure 1. Conceptual research model.

4. Methods

The scientific goal described in the introduction was achieved by conducting empirical research using the survey method. The research material was collected by means of an online questionnaire sent to organizations on the 2020 list of the largest companies in terms of revenues operating in Poland, which is published annually by the economic and legal journal *Rzeczpospolita* (so-called 500 List). The rationale for conducting research on a sample of large companies is that the main research subject, that is TM, occurs in this type of organizations. Small and medium-sized enterprises decide less often to implement TM programmes (Kraus, Strużyna and Ingram, 2007). A similar assumption has been made by T. Ingram (2016) and M. Chodorek (2016). Purposive sampling was used, as in most studies on TM. Conducting the research on a random sample was impossible owing to the lack of a register of companies that manage talent in an deliberate and organized manner. The target group of respondents included

employees participating in TM programmes (so-called talents). In the course of research conducted from October 2020 to January 2021, data were obtained from 730 respondents in 33 companies, each of which implemented a well-developed TM programme. At least 20 questionnaires were collected in each of the surveyed organizations.

4.1. Variables and measures

When constructing the research tool, the author used the scales available in the literature. The talent management was measured using the scale developed by E. Tatoglu, A.J. Glaister and M. Demirbag (2016). The level of work engagement was measured using a shortened version of the *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9)* designed by W.B. Schaufeli, A.B. Bakker, M. Salanova (2006). Perceived distributive and procedural justice were measured using scales developed by B.P. Niehoff and R.H. Moorman (1993).

To verify the reliability of the scales used, the author calculated the α Cronbach coefficients, which determine the internal consistency of a measuring tool, that is, the degree to which all items on the scale measure the same construct (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011). The Cronbach's α coefficients were 0.89 for the scales for measuring TM practices, perceived distributive justice and UWES-9, and 0.90 for the scale for measuring perceived procedural justice. The values of the Cronbach's α coefficients obtained indicate that all the scales used in the research were of adequate reliability.

4.2. Characteristics of research sample

Among the surveyed employees, 54.4% were women and 45.6% men. The age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 37 years, and the mean age was 29.76 (SD = 3.41). The average length of their organisational tenure was 5.59 (SD = 2.60) years, while their average job tenure was 4.06 (SD = 2.19) years. Moreover, 45.8% of the respondents declared having a higher master's degree, 23.6% a higher bachelor's or engineering degree and 30.7% secondary education. Finally, 93.4% of the respondents worked full-time.

5. Research results

The empirical data obtained in the results of the empirical research was subjected to statistical analyses. The analyses began by calculating descriptive statistics and determining the correlation coefficients between the variables. Table 1 shows the results of the descriptive and correlations analyses.

Table 1.*Descriptive statistics and correlations of variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. TM practices	2.76	0.61										
2. Work engagement	3.88	0.90	0.250***									
3. Distributive justice	4.78	1.13	0.198***	0.564***								
4. Procedural justice	4.69	1.17	0.265***	0.522***	0.797***							
5. Gender	0.54	0.50	-0.005	0.104***	0.037	0.045						
6. Age	29.76	3.41	0.04	-0.008	-0.061*	-0.030	-0.044					
7. Education level	5.15	0.86	-0.129***	-0.067*	-0.007	-0.070*	-0.044	0.215***				
8. Job tenure	4.06	2.19	0.081**	0.030	-0.098***	-0.081**	0.004	0.536***	0.076**			
9. Organizational tenure	5.59	2.60	0.073**	0.003	-0.143***	-0.165***	0.036	0.500***	0.087**	0.722***		
10. Experience	5.93	2.95	0.081**	0.006	-0.123***	-0.136***	0.016	0.617***	0.091**	0.703***	0.912***	
11. Work status	0.93	0.25	0.058	0.078**	0.026	0.005	0.157***	0.134***	0.053	0.048	0.109***	0.080**

Notes: *M* – mean; *SD* – standard deviation; 1-10 – inter-correlations for variables; gender was measured by a dummy variable coded as 0 = male and 1 = female; age, tenure and experience were self-reported in years; education was measured categorically ranging from 1 = primary school to 6 = Master’s degree; work status was measured by a dummy variable coded as 0 = part time and 1 = full time; significance: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Source: own study.

Correlation coefficients showed strong associations between TM practices, distributive justice, procedural justice and work engagement. All the analysed relationships proved to be statistically significant at the level of $p < 0.01$ and were positive. However, the values of correlation coefficients may be artificially overestimated due to the existence of apparent correlations and distortions in the research process, such as a *common method bias* (Zbierowski, 2015). Therefore, in order to verify the research hypotheses, a series of regression analyses was conducted. In each analysis, control variables were included in order to test their impact on the results obtained.

Firstly, it was checked whether the development practices implemented under the TM programmes had a direct impact on work engagement and perceived distributive justice. The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Results of the linear regression analysis: TM practices as a predictor of work engagement and distributive justice

	Work engagement		Distributive justice	
	1		2	
TM practices		0.396*** (0.068)		0.356*** (0.053)
Gender (female)	0.088 (0.085)	0.099 (0.083)	0.163** (0.067)	0.173** (0.065)
Age	-0.001 (0.017)	0.000 (0.017)	-0.007 (0.013)	-0.006 (0.013)
Education level	0.005 (0.050)	0.045 (0.049)	-0.065* (0.039)	-0.030 (0.039)
Job tenure	0.005 (0.029)	-0.001 (0.028)	0.031 (0.023)	0.025 (0.022)
Organizational tenure	-0.088** (0.043)	-0.084** (0.042)	-0.029 (0.034)	-0.026 (0.033)
Experience	0.020 (0.039)	0.012 (0.038)	0.014 (0.031)	0.007 (0.030)
Work status (full time)	0.174 (0.173)	0.112 (0.170)	0.260* (0.137)	0.204 (0.134)
Constant	4.920*** (0.472)	3.713*** (0.505)	4.034*** (0.374)	2.950*** (0.398)
Observations	730		730	
<i>F</i>	2.564**	6.638***	2.276**	7.704***
<i>R</i> ²	0.24	0.069	0.022	0.079

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; significance: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Source: own study.

The first of the estimated regression models indicates that TM practices are a significant predictor of the work engagement of talented employees. The *b* value of 0.396 ($p < 0.01$) indicates a positive relationship between the variables. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is considered to be confirmed. Another model confirmed that TM practices constitute a significant predictor of perceived distributive justice. The *b* value of 0.356 ($p < 0.01$) proves that there is a positive relationship between the variables. These results support hypothesis 2.

Another analysis verified the impact of perceived distributive justice on work engagement. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

Results of the linear regression analysis: distributive justice as a predictor of work engagement

	Work engagement	Work engagement
	1	2
Distributive justice	0.452*** (0.024)	0.176** (0.081)
Procedural justice		-0.028 (0.092)
Distributive justice × procedural justice		0.037** (0.017)
Gender (female)	0.123** (0.055)	0.113** (0.055)
Age	-0.006 (0.011)	-0.011 (0.011)
Education level	-0.068** (0.032)	-0.052 (0.032)
Job tenure	0.028 (0.019)	0.025 (0.019)
Organizational tenure	0.011 (0.028)	0.016 (0.028)
Experience	0.005 (0.025)	0.008 (0.025)
Work status (full time)	0.182 (0.113)	0.185* (0.112)
Constant	1.809*** (0.329)	2.442*** (0.477)
Observations	730	730
<i>F</i>	46.458***	40.153***
<i>R</i> ²	0.340	0.359

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; significance: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Source: own study.

The estimated model indicates that perceived distributive justice is a significant predictor of the work engagement of talented employees. The b value of 0.137 ($p < 0.05$) reveals a positive relationship between the variables. Thus, hypothesis 3 is confirmed.

In order to verify the hypothesis regarding the mediating role of perceived distributive justice (hypothesis 4), the author conducted another series of regression analyses following the procedure of R.M. Baron and D.A. Kenny (1986). The results of the analyses have revealed that: (1) TM practices is a significant predictor of work engagement ($b = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$); (2) TM practices significantly predicted perceived distributive justice ($b = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$); (3) the strength of the relationship between TM practices and work engagement is reduced when distributive justice is added to the model ($b = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$). The results obtained mean that perceived distributive justice partially mediates the relationship between TM practices and work engagement. The significance of the mediation effect was checked using the Sobel test, which showed that this effect is statistically significant ($Z = 5.25$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, hypothesis

H4 is confirmed. To determine the strength of the mediation effect, the kappa-square statistic was calculated (Preacher and Kelley, 2011). The obtained value of this statistic ($\kappa^2 = 0.13$) indicates a mediation of medium strength.

Additional regression analysis was performed to verify the hypothesis regarding the moderating effect of perceived procedural justice (hypothesis 5). Distributive and procedural justices and the interaction between them as independent variables, as well as work engagement as a dependent variable, were included in the model. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 3. The estimated model shows that the interaction between perceived distributive justice and procedural justice has a statistically significant impact on work engagement ($b = 0.037, p < 0.05$). This means that perceived procedural justice moderates the relationship between distributive justice and work engagement. The results obtained confirm hypothesis H5.

6. Discussion of the research results

The research confirmed the occurrence of relationships described in the literature. Employees included in TM programmes gain not only a unique status, but also greater development opportunities, additional incentives and the prospect of rapid promotion, which are perceived as manifestations of preferential treatment. It arouses a feeling of duty towards the employer in talented employees, which is reflected in their increased work engagement. This conclusion corresponds with indications in the scientific literature. For example, I. Björkman et al. (2013) state that including employees in the talent pool is a signal for them that the organisation appreciates their contribution to achieving the company's goals. This signal makes employees believe that the employer, by investing in the development of their careers, has fulfilled his or her part of the psychological contract.

Organisational leaders, however, must bear in mind the repercussions associated with implementing TM programmes. Such initiatives trigger the so-called *Matthew* effect, as a result of which a significant part of the organisation's resources goes to privileged groups of employees. Unequal treatment of the workforce generate a sense of unfair distribution of resources, which may result in employees' negative reactions. As a small group of the most talented people (usually 1% to 5%) are included in TM programmes, there is a risk that the remaining employees, who make up the majority of the employed staff, will feel the frustration of being excluded from the talent pool. Organisations must therefore not neglect those excluded from the talent pool. This does not mean that all employees should be included in TM programmes. It is important that the process of nominating and selecting employees for such a programme is objective and transparent, and that all candidates have equal opportunities. Explaining to employees the principles and criteria for inclusion in the talent pool will not only increase their engagement, but also strengthen their feeling of procedural justice. Introducing

clear and transparent talent identification procedures will also reduce the likelihood that employees will create their own alternative history of their exclusion from a TM programme (Shaw, Wild and Colquitt, 2003). In addition to fostering talents, managers should show concern for other employees by expressing recognition for their ideas and efforts, involving them in decision-making processes, ensuring autonomy or improving working conditions. In this way, companies can stimulate a feeling of organisational support in the entire staff, while making disproportionate investments in human resources.

7. Summary

The purpose of the paper was to verify the assumption about the positive impact of TM practices on the attitudes of talented employees. Earlier publications (e.g., De Boeck, Meyers and Dries, 2017) indicate that managers take this assumption for granted, even though research results in this area are not unequivocal. This research implies the social exchange theory and justice theory for human resource management to develop and test hypotheses about the responses of talented employees to TM practices. The results of the empirical research confirmed that TM practices applied in companies have a positive impact on the work engagement of talented employees. The role of perceived distributive justice as a mechanism explaining the relationship between TM practices and work engagement, as well as the role of perceived procedural justice as a factor conditioning the level work engagement, were also verified. The paper responds to the indications of scientific community as to the possible directions of future research on TM, particularly referring to the need to better understand employees' reactions to TM and to broaden the knowledge about the results of practices in this area at the individual level.

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