Theory and Conceptual Article

The Cultural Evolution of Talent Management: A Memetic Analysis

Stephen Swailes[1]

Abstract

Using the concept of memes as cultural transmitters and replicators, this article explores the origins of a talent meme and the subsequent evolution of talent management (TM). The sociogenesis of TM is traced through historic developments in management thinking. The rise of individualism in the late 20th century created the conditions for the birth of TM, and the proliferation of the meme since birth is analyzed. The meme reproduces through its psychological appeal and the logic of itself, and the article uses an established approach to reveal cultural rather than rational explanations for TM. Five reasons for the attractiveness, survival, and replication of the talent meme in business organizations are identified. They are salience with business conditions, lack of a competing meme, ambiguity, complexity reduction, and enhanced control over a powerful group. Understanding more about the psychological attractors attached to the talent meme forms part of an expanded research agenda.

Keywords

talent management, memetics, innovation diffusion, organizational change

Introduction

As a distinctive approach to human resource management, the phrase "talent management" (TM) first appeared in the 1990s (Casse, 1994; Istvan, 1991) and now attracts a strong practitioner and research following (Lawler, 2008; Silzer & Dowell, 2010; Sparrow, Scullion, & Tarique, 2014). Although it can take many forms, it typically

[1]University of Huddersfield, UK

Corresponding Author:
Stephen Swailes, The Business School, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield HD1 3DH, UK.
Email: s.swailes@hud.ac.uk

concerns the identification, development, and deployment of employees deemed to have above average potential to contribute to an organization. The primary variation involves a broadly elitist approach toward identifying high-performing and high-potential employees and providing them with a differentiated management experience to that enjoyed by the majority workforce. This may be complemented by a robust approach to managing employees whose performance falls below expectations which is necessary, in a "hard" TM mind-set, to liberate the talents of employees that poorly performing managers are suppressing (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Alexrod, 2001).

The idea of memes was introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976) as an analogy to genes and the ways that genes replicate and survive through time, and this article applies meme theory to explain contemporary interest in TM. Memes can be thought of as social cultural phenomena such as ideas or fashions that, like genes, adapt, replicate, and survive throughout time and which help to explain cultural transmission (Blackmore, 1999). Some memes are short-lived, others survive over long periods. They pass from brain to brain often with some level of variation occurring each time transmission occurs. The receiving brain becomes host to the meme and helps to propagate it. Religions, arguably, are memes that have adapted over a long time and which derive their survivability because they provide answers to some difficult questions about human existence.

There is considerable potential for the application of meme theory in organization development. Specific applications include advertising (Williams, 2000), mergers and acquisitions (Vos & Kelleher, 2001), marketing (Pech, 2003), the cultural evolution of the firm (Weeks & Gelunic, 2003), innovation (Voelpel, Leibold, & Streb, 2005), and business process reengineering (O'Mahoney, 2007). Defined originally as "a unit of cultural transmission" (Dawkins, 1976, p. 192), memes are elements of culture that transmit ideas and are passed on especially by imitation (Blackmore, 1999, p. 43). The replication of these cultural units helps to explain cultural evolution (Aunger, 2007); in this case, why some organizational cultures adapt to work with a talent mind-set. Management innovations that are successful, in the sense that they are widely adopted, are memes that "infect" organizations and are transmitted by and through, among other things, networks of executives, consultants, gurus, and conferences (O'Mahoney, 2007). There seems little doubt now about the usefulness of the idea of memes to understanding cultural transmission because they contribute to the distinctive culture of organizations that is itself created by the enactment of combinations of memes (Weeks & Gelunic, 2003).

The theoretical treatment applied in this article builds on previous studies which have focused on coming to terms with the meaning of talent (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Gonzalez-Cruz, 2013; Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014; Tansley, 2011); understanding TM practices and their effects (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013); and mapping the dominant theoretical frameworks (Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015). An underlying assumption of the talent literature is that talent (typically defined as high-potential current or future employees) is scarce but when found, developed, and deployed in pivotal positions makes a disproportionately high contribution to organizations.

A feature of the literature, however, is an ongoing debate about the meaning of talent and TM. For the most part, talent is assumed to be a relative quality of individuals such as ability or mastery (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013) and is judged in relation to context. Talent is usually equated to a scarce combination of performance and potential (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016) although inclusive approaches to TM see talent as something that all employees possess to some extent (Swailes, Downs, & Orr, 2014). However, debates about the etymology of "talent" (Adamsen, 2016; Tansley, 2011) or contemporary definitions of talent (Nijs et al., 2014) do not matter much for the present article because of its interest in explaining the spread of a meme for which ambiguity among its hosts is a key characteristic. What matters here is the cultural attraction to "talent" as a concept in business discourse rather than its various meanings to scholarly or practitioner communities because TM is essentially the manifestation of the ways in which the talent meme plays out in the host organization. Related literatures on strategic TM (Sparrow et al., 2014) and global TM (Schuler, Jackson, & Tarique, 2011; Scullion & Collings, 2011) can be seen as mutations of the original meme.

Thunnissen et al. (2013) noted the top-down nature of TM and called for new perspectives to widen its theoretical framework. Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2015) identified the resource-based view, international human resource management including global talent management, ways of assessing talent, and institutionalism as the dominant frameworks used to-date, and their treatment of TM as a phenomenon is pertinent here in emphasizing that practice is running ahead of theory (see also, Cascio & Boudreau, 2016). Although scholars have attempted to map the TM field, the literature contains little consideration of TM as anything but a rational choice. In a notable exception, Iles, Preece, and Chuai (2010) considered whether TM displays features of management fashions but do not explain its appeal and call for research into the factors behind its adoption. Cappelli (2009, 2010) shows how firms have used management development, and by implication historic approaches to TM, in response to changing market conditions but does not consider TM directly. The point of departure for the present article, therefore, is to trace the evolution of the specific notion of talent not the broader concept of management development and also to provide a fresh perspective on innovation transmission.

Of course, TM attracts a range of theoretical perspectives to explain why it occurs (e.g., organizational institutionalism), why it should work (e.g., resource-based view and workforce differentiation), and its effects on participants (e.g., organizational justice), but the present article shows that they do not fully account for its popularity and to do so requires a consideration of TM over and above rational adoption. Memetics provides a unit of analysis that helps to understand the cultural transmission of ideas and thus the cultural evolution of organizations (Weeks & Gelunic, 2003). A memetic appreciation offers a complementary angle to the existing theoretical frameworks surrounding TM; in particular, providing a deeper understanding of why it is adopted.

Although the aim of the article is to show how and why TM spreads for non-rational reasons, this does not mean that it is irrational. The article seeks to understand why it has flourished and to explain why, in common with other human resource

management practices (Lawler, 2007), it is popular ahead of a strong evidence base. The contribution of the article is to show how TM evolved and proliferated not simply because managers thought it had demonstrable connections to business performance, although many might have done so, but because of the attributes and internal characteristics of the meme itself. These are salience to competitive conditions, a lack of competing ideas, ambiguity in the meaning of talent and the ways it can be operationalized, complexity reduction for executives, and providing a means of control and power over potentially threatening groups.

Methodological Approach

TM carries some characteristics of management fads and fashions (Iles et al., 2010), and it is important to understand why some ideas spread quickly and widely and why others do not. This means looking beyond the apparent costs and benefits of innovations that often do not completely explain why diffusion occurs (Newell, Robertson, & Swan, 2001; Scarborough, Robertson, & Swan, 2015). Explaining this seemingly contradictory aspect of innovation diffusion requires stepping beyond rational interpretations of innovations and looking at alternative yet complementary theoretical explanations (Sturdy, 2004).

Of particular interest in meme theory is that explanations of innovation diffusion have traditionally focused on external, rational actors selecting innovations that would be the most successful for their situations (Abrahamson, 1996). However, rational approaches do not fully explain the choices made by organizations and attention turned to other factors that might influence management decision making. One of these factors is the ability of an innovation to replicate, adapt, and spread. The emphasis thus shifted beyond external actors being responsible for diffusion and toward the innovation itself to better understand its ability to attract attention (O'Mahoney, 2007).

Epistemologically, the article assumes that the present has no distinct boundary with the past. The past has influenced the present, and any historical interpretation is shaped by the present (Jenkins, 1995). The basic approach to understand the sociogenesis of TM is to start at the present and to go backward. The historical material used here is not exhaustive but, proportionate to the researcher's reflexivity, represents the important building blocks in a complex pattern of management thinking.

Meme mapping is a new concept and to understand how TM evolved in management thought, Paull's (2009) meme mapping approach is used to explore gestation events, the meme "birth point," and subsequent meme development events. Events in the gestation period are precursors to the birth event, and some events in this period may be more influential than others. The historical development of the talent meme is traced through a series of database searches looking for the occurrence of "talent" in the source title. JSTOR was searched because of its historic coverage together with *Scopus* and *Business Source Complete* to assess the rate of diffusion of the meme in more recent business sources. The search focus was confined to "talent" because the term captures the specific notion of interest and because "talent" predates the use of "talent management" by centuries. The article next summarizes the gestation (sociogenesis) of

TM. The particular birth point of TM is considered, and explanations for the proliferation of the meme following the birth point are developed.

The Sociogenesis of TM

Memetic analyses require an understanding of events occurring prior to the creation of the meme itself (gestation events) to properly appreciate the social conditions from which a particular meme emerged. The idea that some people are more talented than others at art, sport, music, and science is a recurring feature of human society (Wolfle, 1971). As industrialization progressed in the 19th century, social transformations occurred that gave greater focus to individual achievements over birth status and group membership. As demographic and economic backgrounds began to offer a diminishing role in explanations for individual success, attention turned to understanding differences in mental characteristics (Jansz, 2004). John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), for instance, saw talent as a social resource and was concerned about the loss of talent caused by the ways that women were treated.

Durkheim gave talent central stage in his ideas on social justice. Individuals, he said, possess their talents by chance and should have equal rights to deploy their talents to the extent that they possess them. Durkheim argued that because of their talents, individuals would have different opportunities to realize themselves such that there will be inequalities in the ways that resources are allocated to individuals but that any such inequalities are unavoidable and may be just (Green, 1989) implying that people must be allowed to occupy positions that suit their talents if industrial systems are to function properly. Some inequality based on merit was unavoidable but was preferable to inequality based on social circumstances such as those that might accrue from fortunate parentage.

The Davis–Moore theory of functional stratification (Davis & Moore, 1945) follows Durkheim's thinking in assuming that some roles in society and business organizations require more talent to discharge than others. Societies and organizations place the more skilled and talented people into these roles, and the stratification that results from these processes is presumed to benefit society. Functional stratification draws attention to two things in particular: why some positions are deemed by society as more prestigious (more rewardable) than others and how it is that certain people come to occupy those positions. TM is more concerned with the second question, which is revisited later in the article.

By the start of the 20th century, definitions of talent and genius had attracted close scientific scrutiny (Fischer, 1904). Studies of individual differences showed how mental capacities vary naturally and how they connect to differential ability (Hollingworth, 1923). Social factors and their impact on talent development began to be recognized in the hope, perhaps, that replicating certain social conditions would allow greater talents to flourish in society (Faris, 1936).

More complete theories of talent followed that attempted to combine psychological dimensions, heredity, and general intelligence. Bray (1954), for instance, examined talent in business administration and clearly linked talent to success at the expense of a

more balanced treatment of factors that might boost success or suppress talent. Treatises followed on the need for education and training systems to provide the men (talent was generally equated with being male) who would lead further cultural and economic progress (Brown & Harbison, 1957). The U.S. *Committee on the Identification of Talent* was created in 1951 and recognized the importance of power and individual adjustment to impersonal power systems in relation to talent recognition (McClelland, Baldwin, Bronfenbrenner, & Strodtbeck, 1958). The mobility of talent, popularized as the Brain Drain, and its links to social change, attracted attention in the 1960s (Adams, 1968; Ramsoy, 1965) as did the influence of talent on career achievement (Ginzberg & Herman, 1964).

By the 1960s, articles on the deployment of talent in business were appearing. The term "talent pool" was used in relation to concerns that talented people were choosing careers outside business (Twedt, 1967), and Patton (1967) warned of looming shortages of executive talent in the United States (see also McDonald, 2013b). The U.S. Civil Service Commission oversaw the "strategic deployment" of top executives into key roles (Bolster, 1967), and the strategic significance of aligning scientific talent with company profit objectives was recognized (Blood, 1963). The special treatment of talented employees was recognized in the long term, manpower forecasting and planning strategies at the time, at least in the United States (Hinrichs, 1966; Vetter, 1967) where concerted efforts to isolate the qualities of managerial talent were underway (Ghiselli, 1971). Longitudinal studies of individual differences and their association with career success and on the distribution of rewards appeared (Abrahamson, 1973; Husen, 1972). Concerns were also surfacing about shortages of managerial talent fuelled by the 1960s counterculture and changes to university education that were seen to be questioning authority in ways that discouraged young people from choosing managerial careers (Miner, 1974).

Another ingredient in the social conditions that created the talent meme occurred in the late 20th century when the concept of HRM embodied a re-evaluation of the contributions that employees make to organizations. Concurrent with the rise of HRM was a much stronger interest in fostering and creating high organizational commitment; the basic idea being that committed employees require less supervision and control to perform well (Walton, 1985). Efforts to raise employee commitment were underpinned by a range of HRM practices including contingent-based pay, team building, coaching, and leadership development to engender self-worth and self-efficacy. From the 1980s onward, collectivism and collective agreements declined as a way of managing. Individualism, individual contracts, and greater focus on individual performance gained fresh impetus (van Drunen, van Strien, & Hass, 2004). A psychological shift took place giving the self a more prominent place in organizational thinking.

An important function of labor markets is to allocate people of differing abilities to different sectors of the economy (Grossman, 2004) and, 200 years after Adam Smith realized the role of education and skills in wealth creation (Wolfle, 1971), economists began looking for explanations for the growth of income inequality and used talent heterogeneity as an explanatory variable (Bok, 1993). Rosen (1981) showed how artists with slightly greater talent earn much more than people with slightly less talent partly on the basis that "lesser talent is a poor substitute for greater talent" (Adler, 1985, p. 208). Adler (1985) extended this argument by showing that large differences

in earnings (in the arts) can exist when there are no differences in talent, that is, stars can exist among people of equal talent, a phenomenon returned to below.

Giftedness and talent continued to attract attention (Heller, Monks, & Passow, 1993; Heller, Monks, Subotnik, & Sternberg, 2000) and with the contribution of talent in society well established in the collective consciousness by the late 20th Century, the conditions for the sociogenesis of a meme that would manifest as TM had been created. Interest in understanding the characteristics of high performers continued (O'Connell, 1996; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997), and the conditions for meme creation, in an evolutionary sense, were created by a coalescence of economic liberalization in times of uncertainty, diminishing lifetime employment arrangements, increased external hiring in new organizational structures (Cappelli, 2008, 2009), free movement of labor and capital, efforts to inject private-sector practices into public management, privatization, and deregulation (see also, Adamsen, 2016). The confluence of economic forces and the pointing-up of competitive conditions on such a scale in a relatively short time brought organizational survivability into sharp relief such that concerted and explicit ways of managing talent, in contrast to management development, were a logical way forward, particularly for large, private-sector organizations.

The Birth Point

In common with other innovations, TM arose from what came before; in this case, at least 100 years of thinking about the interrelationships between talent and society. To some extent, it is an aggregate of some older ideas around structured selection methods, performance management, and career development (Cappelli, 2009). However, the critical adaptation was that TM emerged from these related but separate memes to embed itself as part of a complex set of memes that sustain and replicate it (a memeplex). In essence, TM is the outcome of three things: a strong tendency in Western societies to stratify, natural and socially constructed differences in human ability, and distinctive economic conditions. The basis of stratification in this particular case derives from the abilities that signal a person's economic characteristics and potential. The extent to which TM occurs in organizations is moderated by organizational traditions and overlaying competitive and political systems.

TM is in effect an artifact that people experience (as participants or as part of a team designing and managing talent programs) and which is interpreted to give a particular functionality. Human minds construct representations of the artifact to fit a particular context (Aunger, 2007) which explains why talent programs differ in their philosophy and operationalization. Although talent programs require sets of interlocking human resource management practices, they are shaped and driven by a particular philosophy and mind-set. The practices are not the meme, the manifestation of the meme is the mind-set that shapes the practices.

The birth of TM in a business context, and as a distinctive aspect of management development, occurred sometime in the late 20th century. Commentators often attribute McKinsey's 1997 "war for talent" report as a birth point for the sharp growth of interest in what has become known as TM (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin &

Michaels, 1998). The book of the report, *The War for Talent* (Michaels et al., 2001) is also widely cited as a seminal moment. The idea that organizations were fighting a "war" for executive talent caught on and propelled the talent meme across boardrooms. The rhetoric used by McKinsey was both assertive and moralizing; the "exultation" of strong leadership and high-potential employees, the immorality of the poor performer, and survival of the fittest analogies were all used to make the case (O'Mahoney & Sturdy, 2015). Michaels and colleagues claimed to have interviewed nearly 13,000 managers, produced 27 case studies, and held discussions with hundreds of other companies to derive five imperatives including developing a talent mind-set, rebuilding recruitment and development strategies, and differentiating among employees with "candid" performance reviews. They insisted that companies at the top of their talent "index" outperformed others by some distance and considered this to be "compelling" evidence that TM impacted positively on business performance. A causal relationship was in no doubt.

With so much data behind their claims, how could they be wrong? Recognizing the talent imperative was described as a strategic inflexion point; a turning point that companies had to pursue or risk falling behind. It would take a very brave executive in corporate America to ignore it. The actual birth point, however, seems more likely to have been a few years before the influential McKinsey report since it is clear that some companies and large government offices were running variations of TM programs in the preceding years. McKinsey did not birth the meme, rather it was the fruit of a build-up of corporate thinking, in the United States at least, that talent was the competitive weapon that organizations had been overlooking. However, McKinsey's role in the sociogenesis of TM should not be underestimated given its long-standing influence over corporate America and how it thinks and behaves (McDonald, 2013a). It was a great example of the consultant's trump card; a problem identified and a solution provided.

Meme Development

To track the popularity of TM and its progress into the consciousness of management scholars, the Scopus database was searched for "talent" in article titles. Limiting searches to social sciences only, in the 1970s and 1980s no more than five articles per year were indexed. Twenty two were indexed in 1995, 21 in 2000, after which the annual output increased steadily to 76 in 2005, 208 in 2010, and 202 in 2015. The peak year was 2013 with 252 articles. Scopus shows the increasing spread of the talent meme from 1996 to 1997 when the "war for talent" narratives were formulated up to 2010 after which the number of citations in the academic literature has leveled off. Repeating the same search for the annual number of hits in *Business Source Complete*, which indexes a wider range of scholarly and practitioner sources, showed a similar pattern. Twelve articles were indexed in 1990 after which the annual total grew steadily peaking at 717 in 2008 and was 679 in 2015. Both databases show that interest in TM as evidenced by citations has reached a steady-state.

TM derives its survivability in the pool of management memes from its own logic and psychological appeal in relation to uncertain business environments. It provides solace to executives since, if they deploy it, it looks as if they are doing their best to

get the best out of their employees in difficult times. There is as yet little robust evidence that TM does actually improve survival rates (Collings, 2015; Silzer, 2010), but on the surface, it makes sense as a way of improving the chances of organizational survival even if considerable faith is also required. Each organization that pursues TM interprets it in its own ways and adapts it to suit its culture, traditions, and survival strategies. The talent meme can be thought of as the essential basis of the idea that the different organizations deploying TM albeit in different ways hold in common.

The progress of the talent meme is evidenced by a sharp rise in the amount of academic and practitioner publications that has peaked in recent years, and the appeal of TM has continued unabated even in the face of some harsh criticism. Shortly after the birth point, Pfeffer (2001) argued that a talent mind-set could backfire by disaffecting the bulk of a workforce through the glorifying of an elite, undermining teamwork, and using TM to paper over some fundamental cracks in organizational systems and practices. Gladwell (2002), drawing heavily on the Enron folly, criticized the talent myth that had become "the new orthodoxy of American management" pointing to failures in promoting on potential rather than proven performance and the narcissistic behavior of many who do achieve promotions.

But the logic of managing talent outmaneuvered its doubters and the meme spread. In addition to the meme's seductive logic, the meme's progress was boosted and sustained by the actions of some high-profile consulting firms and the ways that they communicate with corporate clients. In 2013, consultants AM Azure published an analysis of what became of the companies glorified in the original *War for Talent*. Of the 106 companies that were identifiable, one third had disappeared and one third had "done OK" or better. The others were somewhere in between. Of the 27 case studies in *War for Talent*, about a quarter had continued to deliver good profitability but nearly half had either disappeared or posted disappointing results. Companies, of course, founder for many reasons and will not live or die by their talent strategies alone so some attrition in the original sample is to be expected. Tantalizingly, however, after trying hard to demolish the original war for talent narrative, AM Azure invites readers to contact them to find out more about "their distinctive approach to TM"; an invitation that suggests they too clung to the faith and the promise of salvation. Likewise, KPMG (2014) reporting a "recent global survey of Human Resources professionals" conceded that "there is little evidence that typical 'war for talent' practices that focus on high performers actually contribute to improved business performance" (p. 1). However, even this conclusion was not used to turn away from TM but to justify new directions and more holistic strategies. This is a sign of the meme adapting to survive, to widen its appeal by recognizing and embracing inclusive as well as elitist strategies and thus appeal to more types of organizations and cultures.

Meme Appeal

So, why has this particular management meme prospered? Applying meme theory to look "inside" the meme reveals five features that give it a high degree of "stickiness" (Barrett, 2015). First, memes spread if they are salient and relevant to existing

activities (Balkin, 1998). The meme benefited by attaching itself to other memes such as leadership and performance management. The talent meme resonated with executives already hardwired for growth, innovation, self-reliance, and change. The meme is easily assimilated; it is simple and sticks in the memory. It produces a behavioral outcome that people experience and transmit as they move between organizations. The structures of social networks affect the extent to which innovations diffuse (Abrahamson & Rosenkopf, 1997) because they transmit information to potential adopters. Human resource directors transmit the meme as they move around, and ambitious employees who have experienced or who are looking for TM will assist the meme's progress as they circulate.

Second, meme propagation was, and continues to be, assisted because it has no competitor save for a "stay as we are" strategy. This attitude has limited mileage in the for-profit sector when conditions toughen although it is a steady defense in not-for-profit sectors where memes for collectivism and non-differentiation provide some immunity. Memes carrying messages of danger tend to spread quickly (Barrett, 2015), and the talent meme taps into the dangers of inaction, of doing nothing while competitors move forward. People are "wired" to pay attention to memes involving danger (Brodie, 2009), and the meme appeals to the conscious fear that there are dangers "out there" that put organizational survival at risk. Had McKinsey "emblazoned" its 20,000 surveys to senior managers (Michaels et al., 2001, p. x) with the "War for Skills" or "The Battle for Recruitment" instead of *War for Talent* then the outcome might have been very different, at least until an equally effective meme evolved.

Third, in the context of business organizations, the concepts of both talent and TM are aided by their ambiguity; a feature that catalyses their diffusion (Adamsen, 2016; Iles et al., 2010). Unlike sport, for example, in most business contexts innate talent is very difficult to identify (Cappelli & Keller, 2014) and quantify. Talent may be, and often is, described in competence frameworks and similar visions, but that does not amount to quantification in the ways that talent in sport can be quantified through goals scored or track times (Franck & Nuesch, 2011). The attributes of pop stars could be described through their voice, appearance, and behavior, for example, but most people displaying the same characteristics would not make it as a pop star. In social settings, it is very difficult to separate real differences in a person's ability and potential from luck, popularity, and effort.

TM has principles that can be interpreted to suit a wide range of organizational situations. It has good "interpretative viability" (Benders & van Veen, 2001) such that it can, and does, mean different things to different organizations and can be defined and implemented in a variety of ways. Memetics helps to understand why the ambiguity around the specificity of talent and TM have not been of more concern to practitioners—it is this very ambiguity that actually helps the meme to spread. "Talent" is a seductive and easily assimilated word that captures a wide range of attitudes, characteristics and skills that many people would think they possess and which organizations might look for. Most people would think they have some sort of talent and the meme attracts attention by reassuring executives that they must, after all, be talented to have got where they are. Consumers of talent can select those bits of the meme's core idea

that appeal to them and use them opportunistically for their own purposes. Executives can extract the meanings that they seek from the idea, line managers can use TM systems to leverage control over employees, and employees can play the systems to their advantage, if they have the talent.

Fourth, meme development ties in with van Krieken's (2012) analysis of contemporary celebrity society, and in particular, his observation that in a celebrity society, information is in oversupply whereas attention is in short supply. The talent meme easily attaches to a host that accepts the underlying philosophy of workforce differentiation by shortcutting through the complexity of managing large organizations. Its message offering the prospect of simple solutions to complex problems appeals to executives in times of attention deficits. However, attention deficits seem likely to create the conditions in which talent recognition is independent of talent and may not be efficient. Extending Adler's (1985, 2006) ideas about the relationships between stardom and talent to business organizations, employees could find themselves in talent pools not because of differences in talent but because of the need for executives to "consume" the same experiences of talent as others are consuming.

Suppose that many employees have talent quality but that executive attention cannot be distributed across all of them. Executives acquire knowledge of those who would be talented by discussing them with others, and when a talented person is popular, then it is easy to find someone to discuss. Hence, executives start to consume the talent that others are consuming. When individuals are discussed by others, they raise their consumption capital (Adler, 1985) such that an employee who does not normally come into contact with the consumers of talent (people influential in talent decisions) and who is not discussed by those consumers will have zero consumption capital. Where a person has high consumption capital, then it is easier for consumers to find other "fans," and thus, individuals benefit from externalities of popularity which explains, in part, why interest settles on a few "stars." Executives, as consumers, concentrate their attention on a specific field of interest (those deemed to have greater talent) at the expense of acquainting themselves with knowledge of the capabilities of a greater number of others. It is more efficient for executives as consumers of talent to patronize a smaller number of individual employees and to save the search costs of discovering information about all others.

Because popularity is relative, everyone cannot be popular at the same time, and so the non-talented suffer the consequences of executive judgments of their relative failure. Thus, "the hierarchy of success manufactures a hierarchy of psuedo-talent in its own image, tending to reinforce the spurious perception of talent differential" (Adler, 2006, p. 898). In this way, stars emerge from groups who are equally talented. Being spotted, and named, as a talented employee arises from chance events that raise popularity and which attract attention. Because executives will prefer popular performers, other executives will switch their attention to them. An initial advantage for an employee, however obtained, can thus snowball into stardom. However, employees do not simply rely on luck as they can engineer their popularity via ingratiation, impression management, and upward influence (Bolino, 1999; Chen & Fang, 2008; Thacker & Wayne, 1995). Employees will invest in such methods to engineer their popularity

to the extent that they think those investments could be recouped by the fruits of talent status in a particular organization.

If employees are overlooked because they are truly less talented than those who are deemed to be more talented, then the processes of talent recognition and reward are efficient (following Rosen, 1981). However, if the reason for talent recognition is actually due to popularity, then the loss of psychic income to the excluded must be balanced against the benefits that executives receive from a narrower concentration on a "talented" minority. In this situation, the just-as-talented employees may stop trying to be recognized further diminishing their psychic income with negative consequences for organizations.

Fifth, the meme is spread by relatively successful and powerful people and elevates the status of people linked to elite programs. Even though TM is hard to link to business success, the idea spreads because those who are involved in running talent programs increase their power over the people in talent pools (van den Brink, Fruytier, & Thunnissen, 2013) and their power to reveal and unmask who is "talented." The same effect occurs in mergers and acquisitions that are often unsuccessful but which raise the power of executives in the predatory firm (Vos & Kelleher, 2001).

Power and status also accrue to those who are selected for elite talent programs. Winning a talent contest produces gains over and above the actual prize that put additional resources at the winner's disposal (Nippa, 2011). Being identified as talented confers higher status that itself confers advantages as status influences the structure of interactions with others and, even if there is no objectified status difference, individuals may draw some subjective evaluation of their recognition and take psychic income from it. Higher status accentuates the perceived value of a person's resources and improves the chances of sharing the resources of others (Thye, 2000), raises the chances of favorable outcomes independently of actual performance (Washington & Zajac, 2005), and lessens the likelihood of receiving negative or aggressive behavior from others (Lamertz & Aquino, 2004). It is clear, therefore, why status is an attractive motivator in itself (Huberman, Loch, & Onculer, 2004) and how it can be used as a means to an end. The outcomes of status in social networks are clear reasons for wanting to be associated with talent programs and help attract attention to the meme.

There is a striking parallel between elite talent programs and the analysis of court society (Elias, 1983) that has influenced thinking about how organizations work (van Iterson, Mastenbroek, Newton, & Smith, 2002). Elias drew attention to social processes and how they are used to maintain order, and elite TM can be viewed as an organizational strategy that uses hierarchical classifications to create and maintain differences and distinctions between employees, talent pool members, line managers, and senior managers. In the same way that royal courts were used to provide a forum in which courtiers disciplined themselves, or face serious consequences, then competitive relationships between the "talented" in talent pools impose a controlling order on participants that mitigates threats that they may pose to senior managers. Talent pools act as outlets for the creativity and individual strategies of ambitious employees, but members must regulate their behavior to comply with prevailing organizational rules and etiquette. Louis XIV of France ruled for 72 years and introduced ballet to his

courts. The nobility and courtiers were kept busy practicing their dance, competing against each other for the attentions of the king (Bintley, 2015). At the same time, dissent and plotting were suppressed by the diversions of the dance.

Conclusion

This article contributes to a wider social understanding of TM, casts TM as a reflection of contemporary society, and provides new insights into the reasons behind the diffusion of TM. In the long tradition of management development, it is clear that large organizations have engaged with practices that, with hindsight, we might now label as TM. However, the widespread use of "talent" in management thinking is recent and had a long gestation time. Set against the rise of individualism that accelerated in the late 20th century, TM is a logical evolutionary device that derives its legitimacy from the logic of itself and is implemented because it is seen in many large profit-seeking organizations as a necessary survival mechanism. However, TM cannot be explained simply through rational adoption, yet it is much more than "smoke and mirror" fashion. Memetics help to understand the phenomenon and act as a metaphorical framing device with strong explanatory power. There is plenty of scope for the meme to fit into prevailing organization cultures and to be subject to whatever systems of inefficiency, bias, and favoritism exist. Furthermore, the meme prospers even though perceived differences in talent and the consequential TM processes may not be based on actual talent differentials.

Indeed, there is little evidence that TM always works to organizational advantage, and this is explainable because, analogous to viruses and bacteria, benefitting a host is not a necessary condition for the spread of a meme. The point is that memes are replicators and they do what they are good at; replicating (Dennett, 1995). Furthermore, in common with other management innovations, the more the talent meme spreads, the more it becomes subject to local interpretation (Jones & Thwaites, 2000), and thus, the number of variations of the ways that the meme plays out in practice increases. The more variations of the original idea there are, the more a definitive theory of TM retreats into the distance.

For practitioners, this article locates TM in a particular managerial rhetoric that will continue evolving. These "rhetorical waves" (Barley & Kunda, 1992) shift their ideological stance across time to play to the ways that society sees the core problems of managing large organizations. The dominant rhetoric of the 1980s and 1990s was of culture, commitment, and quality, and the present rhetoric, arguably, speaks more about leadership, performance, and governance. TM focuses on how an internal resource is used, and talent becomes a firm-specific asset that is impossible to replicate exactly. But talent is not immutable, and the processes and routines used in organizations create resources of a particular kind and value. Where it is introduced, TM seems likely to alter the nature of relations among groups of people by providing opportunities for new interactions among them, and it alters the meaning that particular groups of employees have to top management. The extent to which TM benefits organizations is still unclear, and this article identifies five non-rational (but not irrational) reasons

why it is adopted. As for the future of the meme, if it follows the pattern of other memes such as total quality management and business process reengineering, then the principles will become widely accepted and adopted, and people start to think around the concept but not necessarily use the same label (TM) that carried the original meme.

Memetic analysis suggests an important addition to the research agenda around TM. To understand why TM has affected (infected) so many organizations, more attention needs to be given to what is on the inside of the meme. Understanding more about why and how the talent meme has proved to be a strong psychological attractor is as important as pursuing conventional research agendas. Further research is needed to understand what organizations get out of talent pools that create and maintain a space between top management and ambitious others and which enable their members to play against each other. There is much scope to research TM from a power perspective, and the effects of talent pools on organizational structures and processes offer a fruitful research avenue. This avenue would be complemented by an understanding of the social networks that lie behind the diffusion of TM in a range of organizations to assess how influential they were in adoption or non-adoption and investigation into the influence on non-talent factors in the recognition of talent and executive careers, particularly in the early stages, to reveal the factors that brought particular individuals to attention.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References

Abrahamson, E. (1996). Management fashion. *Academy of Management Review*, *21*, 254-285.

Abrahamson, E., & Rosenkopf, L. (1997). Social network effects on the extent of innovation diffusion: A computer simulation. *Organization Science*, *8*, 289-309.

Abrahamson, M. (1973). Talent complementarity and organizational stratification. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *18*, 186-193.

Adams, W. (1968). *The brain drain*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Adamsen, B. (2016). *Demystifying talent management: A critical approach to the realities of talent*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Adler, M. (1985). Stardom and talent. *The American Economic Review*, *75*, 208-212.

Adler, M. (2006). Stardom and talent. In V. A. Ginsburgh & D. Throsby (Eds.), *Handbook of the economics of art and culture* (Vol. 1, pp. 895-906). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: North Holland.

Azure, AM. (2013). *What happened to the war for talent exemplars?* Retrieved from http://www.amazureconsulting.com/files/1/91963843/WhatHappenedToTheWarForTalentExemplars.pdf

Aunger, R. (2007). Memes. In R. I. M. Dunbar & L. Barrett (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of evolutionary psychology* (pp. 599-604). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Balkin, J. M. (1998). *Cultural software: A theory of ideology*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Barley, S. R., & Kunda, G. (1992). Design and devotion: Surges of rational and normative ideologies of control in managerial discourse. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *37*, 363-399.

Barrett, H. C. (2015). *The shape of thought: How mental adaptations evolve*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Benders, J., & van Veen, K. (2001). What's in a fashion? Interpretative viability and management fashions. *Organization*, *8*, 33-53.

Bintley, D. (2015, September 14). The King who invented ballet: Louis XIV and the noble art of dance. *BBC Four* broadcast, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p031ljxp.

Blackmore, S. (1999). *The meme machine*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Blood, J. W. (Ed.). (1963). *The management of scientific talent*. New York, NY: American Management Association.

Bok, D. (1993). *The cost of talent: How executives and professionals are paid and how it affects America*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Bolino, M. C. (1999). Citizenship and impression management. *Academy of Management Review*, *24*, 82-98.

Bolster, M. H. (1967). The strategic deployment of exceptional talent: An account of the career executive Roster's short history. *Public Administration Review*, *27*, 446-451.

Bray, D. W. (1954). *Issues in the study of talent*. New York, NY: Kings Crown Press.

Brodie, R. (2009). *Virus of the mind: The new science of the meme*. London, England: Hay House.

Brown, J., & Harbison, F. (1957). *High-talent management for science and industry*. Princeton, NJ: Industrial Relations Center, Princeton University.

Cappelli, P. (2008). *Talent on demand: Managing talent in an age of uncertainty*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Cappelli, P. (2009). What's old is new again: Managerial "talent" in an historical context. *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, *28*, 179-218.

Cappelli, P. (2010). The rise and decline of executive development. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, *19*, 509-548.

Cappelli, P., & Keller, J. R. (2014). Talent management: Conceptual approaches and practical challenges. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, *1*, 305-331.

Cascio, W., & Boudreau, J. W. (2016). The search for global competence: From international HR to talent management. *Journal of World Business*, *51*, 103-114.

Casse, P. (1994). People are not resources. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, *18*(5), 23-26.

Chambers, E.G., Foulon, M., Handfield-Jones, H., Hankin, S., & Michaels, E.G. (1998). The McKinsey Quarterly. *The war for talent, 3*, 1-8.

Chen, Y., & Fang, W. (2008). The moderating effect of impression management on the organizational politics-performance relationship. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *79*, 263-277.

Collings, D. G. (2015). The contribution of talent management to organizational success. In K. Kraiger, J. Passmore, N. R. dos Santos & S. Malvezzi (Eds.), *The psychology of training, development, and performance improvement* (pp. 247-260). Chichester, UK: John Wiley.

Collings, D. G., & Mellahi, K. (2009). Strategic talent management: A review and research agenda. *Human Resource Management Review*, *19*, 304-313.

Davis, K., & Moore, W. E. (1945). Some principles of stratification. *American Sociological Review*, *10*, 242-249.

Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Dennett, D. (1995). *Darwin's dangerous idea: Evolution and the meanings of life*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Elias, N. (1983). *The court society*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Faris, R. (1936). Sociological factors in the development of talent and genius. *Journal of Educational Sociology*, *9*, 538-544.

Fischer, V. (1904). Ein Beitrag zur definition von Genie und Talent. [A contribution to the definition of genius and talent] *Annalen der Naturphilosophie, 3*, 233-237.

Franck, E., & Nuesch, S. (2011). Talent and/or popularity: What does it take to be a superstar? *Economic Inquiry*, *50*, 202-216.

Gallardo-Gallardo, E., Dries, N., & Gonzalez-Cruz, T. (2013). What is the meaning of "talent" in the world of work? *Human Resource Management Review*, *23*, 290-300.

Gallardo-Gallardo, E., Nijs, S., Dries, N., & Gallo, P. (2015). Towards an understanding of talent management as a phenomenon-driven field using bibliometric and content analysis. *Human Resource Management Review*, *25*, 264-279.

Gallardo-Gallardo, E., & Thunnissen, M. (2016). Standing on the shoulders of giants? A critical review of empirical talent management research. *Employee Relations*, *38*, 31-56.

Ghiselli, E. E. (Ed.). (1971). *Explorations in managerial talent*. Santa Monica, CA: Goodyear Publishing.

Ginzberg, E., & Herman, J. L. (1964). *Talent and performance*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Gladwell, M. (2002, July 22). The talent myth: Are smart people overrated? *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/07/22/the-talent-myth

Green, S. (1989). Emile Durkheim on human talents and two traditions of social justice. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *40*, 97-117.

Grossman, G. M. (2004). The distribution of talent and the pattern and consequences of international trade. *Journal of Political Economy*, *112*, 209-239.

Heller, A., Monks, F. J., & Passow, A. H. (Eds.). (1993). *International handbook of research and development of giftedness and talent*. Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press.

Heller, K. A., Monks, F. J., Subotnik, R., & Sternberg, R. (2000). *International handbook of giftedness and talent* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Elsevier.

Hinrichs, J. R. (1966). *High-talent personnel: Managing a critical resource*. New York, NY: American Management Association.

Hollingworth, L. T. (1923). *Special talents and defects: Their significance for education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Huberman, B. A., Loch, C. H., & Onculer, A. (2004). Status as a valued resource. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *67*, 103-114.

Husen, T. (1972). *Talent, opportunity and career*. Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvist and Wiksell.

Iles, P., Preece, D., & Chuai, X. (2010). Talent management as a management fashion in HRD: Towards a research agenda. *Human Resource Development International*, *13*, 125-145.

Istvan, D. (1991). Coming full circle in practice management. *Journal of Accountancy*, *171*(5), 42-48.

Jansz, J. (2004). Psychology and society: An overview. In J. Jansz & P. van Drunen (Eds.), *A social history of psychology* (pp. 12-44). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Jenkins, (1995). *On "what is history?" From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*. London, England: Routledge.

Jones, M., & Thwaites, R. (2000). Dedicated followers of fashion: BPR and the public sector. In D. Knights & H. Willmott (Eds.), *The reengineering revolution: Critical studies of corporate change* (pp. 50-62). London, England: SAGE.

KPMG. (2014). *War for talent—Time to change direction* (Publication No. 131349). https://home.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/pdf/2014/07/war-for-talent.pdf.

Lamertz, K., & Aquino, K. (2004). Social power, social status and perceptual similarity of workplace victimization: A social network analysis of stratification. *Human Relations*, *57*, 795-822. doi:10.1177/0018726704045766

Lawler, E. (2007). Why HR practices are not evidence-based. *Academy of Management Journal*, *50*, 1033-1036.

Lawler, E. (2008). *Talent: Making people your competitive advantage*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

McClelland, D. L., Baldwin, A. L., Bronfenbrenner, U., & Strodtbeck, F. L. (1958). *Talent and society: New perspectives in the identification of talent*. Princeton, NJ: van Nostrand.

McDonald, D. (2013a). *The firm: The story of McKinsey and its secret influence on American business*. London, England: Simon & Schuster.

McDonald, D. (2013b, August 13). The godfather of CEO Megapay: McKinsey consultant Arch Patton didn't invent wealth inequality. *Observer News*. Retrieved from http://observer.com/2013/08/the-godfather-of-ceo-megapay-mckinsey-consultant-arch-patton-didnt-invent-wealth-inequality

Michaels, E., Handfield-Jones, H., & Alexrod, B. (2001). *The war for talent*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Mill, J.S. (1869). *The subjection of women.* London: Longman, Green, Reader & Dyer.

Miner, J. B. (1974). *The human constraint: The coming shortage of managerial talent*. Washington, DC: The Bureau of National Affairs.

Newell, S., Robertson, M., & Swan, J. (2001). Management fads and fashions. *Organization*, *8*, 5-16.

Nijs, S., Gallardo-Gallardo, E., Dries, N., & Sels, L. (2014). A multidisciplinary review into the definition, operationalization and measurement of talent. *Journal of World Business*, *49*, 180-191.

Nippa, M. (2011). On the need to extend tournament theory. In J. L. Pearce (Ed.), *Status in management and organizations* (pp. 118-152). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

O'Connell, D. (1996). *High potential identification*. Boston, MA: Executive Development Roundtable, Boston University School of Management.

O'Mahoney, J. (2007). The diffusion of management innovations: The possibilities and limitations of memetics. *Journal of Management Studies*, *44*, 1324-1348.

O'Mahoney, J., & Sturdy, A. (2015). Power and the diffusion of management ideas: The case of McKinsey & Co. *Management Learning*, *47*, 247-265. doi:10.1177/1350507615591756

Patton, A. (1967). The coming scramble for executive talent. *The McKinsey Quarterly*, *4*(1), 2-16.

Paull, J. (2009). Meme maps: A tool for configuring memes in time and space. *European Journal of Scientific Research*, *31*(1), 11-18.

Pech, R. J. (2003). Memes and cognitive hardwiring: Why are some memes more successful than others? *European Journal of Innovation Management*, *6*, 173-181.

Pfeffer, J. (2001). Fighting the war for talent is hazardous to your organization's health. *Organizational Dynamics*, *29*, 248-259.

Ramsoy, N. R. (1965). On the flow of talent in society. *Acta Sociologica*, *9*, 152-174.

Rosen, S. (1981). The economics of superstars. *American Economic Review*, *71*, 845-858.

Scarborough, H., Robertson, M., & Swan, J. (2015). Diffusion in the face of failure: The evolution of a management innovation. *British Journal of Management*, *26*, 365-387.

Schuler, R. S., Jackson, S. E., & Tarique, I. (2011). Global talent management and global talent challenges: Strategic opportunities for IHRM. *Journal of World Business*, *46*, 506-516.

Scullion, H., & Collings, D. (Eds.). (2011). *Global talent management*. London, England: Routledge.

Silzer, R. (2010). Critical research issues in talent management. In R. Silzer & B. Dowell (Eds.), *Strategy-driven talent management* (pp. 767-780). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Silzer, R., & Dowell, B. (Eds.). (2010). *Strategy-driven talent management*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Sparrow, P., Scullion, H., & Tarique, I. (Eds.). (2014). *Strategic talent management: Contemporary issues in international context*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Spreitzer, M. S., McCall, M. W., & Mahoney, J. D. (1997). Early identification of international executive potential. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *82*, 6-29.

Sturdy, A. (2004). The adoption of management ideas and practices. *Management Learning*, *35*, 155-179.

Swailes, S., Downs, Y., & Orr, K. (2014). Conceptualising inclusive talent management: Potential, possibilities and practicalities. *Human Resource Development International*, *17*, 529-544. doi:10.1080/13678868.2014.954188

Tansley, C. (2011). What do we mean by the term "talent" in talent management? *Industrial and Commercial Training*, *43*, 266-274.

Thacker, R. A., & Wayne, S. J. (1995). An examination of the relationship between upward influence tactics and assessments of promotability. *Journal of Management*, *21*, 739-756.

Thunnissen, M., Boselie, P., & Fruytier, B. (2013). A review of talent management: "Infancy or adolescence?" *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *24*, 1744-1761.

Thye, S. (2000). A status value theory of power in exchange relations. *American Sociological Review*, *65*, 407-432.

Twedt, D. W. (1967). Is the talent pool for marketing managers drying up? *Journal of Marketing*, *31*(3), 65-66.

van den Brink, M., Fruytier, B., & Thunnissen, M. (2013). Talent management in academia: Performance systems and HRM policies. *Human Resource Management Journal*, *23*, 180-195.

van Drunen, P., van Strien, P. J., & Haas, E. (2004). Work and organization. In J. Jansz & P. van Drunen (Eds.), *A social history of psychology* (pp. 129-164). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

van Iterson, A., Mastenbroek, M., Newton, T., & Smith, D. (Eds.). (2002). *The civilized organization: Norbert Elias and the future of organization studies*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.

van Krieken, R. (2012). *Celebrity society*. London, England: Routledge.

Vetter, E. (1967). *Manpower planning for high talent personnel*. Ann Arbor: Bureau of Industrial Relations, University of Michigan.

Voelpel, S., Leibold, M., & Streb, C. (2005). The innovation meme: Managing innovation replicators for organizational fitness. *Journal of Change Management*, *5*, 57-69.

Vos, E., & Kelleher, B. (2001). Mergers and takeovers: A memetic approach. *Journal of Memetics—Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission, 5*. Retrieved from http://jom-emit.cfpm.org/2001/vol5/vos_e&kelleher_b.html

Walton, R. E. (1985, March-April). From control to commitment in the workplace. *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 77-84.

Washington, M., & Zajac, E. J. (2005). Status evolution and competition: Theory and evidence. *Academy of Management Journal, 48*, 282-296.

Weeks, J., & Gelunic, C. (2003). A theory of the cultural evolution of the firm: The intra-organizational ecology of memes. *Organization Studies, 24*, 1309-1352.

Williams, R. (2000). The business of memes: Memetic possibilities for marketing and management. *Management Decision, 38*, 272-279.

Wolfle, D. L. (1971). *The uses of talent*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Author Biography

Stephen Swailes is professor of Human Resource Management in The Business School, University of Huddersfield. His current research interests focus on reaching a more critical appreciation and understanding of talent management and the reactions of employees to talent programmes.