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Introduction

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Digital Talent Management

Insights from the Information Technology and Communication Industry

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Abstract: The introduction sets the scene of the entire book and provides an outline of each chapter. It argues that despite the development of a wide spectrum of digital activities and tasks, there is still considerable mystery related to the professionals and managers who perform these roles. This chapter introduces the concept of digital talent and shows that stereotypical portrayals of computer programmers are unlikely to reflect the manifold nature of digital talent. Considering digital talent's distinctive characteristics, the chapter calls for the need for a new kind of talent management, which we refer to as "digital talent management" (DTM) that is applicable to digital talent and decidedly integrates digital talent's distinctive characteristics into talent management strategies and practices in a human-centered manner.

Keywords: digital talent, digital talent management (DTM), digital talent attraction, digital talent development, digital talent retention

The contribution to innovation and economic development of professionals and managers with digital abilities, competencies and skills is undisputable. A large share of present-day economic activity rests upon and is supported by computer programs and digital technologies that such professionals and their organizations design, develop and maintain (Balthasar et al. 2010; Niemi et al. 2021). A wide spectrum of new roles and tasks have surfaced over the years, and, along with them, a variety of digital competencies have come to the fore worldwide. As a global 2019 survey on 26,806 digital experts from 180 countries has outlined, such digital competencies include, but are not limited to (Boston Consulting Group 2019, p. 2):

- Data mining, engineering and analytics;
- Programming and web development, including frontend and backend;

- Digital marketing, including influencer marketing and marketing analytics;
- Digital design, consisting of user experience (UX) and user interface (UI) design;
- Mobile application development;
- Artificial intelligence and machine learning;
- Agile ways of working;
- Robotics and automation engineering.

However, although the role of digital talent in the labor market and organizations has continued to grow, there is still considerable mystery related to the nature of digital talent, its relation to other types of talent and the implications for talent management. Stereotypical portrayals of ‘computer geeks’, such as the one shown in Figure 1, who do nothing else but sit contained, focused and relaxed in front of a computer screen and type symbols, abound in the media.

Figure 1. Portrayal of a stereotypical computer programmer



Source: Pixabay

Nevertheless, this simplified perception has started to be challenged by research on the nature of digital work and work practices of digital talent, which found that digital talent spends at least as

much time on interacting and collaborating as on searching for information, reading documentation, and writing code (Gonçalves et al. 2011; Marks and Scholarios 2008; Meyer et al. 2017). Surrounded by their technical infrastructure, which they need to master well, digital talent tends to be perceived as knowledge workers *par excellence* who takes a focused and planned, step-by-step approach to organizing and implementing their work. According to this ‘rationalized’ working method, there is limited room for personal creativity, which runs against the very notion of knowledge work, which is creative by definition (Barrett 2005). Research on the work life of digital talent, however, has further shown that digital work is more fragmented than believed, and digital talent frequently switches between different technical and interactive activities, both work and non-work related, influencing productivity and well-being (Meyer et al. 2017; Singer et al. 2010). The global COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges by putting additional strain on digital talent and their families and children (Ralph et al. 2020).

This book argues that the interplay between the technical and social facets of digital work is a more accurate reflection of the reality of the current work life and practices of digital talent. This same interplay between ‘the digital’ and ‘the human’ lies at the core of this book’s understanding of the notion of digital talent. It takes two to tango, and the digital side is as important to the human side as the human is to the digital one. Yet, there is a need for more research that integrates these two facets and provides a more holistic conceptualization of digital talent and uses it to analyze the practical implications of the specific nature of digital talent for talent attraction, development and retention. Figure 2 depicts this interplay and symbolizes the ‘mystery’ that characterizes the notion of digital talent.

Figure 2. Symbolic representation of the interplay between the digital and human facets of digital talent



Source: Pixabay.

Considering that digital talent constitutes the engine of innovation and business development, they are particularly valuable to organizations (Balthasar et al. 2010). Companies develop talent management programs and practices that aim to increase job satisfaction and improve organizational commitment and retention (George 2015). As this book shows, the specific characteristics of digital talent pose talent management challenges for organizations which need to ensure that one of their most valuable resources – highly-mobile and educated staff with expert-level digital skills – decide to remain within the organization (Restubog et al. 2006). This is what this book sets out to explore: talent management strategies and practices applied to digital talent with the aim to attract, develop and retain them.

The central argument of this book is that both the shared and distinctive features of digital talent have managerial implications for talent management. We argue that the distinctive nature of digital talent calls for a renewed talent management, which we refer to as “digital talent management” (DTM) that decidedly integrates such distinctive nature into organizational talent management strategies and practices in a human-centered way. To manage their digital talent, organizations need to know them well and understand their specific nature along with other distinctive, ‘God-given’ characteristics that make each person unique. On the basis of this knowledge, they need to adopt a

development and retention-centered mindset. This involves acting across the different stages of the talent management cycle, from recruitment to onboarding and motivation, in such a way as to facilitate professional and personal development and make people want to stay. Our book seeks to contribute theoretically by developing the concept of digital talent and delineating the sphere of digital talent management based on existing research on talent management and IT&C professionals and empirical research carried out within IT&C companies and presented in this book. Our research aims to contribute to talent management practices by examining the implications of managing digital talent for improving their organizational attraction, development and retention. We carry out this research in a new context. This context includes a fast-growing digital innovation ecosystem that comprises a set of nine Romanian IT&C companies and subsidiaries of multinational companies and the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted organizational and personal work arrangements and practices (Ralph et al. 2020).

Chapter 2 lays out the foundation for the remaining chapters. It reviews the literature on digital work as performed by IT&C professionals and managers and the theoretical literature regarding talent management. The chapter provides an original conceptualization of digital talent that reflects digital talent's distinctive professional characteristics and personal human attributes. It shows that two interlinked facets: a digital and a human one best reflect the nature of digital talent and argues that a human-centered approach to understanding and managing digital talent is required that goes beyond the talent-as-object and talent-as-subject approaches found in the general talent management literature. This chapter then distinguishes between different groupings of digital talent depending on the range of actors and scope of activities considered, and ends with defining digital talent.

Starting from the characteristics of digital talent outlined in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 surveys the literature regarding organizational attraction, development and retention strategies as they apply to digital talent. Combined with the literature review, the chapter integrates key practices found in the IT&C industry globally and discusses their implications for digital talent management.

Chapter 4 constitutes the empirical chapter of this book. Building on the scholarly literature outlined in Chapter 3, it presents and analyzes original, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of digital talent management strategies and practices implemented by IT&C companies. Balancing the organizational and individual perspective, the chapter provides insights on effective digital talent management that aimed to attract, develop and retain digital talent. It does so using a qualitative research design that included individual interviews with representatives of the management board of IT&C companies, HR staff and IT&C professionals.

Chapter 5 concludes by bringing together the main arguments of the book and outlining their implications for research and practice. It shows the contribution that this book makes to the existing literature through a developing the concept of digital talent and delineating digital talent management as a human-centered talent management process that consists of strategies and practices applicable to digital talent. The chapter outlines the managerial implications of this research by emphasizing how Covid-19 has impacted the management of digital talent. It ends with a look into the future of digital talent management in post-Covid-19 times – a future that is both uncertain and different than before, perhaps endlessly so.

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