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THE COMMUNICATION OF TALENT STATUS

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INTRODUCTION

An important goal of 'exclusive' talent management (TM) is to commit and retain a key group of employees by acknowledging them as being essential to the future performance of the organization (Iles, Chuai & Preece, 2010). However, communicating talent status to employees can be a sensitive and complicated matter, which, if not carried out effectively, can have unintended consequences (Dries & De Gieter, 2014: Silzer & Church, 2009). This is evident in the existing TM literature that has identified both positive (e.g. Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale & Sumelius, 2013) and negative (e.g. Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013; Ehrnrooth, Björkman, Mäkelä, Smale, Sumelius & Taimitarha, 2018) effects of employee awareness of their talent status. Thus, talent communication can be said to play a key role in TM strategy implementation.

Whilst some organisations pride themselves on the openness and transparency of their communication about talent, other organisations are described as adopting a 'strategic ambiguity' in their approach to communication, characterized by vagueness and secrecy (Dries et al., 2014). One explanation for the latter approach is that since an exclusive approach to talent management requires the differential treatment of employees (Gelens et al., 2013), organisations are concerned that transparency in communication will result in negative attitudes and behaviours both among

those who have been identified as talent, and those who have not. For employees who are not identified as high-potentials ('B' players[1]) this might include feelings of envy, decreased commitment, and turnover intentions, whereas for the 'talent' the fear is that they become complacent, self-satisfied, and develop unrealistic expectations about their future (Dries & De Gieter, 2014).

In this chapter, we review selected literature on talent status communication from the individual employee perspective, which is a small but rapidly emerging area within TM research (McDonnell et al., 2017). Communication about talent status has not been problematized in the TM literature, but research suggests that it can be a sensitive and complex issue capable of influencing the reactions of those identified and not identified as talent. To structure the review, we discuss issues relating to talent communication in connection with two broad approaches: a) Open TM communication which follows the philosophy that no promotion is permanent and employees must keep competing with others to maintain their status (for more on this see Pucik, Evans, Björkman, Morris, 2017, chapter 7); and b) Strategic ambiguity in TM communication, whereby firms for strategic reasons maintain a certain level of ambiguity in their communication about talent status to employees (Dries & Pepermans, 2008; Gelens et al., 2013). The underlying assumption behind this intentional ambiguity is that the costs and benefits of not communicating talent status outweigh those of open communication. This is because it allows for the existence of multiple interpretations by employees as to who possesses talent status (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). The chapter concludes with a suggested agenda for future research that sits at the intersection between communication, talent status and employee reactions.

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[1] In line with Malik and Singh (2014) we use the term 'B' players when referring to employees not included in the talent pool and avoid using terms such as non-talent or non-high potential employees because of their potential negative connotations.

APPROACHES TO TALENT COMMUNICATION

Corporate TM tends to be either inclusive, in that all employees are considered talent, or exclusive, in which case only a certain, small group of employees (e.g. the top 5%) are viewed as talent (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Cruz, 2013). While the rationale for inclusive TM tends to be that people are the key resource in expert, knowledge-intensive, white-collar work, the question this poses is how TM then differs from human resource management (HRM) (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). It has been widely argued in previous TM literature that the main difference between HRM and TM is precisely the concept of workforce differentiation (Chuai, Preece & Iles, 2008; Iles et al., 2010), and the exclusive approach to TM is by many considered the most common in organizations (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). In this chapter, we adopt the following definition of TM: *"the differential management of employees according to their relative potential to contribute to an organization's competitive advantage"* (Gelens et al., 2013: 342). The central purpose of exclusive TM is to retain, motivate and increase commitment levels among key employees by providing them with enhanced and differentiated development opportunities within the organization. From a communication point of view, exclusive TM is also where the majority of interesting questions lie.

In practice, organizations are faced with essentially three options of communication, each with its own advantages and disadvantages: a) inform all employees (talent and non-talent), b) inform only those identified as talent, or c) inform neither. In addition to this, difficult questions organisations must face include: i) How to approach the management of meaning around the term 'talent' or 'high potential' across the organisation? ii) What are the intended messages (now and looking forward)? iii) How to communicate the desired balance between exclusivity and inclusivity? and iv) How to raise expectations of talented employees about their future without

making them complacent or creating false promises? We discuss some of these issues and review the extant research in connection with two commonly adopted approaches to talent communication.

Open TM communication

One approach available to organizations is to communicate openly about talent status throughout the organization, to all employees. This kind of approach has been popularised by the likes of General Electric and its "Session C" (Bartlett & McClean, 2006) – an annual people review in which managers' performance and career development opportunities are openly discussed and evaluated. Haier is another example that adopts a so-called 'racetrack' model based around transparency and fairness (Pucik et al., 2017). In essence, this means that employees have the possibility to demonstrate their capabilities in ongoing, internal races in which they all continuously need to prove their own capabilities in order to maintain rewards and earn promotions. This then triggers new races that need to be won, since no position or reward is guaranteed to last if performance levels drop.

One advantage with this approach of explicitly communicating talent status is the positive, motivational message it sends to employees identified as talent. Some empirical TM research testifies to this effect, showing that employees who believe they have been identified as talent are more likely to exhibit a range of positive behavioural and attitudinal outcomes, such as increased work motivation and commitment (Collings & Mellahi, 2009), more positive views about their future prospects (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), affective commitment (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans & Pepermans, 2015), increased willingness to take on demanding work and build valuable

competencies, support company strategic priorities, identify with the organisation, and reduced intentions to quit (Björkman et al., 2013).

Based on tournament logic (e.g. Claussen et al., 2014, Rosenbaum, 1979), another advantage of an open, racetrack approach is that whilst it is competitive and exclusive, individuals may perceive a merit-based system as fair. This resonates with previous research on organizational justice and TM, which posits that employees, both talent and 'B' players, are likely to be more accepting of less positive outcomes if they believe that the decision-making process has been fair (Gelens et al., 2013; Slan-Jerusalim & Hausdorf, 2007). Furthermore, 'B' players are more likely to believe that they too can become talent in the future if they perceive there to be a fair talent system in place. This motivates them to continue working towards that goal by exhibiting positive rather than negative attitudes and behaviours. Support for this can be found in work that shows the positive effects of transparent organizational communication on employee perceptions of organizational reputation (Men, 2014), employee trust (Rawlins, 2008), and engagement (Men & Hung-Baesecke, 2015).

Communication challenges. The main communication challenges of open TM systems relate to the consistent clarification of the 'rules of the race' on the one hand, and the effective management of key tensions on the other. In terms of the 'rules', transparency requires the organization to send strong and consistent signals about the meaning of talent so that employees are able to develop shared interpretations. Particularly important are shared interpretations about fairness since the vast majority of employees targeted in this communication will not be part of the organization's talent pool. At the very least this will require effective communication about the criteria for talent pool inclusion and how decisions about talent pool inclusion are made – both talent and 'B' players

need to understand what is expected of them. Much of this communication will rest on effective implementation, and especially the ability of individual line managers across the organisation to apply the rules consistently, and justify their decisions in line with intended corporate goals and cultural values (Stahl et al., 2012). This may be difficult to achieve in practice, especially in large multinationals where employees' have diverse views on the quality of their performance appraisals (e.g. Sumelius et al., 2014) that commonly constitute the main source of input into talent decisions. Open TM communication not only shines the spotlight on talent, but also on other actors involved in the talent processes, line managers in particular (Dries & De Gieter, 2014).

In terms of key tensions, it is important to strike the right balance between exclusivity and inclusivity in open TM systems. Whilst this can be said of any exclusive TM system, it is especially important in open TM systems since the distinction is an integral part of the system's purpose and design. The communication challenge rests in how to bestow exclusive, motivation-enhancing talent status on those identified as talent so that they feel like members of a valued in-group, whilst simultaneously communicating messages of inclusivity to the 'B' players who comprise the backbone of the organisation (Malik & Singh, 2014; Marescaux, De Winne & Sels, 2013). Some organisations like Haier try to achieve this by communicating the tenets of the racetrack model whereby exclusivity today (talent pool exclusion) may turn into inclusivity tomorrow (talent pool inclusion) should the employee's performance level increase sufficiently. Being told that talent can also 'fall out' of talent pools is designed to communicate to 'B' players that exclusion may only be short term and future talent pool inclusion is still partly in their own hands.

A related tension is how to manage communication about what talent pool members can expect in terms of exclusive treatment such as 'talent only' training and development opportunities. For the motivating effects of open talent identification to work, talent pool

membership needs to come across as enticing (worth achieving as well as defending) and part of this feeling derives from 'selling' the value of this higher status. However, there are likely to be limits, strategically and legally, to how openly organisations should articulate these differences – feelings of inclusivity will be a lot harder to sustain if the perceived gap between the talent and non-talent grow too large. From a psychological contract perspective (Rousseau, 1995), organisations and line managers also need to avoid communicating in ways that raise talents' expectations beyond what they are committed and able to deliver. The role of communication is central for making explicit the terms of exchange, and allow both talent and 'B' players to make sense of what King (2016) refers to as the 'talent deal'. This is by no means straightforward, especially since talent identification can be construed as more of a curse (e.g. being in the spotlight) than a blessing (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2017), depending on what it entails for talent in terms of work effort vs. perceived benefits.

Strategic ambiguity in TM communication

Defined as deliberate attempts to maintain a degree of information asymmetry between insiders who possess useful information and those who do not (Eisenberg, 1984), strategic ambiguity in communication about talent status from an organizational point of view may be advantageous since it allows for multiple interpretations of messages. This may allow unconfirmed assumptions to persist. For talent, strategic ambiguity can come in the form of being labelled talent, but receiving little or no communication about the implications of possessing this status in terms of development opportunities and workload. This allows the organisation to avoid making unrealistic promises, and may help to address fears that talents' expectations become too high. Or, this could include not communicating openly about talent pool criteria and who else has been

identified. This might allow the organisation to escape the kind of scrutiny that befalls open and transparent TM systems, which may help to maintain an appearance of fairness and a merit-based focus. For non-talent, strategic ambiguity might create conditions in which employees believe that they are talent even though they might in fact not be. This may result in a situation where both the organisation and individual enjoy the benefits that come with this false perception in terms of work motivation and commitment (Collings & Mellahi, 2009).

Exclusive TM systems that adopt an effective open communication approach are likely to struggle to avoid generating negative feelings among those not identified as talent. Among this group of 'B' players, research attests to the likely existence of disappointment, resentment, disengagement (Silzer & Church, 2009), decreased motivation and performance (Gelens et al., 2013; Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Sels, 2014), and jealousy and frustration (Dries & De Gieter, 2014, Malik & Singh, 2014). From an organisational point of view, this raises the question of whether only communicating about talent status to those identified as talent would in fact be the best approach.

The answer to this question is not straightforward, evidenced by empirical findings (Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Ehrnrooth, et al., 2018; Sumelius, Smale & Yamao, 2019) that indicate that those *identified as talent* can react adversely to finding out about their talent status. For instance, studies have found that talents' self-awareness about their special status can lead to feelings of complacency, self-satisfaction, arrogance, and increased expectations towards the organization in terms of development opportunities (Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Malik & Singh, 2014). This, coupled with the potentially negative reactions and behaviours of the larger group of 'B' players, might reasonably lead organisations not to communicate about talent status to either talent or 'B' players.

The above mentioned considerations have led some companies – more than many might think, in our view – to adopt an approach to talent status communication characterized by strategic ambiguity. For example, many Finnish multinationals, such as KONE, have formal TM systems but do not formally communicate about talent status to anyone (Smale, Björkman & Saarinen, 2015). However, considering that the central tenet of exclusive TM is to signal to key employees that their work effort is valued and that they are important for the future success of the organization, some form of communication to key employees seems essential in order to reap the benefits of TM. Otherwise, one could question the decision to implement an exclusive approach to TM in the organization in the first place. If an organization identifies talent but does not communicate this to the talent in question, we would argue that the organization is more accurately described as engaging in succession planning rather than TM.

Communication challenges. The communication challenges in organisations that employ a strategic ambiguity approach to their communication about talent are different from the challenges associated with the open approach. The challenges with strategic ambiguity mostly revolve around determining the optimal degree of information asymmetry for each element of the TM system, and then managing communication to preserve this asymmetry in ways that help the organisation to achieve its TM goals. This also involves addressing certain tensions, but the tensions are again different in nature.

As discussed above, ambiguity can be introduced into a variety of different elements of an organisation's TM system: withholding information about who and who else has been identified, what the exact talent pool criteria are, how long talent status lasts, what forms of differential treatment one can expect, among others. Each element requires the organisation to think about the

advantages and disadvantages (for both talent and non-talent) of introducing ambiguity in communication. As the empirical research we have reviewed suggests (see Table 1), forecasting employee reactions to talent communication is already likely to be difficult, let alone under conditions of purposeful ambiguity.

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In terms of tensions, a communication approach that builds on strategic ambiguity relies on managers being able to comply with a corporate policy of vagueness and secrecy whilst at the same time providing signals, or 'answers', about how individuals should interpret and react to the lack of full information (Björkman et al., 2013). This will require a delicate balance between verbal and non-verbal cues, but especially the non-verbal, which may include performance appraisal ratings, invitations to 'special' programmes or selection for assignments. This might extend to the more controversial area of non-communication that includes a range of communication tactics ranging from keeping quiet and claiming ignorance (see e.g. Connelly et al., 2012 regarding knowledge hiding), to misinformation and white lies.

Another tension lies in how much attention organisations and managers should direct towards formal versus informal communication. In the absence of formal communication, employees will naturally turn to more informal channels of communication in the search for answers to important questions. In light of the political nature of organisations, this information search is likely to occur via internal 'grapevine activity' (Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Sumelius et al., 2019) and to be fuelled by rumours. Whilst the outcomes of these informal information seeking processes might be positive and support a strategic ambiguity approach, they may also be harmful

to both employee and organisation. For example, a rumour that an employee has been identified as talent based purely on being a personal friend of the boss – whether truthful or not – is unlikely to benefit either party neither in terms of the conclusions others may draw about them as individuals, nor the TM system as a whole.

TOWARDS A FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

TM research examining the experiences and reactions of individual employees is emerging yet scarce (McDonnell et al., 2017). One of the explanations provided for the mixed findings we have reviewed regarding employee reactions (talent and non-talent) concerns the role of communication. However, there remains fairly little empirical work that explicitly investigates TM from a communication perspective and how this might help us understand employee interpretations and responses to messages they receive from various kinds of TM systems. In this section, we map out an agenda for future research that illustrates how a communication perspective can help to shed more light on how and why individual employees – both talent and 'B' players – react in different ways.

Communication and the TM process

In terms of theory, one obvious starting point would be to draw on TM's parent field of HRM and recent developments in HRM process theorisation. Building on signalling theory (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Suazo, Martínez & Sandoval, 2009), the HRM process approach assigns a central role to how organisations and managers communicate about HRM, which sends signals to employees about what is expected, valued and rewarded (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Malik and Singh's (2014) conceptual framework extends the HRM process meta-features (visibility,

understandability, legitimacy of authority, relevance, instrumentality, validity, consistency, consensus and fairness) to outline ways in which individuals' perceptions may differ about 'high potential' programs. Based on HR attribution theory (Nishii, Lepak & Schneider, 2008), the framework goes on to argue that talent and 'B' player perceptions of these features will influence the kinds of attributions they make about the programs, which will in turn affect their commitment and organisational citizenship behaviours. Whilst the issue of fairness has already attracted some empirical attention (Slan-Jerusalim & Hausdorf, 2007), most of the other features in Malik and Singh's (2014) framework remain unexamined. From a communication perspective, we would suggest that employee perceptions of *visibility* (explicit and implicit information sharing about workforce segmentation), *consistency* (talent being managed through a consistent and differentiated HR architecture) and *consensus* (agreement among senior level management about the significance of top talent) are among the most interesting for future study.

Communication actors and the 'talent deal'

Perhaps the most common theoretical approach to studying individual reactions to TM is social exchange theory and the psychological contract perspective (e.g. Björkman et al., 2013; Festing & Schäfer, 2014; King, 2016). One way to extend this is to build on the idea that line managers – as the key link between TM strategy and employee reactions – are the main psychological contract brokers (McDermott et al., 2014). Future research could thus examine the role line managers play in communication about talent and how this influences employee views about their own obligations and those of their employer/manager. As outlined in our review above, managers are likely to face complex and quite different challenges depending on the kind of communication approach adopted by the organisation (e.g. how to achieve a balance between

exclusivity and inclusivity in their communication with subordinates, how to use verbal and non-verbal cues in the context of strategic ambiguity). How managers perceive and handle these challenges merits further research, since the way in which news is communicated to employees is likely to weigh heavily on their perceptions of for instance fairness, especially in cases where the outcome is unfavourable for them (Patient & Skarlicki, 2010). In line with the multi-actor model by King (2015), this could extend to different 'communication actors' including top management and HR managers. For instance, we know a lot more about manager-employee communication and psychological reactions of employees within the context of the performance appraisal, but we know very little about the communication that takes place concerning talent status (Ehrnrooth et al., 2015). Our review of the literature also reveals that we know little about the talent communication processes that take place among top management, for example where the CEO, senior managers and corporate HR in corporate talent review sessions, present and jointly assess potential talent pool candidates.

Communicating talent status across cultures

Whilst open, candid and transparent TM communication is evident in organisations from a range of different countries, there remains a clear cultural, Anglo-Saxon bias in this approach to communication and to TM research overall (Thunnissen, Boselie & Fruytier, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). Empirical TM research now covers an ever-growing number of developed and developing country contexts (Cooke, Saini & Wang, 2014; Iles, Chuai & Preece, 2010; Tymon, Stumpf & Doh, 2010), but the individual employee perspective and issues concerning cross-cultural TM communication within these different contexts remains largely ignored (Dries, 2013). We believe that there are interesting questions around the topic of

communication, some of which require a greater problematisation of communication than has thus far been the case. For instance, whilst there are many meanings behind the term 'talent' (Tansley, 2011; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013), do terms such as 'talent' and 'high potential' possess a high level of cross-cultural equivalence; do the meanings change when translated into the local language? How effective are open and strategic ambiguity approaches to TM communication in cultures that utilise high-context versus low-context communication, or in egalitarian versus non-egalitarian societies? Whilst cases such as Haier suggest that open and transparent TM communication has succeeded despite the Chinese cultural tendency to save 'face' (Pucik et al., 2017), these are often anecdotal accounts. How well this works in practice from the managers and employees view, and how easy it is to transfer a TM communication strategy from one country context to another remains unexplored.

Legal and ethical perspectives on talent status communication

Communication about talent status also raises interesting legal and ethical issues. From a legal perspective, the laws (e.g. Data Protection and Data Privacy) regulating what kinds of information organisations can hold about employees, who this can be shared with and how, and the rights that employees have to access this information varies from country to country. The general tightening of this legislation, for instance in Europe, may lead to situations where employees have the right to see whether they have been included in a talent pool and the evaluation this was based on. In organisations employing strategic ambiguity, this may force them to 'come clean' or to simply hold less information in order preserve asymmetry. Whether such legal developments result in more or less transparency, and how this influences TM communication differentially in different legal settings will be an interesting future line of enquiry.

From an ethical standpoint, Swailes (2013) highlights some of the ethical concerns that are associated with the creation and treatment of a managerial elite. Some of the resulting ethics-related questions for organisations he presents as an ethical guide are essentially questions that need to be resolved via effective communication: Why is an elitist talent programme needed and how is this articulated to all? To what extent do the organisation's views of talent embody virtue and eliminate gender bias? How will employees not in the programme feel about being excluded? In terms of strategic ambiguity, keeping employees in the dark about talent pool criteria, their talent status, and their future career could also be seen as unethical (Pucik et al., 2017), especially if, in order to enforce this, managers are required to ignore, mislead or lie to employees. How organisations and managers deal with such ethical dilemmas in communication, and how employees in different country and organisational contexts view the ethical dimension of exclusive TM, may also help to shed light on the reactions of employees.

Talent status communication: Event or process?

Much of the conceptual and empirical work on employee reactions to talent status is silent on how employees came to find out about their status, what their views of themselves were before they found out, and how the effects of 'knowing' unfolded over time. An important overarching question in this regard is whether organisational communication and self-awareness of being a talent or not should be conceptualised as an event or a journey (King, 2016).

In terms of how employees find out, one can imagine that whether one receives this information from the CEO in his/her office, or via a standardised email from HR, or via a rumour from a colleague, is very likely to make a difference to how one reacts – at least in the short term. Situational factors surrounding how an employee finds out (e.g. the credibility of the source,

whether you perceive to be the first or last to know, whether there is a personal touch or the opportunity to ask questions), is likely to send signals about the value of talent status in addition to the status itself. A related question that is particularly pertinent for strategic ambiguity is whether the differences in reactions between talent and non-talent are partly driven by them finding out about talent status in different ways. It may be the case, for example, that talent are informed directly about their status, but non-talent have to work this out for themselves via inference and arduous information seeking activities. We suggest that this kind of information be included in future studies, and that particular emphasis is placed on the under-researched experiences of 'B' players (Delong & Vijayaraghavan, 2003; Malik & Singh, 2014).

Without knowing how talent or 'B' players viewed themselves, their employer and their psychological contract before becoming aware of their talent status, it is problematic to talk about 'reactions' or to draw conclusions about how status has affected one individual or group compared to another. Some Finnish HR directors we have spoken to about strategic ambiguity during our own research (Björkman et al., 2013), are quick to point out that talent "already know", alluding to the fact that in some instances (e.g. sales positions) high performance can be self-evident and is reinforced by praise and positive performance evaluations. For these individuals, talent identification might be more confirmation than revelation. Psychologically, however, this is likely to have a far smaller impact on their attitudes and behaviours compared to those for whom talent status comes as a positive or negative surprise.

When studying the effects of talent status communication, future research might also benefit from making a distinction between short-term reactions where communication is viewed as an event, and longer-term sensemaking where communication is part of a continuous process of self and other evaluation and re-evaluation. Many existing studies in TM suffer from cross-

sectional designs and/or a lack of information about when individuals came to be aware of their status. Few studies track the moves of talent and non-talent to ask about the extent to which TM and its communication was a significant factor in why they left their previous organisation. We therefore know quite little about how individuals make sense of their status over time, the kinds of cognitive and psychological processes they experience (e.g. cognitive dissonance, social identification) (see e.g. Dries, 2013), and the kinds of long-term outcomes that result (stress, anxiety, career success, voluntary turnover, promotion). Longitudinal research designs that follow the intertwined processes of discovering, reacting to and making sense of talent communication are thus sorely needed. Some of the work on the dynamics of 'star' status gain and loss may be useful in this regard (Bothner, Kim, & Smith, 2012).

Table 1. Summary of empirical studies on employee reactions to talent identification

STUDY	METHOD & SAMPLE	ATTITUDES & BEHAVIOURS OF 'TALENT'	ATTITUDES & BEHAVIOURS OF 'B' PLAYERS
Dries & Pepermans (2007) *"Real" high-potential careers: An empirical study into the perspectives of organisations and high potentials"*	• 14 high potentials in six organizations (plus data from 20 organizational representatives, in seven additional organizations) in Belgium • Talent aware of their status • Qualitative interview study	• Expected upward career moves • Intended to remain in the organization • Viewed their own assertiveness as key for their success • Unclarity/ambiguity about organization's intention with TM: Talent development opportunities a way to 'monitor for failure' and test employees in disguise	Not included in study
Slan-Jerusalim & Hausdorf (2007) *"Managers' justice perceptions of high potential identification practices"*	• 123 employees in 76 companies in Canada, both talent and 'B' players • Talent aware of their status • Quantitative study	• Manager input, open communication, and formal program evaluation contributed to higher perceptions of procedural justice (for both talent and B-players) • Having been identified as talent did not result in higher perceived distributive justice	
Björkman et al. (2013) *"Talent or not? Employee reactions to talent identification"*	• 767 employees in 9 Nordic MNCs • Self-perceptions of talent status (yes, no, don't know) • Quantitative study	• Self-perceived talent are more likely than others to commit to increasing performance demands, developing skills valuable to the company, supporting strategic firm priorities, identifying with their subsidiary. • Employees who think they are talent have lower turnover intentions than those who think they are not talent/ do not know	• No significant differences between self-perceived 'B' players and employees who did not know their talent status • Employees who did not know their status equally likely to leave the company as those who know they have been identified as talent
Dries & De Gieter (2014) *"Information asymmetry in high potential programs: A potential risk for psychological contract breach"*	• 20 talent from 9 organizations in Belgium (also 11 HR directors) • Talent all aware of their special status • Qualitative interview study	• Expect special organizational support in achieving career goals & guidance, dvt opportunities, special projects & adequate rewards • Intend to remain in the organization provided their expectations are met • Ambiguity about implications of talent status	Not included in study

Table 1. (cont.) Summary of empirical studies on employee reactions to talent identification

STUDY	METHOD & SAMPLE	ATTITUDES & BEHAVIOURS OF 'TALENT'	ATTITUDES & BEHAVIOURS OF 'B' PLAYERS
Sonnenberg et al. (2014) *"The role of talent-perception incongruence in effective talent management"*	• 2660 employees (88% Dutch) in 21 European organizations • Talent and 'B' players • Quantitative survey	• If talent are unaware that they have a special status they may not participate in the talent activities intended for them	• If 'B' players perceive themselves to be talent, they may mistakenly interpret TM practices as being intended for them, which may result in disappointment and resentment
Gelens et al. (2015) *"Affective commitment of employees designated as talent: signalling perceived organisational support"*	• Study 1: 203 employees in one company in Belgium, both talent & 'B' players • Study 2: 195 employees, in one company in Belgium: some management trainees, some not • Archival data: Everyone aware of their (non) status • Quantitative studies	• Talent (& management trainees) felt greater perceived organizational support compared to 'B' players, which in turn triggered affective commitment • Affective commitment of talent (but not trainees) higher than that of B-players. • No significant direct relationship between talent/designation as trainee and affective commitment	
Swailes & Blackburn (2016) *"Employee reactions to talent pool membership"*	• Matched samples of employees (talent & 'B' players) in one case company operating in Northern Europe • 17 interviews with talent and 17 with 'B' players • Quantitative & qualitative data (open-ended questions & questions answered on a Likert scale)	Talent more positive regarding: • Quality of support from line managers • Access to talent pools (bias free & well balanced) • Overall development opportunities • Access to work-based skill development • Knowledge & skill dev. during the past year • Company commitment to their future career • Career development in the company	• 'B' players perceived lower support from the organization, stronger feelings of unfairness, lower expectations of interest in them from the organization

Ehrnrooth, Björkman, Mäkelä, Smale, Sumelius & Taimitarha (2018) *"Talent responses to talent status awareness- not a question of simple reciprocation"*	• Quantitative survey data • 321 employees in 8 Finnish organizations • Talents (formally identified), some aware of their status and others not	• Awareness of one's status as talent makes individuals more sensitive regarding what they are offered by the company • Self-aware talents respond more strongly to psychological contract fulfilment & leadership development practices, target setting and evaluative feedback is less effective as a management tool	• Not included in study
Sumelius, Smale & Yamao (2019) *"Mixed signals: employee reactions to talent status communication amidst strategic ambiguity"*	• Qualitative interview data • 24 interviews with talents and 'B' players • Aware of their talent status (self-reported)	Immediate reactions: • Pride & happiness • Increased self-esteem • Sense of achievement Long term sense-making • Increased motivation & commitment • Pressure & stress	Immediate reactions: • Disappointment & resentment • Indifference Long term sense-making • Dis-identification • Cognitive dissonance

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