Why are we so bad at predicting potential?

A research project that investigates the unpredictable nature of today's talent management programs, and provides recommendations for increasing program effectiveness and return on investment.

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1 Abstract

To quote two HR directors who contributed to the early stages of this research, "How can we be so bad at predicting potential?"

This report investigates a recurring problem in corporate talent management programs; namely the unreliability of predicted potential versus actual program engagement and career advancement achieved as a result of a structured 'high potential' development program. The report aims to uncover the causes of poor ROI in such talent programs, and recommend appropriate remedies.

This complex subject was analysed with a four stage research approach. Firstly, general observations were made of a number of talent programs, with engagement data gathered from two recent ones. Secondly, 76 business leaders were interviewed to establish the leadership qualities that they look for when identifying 'high potentials'. Thirdly, some background data was gathered from 31 organisations about the nature and scope of talent management programs, and the selection methods used. Finally, a questionnaire was completed by 316 respondents who rated their agreement with the leadership qualities identified in the second stage interviews.

The results of these four stages of research have been analysed to identify some key issues which would seem to contribute to the effectiveness of a talent program. The overall conclusion is that the majority of organisations are still using entirely subjective selection methods for identifying high potentials, and that these methods are extremely susceptible to bias. In fact, there is a clear link between how a leader sees themselves and the criteria they use for identifying high potentials, which results in leaders nominating people who are like them for development programs, causing a lack of intellectual and attitudinal diversity and a potential stagnation of organisational culture. When this is combined with program engagement data, a clear opportunity arises to improve both selection methods in line with organisational strategy and program engagement in order to increase program ROI.

An average talent management program spend for an organisation is just over £200,000. With an average of just 55% of program participants reaching the end of a talent program, and around 42% of participants achieving promotions as a result of talent programs, this represents a significant waste of resources which could be more effectively allocated, if better predictions could be made about program participants.

The implication of these findings is that talent programs risk failing to deliver acceptable ROI and therefore organisations may fail to justify funding future leadership development programs. Furthermore, the bias inherent in the most common selection methods can leave the organisational culture exposed to rapid change in external market forces. With some straightforward changes, these issues can be addressed, and program design and management can enable talent programs to develop the future leaders who are critical in delivering future organisational strategy.

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2   Methodology

The research approach was delivered in four stages.

The first stage was based on direct observations of talent management programs over the past 15 years. The same phenomenon was observed in all of these, in that regardless of the program design or system used to select participants, a predictable pattern of engagement emerges, ranging from highly engaged to highly disengaged.

For the second stage, interview respondents were drawn from an overall group of around 100 people who have taken part in talent programs over the last 4 years, plus managers in their organisations and external recruiters. 76 leaders were interviewed to understand how they identify 'high potential' future leaders in their teams.

Third stage data was gathered using an online questionnaire which aimed to identify the prevalence of formal talent management programs in today's organisations, along with the typical spend and efficacy. 31 respondents provided data.

From the patterns identified in this first set of qualitative data, the fourth stage was an online questionnaire which was used to collect quantitative data to determine the relevance and impact of findings from the first stage. This questionnaire was promoted through social media networks and contacts, a total of around 3,000 people, and the final sample size was 316.

The aim of this fourth questionnaire was to identify any correlation between the subjective qualities of leadership and the self-perception of leaders making recommendations for 'high potential' talent management program candidates. In short, did the respondents apply any objective criteria to the selection process, and if not, was the process subject to individual bias.

2.1   Organisational profiles

A variety of organisations were observed during stage one of this research, including:

- A global defence, mining and aviation contractor based in the UK

- A global specialist in industrial automation based in the USA

- A global, US based manufacturer of products for engineering, entertainment and F&B

- A UK based national specialist retailer/wholesaler

- A UK based national convenience retailer

- A Middle East & Asia based specialist retailer

The interviews for stage 2 were largely carried out with the US based global industrial automation manufacturer, using senior managers in the Asia Pacific and Latin America regions as well as the US headquarters. The managers represented nationalities both within and outside of those regions.

The surveys in stages 3 and 4 were open to any respondents and do not focus on any particular organisation or sector.

3   Research findings

As previously mentioned, the same phenomenon was observed in a number of talent management programs over the past 15 years, in that regardless of the program design or system used to select participants, a predictable pattern of engagement emerges, ranging from highly engaged to highly disengaged, as illustrated in Appendix 12.1, section 12.1.2. The critical issue is that participation in these programs was largely voluntary, which raises the question of why an employee, identified as a 'high potential' would choose to join a talent management program and then not actively participate in the activities provided.

The contribution of leadership development must be considered within the context of overall talent development, because development cannot only focus on today's leaders, it must also prepare tomorrow's. Stewart (2011), defined 'talent' as "High performers identified as the future leaders (HIPOs)". Leadership development can be seen as an ongoing capacity management activity in line with Garavan's definition (Garavan et al, 2009 and also "the systematic … development, engagement/retention and deployment of those individuals with high potential" (Tansley, 2007).

Torraco and Swanson observed that strategic HRD is not only about implementing strategy, but also about "shaping future strategy and enabling organisations to take full advantage of emergent business strategies" (Torraco and Swanson, 1995). Talent management could be regarded as part of delivering that future strategy.

3.1   Subjective selection

Based on research carried out for this project, the most common method used by organisations for selection of 'high potentials' is on the basis personal recommendations, either from their line managers, or based on the review of a group of operational leaders and HR managers. It has been observed that where psychometric instruments or other similar assessment tools are used, these are positioned as a second stage of the selection process, with the personal recommendations coming first. This seems to be based partly on the feasibility of using such instruments with all staff, and partly on the lack of any meaningful points of reference for the use of such tools in talent selection.

The stage 1 observations suggest that the lack of engagement in the talent development process could be related to ineffective selection methods, and the stage 3 data suggests that many organisations are still relying on subjective selection methods. Whilst this is not necessarily a bad thing, it must be taken in context of the return on investment of talent programs. With the average program spend of around £200,000, it is clearly in the best interests of the organisation to apply these resources to the people who will deliver the best organisational outcomes.

3.2   A sequence of subjective errors

The overall sequence of events appears to be as follows:

1. A leader forms an opinion of who to recommend for a talent program based on personal preference and identification of traits that they share with the program candidate (Berscheid and Walster, 1969, Byrne, 1971, Harvey, 1997, Hoffrage, 2004 and Cialdini, 2016).

2. Having formed an opinion about who constitutes a 'high potential', the leaders then defend this opinion, despite any counter-evidence from the person's program engagement or their job KPIs (Festinger et al, 1956, Cialdini, 2016).

3. HR managers who design and organise such programs continue to use subjective selection methods, despite research evidence and their own experience and knowledge of best practice, possibly in order to maintain political relationships with organisational leaders.

4. By focusing on anecdotal evidence and program outcomes for the minority of highly engaged participants, the HR managers imply that the program has been a great success (Wason, 1960).

5. The same individual biases and subjective selection methods then persist for the next talent program.

3.3   Lack of control comparisons

In point 4 above, it is also important to note that during none of the programs observed did HR managers conduct any control-group experiments. Where program participants achieved promotions during the time frame of the program, this was causally attributed to the success of the program without considering the possibility that these people, being highly engaged, would have achieved promotions anyway. It seems possible that the program accelerated their promotion due to the 'halo effect' (Thorndike, 1920) of being recognised as a high potential rather than because of significant program contribution to their personal development.

Based on feedback from program participants, there is no doubt that the highly engaged participants enjoyed it immensely and found it valuable, but the point must be considered that what they gained from the program, as valuable as they found it, was not the direct cause of their promotion.

3.4   Attractiveness begets leadership

An extract from Wikipedia (2018) is particularly relevant in explaining the connection between attractiveness or familiarity and expectations of a person's leadership capability.

"A study by Verhulst, Lodge & Lavine (2010) found that attractiveness and familiarity are strong predictors of decisions regarding who is put in a position of leadership. Judgments made following one-second exposures to side-by-side photos of two US congressional candidates were reasonably predictive of election outcomes. Attractiveness and familiarity were

correlated with competence in this study. Candidates who appeared more attractive and familiar were also seen as more competent and were found more likely to be elected.

Similar studies (Palmer & Peterson 2012) found that even when taking factual knowledge into account, candidates who were rated as more attractive were still perceived as more knowledgeable. These results suggest that the halo effect greatly impacts how individuals perceive political knowledge and it demonstrates the powerful influence of the halo effect in politics."

The data produced by the stage 4 questionnaire seems to confirm the biases discussed here. Whilst this should not be surprising, the important point to observe is the extent to which these issues are prevalent in organisations, even a century after these psychological phenomena were first documented.
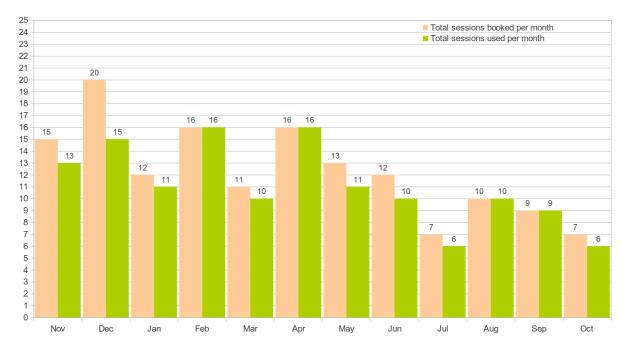
3.5   Maintaining the status quo

An alternative view would be that the very nature of succession planning presupposes that a leader hands their legacy over to a direct replacement, and the subjective selection methods identified in this research would be an efficient way to achieve that. The selection and development systems discussed here would be an effective way to maintain an organisational 'status quo', which at times of economic and political stability may be appropriate. However, market forces in a capitalist economy will always exert pressure on organisations to innovate and improve, which in turn presupposes ongoing change.

3.6   Stage 1 Observations

As previously mentioned, direct observations of talent management program participants over the past 15 years seems to have revealed a consistent pattern of program engagement.

The following bar chart shows the number of participants engaging in coaching sessions over the course of a 12 month talent program.
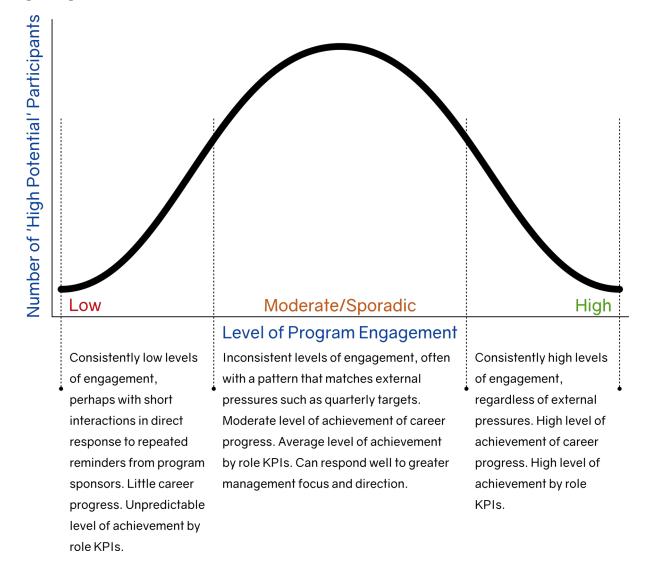
A clear pattern of engagement can be extrapolated from this data, wherein the minimum and maximum chart values correlate with the number of actively engaged participants, and the variation from month to month exactly matches the organisation's quarterly financial reporting periods.

What this raw data demonstrates is that in any month, 7 out of 25 participants (28%) almost never engage, 6 out of 25 participants (24%) almost always engage, and the remaining 10 participants (40%) will engage when they are not under pressure to hit quarterly targets, and their engagement will drop as their priorities shift throughout the quarter. Two participants (8%) left the organisation during the time that the program was running. These figures are typical of all of the similar programs directly observed.

3.6.1 Engagement distribution

The following bell curve illustrates the distribution of these three types of talent program participants.

Number of 'High Potential' Participants

Low   Moderate/Sporadic   High

Level of Program Engagement

Consistently low levels of engagement, perhaps with short interactions in direct response to repeated reminders from program sponsors. Little career progress. Unpredictable level of achievement by role KPIs.

Inconsistent levels of engagement, often with a pattern that matches external pressures such as quarterly targets. Moderate level of achievement of career progress. Average level of achievement by role KPIs. Can respond well to greater management focus and direction.

Consistently high levels of engagement, regardless of external pressures. High level of achievement of career progress. High level of achievement by role KPIs.

From these initial observations, it can at least be concluded that not all participants enrolled in a high potential talent management program live up to the expectations of program sponsors.

The top quartile of program participants show consistently high levels of engagement, regardless of external pressures. They achieve high level of achievement of career progress and high level of achievement by role KPIs.

The bottom quartile of program participants show consistently low levels of engagement, perhaps with short interactions in direct response to repeated reminders from program sponsors. They exhibit little career progress and unpredictable level of achievement by role KPIs, even though they are still subjectively identified as 'high potentials'.

Perhaps the most interesting group of participants are those in the midline of program engagement. They demonstrate inconsistent levels of engagement, often with a pattern that matches external pressures such as quarterly targets.

With moderate level of achievement of career progress, they exhibit average levels of achievement by role KPIs, and can respond well to greater management focus and direction.

Talent program observations seem to suggest that with no change to the design of the talent programs, around one quarter of participants will greatly benefit regardless of any other factors because they see the program as an opportunity. These employees would most likely perform will with the right support, even without the talent program, and therefore the incremental value of the program cost must be questioned.

Equally, around one quarter of participants will not benefit from the program, regardless of any other factors, because they choose not to engage in the process.

This leaves a majority of 40% of participants who would seem to offer the greatest Return On Investment, by developing partially engaged employees to higher levels of engagement and performance.

3.6.2 Leaders versus followers

Early leadership theories, founded in the realm of industrial psychology, tended to focus on the characteristics and behaviours of leaders, whereas later theories begin to consider the relevance of followers and the situational nature of leadership (Bolden, R. et al., 2003). Bass (2010) proposes the 'transformational' model of leadership, in which the leader is not just someone with a vision who walks ahead of the group, the leader's primary focus is on their relationship with their team, in which motivation and productivity result from the team's ownership of the task. This contrasts sharply with the old 'command and control' leadership style (Theory X), based on the belief that people do not want to work and must be controlled in order to produce output (McGregor, 1960).

For leadership effectiveness to be relative to the application of skills within an environment or situation, the leader must be able to learn new skills in order to maintain their leadership effectiveness. This points to the conclusion that all leadership skills must be learned, because the leader will continually find themselves in new situations as the business environment evolves.

3.6.3 Situational leadership

Much academic theory supports the situational view. The Managerial Grid Model created by Blake and Mouton (1964) identifies five leadership styles based on the leader's concern for people versus production. Fiedler's (1967) situational contingency theory proposes that group effectiveness depends on the match between a leader's style and the nature of the situation. Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership (1977) describes four types of management behaviour, based on two dimensions of an employee's competence and maturity. Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973) also theorised that the most effective manager could choose the style most appropriate to the situation.

If leadership is an emergent property of a social group (Curral et al, 2016) then leadership qualities are indeed innate, and would emerge naturally in any group situation. Research into engagement and productivity would also support this view (Blomme et al, 2015).

3.6.4 Categories of leadership behaviour

Many leadership models such as Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973) and Mintzberg (1971) abstract leadership behaviours into more categorical descriptions, such as Mintzberg's 'Figurehead' or 'Negotiator', making it more difficult to correlate the behavioural characteristics from this project's research to those categories, and this in turn presupposes that there are different 'types' of leaders, each with a distinctive set of behaviours. For this research, respondents were not asked to refer to a particular type of leader; only to consider a type of person who they would regard as a leader, independent of context. This would seem closer to Curral's (2016) interpretation as leadership as a property which emerges from the leader-follower relationship, and is not limited to a fixed number of categories.

3.7 Stage 2 observations

Interview respondents were drawn from an overall group of around 100 people who have taken part in talent programs over the last 4 years, plus managers in their organisations and external recruiters. 76 leaders were interviewed to understand how they identify 'high potential' future leaders in their teams, and from their responses, a set of characteristics was created, as follows:

Attention to detail	Passionate
Team player, collaborative, builds relationships	Focus on goals, KPIs
Accountability, integrity	Fast to decide and act
Alignment, customer focus	Creative
Open, approachable, good listener	Good communication
Business knowledge	Time management, multitasking
Strength, persistence, flexibility	Personal learning
Delegate, develop your team	Cultural adaptation

Decisive, analytical   Healthy

Whilst all of these characteristics appear to be 'positive', not all of them can be said to be universally accepted leadership traits or behaviours. There must be some degree of subjectivity in this list, and this cannot be regarded as any definitive list of what a person must demonstrate in order to be seen as a leader. What is missing from the majority of these traits is any sense of a relationship with followers, without which a leader has no-one to lead.

3.7.1 Researching the opinions of leaders

Based on discussions with leaders during the first stage of project research, a pattern seemed to emerge within the qualities that a leader looks for when identifying future leaders.

In order to test that pattern, a simple method was built into both the interview and the stage 4 questionnaire as follows.

At the start of the interview, the respondent was asked to list what they saw as the most important qualities of a leader.

The respondent was then asked a number of other questions, some relevant to the study, some not, in order to shift their focus away from the first question.

At the end of the interview, the respondent was asked to list what they saw as the qualities which had enabled them to achieve a leadership position in their career.

In analysing the data, the responses to the first and last questions were compared.

The result of this is that the qualities that a leader looks for when identifying future leaders are the very same qualities that they attribute to themselves.

3.7.2 We like people like us

According to Berscheid and Walster (1969) and Byrne (1971), people are more strongly attracted to others who share similar attitudes, as determined through their interactions and behaviours. People who share similar important attitudes such as home and family are more likely to be attracted to each other than those who share less important attitudes such as preferences for colours or cars.

Sharing similar attitudes suggests that a person is not alone in their beliefs or preferences. If this is the case, then a leader, operating within a high-risk, high-pressure environment would indeed seek out 'like-minded' individuals, particularly as potential successors.

The effect of confirmation bias (Wason, 1960) could reinforce this behaviour, because the biased leader would never suggest someone for promotion who contradicted their attitudes and beliefs, thereby proving that their recommendations are always right, when in reality, almost anyone could succeed in the leadership role because the organisational structure around them supports that.

3.8   Stage 3 observations

In order to create a context for the potential impact of this research on organisations, a questionnaire was created to find out what types of talent management programs are in use.

31 respondents provided data, showing the following:

35.5% of organisations have a formal talent management program, with the following types of organisations responding:
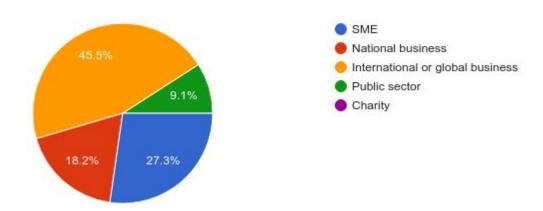
27.3% SME

18.2% National business

45.5% International or global business

9.1% Public sector

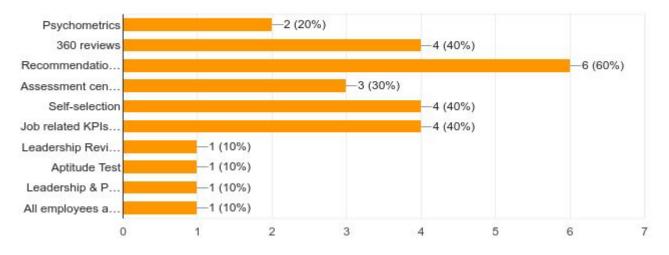# How would you describe your organisation?

3.8.1 The investment in talent management

This survey further indicated that a typical talent management program spend for an organisation is between £10,000 and £600,000 per year, with the average being just over £200,000. An average of 55% of program participants were said to successfully reach the end of a talent program.
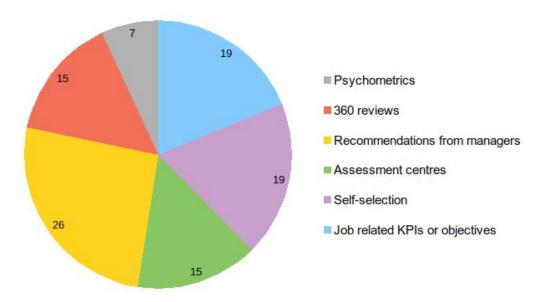
3.8.2 Identifying high potentials

The respondents were asked how high potentials are identified for talent programs, with the following results.

The most common method of identification was personal recommendations, used by 60% of respondents. The bar chart shown above, displaying the raw data, has some overlap as respondents could choose multiple options, and also add their own options even though suitable options were already there. Taking these points into account, the following pie chart shows the relative popularity of different selection methods.

These results could be further grouped as follows:

Objective measures; psychometrics, assessment centres and KPIs: 41%

Subjective measures: Recommendations, 360s and self-selection: 59%

The prevalence of subjective selection methods introduces a significant risk of bias into the process of identifying high potentials.
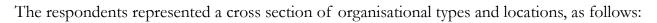
3.8.3 Leadership readiness

Finally, the respondents were asked if their organisation assessed the leadership readiness of talent program participants, and 88.9% responded 'yes'. When asked to estimate the percentage of participants who actually progress in their readiness assessment as a result of the talent program, the average of responses was 42.5%. This figure seems to be skewed by one respondent who claimed that 100% of participants advance in their career readiness. If that one response is removed, the average becomes 23%.
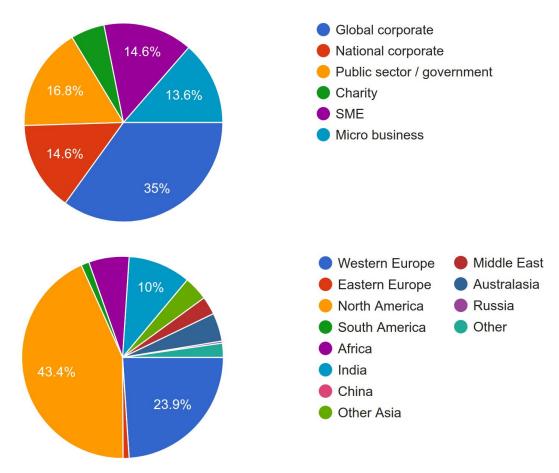
3.8.4 Overall summary

What this data suggests is that the majority of organisations do not formally develop a talent pool, and of those that do, the majority use subjective selection methods, and the typical overall program efficacy has considerable room for improvement.

3.9 Stage 4 observations

The fourth stage of research was an online questionnaire which was used to collect quantitative data to determine the relevance and impact of findings from the first stage. This questionnaire was promoted through social media networks and contacts, a total of around 3,000 people, and the final sample size was 316.

The respondents represented a cross section of organisational types and locations, as follows:

Legend:
- Global corporate
- National corporate
- Public sector / government
- Charity
- SME
- Micro business

Legend:
- Western Europe
- Eastern Europe
- North America
- South America
- Africa
- India
- China
- Other Asia
- Middle East
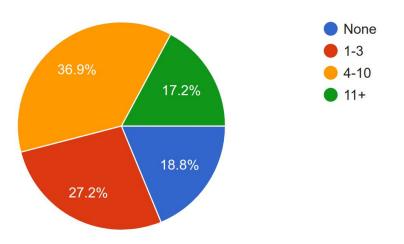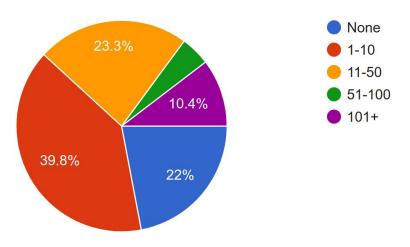- Australasia
- Russia
- Other

3.9.1 Leadership team size

81.2% of respondents were directly responsible for a team, with the number of direct reports as follows.

Counting beyond the first level of direct reports in a respondent's team, the total number of staff in a team was as follows.

3.9.2 Correlating subjective assessments

The aim of this fourth questionnaire was to identify any correlation between the subjective qualities of leadership and the self-perception of leaders making recommendations for 'high potential' talent management program candidates. In short, did the respondents apply any objective criteria to the selection process, and if not, was the process subject to individual bias?
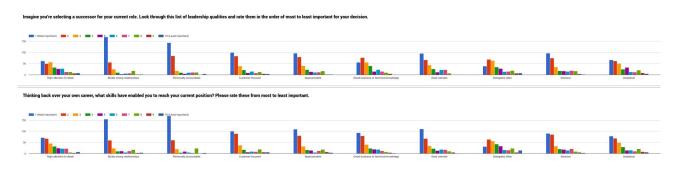
As with the first stage of research, the interview, respondents were asked two questions, with a number of questions in between to ensure they would not directly relate the first and last questions.

The first and last questions asked were:

"Imagine you're selecting a successor for your current role. Look through this list of leadership qualities and rate them in the order of most to least important for your decision."

"Thinking back over your own career, what skills have enabled you to reach your current position? Please rate these from most to least important."

The data produced from these two questions is complex, because respondents were rating a series of 10 leadership qualities in order of importance. Therefore each bar chart below relates to one of these traits, and the coloured bars within each chart show the relative importance. Whilst this representation does not show the detailed results, it offers an immediate visual comparison that shows two traits as being consistently the most important; 'Builds strong relationships' and 'Personally accountable'.

Imagine you're selecting a successor for your current role. Look through this list of leadership qualities and rate them in the order of most to least important for your decision.

Thinking back over your own career, what skills have enabled you to reach your current position? Please rate these from most to least important.

The only leadership quality where the ranking for the first and last questions did not correlate was 'Good business or technical knowledge', and even for this quality, there was only one point of difference in the results. This minor inconsistency could be due to the focus of the organisational culture of different respondents.

This data seems to suggest that there is indeed a direct connection between how a leader perceives themselves and how they make selection decisions for succession planning and talent programs to develop high potentials. Furthermore, when taken in the context of the stage 3 data, it would seem that the majority of organisations are still employing subjective methods of selection, compounding the problem of talent development by stagnating the organisational culture and suppressing diversity in the management hierarchy.

3.10 Analysis of the research

The stage 1 observations suggest that the lack of engagement in the talent development process could be related to ineffective selection methods, and the stage 3 data suggests that many organisations are still relying on subjective selection methods. Whilst this is not necessarily a bad thing, it must be taken in context of the return on investment of talent programs. With the average program spend of around £200,000, it is clearly in the best interests of the organisation to apply these resources to the people who will deliver the best organisational outcomes.

In point 4 in section 4.2 above, it is also important to note that during none of the programs observed did HR managers conduct any control-group experiments, and whilst an intentional control group may raise some ethical concerns, the reality is that organisations do not offer leadership development to all employees, and so some comparison may be possible.

The data produced by the stage 4 questionnaire seems to confirm the biases discussed here. Whilst this should not be surprising, the important point to observe is the extent to which these issues are prevalent in organisations, even a century after these psychological phenomena were first documented.

4   Evaluation of options

The two fundamental issues uncovered appear to be the use of subjective criteria for selecting high potentials, and the lack of engagement in talent development programs.

By simply reversing these issues, the options which arise directly from the research data are as follows:

- Deselect disengaged participants from talent programs

- Do not seek recommendations from line managers for high potentials

- Use objective selection frameworks based on role KPIs and organisational strategy

These options, and some other typical remedies, will now be explored in more detail.

4.1   Deselect participants

The simple solution to a lack of engagement is to deselect the participants who do not engage. Based on direct observations of talent programs, the disengaged participants seem to have their 'own agenda', and so a development program which improves their career prospects within that employer is not necessarily in their interests. Therefore, program resources would be better focused on people who are aligned with corporate strategy, and who see their long term future within that employer.

The downside of this approach is that it can develop a culture where people who do not overtly fit in and support the corporate strategy are sidelined. However, the reality is that, even as program participants and recognised high potentials, they do not engage in the program, and they therefore do not benefit from it. It is possible that explicitly labelling them as high potentials could be counter productive, and in fact students at Aston University are currently working on research into this phenomenon with the support of the author of this report.

Where costs are committed to a talent program at the outset and cannot change based on utilisation, there is no cost advantage to deselecting participants. Conversely, utilisation based pricing can cause service providers to coerce participants into engaging in the program, even if there is no individual benefit to them doing that.

Contract terms could be further reviewed with external program providers to offer pricing reductions for reducing numbers of program participants, as opposed to fixed pricing based on the number of participants selected.

4.1.1 Performance management issues

From a performance management perspective, engagement in the talent programs observed has been voluntary, yet out of all the programs observed, only one nominated participant has ever chosen to not participate. Deselecting disengaged participants can help to create an expectation of exclusivity and high performance in the program, which can be beneficial as it creates a sense of status around selection. However, giving some employees this status and not others can create inequality in teams, which leads to an overall decline in performance.

An alternative could therefore be to permit all employees to self-select, however the potentially higher numbers of participants would drive the use of lower cost delivery methods such as e-learning, reducing the overall effectiveness of the program.

4.1.2 Offer a range of options

Ultimately, an organisation should offer a wide range of development programs for employees of all levels, interests, motivations and aspirations. Recognising an individual as a 'high potential' is, in itself, divisive, and HR professionals might seek a more egalitarian description.

The deselection of participants might not be seen as politically viable, because senior managers have made those recommendations, and for some organisations, it may be preferable to keep disengaged participants in a talent program than to risk criticism of the senior manager's recommendation.

4.1.3 Performance anxiety

Deselection can also put pressure on participants who then feel that they need to 'perform' otherwise they will be removed from the program. Where a talent program is positioned as a special event, based on McKinsey & Co's definition of talent (Chambers et al, 1998), and participants are regarded as special individuals, deselection could also have a greater demotivating effect which neutralises the benefits of the program. Therefore, to consider deselection as an option, the talent program must be positioned differently, in line with Collings and Minbaeva's (2013) broader definition, and the deselection process must be positioned, not as a punishment, but as an offer to not put the participant under pressure to develop their career at that point in time, and that the participant is free to rejoin a future program if they wish.

Ultimately, lack of engagement in a program is a form of passive deselection, and perhaps this option offers the opportunity to focus on the most engaged participants whilst accepting a level of attrition.

4.2   Use objective selection frameworks

Objective selection methods would seem to offer an obvious solution to the problem of subjective selection, however the practical reality is not so straightforward. In order to use an objective framework, the correct framework must first be selected, and that is subject to the same subjective bias as the candidate selection process itself. It has been observed that business leaders disagree over the nature of leadership to such an extent that HR managers find it easier to not seek consensus in this regard, yet to incorporate definitions of leadership that everyone is happy with makes the framework so broad as to be useless in identifying high potentials.

Many external organisations have attempted to define leadership through off-the-shelf assessment tools, and even general purpose psychometric tools have been promoted for this purpose. However, without knowing what defines an organisation's leaders today, these tools are useless. Even if today's leaders were used to create a template, it cannot be guaranteed that these are the best leaders for tomorrow. With so many definitions of leaders and leadership behaviour, the only logical conclusion is that no-one can define leadership independently of the organisational environment.

4.2.1 Ever-changing selection criteria

Many global organisations operate in a fast moving environment, and in a globalised network of operating divisions, where change is a constant reaction to market forces which differ greatly from one country to the next. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to quantify what makes a 'future leader' in order to create an objective framework. Any analysis based on deliberate strategy would necessarily be out of date by the time it was finalised, and a framework based on an emergent strategy would necessarily be reactive and unpredictable, with a significantly subjective selection process. Responsiveness to change might therefore be one of the most valuable selection criteria.

Perhaps the most realistic mechanism is therefore to formalise the subjective process, and increase the links between the recommender and the participant, to create a formal mentoring or succession planning process. With greater accountability and responsibility on the part of the recommending manager, their selection criteria may change.

4.3 Provide additional support for participants

If the talent program is viewed as a developmental program, and given the political issues mentioned above, program sponsors may want to give extra support to help participants make time and commit to the process, essentially 'spoon feeding' the program. If one of the essential qualities of a leader is personal accountability, then the provision of greater support may be counter-productive.

Instead, support could be offered to participants' managers, to free up time to enable participants to commit more fully to the program.

The operational targets or participants and their managers can pose a challenge here. Encouraging managers to 'ease off' for the duration of the program would unfairly favour program participants over their colleagues, however to expect participants to give additional discretionary effort, or study in their own time, is equally unfair. Therefore, participation in a talent program would need to be integrated into a person's role objectives, so that time was made available for study and project work without any overall imbalance being introduced into team performance.

4.4 Allow self-selection

One organisation that responded to the stage 4 survey stated that all employees have the opportunity to nominate themselves for talent programs. If the requirements of the program are sufficiently well communicated beforehand in terms of the workload and expected outcomes, then this could be a viable option, alongside other selection methods. This would enable people who were willing to put in the work but who had previously not been recognised by senior managers as being high potentials.

This approach would offer an opportunity to employees who are good performers with untapped potential who are not accustomed to self-promotion or political networking.

A focus on limited results can mask the solid performance of some employees across a range of unmeasured attributes, and to give them at least the perception that they could engage in an accelerated development process could have a positive effect on their morale and overall work engagement.

The number of applicants would need to be balanced against program cost in order to maintain high quality program delivery, without reducing the investment per participant, as this would adversely affect program deliverables, neutralising the benefits of the program.

4.5   Do nothing

The 'do nothing' option must always be considered. In this case, what is the cost of the current situation, and are the issues highlighted adversely affecting organisational performance? The answer from many HR managers is that an amount of attrition and disengagement is expected in all development programs, and therefore the feeling that some action is being taken to develop future leaders is better than doing nothing. As previously mentioned, without controlled experiment, there is no way to tell if a talent program is significantly more effective than no action, so continuing with a program which receives at least anecdotally positive feedback is preferable.

5   Conclusions

The data seems to highlight both the problem and an obvious solution – stop using subjective selection methods. However, the solution is not so straightforward. Even 'objective' selection methods are fundamentally subjective, because the criteria used to design the selection method are themselves subjective. Such methods as leadership models, 360 reviews, assessment centres and even psychometric tools therefore offer consistent subjectivity rather than true objectivity.

Leadership models such as Blake and Mouton (1964) or Mintzberg (1971) offer a categorisation of leadership types, but no information on how to identify the most effective leadership type. The most effective leader may be the one who is best aligned with the culture of the organisation, however alignment for today comes at the cost of adaptation to tomorrow's market environment. Many modern leadership commentators cite adaptation to change as one of the most valuable skills of a modern business leader, (Dilts, Deering and Russell, 2002, Reeves and Deimler, 2001, Neubauer, Tarlong and Wade, 2017) but change comes at the cost of stability. Both too little, and too much change are damaging to the organisation.

In the context of this research, either selecting future leaders against a static template or allowing today's leaders to select in their own image leads to a static culture. HR professionals can therefore support diversity by identifying the risk of 'groupthink' (Janis, 1972), not only within a group but in a group as it evolves over time, passing the mantle of leadership to the next generation.

Despite the concept of the 'talent war', hiring external candidates cannot be a viable solution. Firstly, it further erodes organisational culture by bringing in leaders from very different environments, and secondly, there is a higher cost of recruitment.

If an organisation is large enough, managers could be encouraged to move diagonally for promotions rather than linearly up the 'management line'.

Leadership development should, in any case, take place within the broader organisational strategy. Mintzberg and Waters (1985) indicates that a balance of both deliberate and emergent strategies would be most effective in helping an organisation to achieve its goals whilst still responding to market forces, and this approach can be reflected in the organisation's approach to leadership development. After all, today's high potentials are tomorrow's leaders, tasked with executing that strategy.

The focus of talent programs can change to support this. Instead of aiming to develop all program participants, the program can aim to create business simulations through real projects, job rotations and role secondments. By simulating the future positions that candidates might find themselves in, their true performance can be more accurately measured.

The overall practical recommendations for HR professionals which can be concluded from this report are as follows:

1. Do not rely solely on line managers to recommend staff for talent development – also have some cross-checking or KPI based assessment

2. Create a clear frame of reference for what constitutes a 'high potential' before making any selections for a talent management program

3. Shift the focus of talent management programs from development to assessment

4. Shift the focus of talent development from training to simulation of future senior roles

5. Encourage promotions across an organisational hierarchy in diagonal rather than linear directions

6. Use HR systems to track the long term career performance of high potentials versus other employees to support better-informed selection decisions

6   Research methods

6.1   Qualitative research

According to Saunders etc al (2012), "Qualitative research is associated with an interpretive philosophy .... because researchers need to make sense of the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed about the phenomenon being studied."

In order to address some of these issues, the qualitative data gathered is based on a narrow set of questions which in turn are derived from the initial hypothesis. This introduces the risk of confirmation bias (Wason, 1960), so it has been very important to carefully consider any responses which contradict that hypothesis, and to re-evaluate the hypothesis where necessary.

The individual interviews used to collect qualitative data have a number of advantages and disadvantages. For the purposes of this project, it seems that the most relevant issue affecting the data is interviewer bias. Where respondents give a wide range of answers, it can be difficult to group those answers to form the basis for the next stage of research without interpreting and therefore influencing what the respondents said.

The qualitative interviews were be carried out either by telephone or face to face where possible, and responses were collated in a spreadsheet.

6.2   Quantitative research

According to Saunders etc al (2012), "Quantitative research is generally associated with positivism, especially when used with predetermined and highly structured data collection techniques. However, a distinction needs to be drawn between data about the attributes of people, organisations or other things and data based on opinions, sometimes referred to as 'qualitative' numbers. In this way, some survey research, whilst conducted quantitatively, may be seen to fit partly within an interpretivist philosophy."

With quantitative research, the numbers of participants conforming to certain arbitrary distinctions can be measured, but the reasons why they behave or respond in those ways is less obvious.

A simple way to gather quantitative data, especially given the geographic spread of participants, is using a questionnaire, which has both advantages and disadvantages.

The quantitative questionnaire was delivered online using Google forms, which can be used to create complex branching questionnaires and store the data automatically in a spreadsheet. The collection and analysis of quantitative data is simple, however the response rates are unpredictable and the responses are necessarily limited by the questions asked.

6.3   Secondary research

The literature review section explores a number of sources in order to better position this research within the context of talent management and development. In addition to this, various existing surveys and research projects have been explored to understand the scale of the talent management and leadership development industry and explore some of the common issues, These sources are detailed in the References section.

6.4   Mixed methods

Because of the advantages and limitations of both qualitative and quantitative methods, a mixed approach has been used which is intended to overcome some of these challenges.

6.5   Inductive reasoning

The overall approach to gathering and interpreting data in this project could be said to be inductive, according to Saunders et al (2012). Based on observations of common patterns in a number of talent programs, a phenomenon has been identified and explored using the methods already outlined. From this, themes and patterns have been used to create a conceptual framework, from which practical conclusions and actions have been taken.

Whilst the mixed method, inductive approach has limitations, the greatest constraint on the research output will be the likely sample size, which will be large enough to show an interesting cross section of different national and organisational cultures, but too small to be statistically valid. However, as a preliminary investigation into an issue which plagues many corporate talent programs, the approach will provide a useful set of clues for any future investigation.

6.6   Ethical considerations

In the first and second stages of the research, no personally identifying details are recorded for either the observations or interviews in order to protect against any ethical issues and to maintain the confidentiality that is explicitly part of the coaching component of the talent programs observed.

No ethical issues are foreseen in the third and fourth stage of the research because the questionnaire does not require respondents to enter any identifying details. In the first stage, where individual interviews are being used, the questions asked do not appear to pose any ethical issues, however if any respondent is unwilling to participate or answer any particular questions then that is entirely their choice, and the data collected would not be attributed to any individual.

The survey web page which respondents would visit clearly states the nature of the survey and the usage of the data:

"I am conducting research into talent programs.

I'd like to hear from organisations who have a defined, annual graduate or talent program, where you take a group of identified 'high potential' candidates and develop them over the course of a year, in readiness for accelerated promotion to senior positions.

You can submit your data anonymously. Your responses will form part of an overall analysis of the data collected which will help me to understand the nature of corporate talent programs that are being delivered. No responses will be singled out or attributed to any individual."

7 Literature review

The focus of this literature is around the definition of talent, which is the foundation for the talent management programs investigated for this research. There are two broad schools of thought here, each with some merits which must be balanced to provide a context for the findings and recommendations to follow.

7.1 Talent management

Talent Management is a commonly used phrase amongst HR professionals, gaining popularity in general reference to the recruitment and placement of employees in organisations in a corporate world increasingly focused on profits. Today, professionals and business leaders are not sure whether to use 'talent' to refer to some special personnel with unique characteristics or as a blanket description for the total workforce.

The difficulty arising from the word talent is part of the academic debate about how best to manage 'talent'. In this review, literature will be reviewed to reveal the underlying views on talent management and what the modern approach in the field means to an organisation. To some extent, the importance of language use in the definition will be examined in relation to an organisation and how best this has contributed or not to the success of Human Resource Management.

7.2 Talent as a specialised resource

Roper (2015) observes that the success of a CEO in the business environment has become a competitive differentiator and key skill required for success. Accordingly, retaining talents and skills in an organisation is an important focus of talent development, and the phrase 'the talent war' has entered HR language, to denote the competition between organisations to attract and retain talented individuals. Academics seem to fall into two camps regarding the talent war.

On one side, a report from McKinsey & Co (Chambers et al, 1998) explains that talent in an organisation has come to refer to the best and critical positions that contribute to high performance, stating that "better talent is worth fighting for". In this view, senior positions have come to be associated with talent, distinct from the rest of the employees. The organisation sends a message that the senior positions are most important and are critical to the success of the organisation, compared to standard or junior positions. Employees working in the 'lower' levels aspire to become seniors or directors in the organisation. It might be noted that McKinsey & CO are not without bias in this matter, as creating the concept of a talent war can serve as part of their employer branding.

Stewart (2011), defined 'talent' as "High performers identified as the future leaders (HIPOs)"

Tansley et al (2007) Describes talent management as "the systematic … development, engagement/retention and deployment of those individuals with high potential", and Torraco & Swanson(1995) discuss the role of strategic HRD in not only implementing strategy, but also about "shaping future strategy and enabling organisations to take full advantage of emergent business strategies". Talent management and development must be part of this future strategic advantage.

The fundamental problem with any prediction of potential is that it is an attempt to predict specific future behaviours in a different context to the one that the individual is currently performing in. Viewing talent as a specialised resource is dependent on forming accurate predictions of future performance, which is inherently unreliable.

7.3   Talent as a generalised human resource

In the second view, Collings and Minbaeva (2013) suggest that talent management revolves around an understanding of the importance of structural arrangement, resources and motivation of the total workforce. To this group, talent management is not about the best senior people, often recruited from external sources, but rather a process of engaging with and developing in-house high potentials such as employees who are already outperforming their role KPIs.

A number of researchers agree with the second group's view in that many organisations fail to adequately develop in-house talent. Hirsh and Campbell (2014) suggest that language and communication around talent management makes the difference, noting that where organisations are preoccupied with talent management represented by a senior executive sourced externally, it follows that the current workforce feels deprived, rejected and unsupported. What this means is the loss of such personnel whose strength and skills have not been tested, who then take with them significant tacit knowledge, potentially to competitors.

Collings and Minbaeva (2013) have the view that the whole workforce is what comprises the talent of an organisation. In relation to this view, they make an observation that talent is to be nurtured and developed in the entire present workforce as opposed to the idea of external sourcing. Hence, an organisation has the option to make the workforce feel appreciated, potentially revealing higher levels of performance.

In a broader view in Subramaniam's (2013) study, talent management has been referred to by researchers as comprising of persons with high skills and special abilities or knowledge. In this view, writers such as Iles et al (2010) and Capelli (2008) believe that talent management is almost a new way of referring to HRM in organisations. Accordingly, talent management incorporates all the tools of HRM in terms of managing talent, only that the former is focused on talented people. The focus on talent management creates a process for developing people to make a talent pool as opposed to a work force.

Boston Consulting Group (Personnel Today, 2007) lists talent management as the greatest challenge facing organisations, and Pruis (2011) notes that in the face of economic downturn and tough financial conditions in the global business world, an organisation should focus on efficiency to achieve its goals. In the face of such challenges, a talented workforce can help an organisation to focus on strategic plans and deliver the right skills, abilities, behaviours and relationships within the organisation's ethics and values.

Fernandez-Araoz (2014) suggests that the modern business environment has created this view, where business cycles and economies are constantly changing . The technology driven business world presents new demands to organisations, driving the need for employees who can plan, execute and implement strategies in relation to these business aspects. Galagan (2015) summarises by suggesting that the trends in talent management therefore revolve around seeking and keeping exceptional, knowledgeable, able and young talents that can keep pace with

the forces, pressures and future expectations of a fast changing world for longer periods of time.

An inclusive talent pool is a powerful asset for any organisation. To make this count, Turner and Kalman (2014) observe that organisations must not only consider the needs of the workforce but must invest in resources to develop available talents that in turn produce the best products and services offered. Employees bring different talents into an organisation and therefore, according to Frost and Kalman (2016), talent management should be an inclusive agenda that seeks to deal with diversity in the work place, in the business world and the organisation's policies and future plans.

The drawback of this inclusive approach to defining talent is that it may not enable organisations to differentiate their provision of development programs. The hierarchical structure of many organisations means that, whilst anyone might be capable of becoming a senior management, only a minority actually will, and ultimately, development resources have to be focused where the ROI will be greatest.

7.4 Conclusions

An organisation that recognises the right definition and blend of what talent management means to its structure and internal relationships can deliver success. Whilst talent management may be the newest 'war front' for business performance and success, it is worth noting that when defined and applied wrongly, it can present a risk to the achievement of organisational objectives, where biased talent selection can lead to more generalised employee disengagement.

Therefore the fundamental academic debate is over whether talented employees are special and unique, or whether the term 'talent' potentially applies to all employees, and 'talent management' simply a modern phrase used to describe 'Human Resource Development'.

This research project is based on the selection of high potentials within an overall talent management strategy, and so incorporates elements of both of these definitions.

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