
Talented employees' identification in public organization in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This research aims at investigating talented employee identification in public organization in the context of Saudi Arabia. In order to achieve the research aim, the researcher has conducted semi- structured interview with 18 human resource managers in public organizations. Following the analysing the result, this paper demonstrates that public organizations need to improve its system and policies regarding talented employee identification.

Keywords: talented employees, talent, talent management, public organization, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Organisations are facing a number of talent management (TM) issues across the globe, including in Europe and North America (Bhatnagar, 2012). These challenges are particularly formidable for new and young managers in different organizations and different parts of the world. Naumann and Bennett (2000) conclude that businesses need to ensure focus on intentions concerning the methods implemented in achieving TM results. Accordingly, there is also a need to ensure that information is provided relating to the effects of TM practices on organisational justice perspectives, causing positive employee outcomes and helping to achieve positive organisational results. This is especially important when we acknowledge that TM practices have a more significant effect when staff are treated fairly, rather than a select few being subjected to preferential treatment for no sound reason. With the new government in Saudi Arabia, huge attention was given to talented employees in both the government and private organization in Saudi; accordingly, this research aims at investigating talented employees' identification in the public organization in Saudi Arabia. In order to achieve this aim, this paper firstly examines the concept of talent management and its identification. Following this literature, I introduce research methodology and findings of this research. Then, I discuss the findings and conclude with a conclusion and suggestions for future research.

2. Talent and talent management

One of the challenges researchers may face in their research on TM relates to lack of agreement about the meaning of TM among academic researchers. Lack of consensus on the definition of talent may have a negative impact on the implementation of TM among managers and leaders (Venkateswaran.2012). Tansley et al. (2006) argue that HR managers need to understand how they define talent and who they think are talented. Lewis and Heckman (2006) believe that it is hard to find an exact definition of TM because of the many assumptions surrounding the phrase, due to the work of previous authors. However, in their review paper, they contend that there are three different perspectives on TM: firstly, TM can be defined as the collection of human resource management department practices, such as selection, development and career management. Secondly, TM is focused on a talent pool and thus limited to a small number of employees. Thirdly, it focuses on talent generally. They

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added that TM still lacks a completely satisfactory definition.

The awareness of the need for talented employees has increased amongst organisations around the world, with Ready et al. (2010) arguing that, according to recent studies, 98% of global businesses have a talented employees list, and deliberately seek and develop their high-potential employees. According to the same study, 93% of these talented employees are promoted faster than other employees. Reem (2014) believes that one of the most challenging parts of TM is putting the right employees in the right place on the right time, so if management makes wrong decisions in this area, there will be a huge price for the organisation to pay. He added that while many organisations use employee performance to assess which employees are talented, organisations should first work to identify performance problems, work with line managers to develop an approach to solve these problems and empower employees to find solutions for these problem. Dries and Pepermans (2008) believe that performance output in organisations can be measured easier than performance input, so businesses should use performance appraisals to identify talented employees.

It has been claimed that the performance criteria used to identify the talent pool are obscure to many employees in terms of what they should and should not do, making the identification of talented employees more difficult (Lynette and Carley, 2010). Opas and Pacapol (2010) believe that the reason for most organisations using performance appraisal to identify talented employees is that HR departments want to avoid the effort of organising a TM programme and the difficulties of measuring individual talent. Repko (2005) states that research on TM has shown that businesses can identify talented employees at an early stage with the company. If organisations succeed in doing this, they will be able to give these employees training and development, getting results faster than if they were late in identifying them. However, the selection of the group of employees for special training and development can be seen as a source of discomfort for managers who are used to the idea of equality and justice for all employees (Opas and Pacapol, 2010).

Martin et al. (2013) identified some significant signs that TM is emerging in the UK Health Service, including the facts that talent is increasingly seen as a strategic resource for the NHS, TM is focusing on leadership and identification of managers who form a recruitment pool for chief executives and clinical directors, while TM is subject to bureaucratic procedures outlining how the leadership pool should be identified and documenting knowledge about these staff members. Cascio and Aguinis (2008) argue that the challenges in talented employee identification are similar to the challenges of measuring job performance, mainly owing to the fact that it is difficult to predict future performance in a new role.

Branham (2005) claims that effective talented employee retention practices started with effective and good hiring and identification practices, where well-motivated and qualified employees stay in organisations for longer periods, while, poor hiring and identification practices can affect organisations in two ways: firstly, new staff members who are mismatched and not a good fit in the firm will leave quickly as they will feel uncomfortable; secondly, experienced and well-trained staff will feel frustrated as new employees keep joining and leaving the business, creating time-related costs of training new staff, affecting performance. McCall (1994) supports this argument by stating that careful selection and identification of talented managers from international businesses has a huge impact on organisational performance.

3. Research Methodology

When a study seeks to gain insight into an issue from subjects' perspectives, use of social and organisational qualitative data will be useful (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994). Sarantakos (2005), among others, contends that the qualitative approach is centred on identifying and gaining an understanding of person-centred experiences in an under-examined area. Kvale (2007) views a qualitative interview as a data collection method concerned with gathering descriptions relating to the real world of interviewees with regard to improving understanding. The use of interviews is a popular, much-used method for gathering data. Accordingly, this research adopt qualitative interview as a tool for data collection. 18 human resource managers in public

organizations were interviewed, the interview last between 45 and 60 mints. Qualitative content analysis is considered appropriate to this research as it conserves most of the meaning provided by respondents. As noted by Darke et al. (1998), qualitative content analysis enables documents, interviews and observational notes to be explained, drawing links across all in an effort to gain wide understanding of the issue. In this research, a qualitative content analysis approach was chosen with a view to improving understanding of the issue under examination and to describe the subjects' behaviours and beliefs

4. Findings and Discussion

The researcher asked questions related to the processes and procedures that the organisations have in place to identify talented employees. Moreover, it was necessary to explore the sources that the organisations use to recruit talented employees and the difficulties that they face in term of talent identification. There was agreement about the procedure adopted by public sector organisations in assessing and identifying talented employees with the organisation. The only tool used was the annual performance assessment:

'As I mentioned earlier, we do not have any system or systems to identify and define talented employees. The only thing that exists is our job evaluation, in which the manager evaluates the employee each year to specific criteria and information. This assessment perhaps helps to identify and motivate talented employees and also helps their supervisors' in term of retention and take care of them. But this assessment is an annual assessment. This is considered a long time to evaluate employees. The results are better if the employee himself knows the criteria and if the institution assists the employee in the development of his weaknesses. This evaluation includes basic qualifications and extra, beneficial qualifications. It also includes basic skills, such as computer skills and the ability to deal with reviewers and colleagues.' (Male HR Manager, middle 40s)

However, this tool (the annual performance assessment) was criticised by many of the interviewees as inaccurate and not very useful in identifying talented employees. For instance, it may be subject to discrimination and subjective judgement. For example:

'Performance assessment is on an annual basis, which has become a boring routine only. There is no impact of this assessment on the employees' position, it does not affect it at all, but there may be delay in the upgrade perhaps - only six months after that all staff will be in the same ranks.' (Male HR Manager, early 40s)

In term of the challenges that managers face when they attempt to identify talented employees, some of the interviewees claimed that public roles and policies for appointing new employees are huge challenges for them, so they would like more empowerment in terms of selecting and appointing new employees. Another interviewee pointed out that:

'The level of empowerment that managers give to their employees can be considered a challenge because some managers do not allow their employees – especially new employees- to do huge tasks unless they have known those employees for a long time, so it can be easily noticed that, in each organisation, managers trust some employees more than others.'

(Male HR manager, early 50s)

One of the interviewees argued that:

'Identifying talented employees takes a long time. Because of this, almost all employees when they start new jobs will be in the highest level of their power; however, this power may decrease within a few months unless he or she is a talented employee.' (Male HR manager, late 40s)

In regard to the sharing of the talented employees' identification process between the organisation and its employees, the interviewees agreed that, in public sector organisations, human resource managers usually use the annual assessment as a tool for selecting and identifying talented employees, and when new employees arrive, the human resources department usually gives them workshops that are related to what they need. Today, these workshops are often related to how to be talented employees:

'I can assure you that each employee is well aware of the tool we are using to identify and assess employees. The government policies are clear and well explained in regard to this issue; however, in regard to talented employees, I have to admit: it is a new system, and there is no government policy explaining the process of talented employees' identification, meaning almost all public organisations are using annual assessment as a tool for this job. In addition, if the human resources department introduces new tools, they must make sure that all employees in the organisation are well aware of these policies, so I am confident that our employees understand the process and policies used to identify talented employees.' (Male HR manager, early 40s)

Regarding fairness, the interviewees commented that there are special committees in each organisation. These committees are responsible for dealing with employees' annual assessments, including complaints about the assessments. Moreover, almost all of the interviewees agreed that it is very important for human resource managers to explain to their employees the criteria used to assess them. Also, they must inform their employees when they make any changes to these criteria.

'To ensure fairness, we have an independent committee. The task of this committee is to receive and evaluate complaints from employees who believe they have been misjudged. This committee examines the complaint and then makes the decision that seems most appropriate. Moreover, as we are government employees, the civil service system requires the direct manager to notify the employee about the employee's annual performance assessment result and to allow the employee to appeal and object to the result if they are not happy. By applying this system, we can ensure fairness to the maximum level possible.' (Male HR manager, late 30s)

When the interviewees were asked about how new employees come to know the assessment criteria, it was agreed that this is the human resource department's responsibility:

'The head of the department of human resources has to meet new

employees at the beginning of their careers and explain all the regulations that relate to the life of the new employee. Part of what is explained is the system of evaluating employees, which is the annual performance assessment. Thus, all employees have knowledge of the staff assessment system.’ (Male HR manager, early 50s)

On the subject of unfairness, some of the interviewees had received complaints from employees about their assessments. These complaints were a mix of true and untrue:

‘We have received complaints about the lack of fairness. The special employee committee receives complaints relating to the assessment of job performance. When we receive a complaint, we go back to the sources of the employee evaluation. We also call the head of the employee’s department. Notably, we find that, in some cases, there was unfairness. But, in many cases, we find that the original assessment was accurate.’ (Male HR manager, middle 50s)

The majority of the interviewees claimed that networking (*wasta*) is playing a huge role in the selection of talented employees, which may affect the level of fairness.

‘Fairness with humans is very difficult because we have a lot of preferences, favouritism, social connections and so on. Sometimes, talented employees need to be dealt with carefully. The greatest incentive for employees is fairness among staff in the benefits granted to them. If an employee feels hurt, he will have decreased motivation and performance. Fairness motivates the employee’s appreciation and protection of his rights, attesting the importance of a fair work environment.’ (Male HR manager, early 40s)

One of the interviewees clearly stated that the level of fairness in terms of talented employees’ identification would not be met as there was no clear government policy describing and explaining talented employee identification, meaning the government needed to act immediately in order to ensure that all employees are happy and satisfied regarding the level of justice and fairness in regard to talented employee identification:

‘I am sure that every human resource department manager is doing their best to be as far as they can; however, with missing policies and rules about TM in the organisation, the level of justice and fairness will be questionable, and there may be some conflict between the employees and the organisation in regard to talented employees. This conflict for sure will affect the organisation’s performance, so it is the government’s responsibility to introduce new policies and roles, which clearly deal with the TM system in order to increase organisations’ performance and save managers’ and employees’ time, which would be directed towards dealing with conflicts on various practical issues. If the government does not do this, I am sure we will face a big problem, especially with new, young and well-educated employees, and for sure organisations will lose their best employees.’ (Male HR manager, early 50s)

Having analysed the data, it is very clear that talent identification was a big challenge for the public sector organisations. The system used by the government clearly does not support the implementation of TM systems. The challenges facing public sector organisations relate to identifying talented employees within organisations and attracting talented employees from outside organisations. Annual assessment is considered as the only way for the government to assess and identify talented employees. There were some complaints from the employees about the fairness of this assessment. In addition, the line managers in the public organisations are in charge of employees' assessments. In public sector organisations, the identification of talented employees can be a challenge for the management team, due to the system and roles of the government. This is consistent with the contention of Reem (2014) that the identification of talented employees is the most challenging part of TM.

In terms of tools for the identification of talented employees, public organisations use performance appraisals. This is consistent with the work of Opas and Pacapol (2010), who argue that most organisations use performance appraisals to identify talented employees because human resource departments want to measure difficult matters like individual talent in the easiest way possible. Annual performance appraisals were criticised by the interviewees as an old way to assess and identify talented employees; they are also based on employees' individual differences. This issue was highlighted in the literature review: Jorge et al. (2013) argue that it is inappropriate for organisations to select talented employees based on their individual differences and organisations should use exclusive approaches in the process of identifying talented employees. The interviewees expressed great concern about personal issues being involved in the identification of talented employees and how some managers could bring injustice to the process. This issue is highlighted by Jorge et al. (2013), who also highlight another issue: self-interest, which could lead to unfairness and injustice among employees. Moreover, the importance of putting the right employees in the right place at the right time was an issue for the human resource managers, as it may affect the organisation's performance. Reem (2014) believes that if the organisation's management team makes any inappropriate decisions related to the identification of talented employees, the organisation will pay a huge cost. Remark et al. (2013) believe that the best solution for public organisations is to remove performance appraisals from the process of identifying talented employees, in order to increase the level of fairness. New tools and methods could be used to assess employees; one of the interviewees suggested adding new criteria to the performance appraisals and conducting assessments more than once per year, to solve any problems as soon as possible.

In addition, one of the interviewees highlighted the importance of allowing employees to contribute to the strategy regarding talented employees, in order to increase the level of fairness in TM. This idea is supported by Gelens, . (2013), who argue that it will increase satisfaction among employees regarding the level of fairness and justice in talent identification and development.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to find out the process and challenges of talented employee identification

in public organizations. The lack of clear role and procedures in talented employee identification is a significant negative factor for public sector employees and even managers. Accordingly, more attention should be directed in these organisations towards improving their TM system and policies. By so doing, public organisations will solve big issues that relate mainly to injustice in talented employee identification.

We suggest the following consideration for the future studies:

The sample of this research was limited due to the somewhat restricted access gained by the researcher at the beginning of this research project. Future researchers should increase the sample of participants to get stronger results.

The participants of this research were all male, as the researcher could not get access to any organisations managed by women, despite attempts made by the researcher prior to starting the data collection process. As a result, future research should seek to take a sample of female participants.

The participants in this research were all human resource managers, owing to the fact that the research aimed to investigate organisations' perspectives. Future research should investigate and test employees' perspectives as they play a significant role in TM implementation.

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