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Talent management in healthcare organizations - qualitative research results

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Abstract

Talent management has received increased attention over recent years, however, up-to-date research has concentrated mainly on developing concepts, constructs and definitions. Although numerous researches, talent management has not been studied extensively in regard to diverse types of organizations. The need for highly qualified employees, which may be regarded as talents, is emphasized and evident in this types of organizations. Up to this moment studies on talent management in health care organizations are scarce, and the need for such research is obvious. The research was based on 5, semi structured interviews carried out in chosen, different health care organizations in Poland. The data gathered during interviews were analyzed following abovementioned methodology leading to conclusions which include theoretical implications in form of propositions, practical implications, as a list of talent management practices suitable for health care organizations as well as future research directions.

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1. Introduction

In recent years talent management has received increased research attention due to its ability to create and sustain competitive advantage of the company (Ashton & Morton, 2005; Coulson-Thomas, 2012). Basically, talent management is related to creating a talent pool from external and internal sources, adequately deploying these resources in pivotal positions, and further, work on their work motivation, organizational commitment and extra-

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roles behaviors that contribute to organizational performance (see: Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Such understanding of talent management concentrates attention on differentiation and departing from classical – human resource management approach. That means that organization willing to actively engage talents in organizational life have to figure out ways of capitalizing on their competencies and prepare structures, strategies and climate to encourage their employees on pivotal positions to contribute to organizational success.

Despite growing research interest little is known about the ways in which public organizations, and healthcare in particular, manage their talents. To fill in this literature gap this study aims at exploring and understanding talent management in healthcare organizations. This aim is obtained in two basic steps. Firstly, we review recent talent management literature trying to identify directions in which scientific debate goes. Secondly, we present empirical study research carried in 5 chosen healthcare organizations from southern Poland and formulate theoretical and practical implications.

2. Research on talent management: what do we know and where do we go from here?

There are several valuable research paths undertaken by researchers in talent management recently. We present just a fraction of a vast number of this diversity just to emphasize numerous approaches that are valuable and had received research consideration.

The first one concentrates on creating sound theoretical background for the discipline. In this vein two main subcategories may be identified. The first relates to defining talent, the nature and essence of talent management. Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, and Gonzales-Cruz (2013) present a broad, in-depth analysis of the term of talent stating that talent may be conceptualized as naturalability, mastery, commitment and fit revealed in innate abilities, acquired skills, knowledge, skills and attitudes of employees which lead to achieving outstanding results. They also claim that inclusive and exclusive approach to talent management may be identified. In the same manner Meyers, van Woerkom, and Dries (2013) state that talent may be innate or acquired. Despite numerous other approaches to the problem of definition consistent results were not obtained.

The second approach concentrates on talent management itself. Growing interest in talent management has resulted in numerous studies, in which several interesting approaches may be identified. In particular, four main perspectives on talent management are prevailing in the literature. First of them focuses on sets of practices and functions strongly related to human resource management (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Researchers undertaking this perspective try to differentiate the set of talent management practices underlining its strategic and future oriented nature and relationship to strategic objectives (Tarique & Schuler, 2010).

Second perspective concentrates on perceiving talent management as a way in which valuable competencies of talented employees are put into practice. The researchers addressing the issue from this standpoint theorize that talents, sometimes described as “top performers”, are *crème de la crème* of an organization. It emphasizes that talent management is addressed to elite group of employees. Therefore, researchers in this vein focus on exclusive approach to talent management, and, according to these authors organizations are as strong as competent are their best employees (Downs & Swailes, 2013; Christensen Hughes & Rog, 2008).

Third approach emphasizes the role of employee flow within the organization and refers to supply and demand – it concentrates attention on internal talent pools strongly relating decisions in the field with succession planning (Aksakal, Dagdeviren, Eraslan, & Yuksel, 2013; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). Fourth perspective focuses rather on identification of key – pivotal – positions than on searching talents by itself. It highlights organizational perspective and organizational interests are the key point in this vein (Iles, Preece, & Chuai, 2010; Vural, Vardarliier, & Aykir, 2012).

While there are numerous other approaches presented in the literature (for example decisive – see: it seems that presented ways of conceptualizing talent management refer to the vast majority of theoretical veins. On the basis of different approaches at least two conclusions may be made. First, talent management is embedded in internal contradictions, and managers are responsible for dealing with them. Second, talent management requires consistent and effective set of organizational solutions (Vaiman, Sculion, & Collings, 2012).

There are also other studies related to particular aspects of talent management. Both theoretical and empirical relationships with organizational success, competitive advantage and organizational effectiveness have been

strongly represented in the literature (Farley, 2005, pp. 55-61). Also, some studies on national talent management programs has been presented (Heinen & O'Neil, 2004; Iles, Chuai, Preece, 2010; Kehinde, 2012; Jones, Whitaker, Seet, & Parkin, 2012; Preece, Iles, Chuai, 2011; Schoemaker, 2003). Some particular solutions of talent management programs were also presented (Cairns, 2009), as well as talent management in respect to soccer clubs (Di Minin, Frattini, Bianchi, Bortoluzzi, & Piaccaluga, 2014). Plenty of research has been done on talent management in large, international organizations, and a huge pressure was put on developing theoretical propositions and practical implications for such a type of companies (Adobor, 2004). Also, some researchers has focused on developing propositions regarding special groups of employees, for example older people (Calo, 2008; Smith & Campbell, 2010; Tikkanen, 2011; van Rooij, 2012), females (Tatli, Vassilopoulou & Oxbiglin, 2013, pp. 539-553) or diversity problems (Ng & Burke, 2005).

Despite numerous research on the topic so far little attention has been paid to talent management in public organizations (Glenn, 2012; Kock & Burke, 2008). Despite the specificity of public organizations existing studies in this field fail to differentiate in terms of propositions from others. Considering ageing society and the importance of healthcare organizations for public health, so far researchers did not present a concise, systematic approach to the problem in this type of organizations. In the paper we try to fill in this gap by presenting the results of the study carried out in Polish healthcare organizations.

3. Methodology

To carry out research on talent management in Polish healthcare organizations we decided to follow Eisenhardt (1989) recommendations. The method proposed by the scholar is composed of 8 subsequent steps leading to theoretical implications helping to grasp unobserved relationships in a form of propositions. Therefore, it is an alternative for grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss, and the main difference lays in two aspects: it requires precision in preparation of research questions and assumptions regarding the state of knowledge (i.e. constructs and relationships) as well as diverse types of data analysis. We have chosen this approach while there is extant, as presented above, theory about talent management and it would be ill-advised to ignore this knowledge. Moreover, it would lead to preconceptions, which compromise results of grounded theory approach. Eisenhardt approach, similarly to grounded theory, is highly structured, and we followed that structure in our study.

Theory development process starts with asking a basic, research question. In this regard it was related to solutions in talent management field that are employed in healthcare organizations. In the next step we identified 5, diverse in terms of economic condition and ownership status healthcare organizations in which elements of talent management could be identified. To our case studies we have chosen public and private hospital, diagnostic laboratory, private clinic and emergency medical services company from the Silesian voivodeship in Poland. These organizations were chosen purposefully in order to grasp as many as possible aspects of talent management both in large (public hospital – employing 800+ people; medical services company – employing 1400+ people), medium (private hospital – employing 160+ people), and small (diagnostic laboratory – employing 50+ employees and private clinic – 35 employees) units. Thus, we have chosen organizations purposefully in a theoretical way, fulfilling Eisenhardt demand.

In the third step, on the basis of literature studies we have prepared the research questionnaire regarding talent management in healthcare organizations. This, in turn, allowed us to carry out the research and gather data using semi-structured interviews on the basis of open-ended questions. In this step we asked respondents to document solutions with existing documents so that we could triangulate the data and reach theoretical saturation of our proposition. In every organization respondents were either top managers or employees with deep knowledge about organizational strategies, policies and practices. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed to word documents. The study finished in December 2014, and we gathered more than 60 pages of transcripts plus numerous pages of organizational documents that presented regulations regarding human resource management and talent management in particular. These transcripts were the basis for qualitative analysis that was carried out in two steps. Firstly, we coded transcripts assigning codes to parts of a text (to sentences or smaller parts). Secondly, we carried out analysis within cases identifying talent management policies and practices for every organization. Thirdly, we performed cross case analysis trying to identify patterns and dissimilarities between cases. These data comprised of

a basis for formulation of propositions presented in the final part of the paper. In the end of the process research results were confronted with existing knowledge about talent management in healthcare organizations. The final part of the study assumes critical analysis of the theory and the research finishes when new data do not bring new knowledge to identified regularities. In a situation of missing data or the need to gain better understanding of talent management respondents from companies were contacted again to guarantee theoretical saturation.

4. Research results

Case descriptions

First case: public hospital

In the hospital there were clearly identified pivotal positions – they were doctors and nurses. Respondents also indicated important are positions of personnel responsible for highly specified diagnostic activities as well as some positions in administrative parts. This personnel was treated carefully in respect to motivation and training. Formal planning of training needs was performed, however, there were no documents specifying the way treatment of this personnel is different in comparison to rest of the staff. The training was aiming at improving knowledge and skills related to new medical techniques and these activities were performed by international experts and specialists from other hospitals. The training of administrative staff was performed if needed, in case of organizational changes (for example in the case of quality management system introduction). Selected employees were also trained when new law regulations are introduced. No other ways of talent management were mentioned by respondent, however he claimed that organization currently works on formal talent management programs that would be more comprehensive. On the other hand, no additional data were supplied to interviewers during meetings. Respondent (Director) also stated that these positions are highly important for an organization from the competitive advantage point of view.

Second case: private diagnostic laboratory

In this organization no formal talent management program was prepared, however respondent indicated pivotal positions which were laboratory diagnostician and technology laborant. In both cases special training methods were applied and these employees had opportunities to choose appropriate training for them – trainings were divided to obligatory and other (aiming at improving qualifications). The company constantly monitors training needs and focuses on improving qualification of staff employed in pivotal positions. Recently, company invested heavily in trainings of staff for handling so called “tough client”. However, except for training, there were no other ways of special treatment of the abovementioned group.

Thrid case: emergency medical services organization

Similarly to previous cases, there is no formal talent management program introduced within the organization. The most important groups of employees are these employed in paramedic position as well as doctors (medics) and a part of administrative staff; positions were not enlisted. Special treatment of employees in abovementioned positions is realized twofold: firstly, they are highly compensated (well paid) and receive acknowledgement of their achievements. Secondly, they are trained (regarding medical procedures and law regulations) and take part in international competitions of life-guards. Training also aim at shaping behaviors and adopting best medical practices. Administrative staff, especially important for the company, is trained by external agencies in respect to enriching knowledge and skills.

Fourth case: private hospital

There is no formal talent management program within the company, but there are pivotal positions according to respondent (Director). They were managers of chosen organizational departments and medical personnel, however,

Director did not overestimated the role of medical staff. According to respondent both groups are equally valuable for the organization. Moreover, medical statistics department was identified as one of the most important within the company, while its efficiency decides on the contract with National Health Fund. Respondent stated that most important employees are not treated differently in most cases, but they are paid better (pay for performance). Also, hospital introduced special motivational instruments (assurance, flexible working hours). In particular, the company shares profits flowing from patients “brought to hospital” by medics. The second instrument stimulating the development of abovementioned employees is a training system, and specialists may choose which competencies are the most important for them. Director tends to keep best employees by job satisfaction surveys in which he assesses if employees are satisfied with their job. The first job satisfaction survey (carried out in 2013) was a motive for changes in the way human resource management is performed while it helps to diagnose key needs of the staff.

Fifth case: private clinic

From the point of view of respondent (owner) the most important assets for the company are medics and rehabilitants. Respondent says, that “it is so, because it’s hard to find medics due to localization, and they sometimes drive several kilometers to reach the clinic. It is necessary to keep this group of employees while commercial clinic is highly dependent on the contract with National Health Fund. The second group is comprised of rehabilitants with which we work closely for a long period of time. We care about them much”. This special care is performed, according to respondent, by frequent meetings devoted to details of their work. During meetings owner may better know the level of their satisfaction and training needs. It is the same in regard to medics, while the company wants to give them opportunity to work in friendly conditions and supply them best possible medical instruments. These groups are constantly trained, and trainings are financed by the organization.

Case comparison: cross case analysis results

Cross case analysis revealed several regularities and few irregularities. Results, synthetically, are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Cross case analysis

Organization	Public hospital	Private diagnostic laboratory	Emergency medical services	Private hospital	Private clinic
Formal talent management program	Non existent, in preparation	Non existent	Non existent	Non existent	Non existent
Pivotal positions	Doctors, nurses, diagnosticians, some administrative staff	Laboratory diagnostician, technology laborant	Paramedics, medics and some administrative staff	Managers, medics, medical statistics	Medics, rehabilitants
Relation with the competitive advantage (organizational effectiveness)	Yes	Implicit	Implicit	Yes	Yes
Talent management tools	Trainings	Trainings	Motivation system concentrated on selected group and trainings	Motivation system concentrate on selected group and trainings, job satisfaction assessment	Frequent meetings and trainings, job satisfaction assessment
Expected outcomes of talent management activities for organization	Knowledge and skills improvement	Knowledge and skills improvement	Knowledge and skills improvement	Knowledge and skills improvement, lower turnover, retention	Knowledge and skills improvement, better needs assessment, lower turnover, retention
Expected outcomes of talent	Knowledge and skills	Knowledge and skills improvement	Knowledge and skills improvement	Knowledge and skills improvement,	Knowledge and skills improvement,

management activities for individuals	improvement	job satisfaction	job satisfaction, willingness to stay in organization
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Source: self prepared

Table 1 analysis leads to several conclusions about the state of talent management in healthcare organizations. First, talent management programs are not popular among (even large) organizations. While they are nonexistent, organizations usually know which employees are crucial for their success and make, somewhat haphazard attempts to manage them differently. Second, pivotal positions are mainly and explicitly identified in the medical field, while it is not that common to identify key employees within the administrative staff. It seems particularly strange while the success of healthcare organizations in Poland strongly rely on their ability to obtain financing from National Health Fund. In order to get these resources organizations have to fulfill numerous conditions and depict what they do and how they do it appropriately. They are administrative employees who are responsible for that part, and this group is, in most cases, unnoticed. Third, talent management tools are simplistic and they mainly concentrate in two fields: training and motivation. None of respondents referred directly to integration of that staff, comprehensive development plans or succession planning. Fourth, expected results of talent management initiatives are directly related to tools employed – organizations concentrate on skills and knowledge development through training and managers expect that part to be developed. Fifth, expected individual benefits of talents are mainly knowledge enrichment and skills acquisition plus commitment and motivation. Little attention is paid to job satisfaction, willingness to stay or broadly understood well-being of an individual. In the final part of the paper research results are summarized as well as theoretical and practical implications are drawn.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of research results there are 6 propositions that may be developed. They are as follows:

Proposition 1. Formal talent management programs are not perceived as a valuable solution to healthcare units problems.

According to analysis there is no difference in regard to existence of formal talent management programs, no matter the size of the company. That is especially interesting considering that in large organizations such programs became very popular and are frequently introduced (Preece, Iles, & Chuai, 2011, pp. 3413-3428). Such programs would help organizations to structure their attempts and better motivate their employees.

Proposition 2. Healthcare organizations know pivotal positions, but there are rarely indicated top performers or talents.

That means that organizations concentrate on positions rather than identification of talents. Therefore, talent identification process, which by itself is related to comparisons between employees and choosing the ones organization is interested in (Bjorkman, Ehrnrooth, Makela, Smale, & Sumelius, 2013, pp. 195-214) is based on a simple rule – only person employed in important position may become a talent.

Proposition 3. Pivotal positions are associated mainly within the medical positions, not the administrative ones.

Proposition 4. In regard to pivotal positions healthcare organizations adopt inclusive approach to talent management.

Medical positions are the “bulls’ eye” of managers and they frequently forget about so called “grey” personnel. It is curious, while both groups are essential for smooth operation of an organization and achieving its economical and social goals. Inclusive approach to talent management, focusing on giving equal chances to all candidates, follows recent recommendations in the field (Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013, pp. 305-321). However, researched healthcare organizations adopted diverse approach, while they concentrate mainly on pivotal positions, not individuals.

Proposition 5. Talent management tools used in healthcare organizations are mainly trainings and motivational programs.

Talent management in healthcare organizations tend to be based on trainings mainly. Also, some attempts are made to motivate that personnel group in a better way, but mainly financial motivation is used to achieve this aim.

Proposition 5. The main aim of talent management in healthcare organizations is knowledge and skill improvement as well as maintaining high level of motivation to work.

Proposition 7. Healthcare organizations pay attention to organizational needs more than on individual ones.

Introducing talent management solutions organizations are willing mainly to improve competencies of their employees, but the goal is to make them more efficient and help to achieve organizational goals. The self-development of employees, with the use of trainings financed by organization, was not an option according to respondents. This leads to conclusion that organizations focus on themselves rather than on their employees, even in regard to talents.

Practical implications of that study are trifold. First, in order to fully capitalize on the potential of employees healthcare organizations should focus their attention on developing more strategic approach to these groups of employees. Second, talent management programs should embrace larger number of possible solutions, while concentration on trainings and financial motivation may not keep employee satisfaction at desired levels. Third, healthcare organizations, aiming at keeping their best staff, should consider more broadly their needs and aims and balance more consciously individual and organizational needs. Surely, further research on the topic are clearly necessary and these propositions may become a background for further researches and, after operationalization, they may constitute a basis for research hypotheses in quantitative study.

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