
Book Review

Talent Management: Strategies for Success from Six Leading Companies
Larry Israelite (2010)
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What is talent management? What must firms do to leverage on the modalities of talent management in a competitive economy? What are the best practices in this area? If formalized, can these talent management practices be applied across a range of firms? These then are some of the important questions that will come to a reader's mind as he works his way through this anthology of essays. This book can be used as both a source of insights for constructing a theory of talent management, and as a casebook with specific instances of what works in this area. There are six cases included here comprising organizations such as Bersin & Associates, Cisco, McDonald's, Avon Products, Children's Healthcare (Atlanta), and Ciena. These organizations are not in the same sector and the goal is not to argue that all these organizations have the same set of challenges by any means. Instead, we have a collection of approaches that have worked in specific contexts, and it is for the reader to decide the extent to which any of these case studies is applicable to the organization in which he finds himself. Larry Israelite, the editor of this anthology, argues that while we will uncover insights that have universal value, more often than not, we must be prepared to understand that 'things are local'. What is at stake in this area then 'comprise a combination of philosophies, tools, processes, and systems' that proved to be useful in the case studies included here. While readers are welcome to try these elements in their respective firms, it is important not to take a deterministic approach to these applications. They are

more like the 'implications' of approaches to talent management rather than direct 'applications' to managing talent in organizations.

There are eleven chapters and an appendix in this book including an introduction and conclusion by the editor who is the VP of HRD at the Liberty Mutual Group. Larry Israelite points out that talent management is an emerging area in management. It is therefore necessary to improvise the processes appropriate to doing so. There are no fixed rules for managing talent, and it is not the intention of the editor or any of the contributors to lead the reader into thinking that can indeed be the case. Instead, readers should approach this problem with an open mind and think-through the different aspects of talent management whether it be 'performance management, career development, management development', or even the role of an 'employee opinion survey'. Josh Bersin of Bersin Associates, for instance, argues that an integrated approach is what is needed now. He is interested in working out how a talent management approach that is aligned to the interests of a business can be worked out in a way that accommodates the roles played by the process of learning and development. He differentiates between performance-driven and talent-driven approaches to learning based on the time period that is at stake in manpower planning processes in a firm. The approach that he favors is related to identifying business

problems first rather than approach talent directly. The deployment of a specific instance of talent then is proffered as a solution. The governance and ownership of talent management should be a function of the business as a whole rather than an area within HR - especially if HR is perceived to be preoccupied with questions of functional autonomy. In the absence of effective alignment with the strategic function of a business enterprise, it becomes much more difficult to measure the tangible gains, if any, of talent management.

The contributors to this book are pushing for a 'local knowledge' approach to talent management that favors the need for conceiving practical approaches rather than inquire into what talent is as an end in itself since most of them are caught up with these challenges in the organizations in which they find themselves. Annmarie of Cisco worries aloud about the shortage of talent in a globalizing economy; hence Cisco's preoccupation with the need to identify and develop the human and leadership elements of talent management. An approach that works wonderfully well is the emphasis on 'unlearning' as a prelude to new learning. Cisco also had to learn how to 'mature' its talent management processes in order to 'meet the demands of a transforming global enterprise'. This means coming to terms with needless complexity within the organization especially when the number of variables is continually increasing in the external environment. How can talent be successfully deployed in such circumstances? Neal argues that 'when times are good, have a simple plan; when times are complex, have a very simple plan'. Likewise Neal Kulick of McDonald's argues that talent management is strongly related to performance management since in

a sense 'all management is performance management'. But at the same time it is important to differentiate between 'potential' and 'performance' by working on related factors such as the rating system, aligning compensation to performance, and by ensuring that 'pay differentiation' is related to 'performance differentiation'. It was also important to come up with a talent management plan with clarity on the processes relevant to doing so along with periodic talent reviews. The implementation would proceed with the help of a talent management template that would be made available to all the major business units of the firm. The components listed in the template would ensure that all the main aspects would be covered while translating talent management imperatives into practice. While getting this template right would involve several iterations, it would ensure that talent management practices were aligned to the strategic goals of the firm. McDonald's sense of urgency in this matter was precipitated by the unexpected illness and death of two CEOs in quick succession.

Marc Efron of Avon Products explains in his turn how his firm managed to build 'a new talent management system' given that it was growing faster than the firm could support. It was therefore important to understand the situation in Avon in the context of corporate restructuring and its implications for the organizational hierarchy. Avon began by identifying its weaknesses in managing talent before proposing a new model that would work with a greater degree of transparency in matters pertaining to career development, development plans, and performance reviews. Here, again, the focus was on bringing a greater amount of simplicity to bear on the situation by repeatedly asking what the

business gains of talent deployment might be. Once the answers to these questions became clear, it became much easier to make a business case for managing talent especially in the context of performance management. In Effron's words, 'with limited funds to spend, we needed to make a decision about which talent bets would truly pay off'. Talent management practices basically provide a set of guidelines on how to make these bets pay-off consistently. This also means that the workforce should be differentiated more effectively and being egalitarian is not the most effective way going forward. And, finally, it is important to find a way of measuring the gains on organizational turnarounds that are propelled by talent management practices if the gains are to be sustainable. While there is not sufficient space to list all the insights available in the cases and reflections included in this book, the characteristic feature of the approaches included here is that they are not only specific forays in talent management, but haunted by the idea that there is no objective or even comprehensive approach that will be applicable across a range of contexts. What these cases however succeed in doing well is in giving talent managers a chance to rehearse their options, practices, and techniques in opening up for discussion an exciting new area in the theory and practice of talent management. It is therefore important for such managers to differentiate between processes and outcomes, develop adequate measures, and work-out the forms of alignment that will make an effective business case possible while betting every now and then on specific instances of talent.

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