



A qualitative perspective of Talent Management

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ABSTRACT

Setting the scene for talent management requires an in-depth investigation in order to holistically assist management to implement talent management successfully. As far as could be established, little (if any) research has been conducted on talent management in the South African statutory water board sector. The purpose of the study on which this article reports was to explore talent management in this sector from a qualitative perspective. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the email interview transcripts collected in the study. The identified talent management themes were: geographical isolation of some operational areas; alignment with organisational strategy; comprehensive stakeholder involvement; a blend of inclusive and exclusive talent management practices; limited scarce skills talent pool; employing designated talent in meeting employment equity targets; isolated emphasis on recruitment and selection; low staff turnover and mobility; lack of career advancement opportunities; and insufficient alignment of learning development to competency and/or skills needs. The implication of these findings is that ignorance of talent management can be detrimental for successful implementation. The unique contribution of this research is that it proposes three strategic pillars that can be used to support a successful talent management strategy.

Key phrases

South African statutory water board sector; talent management and talent management challenges

1. INTRODUCTION

Statutory water boards have been established as water services providers all over South Africa in terms of the Water Services Act, No. 108 of 1997 (Republic of South Africa 1997). These statutory water boards are classified as national government business enterprises in accordance with the Public Finance Management Act, No. 1 of 1999 (Republic of South Africa 1999) and resort under the national Department of Water and Sanitation (Hollingworth, Koch, Chimuti & Malzbender 2011:5-6). The Government Communications and Information Service (2016:446) indicates that the primary objective of such statutory water boards is to provide bulk water and sanitation services to municipalities, the agricultural sector, industries and mines. A total of nine water boards have been established, namely Amatola Water, Bloem Water, Lepelle Northern Water, Magalies Water, Mhlathuze Water, Overberg Water, Rand Water, Sedibeng Water and Umgeni Water. The main role players in the South African water sector are the Department of Water and Sanitation, the aforementioned statutory water boards as water services providers and municipalities as water services authorities (Government Communications and Information Service 2016:448).

At the end of the previous decade, numerous experts and authors began to warn against the development of a capacity crisis in the water sector (Karar & Pietersen 2009:5-6). Meyer (2010:2) argues that the ongoing scarce skills shortage within the water sector and poor talent management strategies that fail to retain key talent pose a threat to the achievement of water and sanitation delivery and compliance targets. Since then, this capacity crisis and scarce skills shortage have intensified. In more recent years, several public institutions (for example, the Water Research Commission 2015:25) and senior government officials (Auditor-General of South Africa 2016:14) have also repeatedly expressed their concern that skills shortages and talent management inadequacies in the water sector are obstructing effective service delivery. This is contrary to the notion that public service entities worldwide are supposed to engage the necessary skills and talent to deliver against the ambitions of reform agendas and to improve the lives of the communities they serve (Gadsden, McLaughlin, Grant, Mackie, Cassidy & Derbyshire 2017:4).

2. PROBLEM INVESTIGATED

Reports and research on the prevailing capacity crisis, scarce skills shortage and poor talent management strategies in the water sector in general usually focus on government structures, such as the national Department of Water and Sanitation and municipalities, but tend to exclude water boards as state-owned entities (Amrop Landelahni 2012:3). Consequently, as far as could be established, little (if any) research has been conducted on

talent management in the South African statutory water board sector, indicating a research gap in this regard.

3. RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research was to explore talent management in the South African statutory water board sector from a qualitative perspective. The secondary objectives of the research pivoted on the use of the findings of the study as a point of departure to develop and propose strategic pillars that could support the successful implementation of a talent management strategy in a more focused and systematic manner.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Towards the late 1990s, the notion emerged that, as the business environment becomes more competitive, complex and global, finding and employing suitable employees would become a prime concern of organisations. This issue grew in prominence in 1997 when a group of McKinsey consultants coined the term ‘the War for Talent’ (Van Zyl, Mathafena & Ras 2017:2). Since then, numerous authors such as Shukla (2009:4) have affirmed that, in the present talent-hungry marketplace, one of the greatest challenges that organisations have come to face, is indeed to attract and retain talented employees successfully. Scullion and Collings (2011:3) also observe that talent management has become a critical success factor in today’s corporate environment.

4.1 Defining talent management

According to Collings, Mellahi and Cascio (2017:5), the most widely accepted definition of talent management delineates the concept as the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to an organisation’s sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high-potential and high-performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource (HR) architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents, and to ensure their continued commitment to that particular organisation.

4.2 Strategic focus in talent management

Phillips and Edwards (2009:1) contend that talent management has become a key strategy in today’s corporate environment in order to maintain a competitive advantage and to ensure organisational success, efficiency and consistency. Strategic focus can only be created and maintained if talent management is:

- aligned with business strategies (Barkhuizen 2015:12) and the overall strategic intent and operational goals of the organisation (Armstrong 2016:190);

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- driven by business strategies (Silzer & Dowell 2010:xxi);
 - recognised as a core competitive asset in business organisations (Silzer & Dowell 2010:xxi);
 - managed as a core business practice (Silzer & Dowell 2010:xxi);
 - contributing to the competitive advantage of the organisation (Collings & Mellahi 2009:304); and
 - achieving organisational capability, sustainability and growth (Armstrong 2016:190).

According to the findings, the following ten talent management challenges exist in the South African statutory water board sector:

4.3 Approaches to talent management

Organisations can follow either an inclusive or an exclusive approach to talent management. The point of departure in inclusive talent management is that all employees can add value to ensuring high-performance delivery. It is for this reason that all employees should be included in the talent management process (Cappelli & Keller 2014:307). On the other hand, authors such as Buttiens and Hondeghem (2012:9-10) indicate that exclusive talent management is aimed at a specific segment of the workforce consisting of high performers with highly specialised and scarce skills critical to organisational success. A talent management strategy with specific aims, programmes and actions is then developed for this designated group or segment of employees. Schreuder and Noorman (2019:1) also support a more exclusive approach by emphasising strategic talent management, rather than generic talent management, by focusing on the strategic demands of an organisation and on recruiting specific and crucial top talent that has a disproportionately large influence on realising such a strategy.

Maqueira, Bruque and Uhrin (2019:34) include an additional nuance to the inclusive versus exclusive talent management debate by concluding that the internal talent development model would be more beneficial to companies whose competitive advantage is achieved through collective effort (teamwork). However, companies that do not achieve a clear differentiation through teamwork should rather pursue the external talent capture model.

Against this background, Gilmore and Williams (2013:166) support the investing of scarce organisational resources in the most promising talent, but that such an exclusive approach to talent management should never be at the expense or neglect of other employees.

4.4 Talent management practices

Different authors and scholars have different views on what talent management practices entail. For example, talent management could comprise the following:

- recruitment and selection, succession planning, training and development, performance management, compensation, employee retention, and senior management involvement (Dhanabhakym & Kokilambal 2014:31);
- recruitment and promotion, workforce planning, succession planning, organisational development, career development, and learning and development (Campbell & Hirsh 2012:7-8); and
- recruiting, performance management, learning management and compensation management (Shukla 2009:4).

Stahl, Björkman, Farndale, Morris, Paauwe, Stiles, Trevor and Wright (2012:31) propose that organisations follow a convergence of talent management practices. Apart from abiding by a common set of talent management principles, leading companies often subscribe too many of the same talent-related practices. Stahl *et al.* (2012:31) argue that best practices are only 'best' when they are applied within a given context - practices that have been proven successful in one company may not necessarily have positive effect in another. Companies need to adapt talent management practices to fit in with their own business strategy and circumstances.

4.5 Responsibility for talent management

The function of HR management should not be solely responsible for talent management processes in an organisation (Turner & Kalman 2014:283-284). In order to develop talent practices, implement an efficient talent management programme and develop a talent management culture in the organisation, Silzer and Dowell (2010:57) argue that all stakeholders should take co-responsibility and co-ownership in ensuring the success of the talent management process, namely:

- the organisation's board of directors;
- the chief executive officer (CEO) and senior executives;
- the HR department and talent professionals;
- line managers; and
- individual employees.

4.6 Talent management challenges

Li, Hedayati-Mehdiabadi, Choi, Wu and Bell (2018:501) state that attracting and retaining talent, tension between subsidiaries and headquarters, tension between high potentials and

non-high potentials, and tension between generations are talent management challenges. Filippus and Schultz (2019:9) posit that a lack of performance management, a lack of talent development, a lack of talent retention, remuneration challenges, cumbersome rules and red tape of government, and lack of leadership form part of talent management challenges. According to Ogbari, Onasanya, Ogunnaike, and Kehinde (2018:22), the comprehensive solution to talent management challenges is composed of strategic job requirements, job grading, performance management, recruitment criteria and succession planning. Many organisations are challenged by the war for talent with regard to imperative talent management factors such as work motivation, attraction, development, work value and recruitment (Van Hoek 2016:46).

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The devised research methodology of the study covered the following:

5.1 Approach

A qualitative research methodology was used in this research. Creswell and Creswell (2018:18) maintain that qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human phenomenon or problem, while the process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. McMillan and Schumacher (2006:317) argue that qualitative research is often underpinned by a constructivist philosophy or research paradigm. According to Bryman and Bell (2014:17-19), constructivists subscribe to the viewpoint that reality is in a constant state of flux, is subjective and is a social human construct based on interpretation, and that multiple realities co-exist in human experience. Knowledge and meaning are furthermore regarded as acts of interpretation; hence, there is no objective knowledge that is independent of thinking, reasoning humans (Antwi & Hamza 2015:218). Constructivists use meaning-oriented data collection methods (versus measurement), such as interviewing or participant observation, which rely on a subjective relationship between the researcher and participants (Creswell 2014:37).

The current study also followed an exploratory research design based on qualitative data analysis. According to Creswell (2014:152), one of the chief reasons for conducting an explorative study is that little is known about a research topic, area of interest, research environment or the population being studied. In such a case, where the variables and theory base are unknown, the researcher seeks the input of participants to form an understanding

of a particular phenomenon. Such an explorative research design was regarded as appropriate for this study given the fact that little (if any) research on talent management in the statutory water board sector had been done before.

5.2 Research participants

The purposive or judgemental sampling technique was implemented in this study. Babbie (2011:207) explains that the basis for selection according to this sampling technique stems from the researcher's own knowledge of the population, its elements, and the nature of a study's research aims. In short, this sampling technique is based on the researcher's own judgement and the purpose of the intended study. The total population in the suggested research environment comprised the existing nine South African statutory water boards. Within the context of the non-probability and purposive (judgemental) sampling technique, three major water boards were identified and selected. These three water boards can be regarded as the major role players in the sector, owing to the scale of their operations, the number of consumers and clients being serviced, and the number of staff employed. It was assumed that these three large water boards would be more intensely involved in talent management than smaller water boards due to their more extensive staff complements and larger scale of operations (leading to greater diversity in employment and/or talent needs, challenges and opportunities). The first water board operates predominantly in urban areas, while the operational areas of the second are located mostly in rural areas. The third water board operates in both a rural and an urban environment.

The managers responsible for talent management in each of the three selected statutory water boards and their designated staff directly involved in performing the talent management function were assumed to be the best-suited and most experienced role players to share authentic information on issues related to the implementation of talent management in this environment. Enhancing the integrity of data gathered during the data collection process, 13 participants responsible for talent management at the water boards took part in the study. Saturation of data was taken into consideration.

5.3 Data collection

Email interviewing as a means of data collection was used in this study. Ratislavova and Ratislav (2014:452) argue that the asynchronous email interview as a form of computer-mediated communication in today's digital environment is gaining prominence as a data collection method in qualitative research. Edwards and Holland (2013:49-51) claim the main advantages of email interviewing are as follows:

- It is particularly useful when participants are geographically widely separated.

- Email interviews produce text, obviating the need for note-taking, recording and transcription, reducing the margin of error associated with such activities.
- Participants have more time for reflection on questions, which often encourages more descriptive and well-thought-out replies.

The email interviews used for data collection could be regarded as structured, since a list of ten standardised and open-ended questions (Leedy & Ormrod 2010:196) were mailed to the interviewees. The following interview guide was used:

- Who is responsible for talent management at your water board, and where does this capacity fit into your organisational structure?
- To what extent is talent management aligned with the business strategies of your water board, or do you regard it as a HR function?
- Is the focus in talent management at your water board on the inclusive or the exclusive talent management approach, or perhaps a combination of both? Motivate your answer.
- Given the distinctive operational environment of your water board, what are the challenges that you experience with regard to talent?

5.4 Data analysis

Tesch's (1992:142-145) approach to data analysis in qualitative research (providing detailed guidelines to develop an organising system for unstructured qualitative data) was applied in this study to analyse the data collected by means of the open-ended questions about talent management in the three water boards concerned. Both inductive and descriptive data analysis were conducted to analyse primary data. During inductive analysis, general or universal conclusions, abstractions, concepts and theories are induced from specific, detailed information (Atieno 2009:14), while descriptive data analysis involves searching for patterns, themes and holistic features (Barkhuizen & Schutte 2015:7). Data was hand-coded, and themes and categories of themes were developed.

5.5 Trustworthiness of the study

Strategies used to ensure the trustworthiness of this research study as proposed by Bryman and Bell (2014:44-45) comprised ensuring that:

The study measured or tested what was actually intended namely, an investigation of talent management (credibility).

The findings can be applied to other South African statutory water boards (transferability).

If the research study were to be repeated in the same context, with the same methods and with the same participants, similar results would most probably be obtained due to the fact that the South African statutory water boards have the same dynamics (dependability).

The research findings were (as far as possible) the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants by using member checking to give participants the opportunity to affirm that the summaries reflect their views, feelings, and experiences (confirmability).

Within the context of the already stated qualitative research approach of this study and an underlying constructivist research paradigm, the current researchers subscribe to the assumption that no objective knowledge exists independent of thinking, reasoning humans (Antwi & Hamza 2015:218). The researchers do not claim objectivity nor neutrality in conducting this study as they regard themselves as being subjectively involved in constructing meaning from the data by making use of inductive interpretation (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:317). The researchers have nonetheless attempted to adhere rigorously to generally accepted scientific procedures and the predetermined research methodology (credibility). When it comes to whether the findings of the study could be applied to other situations and a wider population (transferability), it is assumed that at least some of the findings on talent management can be transferred to the other six smaller statutory water boards in the sector. The reason for this assumption is that all of these water boards share in certain homogenous characteristics related to their government-instituted mandate, organisational dynamics as state-owned entities, operational environment as water services providers, etc. Within the confines of an academic research article, the qualitative research approach, constructivist research paradigm, as well as the research setting, selection of research participants, means of data collection and analysis has also been clearly described, explained and justified where necessary to adequately allow for replication (dependability). Furthermore, the experiences and ideas of the participants have been authentically reflected by means of unedited quotations (confirmability).

6. FINDINGS

With regard to gender distribution in the group of 13 participants, six interviewees were women. All of the participants had obtained tertiary academic qualifications at a degree level in fields of study related to HR management, while 10 had also acquired relevant postgraduate qualifications (two of them at master's level). The participants were all permanently employed in HR-related structures at the various water boards concerned, and the duration of employment within an HR or talent management environment ranged from less than five years in the case of five participants (mostly in junior positions), to more than 15 years in the case of six participants (mostly at the level of executive manager). No

standardised range of occupational descriptions or titles related to HR and/or talent management existed in the sector at the time of this study. Therefore, the reported positions of the participants in the findings differed from water board to water board. To address the aim of this study, namely to qualitatively investigate talent management in the South African statutory water board sector, 10 themes were identified, as reflected in the unedited quotes below. Since this study subscribes to the qualitative research methodology and constructivist research paradigm, it is acknowledged that the identification of these themes represented a constructed, meaning-oriented and inductive interpretation of the data by the researchers. Against this background, the following themes emerged in the study:

Table 1: Talent management themes and quotes

EMERGING THEMES	QUOTES
Comprehensive stakeholder involvement	"Talent management is not considered purely an HR function, since one of the strategic objectives of the organisation as a whole is to create a high performance culture" (Interviewee 2, male, talent and organisational development manager). "The performance appraisal of all functional heads and strategic business units/regional managers includes measurement on talent management activities, such as training and development, etc. Thus, all line functionaries are responsible and have a specific role to play in talent management. The Coordinator: Human Resources Development coordinates overall implementation" (Interviewee 7, male, HR development coordinator).
Alignment with organisational strategy	"Talent management is fully aligned to the business strategies and the successful management of this process creates a competitive advantage for the organisation" (Interviewee 3, female, skills development facilitator). "Talent management is one of the strategic goals of the organisation in order to create an environment that is conducive to the growth and retention of skills" (Interviewee 8, female, talent manager).
A blend of inclusive and exclusive talent management practices	"The organisation duly recognises the contribution of core employees. However, there is understanding of the fact that support functions also need to be optimised in order for the core to function properly" (Interviewee 2, male, talent and organisational development manager). "The organisation offers a number of training and development initiatives for all employees who display potential and the willingness to improve and develop their skills, while also implementing talent management measures aimed at attracting and retaining specific employees with more scarce skills" (Interviewee 12, male, HR executive).
Limited scarce skills talent pool	"We continuously struggle to recruit suitable engineers (all disciplines); scientists; technologists; and technicians" (Interviewee 6, female, talent management consultant). "Apart from engineers and water scientists, we have difficulty in filling positions for fitter and turners (with trade tests); electricians (with wireman's license); instrument mechanists; and diesel motor mechanics" (Interviewee 13, male, HR officer).

EMERGING THEMES	QUOTES
Isolated emphasis on recruitment and selection	"In our corporate culture, some line managers do not see the talent management process holistically. They tend to separate talent management practices from one another" (Interviewee 1, male, senior HR manager). "Emphasis is still placed on recruitment and selection as such, and not on the talent management process as a whole" (Interviewee 3, female, skills development facilitator).
Low staff turnover and mobility	"The organisation does not per se have a problem to attract or retain employees. However, due to a low staff turnover rate, the staff morale in some areas is low. This is due to limited mobility" (Interviewee 8, female, talent manager). "There is also at times a struggle in action and behaviour of knowledge versus experience due to an ageing workforce vis-à-vis the new generation of millennials. The young professionals strive for innovation and are always challenged by the older conservative workforce to focus on the core and maintain the status quo" (Interviewee 9, female, talent management consultant).
Lack of career advancement opportunities	"The prevailing low staff turnover reduces advancement opportunities specifically for younger employees" (Interviewee 6, female, talent management consultant). "Employees at middle management who underwent development for succession planning purposes, leave the organisation when career growth opportunities do not become available soon after they have acquired the requisite skills" (Interviewee 10, male, employee relations manager).
Geographical isolation of some operational areas	"Most of our plants are located in rural areas, where there are no private schools, specialist doctors, institutions of higher learning, health care facilities, etc. Potential employees do not take up positions within the organisation once they realise where they will be placed" (Interviewee 4, female, HR practitioner). "Young graduates who do join the organisation also do not stay, but leave after acquiring some experience in order to join competitors in cities and larger towns" (Interviewee 5, male, employee relations and wellness manager).
Insufficient alignment of learning development to competency or skills needs	"Talent management is not fully integrated with the corporate culture of the organisation. More emphasis can be placed on a strategic approach to addressing competency and skills issues" (Interviewee 1, male, senior HR manager). "Learning development should be more aligned to competency/skills needed by the organisation" (Interviewee 2, male, talent and organisational development manager).
Employing designated talent in meeting employment equity targets	"Another challenge is reaching set employment equity targets due to the fact that female employees find it difficult to relocate their families, especially young ones, to areas where there are a lack of amenities" (Interviewee 12, male, HR executive). "Positions for especially black female engineers are difficult to fill" (Interviewee 8, female, talent manager).

Source: Authors own compilation

7. DISCUSSION OF THE IDENTIFIED TALENT MANAGEMENT THEMES

The talent management themes identified in this study are being discussed in this section within the context of an explorative study. As mentioned earlier in the research problem, little (if any) research has been conducted on talent management in the South African statutory water board sector. Official documentation of the water boards concerned in the public domain (such as annual reports, for example) also do not reveal sufficient primary and focused information on talent management to adequately address most of the questions in the interview guide of this study. It is for these reasons that the researchers had to rely principally on the input of the research participants and the consequent identification of themes constructed from the experiences and views shared by these participants. Furthermore, the identified themes can also be regarded as indicative of enabling or hampering institutional factors, as well as real and practical challenges to the successful implementation of talent management being experienced by the statutory water boards concerned.

Wherever possible, similarities with two recently published studies related to talent management in other South African sectors (Mtshali, Gerwel Proches & Green 2018:1288; Shikweni 2018; Shikweni, Schurink & Van Wyk 2019:11), as well as talent management literature in general, are also indicated.

According to the findings, the following ten talent management challenges exist in the South African statutory water board sector which will be discussed in the different sections below.

7.1 Comprehensive stakeholder involvement

Stahl *et al.* (2012:27-32) emphasise that, in order to be efficient and successful, the talent management process needs to have broad ownership. It was evident from the responses provided by the participants during email interviewing that they did not see HR management as the sole driver of talent management processes in their respective water boards. Several examples offered indicated comprehensive stakeholder involvement and highlighted the role of especially senior executives and line managers in the implementation of talent management. Mtshali *et al.* (2018:1286) likewise emphasise the role of especially leadership commitment and accountability as a possible enabler in the effective implementation of talent management within the context of a Southern African public electricity utility company.

7.2 Alignment with organisational strategy

Aligning talent management and talent management practices with the business strategy is a critical success factor in the implementation of talent management (Stahl *et al.* 2012:26).

Without strategic focus and intent, the implementation of talent management in organisations will remain a haphazard, isolated and inefficient endeavour without significant organisational impact (Armstrong 2016:190). Email interviewees from the participating water boards claimed that talent management was aligned with the business strategies of their respective water boards, and that it was not simply regarded as an HR function only. The link between strategic leadership and management was likewise acknowledged as a potential enabler in a study on talent management in the electricity sector (Mtshali *et al.* 2018:1290).

7.3 A blend of inclusive and exclusive talent management practices

Many organisations attempt to create a balance between inclusive and exclusive approaches to talent management, investing scarce resources in the most promising talent, but not at the expense or neglect of other employees (Gilmore & Williams 2013:166). Although email interviewees recognised the importance of exclusive talent management aimed at a specific segment of the workforce consisting of high performers with highly specialised skills, the need for inclusive talent in developing every employee's abilities to contribute towards ensuring high-performance delivery was also acknowledged. The incorporation of an inclusive approach to talent management, as was the case with the statutory water boards concerned, is validated by the recommendation of Maqueira *et al.* (2019:47) that organisations whose competitive advantage is achieved through differentiation and teamwork need to include an internal focus in talent management. Using a blend of inclusive and exclusive talent management practices as an enabler was also identified in the aforementioned study on the South African construction sector (Shikweni *et al.* 2019:3).

7.4 Limited scarce skills talent pool

In line with the rest of the South African water sector (Water Sector Leadership Group Skills Development Task Team 2009:1), the email interviewees confirmed the existence of the following scarce skills shortages in the statutory water board sector:

- mechanical, civil, electrical and chemical engineers;
- scientists and technologists (including microbiologists, analytical chemists, hydrologists, environmentalists and water quality analysts); and
- technicians or artisans (for example, process controllers, plant operators, welders, electricians, plumbers, fitters and turners, diesel mechanics and instrument makers).

Against this background, the importance of implementing effective and efficient talent management practices to attract and retain employees with suitable skills cannot be over-emphasised. Without these, the statutory water board sector will not be successful in

meeting service delivery targets and managing water resources sustainably. Similar scarcities of talent as a barrier to talent management seem to be the case across numerous sectors in South Africa (ManpowerGroup 2017:1), including the electricity (Mtshali *et al.* 2018:1286) and construction (Shikweni *et al.* 2019:11) sectors.

7.5 Isolated emphasis on recruitment and selection

According to Shukla (2009:4), Campbell and Hirsh (2012:7-8) and Dhanabhakyaam and Kokilambal (2014:31), the talent management process usually includes practices such as recruitment and selection, succession planning, training and development, performance management, compensation and reward management, and employee retention management. According to one participant, at a particular water board, emphasis was still placed on recruitment and selection as such, and not on the talent management process as a whole. Such a lack of integration of recruitment and selection with the other subsequent practices not only limits the scope of talent management, but also the efficiency and effectiveness of the process aimed at addressing the current and future employment needs of an organisation.

7.6 Low staff turnover and mobility

An email interviewee related to one of the water boards claimed that this water board did not have difficulty in attracting and retaining employees. However, low staff turnover (amplified by a moratorium on recruitment) caused a lack of mobility within the organisation, which posed talent management challenges. Amongst others, low staff turnover and mobility result in an aging workforce and a substantial loss of institutional memory along with strategic and operational decision-making capabilities when senior managers eventually retire. This identified barrier in the statutory water board sector corresponds with the conclusion of the Auditor-General of South Africa (2016:44) that an ageing professional workforce and a lack of succession, especially concerning engineers and scientists, are obstructing effective service delivery in the water sector as a whole. In addition, interviewees from the same water board added that the reality of an aging workforce also created friction between the older and younger generations of employees, because young professionals strove for innovation, while the older generation favoured maintaining the status quo when it comes to operational issues and practices. The consequences of an aging workforce amidst prevailing skills shortages (Minnecci 2015) and the challenges posed by a prevailing multi-generational mix in organisations (Ng & Parry 2016:40) seem to be an international trend.

7.7 Lack of career advancement opportunities

This barrier is closely related to the previous one. One of the interviewees observed that a prevailing low staff turnover and mobility also reduced career advancement opportunities, specifically for younger employees. Consequently, natural succession processes were limited, and the younger generation of employees were denied the opportunity to expand their operational responsibilities and advance into managerial positions. Another participant from a different water board added that succession planning for employees had to be managed carefully, since these initiatives may become counterproductive if there is eventually not sufficient mobility and career growth opportunities within an organisation. Makgopela (2010:2) contends that a high staff turnover inhibits effective talent management. The findings of this study also indicate the opposite: low staff turnover is not necessarily a positive organisational phenomenon, but could negatively affect attempts at successful talent management. Shikweni (2018:368) indicates that limited career growth opportunities constitute a major reason why employees leave organisations in the construction sector.

7.8 Geographical isolation of some operational areas

Email interviewees representing a particular water board, which operates predominantly in remote rural areas, cited especially geographical isolation as a unique barrier to the successful implementation of talent management. Potential employees were often hesitant or refused to take up positions within the organisation once they realised that they would work in remote rural areas with a lack of amenities. There was also a high turnover of especially young graduates who did join the organisation, but then left once they had acquired some experience. As a result, geographical isolation not only added complexities to the management of scarce talent, but also extended the range or scope of positions that were difficult to fill. Research participants from this water board reported that they likewise experienced difficulty in filling positions related to the fields of information technology; safety, health and environmental management; legal and corporate governance; financial management; and project management. This barrier to talent management is not necessarily unique to some statutory water boards. The challenge to attract especially a younger generation of talent to work in isolated geographical areas is also being experienced in the South African construction sector (Shikweni 2018:242).

7.9 Insufficient alignment of learning development to competency and skills needs

According to the Water Sector Leadership Group Skills Development Task Team (2009:68), it is critical that the water sector should emphasise constant investment in human capital and upskilling across workforces. KPMG (2013:1) concludes that, if this is not done, a divide will

manifest between the skills current employees have and those that are needed by their employer. Against this background, it is noteworthy that some of the interviewees were of the opinion that learning development was insufficiently aligned to the competency and skills needs of the water boards concerned. This may be indicative of a situation where not enough emphasis is placed on a strategic approach to learning development in addressing competency and skills issues.

7.10 Employing designated talent in meeting employment equity targets

As national government business enterprises, statutory water boards also have to comply with national legislation for example, the Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998, Republic of South Africa (1998) in meeting employment equity requirements and targets. According to some of the interviewees, this situation added further complexity to talent management in the sector and filling positions with individuals from the designated groups. Apart from racial representation and diversification, one of the interviewees was of the opinion that finding suitable female talent (especially with regard to scarce skills related to engineers, technicians and technical trades) currently poses a significant challenge in a sector that has been characterised in the past as a predominantly male working environment. Within the South African context, this could potentially be a collective barrier to talent management since it also emerged in the already mentioned studies on the local construction and electricity sectors (Mtshali *et al.* 2018; Shikweni *et al.* 2019:11).

8. CATEGORISING THE IDENTIFIED TALENT MANAGEMENT THEMES AND INDUCING STRATEGIC PILLARS FOR TALENT MANAGEMENT

Inductive coding (new codes) and inductive logic (inducing general principles from specific observations) were used to categorise the above themes and induce three strategic pillars for talent management as follows:

Table 2: Identifying categories of talent management themes and induced strategic pillars

EMERGING CATEGORIES	CONTRIBUTING THEMES	INDUCED STRATEGIC PILLARS
Distinctive organisational challenges	- Geographical isolation of some operational areas - Employing designated talent in meeting employment equity targets - Alignment with organisational strategy - Comprehensive stakeholder involvement	Pillar One: Distinctive organisational challenges need to be taken into consideration and addressed during the development and implementation of a successful talent management strategy

EMERGING CATEGORIES	CONTRIBUTING THEMES	INDUCED STRATEGIC PILLARS
Talent attraction	- A blend of inclusive and exclusive talent management practices - Limited scarce skills talent pool - Isolated emphasis on recruitment and selection	Pillar Two: An organisation has to consciously position itself as an attractive employer to targeted talent
Talent advancement	- Low staff turnover and mobility - Lack of career advancement opportunities - Insufficient alignment of learning development to competency and/or skills needs	Pillar Three: An organisation must commit itself to ongoing talent advancement in retaining talent

Source: Authors own compilation

In the above table, the three identified categories of themes were used to induce and propose three strategic pillars to support the development of a successful talent management strategy. The suggested supporting pillars should guide and focus both the strategic planning and implementation processes. How to use these supporting pillars in strategic talent management and their implications will now be briefly highlighted:

- **Pillar One: Distinctive organisational challenges need to be taken into consideration and addressed during the development and implementation of a successful talent management strategy**

Every organisation operates within a distinctive internal and external organisational environment. As a result, the challenges that could influence the successful implementation of talent management may differ from organisation to organisation. The unique and identified organisational challenges that characterise the internal and external environment of the water boards concerned relate to the geographical isolation of some operational areas, the imperative as a state-owned entity to meet employment equity targets by employing talent from designated groups, the extent to which talent management is aligned with organisational strategy, and the prevalence (or not) of comprehensive stakeholder involvement. The water boards concerned have to overtly address the identified distinctive organisational challenges in order to facilitate the successful implementation of talent management. Such cognition of distinctive organisational challenges is a prerequisite to the successful implementation of talent management.

- **Pillar Two: An organisation has to consciously position itself as an attractive employer to targeted talent**

Organisations must not only comprehend what blend of inclusive and exclusive talent management practices would position them as attractive employers, but also be aware of factors that could inhibit the attraction of potential talent. In the case of the water boards concerned, the existence of a limited scarce skills talent pool that can be accessed and a situation where recruitment and selection are not holistically integrated with the entire talent management process were identified as potential factors that could impede the attraction of talent.

- **Pillar Three: An organisation must commit itself to ongoing talent advancement in retaining talent**

Once talent has been attracted and recruited, talent advancement could play a crucial role in retaining such talent. The institutional factors that hamper the effective implementation of talent management within these boards must be dealt with. Within the context of the water boards concerned, factors such as low staff turnover and mobility, a lack of career advancement opportunities, and the insufficient alignment of learning development to competency and/or skills needs could constrain talent advancement and the successful implementation of talent management.

9. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The implication of the findings of the study is that ignorance of the identified talent management themes and pillars can be detrimental for successful implementation. Since talent management is not merely an HR responsibility, but also a business imperative, senior managers need to be actively involved in the talent management process by making recruitment, succession planning, leadership development and the retention of key employees' part of their managerial priorities. Managers must also be willing to devote a significant amount of their time to these activities, such as taking part in recruitment interviews in their respective departments (Stahl *et al.* 2012:27–32) and providing the necessary support to other talent management stakeholders (Garavan 2013:1). Only by doing so will managerial involvement manifest as an enabler and not as a barrier to the successful implementation of talent management.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that management in cooperation with the HR management departments in the statutory water board sector consider using the identified and proposed strategic pillars to support the development of successful talent management strategies that could guide the implementation of talent management practices in a more focused and systematic

manner. Moreover, the potential use of the proposed strategic pillars for talent management within other talent management contexts deserves further research.

To address the three (3) pillars, it is recommended that practitioners do the following:

- Take the organisational challenges into consideration in order to plan and develop the talent management strategy as well as to align the business strategy to the talent management strategy.
- An organisation has to consciously position itself as an attractive employer to targeted talent by engaging with government to improve the geographical challenges in which these boards are situated.
- An organisation must commit itself to ongoing talent advancement in retaining talent by increasing the career advancement opportunities and aligning learning development to competency and/or skills needs.

11. LIMITATIONS

The South African statutory water board sector is a complex, multi-faceted and context-sensitive environment. It cannot be suggested that smaller water boards excluded from the study would necessarily experience and identify the same talent management themes. The transferability of the findings on the identification of talent management themes and pillars to the statutory water board sector as a whole may be limited. Nonetheless, the proposed strategic pillars for developing a context-specific talent management strategy transcend the research environment in which they were developed. As a result, this outcome of the study may also be of practical value in other talent management environments.

12. CONCLUSION

Identifying and eventually attending to talent management themes and pillars will empower statutory water boards to address current and future employment needs effectively and efficiently, and assist in realising their strategic goals and objectives in order to improve the delivery of water services. By taking note of the challenges and pillars suggested in this research, the management of talent within the South African statutory water board sector may be improved.

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