

Aligning talent with strategy: An empirical study on the existence and implementation of talent management policies

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Background: In South Africa's gold-mining sector, aligning talent with organisational strategy is critical for operational sustainability and competitiveness. However, the effective implementation of talent management policies remains a challenge, often characterised by inconsistencies and organisational fragmentation.

Aim: The study investigated the existence and implementation of talent management policies and assessed the extent to which these are aligned with corporate strategy in selected gold-mining companies in the Free State province.

Setting: The research was conducted at six gold-mining companies operating in the Free State province of South Africa.

Method: Anchored in the interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative case study design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with human resource professionals responsible for talent management practices.

Results: The findings indicate that while formal talent management policies exist, their implementation is inconsistently applied across departments. This is often hindered by organisational silos, limited leadership support, and insufficient resources. The study reveals only partial alignment between talent strategies and broader business objectives, raising concerns about policy integration and execution.

Conclusion: The study highlights a gap between policy and practice, emphasising the need for more integrated and strategically aligned talent management systems in the mining sector.

Contribution: The research contributes to talent management scholarship by offering context-specific insights into how talent management is operationalised in the South African mining sector. It provides practical recommendations for aligning talent strategies with organisational goals to enhance workforce effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

Keywords: talent management; talent management policy; corporate strategic alignment; mining industry; strategic alignment.

Introduction

The South African mining industry remains one of the anchors of economic development in the country, contributing significantly to both employment and gross domestic product (GDP) (Khubana, Rootman & Smith 2022; Lumadi & Nyasha 2024). However, the sector faces persistent challenges related to workforce management, skills shortages and development, and the implementation of talent management policies (Buthelezi & Naidoo 2024). Talent management is critical to maintaining operational efficiency, safety, and competitiveness.

Aligning talent management policies with corporate strategy enhances workforce stability and productivity; however, numerous barriers hinder effective implementation (Ntlhoiseng 2023).

Since apartheid, mining has remained a pivotal sector driving economic growth, foreign investment, and job creation in South Africa (Benard 2018). The country is endowed with vast mineral wealth and ranks among the world's leaders in the production of platinum, gold, diamonds, and coal. Mining contributes approximately 8% – 10% of national GDP and provides direct employment to hundreds of thousands, with many more employed indirectly through support industries (Khubana et al. 2022). Apart from being a major contributor to export earnings, the sector plays a vital role in infrastructural development and community upliftment.

Despite these contributions, the mining industry has long grappled with economic and structural challenges, including fluctuating commodity prices, regulatory uncertainty, and socio-political pressures (Lumadi & Nyasha 2024). The increasing focus on sustainable and responsible mining has heightened the need for effective workforce management, particularly to meet environmental, social, and governance obligations (Hamann 2003). These sustainability pressures have highlighted the importance of aligning talent management policies with corporate strategy to secure the industry's sustainability and long-term success. Moreover, executive leaders continue to express concern regarding poor implementation of such policies, which can undermine organisational effectiveness and business performance (Mokoena, Schultz & Dachapalli 2022).

Although talent management is widely acknowledged as a strategic tool for achieving organisational outcomes (Al Aina & Atan 2020), there remains a notable gap in empirical research regarding its application and strategic alignment in developing markets, particularly within the mining sector (Jayaraman, Talib & Khan 2018).

Furthermore, despite its recognised importance, limited research has explored organisational perspectives and practices on talent management (Aljbou, French & Ali 2025), reinforcing the need for further investigation. This gap is especially concerning given the mining industry's reliance on scarce and highly specialised skills, rendering it vulnerable to talent shortages.

Talent management has been increasingly recognised as a strategic imperative, and it is regarded as an essential for enhancing organisational performance and attracting, developing, and retaining high-performing employees (Nugroho & Wulanhari 2025). The growth and competitiveness of organisations are directly affected by their ability, or inability, to implement effective talent management strategies (Xulu & Brijball Parumasur 2023). Therefore, realising the benefits of talent management requires mastering the implementation of well-structured talent management policies.

Talent management, as a core aspect of human resource management (HRM), centres on attracting, developing, and retaining skilled employees (Mokoena et al. 2022). While the operational dimensions of talent management, such as recruitment, development, and retention, have been widely studied across various sectors (Kravariti et al. 2022), these studies offer limited insight into the internal and external strategic alignment of talent management practices (Kravariti et al. 2025). A deeper exploration of this alignment could illuminate how and why talent management is implemented in practice, complementing existing studies that often focus only on intended or espoused approaches (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo 2017). Understanding this alignment could unlock greater insight into the practical value and contextual application of talent management.

Although there has been much discussion on talent management issues in South Africa's mining sector, little research has focused specifically on the implementation of talent management practices in Free State gold mines and how these practices are influenced by local historical labour relations, the need for specialised skills, et cetera.

To address the identified research gap, this study investigated the existence and implementation of talent management policies in gold-mining companies in the Free State province and how these policies support corporate sustainability goals. The next section of the article covers the literature review. Followed by the research methodology and philosophy employed in the study. The subsequent section presents and analyses the empirical findings. Lastly, the study's key contributions are highlighted, including practical implications for management, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Research purpose and objectives

This article explores the challenges of implementing talent management policies and their alignment with corporate strategies at gold mines in the Free State, South Africa. To achieve the primary purpose, the objectives of the study are twofold. Firstly, to determine whether talent management policies exist and to identify the challenges experienced in effectively implementing them in the South African mining industry. Secondly, to investigate the extent to which talent management policies are aligned with corporate strategy in the mining industry.

Literature review

This section delineates the key concepts underpinning the study as identified in the literature. These include talent management, corporate strategic alignment, talent management policy, and talent management in the mining industry.

Talent management

Lesenyeho, Barkhuizen and Schutte (2018) and Musakuro and De Klerk (2021) observe that both academics and human resource (HR) professionals have shown growing interest in talent management in the 21st century.

The concept has evolved over time through distinct phases. As a result, scholars have developed different definitions of talent management based on their disciplinary approaches, perspectives and conceptual frameworks for talent (Gandi & Saurombe 2025). A significant body of literature suggests that talent management should be examined within specific organisational contexts, considering its interconnected elements (Kravariti et al. 2025). For the purpose of this study, talent management is defined as:

[A]n integrated set of processes, programs, and cultural norms in an organisation designed and implemented to attract, develop, deploy, and retain talent to achieve strategic

objectives and meet future business needs. (Silzer & Dowell 2009:18)

Talent management typically entails attracting, developing, deploying and retaining employees (Silzer & Dowell 2009), but this study focusses only on how talent management policy is developed, implemented and aligned with the organisation's strategy, specifically regarding talent development and deployment. Talent development and deployment are critical to building workforce capabilities and sustaining operations in a gold-mining environment, which is why this study primarily focuses on these two areas.

Talent attraction and retention are also important aspects of talent management; however, they are not included in this study. Silzer and Dowell's definition is adopted as it encapsulates both the strategic and comprehensive nature of talent management while clearly linking it to long-term organisational goals and success. In resource-intensive industries such as mining, where competitiveness and sustainability depend heavily on the strategic deployment of human capital, this definition highlights the technical and procedural dimensions of talent management but also underscores the importance of organisational culture and strategic foresight.

Talent management and corporate strategic alignment

Strategic alignment is one of the main tenets of effective talent management, requiring coordination among HR functions, senior leadership, and line management (Schiemann 2009; Silzer & Dowell 2009). Strategic alignment refers to the extent to which HR practices, including talent management, support and reinforce the overarching strategic direction of an organisation (Lees & Dhanpat 2021). Effective alignment ensures that talent is recruited, developed, and retained in ways that support the achievement of long-term business objectives (Bethke-Langenegger, Mahler & Staffebach 2011; Garrow & Hirsh 2008; Silzer & Dowell 2010).

Corporate strategy, in turn, encompasses an organisation's long-term goals and the methods employed to attain them (Feldman 2020). However, in practice, organisational silos often cause a disconnect between strategic intent and operational execution, as human resources management (HRM) functions create talent management policies while line management creates the conditions under which those policies are enacted. Therefore, HRM functions set talent management policies without the authority or means to implement them, thereby putting line managers in an awkward position regarding their authority and accountability.

Parajuli, Mahat and Kandel (2023) argue that aligning talent management policies with corporate strategy is essential to ensure that the workforce is equipped to contribute effectively to the organisation's overall objectives and vision. Communication and transparency are identified as key

enablers of this alignment (Raut 2024). When organisational goals and expectations are clearly communicated, employees are more likely to understand how their individual roles contribute to overall corporate success.

In addition to communication, training and development play a central role in aligning talent management with corporate strategy (Sindhura 2023). By investing in upskilling and development programmes, mining companies can enhance employee capabilities and ensure workforce competencies align with strategic priorities. Performance management is another critical mechanism in fostering alignment between talent practices and corporate goals, as it enables organisations to translate strategic objectives into measurable performance expectations, guide employee behaviour, and reinforce desired competencies (Hanson, Lelnyk & Calantone 2010; Schiemann 2009). Maley et al. (2024) highlight the importance of setting clear performance objectives, offering continuous feedback, and recognising high performers. These practices motivate employees to direct their efforts toward achieving the organisation's strategic goals.

Existence and implementation of talent management policies

The presence of formal talent management policies does not necessarily guarantee effective implementation.

Factors such as leadership support, organisational culture, and change readiness significantly influence whether these policies are translated into practice (Rismanayah et al. 2024). Increasingly, talent management policies emphasise building strong employer brands and employee value propositions to attract top talent (Al Jawali et al. 2022). Meyer (2016) argues that businesses must develop talent management policies to effectively guide the underlying principles of talent management practices and strategy. Musakuro (2022) adds that such policies must be applied consistently and equitably, even as talent management strategies evolve in response to changing organisational needs. Bussin (2014) further emphasises the importance of clearly articulating an organisation's philosophy on talent management, including governance structures, accountability mechanisms, and processes for evaluating outcomes.

In the mining sector, the existence of talent management policies does not necessarily imply successful execution. Garavan, Carbery and Rock (2012) suggest that although many organisations formally adopt talent management models, they often fail to implement them effectively, particularly in industries such as mining, where organisational culture tends to prioritise capital investment and operational efficiency over human development (Lumadi & Nyasha 2024). In the South African context, research has shown that although talent management policies exist in most mining companies, their implementation is often uneven (Barkhuizen & Gumede 2021). This is often attributed to structural rigidities, skills deficits, and shifting business imperatives. In addition,

organisational silos and the lack of coordination between HR and line functions contribute to fragmentation that hinders talent management policy integration across departments (Celestin & Vanitha 2017; Chimakati & Odiyo 2023). The dynamic nature of the mining environment, marked by labour unrest, health and safety risks, and volatile commodity prices, further complicates the consistent application of talent management strategies (Gunawan et al. 2024). To overcome these challenges, the implementation of talent management policies requires continuous monitoring, committed leadership, and contextual adaptation. Only through such sustained efforts can these policies move beyond formal documentation to become meaningful drivers of strategic workforce outcomes.

Talent management in the mining sector

The South African mining sector operates within a highly complex environment characterised by regulatory pressures, skills shortages, and strong trade union dynamics (Kau & Flotman 2025; Plagerson & Stuart 2024).

The sector faces unique talent management challenges, including remote operational sites, hazardous working conditions, labour tensions, and the dual engagement of skilled and semi-skilled employees (Milošević et al. 2025). These challenges are further intensified by the country's socio-political context, particularly the lingering effects of apartheid, existing skills imbalances, and historical labour tensions (Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu 2011). According to Matinde (2025), talent attraction and retention in the mining industry are also influenced by the cyclical nature of commodity markets. During downturns, companies often scale back operations, making it difficult to maintain or rebuild talent pipelines during subsequent booms.

In previous studies conducted in the South African mining sector, researchers have identified numerous obstacles to implementing initiatives to promote organisational sustainability.

Cronjé and Chenga (2009), for instance, investigated how mining companies in South Africa were attempting to implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and found that there were still many differences between what was intended in policy and how it was actually executed. Although their research concentrated primarily on CSR within the context of sustainable development, in general, the implementation of other strategic organisational policies within the sector is also characterised by similar problems. The current research continues to advance the sustainability discourse that was initiated through the aforementioned study, but now focuses on talent management policies and the effective implementation of talent management as enablers for long-term organisational sustainability in the mining industry.

Talent management is seen as a strategic and sustainability-oriented practice. Conceptually, it is not widely implemented, especially in sectors that are complex and highly regulated, such as mining. Many existing studies have either reported the existence of talent management frameworks or environmental or corporate commitments and have constructed an empirical basis for developing these practices at the corporate level and sustaining them over time.

In addition, few studies have explored these dynamics in the context of South African gold-mining companies.

The intersection between historical inequities, institutional frameworks, and operational constraints in this sector suggests a significant gap in understanding the relationship between the existence of talent management policies and their effectiveness in practice and sustainability. The objective of this research is to explore the extent to which talent management policies are implemented as mandated in Free State gold-mining companies and whether they align with corporate sustainability objectives.

Theoretical framework

The research employed a dual theoretical framework, institutional theory and resource-based view (RBV), to better understand the sustainability and implementation of talent management policies in the context of gold mines in South Africa. By understanding how various forces impact organisations at the institutional level, institutional theory examines how the regulatory environment, historical events, industry norms and stakeholder expectations shape the establishment and continuation of organisational practices (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). In the current research, labour regulations, demands for transformation, union pressures and sustainability expectations pose critical challenges to organisations seeking to develop and implement their talent management policies.

In comparison, the RBV defines human capital as a source of competitive advantage if it is valuable, rare, inimitable, and effectively organised (Barney 1991). Based on this philosophy, talent management policies have been created to align human capital development with corporate strategy, improving long-term sustainability and performance.

The integration of the two theories provides a fuller understanding of the difficulties in implementing talent management policy. The RBV explains why organisations want to align their talent strategy with their overarching corporate goals, whereas institutional theory illustrates how context-specific limitations and structures, such as entrenched silos, power dynamics, and compliance-oriented structures, impact the translation from policy vision into practice. Thus, organisational silos with fragmented accountabilities are institutionalised practices that ultimately create barriers to the successful development of human capital as a strategic resource.

This integrated framework can be understood as the theoretical underpinning for interpreting the empirical data via strategic alignment, organisational structure, and implementation results. Through this integration, the study can progress from merely descriptive presentations of the policy gap towards an understanding of the interaction between the institutional pressure brought to bear on organisational actors and the effect of organisations' internal dynamics on the development and sustainability of talent management policy in South African gold-mining firms.

Methods

Research design and approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2023). This method was selected as it facilitates the collection of data grounded in personal experience and is inherently exploratory in nature (Flick 2011). A qualitative case study design was employed to develop an in-depth understanding of talent alignment and the implementation of talent management policies (Creswell & Poth 2017). This design was particularly well-suited to providing insight into how selected South African gold-mining companies implement talent management practices aligned with their corporate strategy (Meyers & Van Woerkom 2013).

Research philosophy

An interpretivist philosophical paradigm was adopted in the research (Pervin & Mokhtar 2022). The ontological stance emphasised understanding the existence and alignment of talent management policies from the perspectives of industry practitioners. This approach enabled exploration of complex, context-specific issues faced by the participating gold-mining companies.

Population and sampling

The study employed purposive sampling to select six HR professionals who oversee talent management activities at various mining sites, in accordance with the qualitative sample size recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2021a). The study by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) found that 94% of the most prominent or frequent codes emerged in the first six interviews and 97% by the 12th interview, suggesting that the sample size was sufficient to ensure valid findings and possibly indicating data saturation. These participants were deemed suitable due to their direct involvement in the

design and implementation of talent management strategies. People who serve as key informants for an investigation have expert knowledge and experience directly related to the phenomenon being studied. As a result, they can provide detailed, context-specific information about the situation (Patton 2002). In the case of South African mining, HR professionals play a central role, allowing them to analyse both how policy is intended to work and how it will actually be implemented; therefore, HR professionals are positioned to provide organisational-level insights in this area (Cronjé & Chenga 2009). The final sample consisted of six HR professionals who meaningfully contributed their experiences of talent management. The following sampling criteria were applied to select participants: Firstly, participants had to be employed in the mining industry; secondly, they needed to be directly involved in talent management; and third, they were required to hold HR qualifications and have relevant HR experience.. These inclusion criteria ensured that participants could provide meaningful and relevant responses.

In this study, as shown in Table 1, the sample comprised of four males and two females. Their professional experience ranged from fewer than 5 years to more than 20 years, and their ages ranged from 31 years old to over 50 years old. Their educational backgrounds included post-matric certificates, diplomas, B.Tech., and B.Com., degrees, and postgraduate qualifications.

The decision to focus on HR professionals was deliberate, as the study aimed to analyse talent management policy through both its design and implementation. HR professionals play an essential role in translating the corporate talent strategy into operational talent management practices. This makes it possible for them to evaluate the areas in which there is a disconnect between what the policy is intended to accomplish and what actually occurs. Employee opinions will provide a valuable source of information about the talent management experience; however, they were not a part of the current study, and future research should focus on this topic.

Research instrument

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted at the participants' workplaces, scheduled at times convenient for them. An interview guide was developed based on the study's objectives, research problem, and key themes identified in the literature review. Participants received the

TABLE 1: Demographic profile of the participants.

Participant	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male
Race	Black African person	Black African person	Black African person	Black African person	Black African person	Black African person
Age (years)	41–50	31–40	31–40	41–50	51–65	31–40
Occupational category	HR manager	Senior personnel manager (acting)	SDF	HR manager	Training manager	HR officer
Number of years in the job	11–15	0–5	0–5	6–10	11–15	11–15
Total number of years working	20+	11–15	0–5	11–15	20+	11–15
Highest educational qualification	Diploma or degree	Post-metric certificate	PGDip	B. Tech: HRM	Diploma	Degree

SDF, skills development facilitator; HR, human resources; PGDIP, post-graduate diploma; B. Tech, Bachelor of Engineering (Technology); HRM, human resource management.

consent forms, participant information sheets, and interview schedule via email 1 week prior to the interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, and supplementary field notes were taken by the researcher as necessary.

Data recording and analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Field notes were taken during the interviews to mitigate potential omission errors. The transcripts were imported into ATLAS.ti software (ver. 23) to support the organisation of data for analysis and to aid in analysing the interviews. Analyses were completed using the thematic framework of Braun and Clarke (2006) to ensure both transparency and consistency, while the ATLAS.ti software assisted in the reliability of the analysis throughout the process. Categorisation was guided by the research objectives, and themes were developed to ensure clarity and depth of meaning (Bazeley 2013). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis was followed. These steps included: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) identifying initial themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final report (Braun & Clarke 2021b).

Trustworthiness

The study ensured trustworthiness by adhering to the principles of credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability (Ahmed 2024). Credibility was established by ensuring sufficient time was spent on reviewing and revising data, conducting verbatim transcriptions of all interviews, and using direct quotes as evidence of participants' perspectives. In addition, the process of coding and developing themes allowed for continued involvement with the data, maintaining fidelity to the participants' perspectives. Through a thorough description of the research context (i.e. organisation, sector, role of participants and socio-economic environment) in which the study took place, thick descriptions were used to identify potential transferability. By providing an overview of the context, the reader can evaluate how to apply the results of this research in settings with similar characteristics, but they will not be able to make any guarantees regarding the statistical generalisation of the results. Using the ATLAS.ti software systematically created an audit trail for the research through documenting methodological choices, developing data codes into themes, and providing a way for the researcher to demonstrate the methodological transparency and consistency of the data analysis process. The researchers enhanced the confirmability of the research by engaging in reflexive memo writing and by thoroughly documenting the data analysis methodologies and the decisions made. Each decision was logically supported by the evidence and data, not by the researcher's bias.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Central University of Technology Faculty Research and Innovation Committee on

29 May 2025 (Ref. no. FMSEC30317). Following approval, formal requests for permission to conduct the study were emailed to mining shafts across the Free State province. Six mining sites granted consent to participate. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed that all information would be treated confidentially and used solely for academic purposes. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews were conducted at the participants' workplaces, scheduled at their convenience. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms (P1–P6) were assigned to all participants.

Results

Three themes emerged from the data analysis in this study: (1) Talent management policy implementation; (2) Challenges of talent management policy implementation; and (3) Alignment between talent management and corporate strategy. Themes one and two address the first research objective, while theme three addresses the second research objective.

Theme 1: Talent management policy implementation

Implementing talent management is one of the most critical strategic issues facing managers in South African organisations (Mukwawaya, Nel & Van Zyl 2022; Simataa & Pearse 2018). Talent management policies, procedures, and strategies serve as a framework for guiding these processes. Participants reported that the presence of such policies helped them manage talent more efficiently in their organisations. One participant stated:

'Talent management policies have been fully implemented and that is beneficial to hire people with the correct skill set. Because skills would be matched appropriately to positions within the organisation. This means that every employee would have a clear understanding of what they are expected to do and what their responsibilities are. This clarity can contribute to a more efficient and productive workforce. The employees would feel valued and perform optimally.' (P5)

Additionally, participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 indicated that their respective mining shafts had talent management policies. Participants 3, 4, and 6 also noted that employees were aware of the policy. One participant remarked:

'We do have the talent management policy, and it is implemented. I believe all employees are aware of the policy.' (P6)

However, not all participants shared this view. One participant raised concerns about inconsistent implementation, stating:

'We do have a policy on talent management, but I don't think it is properly implemented in all the departments within the mine. Some departments do implement it; others don't bother to implement the policy.' (P5)

In some mining organisations, specific roles are assigned to monitor the implementation of talent management policies. Nevertheless, Turner and Kalmen (2014) argue that HR management should not bear sole responsibility for the implementation of talent management processes. Rather, the

responsibility should be distributed among multiple stakeholders, including line managers, senior leadership, and employees themselves. One participant elaborated:

'It has been implemented as much as possible, as there are controls in place to ensure that employees adhere to the requirements of the policy. There is a talent management supervisor who constantly monitors employees to ensure their individual development plans are up to date and that there is progress.' (P2)

Although a designated individual may drive the process, responsibility for talent management appears to be broadly shared. One participant emphasised the coordinating role of the HR department:

'HR is expected to advise line managers on how to complete the talent form and individual development plans (IDPs) of the employees in the system.' (P1)

Another participant supported this view, noting that the mine uses a variety of structures to manage policy compliance:

'Compliance with implemented policies is monitored through various platforms such as employment equity meetings, succession plan meetings, and ad-hoc engagements with employees.' (P2)

The participants interviewed acknowledged that talent management policy is not only an HR driven function.

The greater challenge for governance is that having multiple parties (HR, line management, and senior leadership) responsible for a function creates uncertainty about who owns and is accountable for results related to talent management outcomes. In practice, line managers may focus on meeting productivity targets rather than developing talent, and HR has limited authority to enforce compliance beyond its advisory role. The relationship between operational managers and HR professionals is much like the relationship between two equally qualified employees. HR professionals usually have less authority to make decisions than an operational manager. Even though a company's talent management policies are supported at the corporate level, in many cases, these are subordinate to site-level operational requirements. The results indicate that without well-established accountability channels and an executive sponsor for talent management policies, the shared accountability model can weaken, rather than strengthen their implementation of these policies...

Theme 2: Challenges of talent management policy implementation

Participants shared their perspectives on implementing talent management policies in practice and outlined several challenges they encountered. Table 2 summarises the key challenges identified by participants.

The responses confirm that misalignment between policy and practice remains a persistent issue. For instance, participant 3's concern that 'only certain people are given

opportunities' highlights a perceived lack of fairness and transparency, which can erode employee trust and commitment. This perception is supported by Simataa and Pearce (2018), who argue that talent management policies are often perceived as bureaucratic exercises rather than developmental tools, especially when implementation is uneven or politically influenced.

Resistance to change and entrenched organisational cultures were also reported as core barriers. Participant 2's observation that some employees 'still prefer the old way of doing things' illustrates how legacy systems continue to influence employee attitudes and behaviour. This finding aligns with Mukwawaya et al. (2022), who note that entrenched cultural patterns in South Africa's public and resource-based sectors tend to slow the adoption of modern talent management approaches.

The inconsistent application of policies across departments, noted by participant 5, underscores a lack of standardisation and uneven leadership accountability. While some departments are committed to talent development, others do not prioritise it, resulting in disparate employee experiences and uneven strategic outcomes. Mokhathi and Van der Westhuizen (2019) similarly observed that in financially constrained sectors, such as mining, HR policy implementation is often ad hoc and reliant on individual departmental leadership.

Trade union resistance was also cited as a significant impediment. Participant 3 indicated that 'trade unions tend to become less cooperative' during policy implementation efforts. While unions play a vital role in safeguarding employee rights, their adversarial stance may hinder or delay talent-related initiatives unless collaborative labour-management relations are prioritised. This reinforces the need for inclusive dialogue and partnership when introducing HR reforms in unionised sectors.

TABLE 2: Challenges with talent management policy implementation.

Participant	Challenge(s)	Main concern
3	'Employees often feel that only certain people are given opportunities'.	Perceived unfair distribution of opportunities.
3	'Trade unions tend to become less cooperative when there is a need for implementing the policies'.	Lack of cooperation from trade unions.
2	'There is an old culture wherein practices and procedures were not followed properly, and therefore, there are certain individuals who still prefer the old way of doing things'.	Resistance to change and outdated practices.
2	'Employees were not always given positions on merit ... now that policies are in place ... this causes conflict and disputes'.	Workplace conflict due to perceptions of unfairness.
5	'Talent management policy in certain departments is implemented... that's inherent to the department in the development of staff'.	Fragmented implementation of talent management policy.
1	'It is challenging to develop a worker who is either unwilling to grow ... most of them feel that they will work here as a cleaner, for example, and feels they will die here. Plan according to the needs of the employees instead of the company's needs'.	Employee unwillingness to develop; lack of a growth mindset.

Furthermore, employee reluctance to engage in development programmes was raised. Participant 1 reported that some employees 'feel they will die here' in the same low-level job, pointing to a lack of aspiration or motivation. The resistance to personal growth poses a psychological and cultural challenge, particularly in environments where policies are not co-designed with employee input. Poorhosseinzadeh and Subramaniam (2012) emphasise the importance of aligning talent development efforts with employee aspirations to foster engagement.

Finally, workplace conflict related to perceptions of historical injustice continues to disrupt implementation.

As noted by participant 2, transitioning from informal recruitment practices to merit-based systems has created tension and internal resistance. Without effective change management strategies, even well-intentioned policies may fail.

Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of inclusive, transparent, and strategically aligned implementation. Talent management policies are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes unless the operational, cultural, and relational challenges identified here are addressed holistically.

Theme 3: Alignment between talent management and corporate strategy

A crucial component of talent optimisation is aligning employees with organisational strategy. However, many companies at both leadership and operational levels struggle to achieve this alignment effectively (Grensing-Prophal 2023). Aligning organisational objectives with talent management strategies is essential, as placing the right people in the right roles at the right times can offer organisations a competitive advantage and enhance long-term sustainability.

In this regard, one participant remarked:

'For me, the focus of talent management is on developing and aligning a team member's skill set with the organisation's strategic objectives. As a result, it all boils down to corporate strategy and matching the right skill set for the job.' (P6)

The importance of aligning strategic planning with talent strategies was also highlighted by another participant, who stated:

'To develop a well-balanced strategic plan, talent management strategies in the mine, it is necessary required conducting a thorough and in-depth analysis of each potential employee according to job description and level of job satisfaction.' (P1)

This discussion reflects the fact that the participating mining companies adopt a systematic and strategic approach to talent management. In today's competitive economic climate, such an approach is more critical than ever. Duran (2023) contends that strategic talent management, defined as the process of aligning an organisation's human capital needs

with its strategic goals, is essential for attracting, developing, and retaining top talent.

Moreover, as business strategies evolve, talent management practices must also be reviewed and adjusted accordingly. Participants emphasised the alignment between talent practices and organisational needs, particularly in enhancing customer service. Customer service is frequently the first and most influential point of contact between the company and its clients (Wiid 2023). Perez-Vega et al. (2022) suggest that when businesses provide excellent customer service, the positive experience becomes associated with their products or services, increasing customer retention. This view was supported by a participant, who observed:

'Talent management is more about what we need to build in our staff and what skill sets we currently have to guarantee that we are providing the correct services to our customers.' (P6)

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the challenges associated with implementing talent management policies and aligning them with corporate strategy in gold-mining organisations in the Free State, South Africa. The discussion is structured around the three key themes.

Interpreting perceived unfairness in talent management

While the lack of fairness in talent management procedures cannot be viewed solely as a failure of the technical aspects or policy implementation, the perception of unfairness also emphasises the historical and structural dynamics of the South African gold-mining industry.

The legacy of apartheid labour practices, in addition to contemporary pressures for transformation and equality, has led employees in the mining sector to believe that they should have access to a relatively equal number of development and advancement opportunities. When the talent management process is not implemented consistently or transparently, there is a risk of reinforcing mistrust rooted in the historical context rather than supporting the industry's strategic renewal.

The results of this research further validate previous findings identifying fairness and transparency as major factors that inhibit effective talent management (Bethke-Langenegger et al. 2011; Silzer & Dowell 2010). However, in the context of mining, perceived unfairness reflects a failure of change management characterised by the lack of effective communication, stakeholder engagement, and ultimately trust in managerial intent. The absence of trust is critical to achieving strategic alignment in an environment characterised by a high level of unionisation.

Distributed responsibility and organisational power dynamics

Talent management is perceived as a shared responsibility between HR and line management, creating structural tension

in the mining industry. Shared ownership of talent management supports the foundational theories of strategic HR. However, the findings of this research suggest that shared ownership is associated with decreased accountability among those involved in talent development in practice. Operational managers typically have more authority over decision-making than HR does; therefore, they emphasise short-term production goals at the expense of developing talent for long-term success, thereby displacing HR's strategic role.

The findings also support the existing body of research highlighting the challenges HR faces in establishing strategic influence within industries that are primarily operationally focused (Garrow & Hirsh 2008; Schiemann 2009). The study demonstrates how, without explicit systems of governance and executive endorsement, the redistribution of responsibility can contribute to further fragmentation rather than enhance strategic integration.

Talent management, sustainability, and strategic alignment

Findings have also indicated that it is less important how well-established talent management policies are (formally defined) for achieving sustainability than for how well they are integrated into other governance and performance systems within the organisation. When talent management is viewed as a regulatory compliance exercise rather than a strategic capability, it will likely only meet 'sustainability objectives' in a cursory manner (e.g. not being aligned with, or utilised to further), due to its misalignment with the company's core values. This finding is consistent with the previously identified disconnect between policy intent and implementation in the mining sector (Cronjé & Chenga 2009; Hamann 2003), but takes the analysis one step further by demonstrating that this disconnect is specific to talent management processes.

This study makes several new contributions to the field of talent management. The first contribution is an extension of previous research on talent management in the South African mining industry, focusing more on the sustainability of the current policy at the operational level, rather than analysing it solely in terms of its policy presence or absence.

The second contribution is that, by placing the topic of talent management within the historical and/or institutional background of Free State gold-mining, we show how historic inequities, power dynamics and trust deficits shape today's talent management outcomes. The third contribution of this study is that it supports the strategic HRM theoretical framework by demonstrating how both distributed accountability and weak management structures limit the ability for talent management policies to be strategically aligned within heavily unionised, resource-based industries.

Practical implications

The results of this research indicate that to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of the talent management

policies employed by South African gold-mining organisations, an intentional approach to the managerial factors of governance, accountability, and stakeholder engagement is needed. These recommendations are based on the empirical themes that emerged from this research, not broadly defined aspirational principles. Firstly, to create a stronger accountability structure for the implementation of talent management. Because the findings revealed that accountability for talent management is divided between HR and operational line management, mining companies must formalise an executive-level structure for talent management accountability within the performance scorecards of senior and operational managers.

Specifically, succession planning, skills pipeline development, and targets for filling positions internally should be included in managers' performance evaluations to elevate talent management from a support function to a strategic responsibility.

Secondly, to develop cross-functional governance structures for talent management. Mining companies should create a site-based talent management steering committee comprising representatives from the HR function, operational management, and senior leadership. Quarterly meetings will be held to review site-specific talent metrics, assess employee succession risks, and ensure alignment among the different talent management initiatives and the organisation's operational and sustainability priorities.

Thirdly, provide a structured mechanism for company-union collaboration. Given how highly unionised the gold-mining industry is, companies need to move beyond occasional meetings with their unions and establish joint union-management talent development committees. Through these committees, companies will work with unions to develop common succession planning frameworks, skills development pathways and leadership development initiatives, which will help reduce resistance to talent management initiatives while improving employees' perception of legitimacy.

Fourthly, develop measurement and monitoring systems for all aspects of talent management. To achieve sustainable talent management, mining companies must have measurable outcomes. Companies need to establish a very limited number (less than 10) of talent metrics that are specific to their environment; for example, what percentage of the skills required in the business are covered by current employees; how many employees were promoted internally into critical skill shortages; and how many employees are ready to assume leadership roles in the key technical areas (technical and leadership), and this data must be reviewed by executives regularly to help inform decisions about the strategic planning for the organisation's workforce.

Finally, the leadership competencies of operational-level managers must be further developed through targeted leadership development programmes. Line managers are instrumental in implementing policies, and targeted

leadership development programmes equip operational-level managers with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively manage employee talent and production requirements. They will include strategies for identifying talent, coaching, and conducting performance-related conversations in the dynamic, multifaceted, and high-pressure world of mining.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study was subject to several limitations that offer opportunities for future research. Firstly, the research adopted a qualitative design and focused exclusively on gold-mining operations in the Free State province. As such, the findings may not be generalisable to the broader South African mining sector or to other industries where contextual dynamics, organisational cultures, and talent management priorities differ significantly (Alharahsheh & Pius 2020; Pham 2018).

Secondly, the study relied predominantly on self-reported data from organisational stakeholders. This introduces the potential for response bias, particularly when assessing the effectiveness of policy implementation. Notably, the perspectives of employees, the primary recipients and intended beneficiaries of talent management policies, were not thoroughly explored. This limits insights into how such policies are perceived and experienced at the operational level.

Thirdly, the study was limited in its ability to generalise due to potential bias arising from the interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm tends to capture individuals' subjective interpretations of reality rather than provide objective evidence of universal truth (Mack 2010). As a result of this, the study's outcome reflects HR professionals' interpretations, potentially including fewer alternative views. Moreover, power, agency, and structural inequality do not usually receive as much focus through interpretivist methodologies as they may in other contexts, particularly within the structural hierarchy of mining, which is often unionised and hierarchical (Pham 2018). Future research could provide a more comprehensive assessment of the impact of power relationships, managerial authority, and employee agency on the implementation and sustainability of talent management policies by employing a critical or mixed-paradigm approach.

A further limitation of this study is the lack of direct investigation into talent attraction and retention practices.

While these have been established as integral components of a talent management framework, this study focused solely on the method for strategically aligning organisations' talent development and deployment policies with their business objectives. Future studies could examine both recruitment and retention dynamics of talent in the South African mining sector, with a primary emphasis on sustainability and long-term stability.

Lastly, further research could usefully examine how technological interventions, such as talent analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), and digital HR systems, are being leveraged to strengthen the alignment between talent management and operational strategy. Such studies would provide critical evidence for organisations seeking to modernise and optimise workforce planning through data-driven practices.

Conclusion

This study offers a significant contribution to the body of knowledge on strategic HR management and talent management by providing empirical insights into the existence and implementation of talent management policies within the South African gold-mining industry. The mining sector is critical to national economic development but remains underrepresented in talent management literature. By focusing on six gold-mining operations in the Free State province, this research addresses a notable gap in understanding how talent management practices are operationalised in resource-intensive, unionised, and structurally complex environments.

The findings reveal that although formal talent management policies are in place, their implementation is often fragmented and inconsistently applied across departments. This is further hindered by outdated organisational cultures, limited leadership engagement, and resistance from trade unions. These insights deepen understanding of the barriers to effective policy implementation and highlight the importance of a contextualised approach to talent management, particularly in sectors where human capital is essential yet underdeveloped.

The study also advances theoretical and practical debates on the strategic alignment between corporate strategy and talent management. By integrating organisational theory and strategic HR perspectives, the research underscores the value of aligning talent policies with long-term business goals to promote operational sustainability. One of the study's key contributions lies in identifying the systemic and relational challenges encountered at gold-mining operations, thereby offering a practical framework for mining executives, HR practitioners, and policymakers to develop more coherent, inclusive, and strategically aligned talent management systems. Moreover, by recommending future research into employee perspectives and the role of digital tools in talent alignment, the study lays the groundwork for further inquiry into how workforce planning can be rendered more dynamic, inclusive, and responsive to organisational strategy, especially in high-risk, labour-intensive industries.

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Malefetsane E. Thasi: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Visualisation, Project administration, Data curation, Resources, Writing – review and editing. Freda van der Walt: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Writing – review and editing, Supervision. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The dataset is available on reasonable request from the corresponding author, Malefetsane E. Thasi.

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