



# Human Resource practitioners' perspectives on talent management in the South African gold-mining sector



## Authors:

Malefetsane Thasi<sup>1</sup>   
Freda van der Walt<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Business Management, Faculty of Management Sciences, Central University of Technology, Welkom, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Freda van der Walt,  
fvdwalt@cut.ac.za

## Dates:

Received: 09 June 2025

Accepted: 21 Oct. 2025

Published: 08 Dec. 2025

## How to cite this article:

Thasi, M., & Van der Walt, F. (2025). Human Resource practitioners' perspectives on talent management in the South African gold-mining sector. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur, 23(0), a3145. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v23i0.3145>

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**Orientation:** The South African gold-mining sector is in decline and faces numerous challenges, particularly regarding talent management.

**Research purpose:** The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of Human Resource (HR) practitioners on talent management in the South African gold-mining industry.

**Motivation for the study:** While the mining sector makes a significant contribution to the South African economy, it faces several operational and human capital challenges, one of which is talent management.

**Research approach/design and method:** The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, employing qualitative research methods. A qualitative descriptive design was utilised, with data collected through semi-structured interviews.

**Main findings:** The study found that HR practitioners conceptualise talent management as a systematic approach aligned with organisational strategy, involving the identification, development and retention of talent; gold-mining companies adopt an ethical and responsible approach to talent management and gold-mining companies prefer to nurture internal talent rather than recruiting top talent externally.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Based on the findings, it is evident that developing formal procedures for talent management is essential to clarify the roles of various structures within the talent management process and promoting responsible talent management is crucial.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study contributes to the limited research on HR practitioners' views of talent management within the gold-mining industry. The study highlights the need for formalised talent management practices to clarify stakeholder roles, improve implementation oversight and prevent inefficiencies. Furthermore, advocates for a more inclusive and responsible approach to talent management, one that recognises potential, enhances internal mobility and addresses the sector's challenges in attracting external talent.

**Keywords:** talent; talent management; South African mining industry; responsible talent management; gold-mining sector.

## Introduction

South Africa's mining sector has historically been essential to the growth of the economy because of its competitive position as one of the world's most resource-rich countries (Antin, 2013). The South African gold-mining industry is faced with both human capital and structural challenges, like declining ore grades, volatile commodity prices, skills shortages and emigration of experienced experts (Lumadi & Nyasha, 2024). Such pressures undermine continuity of operation and productivity, and therefore, the need to pursue resilient human resource (HR) strategies that are capable of obtaining, developing and holding on to core talent. In such a setting, effective talent management is not merely a strategic priority but a business requirement (Raheem & Kahn, 2019). Despite the primacy of the 'war for talent' discourse since the late 1990s, the majority of talent management practice has undergone a slight transformation (Hollstein et al., 2025; Setiawati et al., 2025). This is particularly concerning in gold-mining, where attracting and retaining high-quality labour is necessary for competitiveness.

The field of talent management remains conceptually scattered, with ongoing disagreements regarding the definitions of 'talent' and 'talent management' (Barkhuizen & Gumede, 2021; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). Whereas talent management has been extensively researched across sectors such as finance (Theodorsson et al., 2022), manufacturing (Wei-Loon & Marmaya, 2023) and the public sector (Kravariti & Johnston, 2020), scholarly attention to this process within the South African gold-mining sector remains scant. As such, this research study is particularly pertinent, given the industry's distinctive dynamics: its operations are geographically dispersed, occupational safety risks are embedded in organisational culture, and the industry has long-standing issues with retaining and attracting skilled professionals. These circumstances influence talent identification, development and retention yet remain underexplored in the existing literature. By addressing this lacuna, this study explores HR practitioners' perceptions of talent management in the gold-mining sector to establish insights that can inform more adaptive approaches aligned with the industry's distinctive operational realities.

Mining remains a cornerstone of South Africa's economy. However, the gold-mining sector has urgent challenges, most prominently persistent skills deficits, talent flight and an ageing workforce that threaten to limit productivity and long-term resilience (Lumandi & Nyasha, 2024). It is therefore unsurprising that talent management has emerged as one of the industry's most pressing challenges (Seima, 2024). It is argued that the mining industry has become so technologically advanced that management has placed a far higher priority on machinery and technology than on human capital, resulting in insufficient talent management (Van Hoek, 2014). The need for more effective talent management in the South African mining industry cannot be questioned as technological advancements require a more sophisticated skill set (Anlesinya et al., 2019; Burger et al., 2019). This requires the mining sector to develop and retain tech talent by focusing on career development opportunities, potential for advancement, competitive compensation and upskilling programmes (Durth et al., 2023). Research studies indicate that in South Africa, 75% of the nation's mining graduates exit the industry within a few years of being employed by the industry (Mekgwe et al., 2023). This is not disaggregated into subsectors such as gold-mining, but it indicates a general young professional retention issue in the mining sector. The lack of subsector statistics on gold-mining retention in the above contexts necessitates empirical research into how HR practitioners perceive talent management in this strategic sector. The high attrition rate in the mining sector is attributed to the increasing emigration of skilled professionals to countries such as Australia and Canada, which are actively recruiting South African mining talent (Mining Mirror, 2015). South Africa, despite being globally recognised for its mining expertise, has become a prime source for talent poaching (Lumadi & Nyasha, 2024). This suggests that South Africa is losing skilled employees to other nations as seasoned professionals leave the country (Lane et al., 2015). In addition

to competing with international mining companies for scarce skills, the South African mining industry faces internal competition from other domestic industries such as infrastructure development and manufacturing (Cawood et al., 2024; Human Sciences Research Council, 2025). This extensive talent competition requires talent attraction and retention strategies to be increasingly proactive and better than those of competing firms (Guerra et al., 2023).

The mining industry is further challenged by harsh working conditions and the geographic remoteness of many mining operations (Lane et al., 2015; Lund et al., 2024). South Africa's gold-mining activities are concentrated primarily in three regions: the Witwatersrand Basin, the Free State goldfields (including towns such as Welkom, Virginia, Allanridge and Odendaalsrus) and the North West Province (including towns such as Klerksdorp, Stilfontein and Orkney) (Laker, 2023). As such, mining organisations must retain their key talented employees because it is often difficult to attract talent to these areas. Other factors that affect the future supply of talent in the mining industry include an ageing workforce, increasing globalisation and the impact of disruptive technologies (Sprague, 2015). Without a robust and strategic approach to talent management, the industry is at risk of two key outcomes: the loss of institutional knowledge and expertise as senior professionals retire and a severe talent shortage during the next economic upswing (Sprague, 2015). Spence (2013) shares this concern, noting that if mining organisations fail to prioritise talent management, they risk losing experienced, skilled and competent employees, resulting in significant talent deficits in the future.

In addition to economic pressures and skills shortages, safety has become a significant issue in South Africa's gold-mining industry. The rise of illegal mining, often referred to as *zama zamas*, poses a massive risk to operational security and employee safety (Cramer, 2016). These conditions can lead to stress, fear and dissatisfaction among skilled workers, impacting turnover and talent retention. However, the researchers did not explore this phenomenon in this study but acknowledged it as a context that can influence how HR practitioners approach talent management. Furthermore, for mining organisations to experience sustained success, effective talent management processes are essential (Anlesinya et al., 2019; Burger et al., 2019).

HR practitioners are key to designing and implementing talent management strategies in organisations (Amushila & Bussin, 2021). Their responsibilities include workforce planning, recruitment, employee development, succession planning and retention initiatives (Musakuro, 2022). In the gold-mining sector, these responsibilities are complicated by sector-specific challenges such as remote operations, skills shortages, high turnover and fluctuating labour demand. Understanding HR practitioners' perspectives is therefore key to understanding how talent is identified, developed and retained in this complex environment.

## Research purpose and objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of HR practitioners on talent management in the South African gold-mining industry. This is particularly relevant given that effective talent management is critical to addressing the challenges faced by the industry and ensuring a suitably skilled workforce capable of operating both efficiently and safely. To achieve this purpose, the study pursued the following objectives:

- To examine how HR practitioners conceptualise talent and talent management
- To gain insight into the talent management practices implemented by gold-mining companies
- To explore the role of HR practitioners within the talent management process.

## Literature review

### Talent

The notion of 'talent' has various meanings across academic and practitioner literatures, reflecting a range of organisational contexts and agendas. While the majority of authors acknowledge that talent is a combination of ability, potential, competence, knowledge and skills (Cheese et al., 2008; NHS Leadership Academy, 2014; Niedźwiecka, 2016; Eds. Silzer & Dowell, 2010; Štefko & Sojka, 2014; Tansley, 2011; Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012), the lack of consensus about its precise boundaries makes it hard to identify and manage consistently. Whereas some definitions emphasise innate ability, others highlight developmental potential (Nakato, 2019) or contextual performance (Holck & Stjerne, 2020).

The concept of 'talent' remains contested, with scholars emphasising different elements depending on organisational context and research tradition. For example, Cheese et al. (2008) and Silzer and Dowell (Eds. 2010) stress ability and competence as core features, whereas Tansley (2011) foregrounds commitment and leadership potential. In educational psychology, talent is often regarded as giftedness, while in positive psychology, it is viewed as a strength (Dries, 2013; Kravariti & Johnston, 2020). These definitional tensions echo Holck and Stjerne's (2020) observation that some views privilege innate ability, while others emphasise developmental potential and contextual performance. Such variation reflects what Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013) describe as a 'conceptual scatter', which complicates consistent application in practice. In the South African mining context, this lack of consensus is particularly problematic, as inequality legacies and transformation imperatives demand a broader, more inclusive conceptualisation of talent (Swales et al., 2014). Thus, while Tansley's (2011) definition is useful for this study, it must be interpreted alongside local inclusivity imperatives and debates around whether talent should be viewed exclusively or inclusively (Kaliannan et al., 2023; Swales, 2020). In South Africa's gold-mining sector, inequality legacies and transformation imperatives present further complexities in

talent conceptualisation. A more refined understanding is thus required, one that encompasses both performance and inclusivity dimensions (Swales et al., 2014). For the purpose of this study, Tansley's (2011) definition is applied, which conceptualises talent as individuals with high ability, capability, commitment and dedication, particularly in managerial and leadership roles. This definition is suitable considering the sector's emphasis on building a strong pipeline of leaders, even though it might underrepresent contributions of non-managerial talents.

### Talent management

Talent management remains a contested and emerging construct lacking an agreed definition, partly accounted for by tensions between inclusive and exclusive orientations. While some organisations seek to manage a narrow elite of 'high potentials', others adopt a more inclusive developmental orientation (Abiwu & Martins, 2024; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thanh et al., 2020). These differences in perspectives shape organisational strategy, resource allocation and equity considerations. Conceptual ambiguity often translates into talent management practice and outcome inconsistency (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Furthermore, practitioner literature often offers broad and aspirational descriptions with minimal theoretical foundations, whereas academic scholarship requires frameworks capable of capturing the dynamic and context-contingent nature of talent management (Vardi & Collings, 2023). Restricted South African empirical research, submitting such complexities to critical scrutiny, further motivates this study. Building on these definitional debates, talent management approaches are often distinguished as exclusive or inclusive, with each carrying unique implications for organisational practice. The exclusive approach is defended on the grounds that scarce organisational resources should be concentrated on high-performing or high-potential employees who are assumed to deliver disproportionate value (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Huselid et al., 2005). From a strategic standpoint, this focus on 'A positions' and 'A players' is linked to the resource-based view (RBV), which stresses that competitive advantage derives from rare and inimitable capabilities. However, critical scholarship highlights that the approach can be divisive, creating an organisational hierarchy that undermines cohesion and exacerbates perceptions of inequity (Holck & Stjerne, 2020; O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2017). Employees excluded from talent pools may experience marginalisation, disengagement and diminished organisational identification (Lai & Ishizaka, 2020; Meyers, 2020). At the same time, those who are included face intensified expectations that may contribute to burnout or to the erosion of their perceived status when performance falters (Malik & Singh, 2020). Thus, while exclusivity can yield immediate efficiency gains, it is criticised for failing to support sustainable talent ecosystems, especially in volatile sectors where broader workforce adaptability is critical. The inclusive approach is underpinned by the assumption that all employees possess talents that can contribute to organisational performance if identified,

nurtured and aligned with strategic objectives (Kichuk, 2017; Meyers, 2016). This egalitarian orientation is supported by legal and policy frameworks advocating equal treatment in employment (Cappelli & Keller, 2014; Thunnissen, 2015). Advocates argue that inclusivity promotes employee engagement, fairness and long-term retention by signalling that every worker is valued and given opportunities to grow (Obeng et al., 2021). Moreover, inclusivity is seen as vital in dynamic labour markets, where resilience and innovation rely on broad participation rather than a narrow cadre of elite performers (Swaiiles, 2020; Van der Sluis & Barkhuizen, 2023). Yet, critiques remain. Inclusive models can be overly generalist, distributing resources too widely and failing to provide sufficient differentiation or tailored development for high-potential employees (Iles et al., 2010). This tension underscores that inclusivity must be balanced with strategic prioritisation; otherwise, it risks becoming administratively heavy while neglecting the unique developmental needs of high achievers. In the South African mining industry, inclusive talent management has emerged as both a regulatory requirement and a strategic imperative. Legislative frameworks such as the *Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995* (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1995) as amended and the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997* (RSA, 1997) as amended mandate fair treatment and broad workforce development, while transformation policies drive firms to extend training and career pathways across diverse employee groups (Ndlovu, 2020). Scholars note that mining companies increasingly blend inclusive and exclusive practices: while high-potential individuals are identified for accelerated development, organisations also invest in cultivating the wider workforce to secure long-term sustainability (Bussin, 2014; Macpherson et al., 2023; Mashaba & Botha, 2023). This inclusive orientation addresses the dual challenge of critical skills shortages and the need for stronger employee engagement in hazardous and resource-intensive contexts. At the same time, inclusivity enhances perceptions of procedural justice and organisational support, contributing to social stability in a sector often marked by labour unrest (Daniel, 2024; Dries & Kaše, 2023). Nonetheless, scholars caution that cost pressures, limited training resources and retention challenges in remote mining areas constrain the effectiveness of inclusivity. The industry's experience, therefore, illustrates both the promise and the practical limitations of applying inclusive talent management. From this discussion, it becomes evident that talent management must be understood within sector-specific institutional constraints. For the purpose of this research, talent management is defined as:

[A]n integrated set of processes, programmes, and cultural norms within an organisation, designed and implemented to attract, develop, deploy, and retain talent to achieve strategic objectives and meet future business needs. (Eds. Silzer & Dowell, 2010)

This definition underscores the strategic, systemic and cultural character of talent management required for South Africa's heterogeneous and historically complex workforce.

It recognises four critical processes: attraction, development, deployment and retention that underpin effective talent management systems, whose application in the mining context remains a challenge.

## Theoretical framework

The study draws on the RBV and Institutional Theory. Resource-based view considers talent as a strategic resource that is valuable, scarce and not easily imitated, hence conferring sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Wright et al., 2001). With skills shortages and operational pressures in gold-mining, RBV provides the prism through which to view why optimal management of talent is critical to organisational success. Consistent with RBV, Institutional Theory also underscores the way organisational practices are influenced by external social, legal and normative pressures (Scott, 2008). Legal compliance and socio-political demands in the South African mining sector represent coercive and normative pressures influencing talent management implementation. These two theories provide insights into the complex interaction between internal strategic agendas and external institutional environments in determining talent management.

## Conceptual framework

Building on the theoretical foundation and literature, this study presents a conceptual framework where talent management practices find themselves at the intersection of strategic alignment and institutional pressures. Strategic alignment triggers talent management processes that function towards organisational goals such as productivity, retention and leadership development. Meanwhile, institutional pressures necessitate compliance with transformation, equity and labour law. Human Resource professionals function as mediators navigating these competing calls, leveraging talent management through organisational cultural norms and formal processes. Talent management outcomes in terms of employee engagement, capability development and organisational performance depend on this dynamic tension between internal resource capacities and external institutional environments.

## Research methodology

### Research paradigm and approach

The study was conducted from an interpretivist paradigm, which understands reality best through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences and also recognises that reality is socially constructed (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). For the research's exploratory nature, this paradigm was appropriate. This study sought to understand perceptions of talent management practices for HR specialists in South African gold mines. Rather than generalising findings, interpretivism aligns with the study's objective of capturing rich, context-specific understandings. Researchers explored how participants construct meaning when managing talent

within complex and dynamic organisational environments by focusing upon the lived experiences and perspectives of HR practitioners. Therefore, researchers employed a qualitative descriptive research design, since it explores social and human phenomena through open-ended inquiry and inductive reasoning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Bradshaw et al. (2017), a qualitative descriptive design prioritises the investigation of ascribed meaning from those involved and employs a naturalistic approach to comprehend a phenomenon in its natural environment. A phenomenon about which little is known can be richly described using such an approach (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). The purpose of a qualitative descriptive study is to elicit and articulate the lived experiences, events and interactions surrounding a phenomenon as understood and reported by those directly involved (Bradshaw et al., 2017). A qualitative descriptive design was especially appropriate for this study since the purpose is to investigate the viewpoints of HR practitioners about talent management in the South African gold-mining sector.

### Participants of the study

The participants were drawn from a total of six gold-mining shafts in the Free State province in South Africa. The HR specialists responsible for talent management at the respective shafts were deemed the most suitable to share their lived experiences of talent management within the gold-mining industry. The final sample comprised six HR specialists who meaningfully contributed their experiences of talent management. The following sampling criteria were applied to select participants: firstly, individuals had to be employed at one of the selected shafts; secondly, they needed to be directly involved in talent management (minimum of 3 years); and thirdly, they were required to hold HR qualifications and possess relevant work experience in the HR department. These inclusion criteria ensured that participants could provide meaningful and relevant responses.

In this study, as shown in Table 1, two participants were female and four were male. All participants identified as black African people. With regard to age, three were between 31 and 40 years old, two were between 41 years and 50 years old and one was between 51 years and 65 years old. Concerning years in their current role, two participants had 5 years or less, one had 6–10 years, and the remaining three had between 11 years and 15 years. Regarding total work experience, one participant reported

5 years or less, two had 11–15 years, one had 16–20 years and two had over 20 years. In terms of educational qualifications, two participants held diplomas, while the others possessed various academic qualifications, including a post-matric certificate, a BTech degree, a BCom degree and a postgraduate diploma.

### Data collection

Semi-structured individual interviews were used to collect data. This method allowed the researcher to pose specific questions regarding talent management while permitting participants to express their views and opinions systematically, thus offering both structure and flexibility (Naz et al., 2022). A series of questions concerning the HR specialists' understanding of talent management and its associated procedures was included. The interview questions were informed by theoretical insights from the literature review. Interviews were conducted in person and lasted approximately 40 min. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Field notes were taken during interviews to enhance the accuracy of the transcribed data. According to Ahmed (2024), trustworthiness in qualitative research is assessed by examining dependability, confirmability, transferability and credibility. Because the data gathered for this study were applicable only to employees within the gold-mining industry, purposive sampling was used to enhance transferability. Credibility was ensured by sending transcribed interviews to each participant via email to ensure consistency and clarity. Participants reviewed the transcripts to confirm accuracy and clarity. Conformability was assured by presenting findings in a neutral, objective and unbiased manner.

### Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data (Naeem et al., 2023). This method is appropriate for capturing the complexity of meaning within qualitative data (Guest, 2011). It also involves identifying patterns or common threads across interviews (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis was followed, consisting of: familiarisation with the data, coding, generating initial ideas, reviewing themes, defining themes and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Data were managed and coded using Atlas.ti software to facilitate systematic organisation.

**TABLE 1:** Demographic profile of the participants.

Participant	Gender	Race	Age group (years)	Occupational category	Years in job	Total years working	Highest qualification
P1	Female	black African	41–50	HR Manager	11–15	20 +	Diploma / Degree
P2	Female	black African	31–40	Acting Senior Personnel Manager	0–5	11–15	Post-matric Certificate
P3	Male	black African	31–40	SDF	0–5	0–5	PGDIP
P4	Male	black African	41–50	HR Manager	6–10	11–15	BTech: HRM
P5	Male	black African	51–65	Training Manager	11–15	20 +	Diploma
P6	Male	black African	31–40	HR Officer	11–15	11–15	Degree

SDF, skills development facilitator; PGDIP, post graduate diploma; BTech, bachelor of technology; HRM, human resource management.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Management Sciences: Faculty Research Committee (FMSEC30317). Following approval, mine shafts in the Free State province were contacted via email to request permission to conduct the study. Six mine shafts agreed to participate. Participants were informed before the interviews that all data would be treated confidentially and used solely for research purposes. Only individuals who consented were interviewed. Interviews were conducted at participants' workplaces at times convenient for them. Pseudonyms (P1–P6) were used to ensure participant anonymity.

## Results

### Theme 1: Understanding of talent management

The first theme that emerged from the data analysis process was the understanding of talent management. Most participants stated that they viewed talent management as a strategic process that should align with organisational goals and objectives. For example, Participant 6 remarked:

'... 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)

Aligning an organisation's talent needs with its strategic goals is referred to as strategic talent management, which is essential for attracting, developing and retaining top talent (Duran, 2023). Regarding the various talent management practices employed, most participants highlighted the importance of talent identification, attraction, development and retention within their respective mine shafts. Participant 3 observed:

'In the mining context, talent management is when talent is identified, recruited and retained in the mine. This can be done through training and development, motivation, sound work policies and good working relations.' (P3)

The participants emphasised the role of talent management practices in fostering personal and professional growth. Professional development has gained significant attention in recent years, as it enhances organisational culture, attracts talent and drives positive outcomes such as employee engagement and retention (Keswin, 2022). Participant 1 remarked:

'When workers are confident, they will have many opportunities for growth and the chance to become competent, fully committed professionals; they feel valued in the workplace. Talent management helps in boosting employees' commitment and assists in the performance and growth of the best teams for the company.' (P1)

Participants also stressed the importance of fostering a sense of belonging through talent management practices. Participant 5 elaborated:

'It is also about hiring these people, managing their careers, and developing them. It is also about anticipating where the person will be in the organisation in the future. If you look at

the big picture, it is about making sure people feel like they are a part of the organisation, and not just performing their jobs in isolation.' (P5)

Additionally, participants highlighted the organisational benefits of maintaining a pool of highly qualified employees. Participant 2 noted:

'The identification and training of employees with potential to acquire knowledge, skill and experience that will assist in the growth of the organisation.' (P2)

Respondents provide a common definition of talent management as a systematic, strategy-driven process of identifying, developing and retaining talent. This emphasis echoes the RBV, positioning talent as a limited but valuable resource with the potential to deliver lasting competitive advantage. Even during skills shortages, strategic alignment ensures that limited talent is optimally effective. The focus is also aligned with Institutional Theory, under which practices are driven by both strategic pressures and exogenous pressures such as industry norms and policy requirements. Within the gold-mining industry, legislative frameworks may be conducive to alignment goals, though execution constraints limit full application. This belief underpins an inclusive model, where everyone in the workforce is assumed to have talent to some extent (Nakato, 2019) and should be allowed to acquire skills, knowledge and qualities to keep pace with changing organisational requirements (Guerra et al., 2023).

### Theme 2: Talent management practices

The HR specialists indicated that a range of talent management practices are implemented within the gold-mining industry. The most frequently mentioned practice was the use of performance management and appraisal systems to identify talent at their respective mining shafts. Regarding performance management, Participant 5 stated:

'Each job position or role within the mine has its own ... key performance indicators. These allow us to identify the candidate's profile in order to successfully perform the role. Once we have a profile for the candidate, we evaluate various applications against those criteria to ensure the necessary skills are present.' (P5)

Similarly, Participant 2 observed:

'Employees are also identified through performance appraisals and advised to pursue development in areas where they show great performance.' (P2)

Whereas participants prized performance appraisals as an essential input for the identification and development of talent, there are limitations in merely depending on these tools. Performance appraisals essentially capture past performance and tend to be structured to reward current superior performers (Golik & Blanco, 2014). However, as suggested by Letchmiah and Thomas (2017) and Amushila and Bussin (2021), such a policy might overlook high-potential employees who have yet to demonstrate their potential. This reliance might therefore constrain the talent pipeline by

preferring proven performance to latent potential. Within the gold-mining industry, where there are continual skills shortages, enlarging talent assessment to include potential-based indicators may maximise succession planning and strategic workforce continuity.

The participants also referred to the use of individual development plans (IDPs) at many mining shafts to support employee growth and talent development. Individual development plans are designed to enhance employee knowledge, skills and capabilities while aligning personal strengths and interests with organisational goals. Participant 1 explained:

'... employees are advised to do their IDPs, Individual Performance Plans, ... so that the employee can be able to be identified from the talent at the department because all the employees with qualifications they get captured on the system so that we know if we do have a shortage regarding, let's say for example on IT [Information Technology] or HR or something we know that's in our talent list, we do have a person maybe we can select from the talent so that that particular person can be given an opportunity to be developed ...' (P1)

It was further mentioned that many gold-mining companies prioritise adult education and training (AET). Participants indicated that AET Centres focus on essential communication and numeracy skills, providing foundational skills to support job performance. Participant 2 stated:

'There is an AET Centre that seeks to ensure that the employees have basic communication and numeracy skills.' (P2)

Participant 1 added:

'We also have ABET [*Adult Basic Education and Training*], now we call it ABET, and that is where we take them from A to B. If an employee does not know how to write their name or surname, we take them to be trained so that they can know how to write their names, how to read, so that they can be skilled, then from there they will be able to be trained towards bigger designations.' (P1)

Participants also found that talent management is reinforced through initiatives such as learnerships, internships, bursaries and leadership development programmes. Participants 3, 4 and 6 highlighted the availability of diverse learning opportunities. Participant 3 stated:

'Many learning options and methods are provided to our employees. Leadership development is included as well ...' (P3)

Participant 6 added:

'Scholarships and study leaves to talented employees would improve their skills to the advantage of the mine.' (P6)

Participant 2 commented:

'Mining and engineering learnerships for those who meet the minimum requirements, bursaries and study assistance for those who wish to study further, although it should be in line with the company objectives.' (P2)

The participants indicated that training centres within gold-mining companies play a crucial role in equipping employees,

particularly those with low literacy levels or formal education, with fundamental communication and numeracy skills. These centres help in career progression and facilitate upward mobility, which results in both individual empowerment and organisational capacity. Furthermore, there is a multidimensional character of training, e.g. portable skills programmes that allow workers with transferable competencies to be utilised in other sectors. Development programmes such as leadership development programmes, mining and engineering learnerships and bursary programmes reflect a dual commitment to organisational capacity building and employee growth.

These findings are in line with prevailing literature stressing career development as a key employee retention and engagement driver (Abiwu & Martins, 2024). The emphasis on lifelong learning resonates with South African institutional agendas, where universities and industry alike encourage ongoing skills development to enhance labour market competitiveness (Osibanjo et al., 2014). Tang et al. (2015) further highlight that staff training and career development programmes address both individual career aspirations as well as general business goals, once again reflecting the strategic value of employee development.

The application of complementary strategies such as performance scorecards, mentoring and apprenticeships towards capacity building and succession planning is in accordance with the best practices in literature (Damer, 2020). Literature also confirms that a capable and responsive workforce provides organisations with a sustainable competitive advantage in increasingly dynamic markets (Durth et al., 2023).

Interestingly, findings reveal a strategic preference on the part of gold-mining companies to build internal capacity rather than relying primarily on external recruitment. Development opportunities appear plentiful, in favour of an inclusive approach in offering opportunities to all employees, rather than restricting benefits to an elite talent pool. However, despite these good practices, participants also referred to limitations such as sparse resources and having to trade off short-term operational imperatives against long-term developmental investments.

Cumulatively, the results highlight the strategic positioning of training and development in talent management practice in gold-mining, as well as the difficult balancing act that organisations have to undertake in sustaining workforce competencies amid sector-specific pressures.

### Theme 3: The role of human resource practitioners in the talent management process

The participants indicated that the role of HR practitioners is to facilitate talent management through guidance and monitoring. For example, Participant 2 stated:

'There is a talent management supervisor who constantly monitors employees to ensure their IDPs are up to date and that there is progress.' (P2)

It also became apparent that shared ownership of the talent management process was advocated among mining companies. Participants reported active involvement of line managers, employees and various formal structures to ensure shared responsibility. Participant 2 remarked:

‘Compliance with implemented policies is monitored through various platforms such as employment equity meetings, succession plan meetings and ad hoc engagements with employees.’ (P6)

Participant 4 similarly emphasised shared responsibility:

‘Training needs are identified through their supervisors or shift bosses, and that is taken over by the training and development department ...’ (P4)

From this discussion, it is evident that gold-mining companies adopt an ethical and responsible approach to talent management. Responsible talent management, a relatively recent construct, is defined as:

Talent management practices and strategies that emphasise an organisation’s responsibility to identify, develop, and nurture the unique and diverse talents of all workers by expanding access to available talent development opportunities, by fairly managing their weaknesses and by recognising their contributions while giving them equal opportunities to flourish as valued employees to ensure their commitment to the organisation so as to achieve mutual sustainable outcomes for employees and their organisation. (Anlesinya et al., 2019, p. 284)

The evidence indicates that HR practitioners endorse responsible talent management on the basis of inclusiveness, corporate social responsibility, fairness and equal opportunity, consistent with Anlesinya et al.’s (2019) framework. The participants revealed that they perceive their task as enforcing an ethical process of talent management, which actively interacts with various stakeholders and organisational frameworks, corroborating the notion of collective responsibility. This is consistent with Swailes’ (2020) claim of talent management as an open, morally fair practice requiring collaboration among different actors to achieve justice and legitimacy.

However, the study also detects inherent tensions. While HR professionals would like to promote fairness and inclusiveness, organisational politics and realities of work sometimes restrict such ideals. For example, calls for prioritising compliance with legal obligations or production targets can curtail the extent of ethical discretion in talent issues. Furthermore, the multidimensional nature of harmonising competing interests of different stakeholders, namely management, unions and employees, can make the consistent application of fair principles difficult.

These reflections highlight the significant but charged boundary-spanning role of HR practitioners in balancing strategic imperatives, ethical standards and pragmatic realities. They require not only technical competency in talent management systems but also political acumen and

moral abilities to maintain fairness in often contested organisational environments. Generally, these results emphasise the intricate and dynamic character of HR practitioners’ roles in impacting ethical and inclusive talent management for the South African gold-mining sector.

## Practical implications

The study has several practical implications for enhancing talent management in gold-mining firms. Because of the engagement of various stakeholders in talent management, there is a need to develop institutionalised processes that clearly define the roles and responsibilities of each structure. These can be operationalised through standard operating procedures, complemented by tools such as talent management scorecards and internal audits to verify implementation and prevent task duplication.

Responsible talent management prioritising inclusivity, corporate social responsibility, justice and equal opportunity (Anlesinya et al., 2019) needs to be institutionalised in organisational practice. The strategy can be implemented by increasing training programme accessibility, implementing open advancement criteria and offering targeted development pathways for underrepresented groups. These strategies are particularly relevant in the gold-mining sector, where the hiring of external talent is challenging because of geographic remoteness and industry image.

There needs to be a shift from solely measuring past performance to also recognising future potential, as emphasised by Nakato (2019). It can be achieved by incorporating psychometric tests into recruitment, succession planning and leadership development schemes. Roll-out can involve training HR managers and line managers in the interpretation of psychometric test results, ensuring fair application and involving unions early on to dispel concerns about bias.

Chief among these potential barriers is financial resistance from operational managers and logistics challenges in the administration of assessments and development programmes in remote areas. These challenges can be addressed through a phased roll-out, the use of digital platforms for training and assessment and targeted change management strategies to secure stakeholder buy-in.

## Limitations and recommendations for future research

Several limitations must be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. Firstly, not all gold-mining companies volunteered to participate; the findings therefore refer to the six shafts from which data were obtained, all of which are located in the Free State province. This limited geographical and organisational coverage restricts the generalisability of the findings. Future studies would be well advised to incorporate gold-mining operations in other provinces and other mining operations to span an even broader range of organisational contexts.

Secondly, the sample comprised a total of six HR practitioners who were all black Africans, with only two females represented. This demographic homogeneity limits the study's potential to capture potential racial or gendered variation in HR practices. Given the study's concern with 'inclusive' talent management, future research should make an effort to recruit more diverse participants to enable a richer, more representative understanding of the phenomenon.

Thirdly, reliance on qualitative interviews with HR practitioners alone risks responses that are idealised or policy-compliant reports. Triangulation with employees, line managers, union representatives and other stakeholders in future studies would counter this risk and allow a more balanced view of talent management practices to be constructed.

Fourthly, the cross-sectional design of the study offers only a snapshot, limiting the possibility of examining how talent management practices evolve over time in response to internal and external pressures. Longitudinal designs are recommended to trace changes over time, enabling HR practitioners to develop evidence-based knowledge for ongoing improvement.

Fifthly, while budgetary and time constraints rendered these parameters unavoidable, this study forms the initial qualitative component of a larger mixed-methods research design. The results produced here are capable of informing future quantitative research in verifying the patterns and relationships formed, towards a more complete understanding of talent management in the South African mining sector.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to conduct an empirical investigation into the perspectives of HR practitioners responsible for talent management at gold-mining shafts. The main findings reveal that HR practitioners regard talent management as an inclusive and strategic process. A multifaceted approach is adopted for talent development, with emphasis placed on responsible and ethical practices. Despite certain limitations, the findings contribute to the limited body of knowledge on talent management within the gold-mining sector. While gold mines largely support responsible and ethical talent management, further efforts are required to strengthen such practices. Enhancing responsible talent management will promote inclusivity, in line with South Africa's vision for social justice and equal opportunity.

## Acknowledgements

This article is based on research originally conducted as part of Malefetsane Thasi's doctoral thesis titled 'Talent management in the South African mining industry: A case of Free State gold-mining companies', submitted to the Faculty of Management Sciences, Department of Business Management, Central University of Technology in 2025. The

thesis was supervised by Freda van der Walt. The manuscript has since been revised and adapted for journal publication.

## Competing interests

The authors reported that they received funding from CUT DHET grant, which may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed publication. The author has disclosed those interests fully and has implemented an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from their involvement. The terms of these funding arrangements have been reviewed and approved by the affiliated university in accordance with its policy on objectivity in research'.

## CRedit authorship contribution

Malefetsane Thasi: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing, Visualisation, Project Administration, Data Curation, Resources, Writing - review & editing. Freda van der Walt – Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Project Administration, Writing - review & editing, Supervision.

## Funding information

This research received support from the Central University of Technology Department of Higher Education and Training grant.

## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Freda van der Walt, upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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