Managers' views on Talent Management:
A qualitative study in Canada's Public Sector

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of Talent Management (TM) within the context of a Canadian public sector organization. More specifically, by undertaking a qualitative study, we solicited the views of managers concerning the design and implementation of TM within their organization. We outline the various structural, cultural, and environmental challenges inhibiting TM within the case setting and discuss participants' views on how TM *should* be approached moving forward. Furthermore, we contribute to the evolving narrative on inclusive TM by exploring contextual nuances, offering organization-level and individual-level considerations, and proposing a definition and model rooted in the strengths-based literature.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Ever since a group of consultants coined the phrase *the war for talent* in a 1997 McKinsey & Company report, the topic of talent management (TM) has received a significant level of practitioner and academic interest (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). The now-famous report proclaimed that better talent is worth fighting for, and that talent is the critical driver of corporate performance (Poocharoen & Lee, 2013). This arguably replaced the "old reality" that people need companies with the "new reality" that companies need people (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). Authors of the McKinsey report, Michaels et al. (2001), have insisted that this war for talent in the private sector would continue for at least the next 20 years, necessitating a greater focus on, and commitment to, TM.

Despite differences in contextual factors between the private and public sectors (Christensen et al., 2007), this assertion is said to be true in the public sector as well (Van Dijk, 2009). In the UK and Canada, for example, public sector organizations are confronted with an intensifying competition for talent, and many suffer from a chronic shortage of talented people (Glenn, 2012; Macfarlane et al., 2012). Thus, the ability to find and retain talented people has become critical to public service success and reform (Glenn, 2012). In Canada, senior government officials have been reporting for well over a decade that their capacity to "recruit and retain highly trained, qualified staff" is a major concern, and should become a top priority for public service reform at all levels of government in the 21st century (IPAC, 2009, p. 54). And yet, despite the consensus behind this priority, students of Canadian public administration know little about the strategies and programs aimed at managing talent in Canada's public sector (Glenn, 2012). In fact, since Glenn's article in 2012 describing the state of TM in several Canadian public sector jurisdictions, and despite the increasing attention to TM in the academic

literature over the course of the last decade (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016), academics have seemingly ignored this topic altogether. TM in the public sector is clearly an underexplored field of research (Thunnissen & Buttiens, 2017), with little academic attention paid to specific TM issues in public sector organizations, such as how widely they should define the scope of TM activities, and/or how successful they are in their battle for talent (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen et al., 2013).

As it currently stands, the term TM itself remains ambiguous and seemingly contested by those who seek to, at the very least, make sense of it. This is not an uncommon occurrence. The literature on sensemaking suggests that meaning in organizations is often highly contested and negotiated among a wide range of individuals who may understand or construct an issue in different ways due to their different positions, interests, and backgrounds (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Nevertheless, this ambiguity among stakeholders about the interpretation and/or the intended outcomes of TM is potentially problematic because it can then influence TM implementation (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Nijs et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2013). It has, for instance, been argued that the same HR practice can be implemented in many different ways, and that its effects will vary depending on the way in which it is designed by managers and perceived by employees (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). It is unsurprising, therefore, that TM researchers have encouraged studying the perspectives of multiple stakeholders—such as middle and line managers—on the scope and aim of TM, and in the development of the intended TM approach (Thunnissen & Buttiens, 2017).

Other authors have requested more research on TM in a variety of countries and sectors of industry, also advising the need to contextualize TM in both theoretical frameworks and in research designs (e.g. Collings et al., 2011; Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Thunnissen et al.,

2013). Overall, there remains a considerable need for research on how best to integrate all the relevant information when designing TM schemes in the public sector (Poocharoen & Lee, 2013).

Our study responds to these recent calls for research. We explored TM within in a Canadian federal government organization to support the need for further research that clarifies TM's operationalization in various contexts. To do so, we applied a pragmatic qualitative approach to elicit participants' experiences with (and their diverse views of) TM, to close the gaps in our understanding of how TM is perceived, why it is such a challenge, and how it can be approached to be more effective moving forward—all from the perspective of multiple levels of management. Considering the apparent need for, and uncertainty around, how to overcome barriers and approach TM effectively in the Canadian public sector in particular, the following research questions guided our study:

1. *How do managers experience TM in their organization?*
2. *What do they understand to be the underlying factors which challenge TM in their organization?*
3. *How do they propose that TM be approached so as to improve its likelihood to achieve their conceptually ideal version of it?*

By answering these questions via the perspective of managers inhabiting various ranks within the case setting (as suggested by Thunnissen & Buttiens, 2017), we were able to heighten our understanding of how and why TM is conceptualized and operationalized the way that it is within a specific context—thereby addressing several of the aforementioned gaps in the literature.

From a pragmatic standpoint, our goal is to help reduce the ambiguity surrounding TM in order to support the purposeful design and implementation of TM programs within organizations. While this introduction has pointed to gaps in the literature, and, ultimately, underscored the necessity for our research project, the following literature review will provide greater detail on the background of TM literature.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section we aim to clarify what is often meant by the term TM, and to situate it as a concept in the literature. Furthermore, we discuss the limited TM research specific to public sector organizations, including in Canada. Given the inductive and exploratory nature of our study, we present a rather concise review of the literature. Though inspired by several key gaps in the literature, we applied a "level of semi-ignorance or suspension of belief in the received wisdom of prior work" in an effort to represent the voices of our participants and to discover *new* ideas and perspectives rather than simply affirming existing ones (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 23). Nonetheless, to support our exploratory research, we structured this concise literature summary by first taking a look at the diverse lenses for conceptualization and operationalization of TM (with a particular focus on the inclusive/exclusive dichotomy), and we then consider contextual factors that the literature has identified as potential drivers of/challenges for TM. We conclude it with an overview of TM within the Canadian public sector context.

Talent Management (Diverse Conceptualizations & Operationalizations)

The word *talent* can be defined as "the sum of a person's abilities…his or her intrinsic gifts, skills, knowledge, experience, intelligence, judgment, attitude, character and drive. It also

includes his or her ability to learn and grow" (Michaels et al., 2001, p. xii). Just as the word talent carries with it a multi-faceted definition, so too does the concept of TM. It is argued that the variety of terms used to define talent reflects one of the major debates in TM, that is, whether a TM program is an *inclusive* or an *exclusive* undertaking (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014).

The *inclusive* approach to TM is based on the fundamental belief that *all* employees have qualities and strengths that can, in one way or another, be valuable for the organization. In this view, TM is approached as "the recognition and acceptance that all employees have talent, together with the ongoing evaluation and deployment of employees in positions that give the best fit and opportunity (via participation) for employees to use those talents" (Swailes et al., 2014, p. 533). The *exclusive* TM orientation, on the other hand, involves initiatives that are aimed at an elite group of employees whose abilities are generally seen as more valuable to the organization (Lepak & Snell, 1999), and/or who occupy strategically important positions within the organization (namely managerial roles). For the exclusive approach, the following definition is often cited:

> "the activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization." (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 304)

Regardless of the chosen approach, TM activities occupy a significant amount of organizational resources. A recent study found that CEOs are increasingly involved in TM initiatives, with the majority of those surveyed spending over 20% of their time on talent issues, and others spending up to 50% of their time on talent issues (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006). However, this time commitment appears to be warranted. For example, Maślanka-Wieczorek

(2014) suggests that TM can play a pivotal role in the effectiveness of a *high-performance work system (HPWS)*—that which is achieved when a combination of HR practices, work organization and processes allow for the maximization of workers' knowledge, skills, commitment, and flexibility (Snell & Bohlander, 2004). Maślanka-Wieczorek (2014) argues that HR teams should actively engage a selected group of *high-potential employees* in all business units to build commitment and to develop resources (knowledge and skills) which others may draw from. Furthermore, an investigation of TM as a "High Performance Work Practice" within high performance organizations found that all organizations in the study devoted significant resources to TM (Chugh & Bhatnagar, 2006). Of importance to note is that the sparse literature on the relationship between HPWS and TM tends to favour the exclusive TM perspective, with inclusive TM underrepresented.

Collings and Mellahi (2009) argue that this relatively recent emphasis on TM represents a shift away from literature on traditional HR-related sources of competitive advantage, or strategic human resource management, and towards the management of talent specifically suited to today's work environment. However, the line between TM and other streams of HR literature remains unclear, necessitating further academic research on how TM is perceived and operationalized in practice. Lewis and Heckman (2006) identified three key streams of thought that provide some structure to the conceptualization of TM. The first stream involves those who simply substitute the label TM for human resource management (HRM), often limiting their focus to particular HR practices such as recruitment, leadership development, and succession planning. As noted by Lewis and Heckman (2006), the contribution of this literature rarely extends beyond the strategic HR literature, and largely amounts to a rebranding of HRM. The second stream typically discusses *talent pools* as a critical element of TM—as well as

"projecting employee/staffing needs and managing the progression of employees through positions"—which builds on earlier research in manpower planning or succession planning literatures (Lewis & Heckman, 2006, p. 140). These first two streams resemble the inclusive approach to TM; however, the second may be regarded as a subset of the first, as it focuses more narrowly on the staffing/recruitment activities of HRM. The third stream resembles the exclusive approach described by Collings and Mellahi (2009) and focuses on the management of talented people. Lewis and Heckman (2006) claim that this literature often encourages staffing all positions with "A performers", referred to as "top-grading" (Smart, 1999), while simultaneously disposing of consistently poor performers. Collings and Mellahi's (2009) interpretation of this third stream emphasizes the positioning of "A performers" in *pivotal* roles (previously identified by senior management) rather than in all roles, which is perhaps more realistic in practice.

Evidently, conceptualizing TM in a coherent manner continues to be an ongoing issue to academics and practitioners. While some of the major activities often associated with TM frequently resurface (i.e. attraction, retention, development, transition, etc.), neither the objectives nor the design/implementation approach to TM programs has been thoroughly (or consistently) developed.

Contextual Factors in TM

Kravariti & Johnston (2020) assert that private sector organizations tend to favour exclusive TM because it involves less cost and time in order to identify, reward, and retain an elite workforce, while inclusive TM is appropriate in the public sector since there is often an ideological predisposition to principles of egalitarianism. This is an interesting assertion, pointing to the varied contextual pressures—largely ingrained in values and norms—

distinguishing the two sectors. Although many TM studies have been conducted in public and in private sector organizations, the organizational context is often not considered (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). A variety of pressures are likely to drive or restrain TM implementation in various contexts; however, Kravariti & Johnston (2020) suggest that private sector pressures can be broadly grouped into two categories: internal and external. They describe internal factors as those which *facilitate* TM, offering both activity/resource-based examples such as existing information systems and employee development programs, as well as "soft element" examples such as employee engagement, organizational culture, and management support. As we later discuss, our research suggests that the absence of these "internal factors" can act a potential barrier to TM. On the other hand, Kravariti & Johnston (2020) offer legislation/political situation, market labour conditions, national/regional culture, and industry attributes as examples of external factors that may influence TM decision making. Though less researched, they argue that public sector organizations *could* be influenced by those two categories of factors as well.

In studying TM in public sector organizations, several have noted the importance of exploring contextual pressures due to the significant impact of institutional mechanisms (Christensen et al., 2007; Thunnissen & Buttiens, 2017). In some democratic national contexts, the principle of equality—implying that all workers are equal and should be treated as equal as much as possible—has a strong tradition (Boselie et al., 2011). Yet, academic literature shows that both inclusive and exclusive approaches occur in public sector organizations within democratic national contexts (e.g., Glenn, 2012; Kock & Burke, 2008; Macfarlane et al., 2012), and the rationale behind either approach often remains unclear. In particular, the academic TM literature neglects to describe the impact of contextual factors (e.g., egalitarian institutional

norms) in the shaping of the employment relationship and human resource management practices (Thunnissen & Buttiens, 2017).

Though we discuss contextual challenges at length in the Results chapter, for now we will define the categories of pressures that surfaced in our findings, as doing so will clarify forthcoming discussions. Firstly, we divide the "internal" category proposed by Kravariti & Johnston (2020) into two: structural and cultural. *Structural* broadly covers issues of design, structure, process, and resource, in relation to the organization and its HR practices (including TM). Whereas *cultural*, as described by Schein (1990), denotes items such as norms and beliefs, which are often manifested in observable artifacts, values, and basic underlying assumptions. Lastly, *environmental* pressures, similar to Kravariti & Johnston's (2020) second category, includes factors external to the organization (such as market pressures) which influence decision making. Given the absence of well-established categories of pressures to TM, we offer these three as a way of clarifying our findings and contributing to the narrative on contextual nuances.

TM in the Canadian Public Sector

As noted by Glenn (2012, p. 26), "there has been little written about the strategies and programs that Canadian public services currently use to attract, recruit, retain and transition key employees beyond a few pieces on reform and renewal in the federal public service (see Lindquist et al., 2004; Malloy, 2004; Mau, 2007)". Unfortunately, this is not because Canadian public service organizations are without people management challenges. In a recent article on management improvement in the Canadian public service, Charko (2013) states that, despite some areas of success in human resource management, challenges remain. Glenn (2012) explains that several public service jurisdictions in Canada have adopted TM as an approach to

managing their human resources and, unsurprisingly, two familiar models of TM have emerged in response to several different sets of contextual priorities—inclusive and exclusive. For example, a broad range of factors led organizations in British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland and Labrador to define TM much more inclusively, deploying programs that extended "beyond the focus on management and leadership roles in order to build high performance and high involvement work environments for all employees" (http://www.gov.ns.ca/psc/v2/pdf/hrCentre/resources/talentManagement/TM%20Process%20Guide.pdf). On the other hand, as Glenn (2012) explains, other jurisdictions employed an exclusive TM approach targeting senior management because of challenges posed by upcoming retirements in those ranks. For example, a 2004 report to senior officials in Ontario highlighted the fact that 28% of the Ontario public service's 6,000 senior managers would be eligible for retirement by 2009, with that number growing to 56% in 2014 (Glenn, 2012).

It is clear that a variety of approaches to TM exist within the Canadian public sector, each with a slightly different way of characterizing, designing, and implementing TM initiatives. And yet, little is known about the *actual* manifestation of intended TM initiatives in practice, let alone the effectiveness of said initiatives. In response to this uncertainty, Glenn (2012) questions whether TM should be implemented altogether. By seeking the perspectives of managers—those individuals most involved in the daily operationalization of TM—this project explores whether public servants share the same skepticism. In doing so our aim is to inform, in particular, public sector HR and senior management teams tasked with designing and implementing TM programs, with transferability to other contexts a possibility worthy of further research attention. The eventual conclusions from this project resulted from a predominantly inductive research

approach, while drawing elements from the research discussed in this section. Our methodology will now be discussed.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the inner workings of TM in Canada's public sector, we conducted a qualitative study within a large federal public sector organization—one which currently views TM as a priority yet has struggled to implement organization-wide initiatives. Prior to commencing, we acquired a Certificate of Ethics Approval from the University of Ottawa's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity (Appendix 1).

Qualitative Research

The qualitative research methods employed in this project closely followed the principles and practices described by Miles et al. (2014) and Hennink et al. (2011). As they describe, qualitative research allows the researcher to examine people's perspectives in detail by using a specific set of research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation, content analysis, and visual methods. In addition, qualitative research can be effective in exploring the contextual influences on the research issues, and in addressing *why* questions that clarify issues or *how* questions that describe processes or behaviour (Hennink et al., 2011; Miles et al., 2014). This was an important consideration because, as previously mentioned, TM can be significantly impacted by context (Thunnissen & Buttiens, 2017). Therefore, in an effort to elicit the views of managers within a specific context, we conducted 17 semi-structured interviews for data collection.

The research questions strive for practical understandings, thus, the approach we adopted is that of pragmatism and general qualitative inquiry. As a qualitative inquiry framework,

pragmatism encourages us to seek practical and useful answers that can solve, or at least provide direction in addressing, concrete problems (Patton, 2015). In this case, the problem is a seemingly ambiguous and ineffective TM program within the case setting. Creswell (2013) too acknowledges the usefulness of a pragmatic approach in studies that emphasize the practical implications of the research, as we do.

Case Setting

Our case setting is a branch of several hundred employees within a large federal department, situated in Canada's National Capital Region (NCR). Throughout our paper, we refer to the branch as the *organization*, as our TM-related findings were specific to the branch rather than to the department. This organization was selected in part due to convenience and parsimony, and because its HR-related challenges and, in particular, TM inconsistencies (as we will explore in the Results) were attractive for a research project of this nature. Unfortunately, while TM has been identified as a priority across the Canadian federal public service, internal research covering people management practices (via the Public Service Employee Survey (PSES) and the Public Service Employee Annual Survey (PSEAS), described below), do not include questions specific to TM.

Since 1999, the Canadian federal government has conducted the PSES every three years for the purpose of surveying federal public service employees about their opinions on people management practices. In 2015, the Clerk of the Privy Council identified the need for more frequent surveys of employees to gather timelier data to inform people management practices (https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/innovation/public-service-employee-survey/summary-report-results-overall-public-service-2017.html). In order to meet that need, the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer within the Treasury Board of Canada

Secretariat developed the PSEAS—a short survey to complement the more comprehensive PSES. Our study's organization's 2017 PSEAS results were consistent with the overall government-wide PSEAS results, with less than two thirds of respondents indicating "I am satisfied with my organization", and approximately three quarters of respondents indicating "Overall, I like my job" (down from 82% in 2011 and 79% in 2014). In addition, the organization's most recent annual HR Plan indicates that it experienced an 18% employee turnover rate in 2017. The plan also advises that, as of October 1st, 2017, nearly 26% of all indeterminate (full-time) employees are eligible for retirement within the next five years. Per senior management, though TM is not expected to singlehandedly cure the issues with satisfaction, turnover, and transition (retirement), they demand a more coordinated effort to continuously and purposefully deploy people in order to drive organizational priorities.

Sample Recruitment

As mentioned, our research project took place in a single branch (case setting/organization) of a large Canadian federal government department. Posting an advertisement in newsletters or physical poster boards around the office were described by senior management as unsuccessful at attracting research participants in the case setting, therefore a more targeted yet flexible approach was required.

To begin, several senior managers were contacted via a standardized invitation to participate (see Appendix 2) and used as gatekeepers. Typically, gatekeepers are individuals with important roles within a community, and have both knowledge about the characteristics of community members and sufficient influence to encourage community members to participate in a study (Hennink et al., 2011). In this case, the community being the entire management team in the case setting. Therefore, we contacted numerous senior managers who, upon acknowledging

interest in the study, recommended potential participants. This resulted in the identification of our first few participants who then, in the spirit of snowballing, were also asked to identify potential participants. While the snowball recruitment method—asking a study participant whether they know anyone else in the community who meets the study criteria and asking them to refer this person to the researcher; and so on (Hennink et al., 2011)—was not the initial method utilized, it become helpful in identifying participants at various levels of management. This method can be advantageous in that potential participants are introduced to the study by a familiar person who can describe the interview process and alleviate potential concerns (Hennink et al., 2011). Although individuals were invited to suggest potential participants, we did not confirm or deny whether the individual(s) suggested were interviewed. We aimed to avoid any possibility for the direct or indirect identification of participants, as full confidentiality was a clear priority, as indicated in the participant consent form (see Appendix 3).

Data Collection

As previously noted, this project aimed to capture the perspectives of individuals at various levels of management. In order to do so, we interviewed 17 managers, as shown below in Table 1.

	Middle Managers (MM)		**Senior Managers (SM)**	
Levels of Management	Manager	Director	Director General	Assistant Deputy Minister
Number of participants	5	5	6	1
Totals	**10**		**7**	

Table 1: Breakdown of participants, by level of management

Quotations throughout are denoted as MM or SM, indicating their level as either a member of middle or senior management. The number following the MM or SM denotation (i.e. MM2 or SM4) is simply used to differentiate participants.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The primary researcher conducted all interviews to ensure consistency and familiarity with the data. Each participant completed one digitally voice recorded interview, following a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix 4) and lasting approximately 45 minutes in duration. In cases where alterations to the interview protocol or other elements of data collection were deemed necessary following initial analysis, decisions were made under the direction of thesis supervisors to ensure that the approach continued to successfully target the research questions.

Data Analysis

Although there are different approaches to analyzing qualitative data, the approach taken for this research project closely followed the principles and practices described by Hennink et al. (2011) and Miles et al. (2014). An early step in our data analysis was data preparation, which involved two main tasks: producing verbatim transcripts of the interviews and removing identifiers from the data to preserve participant anonymity. The transcripts were anonymized and embrace the colloquial language used by participants, as some expressions hold cultural meaning that was preserved for analysis. Interviews were transcribed directly after they were completed to help identify new issues to be explored in subsequent interviews, to support snowballing, and to enable the identification of the point of saturation. On saturation, we ceased to pursue further interviews at both the middle and senior management levels once emergent themes became pronounced, and once nuances in participant perspectives contributed little to our overall analysis and conclusions.

Developing codes was the next phase of our data analysis, again following the practices described by Hennink et al. (2011). They propose mainly an inductive approach to data analysis. However, they also acknowledge the use of deductive strategies and believe that qualitative data

analysis involves the interplay between induction and deduction. Thus, some of our codes were derived from topics in the research instrument as informed by the literature underlying the study (deductive), while other codes were developed by directly reading the transcripts (inductive) (Hennink et al., 2011; Miles et al., 2014).

Coding was divided into two major stages: First Cycle and Second Cycle coding (Miles et al., 2014). Once an initial set of codes was applied to the data, a second level (which Miles et al. (2014) call pattern codes) was applied. The first cycle involved labelling data in close relation to the language used by participants, while the pattern codes helped in grouping large amounts of data and codes, thus supporting analysis and the development of emergent themes. To assist with the coding process, the computer program NVivo was used. Our data structure, as presented in Figure 1 on page 18, follows the guiding principles of Gioia et al. (2013) to illustrate the 1st order concepts, 2nd order themes, and aggregate dimensions of our data analysis.

Trustworthiness

While the primary researcher is involved in Human Resources in the Public Sector as a profession, he does not have a personal agenda, or personal "axes to grind", which could skew his ability to represent and present fieldwork and data analysis in a trustworthy manner (Miles et al. 2014). Ultimately, as we conducted this research, we aimed to put aside all beliefs, come from a pragmatic perspective, and approach the research questions and methods without bias. We followed the guidance of Miles et al. (2014) and undertook activities to ensure trustworthiness of the findings. In this study, this entailed a number of practices. Writing with detailed and thick descriptions and taking the entire written narrative back to participants in member checking were employed. We provide extensive data in the text and in an additional appendix to support the analysis (Appendix 5). Member checking involved taking the entire written narrative back to six

of the study participants. One consistent response from the member checks was that of satisfaction in seeing that what they discussed was fairly consistent with other participants' views and recommendations. By seeking confirmation from study participants on the analysis, we ensured that participants' views are well represented. Miles et al. (2014) note that triangulation is a near-obligatory method of confirming findings. Of the types of triangulation proposed, triangulation by researcher was conducted. This involved frequent discussions with two other academic researchers (thesis supervisors) with regards to methods and analysis (including discussions around emergent themes). By working closely with the data and involving multiple professional academic researchers, we aimed to ensure that findings are not based on the interpretations of one analyst.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this section, we present the results of our data analysis. We provide additional quotations from participants on the themes presented here in Appendix 5. We first explore the participants' views on how TM is currently approached within the case setting, exposing its application in practice, including several key weaknesses. In an effort to uncover why the organization seemingly struggles to implement clear and uniform TM practices, we then present the challenges hindering TM. Finally, we investigate TM's potential within the case setting, summarizing participants' recommendations on how it should be approached moving forward. A visual display of our data structure is seen in Figure 1 on page 18. Beyond contributing practical and contextual considerations to the TM literature, the findings presented in this chapter aim to add perspective to the apparent ambiguity surrounding what exactly TM *is* within the sphere of

human resource management—inching us closer to a distinct and widely accepted definition and model.

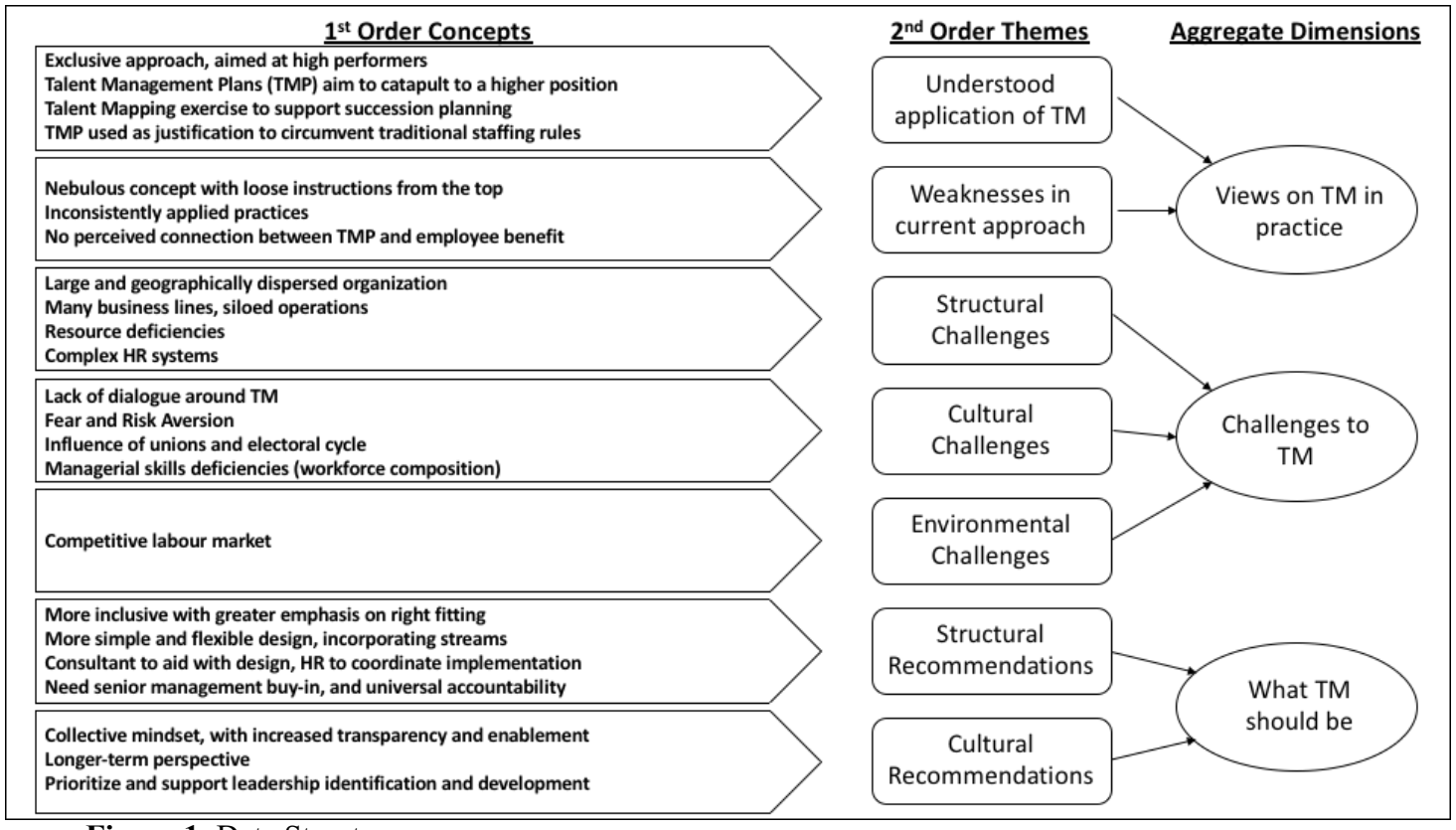

Figure 1: Data Structure

Section 1: Views on TM in Practice

In this first section of the Results, the intention is to illustrate how TM is currently approached within the context of a Canadian public sector organization, and to expose its weaknesses. To do so, we explore its manifestation as described by those who engage in TM activities on a regular basis—managers.

When asked to describe the organization's current approach to TM, participants confessed significant confusion around how TM is defined, and struggled to identify clear TM practices. As described by MM9:

> Thinking about it in the context of the way we work, I would say talent management here is sort of the sum of a whole bunch of other pieces. It is the sum of what is succession planning, what is performance management—it's the sum of all those activities. It's almost the umbrella of sub-activities. It's kind of a nebulous concept that's not super clear.

The presence of ambiguity and inconsistency in the organization's current TM efforts was perhaps the most prominent theme in participants' accounts. As MM10 described, "Each DG or Director can run their own fiefdom in their own way, so it (TM) takes on their personalities. There's loose instructions up at the top, and everyone can interpret the talent management requirements in their own way." Some, such as SM5, question its application altogether, "No, I don't think we're actually doing talent management". Although the various challenges inhibiting TM will be discussed in a forthcoming section, for now we highlight these concerns to introduce the contrast between what TM *is* versus what it *should* be. To begin our inquiry into the organization's current approach, we first consider the scope of TM practices.

Scope here refers to the level of inclusiveness of the overall TM program. In other words, are TM practices aimed at all employees (inclusive TM) or only at a specific group of employees (exclusive TM)? As concisely pronounced by SM3, "Well, the way it's laid out now, it's only for strong performers." This sentiment, that TM is currently reserved only for "highflyers" (MM2)—high performers that are often destined for managerial roles—was in fact echoed by *all* participants. To help explain this perceived exclusive application of TM, we take a look at the activities that participants associated with TM.

During the annual year-end performance assessment, all employees are afforded an overall performance rating of one to five. A score of one or two implies that the employee has underperformed, while a score of three implies that the employee has met expectations. Scores of four or five are uncommon and reserved for employees whose performance exceeded

expectations. As an organizational policy, high performing employees that receive a rating of four or five are to be offered a Talent Management Plan (TMP). On the other hand, employees that receive a rating of one or two are assigned a Performance Management Plan. Unlike the ubiquitous and loosely defined employee Learning Plan, which is to be curated by both the manager and the employee, the TMP more specifically aims to catapult the employee to the next level of their career. It is an additional development-oriented plan devised by the manager and assigned to the employee. When asked what they typically see in a TMP, MM5 cites the following:

> Well some of the things that I've kind of advised, or have seen, are Acting opportunities or supervisory opportunities, because it's often at that level where you're kind of moving from being an analyst to a supervisor or a manager that it (TMP) often comes into play. So those kinds of opportunities, as well as some coaching. There can be specific training, especially language training in order to meet requirements of a particular position—usually a higher position. There could be other types of training, but I often prefer trying to keep an eye out for challenging and interesting work assignments, to acquire experience.

There we see that a TMP is directed at high performers, and the contents of the plan aim to support the individual's eventual promotion to a managerial position. MM8 also describes assigning TMPs that focus on facilitating employee promotion into managerial roles; however, in their explanation we begin to see how the motivation behind a TMP may be contributing to the level of inconsistency earlier alluded to:

> We usually mark down Actings or training, even when there's limited seats—like the Aspiring Directors or the Manager Development programs. Assignments outside of the Branch or Directorate as well—outside of your area. Micro-missions, things like that. And focusing on specific skills that kind of need attention. Like maybe presenting. But honestly, for some people (managers), I think it's just a check box. I think it's a process that we go through. But I don't necessarily think that, say, if I have a Talent Management Plan, that there are things that I'm receiving because of that, or that I'm going to get a promotion. There's no connection in my mind. You still have to run and qualify in an advertised staffing process. Well, for some people that might be the case, for other people that might not be the case. So, it just depends. It's not consistent.

While it is clear that *some* managers do appear to create individualized TMPs in the hopes of supporting their highflyer employees' development and *advancement*, there is clear concern regarding the likelihood of a TMP resulting in the latter. Coupled with this lack of confidence is that fact that the online performance management tool used to document performance assessments permits managers to simply check off a box indicating that the employee is on a TMP, when in reality no concrete plan is in place. As SM3 describes, this can and does result in the absence of a tangible plan altogether:

> So it's a challenge because from an HR perspective, you want to ensure people are doing these things and, often, a good way to create a process is to have templates because you don't want everyone coming up with their own way—you want some consistency. Processes are designed to make things efficient and consistent, so you've got good quality and it doesn't take you forever to do these things. But we kind of miss the boat on that. Now we just tick the boxes on those things. So yeah, my experience is we tick the box on that stuff to meet a performance deadline, and then if we've got good leaders then they get talent managed in a different way.

Aside from managers creating and assigning TMPs to high performing employees, there are several other organizational TM practices which appear to have contributed to the ambiguity and inconsistency. For example, at the conclusion of the most recent yearly performance management cycle, employees that received TMPs were identified during a first-ever Talent Mapping exercise. The exercise involved managers flagging individuals with TMPs and labelling all employees on their respective teams as one of the following: developing in role, well-placed in role, ready for movement, or ready for advancement. For each employee, an additional column on the grid asked about "bench strength" (indicating whether someone else on the team would be ready to move into that role, should the incumbent vacate), as well as a column indicating each person's likelihood to leave within the next 2 years. With regards to this exercise, SM5 notes the following:

> I did think the talent management exercise that we did just this Fall was more about succession planning in some ways than talent management, because a lot of the questions were focused on the position. It was more about whether you have a plan for the position. As opposed to the individual, and whether you have a plan for them and their talent.

This exercise, which resulted in what is referred to as a Talent Map by several participants, does not appear to be connected to an overall TM strategy. Furthermore, there were no regular follow-up discussions to, or updating of, the resulting Talent Map. When asked about when or where follow-up discussions could have potentially taken place, several participants mentioned the Workforce Management Committee (WMC).

Every two weeks, all senior managers in the organization meet to discuss proposed staffing actions and other pertinent HR matters—this committee meeting is referred to as WMC. It is during these routine committee meetings that TM-related items are apparently supposed to be discussed. Unfortunately, as noted by SM6, WMC appears to focus on individual staffing actions rather than on broader HR planning: "I hate WMC as it is now, because it's all about one-off staffing actions." MM6, while also critical of the current approach to WMC, is slightly more optimistic:

> We're not really talking about it (TM) at any management roundtables—it's the manager putting it (an employee's TMP) on paper and telling us that it's there. But there's not a lot of transparency in that regard. We are starting to use it a bit more, but not super effectively. We're seeing it (the presence of an employee's TMP) getting included more and more as a justification for a non-advertised staffing action at WMC. So, there's that linkage to talent management...Apart from that there's so much more we should be doing with talent management. And we're simply not.

There MM6 points again to the unclear and uncoordinated application of TM practices. Participants' desire to do more with TM is a notion that will be presented in a later section of the Results. For now, we explore the following question: what is TM meant to achieve within the case setting?

Given this nebulous approach to TM, participants struggled to deduce clear organization or individual-level TM objectives. From an organizational standpoint, the existing TM practices arguably align most to the objective described by SM1, "To make sure that our critical and demanding highly skilled roles actually have a feeder group of people who will be ready to take them on when we need them." Though a clear and promising objective, we know that unfortunately those with TMPs are not being consistently tracked and groomed for specific roles. While other participants alluded to TM being part of a larger plan to retain employees, the majority were unable to produce more than a vague overarching TM objective, such as: "ensuring that we have the right people in the right places at the right levels to deliver on the work that we need to do, I suppose…" (MM2)

At the individual level (the manager-employee relationship level), it appears that in *some* cases TM aims to clarify the prerequisites that will facilitate an employee's career progression. In other cases, however, we see how managers simply use the presence of a TMP to justify the promotion of an employee, outside of conventional advertised staffing procedures:

> Right now, we (managers) give them (high performing employees) this Talent Management Plan. It's almost less important what's in their Talent Management Plan, than it is that they *have* one. Because then it's used as a justification for "oh I want to promote this person non-advertised". Well, part of the argument now is that they have a Talent Management Plan. And, at this point in time, it's not a fully mature system whereby you state that you want to promote this person because they have X, Y and Z competencies, necessarily. It's still very much a nebulous definition of "talent". (SM2)

This short cut—using an employee's TMP to streamline a staffing action—should perhaps not be surprising because, as MM6 notes, "You know, the government itself is *very* slow at staffing." While in other contexts (sectors or organizations) this may simply be seen as an unintended consequence of TM rather than as an objective, given the bureaucratic and slow moving nature

of government staffing processes, the possibility of an individual-level goal of using TM as a way for managers to improve process efficiency should not be overlooked.

Ultimately, although there appear to be steps taken towards executing a TM program, there are several challenges associated with implementation. Efforts lack coordination and seemingly do not align to a defined strategy with clear objectives. To investigate why this struggle exists, in the following section we explore the various factors that appear to constrain the organization's ability to implement a clear and uniform TM approach.

Section 2: Challenges to TM

In this section, we examine a number of prominent organization and individual-level challenges to TM that surfaced in the data collection. We present these issues prior to exploring participants' views on how TM *should* be approached, as addressing several of the organization-level challenges in particular appears to be pivotal in enabling TM in the case setting moving forward. Given the highly contextual nature of organizational challenges, our objective is primarily to caution public sector HR professionals and managers of issues which, if unaddressed, pose a risk to TM clarity, uniformity and, ultimately, effectiveness. As outlined in the Literature Review, we grouped challenges into the following three categories: structural, cultural, and environmental.

Structural Challenges

Though a number of structural challenges were discussed by participants, the organization's *large employee population* was frequently identified as a seemingly insurmountable barrier to TM. For example: "Another hindrance is we're so large. The larger the organization, the harder it (TM) is to do—public and private, no matter what. The bureaucracy

and the steps and the time everything takes. It *is* bigger here. And so, it's harder to talent manage" (SM4). This challenge appears to amplify the difficulty of both communicating a clear and consistent TM approach to all employees, and of simultaneously supporting and promoting standardized manager-led TM practices. As described by MM4, striving for consistent organization-wide implementation, rather than small scale efforts, is not easy:

> We're such a large beast that it's really hard. And I think that's the biggest challenge. It's easier to think about talent management within the scope of your own division or your own directorate. We try to do it at the branch (organization) level, but I'm not even sure we succeed very well at that.

Aside from size, participants pointed to other structural challenges such as geographically dispersed teams, high staff turnover, and the hierarchical organizational structure. However, three in particular garnered significant attention and, thus, will be discussed here and re-visited in the following section on how to move forward with TM. The first involves the *multi-business line* and *siloed* characteristics of the organization. As SM2 describes:

> I think the different business lines that we have…I mean it's all sort of related to the size of the organization, but we have a lot of different business lines. And so, when you have a lot of different business lines it means you might be able to identify talent that fits in one of the business lines, but that same talent might not fit in another business line.

The belief that a one-size-fits-all approach to TM would *not* be ideal resurfaced frequently, with participants acknowledging the challenge associated with creating a consistent program across such a complex organization. Though multiple business lines alone add a level of difficulty, it is compounded with business lines working in silos. "Well, we're very siloed. I'm not sure how much (employee) movement there is between policy and service operations." (SM1) As discussed in the following section, with employee mobility being a key component of participants' vision of an improved TM program, restricted employee movement resulting from silos is certainly a concern. As MM2 puts it: "So we get this ongoing silo-ism. We always talk

about breaking it down, but we don't make a lot of progress. And I think that that's exacerbated in the talent management sphere." With a current HR approach to TM that does not consider this challenge, many of the TM communications and resources are not suitable for all situations. As we will now discuss, not only are resources unsuitable, but they are exceedingly scarce.

Implementing a clear and consistent TM program that suits the needs of managers and employees across a large and complex organization is no easy feat. It would likely require a variety of resources to support those involved in TM practices. Unfortunately, when asked about current restrictions to TM, participants pointed to several *key resource deficiencies*. For example:

> In order to talent manage everyone, we have to sort of flip HR on its head to do it appropriately. But given budgets and the dollars and availability of training and availability of kinds of work, we're not structurally set up to talent manage everyone. Resources are scarce. (SM4)

In addition to money and training shortages, interviewees also point to a lack of data, tools, systems, and governance. As summarized by MM9, "if it doesn't get measured it doesn't get done. So, if we don't have data on what we're doing, how do you do that?" MM9 later continues: "I don't think that the organizational structure and the organizational tools are in place to allow anybody to do it (TM) properly. I think everything that's done is done very, you know, the best people can do, but there's no systems or governance to allow people to actually do it."

While frustration has resulted from a myriad of resource deficiencies, the greatest hindrance to managers in their quest to "talent manage" appears to be a time shortage. SM4, as many others, points to operational pressures taking precedence to TM: "But the practical reality is, it just runs into kind of what I said before which is tons of work, competing priorities, impossible deadlines." When explaining the need to take just a few minutes to occasionally have TM-related discussions, SM3 also points to it being a real challenge:

> So, you have to make a conscious commitment as a manager or a leader to *make* time for it. You know, there's always going to be more work than you can handle but you have to carve out that 15 minutes every month or two weeks or whatever for a check in or to have those conversations.

Not only are managers' juggling competing priorities, but their time is also consumed by having to navigate complex HR systems, which we will now discuss in further detail.

Prior to addressing cultural challenges, we conclude with a look at participants' irritation with what appears to be a complex and tenuous HRM environment—pointing again to organization-level issues that extend beyond TM-specific efforts. For example, participants identify the performance management and collective staffing processes as both convoluted and inefficient. Expected to lean on archaic and often illogical HR procedures, managers seemingly struggle to even comprehend the various *complex HR systems*, let alone feel supported by them. On this topic, MM6 offers the following observation:

> This is just a sense I have, that HR is already confusing enough, that I don't think people have the ability to think any more about HR, or to add any more to it than already is there. And that's part of the problem. For example, we have so many layers to our staffing approach. And every time there is a case that goes to the public service tribunal or there is a complaint made or whatever—we just add more layers to it. And then there's the complexities, as well, about how long it takes for things to happen. We have pay complexities as well. So, it's just so confusing to the average manager that they can't comprehend or even wrap their heads around a bigger picture, because they're focused on the details of every single staffing action.

Participants' frustrations related to the large employee population, silos, hierarchy, and bureaucracy almost seemed rehearsed, as nearly all participants described their organization in those terms. These challenge and realities of work-life in a large public sector organization, though largely systemic challenges, are considerations that clearly should not be left unaddressed. However, as we will see later in participants' practical recommendations, the need for key resources and approachable HR processes are perhaps more manageable and pressing. So

too, arguably, is overcoming several of the cultural challenges we explore in the following section.

Cultural Challenges

In discussing cultural challenges, we move away from material issues of structure or resource, and toward the intangibles entrenched in the organization's values, beliefs, and norms, shedding light on the human barriers to TM. While structural issues are perhaps best examined to clarify managers' perceived lack of supports to manage talent effectively, issues of culture in particular seem to stimulate ambiguity and variability in TM practices. To begin our overview of cultural challenges, we discuss the influence of inadequate communication.

As previously discussed, there appears to be a general sense of confusion amongst participants around how the organization defines or intends to approach TM. This confusion is the result of several factors, one of which is the simple *lack of dialogue* around TM. For example, when asked whether there is a common understanding amongst managers of what TM means, MM7 responded, "No. No definitely not. And mostly because it's not talked openly about." Indeed, a lack of dialogue arguably does not help managers to collectively agree upon a TM definition or approach; however, a more concerning cause of widespread confusion is described here by MM9:

> The organization doesn't give us a definition of what talent management is and what they want talent management to be. But I also think that there's a bit of an organizational fear, that if we define something really clearly and what it is, then we actually have to implement it. And when we leave something super vague, we can dance around it a bit more. And I think it's (TM) a topic that people are uncomfortable with. So, when you define it super clearly there is a greater commitment delivering on that. That's been my experience in the context of our work here.

Fear, coupled with *risk aversion*, have seemingly motivated an intentionally ambiguous approach to TM. Fear and risk aversion appear to also influence how managers approach a key contributor to TM—performance management:

> I think the bigger challenges around that are things that you don't see, that aren't formulaic that are more—there's the fear of giving someone too low a mark because then they'll grieve it. There's the fear of giving somebody, like, even a good mark is seen as a bad mark now. Because people who probably should get lower get good, and then the people who are good get good. So, where's that distinction, right? These are all legitimate issues. (SM3)

Several participants spoke candidly about the anxiety caused by performance management conversations with employees. There is a sense that the ambiguity surrounding performance management and TM contributes to skewed employee perceptions. Thus, achieving uniformity in TM practices appears to hinge on a manager's comfort in managing employee expectations which, as MM4 describes, is not easy in this context: "So one of the biggest challenges, and I'm sure you will hear this from many, is that everybody's perception is different. So, as a supervisor or manager in a team you see people in one way, but they may have a very different perception of their abilities and their talents." MM1 discusses a similar sentiment, "Being able to, like, for talent management with my employees—managing expectations is one big thing (challenge)…Being able to have frank discussions *about* them is hard." While performance management discussions are likely to be delicate in other settings as well, the trepidation here appears to be intensified by an undercurrent of fear and risk aversion. Furthermore, as we will now address, managers are also expected to perform performance conversations—and all HR activities—under the watchful eyes of unions.

Though working within the confines of a *unionized environment* ideally contributes transparency and consistency to HR processes, some managers perceive such an environment to limit the autonomy and flexibility necessary to "talent manage" effectively. As MM10 puts it,

“It's always challenging working in a unionized environment, and until people do it, you really don't understand”. More specifically with regards to the perceived limitations imposed by the union on HR, SM2 explains: “We're in a unionized environment…Anytime you're doing a staffing action it has to be so well documented because if you ever get challenged you need to be able to back it up. Otherwise it gets undone.” Several other participants echoed this assertion, noting how the union-imposed restrictions limit any official TM program to operating within conventional HR parameters. Yet, of particular importance to note is that, in practice, it appears some managers are more confident (and aware) than others in how to take advantage of available flexibilities. For example, on this topic SM2 proclaims: “I don't think you could ever constrain our ability to promote those people who we *really* think are deserving of promotion…We are creative, we'll find a way around it.” The apprehension and confusion around what one can or cannot do within the confines of a unionized environment seemingly contribute to inconsistent TM practices. Therefore, the design of a clear and consistent TM program would have to take this cultural challenge into consideration.

Similar to the perceived restrictions imposed by the union are the perceived challenges managers assign to managing from one *electoral cycle* to the next. In this case, it appears that whether circumstances (such as budget, workload, or other structural issues) change or not, participants believe to be expected to be bracing for change. As MM2 comments: “I guess that's where I think we go wrong, is that we don't think outside of the electoral cycle.” MM2 stresses that this short-term mentality impedes long-term HR planning. MM9 also mentions the impact of the electoral cycle, noting how its effect on the government mandate can result in a potentially fluctuating appetite for TM:

> We are currently delivering on an extremely—the branch, when I say we—large mandate for our current government, as the government has an X (removed to preserve

> confidentiality) agenda. So, getting any amount of time from those managers and the management teams on those sides to engage them on this is very difficult, because they're not really managing, they're just doing the work to deliver on the government's priorities. In the same vein, let's say six months from now, or whenever the election comes and we have a different government, and maybe then we won't have a huge X agenda. My concern then would be is, I don't think there would be the appetite for talent management conversations because there's going to be a lot less (employee) movement.

Other cultural issues, such as counterproductive internal politics and a lack of confidence in the organization's HR unit also surfaced in the data collection. One such example to note is regarding the workforce composition or, more specifically, the widespread *managerial skills deficiency*. When discussing the skills required to manage (in this case, referring mainly to TM and performance management), MM10 responded:

> No, I don't think we're well equipped. I think the managers who do it well are ones who either have a lot of experience managing or they've been lucky in that they've had really good training and they've been able to operationalize it very quickly. I don't think we've prepared most managers here with the skillset they need to deal with managerial challenges.

This observed deficiency is reiterated by SM3, who points to a potential reason for said deficiency: "We promote people based on their analytical strength in the policy field, which does not always correlate with management capacity or competency." To explore this perspective more profoundly, consider MM9's following assessment of the deficiency and its rooting in both culture and structure:

> So, I think a big part of it in our branch is we don't have a structure, an organizational structure, where people learn management skills early. It's a policy branch. We have a lot of people with master's degrees and PhDs who are brilliant people, who understand the socio-economic conditions of this country and could provide excellent advice to Ministers and Deputy Ministers. That said, they wait until they're at an EC-07 (manager) level to ever manage people, for the most part. So, they get thrust into this management role, yet they may not have management competencies. They're probably super-analysts. They're extremely intelligent people who know everything about a file but have never managed a person—who don't even know how to fill out a form to hire somebody.

While this quotation revisits structural issues and inherently suggests the need for improved supports for management development, it is included here to solidify the notion that, from a workforce composition perspective, widespread managerial deficiencies pose a clear cultural barrier to TM. In the absence of the competencies required to effectively "talent manage", it serves to reason that even given the proper tools and environment, there would continue to be issues with achieving uniformity in the organization's approach to TM.

We concluded the section on Structural Challenges by raising concern over the complexity of current HR systems within the case setting. Already frustrated by insufficient support from HR, we see now that managers are also contending with cultural issues of organizational fear, risk aversion, union constraints, and electoral cycle pressures—all while apparently lacking the skills to manage. As a final consideration in our discussion on challenges, we now explore the hurdle that the external environment poses to management's TM efforts.

Environmental Challenges

To conclude our presentation of various barriers to TM, we offer a single environmental challenge that presented itself in the data. It is, of course, likely that a variety of environmental challenges impede TM in the case setting; however, from the perspective of our participants, one issue is of particular concern—the *competitive labour market*. As a public sector organization, the pursuit of talented employees, as MM4 notes, is one with several competitors: "Because we are constantly competing with the private sector. We as a government should at least be not competing with each other, and we are. So, I think that that's a challenge that we need to look at." Competition with the private sector, while inevitable, was raised as a challenge, though more

so in relation to employee attraction or retention rather than overall TM. On the other hand, internal competition for talent was frequently identified as a challenge, and in close relation to TM. Participants discussed the lack of cross-organization collaboration in TM efforts, and the resulting disadvantage some organizations find themselves in due to inconsistent TM practices across the Canadian public sector. SM5 describes this lack of coordination:

> I think the fact that we're in a situation where there are too many jobs and not enough people to fill them puts management teams in competition with each other for talent, which then doesn't have senior management teams—ADMs and DGs—working together to allow their talent to be identified to go elsewhere.

Though the majority of participants agree that a TM program should be confined to the organization for feasibility (and not to the public sector as a whole), TM strategists may wish to consider the presence and threat of alternative employment opportunities in their overall approach.

In Section 2 of the Results, we aimed to clarify why TM is so difficult within the case setting. Building upon the TM-specific glitches highlighted in Section 1—namely ambiguity and inconsistency—we presented structural, cultural, and environmental challenges to highlight those factors which should be considered when developing future TM design and implementation plans. As SM1 notes, "I'm a believer in just getting on and doing *something*, especially with what's within your ability to decide to do." What is it that participants believe is within the organization's ability to change? That is what we will explore now.

Section 3: What TM Should Be

In this third and final section of the Results, we shift away from the current state of TM within the case setting and focus on participants' views on what TM *should* be. Given their

frustrations and challenges, participants were asked to discuss how the organization could potentially go about improving TM. In exploring their recommendations, our objective is not to propose a single optimal TM approach, but rather to present the common themes that emerged from participants' elaborations on advancing towards a more desirable state. As in the previous section on challenges, we categorize recommendations as either structural or cultural (no significant environment-related recommendations surfaced in the data). Structural here refers to items such as TM activities and resources, and cultural to intangibles such as attitudes. We start first with a look at participants' views on scope.

Structural Recommendations

In conducting this research project, we interviewed managers at several different levels, in part to reflect the full management team of the organization, but also to see whether any glaring similarities or differences would surface between the levels. Overall views and experiences were similar across levels, with a common desire for heightened inclusivity in the TM approach a particularly prominent theme. As MM4 proposes, the organization should consider designing and implementing a TM approach that involves *all* employees:

> I know people always talk about talent management in terms of thinking about people who are in line, the up and comers, who are the future Deputies of the world—of which there are always some, *that* you can see—it's all about "how do we talent manage those people and help them grow and develop". We only do a Talent Management Plan for people who get fairly high results in terms of their performance. But I truly think *everybody* needs to be talent managed. And talent management isn't always about moving up. It's about drawing on expertise that people have and/or seeing something that people have potential for.

There is also a clear desire for a refined and universal definition of TM. "I think you *do* ultimately need to put parameters around it (TM)." (MM3) While flexibility, as we will see later, is an important structural consideration, participants agree that the ambiguity surrounding TM

should be dispensed of by adopting a clearer definition. The following proposed definition will be elaborated upon in the Discussion chapter, as it was deduced from both the data collection and from the literature. However, it is useful to present it now, as forthcoming recommendations tie closely to this definition:

> *Strengths-based Talent Management (SBTM) involves the identification and consideration of each employee's capabilities, interests, and needs, as well as organizational needs, to facilitate the deployment of employees into suitable roles, thus supporting individual contribution towards organizational goals*.

In constructing a definition, participants recommend distinguishing TM from other HR initiatives, such as existing performance management, employee development, and succession planning, but to ensure integration with them in practice, thus avoiding duplication and simplifying HR decision-making. Though the proposed definition briefly summarizes critical activities and objectives, we now offer a more detailed overview, beginning with organization-level objectives.

The majority of participants believe that TM should aim, as described by SM7, "to maximize the skills, abilities, and capacities of the people who work for us within the branch. To maximize their output, so that we can have the best outputs possible." This, of course, as acknowledged by MM6 is "a very big beast". MM6 goes on to describe TM's purpose as, "an asset management in some ways. It's how we manage our human resource assets to navigate both our operational needs—current and into the future—but balanced with the employee's career development goals. And it's a bit of both." This description demonstrates, once again, a clear indication for the need to study TM considerations at both the organization and individual levels.

Managers wish to see TM contribute to both employee optimization *and* the lowering of employee turnover, not only by fast-tracking employee movement in situations with high

operational demands or a flight risk of a strong employee, but also by focusing heavily on ensuring that employees are placed in roles that suit them. As MM4 discusses,

> We need to think about and find ways to—and I don't necessarily have the solution on the "how" part—but thinking about how we can do right fitting in a way that we get a more holistic view of people. That way there are opportunities for movement and opportunities to help manage people into better fitting positions.

When asked to elaborate on why right fitting is such an important element, MM4 answers as follows: "I am of the perspective that everybody has talent, and you just have to find the right place and the right fit, and you watch the flower grow. They may have been the thorny rose where they were, and then they become the great big sunflower because they're in the right place."

Finding oneself in a suitable position is also a desirable proposition at the individual level. So too is having access to enticing and challenging opportunities as a result of high achievement. Yet, ultimately, the main individual-level TM objective that surfaced was to increase the level of transparency around an employee's career path. The following anecdote from SM5 portrays the desired level of transparency:

> But my superior hasn't indicated anything beyond saying I'm well-placed in role—that's not a plan, that's a placement. So, the plan in my mind would be, "Employee X you've been here a year. You're doing well. We think you need this training and at least another year to 18 months in the job, or two years in the job, or three years, or whatever the time period would be. And then we would identify you as needing to do another type of job after that. And we have openings that will be happening in these areas and we think you would be appropriate for these." That's a plan. And it's transparent. We don't do any of that. We just tell people kind of where they are.

It serves to reason that achieving desired TM organization and individual-level outcomes would require both strategic activities at the organization level, as well as planning and supporting measures at the manager-employee level. To inform the operationalization of TM, we now

review several key design and implementation recommendations that surfaced in the data.

TM Design Elements

When discussing how TM should be approached, participants often opted to describe how a TM program should be designed. Principles such as *simplicity* and *flexibility* were widely regarded as both currently absent and highly desirable. In the case of simplicity, several advised, as SM6 does, to avoid creating additional administrative burden on managers: "You can come up with this, an innovation, and we're going to ask people to fill-in this, or to do that, or to report every six months on that. Well that's just another stress element on my list, right?" But simplicity in the approach also benefits employees, as expressed by MM4: "And keep it simple for the employees. Keep it simple—if they understand how it works and what it is and what you're measuring them on—*that* is simple and helpful." This concern over imposing new TM deeds that are laborious and convoluted is unsurprising, given the earlier noted complexity of current HR systems within the case setting. The message is clear: keep it simple. And often coupled with the recommendation to simplify, was the urge to incorporate flexibility as a design principle. As described by SM2:

> There needs to be flexibility for some differences given there are operational contexts, but there should be some coordination of it. At least a way of ensuring that everyone's got the same understanding, and the same understanding of when they can apply that flexibility or when they should apply whatever flexibilities exist in their context. Otherwise you run the risk that everyone's going to go in completely different directions and who knows what's going to get spit out at the end.

With regards to the need for flexibility, and its importance given varying internal operational demands, several participants recommended *integrating streams* into a TM program. This appears to tie very closely to employee development, as each TM stream would focus on the experience and/or training an individual would require in order to progress through a given

stream. These streams would take into consideration differences between business lines—policy development versus client service, for example—and address the behavioral competencies required to excel in each stream. As MM3 notes, this promotes inclusivity in the TM approach:

> If you were to take it and stream it, you could have a talent management for leadership component. That would be essentially what the typical assumption and understanding of talent management is. So that's talent management for leadership. OK, I understand that. What about those who are very talented and again who are going to probably stay for a good part of their career maybe in that mid-level and maybe they actually could be good leaders. Maybe they don't want it.

MM3 goes on to describe how TM for those who are less inclined to lead might benefit from lateral stints in other government organizations, or outside of government. If TM is to expand beyond leadership development, it will be necessary for the various "talent streams" to clarify how a suitable candidate is to navigate a given stream, and how their manager can support them.

Creation and Coordination

Creating a TM program that is inclusive, user friendly, and adaptable to the complex nature of the organization is, as participants admitted, a major undertaking. When it comes to laying the foundation of the program—i.e. constructing a comprehensive and streamed approach, producing a strategic document that clarifies expectations and parameters, advising on key tools and resources, etc.—participants all expressed the need for leadership from the organization's HR unit. On this point, however, MM9 makes an interesting recommendation:

> Sometimes when suggestions for implementing this kind of thing comes from civil servants there is a bit of a resistance. So, I think that there's a point, and I'm not sure exactly what point that is, that we bring in somebody from the outside to have a serious conversation with our DGs and ADMs to say this is how you need to move forward. And it's unfortunate but I think a lot of times recommendations that come from *consultants* are given a bit more weight because they're seen as experts.

Though detailing the specific tools or resources required to create an effective TM plan falls outside the scope of this project, we inquired as to what it would take, given those items in place, to sustain commitment to the program. When asked about this, participants felt strongly that a small team (or, at minimum, an individual) within *HR should work to coordinate* TM efforts across the organization. At the organization level, there is a clear belief that the HR coordinating unit *and* senior management should play an active role in forming a definition, scope, activities, and objectives for TM. This would benefit the organization by, "Having some clear guidelines about what can be expected from everyone, adding some consistency. Because it's (the organization) so big and there's so many resources available to us. Proper information sharing is very important, so we are aware of the tools available to us and to our employees." (MM1) From the coordinating body in particular, there is a desire to not only create tools, guidelines, and data to support decision making, but also to communicate those resources effectively to the management team and all employees.

With the desired coordinating unit appearing to serve mainly as support function, the participants envision *senior management exemplifying and promoting TM* by engaging in regular strategic HR planning in collaboration with colleagues. This would involve not only taking part in TM and talent mapping exercises, but also using, as described by SM6, the management HR roundtables (such as WMC) to promote strategic discussions around topics like employee fast-tracking, mobility, and right fitting:

> I think we should have these types of discussions, but DGs need to have a (HR) plan to share. To share at a strategic level their challenges, their mitigation strategies, and their staffing plan that will help them meet their operational requirements…We need to have these strategic discussions on strategic HR planning, which would then open the door for, "Okay, well I've got someone here who needs a change". Also like, "we've got *this* person, or use *that* person". You've got them right here on the floor. We can work together to open up opportunities for our staff, but also to meet our operational demands, which we would share. Because right now, what's happening is, I'm not aware of all these

> opportunities—for the staff and for the management to have access to people that are here.

In addition to these organization-level activities, SM6, as many others, also believes that the employee-manager level of engagement is where the ultimate responsibility lies: “These systems with the mapping and the discussions, those are some tools to help. Yes, I think we could have more tools but in the end it's the responsibility of managers to connect with each individual, to coach them and get the max they can from them.”

At the individual level, the employee-manager TM efforts should involve a partnership in building a more transparent career path for the employee. When asked about what an employee’s role in TM should be, SM3 describes the following:

> So, I think a couple of things. One is to understand what they'd like out of their career as best they can, at whatever point they're at, and that changes over time, for sure. And then, I think to take on responsibility for their career. We see that to varying extents. But I do think it's important for employees to realize that they're in the driver's seat. They need to manage their own career, rather than waiting for the organization to do it for them.

Many believe that employee ownership should be a major component of TM, and that employees must play an active role in seeking out and participating in developmental activities, and in, as MM4 notes, “poking and pushing for what they want to help them grow in their career.”

As their partner in this endeavor, the manager is expected to engage in *transparent career planning*, which can involve the co-creation of, and support to achieve, an individualized plan for each employee to reach the next stage of their career. While tools should be in place to create some consistency in how conversations unfold, as SM1 and others describe, informal yet honest one-on-one conversations are a crucial component:

> It should almost be like two peers sitting side-by-side. You should be able to say look, tell me what it is you want to do, and let's talk about what I see or what other people might see. And it's not a put down or a “I'm sitting above you and I'm rating you on this

> scale." It's about an open conversation. And if people aren't comfortable in that, then there's some development needed there—for the person who's leading that conversation, which would be the supervisor. And if people aren't receiving that feedback very well, then they also need some development in terms of how to have those kinds of conversations, how to receive feedback. It's a bit like having a conversation with somebody about making renovations to your house. You say I want to have this done and they say you're not going to be able to do that, because it's a retaining wall or whatever. Ok, well then what are the other options?

This notion of a partnership, of two parties engaging in transparent conversations for mutual benefit, though seemingly simple, relies upon a culture that promotes this behaviour. Indeed, while clear direction, practicality, coordination, accountability, and other structural considerations are vital, so too are the belief systems that underpin behaviour. To study this in greater detail, the following section presents pragmatic cultural recommendations.

Cultural Recommendations

As we continue to explore participants' recommendations on how to "move the needle" on TM, we revisit the topic of culture. Earlier, a number of cultural challenges were discussed, revealing how perceptions, attitudes, and norms constrain TM within the case setting. Addressing cultural issues, as MM4 explains, "is an uphill battle. I certainly don't envy you (the researcher, for tackling this issue), because part of it is changing mindsets to start to think for the greater good." Though often deeply rooted, participants vented the necessity to address several of these issues. First, we build on MM4's point regarding a more collective mindset, uncovering the resounding sentiment that management must shift its focus toward enablement rather than self-preservation. We then explore participants' views on building a culture of leadership development. As essential as the aforementioned structural considerations may be, participants were adamant that even with helpful tools and resources in place, employee attitudes must be at the core of a successful movement toward improved TM.

A Collective Mindset

From a strategic standpoint, participants recommended that management approach TM with a truly organization-wide perspective, and not solely team-by-team or individual-by-individual. In order to do so, as previously noted by MM4, management should approach TM collectively. MM4 continues:

> But when you're talking to people, they (managers) don't want to lose their good people. They don't want to give them an opportunity to go and try something else because they need them. So that part is really an uphill battle and that's a culture change…We need to encourage managers to collaborate when it comes to talent management, and to work together."

While the suggestion for more regular and open TM discussions was prevalent, there was concern that without direction, or if they continue to remain overly superficial, these conversations may not be productive. Several expressed that productive TM conversations and resulting actions require transparency and a willingness on the part of management to *enable employee mobility*. In the absence of transparency and collaboration, internal movement, as described by MM5 can be perceived negatively: "And so there is a bit of a fine line between that mobility, encouraging and supporting that mobility, and being seen as a poacher." This is reiterated by MM2, who also points to the need to have open conversations in the spirit of enabling employee mobility:

> We basically poach each other's talent rather than having a concerted discussion about, you know, "We have Joe and he's a mid-level EC and he's gotten some great experience in a policy area but what he really needs to round out his experience may be in operations work, and then maybe working on a project, and then he'll be a well-rounded policy guy that can go anywhere and benefit the organization." I feel like we leave a lot of that to the individuals, rather than there being any kind of concerted approach to say, "okay, what do we think that people need in terms of experiences across the board to be well-rounded?"

This long-term and more comprehensive HR planning—encompassing both succession planning (organizational consideration) and career planning (employee consideration)—requires

management to think beyond the next year or two, and likely beyond the next electoral cycle. MM2 continues.

> We're kind of thinking like within the next year and the next two years. But do we need to be thinking about longer-term talent plans, and in longer-term career paths for people. And then there's obviously the inputs from individuals about where they see themselves in five years, ten years. And then a question of how do they get there? And how does that align with the organization's needs within that kind of five-year window or longer?

In striving toward a *long-term TM approach*, many pointed toward an absolutely critical element that is currently absent: greater *transparency* with employees. This involves not only clarifying the activities and purpose of the TM program, but also how conversations at the management level may impact the employee's development and career goals. With employees currently left in the dark and unsure of whether (and how) TM impacts them, participants emphatically expressed the need for greater transparency with employees. MM1 describes their approach to this:

> Often people within my team are asking for more transparency. I try and take some time in the spring to talk about HR processes with them. I don't present myself as an HR expert, but I say "Sometimes you see, there are processes in place for people to get promoted and to develop their skills. And that's what we try to encourage".

This openness with employees clarifies the organization's commitment to, and support of, their career plan. As SM6 explains, this ideally contributes to employee retention:

> I know that, as a person I want to know where I fit. I know my staff—they're looking up and thinking OK where do I fit? What is this place? What's going on? So, if you don't provide that as a leader, your staff go like maybe I'll jump ship if something else comes up.

From this quote we extract a key term that frequently surfaced in participants' recommendation for a more collective and transparent TM approach—*leader*. Though shifting toward a collective mindset may inspire more supportive, transparent, and productive TM conversations at management roundtables, participants insist on greater leadership at the manager-employee level

to ensure that employees are informed and engaged in TM. This involves more coaching, mentorship, and one-on-one discussions about career planning and professional development. Given the above noted organizational emphasis on work objectives and deficiency in the area of managerial skills, how might a cultural shift toward greater prioritization of leadership development be catalyzed? That is what we will now explore in the final section of the Results.

Cultivating Leadership

Managerial skills deficiencies occupied a significant share of participants' discussions on barriers to TM. When expressing observed individual challenges with managing, the people-oriented component of management tended to be most pronounced. When asked about improving the situation, the most common response pertained to increased employee development opportunities to compensate for people skill gaps:

> I hope to see that the skills of managers are developed to really do good *people* management. This is the problem: we promote some of our good, our best thinkers into management positions but sometimes they can't manage their way out of a paper bag. (SM2)

Rather than criticizing the more task-oriented managerial skills—planning, organizing, or controlling—participants' concerns were with managing expectations, providing feedback, empowering, and promoting employee growth. Developing employees to have the necessary skills, as SM7 describes, begins with an earlier recognition and investment: "…somehow identifying potential earlier on is really important, and then providing the training to help those people meet their potential." Interestingly, although several participants proposed perhaps more obvious solutions such as more training or professional coaching, many expressed the need for management to *encourage* and *support* the early and ongoing development of employees into

well-rounded leaders. “For talent management, if what we're ultimately trying to grow are people who are well-rounded enough to move up into the senior ranks, that's a good thing.” (MM4) The key distinction here being that resource availability, such as training, is not the issue—but rather the absence of a culture that values, encourages, and rewards leadership development (not just the achievement of work objectives). This is challenging but necessary, as SM6 describes:

> It's really hard to step back and say (to managers), “Yes but there's a *way* of getting things done and you don't want to damage people. You want them to learn as they go, through a culture of growing people.” It's that type of leadership that will change the culture here.

While clearly a significant cultural consideration, how can the organization improve widespread leadership development when, as previously established, managers are encouraged and accustomed to prioritizing work objectives, and expected to handle large workloads? This is a complex undertaking that participants offer an interesting perspective on. Beyond early identification of leadership potential, and subsequent early and ongoing developmental opportunities, the question of whether the “right people” are being promoted into managerial roles resurfaced frequently. MM9 provides the following perspective:

> Many managers don't know how to give feedback, and that's a very base layer. They can’t give feedback because they've never been asked to do it before. So how do they tell an employee, you're not meeting expectations. Especially when maybe they're not people who are really great at that stuff to begin with. They're good at other things. They're good at writing, analysis, research. I think there's a huge gap and we would be more effective at things like talent management if we had the right people managing talent.

Though a detailed inquiry into the character traits perceived to be necessary in a strong leader fell beyond the scope of our research, this notion of the “right people” seems to suggest that many managers are perceived to either not have developed the necessary skills or are unlikely to

be able to do so. This is the result, perhaps, of a tradition of promoting based solely on one's ability to deliver on objectives. On this topic, SM6 offers the following:

> What will change the culture is if you bring in managers that are people oriented—*that* will change the culture. If you bring in more economists who just think about system change, well, they're not going to care about people. But if you take people that are more balanced…Ultimately, it's part of your decision when you bring someone on board as a manager. You want someone that knows enough about the topic and has the skills, but also maybe the experience where they've shown that they put value on people. You have to consider modeling—the modeling of behavior. Because as soon as you've got *that* person at the top, then others start to see, "oh, people are important". They (managers) start to treat people more decently, and they connect with them and they nurture their relationships. If you put in a Senior Manager that does not do that, well then, the message gets down that, "ok, I can be successful without investing my time in seeing people and supporting their development".

This perspective demonstrates once again how intertwined TM is with other key elements of HRM, such as hiring and employee development. It encourages management to consider the potentially negative impact of hiring and promoting solely based on technical skills, and of delaying proper leadership development. Participants question whether the characteristics that are being assessed during the hiring process, especially during the hiring of a manager, suit the long-term needs of the organization. Given the current state, several pointed to the potential need to expand the search to find managers. "I think the folks who develop very strong management competencies early on are in operations units (i.e. HR, finance, IT, etc.), where you're often a team leader at an earlier age—like in the processing center I spent some time in at X (organization)." (SM3) Though undoubtedly a complex issue to solve, participants offer compelling options to improve this cultural challenge.

Ultimately, for a TM program to thrive, any new tools or resources must be coupled with a culture that values and encourages both the consistent execution of TM practices as well as a united and long-term commitment to transparent employee growth. This requires managers to

collaborate strategically and selflessly, with employee and organizational goals in mind. It also demands of the organization to cultivate leaders who embody these values and norms.

Summary of Results

The results of this research project provide a snapshot of how TM is manifested within a public sector organization, told from the perspective of managers who are all too familiar with the difficulty of maximizing the organization's most valuable asset—people. We first presented participants' views on the current TM approach within the case setting, exposing a vaguely defined program comprised of loosely coordinated and inconsistently applied practices aimed at catapulting top performers to higher positions. Given their clear dissatisfaction, we then explored participants' perceptions of the challenges inhibiting TM. The barriers that surfaced were structural, cultural, and environmental in nature, pointing to the complexity and, thus, difficulty of successfully designing and implementing a TM program. From resource deficiencies and siloed operations, to organizational fear and risk aversion, to a highly competitive labour market, the uninspiring current state of TM in the case setting is perhaps in large part the result of a less than sympathetic work environment. Nonetheless, participants were eager to share recommendations on how to move forward with TM. Suggestions pointed to structural considerations such as designing a simple and flexible program that encompasses all employees—not *just* high performers. Participants called for a streamed approach that would better suit the varied demands of such a large organization with multiple business lines. They requested clearer direction and greater coordination from the HR team but admitted that accountability ultimately falls on all employees. Indeed, in particular amongst management, a collective mindset is needed—one which fosters transparent and collaborative conversations

about employee mobility and development. This calls for a stronger tradition of leadership within the organization, which cultivates managers who embody these values and norms. Ultimately, if approached more strategically and with a longer-term perspective, participants believe that TM can truly help meet the needs of employees and the organization.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

We were inspired to pursue this research project to contribute to the evolving narrative on TM in the academic literature and in practice. Considering its growth in popularity, TM's manifestation within organizations has remained relatively ambiguous in the eyes of academics (Bolander et al., 2017). Moreover, much of the existing empirical research reflects the viewpoint of HR professionals. Such research assumes that HR professionals' perspectives accurately represent the opinions and experiences of other organizational members with regards to HR practices, or that variability in employees' experiences of HR practices need not be captured (Nishii & Wright, 2007). While offering a level of authority on the topic, we caution that HR professionals describe how their organization *intends* to approach TM, which may not always represent how TM activities *actually* unfold in practice. This caution is also raised by Thunnissen (2016). With that in mind—and given the extensive research via HR professionals and recent studies on employee perspectives (see De Boeck et al., 2018; Khoreva et al., 2017)—we instead elicited *managers'* views. By interviewing managers within a case setting that actively uses the term TM to describe certain practices, we were able to explore its nuances from the perspective of those most engaged in its daily operationalization. This is an important contribution to the literature as we shed light on both the lacklustre status quo, and on a potentially brighter vision for TM within the context of a Canadian public sector organization.

The findings discussed in the previous chapter responded to our research questions and, as summarized in the Summary of Results, offered a glimpse into the current and imagined future of TM within our specific case setting. We now turn our attention to the broader contributions emanating from our study, which may resonate with practitioners and researchers, in an effort to support HR decision-making and refine TM conceptualization. This begins with a brief look at the importance of examining context-specific considerations. From there, we discuss the following three TM-specific contributions to help advance our pursuit of clearer TM parameters: organization-level and individual-level analysis, distinction and integration of TM, and the inclusive TM approach. To conclude, we offer a proposed TM definition and model motivated by our findings and underpinned by several existing concepts in the literature.

Context-driven Considerations

It has been well established that context must be taken into account when discussing TM (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). Yet Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2020) assert that organizational context has been underappreciated in TM research, which is an oversight since context affects the meaning and implementation of TM. Though we hope to see continued advances toward a universal TM typology to address inconsistencies in its definition, practices, stakeholders, and objectives, context will inevitably play a pivotal role in the process of TM, given context-specific pressures, systems, and challenges.

Of importance to note is both the number and perceived impact of the *challenges* discussed by our participants. We contribute a variety of context-specific challenges and suggest the Structural-Cultural-Environmental categorization for future inquiries into TM barriers. However, two challenges in particular are worthy of revisiting. Firstly, we discovered that the

current approach to TM in the case setting is exclusive, contrary to the desire of most of our participants, who recommended an inclusive approach. Part of their rationale for an inclusive approach is to better align with the inclusive nature of the organization. This is an interesting finding, as *alignment with organizational culture* has been shown to be important in ensuring the effectiveness of HR practices (Harrison & Bazzy, 2017). Therefore, it seems that for TM practices to suit a given context, its overall approach must align with organizational norms and values.

Secondly, we draw considerable attention to the presence of a managerial skills deficiency in the case setting. Combine this with managers' lack of involvement in developing the TM approach and practices, we question the *realistic contribution* to TM that should be expected of managers. Research has long suggested that middle managers make important contributions to strategy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). In the HR literature, we have seen situations where middle managers are equipped to implement basic HR functions that are closely related to their routine day-to-day "hard" managerial activities involving metrics, but struggle in "soft" areas, such as training and career development, corporate culture, and labour relations (Xie et al., 2013). In the absence of natural leadership skills or proper development, middle managers seem unlikely to thrive as TM champions, stifling even a well-designed TM program, let alone a troubled one.

These two challenges speak to the complexity of TM and emphasize the diversity of context-driven challenges. We encourage further research in these areas, steering us toward the commonalities and differences that exist across various types of organizations. Though more multi-context research would benefit the TM field, so too would more multi-level analysis within organizations, as we will now discuss.

Organization-level and Individual-level Analysis

Throughout our Results, when applicable, we distinguished between organization-level and individual-level considerations—an approach rarely undertaken in the TM literature. As Thunnissen (2016) notes, contemporary TM literature mainly emphasizes organizational objectives. As a result, she notes the interests and well-being of individual employees is largely neglected. While the literature does occasionally acknowledge *multi-level considerations* in relation to TM objectives (see Collings & Mellahi, 2009), even more infrequently do individual-level considerations surface in discussions around design and implementation. This is surprising, as we have seen how the actual implementation of intended HR practices is often done by actors other than the decision makers in the "dominant coalition" (i.e. senior management, supervisory board, HR management, etc.), and that practices are often applied in ways that differ from the initial intention (Thunnissen, 2016). Considering our participants' recommendation to actively involve middle management and employees in TM, our findings certainly support that notion. Wright and Nishii (2013) argue that obstacles at both the organization and the individual levels may interfere with the implementation process. Our participants reaffirmed this as well. Therefore, given our findings and multi-level analysis, we urge a greater focus on, in particular, individual-level considerations in all aspects of a TM program.

Though exploration at both levels is beneficial, individual-level analysis in particular will illustrate nuances in TM operationalization, and further our understanding of *stakeholder roles*—a neglected topic in TM literature. What roles are most critical in the design and implementation of TM, and in what ways? For example, how does the senior management community contribute to TM (roundtable discussions, talent mapping, etc.), in comparison to, and in collaboration with,

middle managers and employees (supporting career planning, professional development, employee mobility, etc.). It has been shown that ambiguity surrounding the interpretation of TM (or the outcomes of TM), amongst stakeholders can result in internal tensions, which can then influence TM implementation (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Nijs et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2013). Although we did not discover any major discrepancies in TM interpretations on the basis of employee rank, we question the presence of other factors that may influence one's sensemaking of TM (i.e. time in role, previous experiences, age, etc.). As greater attention is attributed to individual-level considerations, and as we continue to inch toward a less ambiguous conceptualization of TM, sensemaking of TM likely warrants greater consideration. Further to that point, we now clarify our contribution to distinguishing and integrating TM.

Distinguishing and Integrating TM

Our study is consistent with others in that the results point to an ambiguous TM program in the case setting. Participants acknowledged that TM exists but struggle to distinguish it from other HR initiatives. Unfortunately, few have inquired as to *why* organizations loosely define and implement TM. While we discussed factors such as organizational fear and risk aversion as potential culprits, additional factors are probable. For example, given that several participants suggested a *deliberate* organizational effort to present TM imprecisely, we raise the possibility of strategic ambiguity (when ambiguity and allowing for multiple interpretations are used purposefully to accomplish goals (Eisenberg, 1984)). Ultimately, as discussed in this section, we sense that blurry parameters—deliberate or not—continue to hinder TM conceptualization, and we seek a clearer distinction between TM practices versus those belonging to separate HR initiatives.

TM is often described as the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment of talents (Scullion et al., 2010). Within their TM definitions, authors adopt different terms for "talent," for example excellent abilities, but also terms like key employees, high potentials or those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to an organization are used (Thunnissen, 2016). In practice, how does this differ from Strategic Human Resources Management (SHRM), which has been described as "the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals" (Wright & McMahan, 1992, p. 298)? Given the complexity of an HR environment, overlap is likely; however, several have questioned whether TM is truly a distinct program, insofar as to question whether it is simply a management fad (Iles et al., 2010). By interviewing managers, we discovered that while HR may position certain activities as being TM-related, they occasionally disagreed and viewed them as actually belonging to a separate HR initiative (most notably staffing, succession planning, employee development, and performance management). We believe this to be an important contribution. Overwhelmingly, the literature neutrally reports on TM practices and objectives, with little discussion around inconsistent terminology or variably characterized practices. For example, though a participant may claim "talent acquisition" to be a key component of TM within their organization, if recruiting efforts show no signs of integration with a TM program, is it accurate to report talent acquisition as a part of the organization's TM efforts? As previously mentioned, a high-performance work system is achieved when *a combination of HR practices*, work organization and processes allow for the maximization of workers' knowledge and skills, commitment and flexibility (Snell & Bohlander, 2004). Therefore, while talent acquisition (i.e. recruitment) may not fall within the parameters of TM, it may work in combination with TM and other HR practices to stimulate a

high-performance work system. This proposition, while promising, warrants further research attention. As illustrated in our forthcoming proposed definition and model, our findings support the notion that TM is a distinct program within the umbrella of HR, and it interacts with (informs or is informed by) several other HR initiatives. Given that our proposal is rooted in an inclusive TM perspective, we first offer a brief synopsis of our contribution to the inclusive TM literature, advancing recent efforts to reflect inclusive approaches in a TM typology (Bolander et al., 2017).

Inclusive TM

As noted in our Literature Review, the term TM was first introduced by McKinsey & Company in their report *The War for Talent* (Michaels et al., 2001). As they describe:

> "Although the war for talent rages on many fronts, this book is about the war for managerial talent: people who can lead a company, division, or function; guide a new product team; supervise a shift in an industrial plant; or manage a store with 15 or 150 associates. Managerial talent is not the only type of talent that companies need to be successful, but it is a critical one and it is at the epicentre of the war for talent." (p. 2)

As TM propagated in practice and in the literature, this exclusive perspective remained widely accepted. More recently, however, the variety of TM perspectives has become one of the most central debates in TM—i.e. whether TM is an inclusive approach which focusses on (the talents of) all employees, or an exclusive approach aimed at attracting and retaining a select group of employees (Tansley, 2011). While examples of exclusive approaches to TM are easily found in the literature, the meaning of inclusive TM remains ill-defined and vague, and concrete examples are rare (Swailes et al., 2014). One possible explanation for this is that decision-makers struggle with the philosophy and practicalities of inclusive talent programs, leading to the exclusive approach dominating because it is easier to conceptualize and implement, despite the

implications for the majority it leaves behind (Stewart, 2008). While that may commonly be true, it was not fully representative of our research findings. In fact, by asking managers (*potential* decision-makers) to describe how TM should be approached, we elicited recommendations on how inclusive TM could unravel in practice.

Our findings suggest that while managerial talent is important and must be managed, it should perhaps be a component of a multi-streamed approach to TM—one which centres around the "right fitting" of *all* employees, not just potential managers. This perspective aligns with that of Swailes et al. (2014, p. 534), who define Fully Inclusive Talent Management (FITM) as when: "the organisation puts systems in place to recognise the full range of talent in the organisation and to deploy talent according to job fit". This definition is rooted in positive psychology, which is concerned with the strengths and potential that people have rather than overcoming their weaknesses and limitations (Swailes et al., 2014). Like FITM, positive psychology is primarily focused on applying the particular talents that a person has by providing ongoing opportunities to display them and on understanding the best of the human condition (Dries, 2013; Mills et al., 2013). We revisit these underlying principles of inclusive TM—in particular, the role that employee *strengths* play—as we offer our own definition momentarily. First, we cast a look at how our findings compare to another recent inclusive TM perspective in the literature.

Our findings also closely resemble the "humanistic" approach to TM, described in a recent TM typology by Bolander et al. (2017). For example, similarities include supporting employee development for all (and tailored to employee interests), minimizing reliance on external recruitment, perceiving talent as context-dependant (i.e. employees underperforming in one position might thrive in another), and acknowledging that employee abilities, interests, and desires should be taken into consideration. However, while our findings align with humanistic

TM in that staffing actions rely on clearly defined criteria and formal tools to assess internal candidates, the humanistic approach does not allow for the fast-tracking of employees. Our research points to employee mobility as fundamental to TM and, thus, if a deployment is transparent and justified, TM should act as a mechanism to facilitate staffing actions, including circumventing conventional staffing practices. If there is truly a "war for talent", internal processes should not stand in the way of efficiently placing employees into *suitable roles*—those which benefit both the employee and the organization. To clarify this perspective, we now propose a new definition and model of inclusive TM.

Definition

In contrast to exclusive TM approaches which tend to centre around the identification and development of employees with managerial potential, we define the inclusive *Strengths-based Talent Management* approach as follows:

> *Strengths-based Talent Management (SBTM) involves the identification and consideration of each employee's capabilities, interests, and needs, as well as organizational needs, to facilitate the deployment of employees into suitable roles, thus supporting individual contribution towards organizational goals*.

Professional attention to the topic of *strengths* has increased in recent years, with perhaps the largest area of attention on strengths being within the organizational context (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). Earlier, we mentioned that the Swailes et al. (2014) FITM approach is rooted in positive psychology. In the organizational and HR literature, the principles of positive psychology underpin various "strengths-based" approaches—recent examples include performance appraisals and goal setting (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011) and coaching (Peláez et al., 2019). Research has shown countless examples of positive results when individuals are deployed in such a way that takes advantage of their strengths, such as increased performance,

job satisfaction, and engagement, to name a few (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). Given our interpretation of "talent" as the object (characteristics of individuals, such as abilities) rather than the subject (talented individuals)—as discussed by Bolander et al. (2017)—we use "strength" here to represent the intersection of the employee's capabilities, interests, and needs.

With this definition, we contribute a clear description of the fundamental steps required to inclusively manage talent in an organization. Though contextual factors will undoubtedly influence how an organization implements these steps, we believe the following three components are transferable:

1. *the identification and consideration of each employee's capabilities, interests, and needs, as well as organizational needs*;

To identify and consider each employee's capabilities, interests, and needs, organizations will require resources and practices (such HR analytics, employee profiling, talent mapping, etc.) to support TM discussions and decisions both at the individual (manager-employee) and organizational (management TM roundtables) levels. Such resources and practices may already be ingrained in existing HR programs such as employee development, performance management, and career planning. This is an example of where TM is integrated with other elements of HR, rather than encompassing them. In fact, the same can be said for the identification and consideration of organizational needs, which may be informed by current succession planning and external recruitment initiatives.

We use the term *capabilities* here, as it reflects the influence that context has on one's abilities. As Nussbaum (2011, p. 20) describes, capabilities "are not just abilities residing inside a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment" (or, in this case, the work environment). To

illustrate the distinction, consider an employee possessing the ability to conduct advanced multi-variate analysis, but confined by an organization with inadequate software to do so. Employee *interests*, however, are more straightforward. These include items such as what the employee wants to learn or work on, or who they wish to work with. Employee *needs* are requirements and are often less subjective than interests. Examples include the need to develop a particular skill, a physical accommodation, a flexible work arrangement, and so on. The *organization's needs* here refer primarily to its HR needs, such as position pre-requisites or vacancies, but context will play a significant role in the interpretation of this term.

2. *to facilitate the deployment of employees into suitable roles;*

As previously mentioned, our findings suggest the need for TM to serve as a mechanism to facilitate employee mobility, even if that means circumventing traditional staffing procedures. Ideally, this flexibility becomes embedded in the organization's underlying staffing principles. Ultimately, if the deployment benefits the employee and the organization, and measures are taken to ensure its transparency and fairness, efficiency should be prioritized given the competitive labour market. In the spirit of "right fitting" we use the term *suitable role* here to denote one which is deemed to satisfy the employee's capabilities, interests, and needs, as well as the organization's needs. Also, we use "role" rather than position, as is it possible for the employee to stay within their current position but take on a different role. However, in the majority of cases, role and position are likely interchangeable.

3. *thus supporting individual contribution towards organizational goals*.

Given the research suggesting that empowering strengths has a positive impact on performance and goal achievement, we conclude that this strengths-based approach to TM will support individual contribution towards organizational goals (Corporate Leadership Council,

2002; Linley et al., 2010). We use the term "support", rather than maximize, as there are other factors that might influence an employee's contribution. For example, earlier we noted the pivotal role a manager plays in TM. Unfortunately, the managers in our case setting are perceived to lack the leadership skills likely required to maximize an employee's contribution, and this may be the case in other organizations. Furthermore, we use the term organizational *goals*, as employees may be mobilized to impact organizational culture or client service, and not necessarily hard outcomes such as the bottom line—especially in a public sector organization.

From the standpoint of a multi-level analysis, employing a strengths-based approach has been shown to have a variety of positive effects at both levels, including increased work satisfaction (individual-level: Peterson et al., 2009), and reduced employee turnover (organization-level: Stefanyszyn, 2007). Yet, we confine the objective of strengths-based TM (SBTM) to "supporting employee contribution toward organizational goals" primarily to align with the recommended TM objectives described by our participants. Inevitably, each manager's leadership, coupled with other structural, cultural, and environmental factors, will determine whether this approach simply supports employee contribution, or delivers beyond.

To conclude our Discussion and to further illustrate our proposed approach to inclusive TM, we offer a model (Figure 2) that is broken down using the three components detailed above.

Model

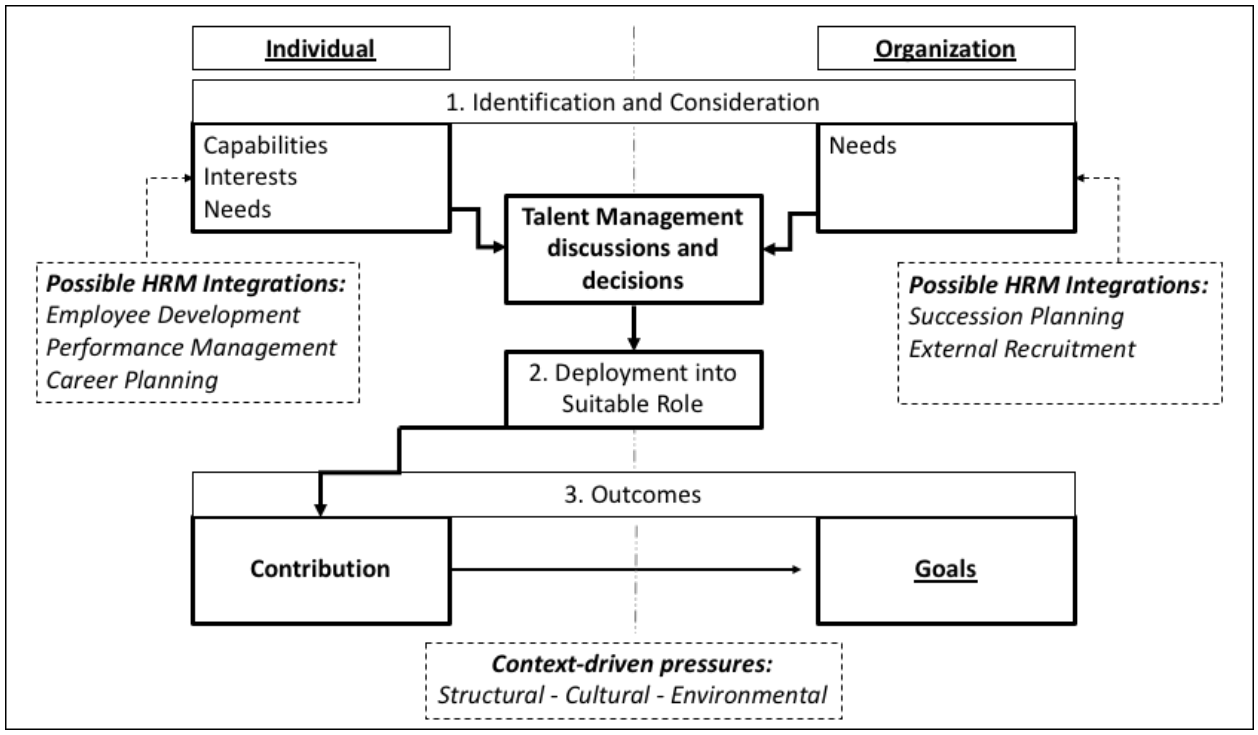

Figure 2: Model of Strengths-Based Talent Management

In this model, we depict the major components of SBTM, clarifying the parameters of our proposed approach to inclusive TM. The model reflects our recommendation to address individual and organization-level considerations, acknowledges the contextual nature of TM, and highlights the necessity for TM to be integrated with other HR initiatives. What this model does not cover are the various resources, tools, practices, and stakeholders involved, as that will depend heavily on each organization's HR environment. For example, the process of deciding how, why, and where to deploy an individual will differ from one organization to the next, as both internal staffing procedures and the format and frequency of TM discussions are context dependent. It is for this reason, and others, that we also do not discuss the element of time.

In sum, this project has contributed key findings related to TM within the Canadian public sector context, clarified the types of challenges inhibiting TM, and proposed a new and

refined approach to inclusive TM. To conclude, we now summarize study strengths and limitations, future research opportunities, and final thoughts on the present and future of TM.

Conclusion

Since its inception, TM has piqued the curiosity of HR enthusiasts. Though sometimes described as a nebulous concept, compelling efforts have begun to surface in the literature which inch us closer to a more refined conceptualization, with clearer inclusive and exclusive approaches. While interpretations continue to vary in practice, we see academic researchers playing an important role in differentiating TM within the HR arena and, ultimately, in informing TM design and decision making. We urge further research that both clarifies its parameters by identifying activities and processes that are specific to TM, and that also demonstrates how it is integrated with other HR initiatives.

We believe that our efforts to define and integrate TM is one of our study's primary strengths and contributions to the TM field. Furthermore, our findings reflect the oft neglected perspective of those most engaged in TM activities—managers. On the other hand, this singular perspective is also a limitation. We encourage future research that elicits the views of HR professionals, managers, and employees within a case setting, and offers comparative analyses to advance our understanding of stakeholder roles and the sensemaking of TM. Furthermore, given our purely interview-based qualitative approach, we recommend other qualitative and mixed methods approaches to explore the multi-level TM drivers, challenges, and desired outcomes as described by various stakeholders. Additional recommended future research topics are found in Appendix 6.

The practical implications of our research target those who are committed to creating a distinct and inclusive TM program within their organization. Contrary to other ambiguous or all-encompassing TM approaches, our proposed model strategically aligns employee strengths with organizational needs to achieve positive results at both levels. We believe that this strength-based approach is sufficiently flexible to suit a variety of organizations. Therefore, as HR and senior management teams deliberate whether an inclusive or exclusive TM program best suits the needs of their organization, we urge them to consider a strengths-based approach. TM has long endured a contested and dichotomous existence. Though questions still remain, we are optimistic that research efforts such as ours illuminate a path toward a strategically significant role for TM in *every* organization.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethics Approval

18/12/2019

Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE I CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number	S-12-18-1773
Titre du projet / Project Title	Talent Management in Canada's Federal Public Service
Type de projet / Project Type	Thèse de maîtrise / Master's thesis
Statut du projet / Project Status	Renouvelé / Renewed
Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	18/12/2019
Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	06/01/2021

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

Chercheur / Researcher	Affiliation	Role
Jonathan LEDOUX	École de gestion Telfer / Telfer School of Management	Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator
Samia CHREIM	École de gestion Telfer / Telfer School of Management	Superviseur / Supervisor
Sharon O'SULLIVAN	École de gestion Telfer / Telfer School of Management	Co-superviseur / Co-supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

<u>Appendix 2</u>: Invitation to Participate

VOTRE LIEN AVEC CE QUI COMPTE — CONNECTS YOU TO WHAT MATTERS

Date

Recipient Name
Title
Company
Address
City, ST ZIP Code

Dear *Recipient Name*:

Please accept this as a formal invitation to participate in the research project that I am currently conducting as part of a Master's program at the University of Ottawa. This project is aimed at exploring the following topic: *Talent Management in Canada's Federal Public Service*. It is being led by me, Jonathan Ledoux (Master of Science in Management student at the University of Ottawa) and is co-supervised by Dr. Samia Chreim and Dr. Sharon O'Sullivan (Professors at the University of Ottawa).

Your participation is completely voluntary. Should you accept this invitation, your participation would simply involve an individual interview lasting approximately one hour, during which you will be asked to discuss your experiences with and your views of Talent Management. Our discussion would contribute to my Master's thesis; however, you would remain anonymous. The following bullet points are true for all participants in the study:

- The project is being conducted independently from the organizations and agencies from which participants may be recruited.
- Their decision to participate (or not) will not affect their employment.
- No one, including their superiors and/or colleagues, will know whether they chose to participate (or not).

If you are interested in learning more, I am happy to discuss all other important details you.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Ledoux
MSc in Management (candidate)
Telfer School of Management, University of Ottawa

Appendix 3: Consent Form (2 pages)

TELFER

VOTRE LIEN AVEC CE QUI COMPTE — CONNECTS YOU TO WHAT MATTERS

Consent form – Research conducted as part of a Master's Program
Program and University: Master of Science in Management, University of Ottawa

Name of student researcher: Jonathan Ledoux
Coordinates:
Name of thesis co-supervisors: Dr. Samia Chreim and Dr. Sharon O'Sullivan
Affiliation: Telfer School of Management, University of Ottawa
Coordinates: Dr. Samia Chreim**:**
Dr. Sharon O'Sullivan:

Invitation to participate: I am invited to participate in the research study titled *Talent Management in Canada's Federal Public Service* conducted by Jonathan Ledoux, and co-supervised by Dr. Samia Chreim and Dr. Sharon O'Sullivan.

Purpose of the study: I understand that the purpose of the study is to close the gaps in our understanding of Talent Management (TM) in Canada's Federal Public Service. I also understand that, from a pragmatic standpoint, the goal of this study is to help Canadian public sector organizations achieve desired TM-related objectives.

Participation: My participation will consist of taking part in an individual interview lasting about one hour.
I agree to the session being audio recorded for better data collection purposes only (please select one of the following): ☐ YES ☐ NO

Benefits: My participation in this study will provide me with the opportunity to describe my experiences with and views of TM. My participation will benefit the research project, and the overall findings of the research project will contribute to our improved understanding of TM in Canada's Federal Public Service. My participation will also help the student gain experience in how to conduct qualitative research.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I have been assured that in written reports (including publications), my name, role/position and organization will be disguised to ensure my anonymity. I understand the following bullet points to be true for all participants in this study:

- The project is being conducted independently from the organizations and agencies from which participants may be recruited.
- Their decision to participate (or not) will not affect their employment.
- No one, including their superiors and/or colleagues, will know whether they chose to participate (or not).

TELFER

VOTRE LIEN AVEC CE QUI COMPTE — CONNECTS YOU TO WHAT MATTERS

Consent form – Research conducted as part of a Master's Program

Program and University: Master of Science in Management, University of Ottawa

Conservation of data: The data collected (digital recording of interview and interview transcript) will be kept in a secure manner. They will be stored on a computer with secure password. Only the student researcher and the thesis co-supervisors will have access to the interview data. The data will be conserved for 5 years.

Voluntary participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I may withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be deleted.

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the above noted research study conducted by Jonathan Ledoux of the Telfer School of Management, whose research is under the co-supervision of Dr. Samia Chreim and Dr. Sharon O'Sullivan. I understand that by accepting to participate I am in no way waiving my right to withdraw from the study.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the student and/or the professors at the coordinates mentioned above.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 4: Interview Protocol

Introduction

Tell me about your role in *the case setting* (we use *the case setting* here rather than the name of the organization for confidentiality).

- How long have you been in your current role? (*Indented bullets are possible probes:)*
- Where did you work previously?
- What projects are you currently working on?

Conceptualizing Talent Management

I would like to better understand your perspective of Talent Management. In general terms, how would you describe the concept of Talent Management?

- What are its objectives?

- Do you believe that these objectives of TM should be an important priority for a public sector organization?
    - Why/Why not? *Probe around rationale for perceived importance*

- What activities/practices do you associate with TM?

- There are different perspectives on how to approach TM practices. Studies on TM tend to conceptualize the approach to TM in one of two ways:
    1. The first approach is *inclusive*: It claims that everyone has talent, and therefore a talent management strategy should focus on activities that harness the potential of all employees, as they all have an impact on organizational goals.
    2. The second approach is more *exclusive*: It claims that certain positions within the organization have a greater impact on organizational goals than others and, therefore, talent management should focus on activities that get the right talented people into those pivotal roles.

    Which perspective on TM would you prefer (inclusive or exclusive), and why?
    - Do you think this approach would be suitable for a public sector organization? Why/why not?

Personal Experience with TM in *the case setting*

- You shared your view on whether a public sector organization should (or should not) prioritize TM. Do you feel *the case setting* has prioritized it appropriately?
    - Why? /Why not?

- You mentioned that, in general, the objective(s) of TM is to _____. Do you believe that *the case setting* achieves that objective(s)?
    - Why/why not?

- If not (if you feel that accomplishing TM has been a challenge in *the case setting*), can you explain why?
    - *Probe heavily around this to obtain critical incidents*
    - *(e.g.,* Describe your experiences with TM-related challenges – nature of the challenges, stakeholders involved, and facilitating/hindering factors)

- (For HR only) Have you been involved in the development of any Talent Management initiatives or resources for the Department?
    - Can you describe those initiatives? How were they developed? How well did they work?
        - *Probe – nature of challenges experienced, stakeholders involved, facilitating/hindering factors*

- You shared your preference on the TM perspective (inclusive/exclusive) that you feel should be taken by a public sector organization. Which approach do you feel *the case setting* has actually taken, and why do you think that is?
- *Probe*: What else provides you with an indication of *the case setting*'s approach to TM?
    - Describe your familiarity with any other TM initiatives or resources
    - How/by whom is TM-related information communicated to you?

Design & Implementation

Given how you have described your concept of the ideal TM approach, and your actual experiences with TM at *the case setting*, I'm curious to get your thoughts as to whether or how you might have approached TM at *the case setting* any differently, if you were to have completely free rein on the design and implementation process.

If you were tasked with designing a TM strategy for organization, how would you do it?

- For your overall strategy:
    - Which stakeholders would you consult, and why?
    - What would be the key activities/practices included?
    - What resources, such as IT, would you require?
    - What challenges do you anticipate? How might you overcome these challenges?

- When it comes time to implement your strategy, how would you pilot your approach?
    - Which stakeholders would be involved in each step?
    - What challenges do you anticipate, in each step? How might you overcome these challenges?
    - How would you track progress?
    - How should this approach be communicated? To whom?

    - Ultimately, in your view, who should be accountable for seeing that TM is prioritized and effectively utilized? For example, does it fall on the Department, HR, the Branch, the Directorate, each manager? Each individual? …

- Why?

Conclusion

- Is there any other constructive feedback you might offer about TM in the organization? Any questions that I have not asked that you feel would be relevant for me to know?
- If I have any additional questions, may I contact you? What is the best way to get in touch?
- If anything, else comes to mind, please feel free to contact me by email.

Appendix 5: Additional Supporting Quotations

Views on TM in practice	
Understood application of TM	
Exclusive approach, aimed at high performers	We still sort of conceptualize talent management in a bit of an old-fashioned sense, and I realize that it seems to be changing. But the old-fashioned articulation of talent management—whether it was ever written like this or not—was always a way of, when management spotted someone that had this intangible "it"—certain skills in certain areas, just this intangible—this person, obviously, had the leadership skills and was well positioned to be a future leader…that they could help them sort of navigate through the system and advance their career. (SM2)
Talent Management Plans (TMP) aim to catapult to a higher position	So, there are different ways in which it's (TMP) used, and I think we probably have used it a fair bit to talk about the management of the kind of high potential individual group. The people who have the capacity and the interest in moving to positions of greater responsibility in their career. So that's the frame that I put around it. (SM1)
Talent Mapping exercise to support succession planning	I think our process (talent mapping) this year, while very simple, I think is a step in the right direction—getting people to start thinking about talent management. Really, we were starting to think about succession planning, and that's the foundation really. (MM6)
TMP used as justification to circumvent traditional staffing rules	But when it comes to staffing, sometimes it (TMP) is used for people to move forward in a non-advertised way. So, for example, we can move someone from EC-02 to EC-04. It helps them get moved forward without a competition because they're on a talent management plan. Sometimes they shouldn't necessarily be, but it's (TMP) a vehicle used to move them forward and I know I've seen that as a manager. (MM7)
Weaknesses in current approach	
Nebulous concept with loose instructions from the top	It's one of those kind of nebulous words, where you kind of think you know what it means…There needs to be more of a definition at the highest level, rather than just saying stuff like "you've got to manage talent!" well yeah that's great, thanks. What do you want us to do? (MM2)
Inconsistently applied practices	No, it's (TM) not done consistently, holistically across the whole organization. I think there might be pockets. I think there are groups that I've seen who attempt to do it, but I don't think that the organizational structure and the organizational tools are in place to allow anybody to do it properly. (MM9)
No perceived connection between TMP and employee benefit	I've been on a talent management plan. I think this is my third time and it's never helped me move forward in any process. It's never helped me move forward in anything. (MM7)
Challenges to TM	
Structural Challenges	
Large and geographically dispersed organization	Yeah, I think part of it is size of organization. It's very complex because we're so big. (SM5)
Many business lines, siloed operations	It's unfortunate because if we had more communication and more collaboration about managing our staff, I think we would be able to

	grow our staff much more, rather than having them to jump from one department to another. Like look it's an organization of several hundred people and many different teams. There's huge opportunities to move people around here and grow them here. (SM6)
Resource deficiencies	When I became a manager they (training) weren't focused on how you talent manage your team, like they're all focused on the financial management, delegations, signing authority…but it wasn't focused on the, here are tips and tricks, and how you can help talent manage people, resources you can go to and things to think about to help people grow and develop. And so I think, building some sort of toolkit for the managers is a good thing too. And a set of resources for us to go to because it doesn't exist and this (TM) isn't always easy to do. (MM4)
Complex HR systems	The thinking is often well we're a very complex diverse huge organization so everything we do, our HR systems, need to be complex and diverse. Actually, I think the reverse, we need to simplify more because we are complex. (MM3)
Cultural Challenges	
Lack of dialogue around TM	Talent management appears to be this big secret in the public sector. We don't talk about it. No one knows where they sit vis-à-vis their colleagues. No one knows if senior management has a plan for them. (SM5)
Fear and Risk Aversion	The risk aversion, it's very extreme. And we're not the only ones, it's government in general. (MM2)
Influence of unions and electoral cycle	I think the bigger challenges around that are things that you don't see, that aren't formulaic that are more—there's the fear of giving someone too low a mark because then they'll *grieve* it. (MM3); In the government context we deliver on the government's priorities *of the day*, in turn that affects how we manage the people within the organization (MM9)
Managerial skills deficiencies (workforce composition)	And that's part of the challenge here. Leadership is an art. I would argue that a lot of people here may never get there. Even given opportunities to try. (SM6)
Environmental Challenges	
Competitive labour market	So, in some categories yeah, we are competing against ourselves. And then in other cases we're competing against the private sector. It's hard to recruit people generally across the board, I think. (SM7)
What TM should be	
Structural Recommendations	
More inclusive with greater emphasis on right fitting	I really believe that there is a role for nearly everybody. You just have to find what it is. So, it could be if somebody is not performing, they're not happy. They're not able to contribute in the way that they and management would like, that they're just not in the right role and we need to help them find a role that's more suitable. So I would see that as talent management as well, but from a broader perspective and not within the formal program that's been established here. It's equally important. (SM3)

More simple and flexible design, incorporating streams	I think some of our rules and regulations probably also hinder our ability to be as flexible as, say, my sister in the private sector is, who can pull the resource she needs when she needs it and compensate that person. And I think there could be improvements here to allow for comparability across jobs. (SM5)
Consultant to aid with design, HR to coordinate implementation	Now, would it be good to have somebody who's kind of coordinating a collective approach in the organization to ensure that we're being consistent? Yes, absolutely. And in that case, I mean to me ultimately that makes most sense to fall on human resources because of the nature of the topic. (MM4)
Need senior management buy-in, and universal accountability	If I say everybody, you're gonna hate my answer right? Well, because I really do. As I said earlier on I think the employees need to be accountable for themselves…But truthfully the deputy or the deputies should be creating an environment that encourages talent management from the get go. So, it really needs to come from the top down. (MM4)
Cultural Recommendations	
Collective mindset, with increased transparency and enablement	And so, ideally, by having an approach of succession planning and talent management—or umbrellaed by talent management—you have a management team that's supporting the individual that's surrounded by support. The individual is encouraged to take ownership over their own career development but knows there's the support there, and there's a fostered conversation that's an ongoing one about their mobility and what their gaps are. (MM6)
Longer-term perspective	We need to look further into the future. Like, how do we get people to feel like we care about them and their career path in a way that's not just about our kind of narrow view of, well, we need someone to fill an EC-06 or an EC-07 role right now. (SM1)
Prioritize and support leadership identification and development	I think so, probably with quite a bit of training for managers on how to do this. Because, frankly, I think that managers aren't particularly well trained as managers in public service. (SM2)

Appendix 6: Recommended Future Research Topics

Topic	Brief Description
Distinguishing and Integrating TM	With TM often being used synonymously with Strategic Human Resource Management, efforts to define the parameters of TM and explore its integrations with other HR initiatives (in various contexts) would benefit its conceptualization.
Sensemaking	Given the ambiguity surrounding TM, further investigating the factors which may influence one's sensemaking (in various contexts) may point to major causes for confusion.
High Performance Work Systems (HPWS)	Research on the relationship between TM (*inclusive* TM, in particular) and HPWS is sparse. The role TM plays in a HPWS warrants further consideration.
Strategic Ambiguity	The potential existence (and impact) of strategic ambiguity as it pertains to an organization's communication of TM should be explored, as it may influence our desire to more clearly define TM parameters.
Strengths-Based Talent Management (SBTM)	Though our proposed SBTM model is unlikely to exist in practice, investigating the presence (and structure) of similarly applied TM programs would help advance our understanding of this inclusive TM approach.
HR Analytics	Though largely neglected in the TM literature, it is possible that HR analytics are playing (or will soon begin to play) a significant role in TM programs. Therefore, further research on the interplay between HR analytics and TM would benefit this field.