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TWO WORLDS APART? OVERCOMING THE DISCORD IN TALENT MANAGEMENT BETWEEN ACADEMIA AND BUSINESS

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the persistent gap between academic research on Talent Management (TM) and its practical application in the business area. Key disparities include differing priorities, with academia emphasising theoretical advancement and businesses focusing on practical outcomes, where the faster pace of business publications exceeds the typically longer academic publishing process. The article argues for increased academic-practitioner collaboration, proposing real-world testing of interventions and reciprocal feedback mechanisms to improve understanding and relevance of academic research, thus fostering more effective human resources strategies, aiming to align TM research with real-world needs.*

Key words: *talent management, academia-business gap, scholars-practitioners gap, future of talent, human resources strategies*

1. INTRODUCTION

The academic and business worlds have often been seen as two distinct spheres with unique Talent Management (TM) practises. In recent years, there has been concern about the gap between academic research on TM and its practical application in the business world. Although the field of TM is still in its 'growing' stage, it does not offer clear guidelines for implementation to practitioners [1].

In the current business environment, it is important to answer the "So What" question, which leads to more effective performance feedback discussions, greater individual engagement, and organisational excellence. Academic and industry collaboration is necessary to achieve success, as practitioners are primarily interested in practical solutions rather than excessive data [2]. Dave Ulrich, professor at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, known for his work on HR transformation and strategic HR management, introduced the "So What?" question in his book "HR Champions: The Next Agenda for Adding Value and Delivering Results" back in 1997. In the book, he emphasised the importance of HR professionals being able to demonstrate the value of their work and connect it to business

outcomes. The "So What?" question is a way to challenge people to critically think about the impact of their work and to ensure that they are delivering real value to organisations [3]. This question was meant to be addressed within the corporate environment.

Academics are typically focused on conducting research that advances theoretical knowledge, while businesses are more concerned with practical outcomes and achieving tangible results. This study explores the academic-business gap, examining its causes, and try to find solutions for bringing the two worlds together.

2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Several factors contribute to the academic-business gap in TM. Anyone who writes articles for scholarly journals with peer review knows that it can take from a few weeks to one year or even more to have them published. When it comes to the latest business practises, news and trends, the speed of publication in magazines, online posts, research from companies, or whitepapers is very fast, ranging from a few days to a maximum of a few weeks. By the time the scientific paper is published, the risk is that the

content is no longer up-to-date, as the changes in the corporate area are happening extremely fast.

Intrigued by the scholarly literature exploring the gap between academia and practitioners in the field of TM, I undertook exploratory research to delve deeper into this subject. I chose to look into three most important databases - Web of Science, Scopus, and Elsevier - and search for the terms: "talent management" and ("academic practitioner gap" or "academic business gap" or "theory practise gap" or "scholars-practitioners gap", without setting up a time frame or any other criteria. The results were very surprising, as I have only got one document from Web of Science and two from Scopus and Elsevier. The article by R.M. Vosburgh, written in 2017 but republished in 2022 in a special edition of Human Resource Management Review journal, and entitled "Closing the academic-practitioner gap: Research must answer the 'So what' question that was present in all three databases [2]. In Scopus I have also retrieved the paper by Gallardo-Gallardo – 'Some critical reflexions on the relevance of talent management research' published in 2020 [1] and in Elsevier I have gotten the article 'The academic-practitioner gap: Past time to bring in the practitioner perspective" written by B. E. Kaufman [4].

During the last twenty years, a so-called 'behavioural asymmetry' between scholars and practitioners was identified, as there are two separate groups of people that do not collaborate in most cases. A research found that only 1% to 2% of businesspeople in the HR area are looking at academic research and papers. And, on the other hand, scholars do not prefer to partner with practitioners to carry out their research and test their theories [4]. It seems like a competition, rather than a collaboration. Due to the speed of business practises and publications, scholars find this competition very difficult. What time proved, in fact, is the need for very well-documented and tested research in HR domain. Two cases can be seen today in the HR world: first, some popular business processes lack evidence and thorough research and remain popular even if they have multiple negative results; and second, some of the HR best practises are not documented and researched

with the participation of scholars, therefore not popularised in the academic world [5].

The literature indicates the need for a more integrated approach that blends existing resources to facilitate innovation and sustainability in both sectors.

3. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

In our research design, we chose to include a variety of perspectives. Due to the under-representation of the topic in three widely recognised databases, we engaged in a comprehensive literature review in the broader domain of HR management, focussing particularly on the identified gap.

Our qualitative investigation examined academic articles, books, industry reports, and TM case studies within both the academic and business spheres. This systematic review enabled us to discern current challenges and gain insights into the current state of the field.

Furthermore, our research extended to the realm of historical and future-orientated analysis. We investigate the perspectives of experts to determine the potential evolutions of work in the next years, providing a temporal dimension to our exploration of TM practises.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Businesses often prioritize short-term results in TM, while academia emphasizes long-term individual development. Our findings suggest that an integrated TM approach could benefit both sectors, enhancing talent cultivation and driving success.

There are five main challenges that contribute to the disconnect between scholars and practitioners, namely blurred conceptual and intellectual boundaries, insufficient interdisciplinary studies, the need to balance theory and practise in Knowledge Management (KM), the role of corporate research teams, and predictions for the future of work.

4.1 Blurred conceptual and intellectual boundaries

The field of TM research currently lacks well-defined conceptual and intellectual

boundaries, posing challenges in translating research findings effectively. To enhance the accuracy of their studies, scholars should strive to establish solid foundational frameworks and clarify key constructs within the field [1]. Researchers and practitioners can begin by addressing two essential enquiries: whether they believe that talent is possessed by many or only a few people and whether they consider talent as an innate characteristic or something that can be developed. These assumptions can guide their approach to TM and future studies [6].

4.2 Insufficient interdisciplinary studies

Currently, there is a deficiency in interdisciplinary studies incorporating TM. We do not have enough evidence of the interactions of TM with the medicine, sociology, and economics that in practise are already available. There is only limited research on workers' behaviour and mental health that impacts their performance. For example, after the pandemic, we do not have enough information on how the behaviour of senior workers was affected and what we can do about it [7].

A big gap of research is found when we talk about ageism at the workplace, how to integrate different age groups in activities without generating negative reactions from senior workers. Mental capacity is believed to decrease over time; however, gerontological research shows that only after the age of 80 there is a decline in intelligence, and also productivity and learning ability could decrease [8].

4.3 Balancing theory and practise in KM

The field of KM is a mature scientific discipline with its own unique language, theories, and research topics. However, there is a gap between the theory of KM and its practical implementation. To address this problem, researchers must shift from know-how loss to a revolution that actively delivers knowledge to professional stakeholders [9].

4.4 The corporate research teams

One practise of big corporations is to hire PhDs as part of HR consulting and

organisational development units. They do not have the need to collaborate with universities, as they are creating their own research competence [5]. The downsize of this internal feature increases the academic-business gap.

4.5 Predictions for the future of work

Renowned Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari asserts a paradoxical concept: with an increase in our knowledge, our ability to make predictions diminishes. In fact, he suggests that we may not even be able to predict our own professional future. Given the likelihood of an increase in life expectancy due to scientific discoveries, reinvention will become an essential part of our lives. Agility will become anchored in our lifestyle. Traditional patterns of professional life, where a period of learning is followed by a period of employment, may become outdated in this rapidly changing world.

Harari references Max Planck's belief that "science advances one funeral at a time," suggesting that fresh perspectives and alternative theories often emerge only with the passing of a generation [10]. Higher education institutions can contemplate upon and employ mechanisms to mitigate the potential risks of resisting change.

Harari thinks that in the future, we may find ourselves overwhelmed with an abundance of information and data, making it impossible to process everything and utilise it to improve our lives. It is in these cases that technological advancements and artificial intelligence (AI) will play a critical role in supporting us [11]. In the post-pandemic world, we already are witnessing the increase of AI use.

In June 2023, McKinsey & Company released a comprehensive study elucidating the impact of generative AI on the economic landscape. It features how the transformation of work structure through automation could save up to 70% of employees' time. Intriguingly, the report projected that half of contemporary work activities could undergo automation between the years 2030 and 2060. Significantly, the domain where generative AI is expected to exert the greatest influence is within high-wage

occupations and the specific roles pursued by academic graduates. [12]

5. STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING THE DISCORD

Bridging this discord requires open dialogue, shared learning experiences, and robust collaborative partnerships. We propose two main categories of actions that can be taken towards integrating best practises from both sectors into a unified TM framework: broadening the exchange of knowledge and practises and leveraging existing resources in both academia and business.

5.1 Broadening the exchange of knowledge and practises

There are several organisations around the world that facilitate the exchange of knowledge and practises for many disciplines between academics and practitioners in real time. We can name the Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychology (SIOP), which is half academics and half practitioners, and the Labour and Employment Relations Association (LERA), which switches the leader position between scholars and businesspeople [2]. In addition, HR management scholars engage practitioners in conferences and editorial boards of academic journals, as well as in different workshops, such as those organised by the European Institute for Advance Studies in Management (EIASM) that contribute to the development of research areas and networks [1]. Regardless of the presence of a large number of academic members, the participation of practitioners remains limited. Developing a strategic approach to actively involve representatives of companies and HR professionals would generate significant benefits for both sectors.

Our findings reveal that a significant number of professors have successfully transitioned to becoming respected Global HR experts. They engage actively in academic research, publishing papers in esteemed HR and management journals, and authoring influential books that profoundly shape both practical implementation and theoretical advancements..

One example is Dave Ulrich, professor at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business, known for his work on HR transformation and strategic HR management and for podcasts and online HR conferences. His book, "HR Champions: The Next Agenda for Adding Value and Delivering Results" published in 1997 is a practical guide for HR, and it emphasises the importance of HR professionals being able to think critically and strategically. The book also introduces the concept of HR as a Business Partner, in which HR professionals are integrated into the strategic decision-making process and work collaboratively with business leaders. His work has been highly influential in the field of HR Management and has helped developing many of the practises and theories that are used today [3]. Even to this day, the book continues to hold significance as numerous practitioners refer to it, recognising the critical role of HR Business Partner in facilitating TM frameworks across organisations.

Edward Lawler, professor of business at the University of Southern California and a leading authority on organisational effectiveness, performance management, TM, and HR strategy, published in 2008 the book 'Talent: Making people your competitive advantage', exploring the importance of TM in achieving business success. Lawler suggests that organisations must adopt a strategic approach to TM, in which talent is viewed as a key driver of business performance [13].

The Great Resignation phenomenon that started in 2020 and is still in place today has had a great impact on knowledge loss, decreased efficiency in business activities, and challenges in attracting top talent. This creates opportunities for research in Knowledge Management (KM) and for the Great Knowledge Revolution that some scholars are talking about as maybe the only way to support the economic sustainability on long term. That means to take the theoretical discoveries until now and convert them into practical applications according to the industry needs. KM scholars can now take the lead and guide practitioners through this unexplored area [9].

5.2 Leveraging existing resources in both academia and business

As the number of senior employees will grow over time due to the advanced medical discoveries and increased life expectancy, it is important for all organizations to engage in examining self-regulation strategies, personalizing interventions for specific groups of senior employees, and establishing a sustainable inclusive environment. Future research in this regard plays a crucial role. Incorporating successful aging at work into the inclusive culture of companies is essential [7]. Both topics are related to behaviour studies for which companies are lacking resources; however, scholars cannot conduct such research without the involvement and support of practitioners.

A very recent US-based study conducted by Nick Bloom, a professor at Stanford University, contains the most comprehensive summary of what working from home (WFH) means in the post-pandemic era. He highlights two main ideas that offer a large debate area in productivity: for professionals fully remote typically lowers productivity (but cuts costs) while organised hybrid raises productivity a little (1% to 3%); employees believe WFH increases productivity by 7.4% while managers believe it reduces it by 3.5%. This is interesting and important data for businesspeople who do not have the resources to conduct such studies [14,15]. This report is one of the most comprehensive research projects on the topic and is distributed on the LinkedIn professional network platform, appreciated and redistributed hundreds of times. Bloom was also voted 2022 Top LinkedIn Voice In Remote Work.

Interdisciplinary collaborations between different academic disciplines and business sectors can facilitate the integration of diverse perspectives, leading to innovative solutions and a greater understanding of complex problems.

HR practitioners can become familiar with the academic literature and even publish in peer reviewed journals and can partner with scholars when working on innovative concepts and processes [2]. Academics can work with practitioners to develop research questions and test interventions in real-world settings, going beyond one discipline of study. This type of

collaboration will trigger a reciprocal feedback mechanism on academic research findings to help researchers better understand the practical implications of their work.

Within the current changing and uncertain working environment, companies have a large-scale need for upskilling for some of the urgent competencies such as digital skills and agile working [16]. Other important post-pandemic skills were found to be resilience, the soft skill that defines the workforce that is continuously able to support change management and the success of any organisation [17]. However, organisations are prioritising the so-called “Great Reskilling”, as digital acceleration is changing the way we look at talent [18]. Academic institutions are urged to take immediate action by proactively implementing programmes aimed at preparing their faculty and students for the forthcoming work environment. Partnership with the business is critical. Embracing short-term trends and equipping individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge is important to ensure readiness for the future.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Most of the research conducted by the scholars in the post-pandemic period of the last two years is providing evidence of the existing literature or future research directions, but not practical solutions, as strong collaboration is still missing with the business.

There are several potential solutions to narrow the gap. It is crucial for academics to ensure that their research addresses the practical aspects and concerns of the business environment, ultimately making a positive impact through their work.

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Două lumi separate? Depășirea diferentelor în gestionarea talentelor între mediul academic și cel de afaceri

Acest articol investighează decalajul persistent dintre cercetarea academică privind Managementul Talentelor (MT) și aplicabilitatea sa în domeniul afacerilor. Principalele disparități includ priorități diferite, mediul academic concentrându-se pe partea teoretică, în timp ce industriile au în vedere rezultatele practice, iar ritmul mai rapid al publicațiilor din mediul de afaceri depășește procesul mai lung de publicare academică. Articolul pledează pentru o colaborare crescută între universități și practicieni, propunând testarea în lumea reală a intervențiilor și mecanismelor de feedback reciproc pentru a îmbunătăți înțelegerea și relevanța cercetării academice, încurajând astfel strategii mai eficiente ale resurselor umane, având ca scop alinierea cercetării MT la nevoile din lumea reală.

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