

## **WORKFORCE DIFFERENTIATION: CONSIDERING THE FUNDAMENT OF TALENT MANAGEMENT**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to contribute to our conceptual understanding of Talent Management (TM) by discussing workforce differentiation, which achieved strong attention in Human Resources Management (HRM) during recent years. Workforce differentiation links Human Resource (HR) architecture with strategic impact of TM and is therefore considered as fundament of TM. For this purpose, four highly recognized models of workforce differentiation in TM literature, published between 2001 and 2005, will be described and contrasted by the following attributes: 'workforce differentiation feature' e.g., employee performance levels, 'hierarchical level' e.g., managerial or non-managerial positions of employees and 'focus' such as bottom-up or top-down approach.*

*Keywords: Talent management, workforce differentiation, human resource architecture, talent management practices, talent management activities, human capital investments*

### **INTRODUCTION**

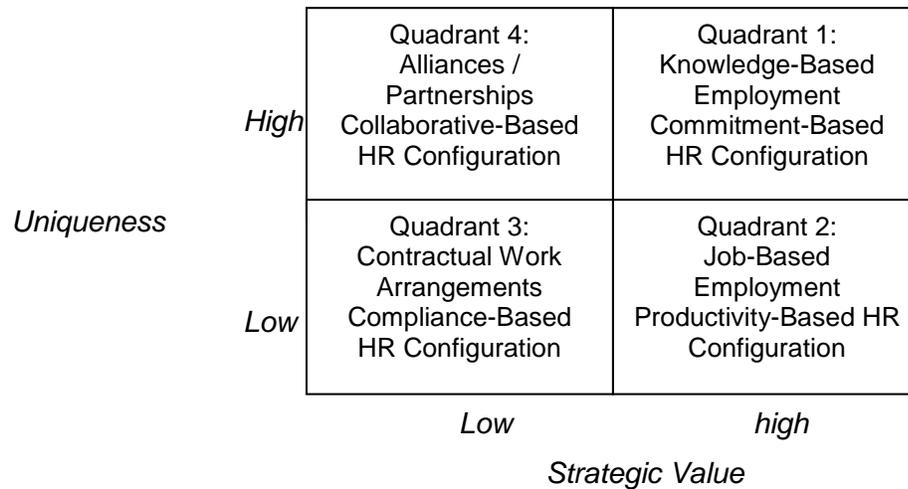
Workforce differentiation models (see e.g., Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b; Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001; Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005; Lepak and Snell, 2002) distinguish employees delivering most distinctive

contributions on organizational objectives from other groups of organizational incumbents. Huselid and Becker (2011) recognize increasing importance of workforce differentiation in industry and considerable investments in workforce differentiation models by well-known organizations (e.g., Avon, BMS, GSK, IBM, ITT, Johnson & Johnson, Lockheed Martin, and numerous others) in order to optimize the management of organizational incumbents for strategic advantage. This is also of central importance for TM, commonly standing for the achievement of outstanding business results adapted from individual talent (Capelli, 2008a; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; McDonnell et al., 2010; Sparrow, Hird and Balain, 2011; Thunnissen, Boselie and Fruytier, 2013a) and authors (Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Tansley et al., 2007) emphasize to create a strong link between talent and corporate strategy. This perception leads to new research opportunities (Huselid and Becker, 2011; Lewis and Heckman, 2006). Lewis and Heckman (2006) for example point out, considering TM in context of HR architecture “offers a system-level, strategic perspective that makes the TM concept one that adds value and opens new research possibilities” (Lewis and Heckman, 2006, p. 143). Furthermore, there is still a fundamental need in TM literature for further research on TM conceptualization, corresponding practices and effects (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Iles, Chuai and Preece, 2010; Scullion, Collings and Caligiuri, 2011; Tarique and Schuler, 2010; Thunnissen, Boselie and Fruytier, 2013a). This article intends to respond to that call and aims to contribute to the conceptual understanding on TM by discussing examples of workforce differentiation models (see Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b; Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001; Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005; Lepak and Snell, 2002), strongly recognized in TM literature (see e.g., Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; McDonnell et al., 2010; Thunnissen, Boselie and Fruytier, 2013a).

## **DESCRIBING WORKFORCE DIFFERENTIATION MODELS**

A model which encompasses the above described view of Lewis and Heckman (2006) regarding the consideration of TM in context of HR architecture is found by Lepak and Snell (2002). The authors (Lepak and Snell, 2002) examined the characteristics of human capital on a Resource Based View (RBV), Transaction Cost Economics and Human Capital Theory (Dries, 2013; McDonnell et al., 2010). Their consideration is anchored on the following basic understanding: “it may be inappropriate to simplify the nature of human capital investments and suggest that there exists a single optimal HR architecture for managing all employees” (Lepak and Snell, 1999, p. 32).

Figure 1: Human Capital Characteristics and Employment Modes



Source: Adapted from Lepak and Snell (2002)

Lepak and Snell (2002) suggest an HR architecture model (see figure 1) for several HR configurations which were applied for different employee categories and aligned employment modes: knowledge work, job-based employment, contract work, and alliance/partnerships. This architecture is considered in context of strategic value and uniqueness of human capital. Strategic value of human capital is drawn on e.g., potential enhancement of an organization's effectiveness and efficiency. The uniqueness of human capital is related to the level of rareness and specialization. Employment modes are related to a sample of corresponding jobs for instance, knowledge-based employment for research and development staff (Lepak and Snell, 2002).

The first quadrant is knowledge-based employment or internal development. Human capital in quadrant one is considered as most important and these employees contribute to organizational strategic objectives based on their high levels of value and uniqueness (Lepak and Snell, 2002). Employees within this quadrant "lie at the heart of talent management" (McDonnell et al., 2010, p. 151). In order to produce value, these employees "use their heads more than their hands" (Horibe, 1999, p. xi, cited at McDonnell et al., 2010). The 21<sup>st</sup> century can be recognized as "era of knowledge economy" (Kong and Zhang, 2012, p. 636). Knowledge is considered as critical resource for value creation (Festing; Schäfer and Scullion, 2013) therefore the importance of talents as owner of knowledge is obvious (Kong and Zhang, 2012). Thunnissen, Boselie and Fruytier (2013b) speak in this context from a transfer of product-based to knowledge-based economies, therefore the demand for employees will increase who can handle more complex situations for instance working with changes in organizational structures (e.g., firm networks or team structures). Organizational acquisition and utilization of knowledge

is based on social capital (Collings, Scullion and Dowling, 2009), defined as “the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social group” (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998, p. 243).

Knowledge-based employment is related to an employment mode focused on supporting skills and competencies instead of conducting job routines and determined tasks (Lepak and Snell, 2002). The HR configuration of this quadrant is characterized by commitment e.g., to one’s work (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and González-Cruz, 2013) considered also important for TM purposes (Collings and Mellahi, 2009).

Because of their value the two following groups of employees can be segmented as talents or “key group” (McDonnell et al., 2010, p. 151) within the group of knowledge-workers (McDonnell et al., 2010): First, functional specialist staff (e.g., from the research and development department) who are decisive regarding organizational development and core competences. Second, the group of high-potential employees considered as up and coming generation of organizational leaders or senior management.

The second quadrant named acquisition or job-based employment include human capital with high strategic value but low uniqueness of skills, which provide no set of differentiating attributes for a company. The approach therefore is focused on the acquisition or hiring of people for performing predetermined tasks. This segment provides in the end also an important strategic value but a more limited and transferable one, compared with quadrant one. Firms therefore should more likely advocate for hiring people with a direct availability of needed skills, instead of investing in the development process of them. Companies should focus on performance appraisals with short-term orientation and output-oriented properties and market-oriented compensation packages (Lepak and Snell, 2002).

For McDonnell et al. (2010) the second quadrant is of lower importance for TM compared with the first one because of the limitation in uniqueness. The following third and fourth quadrant are less important for TM and will however being described shortly for the sake of completeness.

The third quadrant is related to contractual work and provides neither strategic value nor any kind of uniqueness. Thus, workers who belong to this segment are prime candidates for outsourcing. HR configurations are in this segment driven by economic aspects which enable only limited HR and training activities.

Alliances/partnerships in the fourth quadrant are including human capital with a unique status but not sufficient enough regarding strategic value which merit an internal employment (Lepak and Snell, 2002), frequently the case with legal consultants who often provide long-term

services without an internal employment (Lepak and Snell, 2002; McDonnell et al., 2010). Companies should focus HR configurations like team events based on the importance of joint outputs or the necessity of information collection from alliance-partners instead of spending efforts in the development of their human capital (Lepak and Snell, 2002).

The above described conception by Lepak and Snell (2002) is object of investigation on a sample of 206 cases from 148 firms (6.5 percent) representing 86 different industries and 9.836 full-time employees. 48 companies focused on knowledge-based employment, 43 on alliances, 50 on contractual and 65 on job-based employment. As hypothesized, one central outcome of this research is that the commitment-based HR configuration is recognized remarkably better for knowledge-based employees than for the groups of the other three employment modes. The results in total encourage to a RBV of firms (Lepak and Snell, 2002) that “move away from relying solely on transactional or financial criteria and consider more strategic or resource-based factors” (Lepak and Snell, 2002, p. 536).

Another highly recognized contribution on workforce differentiation in literature (Iles, Chuai and Preece, 2010; Lewis and Heckman, 2006) is the approach ‘War for talent’ (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001). In contrary to the approach of Lepak and Snell (2002) it is a strictly performance related conception (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002) and based on the following consideration: “Winning the war for talent isn’t just about recruiting and retaining people. You’ve got to invest in A performers, raise the game of B performers, and – perhaps most difficult of all – deal decisively with C performers” (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002, p. 80).

Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels (2002) investigated in how high-performance companies manage different groups of managers (A, B, C performer) and surveyed 13.000 senior managers at 112 companies, assessed 27 companies with top-talent reputation and analyzed over 100 companies for most-effective activities on differentiated performance groups (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001).

The A performers create outstanding value for their organization directly or via leading other employees and therefore their development and retention is key. The B performers are the consistent performing majority at managerial level, which were in collective decisive for organizational success. Both groups should achieve the same type of developmental efforts e.g., high-quality coaching or mentorship. C managers do not deliver acceptable results, inspiration of others or innovative ideas, discourage colleagues or hire other C performers (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002). According to a folk wisdom approximately 40 percent of individuals labeled as C performers leave the organization during their own accord (Sparrow, Hird and Balain, 2011).

In order to identify C performers, senior management firstly have to define performance targets and correspondent assessment criteria for all positions (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Handsfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001). Secondly, executives have to commit on a basic rating model to describe performance levels, like As, Bs, and Cs. In order to avoid only high ranked results the authors (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002) advocate for performance quotas, self-assessments, 360-degree feedback and the involvement of further senior managers in the performance evaluation process. To achieve a representative picture of the performance level the reviewed departments or units should have an appropriate size (e.g., around 30 people) (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002).

In order to develop a powerful talent pool, senior managers have continuously to remove low performers respectfully away from leadership roles (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002). This approach named the “iron hand in a velvet glove” (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002, p. 82) is consisting of three steps: Senior managers have to identify C performer, agree on an action plan on each, and responsible managers for rolling these plans out. This process should start from the top and then it can be rolled out top-down until it is well established within a company (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002).

Pfeffer (2001) note, that the ‘War for talent’ (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001) is dangerous for organizational health and point out that this approach tend to overemphasize individual performance, which undercut teamwork and glamorize talents outside the organization while playing down the role and motivation of internal talents. Furthermore, there is an overemphasizing of stars, standing for success which may lead to the development of elitist and arrogant behavior of organizational incumbents (Mellahi and Collings, 2010). Others state, “Even if such approaches made sense for an organization, its advocates offer little sound advice for implementing them” (Lewis and Heckman, 2006, p. 142). For instance, how to overcome the assignment of a person to a wrong performance group based on errors in the related performance appraisal) (Lewis and Heckman, 2006).

“Effective management of your A positions requires intelligent management of B and C positions, as well” (Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005, p. 112). Decisive in this approach is that different jobs and people have to be managed in a different way (Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005). The “talent-defining process” (Iles, Chuai and Preece, 2010, p. 182) of this conception is characterized by two stages: Firstly, identifying strategically important A positions and secondly, focus on A players for filling them (Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005).

A positions are rather seldom, less than 20 percent of staff, and not related to hierarchy or the level of hardness to fill them. A positions are aligned with autonomous decision making

and mainly defined on their impact on strategy and the range of performance levels of people in these roles. Therefore these positions require a disproportionate level of investment and compensation. B positions have an indirect strategic impact or little performance variability between those in these roles. B positions are important to support A positions or recognized as “feeder positions” (Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005, p. 116) for A positions. C positions have functional tasks neither with strategic relevance nor any decision-making authority and therefore potential candidates for outsourcing (Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005).

A portfolio approach is necessary to manage all three kinds of positions with aligned strategies. Because of a restricted availability of resources no company can effort to hire only A players for all positions. But, with a focus on A positions organizations should ensure that the right people are in the right jobs. Starting with the development of performance criteria in order to decide who A, B and C players are. The next step is to help out C players of A positions and replace them with A players and help B players to become A players. Another possibility beside the strict distinction between A, B, C players is to differentiate first between A and C players (Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005).

Boudreau and Ramstad (2005b) firstly investigated in factors which were decisive for decisions on talent and how they fit together (Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Vaiman, Scullion and Collings, 2012). The approach is based on two paradigm shifts. First, HR focus has to be enlarged to a “talent decision science” (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b, p. 131) or “talentship” (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b, p. 129), which improves decisions about human capital or talent. Second, management and HR have to define organizational effectiveness beside financial results to achieve sustainable success nowadays which is aligned with future requirements (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b).

“Talent segmentation” (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b, p. 129) is such vital for talent management as “customer segmentation” (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b, p. 129) for marketing. Lacking in talent segmentation or talent pool differentiation organizations often roll out a “peanut butter” (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005a, p. 23) approach, providing programs for everybody in the same way e.g., “40 hours of quality training for everyone” (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005a, p. 23). A corresponding marketing conception such as “40 minutes advertising for every product” (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005a, p. 23) would never be accepted (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005a). “Wise managers” (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005a, p. 24) therefore investigate how talent is aligned with strategic success (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005a).

The approach is based on using three anchor points effecting all business decisions, efficiency, effectiveness, and impact. Efficiency is focused on resources needed for providing HR practices. Effectiveness is related to outcome of HR practices and policies. Impact is aligned

to the question how differences in talent pools (qualitative and quantitative) influence strategic performance. Target is, to build up a pivotal talent pool which can be explained by an entity of jobs with an outstanding contribution to organizational strategic values (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b). For instance, a pivotal talent pool might be staffed with 40 percent A performers whereas non-pivotal talent pools only may need 20 percent (Lewis and Heckman, 2006). Boudreau and Ramstad (2007) point out organizations typically fail to invest efficiently in *pivotal* talent pools and spend too much for talent pools, which are meaningful but not pivotal. Thus, a talent segmentation and focus on pivotal talent pools would have a significant impact on organizational success.

### CONTRASTING WORKFORCE DIFFERENTIATION MODELS

According to Collings and Mellahi (2009) the conception provided by Lepak and Snell (2002) stands for a bottom-up focus based on the idea that employees can contribute to strategic targets because of their value and uniqueness (Lepak and Snell, 2002). Whereas in contrast, the theory development by Huselid, Beatty and Becker (2005) is considered as a top-down focus implementing the perception of employees having value if they were able to contribute to organizational strategic objectives. The 'War for talent' conception (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001) is also a top-down approach (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002) as well as the conception on talent segmentation provided by Boudreau and Ramstad (2005b), because all three approaches were implemented top-down into the organization by management. The 'War for talent' approach (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001) is exclusively related to (e.g., A, B, C-performing) managers in contrary to the above described other conceptions (see Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b; Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005; Lepak and Snell, 2002) which include also non-managerial positions within their considerations.

Table 1: Contrasting workforce differentiation models

Reference	Workforce differentiation feature	Hierarchy-level	Focus
Lepak and Snell (2002)	People delivering high level of value and uniqueness at knowledge-worker positions	Managerial, non-managerial	Bottom-up (Collings and Mellahi, 2009)
Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels (2002); Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod (2001)	A performers: outstanding value directly or by leading others; B performers: majority of performers; C performer: under-performer, have to be moved out	Managerial	Top-down
Huselid, Beatty and	Identification of strategically important	Managerial,	Top-down

Table 1...

Becker (2005)	positions or A positions, then searching for A performers for filling them; B positions are feeder-positions for A positions with less strategic impact; C positions have no/little strategic impact, can be sourced out	non-managerial	(Collings and Mellahi, 2009)
Boudreau and Ramstad (2005b)	Creating a pivotal talent pool as entity of jobs with outstanding impact on organizational performance by addressing efficiency, effectiveness and impact (e.g., about 40% A performer) compared to a talent pool (e.g., about 20% A performer)	Managerial, non-managerial	Top-down

All authors (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b; Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001; Huselid, Beatty and Becker 2005; Lepak and Snell, 2002) have in common that their target of workforce differentiation is to carve out the group of employees with the most distinctive contributions on organizational objectives. Some authors (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b; Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005; Lepak and Snell, 2002) see this strictly aligned with certain positions, for instance knowledge-worker positions (Lepak and Snell, 2002), A positions (Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005) or pivotal talent positions (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2007). Whereas other authors (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001) suggest a performance related approach without a linkage to certain positions. A concluding overview on the considered workforce differentiation models (see (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b; Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001; Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005; Lepak and Snell, 2002) is provided by table 1.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Boudreau and Ramstad (2005a) suggest “to develop a collaborative point of view about how talent connects with organizational strategic success” (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005a, p. 25). Huselid, Beatty and Becker (2005) propose defining strategic impact and performance levels of A positions first because, from this determinations follow further characteristics, which differentiate A positions from B or C positions, such as effect of faults or value creation. According to Lepak and Snell (2002) holder of knowledge-worker positions should be provided with freedom of decision or at least participation on decision making for increasing contributions to firm performance. But, managers fail too often in setting up different strategies for their workforce, necessary for achievement of strategic company success. A checklist for efficient dealing with a firm’s positions and players in workaday life is found by Huselid, Beatty and

Becker (2005). Regarding positions, organizations for example should avoid the same selection process for all positions or job descriptions based on history instead of strategic value. For players, companies should attach importance e.g., to complete and regular performance reviews for all organizational incumbents including top management, not only if the earnings package is monitored. Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels (2002) share this opinion based on research results regarding high-performing companies. Thus, managers of high-performing companies conduct more activities (e.g., on talent identification or review) for A, B and C players than managers from low-performing enterprises. This is therefore considered as “Argument for Disciplined Talent Review” (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002, p. 84).

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

TM is usually recognized as instrument for improvement and control of individual and organizational performance (Capelli, 2008b; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Thunnissen, Boselie and Fruytier, 2013a). For instance, the above described workforce differentiation models (see Axelrod, Handfield-Jones and Michaels, 2002; Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005b; Handfield-Jones, Michaels and Axelrod, 2001; Huselid, Beatty and Becker 2005; Lepak and Snell, 2002) are strongly focused on individual performance and related contributions to strategic advantages. This is reflecting a general recognition and overestimation of talent on individual level (Boxall and Macky, 2009; Thunnissen, Boselie and Fruytier, 2013a) whereas TM and its connections for instance, to leadership, organizational culture, communication or teams are underrepresented in TM literature so far (Tarique and Schuler, 2010; Thunnissen, Boselie and Fruytier, 2013a). This is providing additional starting points for future TM research. Contributions on that may support the further exploration of TM, currently considered as young academic discipline restricted by a shortage of research-based outcomes (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Dries, 2013; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Meyers, van Woerkom and Dries, 2013; Thunnissen, Boselie and Fruytier, 2013a; Thunnissen, Boselie and Fruytier, 2013b).

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