TALENT MANAGEMENT: DEVELOPING OR PREVENTING KNOWLEDGE AND CAPABILITY?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the possibility of a growing tension between employee progression and capability development which emerges as a result of talent management strategies. It is argued that the inter-relationship between the increasing trend to develop talent management strategies, combined with skills shortages and the attitudes of 'Generation Y' employees, leads to the outcomes being, potentially a reduction, rather an increase, in organisational capability. A qualitative case study is used to demonstrate this potential relationship and develop an agenda for future research.

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Introduction

The shift of emphasis towards talent management for staff retention may be seen as three separate stories: first, there is the view that it is necessary for an organisation to learn and use the consequent knowledge as a source of competitive advantage (Hass, 2006; Soliman and Spooner, 2002). It is argued that certain human resource management practices can support learning development, including the selective hiring and strategic training of key personnel (Lopez, Peon and Ordas, 2005, 2006; Haesli and Boxall, 2005). Thus, talent management can be seen as a specific way of attracting and retaining the key knowledge and capabilities of the future. The second story is one of the global skills shortage for organisations (Green, 2000; Aiman-Smith, Bergey, Cantwell and Doran, 2006) which is keenly felt in Australia (Holland, Sheehan, Donohue and Pyman, 2007; Thomson, 2007). This skills shortage has lead to increased competition for the talent that does exist, forcing organisations to take active steps towards staff retention. Lastly, there is the story of the growth in 'Generation Y' tendencies. Young employees are less concerned about preserving life-long employment with a single or a small number of employers, preferring instead to maintain a work-life balance that is the envy of their mature colleagues; consequently the current global skills shortage story is exacerbated by a change in young employees' attitudes and values (Green, 2000; Eisner, 2005; Holland et al., 2007).

Initially in this paper we will explore the theoretical background to these three tales of talent management. We will then go on to describe the specific context of the Australian Public Service (APS), highlighting the particular pressures for this sector in relation to the three stories. We then use qualitative data to explore what we find to be an emerging story about the tension between progress and capability which is contributing to the disappointment of expectations for organisational development in learning, knowledge and capability.

1 TALENT MANAGEMENT

Talent management is one of the primary tools for 21st century human assets management (Ingham, 2006; Ashton and Moreton, 2005; McGee, 2006; McCauley and Wakefield, 2006; Heinien and O'Neill, 2004). The basic strategy of talent management is to seek to categorise and nurture skills that will be needed to maintain future competitive advantage (Frank and Taylor, 2004). According to McCauley and Wakefield talent management processes must be:

> "more strategic, connected, and broad- based than ever before. Talent management processes include workforce planning, talent gap analysis, recruiting, staffing, education and development, retention, talent reviews, succession planning, and evaluation. To drive performance, deal with an increasingly rapid pace of change, and create sustainable success, a company must align these processes with its business strategies" (2006, p.4).

This is achieved by organisations identifying, attracting and retaining key employees and future managers. Existing employees and individuals who are about to join the organisation are carefully screened against preset criteria and a tailored life-cycle HRD programme is designed for each individual whose potential and profile are considered to most closely match future organisational needs The programme is crafted to develop their skills and to recognise their contribution. As a part of this process is a focus upon a management career, possible promotions are pre-mapped for each identified talent.

2

Providing employees successfully meet their given performance targets and feedback from their line manager is routinely positive, accelerated promotion is probable *and* expected.

1.1 TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITIES

There are clear links made in the literature between Strategic Human Resources Management (SHRM) and capability development (Barney and Wright, 1998; Brewster, Sparrow and Harris, 2005; Evans, Novicevic and Davis, 2007; Ghanam and Cox, 2007; Hailey, Farndale and Truss, 2005; Holland, Sheehan and De Cieri, 2007; Martell and Carroll, 1995; Michie and Sheehan, 2005). It is argued that the human resources strategy of talent management, used appropriately, can develop leadership (Romans, Frost and Ford, 2006); support learning initiatives (Bersin, 2007) and develop organisational capabilities (Kates, 2006) - all of which will enable capability building to be developed through knowledge acquisition and capacity.

It should be stressed that capability and capacity building is more than just training individuals in more skills, or even raising the levels of education within an organisation. These approaches may help, but alone they will not be sufficient to make real improvements in capability and capacity. The creation of an enabling environment must be supported by the appropriate policy, legal and organising frameworks which will enable the long term recognition, development and utilisation of appropriate capabilities. Capabilities are the skills necessary for an organisation to coordinate resources effectively to achieve specific purposes (Analoui, 2007). It is argued that for an organisation to be able to recognise and exploit such capabilities there will need to be systematic development in a range of areas: human resource, organisational and institutional. All of these three will affect, and be affected by the HRM initiatives undertaken within the organisation.

Miller, Eisenstat and Foote argue that to be able to create capabilities an entity needs to be able to discover their asymmetries and create new capability configurations: asymmetries are *"skills, knowledge, processes, relationships, proper ties, or outputs that its motivated competitors are unlikely to acquire …these do not currently produce any economic advantages but have potential to be transformed into valuable resources or capabilities"* (Miller et al. in De Wit and Meyer, 2005: 337). The procedure with an asymmetry is to consider what sets one organisation apart from another in its most fundamental terms, as it is from these that distinctive capabilities can be developed. Capability configurations are *"systems of reinforcing elements incorporating core capabilities and the organisational design infrastructures in which they are embedded and that renew, adapt, and support these capabilities"* (Miller et al. in De Wit and Meyer, 2005: 337). Asymmetries will be developed into capabilities by specifically developing structures and designs which maximise the 'virtuous cycle' of enhancement. Chains of influence will develop when one asymmetry based capability has a good outcome which promotes another, new capability, to emerge. In terms of talent management as a supporting structure for such developments, it can be seen that where there is the recruitment, retention and support of individuals which leads to greater levels of shared and new knowledge, this will enable innovation which will lead to greater sustainability.

1.2 SKILLS SHORTAGES

The importance of talent management as a source of capability development is seen to be even more important in the current context because of the global skills shortage which is a widely accepted phenomenon (Aiman-Smith, Bergey, Cantwell and Doran,

2006; Bernhart, 2006; Donaldson, 2006; Green, 2000; Holland, Sheehan, Donohue and Pyman, 2007; Thomson, 2007; Leape, 2006), and which makes the attraction and retention of employees increasingly challenging. Several reasons are given for the increasing problem in retaining employees. First, the demographic makeup of most developing countries is leading to an aging work population (Strack, Baier and Fahlander 2008), and in some industries, the numbers due to retire over the next ten years are very high (APSC, 2007; Patrickson and Hartmann, 1995). Second, there are always trends in the interests of those being educated and, at present, this is leaving major skills gaps in some areas where not enough people are being trained and entering employment (Baker, 2006). This is all set against a context where there is a much higher rate of progression by school leaver to university (ABS, 1999a).

Thus, although some argue the focus upon demographic changes in the skills shortage debate is too strong (Barrett, 2007), there is evidence of a real mismatch between the jobs on offer and the recruitment pool available. This reduction in the workforce available to organisations has led to an increasing focus within human resource departments upon: training for current staff to develop their skills, strategies to retain staff for longer and re-considering the skills and capabilities really needed for a job in order to rethink the recruitment pool actually available (Holland, Sheehan and De Cieri, 2007). A range of different strategies for talent management to overcome the skills shortages are being developed (Romans, Frost and Ford, 2006; Archer, 2007; Dewey, 2007; Baxter and MacDonald, 2007) but many demonstrate a current theme of trying to attract young talent and then holding on to it.

1.3 'GENERATION Y'
Whilst there is debate about the definitions and nomenclatures of Generation Y, actors enter the workforce with different attitudes to both work and career:

> "Unlike the generations that have gone before them, Gen Y has been pampered, nurtured and programmed with a slew of activities since they were toddlers, meaning they are both high-performance and high-maintenance …They also believe in their own worth." (Armour, 2005, np).

Other generational traits include a desire for a work-life balance and an expectation to change jobs more often. This generation expects intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivation from their work (Green, 2000; Eisner, 2005). In a time when retention of employees is vital, this change in values and expectations makes successful talent recruitment and management even more challenging as young employees and new recruits are aware of their own importance:

> "Initial indications for 2007 are that candidates continue to be bullish about how much they are worth, and companies are trying hard to keep pace with their skills requirements" (CareerOne, 2006).

Although we would expect that the large blue-chip employers, continue through their recruitment assessment centres to seek the 'best' candidates, they are no longer able to do so without reference to what they can offer their new recruits. According to trends seen in job adverts many find themselves promising accelerated development and promotion to provide the intrinsic motivation desired and to offer alterative non-monetary rewards to attract and keep the young talents. Other rewards on offer include educational support; increased leave opportunities, greater family friendly options and more flexible work arrangements (Saltzein, Ting and Saltzein, 2001). The argument is that these will attract and retain the desirable recruits, thereby developing greater

4

organisational capability. However, there are those who are concerned that the actual outcome of such strategies may not be increased capability but will, in fact, be reduced effectiveness over the long term (Blackman and Lee-Kelley, 2007). The aim for this paper is to establish whether talent management strategies adopted within the Australian Public Service are perceived to help or hinder the development of capabilities within an organisation.

2.1 METHODOLOGY

This is an exploratory study which seeks to supplement anecdotal evidence and add to the currently limited empirical data on the subject. The subject of this research and its epistemological underpinnings align it with a qualitative approach because the focus is upon developing new understandings and possibly new theory (Creswell 2003). Qualitative methods are useful in explorations of understandings, for uncovering novel insights and for accessing intricate details, thought processes and emotions (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 11). As the theoretical position was counter to much current literature it was important to gain the views of those involved and that needed to be collected via narrative and stores in order to better understand the range of perspectives present (McCaslin and Wilson Scott, 2003).

Data was collected from three sources. Firstly, documentary analysis of materials provided by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) was undertaken in order to establish trends in capability and talent management. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were undertaken within the APS with human resource practitioners, senior management, junior level supervisors and line managers. Respondents were asked for their understanding of what is meant by talent management and their explanation and personal involvement in the talent management processes within their organisations. If they were involved they were asked to clarify how. Questions also discussed the idea of talent management and whether the participants thought it was supporting organisational effectiveness or not. Participants were then asked about their views on the supposedly growing phenomenon of Generation Y and its impact on the organisation. Finally, the possible relationships between talent management and organisational effectiveness were explored. Thirdly, a Talent Management symposium was held in November 2007 where members of private and public organisations met to discuss the current issues pertaining to talent management success. There were five speakers and a panel discussion. The narrative outcomes of the presentations and discussions were assessed in terms of themes, examples and concerns.

2.2 Background to the Study - Recognition of a need to attract and retain for future knowledge capability

The Australian Public Service APS maintains a clear focus on future capabilities required for efficiency and effectiveness in meeting the varied and shifting needs of the Australian community and continent. Not only do public sector agencies in Australia need to ensure that they are anticipating the future needs of the nation, but they are increasingly required to compete with private and third sector organisations in the provision of services. In many areas of the APS attention to comparative advantage has sharpened Public Sector focus on employee recruitment, retention, and development.

There is current move in the APS towards the consolidation of its own capabilities in HRM and learning and development, evidenced in recent years by the development of two major APS Commission models – the first a framework for building capability through learning and development (APSC, 2003) and the second, a human resource capability model (APSC, 2001). These models have supported a sector-wide shift

toward the development and adoption of talent management strategies targeted at increasing the opportunity for better comparative advantage and maintenance of effectiveness in an increasingly knowledge intensive environment. A range of innovative approaches to talent management have been adopted by government departments and agencies including the development the of marketing tools, 'brand promises', 'brand vision' and 'brand experiences' to attract and retain talented staff; targeting school leavers and enticing them with payment of university fees and study time; providing opportunities for school leavers and graduates to progress through 3-4 levels of hierarchy within 3-5 years.

In June 2007 over 71% of the senior executive service were eligible for retirement within the next 10 years (APSC, 2007) - a disturbing prospect for a sector focused on knowledge and capability development for future effectiveness. The short term goals of talent management strategies employed in various government departments and agencies are evident – attracting and retaining talented employees in anticipation of the vacuum that is soon to exist in the senior ranks of the sector, the longer term outcomes, however, may be less obvious as this continues to be a challenge for agencies in terms of succession planning and knowledge management.

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Attracting and Retaining Talent in the APS

'We need to position ourselves to succeed in a war for talent' (Dr Peter Shergold, Secretary, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, APSC 2007).

The APS describes a future in which effectiveness is reliant on "Agencies which are agile, proficient, innovative, connected, co-operative and well positioned in the labour market ….". These requirements demand a focus on innovative and progressive employment frameworks, recruitment processes and retention strategies (Briggs 2007). While there is much focus on recruitment (APSC 2007) retention remains a central concern for the APS. Turnover is cited as the 'highest non-value-creating costs for organisations' (Archer 2007). In the public sector, where the measurement of 'value' is less tangible than it is for commercial organisations, the impact of turnover is equally costly (in terms of both expense and effectiveness). In recent reports the most common reasons for employees exiting the sector are those looking to 'try a different type of work or seeking a career change (38% of those intending to leave in next 12 months) and 'perceived lack of future career opportunities in the agency' (36%).

In the APS strong commitment to respect for employees, 'caring for our people', and strong leadership are cited as supporting successful recruitment and retention of talent (APSC, 2007). In recent years, and in the face of declining skills availability in the labour market, these foundations are being augmented by determined and aggressive retention strategies and activities designed to maintain employees in the sector for longer periods, including the management of plans to assist mature employees to stay in the workplace longer, the redesign of work to accommodate the requirements of mature workers, and models for career planning and mentoring to support older workers (APSC, 2005). At the other end of the age spectrum, the APS is also seeking to accommodate the needs of younger employees, employing strategies that are outlined below with reference to Generation Y.

3.2 The Impact of the Skills shortage on the APS

In Australia in 2007 unemployment was at a 32 year low. There is an ageing population and a burgeoning baby boom bump moving into retirement (ABS, 1999b, 2004). In the public sector in Australia 52% of employees are aged over 45 years of age, and in the Senior Executive Service ranks, the percentage of employees eligible for retirement in the next decade is over 71%. This is a sector at the talent 'tipping point' (Archer, 2007) and one in which the management of demographic risk (Strack et al., 2008) becomes a primary concern. The State of the Service Report for 2007/2008 describes the challenges that arise from the growth of the APS in a context of declining skills availability: 'For agencies managing a workforce with a large proportion of mature workers approaching retirement, the transfer of corporate knowledge will also be particularly important.' (APSC, 2007).

It is an important concern in a sector where the median age of the APS as has risen, on average, one year for every three years over the past 12 years. The most obvious increase has been in the representation of employees over 55 years of age, this group has doubled from 5.4% in June 1995 to 11.2% in June 2007. The age profile of the APS is older on average than the general Australian working population, and fewer younger employees but with a much higher representation (58.9%) of people in the 35-54 years age group compared with the general Australian working population (44.9%)(APSC 2007). It is unsurprising, then, that the ageing of the APS workforce 'continues to raise significant workforce planning and succession management challenges'(APSC 2007).

3.3 Generation Y in the APS

Despite the reporting in 2006 and 2007 of an improvement in the representation of young people (aged under 25 years of age) from 4.0% in June 2005 to 4.5% in June 2006 and 5.0% in June 2007, the APS is hesitant to claim a reversal of the long history of decline in the relative representation of young people in the service. However, targeted and consolidated efforts to increase the numbers of young people have been implemented and are supplemented by a recognition within the public sector for a need to accommodate the interests of a new generation within the sector.

'In the past, the APS was viewed as a 'career for life'. Now, we are seeing increasing career mobility patterns among generations X and Y. We are also seeing a demand from our workforce for the flexibility they need to balance their working and personal lives.' (Briggs, 2007). Within the sector, agencies are making moves to accommodate those distinctive characteristics of the new generations growing in representation. These include the generation's valuing of regular feedback/recognition for effort and opportunities for career development, as well as a good salary. This group was interested in flexible jobs, the ability to make a difference and to develop personally (APSC 2007).

3.4 Progress versus capability

In our case study we see the three stories about attracting and retaining talent, a global skill shortage and generational trends converge as an emerging story about the tension between progress and capability. This tension emerged during both the interviews and the discussions that occurred during the symposium.

Talented employees increasingly anticipate, indeed expect, to be promoted quickly through the hierarchy of the organisation and if this expectation is not met they exit the organisation. One participant put it this way: *'Younger employees have romantic notions about their progress. The organisation at recruitment gives graduates the*

impression that they would progress at a fast rate and be recognised as exceptional. If these expectations aren't met they move on. They have choices'.

Another interview noted that employers are in a difficult situation: *'Within twelve months young talented people leave if there's no structured career path, their expectations of rapid progress and satisfaction aren't met'.* The result of this is that, despite espoused targets for human resource development, in fact there were: *'No management development program in the organisation for the last four years – factor in turnover – opportunities are entirely ad hoc'.* The high turnover actually means that there is less coherent development occurring which has impacts upon service delivery. It could be argued that careful application of the internal promotion systems could slow down the rate of promotion. However, at present, with the skills shortages as they are, if the progression rate is too slow for an employee they will apply elsewhere and, not only get a new job, but probably a promotion that way.

Employers feel compelled to propel members through organisational ranks to retain them in the organisation. However, in this environment *'experience and knowledge are devalued'* with employees focused instead on *'...looking around for the best deals – not just money, but opportunity for career development. There's no expectation of twenty year tenure. There's this group of employees tapping into networks, looking for high profile jobs and organisations, looking to move up'.* Not only is knowledge devalued but it is not developed either and there is, potentially, an actual reduction in capability rather than a development over time.

The tension between progress and capability became evident in other data in which participants explained that when organisational members are progressed rapidly in order to retain them in the organisations, the development of capability in each subsequent role is compromised. *'Core competencies contribute to effectiveness - and we have a cohort coming through at their final level of competence. We're seeing a huge number of grievances, a lack of people skills'.*

In another example of the progress/capability tension, participants described how attempts to slow down progression through a freeze on promotion, actually shifted decision-making power to lower levels of the organisation. Owing to high rates of attrition, and difficulties in replacing senior staff because of the skills shortage, decisions-making was passed back down to those who had been judged as not yet competent: *'We end up with powerful low class individuals – APS4 decision-makers'.*

Another important theme that emerged from the data was that of alignment. It was argued that the APS is in danger of over valuing its new talent to the detriment of the existing organisational members; the setting of high expectations for the new entrants leads to a disparity with extant employees who then feel alienated and are likely to leave faster. Moreover, because of the promises made to talented recruits, those older graduates and junior managers are *"not used effectively,* [become] *dissatisfied and exit the organisation'.* There becomes a mismatch of values and interests between the longer serving employees and the organisation. This alienation is further strengthened by the offering of new opportunities to new employees who are members of the 'talent' programmes, which are not always offered to the other employees.

A further difficulty is that not all of those who need to be involved in the talent management processes are necessarily supportive of the processes, especially as *'the experts are just the long-term employees'.* As such they have become middle and senior managers over time and may not be committed to the new talent strategies which they see as favouring others who have not been in the organisation long enough and so

'might be making it difficult for newcomers and contributing to their propensity to exit'. This is seen to be a specific problem as many of those on talent programmes are younger members from Generation Y.

4 CONCLUSION

This paper explored themes emerging from both the theory and the data: current talent management practices; Generation Y trends; unrealistic expectations and less effective long term organisational learning and knowledge management as a result of the tension between progress and capability. We have demonstrated that there are potential problems with the implementation of some talent management systems which emerge through: overly fast promotion, a reduction in development effectiveness, feelings of inequity by those not recognised as 'talented' staff and a lack of support within the organisations. We argue that instead of talent management strategies encouraging the development of new knowledge which can be used to increase organisational capability, in fact the result is the development of a sub-optimal junior supervisory level who are promoted too soon and then, either learn in the job over time, or leave anyway as they are not promoted again as fast as they would expect. The skills shortage is enabling rapid movement between agencies which is exacerbating the ability of this junior management level to be appointed with less knowledge than they require. This has potentially long term implications for the effectiveness of managerial competencies and organisational commitment. It is important to recognise that it is the combination of the three themes that causes the particular events we are describing. As the context changes, so may the impact of talent management.

This is a limited study and we call for more research. Initially the alternative outcomes of talent management should be explored via more case studies and a wider survey instrument. Subsequently, different potential outcomes, based upon alternative contexts should be considered.

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