Talent is king. ‘Talent is scarce’. ‘Our edge is our talent’. These are some common refrains of corporations today in their ongoing quest for the elixir of business success. Talent Management took hold in the early 2000s and, today, has become a buy-word in HR and from c-suite managers as something new or even special. It’s not. The idea has certainly been bolstered by a growing publication base among academics and consultants. But who or what is this talent? Why do corporations see it as uber-essential? What is so unique in such a generic term like talent that all use? Talent management has never made any of these explicit. It is loosely defined as the “efforts to attract, select, develop and retain key talented employees with the greatest potential to impact on value generation in an organisation”. Talent are supposed to be high valued leaders and employees who leverage change.

Talent management has garnered much acclaim since the early 2000s as the font of competitive advantage. But is it merited? Professors Paul Ryan from Trinity Business School and Tony Dundon from University of Limerick dissect its meaning for organisational employees and explore its implications for business in this new confusing covid-19 world.

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With kind acknowledgements to Trinity Business School and Prof. Paul Ryan.

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How ironic that many of those talented leaders and executives are now so visibly exposed during a global pandemic as clueless. The ruse of talent management has for so long not only ignored but actively derided those who are now stocking supermarket shelves, steer the buses, clean the wards, care for the sick and elderly, drive the trucks, pick the fruit or fix broken machines. These are the very people talent management experts would have sacked, classifying them as B or C performers because their value is not directly attributed to adding value in the name of accumulated profit, or management-only defined attributed of performance.

The stability of global supply chains and ready availability of everyday essentials, it turns out, rest on the endeavours of the fruit or fix broken machines. These are the very people the wards, care for the sick and elderly, drive the trucks, pick the fruit or fix broken machines. These are the very people who are now stocking supermarket shelves, steer the buses, clean the wards, care for the sick and elderly, drive the trucks, pick the fruit or fix broken machines. These are the very people the wards, care for the sick and elderly, drive the trucks, pick the fruit or fix broken machines. These are the very people the wards, care for the sick and elderly, drive the trucks, pick the fruit or fix broken machines. These are the very people the wards, care for the sick and elderly, drive the trucks, pick the fruit or fix broken machines. These are the very people

TALENT IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

In the view of the professors Ryan and Dundon, talent management can be an invidious organisation process that extends exploitation and inequality in the workplace but also spills-over into wider society. They argue that the criteria used to designate certain organisational workers as high or low talent is not only subjectively determined but excluded the voices of those it affects and is rarely if ever negotiated with legitimate workforce representatives. Talent management schemes seldom, if ever, factor in elements such as employee voice, consultation and representation. The process of identification of talent within an organisation invites questions as to fairness of the selection criteria, such as employee voice, consultation and representation. The process of identification of talent within an organisation invites questions as to fairness of the selection criteria, such as employee voice, consultation and representation. The process of identification of talent within an organisation invites questions as to fairness of the selection criteria, such as employee voice, consultation and representation. The process of identification of talent within an organisation invites questions as to fairness of the selection criteria, such as employee voice, consultation and representation. The process of identification of talent within an organisation invites questions as to fairness of the selection criteria, such as employee voice, consultation and representation. The process of identification of talent within an organisation invites questions as to fairness of the selection criteria, such as employee voice, consultation and representation.

Average employees can be coerced to re-adjust, re-train or to improve to set measures imposed from above, while the remainder may be ranked as non-talent who are actively managed out of a firm. This cements ongoing workplace pay disparities and provokes widespread dissatisfaction and even resentment amongst the ranks of the ‘average’ employee, or those who have been branded as ‘non-talented’ or ‘less desirable’ organisation members. Essentially, talent management is premised on a discourse of warfare, initially posited by senior management (typically men) as that between rival firms, but which soon becomes subsumed as warfare among employees all jostling for the higher rewards for the exclusive gain of the talent brigade. On this highly masculine battlefield, the system commonly ignores issues of dignity, stress or mental health and wellbeing.

There are of course all sorts of differentiated talented people in society: an artist, a chef, a footballer or nurse. Where does talent end and non-talent begin? And who commodifies certain types of talent and not other forms of skill, knowledge or expertise? To illustrate how much this is such a grey area subject to exploitation, the professors present a hypothetical example, from the world of sport, of a lower league football player’s differential talent levels.

Although any such player would most likely have been the most talented player in his school or early age category, as the talent pool widens and opportunities narrow, this same young player may later be judged to lack the necessary talent to reach the absolute heights of his profession, such as the English Premiership or Spanish La Liga. But whilst no Messi, that individual is not, on any fair assessment, without footballing talent. It is evident then, that there are degrees of talent. The same fuzziness holds for evaluating the talent of a ballerina, actor, musician, university professor or machine operator. But what and where is the cut off point for anointment as talent? What constitutes enough talent? Again, how is that decided in the corporate world? Care workers in nursing homes who have occupied their premises of work, essentially decided to live-in, in order to protect those they care for have been some of the most undervalued and least paid occupations on the planet because such talent management experts fail to see their value beyond the profit and loss and balance sheets.

TRUE GENERATOR OF VALUE?

Profs Ryan and Dundon claim that the segregation of employees into talent and non-talent can actually be a counterproductive approach to human resource development. Corrupted organisational selection practices can make for unclear, even unfair progression opportunities and paths. Employees in the average or non-talented groups, that are excluded, can end up feeling alienated and may be disinclined to perform at their peak effort. Moreover talent management can be viewed as a system that leads to the development of an inner sanctum of like-minded ‘chosen ones’ in so-called pivotal or profit-enhancing positions. The concentration of such like-for-like talent leaves little room for organisational diversity. The odds are commonly stacked in favour of those that adhere to the rules, play the political game adroitly and tow the party line. This actually diminishes ideation and creativity. Replicating sameness, a form of internal organisational cloning of so-called good talent, is not ideal for engendering innovation, a proven source of business advantage.
But all may not be lost, the professors conclude. Perhaps the biggest failing of talent management is that its essential logic works against its stated objective: value generation in its widest organisational sense. It’s in the hands of organisational leaders, teachers and researchers to direct attention to reducing favouritism and unfairness. An appreciation that talent permeates all areas of the organisation would be best achieved with maximum transparency and social dialogue with employees and their representatives.

Simply said, look after all organisational members and true talent will out, across and between all organisation levels. And the time for such distributive justice in the organisation is now, since all organisation members, not a chosen few, are required more than ever to support others for a greater societal good in tackling a new pandemic affecting all. Indeed, it is the lower-paid and lower-performers classified as non-talented who are now putting their lives at risk for the so-called higher talented privileged elite, the majority of whom are allowed to manage from the security of home. When this is all over, will it be remembered which talent saved the day?

Talent management is defined as the efforts to attract, select, develop and retain key talented employees with the greatest potential to impact on value generation in an organisation. Talent management has existed since the early 2000s, however it presents many faults. The definition of talent is subjective, and there are varying degrees of talents as per the party who decides what it means.

With the practice of talent management, engagement and retention, organisations can end up demotivating workers which may actually reduce overall efficiency. Talent management’s practices are favourable to a select few which includes shareholders and upper management while detrimental to employees and societies. Talent management creates rankings, justifies differential treatment and wage discrimination. Talent management leads to masculine dominated cultures forcing employees to compete for higher rewards rather than collaborate; the resulting emotional stress and inequitable distribution are skewed in favour of the ‘elite’.

The criteria used to segment people as talent is subjectively determined and never negotiated with legitimate workforce representatives. It is typically the subjective views of senior managers who decides what constitutes talent.