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TALENT MANAGEMENT IN IRAN'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: FAMILIARITY WITH TALENT CHARACTERISTICS; A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to identify the characteristic of scientific talents in the Iranian higher education system from the viewpoint of scientific activists. Exploring the mental word and the experiences of individuals and extracting their attitudes requires the application of quality methods and one of the qualitative methods appropriate for the purpose and the question of the present study is the Grounded Theory, which is used in the present research. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. By conducting interviews with 20 scientific talents and after reaching theoretical saturation, the data were collected and analyzed. The collected data was organized in the form of 400 initial codes, 203 concepts, 4 subcategories, and 2 main categories, after the process of open coding. The final result of the analysis of the collected data was presented in the form of a preliminary grounded theory entitled "The theory of talent attributes in Iran's higher education system". The aforementioned theory seeks to illustrate the set of talent features according to the academic environment. According to this theory, academic talent in the academic system have a set of abilities (inherent and developable) and affective (motivation and interests). The present findings reveal the characteristics of talent in the Iranian public university system and can be used as an indicator for higher education practitioner to better understand and evaluate more effectively the attraction, development, and retention of scientific talents.

Keywords: *Characteristics of scientific talents, Higher education system, Mental word, Grounded theory*

INTRODUCTION

As one of the most distinct indices of today's communities, organizations are rapidly undergoing changes in which the human workforce's role is undeniable. In the current system, the enhancement of the individual and organizational performance is one of the substantial goals of every striving and active organization. If the human resources are realized as one of the most important pillars of performance enhancement, it is evident that the investigation of the variables influencing their performance would be of great help in guiding the managers in their improvement of the organization's performance. The role of human resources (HR) gradually changes with the complication of the environment and diversification of the jobs. During the late past 2000s, the organizations figured out the necessity of reaching a precise definition for

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talent in line with the improvement of the organizational performance (Collings and Mellahi, 2009). The officials of HRM are faced with a lot of problems in defining talent even if being capable of presenting a precise definition of talent with previously identified goals (Tansley, 2011). A large number of the HR specialists believe that talent management is one of the most important challenges of the human capital with which the organizations confronted during the 21st century (Scullion *et al.*, 2016). The weakness of the theoretical foundations for talent management can be seen based on the clear-cut conceptualization of talent in the scientific literature (Silzer and Church, 2016). The most important capital of every university is its faculty members. Thus, the universities should appoint the best for this issue and take measures in line with employing from amongst the most talented individuals. They should identify the best or the very scientific talents and set the ground so that these individuals are willing to cooperate with the university. Thus, the identification of the properties, attraction, development, and retention of the talents in such an organization and with different individual properties of the knowledgeable staff entail the adoption of distinct approaches. The competition between the educational organizations, necessity for having a map of the talents available in the work market, the need for dealing with the issue of the future leaders, challenges that organizations are faced with in attraction, development, and retention, population changes, and foreign work market, shortage of the skills and improper use of the existent workforce's expertise are amongst the reasons rendering it obligatory to adopt effective, robust and agile talent management strategies. Resultantly, the establishment of an effective system enables the university's organization to witness a reduction in the recruitment costs, effective knowledge management and knowledge transfer, the offering of advanced services and productions, creation of competitive advantage, reduction of the organizational risks and improvement of the retention as well as optimal use of the capacities. So, it can be claimed in this case that the talent management system tries to invest in the unique properties of the individuals and such a gap would be the largest challenge with which the country's organizations are engaged; if the talents of every person can be well recognized, the selection and improvement systems can be correspondingly designed. Attraction, employment, development, and retention of superior talents are the ultimate goals of every organization worrying about the competitive advantage and market share (Martin, 2015). Considering the idea that a robust theory and a precise interpretation of the empirical data cannot be attained before offering a formal definition, the present study intends to deal with one of the seminal challenges in the area of talent management, i.e. defining and operationalizing the concept of talent; to enter this subject, the identification of properties is amongst the introductory steps. The current research paper seeks to identify the properties of the scientific talents in proportion to the higher education system and through taking advantage of the notions of scientific experts; it also intends to find an answer to the question as to what is the set of properties possessed by scientific talents in Iran's state higher education system? The thing that distinguishes the present study from the literature extant in this regard is the extensive investigation of the properties of the scientific talents from the perspective of the academic actors and through the use of a qualitative method and deep interviews. The current research paper is an effort through a subtle and extensive approach towards the clarification of new angles of the existing problems and challenges. It can be summarily stated that the novelty of the subject "talent management", performing studies on the grounds of state higher education, the offering

of a new model and non-intermediated application of the study's findings are amongst the features of the current research paper.

There are four dominant discourses regarding talent, including the individuals, pools, positions and methods (Collings *et al.*, 2017; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017; Sparrow *et al.*, 2014).

- Individuals' approach: in this approach, talent management focuses on a group of individuals. This approach is inflicted with managerial bias and limited intellectuality. (Sparrow and Makram, 2015).
- Talent pool approach: it includes the identification of groups of individuals who have different effects on the organization's performance. This approach is accompanied by the organizational justice considerations and shareholders' theory and it signifies an exclusive approach towards talent management (Gelens *et al.*, 2014; Gallardo *et al.*, 2014; Thunnissen 2016). Although providing the talented individuals with information about their specific talent position exerts a motivational effect (Björkman, *et al.*, 2013), the talent pool approach can cause the creation of unequal systems and result in the expansion of the payment differences. It is in the meanwhile followed by overemphasis on the performance and it can cause enhancement of the talents of a few key individuals in the businesses (Mellahi and Collings, 2010; Guthridge *et al.*, 2008; Ashton *et al.*, 2010). Cooke *et al.* (2014) have warned about the adverse effects of exclusive talent management systems and the inherent risk of overlooking the affective effects.
- Positions' approach: this approach has been supported by Becker & Huselid (2006) and it indicates that the organizations make disproportionate (special) investments in positions that they have a competitive advantage. However, it is accompanied by challenges for the whole organization, especially those that have been distributed worldwide in terms of internal equality and coordinated performance Management (Minbaeva, 2016).
- Methods' approach: the methodological approach needs a complicated set of policies and HRM interventions capable of developing the global talent skills and competencies and proposed as annual issues of the interrelationships between HRM and performance; these are the issues that include effective talent management in a definition of HRM packet (De Boeck *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, the creation of the relationship between extensive organizational strategies and work and organizational grounds is also included (Mellahi and Collings, 2010; Khilji *et al.*, 2015; Huang and Tansley, 2012).

Lewis and Heckman (2006), Phillips and Roper (2009), Collings and Mellahi (2009), Stall *et al.* (2012), Nijs *et al.* (2014), Thunnissen (2016), Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen (2016), Dries (2013), Meyers and Van Woerkom (2014) and Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2020) are amongst the researchers who have offered talent management models in the foreign literature. The studies by Eghbal *et al.* (2017) and Tahmasebi *et al.* (2015) on higher education and studies by Reza'eiyan and Soltani (2009), Karimi and Hosseini (2010), Khalvandi and Abbaspour (2013) in other textures can be mentioned amongst the efforts made for offering talent management model in Iran.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study's specifications in terms of methodology can be briefly stated in the following words: the study orientation is developmental; the study method is qualitative; the study

philosophy is interpretive; the study strategy is grounded theory; the study approach is inductive; the study's temporal horizon is single cross-sectional; the study data collection method is semi-structured interview. The current research paper seeks to achieve a subtle and full-scale recognition of such an issue as the properties of the scientific talents in Iran's higher education system. Due to the same reason, use has been made of a purposive sampling method for selecting the interviewees and theoretical sampling for determining the number of them as well as determining the place of the required data and also finding the study path. In the meantime, 20 prominent professors familiar with HR and, especially, talent management were interviewed because it was deemed necessary for the present study to contact the informed or goalkeeping individuals who have appropriate and relatively sufficient information about the studied subject.

To gather the information, use was made of the grounded theory strategy and semi-structured exploratory interviews. To start the interviews, a seminal list of the qualified individuals was prepared for later interviews with them. Letters were sent to the interviewees along with interview protocol. The reason for selecting the grounded theory strategy was its proportion with the study question and the reason for the use of a semi-structured interview was the possibility of exchanging ideas and thoughts. Confidentiality of the provided information and anonymousness of the participants were taken into consideration. To investigate the trustworthiness and reliability of the study, Guba and lincoln (1989) scales was used. Several methods were applied to collect information. The use of the numerous information resources is amongst the cases contributing to the credibility of the research. Participants and peer reviews were carried out to ensure dependability. In the current study, retest reliability and inter-subject consistency were utilized to calculate the reliability of the interviews. The retest reliability of the interviews was found out to be equal to 89%. Because the reliability rate is above 60%, the trustworthiness of the interview codes is confirmed. The inter-coder reliability of the interviews was found equal to 84%. In line with determining the confirmability of the study, reports, handwritings and notes were shared with several colleagues and the results were found consistent. Since the process of the present study has been explained completely and its stages have been perfectly explicated, it can be replicated for other grounds hence it can be claimed that the transformability has been actualized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the course of open coding, the data were carefully examined. The relevant main and secondary topics were specified. The aspects and properties were determined. The primary unit of analysis for coding was the concepts. Live, researcher-based and theoretical coding was the method of choice. The first coding stage was line-to-line following which 450 initial codes were extracted. Then, it was reduced to 205 conceptual codes following combining and eliminating the repetitive codes featuring similar conceptual settings. Considering the guidelines presented by Strauss and Corbin (1998), efforts were made by separating the interview text as being comprised of elements conveying messages inside lines and paragraphs for extracting the open codes. Afterward, it was endeavored to categorize the topics within the format of large conceptual sets. **Table (1)** summarizes the coding results.

Table 1. coding framework in analyzing the interviews: results of open coding

Row	General topic	Topic	Subtopics and concepts
1	affections	Interests	Interest in occupational challenge and progress, respect to the coworkers more than the superiors, freedom of action, tendency towards the development of individual knowledge, tendency towards working for long hours, tendency towards playing a useful role, happiness, ambitiousness, industriousness, occupational mobility, diversity in perspectives, needlessness of others, being aware of their own specialness, risk-taking and courageousness, free thinking, sensitivity, exercise and promotion of ethical behavior and honesty, truthfulness, sympathy, generosity, tendency towards learning, being initiator and active, awareness of details, excitability, being worried about sublimation, concerns about the culture, being committed to the culture, order and discipline, accountable, tendency towards facing the challenges and complexities, being interested in team work, positive attitudes and energy, optimism, consciousness, being committed to mission, tendency towards ascending and promotion, sacrifice, trustable, hope in sublimation in the organization, hope in future, liveliness and vigorousness, perfectionism, loyalty to the work result not the job, being committed to the job and not the expertise, interest in work, courage and flexibility for performing the tasks, high rate of service desertion, agility and individual support at workplace
		Motivation	Needs: loyalty to profession, network, and peers in contrast to organization; authentication of the works done by the scientific talents, need for being noted by the others: being seen and thanked, need for establishing friendship, the need for progress, promotion, growth, and individual development; recognitions: self-confidence, demanding success, being self-motivated, motivation for constant improvement, justice, possession of positive self-image; Emotions: emotional stability, jocundity, industriousness, diligence, endurance, self-control, emotional flexibility; external motivations: provoking environment, supportive environmental conditions, salaries and benefits, higher education policies and managers, relations with coworkers, job security, reward, and material welfare
2	Ability	Inherent	Speed, precision, divergent thinking, creativity and innovative thoughts, creativeness, dynamic solution-finding, strategic thinking, high mental ability, psychological integration and coherence, leadership ability, mental agility, successful adaptability, progress in learning, systematic thinking, exercising logical reasoning, seeking novelty

Regular development: skill and knowledge	**Organizational awareness**: long-term and short-term goals, the role and relations between various sections, awareness of business, perception of power; **external awareness:** various market dynamicity issues, government's new policies, rivals' strategies; education capability: creation of instructional contents, educational innovations, fostering pupils, development of educational programs, establishment of instructional institutes, educational profession, registration of inventions and discoveries, scientific capabilities and planning skill; **research capability:** research outputs, implementation of research projects, establishment of research institutions, fostering researchers, participation in the codification of specialized journals; **technological ability:** implementation of technological plans, commercialization of the technological plans, entrepreneurship and job creation, technology transfer and nationalization, technological professions, establishment of technological institutions, fostering technologists, specialized service-providing, subtle applied knowledge for performing job-related responsibilities, computer and software skill; interactive ability: structure and quality of the relations' network, strong and positive interpersonal relations, participation in definition, planning and implementation so that supports can be instigated, effective listening, cooperation with others, ability of persuasion, listening skill, guidance and negotiation skill, use of counseling and negotiation and dispute-resolution skills, high life and social skills, understanding of the team behavior, use of consensus and coalition skills, problem recognition, problem-solving and analysis, designing and organization, adaptability, participation in project and team work, positive work relationships with group manager, stable relations, ability of influencing the others; **managerial ability:** ability of regulating the work activities, absence of constant control from above, having the required power and authority for performing the tasks, ability of learning new skills, collective experiences and skills, facing the goals, better overall performance, high occupational specialty and skills, ability of offering the results, ability of organization, ability in decision-making, understanding strategy, ability in implementation, ability in consistency, ability in problem recognition, behavioral neatness, difficulty in evaluation of their works' results, intellectual independence, knowledge capital, learnability, expertise-orientation, teaching power, critical thinking, change and flexibility, thoughtfulness, low dependency on information, inquisitive, guidance of results, selection of goal and accomplishment of objectives, courageousness, self-knowledge, habits and balanced learning skills, judgment, planning skill, endurance under pressure, tolerance of tension, adaptability, analysis skill, realistic, having meaning and goal in life and responsible and accountable

What set of the properties and skills do the scientific talents enjoy?

Based on the analysis of the data obtained from the lived experiences and perceptions by the scientific talents and according to the performed reviews, the properties of the scientific talents have been categorized into two substantial sets of emotions and abilities. By the emotions, behavioral and dispositional feelings exhibited by an individual in practice are intended. By ability, a set of fixed inherent and developable traits are intended. Each of the two abovementioned substantial topics, as well, has been subdivided into two secondary topics. The

topic "emotions" includes interests and motivations and the topic "ability" has been divided into two inherent and developable abilities. Interests refer to the activities liked and considered important by the scientific talents and the individuals' preferences and tendencies are incorporated thereby. In answering the question about the primary interests, the concepts extracted from the analysis of the interviews with the scientific talents are as explicated in **Table (1)**.

The second indicator of the properties of the scientific talents was termed motivation. Motivation is the concept related to the activities liked by the scientific talents who are more willing to invest their efforts in them. The concepts like needs, recognitions, emotions, and external motivators form the topic of motivation which is per se part of the substantial topic of emotions. By motivation, those processes are intended that guide the behavior. These processes are needs, recognitions, emotions and external events. The needs are related to the individuals' internal conditions that are necessary for the continuation of life and growth and health. Recognitions incorporate the opinions, beliefs and mental events, expectations, and self-image that demonstrate the method of thinking. Emotions are in the form of mental, biological, purposive and social and multidimensional phenomena. External events are motivators strengthening the individuals' behaviors and guiding them towards certain events.

The topic ability was divided into two topics of inherent abilities and regularly developable abilities. By ability, multiple mental competencies are intended. Inherent abilities are relatively fixed internal traits that are less influenced by the environment. Nijs *et al.* (2014) suggested the standard self-examination and self-rating tests for the individuals, colleagues, and supervisors for the assessment of the inherent abilities. The next subtopic was termed the developable ability. By the developable abilities, those capabilities are intended that can be grown and advanced via formal and informal engagement. Scientific talents' management ability was the other secondary topic classified in the interviewees' answers as the property of the scientific talents under such a substantial title as the ability of development.

CONCLUSION

The present study intends to deal with one of the preliminary challenges in the area of talent management. Thus, the present study's goal is the identification of the indicators forming talent in Iran's system of higher education thereby to be able to define proportion to the grounds that is assistive in accomplishing the objectives of the scientific talents' identification as the preliminary part of the establishment of a comprehensive talent management system. The pivotal question of the present study is that what are the features enjoyed by the scientific talents in Iran's state higher education system? The study results led to the identification of 205 concepts related to the properties of the scientific talents and they were subsequently categorized into two substantial groups of emotions and abilities and two secondary topics of interests, motivations, inherent abilities, and developable capabilities. The theory formed in the present study attempts to elaborate on the properties of the scientific talents in the academic environment. The emotions of the scientific talents were classified within the format of two topics, namely interests, and motivation. The identification of the scientific talents' interested areas causes the assignment of them to the activities that can corroborate and flourish their interests. The occupational psychologists realize the evaluation of interests as a key indicator of talent to support the

individuals in finding the proportion between what they are and what they are looking for to do as a job (Arnold and Cohen, 2008). In the literature on gifted, this subject has been put forth under the title of the proportion between the individual and the environment and it is considered as a vital element for optimal progress. The higher education system must have effective plans for the recognition of the emotions and interests of the scientific talents. As believed by some of the interviewees, the use of standardized tests and effective interaction can be useful in this regard. By the effective interaction, the establishment of conditions under which the scientific talents can speak with the manners about their concerns regarding their interests and attitudes is intended. It seems that the standard tests are not followed by effective solutions in the higher education system and effective interaction, as well, is faced with a serious challenge. The collaborations in the academic organization have become more hierarchical and instrumental than effective interaction. Issuance of the cooperation order by the superior authorities for the scientific talents is not also a proper solution. The solution is novel and innovative conceptualizations in proportion to the individuals' psychological properties and, at the same time, aligning them with the strategic goals of the academic system. Van Den Broek *et al.* (2018) have offered novel conceptualizations in this regard and introduced cooperative innovation through common talent pools explicating the method of simultaneous cooperation and competition between the talents. In the study by Dries (2013), reference has been made to the importance of guiding the staff towards activities concentrated on their interests and motivations; he also believes in a special responsibility for employees in line with consulting the interests and motivations with the decision-makers. In the study by Nijs *et al.* (2014), as well, motivation and interest have been underlined as the indicators constituting the talent. To objectively assess the interests of the scientific talents, use is made in occupational psychology of such instruments as Strong's inventory of interests, the study of values, job anchors' questionnaire, organizing of the smart occupational cards, biography interview technique, possible selves' exercise and reflection drills. As for the evaluation of the interests of the scientific talents, there is no unique tool comprehensively encompassing all the interests with each of the instruments having its specific advantages and disadvantages so a combination of instruments (multisource appraisal) can be a more useful method. Standard instruments feature more appropriate validity and they can be more readily used in the organizational contexts because they can be used for a lot of individuals identically. Of course, it has to be noted that the interests and motivations have complicated nature and are experienced differently by the individuals. Due to the same reason, they can be better identified through the application of open-answer methods.

One of the substantial challenges of the higher education system concerning motivation is the formation of instrumental motivations that should be shifted in their directions to conscious and internal motivations. It seems that the academic system needs to take more effective steps towards getting aware of the desires and interests of scientific talents. Considering its strategic orientation, the educational system should be seeking areas of the scientific talents' abilities that lead to the creation of value for the academic organizations. The policies that can be adopted by the higher education system in this recent section are more concentrated on the selection, evaluation, and identification of the competencies. To assess the special inherent capabilities, standardized tests and ratings by one's self, peers and supervisors can be applied. The scientific

talents' abilities are not limited to a given area and they should be tracked concerning the primary missions. The same issue has to be noted in decision-makings. By the developable abilities, those competencies are intended that can be acquired through experience and developed over time. Organizational awareness, external awareness, educational abilities, fostering capabilities and technological potencies as well as interaction power and management competency can be acquired through conscious, extensive and engaging exercises in the processes of formal and informal education. The role of the environment is prominent for the emergence of this part of the scientific talents' capabilities. The analysis of the data obtained in this study shows that a vast part of the scientific talents' properties falls in the category of developable abilities. In this case, it is necessary to make comprehensive plans for the development of capabilities and provide opportunities for learning and storing experiences. The customized educational programs and instruction of special skills in proportion to the scientific talents and strategic organizational goals are amongst the effective solutions. So, it can be stated based on the results that talent is a complex set of inherent and developable abilities along with motivations and interests that interact with one another. To assess the talent, a diverse combination of methods have been conceptualized, including the aptitude and progress test, ratings, self-evaluation instruments, and reflection exercises and it is believed that it can be developed through exercise, performance, and instruction. Butter *et al.* (2016) have pointed in their study to the adoption of strategies in proportion to the needs of faculty members in the higher education system, ability to get adapted to the complicated environment and ability of the academic system's making of effective use of the scientific talents. In a study aimed at the identification of the indices and properties of the key staff in Tehran University, Javaherizadeh *et al.* (2014) have identified 49 indices for the identification of the key employees in Tehran University with the learning power being ranked first. They mentioned emotional intelligence, scientific-cultural history, behavioral properties, and executive skills amongst the specialized attributes. Thunnissen, (2016), as well, underlined the importance of exercise, providing opportunities for storing experience and a useful combination of the inherent and acquirable abilities in their study. Also, Huselid and Becker (2011) pointed to the making of distinction between the human workforces in the literature on human resources. It can be concluded in general that the credible evaluation of talent entails setting the balance between the organizational responsibilities, including the identification of the areas related to the human workforce's performance, offering occupational opportunities for systematic development and personal responsibilities, including expressing the motivation and interests' domains. According to the findings, it can be stated that the aforesaid properties portray the visage of the scientific talents in the academic system.

Considering the study findings, the academic decision-makers have become familiar with the indicators forming the talent in the offered model which is the product of the lived experiences of the scientific talents hence they are required to scrutinize both of these two primary indicators in their plans and programs. Considering the subjective nature of the emotions, it is suggested that the scientific talents should be provided within a codified and comprehensive program with the opportunity of interaction in the areas of their interests and motivations. The profile of the scientific talents' emotions and abilities should be prepared and the map of their emotions and abilities should be delineated to be used and substantiated during decision-making. In the academic system, the blank place of the customized programs for the scientific talents in

proportion to their needs is felt. It is also suggested that future research can investigate the influential organizational properties, including size, culture and ethical topics of the organization in defining the talent and adopting the talent management methods in proportion to the educational system's texture. It is additionally suggested that the value obtained from the emotions and abilities should be empirically assessed in the higher education system so that it can become clear that from which of the primary factors (emotions and abilities) the highest value in Iran's academic system is produced. Amongst the inherent limitations of the qualitative research, the effect of overemphasis on the trustworthiness that may endanger the credibility, as well as the low generalizability, can be pointed out. In terms of implementation constraints, the problem in coordinating the interviews is notable.

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