Augmenting talent management for sustainable development in Africa

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Abstract

Purpose – With the steady overall development of the continent, the African business landscape over the last decade has witnessed increased growth through numerous avenues. Growth has been through the emergence of formalised small and medium enterprises, the growth of business and transition from one scale to another as well as inward foreign direct investment. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how this business growth can be sustained, particularly in the area of talent management, within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents the findings of a narrative inquiry conducted in 2016 on an expert panel of talent managers in businesses based in South Africa.

Findings – The focus of the inquiry was the challenges in talent currently faced by South African businesses and what possible solutions, that address the question of sustainable development, may lie in talent management practices. The study finds that there may be scope for the augmentation of current practice in psychometric testing which may address a plethora of problems currently defining the talent context in African business.

Originality/value – The growth of African businesses has presented interesting challenges in managing the African business particularly in the area of human resources and talent management. A persistent notion is the question of sustaining this growth on the continent. As enterprise grows, the need for talent is ever more pressing. This paper seeks to present pathways to sustainability in this regards.

Keywords South Africa, Talent management, Narrative inquiry, Sustainable development goals, Psychometric testing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A paper by McKinsey & Company (2010) examined the direction of growth of the African continent and found that the tide was changing with less emphasis on the labour intensive extractive industries to more prospects in the relatively more sophisticated sectors of banking, fast moving consumer goods, infrastructure and telecommunications. The talent needs of the continent have therefore evolved, resulting in noticeable voids with businesses being unable to fill their employment vacancies with appropriate talent. A perpetuation of this status quo is not sustainable and would see the development thus far severely compromised.

This paper conceptualises sustainable development on the basis of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development spearheaded by the United Nations (2015). According to this perspective, sustainable development is a process towards meeting the present goals of human development whilst supporting the ability of natural resources and ecosystems to satisfy future needs (United Nations, 2015). The discipline and practice of talent management has the potential to contribute to at least 3 of the 17 sustainable development goals, namely:

(1) Goal 1 – no poverty;

(2) Goal 8 – decent work and economic growth; and

(3) Goal 17 – partnership for the goals.

It is therefore imperative to conceptualise talent and talent management for this discussion. In general language use talent is one's natural aptitude or skill. This definition perceives talent as an innate skill as the word natural suggests. It implies therefore that any individual, regardless of social class, academic achievements or gender can be talented. In contemporary talent management literature, the definition of talent is viewed from both

human resources: management and psychology. The human resource management perspective implies that only employees whose skills and competencies are, or have a high potential to be valuable or worthy towards attaining the goals of the organisation are considered to be talented (Gelens *et al.*, 2013). Generally, the psychological perspective on talent management advocates that humans should not be regarded only as resources in the same logic as non-human resources. This views talent from the perspective of an individual's professional knowledge, individuality and mental ability (Dries, 2013). Consequently, it follows a psychometric paradigm as the central objective. This paper adopts a unified definition of talent, drawn from both perspectives.

Hartmann *et al.* (2010) stated that talent management is a series of human resources activities including recruiting, selection, development and succession; activities that are strategic, future oriented and focussed on overall organisational goals. How talent management activities may be augmented to contribute to the attainment of the named sustainable development goals is explained further in the findings of this paper.

The problem that society is faced with presently is that talent management practices tend to exclude some members of the society in diversion from the sustainable development goals. Talent management philosophies are primarily aligned towards individuals with employment potentials; that is individuals with some form of a qualification, especially academic qualifications. Consequently, uneducated workforces, who are otherwise capable of being competent and productive in the workplace receive little or no consideration for employment by recruiters or moreover consideration in the talent management process. This implies that those individuals who are not fortunate to get a college degree or a diploma or any form of a higher academic qualification, but otherwise have innate skills which when managed and nurtured effectively can be very beneficial to the organisation's success, are entirely ignored. They are perceived as "untalented".

One of the tools of the talent management trade, psychometric testing, may provide solutions in enabling talent management practices to be more inclusive and in so doing contribute to the vision for sustainable development. Generally, psychometric testing measures the mental processes and the characteristics of an individual; indicates one's capability to ascertain new tasks and comprehend information provided to them; and assesses one's abilities to perform certain tasks as well their capability to appraise situations in the work environment and react accordingly (Barrett, 2003; Van Der Merwe, 2002).

A critique of the literature in the context of the sustainable development goals

This section of the paper gives an overview of the sustainable development goals to which talent management practices may contribute. It further reviews how current trends and issues in talent management impact on the attainment of the goals.

The sustainable development goals

As stated in the introduction, this paper focusses on 3 of the 17 sustainable development goals.

Goal 1 – no poverty. This goal speaks to ending poverty comprehensively by conceptualising poverty as lack of income, lack of resources, lack of basic services, hunger, social discrimination, exclusion and lack or participation in decision making (United Nations, 2015). That there are sectors of society being excluded from employment suggests that working towards their inclusion would, in turn, address this goal as their employment would result in income, access to resources and basic services and a greater likelihood in participating in decision making.

Goal 8 – decent work and economic growth. This goal aims to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth as well as full and productive employment through decent work for all (United Nations, 2015). Inclusive sustainable economic growth can be linked to

maximising the full potential of our business enterprises (Basnett and Sen, 2013; Melamed *et al.*, 2011). This full potential cannot be achieved when the current status quo of many businesses is the presence of unfilled positions. By filling these positions through augmented talent management practices, economic growth may be achieved.

Goal 17 – partnership for the goals. This goal is concerned with strengthening the means of implementation of the sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2015). A general notion persists that sustainable development is an area for primarily governmental concern and secondarily for internationally non-governmental concern. The business sector often appears disengaged and its contribution notably absent. By addressing talent management practices across all sectors; public, private and not-for-profit- business can set itself as a viable partner towards the achievement of the goals.

The South African context of business and talent management

South Africa is a developing emerging market and this context presents unique challenges for talent management. A study by Schutte *et al.* (2015) found that talent management is among the competencies that have the poorest application in South African workplaces. The hiring practices of South Africa have been criticised as too rigid (World Economic Forum, 2014). This rigidity is manifesting in the recruitment practices that are leaving talent behind and perpetuating the cycle of poverty, stunted economic growth and minimal contribution of business in attaining the sustainable development goals of the United Nations.

There is growing evidence that talent management practices ought to be different in emerging markets (Bluen, 2013; Latukha, 2016). With the call for sustainability having a particularly high impetus for these contexts, it is apparent that our thought processes and practical implementation of talent management be reconsidered.

Issues in talent management

In their review of the literature, Tarique and Schuler (2010) highlighted the demand-supply gap among the exogenous factors that are trending in the talent management literature. The demand-supply gap implies that businesses have unfilled positions that their recruitment efforts have been unable to fill, presumably due to the scarcity of talent. This hinders the attainment of the goal towards "no poverty" as those deemed to be lacking talent are overlooked in the recruitment drive and remain perpetually unemployed. It further hinders the attainment of the goals towards economic growth and innovation as businesses operate below efficiency with their unfilled positions. This paper acknowledges that the demand-supply gap is not the only issue in talent management. The world of work is currently challenged with managing complex inter-generational dynamics and the role of technology in work (Deloitte, 2014) among others. The demand-supply gap is focussed on as a possibly direct outcome of the current practices and omissions in talent management practice.

For 2018, Haak (2017) has predicted that talent management will move from a standard to an individualised approach and there will be broader acceptance that talent is everywhere. This implies then that the direction of this paper in proposing more tailored approaches that allow for greater inclusivity of the masses of talent is appropriate.

Talent management in emerging markets has largely been considered from the perspective of the multinational corporation (Ambrosius, 2016). This approach has been limiting as it focusses on how expatriates can gain relevant emerging market competencies rather than exploring how the talent of emerging market nationals can be tapped into for the success of the multinational corporation. With a sustainable approach to talent management being called for, it is apparent that he latter is more desirable.

Psychometric testing
Psychometric testing has become a recognised tool employed to validate recruitment and selection processes. It enables the identification of "true talent" as follows: a passion for learning, responsiveness to inspirational role models and influences, hunger for excitement of achievement, ambition and the drive for supremacy, nonconformism and contrariness, self-sufficiency and a preference for solitude, physical vulnerability and personal branding (Joubert, 2007). If we are to accept Joubert's (2007) definition of true talent, it becomes clear that focussing on academic achievements alone or above all other considerations is ineffective. What is further problematic about most implementations of psychometric tests is their narrow application as merely a support tool and also the lack of variation in which types of tests are implemented.

Many scholars and practitioners in talent management have argued that one of the most relevant trends in the field is a new emphasis on potential rather than performance (Tansley, 2011). This potential is best uncovered through measures of intelligence and personality which are both encompassed in several forms of psychometric tests.

Methodology and methods
What the literature demonstrates is that the group of concern currently excluded from the talent management practices of the day are those deemed "untalented", often by virtue of lacking formal education qualifications. Three key questions are posed to address this issue as follows:

(1) How can psychometric testing be designed to accommodate the "untalented" workforce in the recruitment process?

(2) What are the justifications for including or excluding "untalented" workforces according to human resource manager's perspective?

(3) How can managers help to boost and augment the skills and talents of the "untalented" workforce so that they can be effective in the workplace?

Scope
This study focusses on the recruitment, selection and development stages of the talent management process. The study was conducted in Gauteng, South Africa. Thus, all participants were based in South Africa and affiliated with either South African companies or the South African subsidiaries of multinational organisations.

Philosophical approach
An interpretivist paradigm of analysing and interpreting people's social and political behaviours by identifying and narrating their beliefs, actions and experiences in their societal context (Hay, 2011) is adopted. Assuming an ontological position of relativism, the study regards that the reality or truth lying within the concepts of talent management, psychometric testing and employment possibilities for the "untalented" will be gleaned from the opinions and beliefs shared by the participants as they are the observers of such reality (Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). From an epistemological perspective, this study acknowledges that the representations of the findings are subjective and refute the notion of an objective truth.

Narrative inquiry
In the terms of research design, a narrative inquiry is engendered. Narrative inquiry is best suited for the understanding of a social or a psychological phenomenon (Andrews *et al.*, 2008). The design is capable of unwinding and unravelling human knowledge through stories told

from lived experiences. A narrative inquiry is most suitable for this study not only because one is able to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the participants regarding the strategic ways in which psychometric tests have been and are currently being used in their different organisations, but it also provides the possibilities of forming and assessing grounded themes from these shared experiences.

Data collection
Participants were purposively sampled with the sampling criteria being participants with in-depth knowledge and experience in talent management and the use of psychometric testing. Participants were identified from a publicly accessible database of talent management practitioners in South Africa and also through snowballing from recruited participants. Four talent managers participated with whom in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sample size is justifiable based on Creswell's (2014) recommendations and assertions that the minimum sample size for qualitative narrative research be one individual. Initial interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. Further later interviews were conducted to garner depth from the participant stories. Interviews were recorded and replayed for transcription (Table I).

Data analysis
The study undertakes a thematic analysis using a combination of pre-set codes based on the research questions and emergent codes during the coding process. A line-by-line coding strategy was used to highlight recurring words, phrases or ideas and thus arrange the patterns and themes that emerge from the data.

Findings
Using psychometric testing to assess potential
As mentioned earlier, psychometric tests are often used to support other techniques in recruitment and selection:

[…] at the moment […] we don't heavily use psychometric assessment. We only use them just to aid decision making when we are hiring […] not necessarily for selection purposes. So our philosophy is that […] in my current organisation, though my thinking and my opinions, I beg to differ with their beliefs, that psychometric assessment(s) don't really add that much value when it comes to recruitment and selection (Participant 1).

We lose out on a lot of talented people because we are so focused on education then we forget the potential that they have. If you focus more on the potential of people and you provide them with the opportunities that the others have, they will also do great (Participant 3).

Participant 1, however, recognises a further application of psychometric testing in assessing potential towards the achievement of the sustainable development goals as follows:

So that tool [Learning Potential Computerized Adaptive Test (LPCAT)] is actually used to assess people's learning potential. So we mostly use it for people who have got matric and what not.

Participant pseudonym	Role	Company pseudonym
Participant 1	Talent management human resource manager	A heavy equipment company
Participant 2	Talent management human resource manager	An information technology company
Participant 3	Talent management human resource manager	An insurance company
Participant 4	Talent management human resource manager	A professional services

Table I.
Profile of participants

So it assesses and gives you a report in terms of if this person wants to be developed, how far you can go? It is actually such a good tool because from the report […] it can actually tell you this person will have a potential to actually get [to] a point of earning a bachelor's degree.

Participant 3 concurs with this use of psychometric tests in the following quote:

Organisations are able to see their (employment candidates') cognitive ability [through Saville]; what potential they have.

LPCAT is categorised as a dynamic test that allows for fairer multicultural cognitive assessment (De Beer, 2006). This characteristic is directly relevant to Goal 1 earlier explained. The Saville aptitude assessments are said to be a comprehensive portfolio that allows recruiters to sift through large numbers of candidates (Saville and Hopton, 2016). They are widely viewed as ethical and fair and in so being their use may also contribute to the achievement of Goal 1.

Using psychometric testing for synchronising staffing and organisational design
Another area for psychometric use is in establishing where employment candidates may fit into the organisational design. Participant 3 makes reference to tests such as Evalex for this purpose:

It looks at personality and measures the ability, the upward mobility, how far they can go up into the organisation […] and then ranks you […] it classifies you into different categories.

Again it will depend on the role because it's not only about learning potential (Participant 4).

Tests such as Evalex are concerned with the organisational positions candidates would fill to drive performance. When successfully implemented, they bring about more efficient business operations and contribute to the desired economic growth of Goal 8.

Using psychometric testing to bridge skills gaps
Participant 1 further comments on the use of psychometric testing in identifying skills gaps that can be filled through training and development. Specific reference is made to personality tests such as that developed by Saville & Holdsworth Limited (SHL):

[…] the data would be extracted from the report of that which is being assessed to see where they are lacking in terms of skills and behaviour and personality and then we look at how we use that data to help develop the certain skills they are lacking.

You have to […] understand the gap in their knowledge (Participant 4).

Such tests determine one's behavioural style at work (Institute of Psychometric Coaching, n.d.). Rather than out rightly dismissing those candidates lacking desirable traits, mentoring candidates into those desirable areas may be more effective. This use of psychometric tests calls for specific action from enterprises to not only identify gaps in talent but also address the identified gaps. This is well aligned with Goal 18 which calls on the various sectors of economic activity to be partners towards the attainment of the sustainable development goals.

Implications and conclusion
Summary of current talent management practices and recommendations for augmentation towards sustainable development
Table II summarises the key issues drawn from the narrative inquiry with regards to the scope for augmenting talent management practice towards sustainable development.

Demystifying the notion of talent
It is clear that the current problems in talent management practice are strongly rooted in how talent is defined. How talent manifests in individuals is varied and so the recruitment process needs to have an element of variation to minimise missing out on some of the talent and capturing the "untalented". Different psychometric tests could be employed to achieve this:

> I hold a strong view that psychometric assessment actually helps. You know, tapping into things that you won't necessarily gather when you just like, interviewing a person [...] It can actually tell you this person will have a potential to actually get a point of earning a bachelor's degree [...] It will tell you a person has not got the potential to get into a bachelor's degree but they can do well in getting a certificate or practical training [...] So, that's why I'm saying there is really an opportunity there in terms of using psychometric assessment to assess the potential of people that don't have the qualifications (Participant 1).

Although a universal definition of talent is far from being realised, it would seem that contextually relevant definitions are more useful in enabling the improvement of talent management practices. This is to say that for some roles, in some industries, the formal qualification is a fair assessment of talent whereas in others it is not as cited by Participant 4:

> It's less risky to hire a degreed person. So if you are hiring somebody who is less educated a) it is a bigger risk; b) it takes more time, more money, more attention, and more energy, to train that person. That time, the energy, the money takes you away from you work time, which ultimately affects the amount of the time you can spend on clients, the amount of time you're bringing in funds for the company [...] So you're taking huge risks on people, depending obviously on the role, you need to have that knowledge, you have to have it. If you are going to be an accountant, which is the core part of our business, you need to have that training.

Accounting for the criticisms of psychometric testing
Psychometric testing is not without its critics:

> I have come across examples were we have done all kind of formalities and tests [...] like everything has been done [yet] we still come across the cases were the candidate was not appropriate for the position then we got to face some behavioural issues (Participant 2).

> This is the part that I can't get. You take a kid from the rural areas who has not been exposed and you take a kid who has gone to a multiracial school, a black kid, and you put them together. I can't see how they can write the same tests and not expect different results because the exposure also plays a part in terms of how they answer (Participant 3).

Psychometric testing is clearly not an exact science. This does not dismiss its utility in talent management practice rather it urges us to implement, interpret and translate psychometric test with caution. The use of multiple tests may be useful in this regard.

Barriers to overcome
There is continued fear and unwillingness of organisations to take risks of employing the seemingly "untalented" to avoid unnecessary loss and failure. This fear has been stifling as

Current talent management practice	Recommendation for augmentation	Relevant coal towards sustainable development
Using psychometric testing to assess potential	Variation in the reading of psychometric tests	Goal 1
Using academic qualifications to fit staff into organisational design	Using psychometric testing for synchronising staffing and organisational design	Goal 8
Using academic qualifications to fill skills gaps	Using psychometric testing to bridge skills gaps	Goal 18

Table II.
Augmentation of talent management practices for sustainable development

it has reinforced the rigidity that brings about the demand-supply gap in talent in the first instance. Organisational bureaucracies have a large role to play in this as shown here:

> It's unfortunate because we live in a world that has defined protocols and systems. Even when you go into a company, they will tell you these are our policies and these are people that you should employ; people that should have degrees and if personally you have got a different view you sort of can't go against that right, cause then you will be in violation of the company policies (Participant 1).

Although psychometric testing may be used as an alternative to traditional recruitment of those considered "untalented", it cannot replace the need for basic standards in exceptional field as shown here:

> There are certain jobs that require that training that education […] so for example being a lawyer, you will need to have that education, and you will need to have that knowledge base (Participant 4).

Call to action
Organisations are strongly urged to revisit their recruitment policies, identify available opportunities and take it upon themselves as a corporate social responsibility to create employment opportunities for the "untalented". To support the organisational effort, human resource management practitioners, particularly those working in the field of talent management, are advised to identify jobs that may be better suited for "untalented" people in the workplace; where on-the-job training is possible.

In the spirit of partnership towards sustainable development, governments are urged to motivate organisations that take on the aforementioned recommendation by providing substantial incentives. The government may contribute by providing funds for the individual to further attain some form of a higher qualification or/and tax breaks to complying organisations.

It is recommended that individuals do not forsake the drive to get higher education and skilled competencies as they seek employment opportunities. One must also manifest the determination and the strong drive to succeed regardless of any drawbacks in not attaining a higher form of education.

Future research
This study only included talent management managers. It is recommended that a perspective from candidates who have been subjected to psychometric assessment, particularly those that are "untalented", be included in future research.

It must be noted that a case study was initially desired for the design of this research to get a holistic picture of an organisation that uses psychometric assessment to recruit the "untalented". However, there was no single representative case found in the South African context at the time of data collection. It is therefore suggested that researchers continue the search for a case that provides a picture of how an organisation uses psychometric testing to recruit the "untalented" and how they further manage their talent.

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