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My Talent or Yours? A Labour Process Analysis of Talent Management in Practice.

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Manuscript Type:	Neoliberalism in the workplace
Keywords:	Talent, Talent Management, Employment relationship, Labour Process
Abstract:	<p>The article empirically examines the experiences of managers and employees involved in talent management (TM) practices. Our empirical aim is to explore the ways in which degradation of the employment relationship takes place among high-potential employees. We make a theoretical contribution by analysing TM practices through the labour process theory (LPT) as a theoretical lens . LPT is part of a well-established Marxist approach (Cf. Braverman, 1974) and we extend this framework to analyse TM practices in industrial capitalism to offer new insights on how these practices are changing the employment relationships with unintended consequences leading to degradation, and work intensification. Using an employer-employee perspective, we use qualitative data from three multinational companies (MNCs) based in Europe. Through application of LPT, findings indicate softer forms of control, work intensification and illusion of opportunity and expectations, thus degrading and hollowing out the employment relationship. In effect, TM practices are adding pressure through uncompensated talent development activities and paradoxically debilitating the employment relationships for the talented employees.</p>

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Introduction

That talent management (herein after TM) has attracted considerable attention in recent years is unquestionable (see: Farndale et al, 2010; Scullion et al, 2016; Cappelli, 2008; Scullion, Collings, and Caligiuri, 2010, Tarique and Schuler 2010). The concept was initially popularised by the influential McKinsey consultants' report 'War for Talent' which highlighted the shortage of talent owing to the aging population, changes in demographics and mobility of the labour force (Michaels et al., 2001). Indeed, the proverbial war for talent has spiraled TM to the top of the agendas for senior managers and HR professionals. For example, TM was among the top three current and future organisational priorities for both HR and non-HR Leaders in the 2016/2017 HR Outlook survey (CIPD, 2018).

Interest in TM has been sustained by discourses of scarcity (Beechler and Woodward 2009; Michaels et al, 2001; McDonnell et al, 2010; Ready and Conger, 2007; Schuler et al., 2011; Towers Watson 2011, World Economic Forum, 2011), high performance (Bjorkman et al. 2007; 2013; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Makram and Sparrow, 2014; McDonnell, 2011; Schuler et al., 2011; Joyce and Slocum, 2012; Ready and Conger, 2007; Son et al., 2018) and competitive advantage (Blass 2006; Collins and Mellahi, 2009; Lewis and Heckerman, 2006; Scullion et al., 2010). It is apparent from the literature that the focus of TM is on leveraging internal talent to address organizational goals; very limited attention is given to individual needs and aspirations (Farndale et al., 2014) and to the impact of these practices on the nature of work for the talented individuals.

Although there is a small emerging literature addressing individual dimensions in TM (see for example, Bjorkman et al, 2013; Farndale et al., 2014; Festing and Schafer, 2014; Gelens et al, 2014; Khoreva et al., 2017; Thunnissen, 2016; Swailes and Blackburn, 2016;), the everyday work experiences of individual 'high-potentials' have not been critically addressed, and we also lack detailed analysis of how organizations make use of high-potential employees' labour power. While discourses of precarity (Standing, 2011; Manolchev et al., 2018) have focused on the low skilled and low paid, our contention is that precarity increasingly extends not only to white collar and professional work but also to 'talented' employees by virtue of their precious identity- the 'talented'. This paper explores how TM practices might potentially also degrade the work of high-potential and talented employees.

Our empirical aim is to explore the ways in which high-potential employees might be exposed to a degradation of their employment relationship. We make a theoretical contribution by employing labour process theory (LPT) to TM. LPT is part of a well-established Marxist approach (Cf. Braverman, 1974) to analyze TM practices in industrial capitalism to offer new insights on how these practices are changing the employment relationships with unintended consequences leading to degradation, and work intensification through added pressure from executing uncompensated talent

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3 development activities which debilitate the employment relationships for the talented
4 employees.
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7 This article contributes to existing research in two main ways. First, it brings LPT
8 directly into conversation within the ongoing debate in TM: TM has so far resisted
9 critical examination into the nature of its practices and the impact on individual talented
10 employees. LPT with its ability to highlight degradation of work and the use of often
11 covert means of control, couched in positive overtones of autonomy, consent and choice
12 serves as a useful analytical lens to study work intensification and other precarious
13 experiences within TM practices. Secondly, as there are few critical empirical studies
14 (Farndale et al., 2014; Tansley et al., 2013; Thunnissen et al., 2013), the article
15 contributes to the research on TM by providing critical empirical findings on the
16 experiences of high-potentials and the impact of TM practices on individuals including
17 work intensification and illusion of opportunities and expectations, thus degrading and
18 hollowing out of the employment relationship. The paper is structured as follows. We
19 first analyse the literature that underpins TM, before moving on to provide a critical
20 introduction to the conceptual traditions of LPT. Second, we outline the methodological
21 details that underlie our research design, and data collection methods. Third, to elaborate
22 our findings, we present both the managerial expressions as well as employee
23 experiences. We conclude by identifying the complex and contradictory nature of TM
24 which results in commodification and degradation of the employment relationship.
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30 **Talent management in practice**

31 Although TM in practice and as field of academic research has gained currency,
32 conceptual clarity still remains elusive (see: Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Dries, 2013;
33 Mellahi and Collings, 2010; Lewis and Hackerman, 2006; Tansley et al., 2007;
34 Thunnissen et al., 2013). Empirical studies are few and far between (Collings and
35 Mellahi, 2009; Sparrow et al., 2014). Previous studies in TM have called for more
36 empirical work on attitudes and behaviours of the high-potential employees (Hartmann et
37 al., 2010; Sparrow et al., 2014; Thunnissen et al., 2013). Owing to this balkanized terrain,
38 there are a variety of definitions of TM with a lack of unanimity, a review of these is
39 beyond the scope of this study. For the purpose of this study, TM will be defined as “all
40 organizational activities for the purpose of attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining
41 the best employees in the most strategic roles (those roles necessary to achieve
42 organizational strategic priorities) on a global scale” (Scullion, Collings and Caligiuri,
43 2010: 106).
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47 Practical implementation of TM is aimed at developing and leveraging human capital
48 (Swales, 2013). This places TM as a subset of strategic human resource management
49 (HRM) fitting in with the conventional, North American view of HRM as serving
50 organisational effectiveness by aligning people with goals set by top management
51 (Swales, 2013). Within this view, TM promotes the identification and development of a
52 select few individuals who are capable of making a disproportionate impact on
53 organisational performance. Indeed, in practice there are two main approaches used by
54 organisations - exclusive and inclusive. The exclusive approach promotes an elitist
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3 perspective and holds that only about 20% of an organisation differentially contributes to
4 the performance of the organization and are therefore worthy of investment (see: Dries,
5 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Swailes, 2013; Tansley et al., 2007). The inclusive
6 approach is more egalitarian and views all staff as having potential to contribute to
7 competitive advantage and that everyone should get their share of development
8 (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). The exclusive approach is the more dominant and is
9 therefore adopted in this research to allow for conceptual analysis through LPT.
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12 The TM literature has indirectly relied upon human capital thinking to make a series of
13 “value claims” (Sparrow and Makram, 2015; Lepak and Snell, 1999). For this reason,
14 talented employees are distinguished from other employees by the capital they possess,
15 which enables them to add value to their organizations. In similar vein, Huselid et al.
16 (2005) argue that there are often limited financial and managerial resources available to
17 attract, identify, develop and retain top performers. Although this should not be at the
18 expense or neglect of other employees, it is argued that it is both reasonable and essential
19 to invest in scarce developmental assignments and spend resources on the most promising
20 talent (Iles et al., 2010). Similarly, McDonnell (2009) contends that resources are more
21 appropriately utilised if multinational companies (MNCs) focus on those designated as
22 the key talent (high-performing and high-potential). Certainly, it makes economic sense
23 for an organisation to attract and identify only the key talented individuals and in turn
24 provide them with further development opportunities.
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28 Given the reasoning above, there is considerable research focusing on TM as creating
29 value for the business and or competitive advantage (see: Ahammad et al., 2018; Blass,
30 2006; Bjorkman et al. 2007; 2013; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Joyce and Slocum, 2012;
31 Lewis and Heckerman, 2006; Makram and Sparrow, 2014; McDonnell, 2011; Ready and
32 Conger, 2007; Schuler et al., 2011; Schiemann, 2014; Scullion et al., 2010; Son et al.,
33 2018). Most studies of TM focus heavily on organisational gains of increased
34 productivity and competitive advantage which reveals a very limited perspective of TM
35 and the employment relationship. Recent research by Farndale et al (2014) and others has
36 called for a ‘mutual benefits’ perspective to TM. The current paper addressing this call by
37 focusing on ‘talented’ individuals; in particular, exploring how they are managed and
38 how they fare under TM practices.
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42 Talented employees are both an organization’s strategic asset and its manipulable
43 resource that have the potential to contribute to value creation (Sparrow and Makram,
44 2015). Although talent is an individual property, it is acquired by the organisation
45 through the employment relationship. Employers design TM programmes in keeping with
46 their strategic goals and business needs. The approach to TM by MNCs is motivated by a
47 variety of organizational goals, including business control and client demands, moderated
48 by cost considerations (Li and Scullion 2010; Suutari and Brewster, 2001). Through these
49 programmes management seeks to control, restrain, appropriate and cultivate talent for
50 their own purposes, in effect commodifying labour - controlling the factors of production
51 and dictating the terms of the employment relationship for the ‘talented’.
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3 A range of practices exist in firms to identify, manage, develop and in effect control the
4 talented employees, with their application often suffering from a lack of transparency,
5 fairness and openness (Björkman et al., 2013). Individual employees are not perceived as
6 having a vested interest in developing their talent (Blass et al., 2006; Brannen, 2007; The
7 Economist, 2006). In some organisations, those considered to be talented are unaware of
8 this fact, especially if their employers use an opaque approach (Björkman et al., 2013).
9 Sometimes the shroud of opaqueness is driven by the fear of discouraging others and of
10 disrupting the apple cart if the talent pool is relatively small (Blass et al., 2006; Björkman
11 et al., 2013). Often the treatment of these talented individuals leaves much to be desired:
12 in effect the talented are treated as commodities. For example, they may be trained for
13 CEO succession in the interests of the employer while not treated as individuals who
14 need to be supported and nurtured for themselves and for the sake of their potential. This
15 approach to TM is potentially highly exploitative and dishonest as it implies management
16 can and should craft a person's career and future without considering employees'
17 individual responses, needs, and expectations (Blass et al., 2006). It is unsatisfactory,
18 therefore, for research on TM practices to be restricted only to studies on its
19 'effectiveness' (Yan et al., 2002); we also require studies on TM from the perspective of
20 individual high-potential employees who may be suspicious and hesitant about what TM
21 really means for their career, work-life and personhood (Björkman and Mäkela, 2013).
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26 **Explaining Labour Process Theory**

27 Before going any further, it is important to advance the rationale for adopting the LPT as
28 a lens for understanding TM. As noted by Farndale et al., (2014), there are two main
29 stakeholders in TM, the management and the talented employees, with disparate interests,
30 priorities and power. The application of LPT will enable a more rigorous understanding
31 of these two key viewpoints and their converging or diverging agendas and viewpoints.
32 Adopting LPT introduces the voices of the high-potentials into the TM literature as
33 advocated by Thunnissen et al (2013). By viewing TM within a neoliberal labour-capital
34 paradigm, this article argues that TM should be critically evaluated and not merely
35 accepted at face-value. LPT hence provides us with an important framework for the study
36 of TM practices and its impact on the organisation of work and the employment
37 relationship.
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41 Braverman (1973) is the classic expression of LPT thought, building on Marx's insights
42 into labour and employment, and analyzing the impact of advanced industrial capitalism
43 on work and work organisations in twentieth century. Braverman highlighted the
44 degradation of work, asserting that organizational development under capitalism serves to
45 'de-skill' workers and obfuscates the tyranny being imposed on labour. Braverman's
46 (1974) 'labour process' perspective advocates that managerial action/ strategies are
47 determined by capital-labour relations, whereby managers or employers control labour
48 and its unruliness. Within the capitalist economic system skills have two key dimensions
49 – complexity and autonomy - and managers are driven to maximize efficiency and
50 profits, and hence "reduce complexity and autonomy so as to ensure lower costs and
51 greater control" (Adler, 2007: 1314). For Braverman, the methods of control over
52 workers increased over the twentieth century as a consequence of Taylorist systems of
53 scientific management such that it forced the division of labour to the point where
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workers, particularly on assembly lines, became increasingly deskilled and detached from the product they spent their lives working on (Braverman, 1974). Although Braverman mainly focused on industrial work, he also argued that other work, including white-collar jobs, would increasingly become degraded and intensified under Taylorist management systems.

Braverman (1974) focused on the 'labour process' which scripts the relationships between the employer who owns the means of production, and the worker as the possessor of labour power. Through this 'labour process', labour power is transformed into a commodity according to set relations of production (Braverman, 1974; See also Burawoy, 1979). Thompson (1990) outlines the main principles of the LPT in four main points: (a) a focus on the 'function' of labour as capital accumulation in the set context of the workplace or the point of production; (b) an analysis of the role of skills and competencies in this process; (c) a study of the logics of control of the labour process exerted by an employer which transforms the labour power of workers into a commodity or service; and, (d) the unpacking of the social relations between capital and labour as 'structurally antagonistic' which brings into reckoning issues of control, autonomy, consent and resistance at work (see Flecker and Meil, 2010; Jaros, 2005; Newsome, 2010; Smith, 2006, 2015; Smith and Thompson, 1998; Taylor, 2010; Thompson, 1989; Thompson and Vincent, 2010). LPT use the logics of degradation of skills and tasks as a feature of capital accumulation and uses it to study autonomy, control and consent within industrial capitalism (Thompson, 1989; Smith, 2006; Smith and Thompson, 1998; Knights and Willmott, 1990).

Extending Labour Process Theory to Talent Management

LPT as a conceptual body of work is especially well suited to empirical explorations of work degradation and commodification through managerial control, in particular by examining their implications for acerbating workplace contradictions, pressures, anxieties and frustrations.

Firstly, the central premise of LTP is control. Within LPT discourse, one of the key foci is the process by which labour is controlled and degraded under capitalist organisations, through mechanisms which lend themselves to outright as well as more pervasive yet understated ways to maintain the domination of capital over labour. Researchers influenced by Braverman's work note from the mid-1980s a shift in the nature of outright control to soft(er) and sometimes more indirect control (Thompson and Harley, 2007). Indeed, within a knowledge economy and in relation to high potentials' work, the shift in control regime has meant a movement away from traditional Taylorism, Fordism and bureaucracy towards managerial value-based practices to shape employee identities. These softer and more fluid forms of control are associated with wider changes linked with the prevalence of a 'cultural turn' in the workplace (Price et al., 2012). For the talented and skilled professionals, subtle manifestations of control embrace self-directing and self-regulating behaviours including a self-commitment to building competencies (Bjorkman et al., 2013).

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TM practices use different models of control over the skills and competencies of the talented individuals which are more nuanced and normative in the way they operate. With respect to TM practices, softer, more indirect control is exercised by employers including an appeal to professional values, creativity, career, goodwill or trust which all serves to direct the effort of skilled and professional workers (Thompson and Harley, 2007; Smith, 2015). For TM, adopting an elitist or exclusive approach is becoming more acceptable so as to keep in check the investment costs. MNCs justify their focus on a small proportion of high performing employees (see: Iles et al, 2010; McDonnell, 2009; McDonnell et al, 2010). Our empirical research points to a combination of contractual obligations and additional TM development activities with more emphasis on ‘self-regulation’ and ‘self-pressure’ to enact control and monitor the talented workers’ performance and productivity. Such ‘soft controls’ are used to support feedback, ranking, rating and reputational systems which have been referred to as “management by customers” in the case of Uber, call centres and other parts of the gig economy (Fuller and Smith, 1991; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016).

Secondly, ‘talent’ is reduced to being an organizational resource, a commodity which management can utilize by finding, segmenting, nurturing, and placing in pivotal positions (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005) rather than remaining an individual’s possession to be used as desired by the individual for their own satisfaction and career development. Braverman (1974) noted that labour power has become a commodity and his notion of commodification can be extended to the context of TM. By applying Braverman’s commodification argument to TM, talent is no longer organized according to those who sell it but rather those who purchase it. Hassard et al (2011) refer to the notion of investor capitalism which assumes the primacy of shareholder interests over the interests of traditional holders of power in the firm, in this case the high-potential and talented employees. Accordingly how, when and to what purpose will TM be used passes from the hands of those who possess talent, to managers who seek to expand talent’s value in meeting organizational goals (see Farndale et al., 2014). TM’s commodification of talent ensures talent is for sale rather than used by the individual at their will and behest, leading to work intensification and misplaced opportunities for meeting or exceeding potential.

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Thirdly, in line with the central theme of LPT, work is degraded as knowledge and skills are systematically removed from direct producers and are concentrated in the hands of management and their agents; this depletes and debases the quality and experience of work such that workers are condemned to endless routine and impoverished tasks (Braverman, 1974; Buroway, 1979; Jaros, 2005; Smith, 2015). Opportunities for growing, nurturing and maximizing their talent potential become a pipedream, an illusion for most of the talented employees. Farndale et al’s (2014) work points out the disparate interests among employers and employees as key stakeholders in. From an organisational perspective the essence is to increase investment in human talent and leverage employees’ skills and competences in order that organisations can create requisite added value. The high performers and high potential employees are driven by the expectation that the organisation will help them to upgrade their knowledge, skills and abilities in order that they will remain employable in the wider employment market (Holland et al.,

2007). In reality, meeting employees' expectations, needs and potential is an add-on or corollary and not necessarily a priority or focus for the organisation.

Finally, another important facet of LPT is the 'de-skilling' discourse. For Braverman (1974) a central element of the degradation of work is its 'de-skilling' under advanced capitalist employment conditions. But, unlike Braverman's labourers, the talented employee is not one without skill. In fact, 'the talented' are likely to be – at least rhetorically - high-end 'knowledge workers', 'thought leaders' or 'symbolic analysts' (McCann, 2018: 97). Drucker's (1998), 'gold-collar' workers are characterized as having high-level specialist skills to resolve issues and problems critical to an organization's sustainability and competitive advantage. 'The fundamental characteristic with these workers is that they own the means of production in the form of knowledge and have the ability with these specialist skills to attract large rewards' (Holland et al., 2007: 250). However, the conceptualisation of employees as embodying a set of skills which can be 'rented out' to employers (Ehrenberg and Smith, 2012) means that, labour market permitting, employees can withdraw their skills when they perceive that they are not getting a fair deal from the employment relationship. Securing the commitment of these employees through TM practices, therefore, becomes even more important because these employees are not just mobile but also career-minded and can assert themselves by moving employers or threatening to do so unless changes are made.

To what extent is this picture accurate? How much labour power does 'talent' really possess? In this paper, we argue than an application of the critical lenses of LPT - specifically its themes of control, work intensification, illusion of opportunity and deskilling - to 'talent' work, we are able to better analyze the rifts and dichotomies in the workplace and to better understand how white-collar 'knowledge workers' are far from exempt from exposure to restrictive, dishonest and degrading employment conditions.

Research Design and Methods

From an employer-employee perspective, an exploratory approach was taken in order to establish experiences of both management and high potential employees. Data were collected in three European MNCs based in Finland, United Kingdom and Germany. As regards sampling of respondents, it was very important to select the most relevant informants from the chosen organisations who could share meaningful information regarding the research objectives. Purposive sampling (non-probability sampling) was used (Saunders et al., 2016). Following the structure of talent pools within the case study firms, the management responsible for designing and implementing TM initiatives and employees involved in the practices in each case study organisation were identified. The HR departments in conjunction with line managers played an important role in identifying informants. For purposes of anonymity, fictional names have been used for all companies and informants. The three informant organisations have identified TM as a strategic imperative and have been running TM initiatives for at least five years. They also have mature TM structures and systems, providing fertile material around which to conduct research. The following table gives a summary of the informants.

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Use of narratives was considered appropriate in gaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences of those involved in TM as they preserve meaning and convey individuals' experiences within a given context. Use of narratives enables understanding of experiences over a long period of time both within and between individuals (McAlpine 2016). Narrative research presents a novel approach to exploring TM because it presents a plausible and rich presentation of lived experiences. According to Elliott (2005: 3), 'a narrative can be understood to organise a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole'. In addition, Hinchman and Hinchman (1997: xvi) note that narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and people's experiences of it. In the light of an analytical study of TM and the employment relationship which are influenced by past experiences and organisational contexts, it is important to focus on the stories, the logic and sequence in which they are told by the informants in order to gain an understanding of how to interpret their experiences.

Although Labov and Waletzky (1997) outline six elements of narratives, Elliot (2005) notes that the key thing is to be able to establish what actually happened and the meaning of the story. This is precisely the approach taken in the analysis of narratives in this research. Thus, the data analysis stage offered an opportunity to reflect and engage with each different situation represented in the narratives emerging from the case studies. Reading, reflecting and writing notes was thus an important step to understanding the prevailing TM situation in each organisation. Reflection was vital in order to construct the experiences of the management and talented employees. Another important stage in the data analysis process was contextualising, categorising and comparing the information from different sources, which involved studying talented employees' experiences of TM practices, which necessitated exploring their histories through their narratives.

Research Findings

The study set out to explore ways in which high-potential employees involved in TM may experience a degradation of their employment relationship. This section presents qualitative data findings, examining the managerial conceptualisation of TM across the three case companies. Thereafter, managerial and high-potentials' experiences of TM are explored within the framework of LPT analysis. Finally, a summary of key findings from the case studies are presented.

Managerial conceptualisation of TM

The opening section explores the managerial conceptualisation of TM as manifested in the interview data. In Company A, conceptualisation of TM appears to be influenced by an egalitarian culture that is often associated with the Nordic culture of the company's national origin. Here, the use of the term 'talent' had some negative connotations. As a

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3 result, the terminology of ‘competence development’ and ‘competence management’ was
4 preferred to the term TM. As a senior HR manager explains:

5 And maybe the reason for that is that we prefer talking about competencies and
6 competence management instead of TM and maybe it’s connected to the sort of
7 values and mental picture or image which the word ‘talent’, as we understand it,
8 has... (Senior HR manager, Finland)
9

10 Although management claims that it wants to be seen to treat every employee equally,
11 they have a designated competence development programme akin to TM including all
12 associated features of an exclusive approach. The competence development programs are
13 closely linked to business strategy and are aimed at developing competences of strategic
14 importance.
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17 In Company B and Company C, TM at the corporate level is regarded as the process to
18 identify and accelerate the development of high-potential individuals. This is illustrated
19 in the statements below:

20 ...so, for me it’s [TM] all about identifying those people that we think have got
21 the potential to become partners, and in making sure that we nurture them and
22 give them the very best client experiences that we can do, that will mean when
23 they become partners they have a greater breadth of experience. (Senior HR
24 manager, Company B)
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26
27 TM is a structured approach to identifying and developing the people who have
28 the potential to become future leaders of various functions within the organisation
29 in the future (Senior HR Manager, Company C)
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32 In this regard, TM is focused on the white-collar and professional workers; individual
33 employees with demonstrable ability and potential to become leaders. To these
34 organisations, TM is a means of accelerating the development of the leadership
35 competences needed to execute business strategy in a medium to long-term spectrum.
36 TM is a managerial strategy that aims to create a new employment relationship with the
37 talented. In sustaining this new employment relationship, the organisation justifies TM as
38 a managerial strategy for improving organisational efficiency and employee commitment.
39 Company C explicitly expressed the need for efficiency and continuity in the projects as
40 evident in the statement below:
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43 15-17 years is an average length of time we expect employees to stay in our
44 company. So, we're talking about long-term things. If you are building a power
45 plant, if you're talking about coal you need six to eight years... if you are talking
46 about nuclear, eight to 12 years from the first meeting until the power plant is
47 delivering energy. So, we are always talking about long-term strategies and long-
48 term development, (Vice-President of Employer Branding, Germany, Company
49 C)
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54 Company C makes a deliberate investment in TM practices, developing high-potential
55 employees, which brings forth benefits by servicing their long-term projects of building
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3 power plants and delivering energy to their end customers. High-potential employees in
4 turn are expected to feel valued as the company shows an interest in not only helping
5 them develop competences, but also giving them a chance to develop a leadership career.
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8 In Company B, an important aspect of this talent development process is that it is an
9 ongoing process with shared responsibility between management and individual high-
10 potentials. Following nomination and induction, high-potentials have to construct a
11 personal development plan (PDP), with the support of their line managers, counselling
12 partners, coaches, learning and development and the human resources staff. Emphasis is
13 placed on the individual's ability to be proactive in managing his or her development as
14 shown from this line manager's statement:
15

16 ...this is a programme that requires a commitment from you, this doesn't mean
17 you need it; you still need to put in the effort as you have been to get to this stage.
18 All this programme does is creating opportunities for you to go further... they're
19 not there to make you a leader without you trying... (Line manager, Company B)
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22 In this context, the organisation provides the tools and support for high-potentials'
23 development. High-potentials work on live projects as a means of developing their
24 competences. The PDPs can be seen as a form of management structure or part of an HR
25 strategy to control and monitor the behavior and development of the talented employees
26 in order to elicit better performance and organisational productivity as the end product of
27 the labour process.
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29 **Employee experiences of TM**

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31 We now turn to exploring TM from the point of view of employees. First, in all cases,
32 the narratives indicate a certain lack of clarity in the objectives of the TM programs.
33 High-potentials expressed an expectation of a clear connection between TM activities and
34 their own career paths. Undoubtedly, much as they regard the programme to be a form of
35 recognition, high-potentials would like to know how the work they are doing will pay off
36 in terms of rewarding their own career pathways. This point was expressed by the high-
37 potential respondents as below:
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40 ...I would have liked to see it made a little bit clearer as to the impact the course
41 would have on my career path, ... I would like to have known more at the outset
42 what this physically and actually means for my career... does it mean that there is
43 a greater chance that I will be made a partner, or is there any chance that I will be
44 fast tracked (High-potential, UK)?
45

46 I think it's very rewarding being nominated... but at some point, it would be good
47 to know that all this work that you are doing and all this additional time that you
48 are investing... what it means to you at the end of the day. I think that is the piece
49 that is missing (High-potential, UK).
50
51

52 I'm not sure what they were aiming for with the whole thing, it wasn't maybe that
53 clear... we were supposed to be able to make our own conclusions about the
54 whole programme (Junior Managers' programme participant, Finland).
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3 Of course, if the goals are set more clearly, I think it works both ways, then
4 whoever takes part in the course knows it better and maybe then can choose and
5 say that this is something I want to be or do. (Junior Managers' programme
6 participant, Germany)
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8
9 Employees thus described a frustrating absence of clear objectives and a need for clarity
10 around the purpose and meaning of TM practices. This would enable employees to make
11 an informed choice about opportunities which they perceive as being beneficial for their
12 development needs. Rather, managerial influence is described in terms of a perceived
13 increase in organizational control over the outcomes of TM as a managerial strategy. If
14 the objectives of the development opportunities are not clarified for the participants, they
15 will use their own interpretations of TM initiatives, asking the question 'what is in it for
16 me?' thereby forming an understanding of what TM is and how it may relate to their
17 career and well-being in the workplace.
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19

20 We can see this dynamic in one narrative from a high potential employee in Company C:
21

22 My managers did not specifically discuss with me the reasons why I was
23 nominated to be part of the talent pool. But I suppose it was implied ...my
24 managers perhaps assumed that I knew why I was nominated... It was only after
25 going through the global assessment that I had a discussion with my manager. At
26 first when I was told about the TM programme I thought it was just another HR
27 thing, that it would not lead to anything. However, I have had a positive
28 experience, I feel more supported with my development than anticipated
29
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31 The employee perception that TM is just a managerial initiative or just another HR
32 initiative indicates that high-potentials have a vested interest in their own development.
33 Their performance is outcome driven; they are not only interested in giving a service to
34 the organisation, but also meeting their expectations and opportunities for promotion and
35 for career development.
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38
39 Second, there was considerable evidence to suggest that TM practices lead to work
40 intensification. There is evidence in Company B and C to show that high potential
41 employees deem TM activities as an additional responsibility which requires them to put
42 more time aside from their day to day duties. Indeed, there was evidence to suggest that
43 high-potentials are stretched as regards the time they have to devote to their contracted
44 duties and TM activities. This message comes across clearly in the statements below:
45

46 There is an expectation about the amount of time... because really by
47 definition, the people who are in the talent pool are generally those who
48 are the busiest people in the business...I think really it is a must that you
49 end up having more client work than your colleagues and then there is the
50 expectation of having sufficient time to devote to the high-potentials'
51 programme on top (High Potential, UK, Company B)
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54and something that can impact talented individuals is that work always
55 finds its way to you as people know that you will get the job done. So,
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3 doing all of that and not necessarily being freed up to do the work for the
4 high-potentials' programme can present a problem... (High-potential, UK,
5 Company B)
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8 The statements attest work overload and pressures, time constraints to complete tasks and
9 possibly conflicting obligations. In Company B and C, high-potentials are given
10 opportunities to be mentored by senior managers as well as working on client projects
11 which help them develop a considerable breadth of experience within a set period of
12 time. Indeed, management expects high-potentials to move outside their comfort zones
13 by engaging in live projects and other development activities which provide the greatest
14 stretch for their talent. Although high potentials work on live projects, they are not
15 actually remunerated or rewarded for doing this additional work. Management believes
16 that working on live projects presents a development opportunity which is compensation
17 enough. The following evidence from a high potential employee based in Germany
18 working for Company C captures the employee frustration around this:
19
20

21 ...I would finally like to join the senior management pool, and not only the
22 potential pool, obviously, and it is dragging along for me. This is slightly
23 frustrating; at the moment I'm working hard... but I'm not rewarded for what I'm
24 doing [TM activities].
25
26

27 The differences between management intentions and the experiences of the employees
28 signify conflicts of interest in the labour process. On the one hand, management's interest
29 is in developing future leaders for the purpose of increasing production, enhancing profits
30 and creating sustainability for the business. On the other hand, much as high-potential
31 employees have a vested interest in becoming future leaders, there are un-met, perhaps
32 even un-said, interests, expectations and needs about rewards and financial compensation
33 for the extra responsibilities that come with involvement in TM practices. For example,
34 in the words of a high-potential employee based in the UK:
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37 ... I struggle sometimes to strike a balance between my job (what I'm employed to
38 do) and the TM activities. I feel my main duty is first to carry out the duties
39 within my role and then use my spare time to attend to the TM activities...I
40 wonder how others do it (High potential, UK, Company C).
41
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43 Further examination of high-potentials' experiences reveals that they feel overworked in
44 their jobs. The current approach to TM implies that employees must do considerably
45 more in order for TM to create value for the company. Without time to reflect on their
46 development plans or the resources to engage with it in other meaningful ways, high-
47 potentials' PDPs may turn out to be a ritual practiced only for the sake of fulfilling the
48 requirements of the TM programme.
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51 Clearly, high-potential employees' experience conflicting obligations and ambitious
52 targets between the jobs they are paid to do and the development activities in Company B
53 and C. Employees start to question whether their time is well spent. In all of the three
54 companies, TM is structured as an additional opportunity made available to a selected
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3 few high-potentials. For example, in Company B, the high-potentials' programme is
4 structured as an additional responsibility which requires talented employees to put more
5 time aside from their day to day duties. Similarly, one of the high-potential employees in
6 Company C noted that she was struggling to strike a balance between the job which she is
7 paid for and TM activities. This presents evidence of work intensification in addition to
8 the practice of using free labour 'volunteered' by the high potentials engaged in TM
9 practices.
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11
12 TM activities result in work intensification for the talented while showing a lack of
13 consideration towards issues such as work-life balance and personal development. The
14 approach may defeat the ultimate aim of development through the use of PDPs which
15 require time for reflection. In effect, the approach may signify a form of value extraction
16 rather than value creation.
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19 Third, TM is experienced as being process oriented. For example, in Company B and C
20 where TM systems are process-oriented, one of the high-potential employees based in the
21 UK Company B described being part of the talent pool as 'process-oriented and full of
22 activities'. Progression takes longer than anticipated as there are limited senior leadership
23 positions available. The management would like to ensure that high-potential employees
24 develop a considerable breadth of experience. Conversely, high-potential employees
25 perceive management's stringency over promotions as an impediment to their
26 progression to senior management positions. Some high-potentials stated that:
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30 ...I probably think it is for a good reason, but I think maybe you overshoot the
31 target. I think, apart from myself, there are many talented people, but they are
32 held back because the group can only take a certain number of senior managers...
33 In times when the economy is weak of course these hurdles are enforced ... so it is
34 also a kind of formal entry barrier (High-potential employee, Germany- Company
35 C)
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38 ...In my case, I have a senior management position waiting for me, basically, but
39 still I have to go through these formal hurdles, and it just takes time... An example
40 from this week, the next position I will take has to be re-graded or graded, and
41 there are grading committees for that and the grading committee was just
42 cancelled, so it will not happen... I will have to wait again. (High-potential
43 employee, Germany- Company C)
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45
46 Talented employees' narratives repeatedly reveal the managerial control systems inherent
47 in TM practices, designed to ensure efficiency in competence and talent development.
48 Management put measures and activities in place making it very difficult for high-
49 potential employees to reach senior positions of their companies. More attention is paid
50 to adhering to the structured approach than to the specific circumstances of employees.
51 From the management perspective, being in a talent pool does not necessarily guarantee
52 the high-potential employees' progression to senior management.
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3 Indeed, management often noted that it would like to see significant changes in terms of
4 the development of the identified competences. In Company C, one of the high-potential
5 employees had senior management experience before joining the company. However, this
6 individual was told that he too had to go through all the formal procedures before he
7 could be promoted to a senior management position. This high-potential employee
8 described the process frustrating as it was dragging along with no end in sight. Further,
9 the absence of any guarantee for promotion in the sample organisations, coupled with so
10 much emphasis on the procedural details in promotion to senior ranks of management,
11 there was a feeling of disappointment and frustration. For employees, TM programmes in
12 reality presented an ‘illusion’ of opportunity rather than a fast track to promotion and
13 progression.
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17 The above are significant findings which relate to TM and the employment relationship
18 within a neoliberal context and can be summarized as follows: Firstly, there is evidence
19 to suggest that TM is a mechanism for converting labour power into profitable work.
20 Employers design TM programmes which suit their strategic goals and business needs
21 while career development is merely a byproduct. Therefore, expert labour is
22 commoditized. Management in the three companies seeks to identify, develop and retain
23 high-potential individuals who have the talent necessary to lead the operations and ensure
24 sustainability of their businesses.
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27 Secondly, the managerial conceptualization of TM appears to be problematic in that high
28 potentials find the objectives ambiguous. Talent management seems to offer merely an
29 illusion of opportunity to high potential employees. This leads to frustration among high
30 potentials as they have a vested interest in developing their careers and expectations of
31 fast-track promotion. Thirdly, findings indicate that involvement in TM activities is an
32 extra work burden that goes unrewarded, in addition to existing, very demanding
33 contractual obligations. This indicates work intensification and exploitation of labour. As
34 high-potential employees struggle to meet targets in both contractual obligations and TM
35 activities, it would appear that the company uses a value maximisation approach to
36 developing talent which may be counterproductive to espoused TM processes and goals.
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40 **Discussion and Conclusion**

41 This paper aimed to empirically examine the experiences of managers and employees
42 involved in TM practices in order to establish the ways in which TM might impose
43 structures on high-performing ‘talent’ that exposes them to a degradation of the
44 employment relationship. TM practices are described by managerialist literature as
45 priority practices widely used by many organizations for the development of high-
46 potential employees (Hartmann et al., 2010; Khoreva and Vaiman, 2015; Thunnissen,
47 2016). The installation of TM practices is described as ‘best practice’ and essential for all
48 establishments which seek success through understanding the (assumed) links between
49 the ways that talent is managed and organisational performance (Bjorkman et al., 2007;
50 Ready and Conger, 2007).
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54 The approach taken by the three firms has resonance to strategic HRM literature, where it
55 is argued that resources and capabilities that underpin an organisation’s competitive
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3 advantage are directly tied to the capabilities of talented individuals who make up the
4 human capital pool (Cheese et al., 2008). TM focuses on developing high-potential
5 individuals within the sample organisations. In this context, the organisations' investment
6 decisions are influenced by the economic gains that are associated with investing money
7 where it has the most impact, that is, high-potential employees as opposed to embracing
8 the 'everyone mantra' (Warren, 2006).
9

10
11 In answering the question of where degradation of the employment relationship might
12 occur for talented employees, three key themes emerge. Firstly, as the focus is
13 organisational gains, that is, investment in high potential for the purpose of increasing
14 productivity and gaining a competitive position in the market place, it appears there is not
15 much focus on achieving a mutual benefits approach in the labour process. The
16 managerial conceptualisation of TM implies firms' ownership and management of the
17 talent. From the LPT perspective, control of the factors of production including labour
18 (Braverman, 1974; Hassard et al 2011; Thompson, 1989; Smith, 2006) lay in the hands of
19 the owners – in the case of TM, this is the organisation and its senior executives.
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23 Clearly, TM is a managerial practice rooted in strategic HRM. It is part of the human
24 resource (HR) strategies which represent the configurations of decisions management use
25 in relation to how they design work and develop, appraise, motivate and control workers.
26 As attested in the high-potentials' narratives, TM is aimed at securing employee
27 commitment as well as achieving high levels of labour productivity and a corresponding
28 level of profitability. As a result, the management indirectly controls high-potential
29 employees' behaviour through monitoring of levels of achievement in terms of
30 competence development and promotion as well as the use of unfruitful PDP processes.
31 This aspect of controlling employee behaviour as a basis for distinguishing different HR
32 strategies resonates with the study of the labour process by industrial sociologists such as
33 Braverman. As aptly noted by Thompson and Harley (2007), from the perspective of
34 LPT there is indeed a shift from outright control to soft(er) and sometimes more indirect
35 control in the labour process as evident in the research narratives.
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39 Emerging from TM and managerial discourses are the characteristics of talent as human
40 capital which must be further developed in order to enhance the efficiency and
41 competitive position of the organisation. We contend that such conceptualisation and
42 treatment of high-potential employees commodifies these highly skilled employees and,
43 in subtle ways, controls their behavior in the workplace. The introduction of competency
44 frameworks for talent assessment and development introduces structures that control the
45 behaviour of talented employees. In addition, the label of 'talented' becomes a powerful
46 mechanism of control over the construction of these workers' identities and the nature of
47 their work. 'The term talent provides an added meaning of preciousness and distinct
48 value to a human resource that should be invested in, cared for, shaped and developed -
49 but certainly not taken for granted or squandered' (Vaiman and Vance, 2008: 5).
50 However, in effect, this added meaning of preciousness created contradictions and
51 tensions among white-collar and professional workers. On one hand they were told of
52 their value by way of inclusion in TM projects and nomenclature. On the other, the very
53 same TM mechanisms subjected them to pernicious forms of organizational control
54 featuring work intensification, unfair rewards and reduced promotion prospects.
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4 Secondly, in keeping with the findings of many workplace studies of the labour process,
5 work intensification was highly evident. According to Bamberger et al. (2015), work
6 intensification is a popular management strategy to increase productivity, but at the
7 possible expense of employee mental stress. Applying LPT concepts to TM reveals that
8 talented employees experience work intensification, for example, they work on live
9 projects while also attending to their contractual obligations. The talented employees
10 experience work intensification owing to development opportunities which are structured
11 as additional job roles. Indeed, work intensification or heavier workload demands has
12 been reported in studies focusing on junior and middle managers such as Farrell and
13 Morris (2010); Hassard et al (2009); McCann et al (2008). These studies also point to the
14 impact on the roles and behaviour of these managers as being affected markedly by
15 increased spans of control (see Hassard et al 2011). This approach to TM studied in the
16 present paper seems to strongly suggest a similar degradation of the employment
17 relationship between organisations and their talented employees.
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22 Whilst focusing mainly on industrial workers, Braverman (1974) also contended that
23 other forms of work would increasingly become degraded and intensified under Taylorist
24 management systems. Although there has been a shift away from traditional Taylorism,
25 Fordism and bureaucracy towards value-based and cultural practices to shape employee
26 identities, work intensification still exists in various forms. For the talented employees,
27 their 'talent' label exposes them to exploitation; by definition, they get more work done
28 owing to their competencies and new identity in the labour process. Strategic control
29 resulting from the ability of these talented employees to generate value through human
30 capital leads to work intensification.
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33 The findings indicate an exploitation of high-value labour because of high potentials'
34 engagement in extra development activities which are experienced as additional job roles
35 without additional pay or greater likelihood of promotion. Although high potentials spend
36 considerable time working on live projects as a means of developing their competences,
37 there were no financial rewards. Talented employees know their worth in the labour
38 market (Bjorkman et al., 2013), they (potentially) own the means of production in the
39 form of knowledge and (supposedly) have the ability with these specialist skills to attract
40 large rewards (Holland et al., 2007: 250). However, workers in the capitalist system are
41 always exposed to the danger of having their surplus labour expropriated and exploited
42 by employers (Fairlamb, 1996). Managerial regimes enacting TM exploit the labour value
43 of high potentials in their pursuit of profit maximisation while limited or zero financial
44 rewards are attached to the 'stretch' targets given to the 'talent'.
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48 Thirdly, talented employees experience an illusion of career opportunity. In the short-
49 term, high-potentials' efforts are recognised but, as revealed in the findings, there are
50 questions as to whether the promised opportunities of promotion will be achieved. Whilst
51 having the willingness to support the goals of the organisation, individuals also have
52 personal interests (Farndale et al., 2014; Kulvisaechana, 2006). Individuals engage in a
53 calculative process of what value TM might have for them, which leads to a questioning
54 of TM's objectives and essence. The findings indicate that high-potential individuals
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3 want their careers to be developed within the context of their contractual roles and the
4 TM initiatives. This line of thought corresponds with the work of Woodruffe (1999) and
5 Holland et al., (2007), who concede that there is a tacit understanding among high
6 potential employees that in exchange for their effort and commitment the company will
7 support them in developing their potential and advancing their careers.
8
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10 However talented employees who are career minded often become frustrated by the
11 attenuation of their prospects for upwards progression. Indeed, it appears that the
12 corporate world of contemporary neoliberalism has created a new regime with more
13 stringent limits on workers' rights, prospects and benefits (see: Livingston, 2016). Owing
14 to the way management conceptualises and operationalises TM, employees can easily get
15 frustrated and demotivated. If individuals' desired outcomes are unavailable they may
16 lose commitment to TM activities and the firm. Gratton and Ghoshal (2003) note that the
17 highly talented are investors of their own human capital, they can rent their skills to an
18 organisation in tight labour market conditions. Employee commitment to TM activities
19 may depend on how the organisation reciprocates to high potentials' desired outcomes,
20 which, in most cases, will relate to career development (see Collings and Mellahi, 2009;
21 Garavan, Morley, Gunnigle and Collins, 2001; Gratton and Ghoshal, 2003; Hiltrop, 1999;
22 Holland et al., 2007). However, the perceived expectations and rewards of engaging in
23 TM activities appear to be illusory and thus may lead to a weaker bond in the
24 employment relationship.
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28 In the current scenario it would appear that high-potentials' 'talent' is largely under the
29 control of management. As observed by Lawler (2008: 1), 'rather than encouraging
30 people to be important contributors, most of the systems in organisations are designed to
31 control their behaviour'. In this regard, TM can be seen as a means for management to
32 control the talent of the high-potential employees for the purpose of gaining competitive
33 advantage. Guest (2006: 6) notes that 'for organisations adopting a hard approach to
34 HRM, the interests of workers and their well-being are of no significance in themselves'.
35 However, there is a limit to which an organisation can control high potential individuals'
36 talent. The organisation can easily lose control of talented individuals if they disregard
37 employees' interests. Even given the high degree of control over talent that management
38 desire to extend, high potential employees to a greater or lesser degree do still 'own' the
39 means of production; their expert abilities, skills and analytical capacity. If such
40 employees are not treated well they are likely to withdraw their labour as long as labour
41 market conditions permit.
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45 This leads to a final point about abilities and skills. Another central characteristic of LPT
46 is de-skilling. As noted above, de-skilling is not directly apparent in TM. However, the
47 presence of specialist skills among talented employees does not necessarily moderate the
48 "unequal distribution of power over work in the capitalist workplace" (Ackroyd 2009:
49 265). Talent work rather than being "ever safer, cleaner and more automated" is "actually
50 less skilled, more controlled, and more intensive" (Smith, 2015: 222). Structured
51 antagonism is a fundamental feature of the capitalist mode of organization (Delbridge and
52 Keenoy, 2010: 802). Competitive market relations lead to structured antagonism because
53 on one side employers compete for employees resonating their individualist orientations,
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3 whereas on the other employees seek to maximise their opportunities and rewards from
4 employers. Employers are simultaneously competing with others in product and service
5 markets and are under pressure to minimise labour costs in order to sustain and improve
6 profits or other benefits (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010). Structured antagonism provokes
7 conflicts of interests between the employer and the employee.
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10 Owing to the way TM activities are conceptualized, high potentials' voices as regards
11 their experiences appear to be silenced. Attested examples from the three companies
12 show that employees' interests are secondary in the calculation of managers and that
13 there is a plurality of interests because talented employees have their own goals.
14 Although there are studies which have looked at the relationship between high potential
15 and employee development (Khoreva et al., 2017), further empirical work across a wider
16 range of organisations is required if we are to better understand the complex and
17 contradictory nature of TM. Further research is also needed to explore employee voice
18 and the role of unions in TM programmes. While Swailes (2013) has looked at ethics in
19 TM, there is need for research into how TM relates to issues of power, class and gender.
20 While there is agreement in some of the literature that effective TM practice is likely to
21 be associated with positive high-potential employees' attitudes (Chang, 2005), the causal
22 chain between high potential commitment and development through TM is more complex
23 than is often portrayed since high-potential employees are likely to perceive, value and
24 react to TM practices differently (see Khoreva et al., 2017) – indeed often skeptically and
25 critically. Human 'talent' is commoditised as it is utilised by management as any other
26 organisational resource rather than being a possession of individuals with autonomy,
27 discretion and career aspirations. LPT literature has a long history of exposing such
28 contradictions in workplaces and the conflict between management and labour in all its
29 forms under industrial capitalism. Further exploration is required as regards the
30 managerial conceptualisation of TM and how this in turn impacts on the commitment,
31 employment and wellbeing of high-potential employees.
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Appendices

Table 1: Informants' background

Company A	Informant's position	Number of participants
	HR Vice-President	One
	Talent Review Committee member	One
	Line Managers	Two
	Employees involved in TM initiatives	Thirteen
Company B		
	HR Senior Manager	One
	Talent Coach	Two
	Line Managers	Two
	Employees involved in TM initiatives	Five
Company C		
	Vice-President Employer Branding	One
	HR Senior Manager	One
	Line Managers	Two
	High-potentials	Three