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Talent Development in China: Human resource managers' perception of the value of the MBA

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ABSTRACT

As the topic of Talent Development (TD) gets more research attention in Western business, the need for understanding the nature and the scope of TD activities in an Eastern business context increases. This study investigated the perceptions of HR managers in China of the value of different TD practices, with specific attention to the MBA. This qualitative research involved sixteen interviews with HR managers in China. A five-dimension human capital model was adopted to guide the evaluation of the perceptions. The findings revealed a lack of clarity in defining 'talent' in all sample organizations and the use of a variety of TD practices. The findings also indicated perceptions that the MBA improved the value of all five human capital dimensions of the human capital model used in the study. Both national and institutional culture were considered to have influenced TD implementation as well as the perceived value of MBA by HR managers. This study concludes with implications for future research on and practice of TD activities.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China has become a global powerhouse with economic and political influences in the world economy (Liu & Pearson, 2014; Wang-Cowham, 2011). As a result of its rapid economic growth during the last three decades, China is now facing a looming shortage of homegrown Talent¹ (Bambacas & Kulik, 2013; Cai, Klyushina, & Timlon, 2009; Zhou, Liu, & Hong, 2012). The ability of China to maintain a rapidly growing economy, in the long run, will depend on filling its need for Talent (Joshua, 2015; Zuo, 2002). Thus, Talent development (TD) is of great and fundamental importance to the long-term viability and growth of Chinese organizations. This study aims to investigate the perceived value of different TD practices in China, with specific attention to the MBA program.

Talent development (TD) refers to the process of increasing the knowledge, skill, and abilities of employees. TD is a component of the broader aspect of talent management which refers to how organizations attract, select, develop and manage talent employees in an integrated and strategic way (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) and is linked to the broader Human Resource Management (HRM) literature.

The current literature on TD is still relatively scant and fragmented (Garavan, Carbery, & Rock, 2012; Latukha, 2018; Mehdiabadi & Li, 2016). Moreover, research to comprehensively understand the formidable challenges to implement TD in organizations has mostly been in a Western, especially European, context, with relatively fewer studies, conducted in an Eastern context (Liu & Pearson, 2014; Rezaei & Beylerlein, 2018).

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¹ The word of talent has ambiguous definitions (i.e., a group of people or abilities and skills, etc.). In this paper, 'Talent' (with a capital letter) refers to a group of employees with high performance or high potential in an organization.

The lack of research on TD in China is becoming more problematic as developing and managing Talent is increasingly more challenging and critical for organizations in China. A number of TD practices have been adopted by Chinese organizations in recent years, including leadership development programs, on-the-job training, and formal educational programs (Cai et al., 2009; Warner, 2011). Included among these formal education programs is sponsoring and supporting employees to complete the Masters of Business Administration degree (MBA). As a result, the MBA has become the most popular and prestigious managerial qualification in China (Chen & Yang, 2010; Crotty & Soule, 1997; Daily, 2015; Ma & Trigo, 2011; Tay, 2001; Wilkins, He, Zhu, & Elmoshrib, 2018) and many have argued that it has had a great impact on the building of the Chinese market economy and local management skills (CNMESC, 2012; Chen & Yang, 2010; Zhao, 1997).

However, the effectiveness of MBA programs in improving the management of Chinese businesses has become a primary concern to many education and management researchers and practitioners (Chen & Yang, 2010; Gao, Arnulf, & Henning, 2011; Lamb & Currie, 2011; Wilkins et al., 2018; Yan & Mak, 2010). The majority of previous studies on the MBA have focused mostly on the value of MBA program to its graduates rather than the firms that employ them. To date, there is no research has conducted discussing how the MBA contribute to TD in China from HR managers' perspective.

The broad purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of HR managers of the value of different TD practices with Chinese firms, with specific attention to the perceived value of the MBA as a TD practice. Additionally, the research explored whether Chinese national culture and institutional culture characteristics influenced HR managers' perceptions. The following specific research questions about Chinese HR managers' perceptions were addressed in this study:

1. How is 'Talent' defined and identified?
2. What is perceived as the most effective TD practice to develop Talent?
3. What are the perceived benefits/value gained from completing an MBA program?
4. Are the perceptions of HR managers about TD and the value of the MBA program influenced by Chinese culture characteristics or institutional culture characteristics?

While practitioners and consultants claimed that TD was of growing importance to organizations in China, academic research on this topic has been developing at a much slower rate (Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010; Liu & Pearson, 2014). This study is one of the first attempts to investigate how HR managers in China perceived TD practices generally as well as the specific value of the MBA as a TD practice. This research, therefore, makes contributions to the literature of TD and HRD (Human Resource Development) practices in China by broadening understanding about HR managers' perceptions of various TD practices and the role of the MBA among these practices. This study also has practical implications to support the effective redesign of future TD program in China, as well as to provide insights for MBA providers to reorganize the curriculum for local Chinese candidates.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of talent and talent development

A review of the literature on TD indicates that there is no single or universal contemporary definition of 'Talent' (Garavan et al., 2012; Mehdiabadi & Li, 2016; Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruyrtier, 2013). As some researchers argue, 'Talent' is often a taken-for-granted concept and it can mean whatever a business leader or writer wants it to mean (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013).

To offer an in-depth review of the Talent concept within the specific context of the world of work, Megers and Woerkom (2014) developed a model underlying Talent philosophies (see Fig. 1) based on two dimensions, exclusive vs. inclusive (whether practices are focused or available to all employees) and stable vs. developable (whether abilities and skills are seen as unchangeable or can be developed). The combination of these two dimensions leads to four distinct talent philosophies with implications for how organizations relate to the development of their Talent. The first philosophical category considers 'talent' to be exclusive and stable: thus talent is said to reside among a small group of employees. From this philosophical position, organizations should seek to identify, attract and retain these talented individuals to ensure sustainable competitive advantage. The second philosophical category considers 'talent' to be exclusive and developable. Under this philosophy, talent is rare but is often latent and can only be unveiled through development. Thus organizations following this approach would limit their TD practices to individuals with potential. The third philosophical category refers to 'talent' as inclusive and stable. This perspective assumes talent potentially resides in every individual; i.e., everybody has talent in some way but is not particularly able to be developed. Thus HR practitioners would seek to identify individual's talents and use these talents by matching them with job positions (Dries, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Iles et al., 2010). The fourth philosophical category considers 'talent' to be inclusive and developable. This perspective supports the view that 'everyone can become excellent in almost any domain and experts are always made, not born' (Echols, 2007). HR practitioners under this philosophy put a strong focus on the T&D of all employees and encourage their personal growth (Megers & Woerkom, 2014).

However, criticism relates to each of these four approaches toward their conceptualization of talent. Taking an 'exclusive' perspective - identifying an elite subset of the organization as talent - can damage organizational morale, embittering loyal employees and causing resentment among peers (Garrow & Hirsh, 2008; Malik & Singh, 2014). Taking an inclusive perspective makes the differentiation between TD and HRD more difficult and create unnecessarily high HR costs (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Critics of the development approach argue that differential treatment of employees based on their differential talent characteristics can create a 'continuous tournament' of competency or skills development (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Finally, the assumption that talented

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