



'High potential' programs: Let's hear it for 'B' players



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ABSTRACT

Organizations implement 'high potential' (HiPo) programs to identify, develop and retain their most talented employees (also known as 'A' players). However, there is still not much known on how these programs affect other employees (i.e., 'B' players) who are not included. Drawing on Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) framework on the strength of HRM system and attribution theory, we theoretically examine the impact of HiPo programs on 'B' players' attitudes and behaviours. Specifically, we propose that 'B' players use various information and contextual cues to make attributions about these programs. We also propose that trust moderates the relationship between various meta-features of HiPo programs and 'B' players' perceptions about these programs. Further, we examine the role of an employee's motivation profile (i.e., achievement motivation and power motivation) in forming his/her attributions about these programs, which then affects his/her commitment and organizational citizenship behaviours. Future research directions and practical implications are presented.

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1. Introduction

While the term 'war for talent' was first coined by McKinsey and Co. in 1997 (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001), the recent economic recession and labour shortages have resulted in a *true* war for talent among companies. This has generated new ways of thinking about employees' contributions, and subsequently, new ways of managing employees at all organizational levels (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). It is estimated that between 40 and 60% of global companies have 'high potential' (HiPo) programs in place for the management of their most talented employees, in other words 'A' players, often referred to as high potential employees (Pepermans, Vloeberghs, & Perkasas, 2003; Silzer & Church, 2010; Slan-Jerusalim & Hausdorf, 2007). 'A' players¹ are perceived to possess skills and abilities necessary for advancement in the organization, and they are ranked at the top in terms of performance and competencies (Cappelli, 2008; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Hence, HiPo programs are designed and implemented by organizations due to the increased significance of these employees to the organization's success (Silzer & Church, 2010).

The definition of 'high potential' varies among scholars (see Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013) and practitioners (see Silzer & Church, 2009). Consistent with Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, and Pepermans (2013), we consider HiPo employees as distinctively talented employees; that is, those employees who have skills that are valuable (i.e., the potential to contribute to an organization's core competencies) and unique (i.e., the extent to which these employees are difficult to replace). In practice, talent is considered a scarce individual characteristic as only a small percentage of the workforce is identified as high potentials (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012). Since the underlying principle of HiPo programs is workforce differentiation, several scholars (e.g., Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010; Swailes, 2013) have contended that HiPo programs, which are a subset of exclusive talent management, follow Pareto's

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¹ We refer to high potentials as 'A' players. Employees who are average performers and are not identified as talented by the organization, and thus excluded from high potential programs, would be considered as 'B' players. We deliberately avoid the term non-high potential employees because of its negative connotation.

'law of the vital few'. This 'law' suggests that there are only few employees in the organization who contribute disproportionately to successful organizational performance. Consequently, this minority of employees, who are identified as 'high potentials', receive more-valued resources and career opportunities from the organization (Dries, Van Acker, & Verbruggen, 2012), and are the focus of much research available on talent management (for an exception, see Gelens et al., 2013). Much is still unknown about how HiPo programs affect the attitudes and behaviours of employees who are excluded from these programs. Scholars and practitioners tend to segment organizational workforces into three different categories based on their added value to an organization. 'A' players (i.e., value creators) constitute the top 20% of the workforce, 'B' players (i.e., value sustainers) constitute the 70%, and 'C' players (i.e., value destroyers) form the bottom 10% of the workforce (Huselid, Beatty, & Becker, 2005). In this paper, we focus only on 'B' players and discuss how HiPo programs influence their attitudes and behaviors. We exclude 'C' players from the theoretical analysis since 'C' players are usually poor performers in non-strategic jobs, and should be removed from the organization, if they don't improve their performance (Huselid et al., 2005).

In HiPo programs, generally only the top 20% of employees are considered as top talent which implies that 70% of the workforce (this excludes 'C' players) would be excluded from these programs (Swales, 2013). However, as Delong and Vijayaraghavan (2003, p. 96) argued, "...our understandable fascination with star performers can lure us into the dangerous trap of underestimating the vital importance of the supporting actors". They contended that companies' long term performance is very much dependent on the commitment and the contribution of 'B' players. Other researchers have also argued that the contributions of other employees who are not 'A' players should not be ignored (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Guthridge, Komm, & Lawson, 2008). Scholars tend to agree that 'B' players are the best 'supporting actors' of the organizations (DeLong & Vijayaraghavan, 2003) as they provide crucial support to 'A' players in strategic positions (Huselid et al., 2005). However, organizations rarely value their contributions sufficiently and consequently their long term performance can suffer.

There are four key contributions of this paper. In their recent article on the meaning of talent, Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013) highlighted that the field of talent management needs more interdisciplinary studies and research on how talent management impacts employee level outcomes, and Gelens et al. (2013) theoretically examined the impact of workforce differentiation on high potential and non-high potential employees' justice perceptions. The first contribution of the paper is that we build on these studies and integrate workforce differentiation, strategic human resource management (SHRM) and organizational behaviour (OB) literatures (i.e., trust, justice, and motivation), and propose various theoretical linkages by elucidating how HiPo programs may influence 'B' players' attitudes and behaviours; that is, we examine the *process* by which HiPo programs may influence 'B' players' commitment and organizational citizenship behaviours as they are the important outcomes of such programs (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). We extend Gelens et al.'s (2013) work and not only consider justice perceptions but also other meta-features of HiPo programs, since employees not only use fairness information but also other contextual cues to make attributions about HR programs (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Furthermore, unlike Gelens et al. (2013), we take a more critical approach by arguing that not only perceptions of distributive injustice may increase among 'B' players as a result of workforce differentiation but also the perceptions of procedural and interpersonal injustice.

Second, we address the call by scholars (e.g., Guest, 2011; Nishii & Wright, 2007) to study individual differences so as to understand the processes that explain HRM-performance linkage by considering individual motivational profile as an important moderating variable. Third, the paper extends the literature on talent management by paying exclusive attention to a non-traditional group of employees (i.e., 'B' players) which remains underexplored in the literature. Scholars agree that HiPo programs focus on 'A' players who constitute only about 20% of the workforce (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Gelens et al., 2013). However, little attention has been paid to how these programs affect the remaining workforce (Cappelli & Keller, 2014). By doing so, we directly respond to the call by Garavan, Carbery, and Rock (2012) to examine the impact of HiPo programs on employees (i.e., 'B' players) who are not included in these programs. Fourth, we contribute by putting forth several propositions that set the stage for future empirical research as scholars lament that the field of talent management needs more empirical work (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013a). It also enables us to formulate suggestions for practitioners to improve implementation processes related to HiPo programs so as to elicit desired attitudes and behaviors even from employees who are not included in these programs.

In the following sections, we first present a brief overview of the talent management literature including HiPo programs. Then, we present our conceptual model including Bowen and Ostroff's framework and attribution theory. Following this, we discuss the related theories and develop propositions concerning the link between various meta-features of HiPo programs and employee outcomes. We conclude by suggesting future research directions and highlighting practical implications.

2. An overview of the literature on talent management

2.1. Talent management and HiPo programs

Research on talent management is prevalent in the HR practitioner literature; however, it has not yet reached the status of a 'mature field' in academia. As Dries (2013, p. 267) stated in the introduction to the *Human Resource Management Review* Special Issue on talent management, "the topic is still not taken as seriously as it should in the academic literature". Scholars lament that the field of talent management still lacks a consistent definition (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Dries, 2013; Iles et al., 2010; Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013b; Thunnissen et al., 2013a,b), and is still in need of a theoretical framework (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Gelens et al., 2013).

Moreover, there seems to be some tension among scholars on whether talent management should focus on all employees (i.e., an inclusive perspective) or just few HiPo employees (i.e., an exclusive perspective) (see Cappelli & Keller, 2014; Gallardo-Gallardo et al.,

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