Talent Management Challenges: An Exploratory Assessment from Lebanon

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Abstract

Competition and lack of available highly talented and skilled employees make finding and retaining talented people a major priority for organizations. In this highly competitive and demanding business environment, Human Resources departments are starting to move away from only focusing on recruitment and development to a more strategic position that unites the management of human capital with organizational goals.

The purpose of the paper is to explore "Talent Management" strategies and practices, giving a thorough overview of the effective steps used in implementing talent management and the role of the HR in this. Consequently, a survey questionnaire is used to assess respondents' attitudes to and knowledge of the topic. Results and findings are used to draft recommendations to Lebanese HR managers to capitalize on best practices in Talent Management and challenges faced.

Keywords: Human resources, Lebanon, strategies, talent management

INTRODUCTION

The Society for Human Resource Management – SHRM (2015) encourages companies to continuously invest in human capital, whereby "HR leaders act as business partners while working closely with senior management to attract, hire, develop and retain talent" (Para 1). Moreover, and according to SHRM, several risk factors are to be considered to act upon to deal with skills shortage, namely, shifting demographics, global supply chains, the aging workforce and increasing global mobility. Forward-looking organizations must rethink their approach to talent management to best control their human capital talent. By doing so, the aforementioned organizations will be positively positioned to succeed in a highly competitive marketplace (ibid).

Athey (2004) contends that globalization is a force for both collaboration and competition whereby, companies across the globe are engaged in a contest for resources—both natural and human. "In an age in which growth is largely a product of creative and technological advancements, companies that want to dominate their industries must be able to attract and retain talented employees. They must also engage people like never before if they want to innovate and grow. Only those companies that win the hearts and minds of their top talent will be able to deliver value over both the short and long terms" (p.1). Furthermore, Fegley (2006) states that human resource professionals no longer simply focus on their organizations' day-to-day transactional needs, benefits, compensation and staffing. He adds that "the role of HR throughout the years has expanded immensely to include a wide range of organizational initiatives such as training, employee development, diversity and equity in the workplace, disaster preparedness, reward management, and development and execution of organizational strategy. As HR departments continue to evolve from a process-oriented function to a more strategic role within organizations, they are putting in place additional integrated and strategic plans designed to improve processes to help meet future organizational needs" (p. 8).

According to Lockwood (2006), "talent management is the implementation of integrated strategies or systems designed to increase workplace productivity by developing improved processes for attracting, developing, retaining and utilizing people with the required skills and aptitude to meet current and future business needs"(p. 1).

Over the years, talent management has evolved, along with the expanding responsibilities and sophistication of the HR profession, to be incorporated into the goals and strategy of an organization. The emphasis on human capital is now being aligned with management processes such as succession planning, development of leaders, retention and career planning. Talent management has moved away from being an administrative process to a continuous organizational practice with a strategic focal point that drives organizational outcomes (Perrine, 2005, p. 1). Based on the aforementioned definition, an organization's success is directly linked to the talent force it can access. "To integrate talent management into all areas of the company, HR plays a role of change management agent. To promote this change, HR addresses four diverse talent management activities: recruitment, performance management, leadership development and organizational strategy" (Fegley, 2006, p. 8).

Responding to today's workplace demands, innovative means are implemented, whereby firms retain and conserve their talented workforce by using new approaches that go beyond a good paycheck; for example, companies must develop employees' competencies if they are to keep pace with the speed and complexity of technological innovation. According to Athey (2004), "individuals need greater flexibility in their career paths, and organizations need greater flexibility from employees. People must connect across businesses, divisions, and regions in ways that promote high quality decisions and fast execution" (p. 2). Athey contends that firms like Microsoft, Southwest Airlines, and SAS Institute are exemplary in the way they nurture and manage their talent, especially talent which is considered critical to their operations. "These companies go to surprising lengths to help these employees tap into their core skills and passions. They expect continuous learning and growth and know that the most important lessons don't take place in the classroom, but on the job. They also understand that positive relationships raise the performance of critical talent to new levels" (ibid, p. 4).

Furthermore, R. T. Mucha (2004) wrote in the Organization Development Journal that "The ability to execute business strategy is rooted in the ability to attract, retain, and develop key talent. Successful talent management creates the most enduring competitive advantage. No company can afford to be unprepared for both the best and worst of times" (p. 96). Likewise, Lockwood (2005) contends that in "today's global marketplace, talent management represents one of the greatest challenges for HR leaders: successful talent management requires effective alignment of human capital and business strategies to support organizational financial goals and positively impact shareholder value" (p. 1).

This project examines organizational talent management practices and insights from the perspective of HR professionals, presenting specific information about recruitment, employee's development and employees' retention. The project also explores the differences between organizations with and without specific talent management initiatives in place. A sample of HR professionals was conveniently selected and a questionnaire was sent to them. The study covered local and international companies from various industries, and operating in Lebanon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Talent management as defined by the Society of Human Resources Management in the glossary published on their website www.shrm.org, "is the implementation of integrated strategies or systems designed to increase workplace productivity by developing improved processes for attracting, developing, retaining and utilizing people with the required skills and aptitude to meet current and future business needs" (Lockwood, 2005, p. 1).

According to Vinod, Sudhakar, Mihir, Varghese, Bobby and Thomas (2014), "the concept of talent management was officially born in 1997 when McKinsey commissioned research on the global "war for talent" to review the procedures companies in the United States were adopting to recruit the best performing employees". (p. 474). "The aforementioned report found that organizations were aggressively competing for talented people in the context of the favorable economic climate and that the deep belief held by leaders that competitive advantage could be achieved from employing the best talent is a critical factor. The challenge was to manage the talent effectively and that organizations have to adopt talent management strategies" (ibid). On the other hand, Lawler (2008) warn that "increasingly, companies in a wide variety of businesses are finding that people can be their number one source of competitive advantage. But it's not enough for leaders to say that people are important, or to put issues high on their mental to-do list. What is needed are organizations that are designed and managed from -the boardroom to the front line-in ways that optimize talent attraction, retention, and performance" (pp.1-2).

At the United Nations Development Program, talent management is defined as *"an organizational capacity to identify the right person for the right job and at the right time".* Talent management systems, in turn, are defined as the collective HR systems and tools to make it possible to plan demand, develop and evaluate staff, and match capable staff to the right jobs (L. Said, personal interview, July 2007). Another important component

of strategic talent management at UNDP is to ensure that the organization has a gender and diversity balanced workforce who reflects the people and communities it works with. This priority of gender and nationality balance requires special measures to ensure investments in people that would support these goals. The building blocks of UNDP talent management are shown in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1. UNDP Building Blocks

• **Corporate goals:** These goals measure relationship of staff work and performance to corporate, headquarters' office goals and the manager's accountability
• **Career Development:** Dynamic, focused and effective development plans for each staff member that can be monitored and adjusted on a continued basis. Development plans contribute to improved employee skills for the current job and the development of skills required for future career progression
• **Succession Planning:** It is the process of identifying and developing candidates for future openings in key positions or roles.
• **Competencies Framework:** It is an inventory of expected behaviors, skills and knowledge that lead to excellence on the job. The framework captures the values and principles, managerial and leadership priorities of the organization.
• **Performance tools:** Performance review tool measure how individual staff member's performance is contributing to the achievement of UNDP's mission and goals. The tool promotes competency development and learning.
• **Analytics:** Analytics captures and analyzes information for strategic HR planning, management, scenarios, performance management, demand forecasts, supply pools and so on.

Source: Specialist Services Division, OHRM. (2006).
http://practices.undp.org/management/hr/Staff_Management/Talent_Management.cfm

TALENT MANAGEMENT: CORE COMPONENTS AND PROCESS

Ready and Conger (2007) found that "to meet the challenge, companies must rethink how they hire, train and reward their employees, placing those tasks at the heart of their business plans". In doing so, they have an opportunity to address all problems according to a unified integrated plan, rather than waste time and resources attacking each of the issues individually (Para 3). Also, Ibrahim (n.d.) asserts that "a systematic approach should be followed to implement any talent management initiative in any organization. Organizations that formally decide to 'manage their talent' undertake a strategic analysis of their current HR processes. This is to ensure that a coordinated, performance oriented approach is adopted" (Para 4).

Lockwood (2006) contends that talent management is about "the implementation of integrated strategies or systems designed to increase workplace productivity by developing improved processes for attracting, developing, retaining and utilizing people with the required skills and aptitude to meet current and future business needs" (p. 2). Therefore, talent management becomes the process of managing the set of events that each employee experiences. Accordingly, Mehta (2011) asserts that the aforementioned set of events, or core components, is considered fundamental for the success of the organization in the retention of its talent. Exhibit 2 depicts the set of processes which, when integrated, form the foundation of a comprehensive "Talent Management" system according to Mehta.

Exhibit 2. Mehta's core components of talent management

(1) ***Strategic Workforce Planning***: This first stage in talent management addresses the needs and goals of one's organization.
(2) ***Total Talent Acquisition***: Talent acquisition is associated with the use of an applicant tracking system targeted at hiring full-time people. However, effective talent management comes from focusing on total talent acquisition and integrating it.
(3) ***Employee Development***: Integrating employee development with total talent acquisition provides an obvious benefit. Organizations must understand each person's ability as it relates to the core competencies identified in strategic workforce planning.
(4) ***Performance Management***: Linking employee development activities and goals to performance management makes sense. Motivating managers to conduct performance management in a thoughtful and deliberate manner is crucial.
(5) ***Succession Planning***: Every organization has key people and positions which are important for the success and achievement of its goals. Talent management proactively identifies key people in the organization and develops a plan to manage people and positions. In this respect, employing a technology solution can facilitate this process and will mitigate obstacles; and, having a system that links the other components vastly increases organizational commitment to succession planning and streamlines the process. Managing a great talent management program will optimize organizational performance.

Source: Mehta, 2011, pp. 48-49.

Furthermore, Brundage (2010; cited in Aibieyi & Igiebor Henry, 2015, p. 24) highlight the importance of talent retention by stating that effective talent management is a continuous process and must be part of organizational culture. While, Mehta (2011) contends that the "winners in the war for talent will be those who invest time to define a talent management strategy and process for all of the components. Organizations must look at talent management holistically vs. departmentally. It must be part of the culture vs. an HR program" (p. 49).

MIT Human Resources (n.d.; cited in Hejase, Eid, Hamdar, & Haddad, 2012a) have set the following steps to be followed in defining the process of talent management and workforce planning:

1. "Organizational Assessment: Organizational assessment describes the initial steps of a talent management process.
2. Workforce Analysis: Workforce analysis focuses on using information to gain an overview of the workforce and to target a talent management initiative.
3. Talent Review: The talent review activity provides an overview of how to facilitate a discussion of a key talent.
4. Development Planning: The development planning activity focuses on implementing development activity in the organization after the talent review" (pp. 23-24).

Perrine (2005) contends that each entrant into a new position is to be assessed against the competencies and qualifications required to be successful in that position. A training plan is written and executed, enabling the employee to meet performance expectations. With tenure, the person progresses to a career development phase in which the training plan becomes a development plan to prepare the employee for advancement opportunities or to enhance performance to exceed expectations. Then the cycle begins again.

To manage these events, critical components need to be aligned with the company's core values and business strategy, including:

1. Competencies and qualifications. Competencies and qualifications are the most critical components. They are needed to effectively recruit, select, appraise, provide feedback, identify training and development, and determine potential for succession planning decisions (Rothwell, 2001, p. 77).
2. Assessment instruments. Making a well-informed selection and hiring decision that is legally defensible necessitates the development of a structured behavioral interview designed around the competencies and qualifications of each position (Perrine, 2005, p. 4).
3. Performance appraisal. To capture the benefits of a performance appraisal system, each talent organization must at least ensure the following key elements: (1) Aligning individual performance expectations with the organization's vision and values; (2) Measuring key results and competencies; (3) Appraising against clearly defined performance expectations; (4) Working together to develop performance expectations; and, (5) Providing frequent and timely feedback (Deb, 2005, p. 117)
4. Required training. Each job requires certain skills and abilities as well as knowledge about the company and the department where the employee works. The skills and knowledge are specific to the job and company. Consequently, a person who is hired has to have certain individual characteristics, such as understanding more about the company, his/her fit within the company, and the policies to abide by (Perrine, 2005, p. 3).
5. Development solutions. Development solutions come in a wide range of formats and are intended for those who are now exceeding organizational expectations and want to enhance their skills or seek to advance in the company, whether it is a lateral or upward move. A development plan may include an activity related to an existing business challenge to improve decision-making and networking skills to share best practices (ibid, p. 5).

TALENT MANAGEMENT INTEGRATION

Up to this point, talent management has been described and illustrated as a process. This process serves as an impetus to implement the talent management initiative. However, the process is actually within a model. The core values and strategic objectives of the organization become the foundation of the integrated talent management model. Built on that foundation are departments that support the organization's strategy. For example, the HR functions in a given organization may be any or all of the following: recruitment and talent identification, training and development, compensation and benefits, and HR information systems (Robinson, 2004, p. 67). Other processes associated with talent management are best included in a more integrated talent management approach that encompass: recruitment, selection, mentoring, on-boarding, performance management, leadership development, career development, career planning, succession planning and recognition and rewards. These processes are best utilized when designed to support the organization's strategic business goals (Heinen & O'Neill, 2004, pp. 67-82).

TALENT MANAGEMENT EFFECTIVENESS AND BENEFITS

Talent management is a long-term and continuous process. Foremost, talent management requires a belief in talent. As highlighted in the research conducted by The Conference Board, "the talent mindset goes beyond an awareness of the importance of leadership. It includes a broad spectrum of the ability of all individuals to contribute to organizational success now and in the future." Disseminated within the organization, and wider and deeper than succession planning, an effective talent management system builds a winning organization by:

a) Connecting corporate strategy with the quantity and quality of leadership required to execute it.
b) Driving leaders' accountability for the cultural strategies that support business goals.
c) Identifying those individuals with the highest leadership potential across the organization early in their careers.
d) Assessing high-potential talent for future leadership.
e) Accelerating the development of high-potential talent and improving the quality of executive leadership.
f) Enhancing the focus on growing better leaders at all levels, from first line upwards (Smith, Wellins, and & Paese, 2011, p. 5).

For talent management (sometimes referred to as "integrated talent management") to be effective, two broad areas must be addressed: 1) a thorough understanding of the organizational drivers for talent management; and, 2) identification and delivery of people/competencies. Organizational drivers of talent management include reassessment of business issues (e.g., as a result of new leadership, merger or acquisition, poor performance); validation of applicable policies and programs (e.g., benchmarking studies); plans to increase performance by leveraging talent; and, dissatisfaction with current company performance (Lockwood, 2005, p. 2).

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO TALENT MANAGEMENT

The opportunity and challenge for HR, working with senior management, is to increase the strength of employee's engagement. Focus on engagement demands strong leadership, a sense of shared destiny, autonomy, accountability and opportunities for development and advancement. To better engage workers, companies must work harder to inspire them and provide a sense of passion, pride and mission. Ultimately, "it is organizational culture that determines employees' engagement and retention of talent" (Towers Perrin, 2003, p. 4). Confirming Perrin's points of view, Lockwood (2005) contends that the process of building employees' engagement is an ongoing one. Beyond compensation and benefits, employees' engagement is best fostered through a meaningful and emotionally enriching work experience. "Effective employee engagement—a mixture of tangible and intangible factors—fosters an environment of stimulation, development, learning, support, contribution and recognition. However, in a recent study, less than one-fifth of employees were highly engaged, one-fifth was disengaged and about two-thirds were moderately engaged. The risk is that moderately engaged employees may move toward being disengaged" (p. 4). This statement reinforces Gubman (2003) assertion that in "the race to attract and retain talent, employee retention goes hand in hand with employee engagement. Research shows that the future of organizational success depends on the effective engagement of employees—the failure to do so means losing them to the competition" (p. 11). He adds, "the challenge today is not just retaining talented people, but fully engaging them, capturing their minds and hearts at each stage of their work live" (ibid).

Hence, effective talent management policies and practices that demonstrate commitment to human capital result in more engaged employees and lower turnover. Consequently, employee's engagement has a substantial impact on employees' productivity and talent retention. Employee's engagement, in fact, can make or break the bottom line. Accordingly, the Corporate Leadership Council (2004) conducted a survey of more than 50,000 employees at 59 global organizations, with the purpose of identifying the highest impact drivers of employee engagement, and assessing best practices regarding employee engagement tools and strategies (p. 1). Results of the aforementioned survey show that "employees who are most committed perform 20% better and are 87% less likely to resign" (p. 4). In addition, "dramatic differences between companies suggest that engagement levels are determined more by company strategies and policies than any characteristics regarding the employee segments themselves" (ibid). Furthermore, among the top 25 drivers of employee engagement identified by the Council, the most important driver is the connection between an employee's job and organizational strategy (ibid).

As a result of the above statements, organizations have been increasingly putting formal and informal reward programs in place. For example, according to SHRM's *2005 Reward Programs and Incentive Compensation Survey Report*, 84% of companies offer some form of monetary and/or nonmonetary reward programs to employees. To be most effective, however, organizations must regularly communicate to employees about reward programs as early as during the interview process, for this act demonstrates that the organization values its employees (Burke, 2005).

BENEFITS

The HR professional can maximize the return on investment (ROI) in the development and implementation of HR practices by using the latter as a part of the talent management process. However, the amount of the return can be dictated by the amount invested in educating and effectively training managers on how to use this process. In addition, continuity and consistency become part of the process. The aforementioned particular traits are important to employees because they demonstrate interconnectedness. Over time, these same employees would begin to appreciate the system as a whole (seeing the larger picture) (Perrine, 2005, p. 6). Also, Hengst (2007, Para 4; cited in Hejase et al., 2012a) adds that having a strong "Talent Management - TM" helps employees achieve their best individual potential, concurrently helping the business respond to challenges, enter new markets, and move ahead of the competition. An organization with a talented work force can attain a public reputation of being a great place to work at; a fact which promotes faithfulness among its current employees. Talented employees will also be more involved in working for a company that values its employees and gives them chances for growth and success (p. 25). In addition, Amble (2008) contends that when assessing companies applying talent management, it became apparent that their employees are more dedicated and committed to their jobs and companies, compared to other employees whose companies don't have any talent management program. He also concluded that organizations that have a strong talent management culture also favorably impact how workers rate their pride in their organizations and willingness to recommend them as places to work at. Furthermore, Amble asserts that employees who have trust in their companies' talent management practices also have more favorable attitude toward their management. These employees believe their leaders have effectively managed the workload and that senior management have demonstrated that employees are important to the success of the company: they feel they are job secured, are satisfied with job training, and feel that evaluation is fair, thus having better feelings of personal achievement (Para 8-9).

METRICS

Talent management metrics link human capital investment to financial performance. Huselid, Becker and Beatty (2005) name three critical challenges to successful workforce measurement and management. First, there is "the perspective challenge"—meaning, do all managers really understand how workforce behaviors and capabilities drive strategy execution? Second, there is "the metrics challenge"—that is, are the right measures of workforce success identified (e.g., workforce culture, mindset, leadership, competencies and behaviors)? The third challenge is "the execution challenge"—specifically, in order to monitor progress and communicate the strategic intent of talent management initiatives: are managers motivated to use these data and do they have access and capability to do so? (pp. 31-67).

According to Lockwood (2006) "Talent management metrics are evolving. As organizations increasingly focus on talent management strategies, they seek ways to validate these initiatives and measure their business impact. Many firms are beginning to include talent management in their dashboards or scorecards. For example, HSBC, a banking and financial services institution, uses the Balanced Scorecard with talent management listed under learning and growth" (p. 7). Morton (2005) contends that "Scorecards provide a clear "line of sight" to organizational strategic goals by linking talent management to objectives and performance appraisals. Measures may include factors such as employee survey results, turnover (e.g., talent pools) and the number of employees on temporary assignments" (p. 8).

CONSTRAINTS

Wellins, Liu, & Qiuyong (2010) contend, based on their research on Chinese organizations as they investigated the challenges faced when implementing Talent Management initiatives, the following:
• "Frontline leaders in many organizations are not competent in applying talent management tools and processes. Selecting and developing talent is the most critical job for leaders—and they are failing.
• Most organizations lack an accurately assessed pool of ready talent, which is critical to effectively promoting the right people into critical leadership positions.
• The majority of organizations fail to properly measure the outcomes of their HR development initiatives. Without metrics it is almost impossible to know which practices are working and how to improve them.
• Organizations generally don't have a clear understanding about how talent management strategy supports business strategy" (pp. 4-5).

Tansley, Harris, Stewart, & Turner (2006) confirmed the aforementioned challenges and added saying, "the main barrier could be that strategy making in areas of HR are limited generally, usually being done for operational not strategic reasons" (p. 19). Moreover, Hejase et al. (2012a), in their research on Lebanese institutions, report that "the main gap in Lebanon is that most companies are applying some components of Talent Management but not all together in an integrated manner" (p. 31). As with all human resource strategies, a talent management program should be an integral piece of an organization's human resource agenda, and must align with the company's vision, culture and overall strategy.

However, the Human Capital Institute & Hewitt Associates (2008) assert that companies still lack the ability to integrate TM programs and assess the return on their talent investments. The most important reasons are the following:

HUMAN CAPITAL IS NOT ADEQUATELY ASSOCIATED WITH BUSINESS STRATEGY

While senior management plainly distinguishes the significance of human capital, several companies struggle to link their people's practices with their business' essentials. "Only 17% of respondents say their workforce strategy is consistently aligned with their business strategy across the organization, while even fewer (7%) report consistently utilizing a specific quantitative framework in which investments in Talent Management are aligned with business results"(p. 3).

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND CAPABILITY FOR TALENT DEVELOPMENT

While most companies hold their executives and managers accountable for achieving business results, the latter are not held accountable for talent development. The Human Capital Institute and Hewitt Associates (2008) contend that, "most managers lack the necessary capability to effectively develop talent. Just 5% of the companies say their managers have the right skills to help advance or enrich people at their jobs or to provide the constructive feedback that supports and encourages constant employees' development across the company" (p. 3).

INCONSISTENT EXECUTION AND INTEGRATION OF TALENT PROGRAMS

The majority of organizations have essential processes for TM, such as basic workforce planning, development programs for high potential employees, and succession planning. Very few constantly execute such programs across the whole organization. While somewhat more than two-thirds (69%) of organizations say that they accomplish workforce planning across all business units and divisions, less than one-fifth (15%) do so constantly. Moreover, only 21% of the organizations constantly incorporate talent practices through the whole organization (for example rewards are attached to performance and performance is attached to development programs) (ibid).

LIMITED USE OF MEANINGFUL TALENT ANALYTICS

Data analysis plays an important role in prompting business decisions; however, most organizations have a long way to go. Stuck in pursuing traditional workforce procedures, such as headcount, turnover, and cost-based metrics, few organizations have pursued the metrics that matter; that is, talent management metrics. Less than 10% of responding organizations calculate the effectiveness of talent management programs, track the excellence of talent, or use precise quantitative frameworks to bring into line human capital reserves with their business strategy (ibid).

THE HR ROLE

Lockwood (2006) emphasizes that the primary owner of talent management is the HR department, and therefore the HR department has many roles:

(1) One of the most important roles is that of facilitator of the talent mindset. As talent management facilitator, HR pays close attention to how the organization's culture supports talent per se. broadly speaking, "HR's role encompasses communicating the talent management philosophy companywide, and knowing the industry competition. In addition, HR needs to develop an integrated and proactive strategic approach to talent management—the big picture—as well as managing critical information, such as tracking turnover and knowing what factors contribute to retention" (p. 7).

(2) To integrate talent management into all areas of the company, the HR also plays a role of change management agent. To drive this change, "HR addresses four diverse talent management activities: recruitment, performance management, leadership development and organizational strategy" (Corporate Leadership Council, 2003).

Finally, proactive HR leaders take a holistic approach to talent management. It is important to establish clear expectations and communicate openly about the talent management process. By HR explaining to management and employees why talent management is important, how it works and what the benefits are to the organization and participants, talent management strategies are more likely to be seen as a fair process (Walker & LaRocco, 2002, pp. 12-15).

STATISTICS

Talent management is the overarching initiative that supports organizational growth and stability. According to the *SHRM 2006 Talent Management Survey Report*, "talent management is a top priority for 76% of organizations. Broadly speaking, effective talent management practices create a workplace culture that makes individuals want to join the organization, aligns employees with the mission and vision of the organization,

fosters an environment where employees' ideas are listened to and valued, provides current employees with adequate training to allow them to do their jobs well, and places the right people in the right jobs". HR leaders also use talent management practices and policies to create a talent pool of internal candidates for future positions. Specifically, such practices and polices encourage career growth and developmental opportunities, empower employees to make decisions that affect their work, and provide organizations with a competitive advantage by finding the best talent with the needed skills and competencies. Yet, "while 53% of organizations have specific talent management initiatives, many organizations experience challenges in attracting and retaining talent. Thus, as HR professionals continue to work with their organizations to stay ahead of the curve, talent management initiatives are where organizations should concentrate resources" (Fegley, 2006, pp. 9-20).

METHODOLOGY

This research is exploratory and quantitative. It uses a survey questionnaire as the research tool. The Talent Management Survey was conducted over a period of 2 months and contacts were made with HR professionals and senior managers of around 50 companies in Lebanon. The reason behind selecting only HR professionals was to get accurate and valid information on talent management practices in these targeted companies.

For the purposes of the survey, talent management was defined as the implementation of integrated strategies or systems designed to improve processes for recruiting, developing and retaining people with the required skills and aptitude to meet current and future organizational needs. This paper discusses the differences between organizations with and without specific talent management plans in place.

SAMPLE SELECTION

Sampling followed a non-probabilistic convenient approach. The focus was to survey medium to large reputable organizations in Lebanon about their talent management practices by targeting their HR professionals or senior managers who are fully aware of HR practices in the company. Respondents' convenience was based on their acceptance and willingness to participate and answer the questionnaire questions. Initial contacts were made with the target group of 50 companies; only 35 companies responded in filling out the questionnaire from both profit and non-profit organization, of these 35, 5 questionnaires were eliminated since some of them were incomplete or answers were not consistent, which showed that they were not filled with attention.

Thus, the following analysis is based on the responses collected from 30 organizations which were carefully selected and filled by HR professionals from: Leo Burnett, ALFA, MTC Touch, Microsoft, Siemens, Ericsson, Computer Associates, Bank Audi, BLOM bank, AROPE insurance, Victoire Insurance, Indevco Group, Debbane Group, Shayaa Group, Fattal, LibanPost, Heineken, Illy Lilly, ESCWA, UNDP, CDR, IMF, CMC, VTR, Mena Capital, and others. Data is analyzed with support of Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS), an IBM product acquired by IBM in 2009 (Hejase & Hejase, 2013, p. 58).

FORMAL QUESTIONNAIRE CONSTRUCTION

The questionnaire is mainly composed of four sections:
- Introduction and topic overview
- Demographic questions: gender, age, education, position, salary, size of HR Dept., industry, and company size
- Talent management initiatives: existence and ways to improve them
- Strategies and HR initiatives affecting talent management: recruitment, development, retention, benefits, culture, turnover, etc...

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHICS

Results show that respondents are 53% males and 47% females. 90% of the respondents are 26 to 45 years old, 3% are 25 years or less, and 7% are older than 45 years old. Moreover, 47% of the respondents hold a Bachelor of Arts or Science, and 53% have a Master's Degree or higher. Also, respondents belong to 23% of Telecom and IT companies; 23% are in service companies; 13% are in banking; 10% are in retail; and, 13% are in non-profit organizations. Furthermore, 47% of the respondents earn a monthly salary of 1000 to 3000 USD, while 53% earn a salary higher than 3000 USD. Results also show that 77% of the respondents are supervisors and managers, 17% are employees, and 7% are higher ranked executives. As for the size of the organization versus its Human Resource Department's size, Figure 1 depicts the correlation.
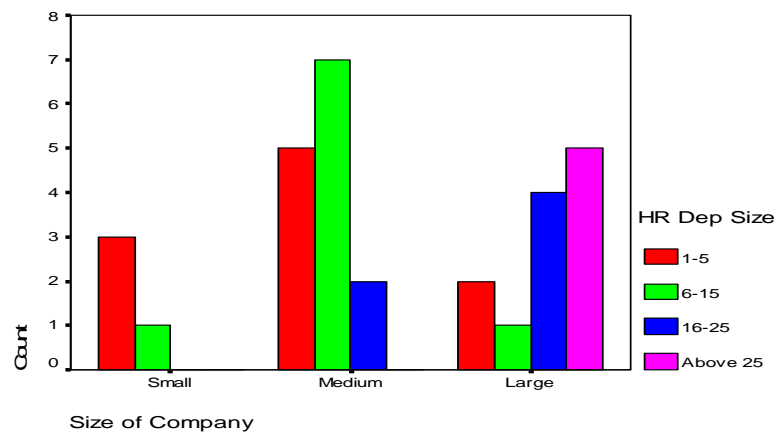
Figure 1. Size of organization vs. HR department's size

TALENT MANAGEMENT INITIATIVES

33% of the respondents declared that there is no existence of Talent Management Initiatives at their firms, while 67% confirmed the fact.

TM PRIORITY PER INDUSTRY

When respondents were asked if TM is considered a top priority at their firms, 67% of the sample (20 employers) said that their organizations have formal talent management initiative in place, and 33% said that they do not have it. The banking, the non-profit organization and the ones classified as "others" have the highest percentages in having TM initiatives. Of these 20 employers who have TM in place, 70% said that TM is a top priority for them, which is a quite high percentage.

Table 1. The top three areas that organization needs to improve in terms of talent management initiatives

Talent management improvement needs	Services	Retail	Banking	Telecom/IT	Non-Profit	Others	Total	% of total 20 who have TM
Aligning employees with the mission	1						**1**	5%
culture that makes individuals want to join the organization						1	**1**	5%
culture that values employees' work			1			1	**2**	10%
Identifying vacancies that will be created					1	2	**3**	15%
policies that encourage career growth and development opportunities	2				1		**3**	15%
Rewarding top-performing employees	1				1	1	**3**	15%
Assessing candidates' skills earlier in the hiring process	1		1		1	2	**5**	**25%**
culture that makes employees want to stay with the organization	2	1		1		1	**5**	**25%**
environment where employees are excited to come to work		1	2		1	1	**5**	**25%**
environment where employees' ideas are listened to	1		1	1	1	1	**5**	**25%**
Identifying gaps in current employee's and candidate's competence			2	3	1	1	**7**	**35%**
Building a deeper reservoir of successors	1	1		3	2	1	**8**	**40%**
Locating the kind of qualified professionals needed			2	3		3	**8**	**40%**
Total	**9**	**3**	**9**	**11**	**9**	**15**	**56**	

The 20 employers, who stated that they have TM initiatives in place, have identified three areas which their organizations need to improve. According to Table 1, the 3 areas are: 1) "Building a deeper reservoir of successors" (40%), 2); "Locating the kind of qualified professionals needed" (40%); and, 3) "Identifying gaps in current employee and candidate competence" (35%). All of these areas are basically centered on recruitment and identifying best talents. This finding shows that succession planning is still not formally implemented in Lebanon regardless of the type of company (local or international). It is going to be a challenge for these companies, especially with the increasing turnover rate and the war of talent among companies in the region, specifically in the telecom, IT and the banking sectors.

STRATEGIES AND HR INITIATIVES AFFECTING TALENT MANAGEMENT

This section was answered by all 30 employers. A considerable portion (40%) disagrees with the statement that their organization "Builds a deep reservoir of successors at every level"; an answer which agrees with the statement "Vacancies are identified and created as the company advances and expands", on which 33% of the respondents disagreed. On the other hand, around 93% agrees that their organizations "Provide current employees with adequate training that allows them to do their jobs well". Table 2 gives more details about which strategies and HR initiatives the targeted professionals agreed on.

Table 2. Extent of agreement with the TM statements the targeted professionals had

My Organization:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Aligns employees with the mission and vision of the organization	3%	7%	50%	40%
Builds a deep reservoir of successors at every level	7%	33%	37%	23%
Creates a culture that makes employees want to stay with the organization	0%	17%	37%	47%
Creates an environment where employees are excited to come to work each day	0%	17%	50%	33%
Has policies that encourage career growth and developmental opportunities	0%	23%	47%	30%
Identifies vacancies that will be created as the company advances and expands	0%	33%	37%	30%
Lets employees feel empowered to make decisions that impact their work	0%	20%	50%	30%
Places the right people in the right jobs	0%	20%	53%	27%
Provides current employees with adequate training that allows them to do their jobs well	0%	7%	47%	47%
Provides current employees with salary adjustments as they master significant skills required for the job	3%	17%	60%	20%
Rewards top-performing employees	7%	13%	37%	43%

63% (19 out of 30) of the respondents agree that their organizations have adequately prepared employees to step into leadership position (see Figure 2). This is a little bit contradictory with previous answers (second statement of Table 2) which show that they do not think that their organizations have prepared a reservoir of successors at every level. The interpretation of this could be that this question was looked at in terms of training and development need only and not as a formal succession plan.
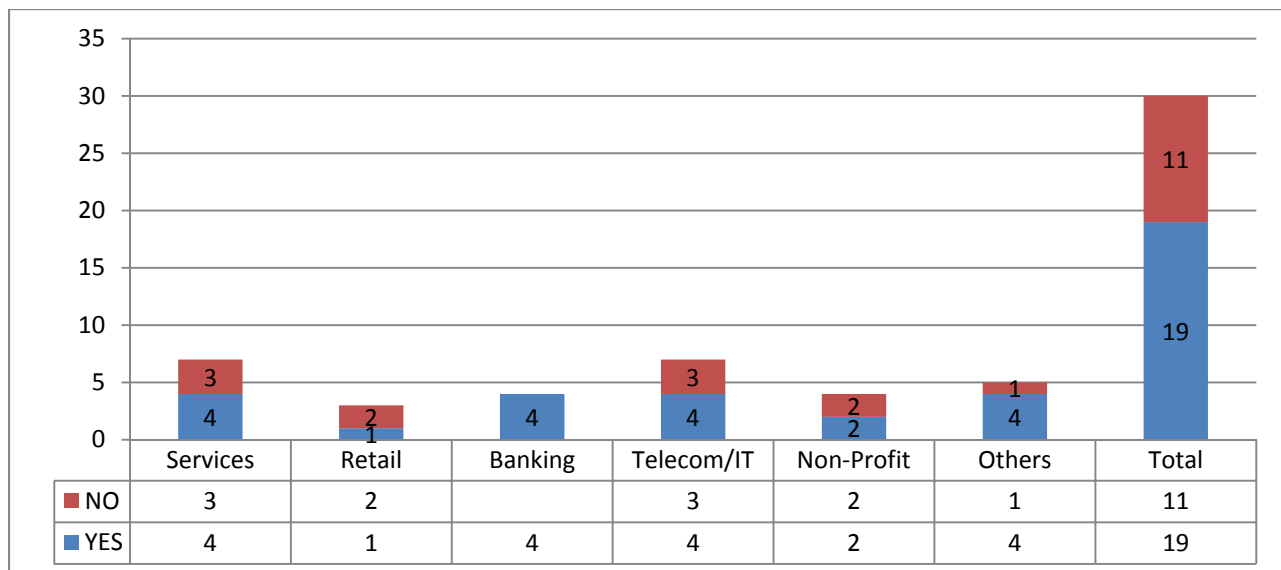
	Services	Retail	Banking	Telecom/IT	Non-Profit	Others	Total
■ NO	3	2		3	2	1	11
■ YES	4	1	4	4	2	4	19

Figure 2. Have organizations adequately prepared junior or mid-level employees to step into senior leadership positions

Moreover, 47% of the respondents stated that their organizations do not have a formal budget for retaining employees, mainly in the non-profit organizations and services sector. This is based on the fact that the services sector is mainly relying on soft skills of employees and not technical skills; therefore, investing in soft skills and customer care trainings are much cheaper in comparison to technical trainings conducted by telecom/IT companies. This fact made the services sector reluctant to invest money in developing retention strategies; these companies usually have a high turnover.

ORGANIZATIONS ALIGN THEIR ORIENTATION PROCESS FOR NEW HIRES WITH ITS TALENT MANAGEMENT INITIATIVES
Only 37% of the respondents said that their organizations (mainly from the telecom/IT and banking sectors) routinely align their orientation process for new hires with its talent management initiatives. 30% said that their organizations occasionally align their orientation process.
Also, 57% of the respondents said that their organizations conduct exit interviews. Only 20% said that their organizations never or rarely conduct exit interviews. Furthermore, 37% of the respondents said that their organizations never or rarely conduct internal employees' surveys, which is quite a high percentage.

HAVE A STRATEGY OR PLAN IN PLACE TO DEAL WITH COMPETITORS THAT TRY HEADHUNTING EMPLOYEES
60% of the respondents said that their organizations do not have a strategy or plan in place to deal with competitors that try headhunting their employees; a percentage which is very high considering that 67% from the 30 sample said that they have TM initiatives in place. Only 40% said that they occasionally or routinely have a plan against losing their employees for competitors.

HAVE FORMAL PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS ON A REGULAR BASIS
83% of the respondents said that their organizations conduct performance appraisals on a regular basis.

PROACTIVELY ATTEMPT TO RECRUIT EMPLOYEES FROM COMPETITORS
63% of the respondents said that their organizations rarely or have never attempted to recruit employees from their competitors.

UTILIZE A FORMAL APPROACH TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL LEADERS
70% of the respondents said that their organizations occasionally or routinely utilize a formal approach to identify potential leaders; which is an interesting fact.

UTILIZE A FORMAL APPROACH TO IDENTIFY *WHY EMPLOYEES LEAVE THE ORGANIZATION*
40% of the respondents said that their organizations rarely or never utilize a formal approach to identify why employees leave the organization**.**

TOP THREE COMPETENCIES VALUED IN THE ORGANIZATION
Results show that the top three competencies (highest percentages) that are most valued in the organizations surveyed are:

➢ Most valued competency is "management and leadership" – 50%
➢ The second competency is "Technical Knowledge" – 43%
➢ The third competency is "Organizational and Project Management Skills" – 43%
➢ Other competencies identified are: "People Skills 37%; Sales Effectives 27%; Operational Ability 23%; and Creativity 23%.

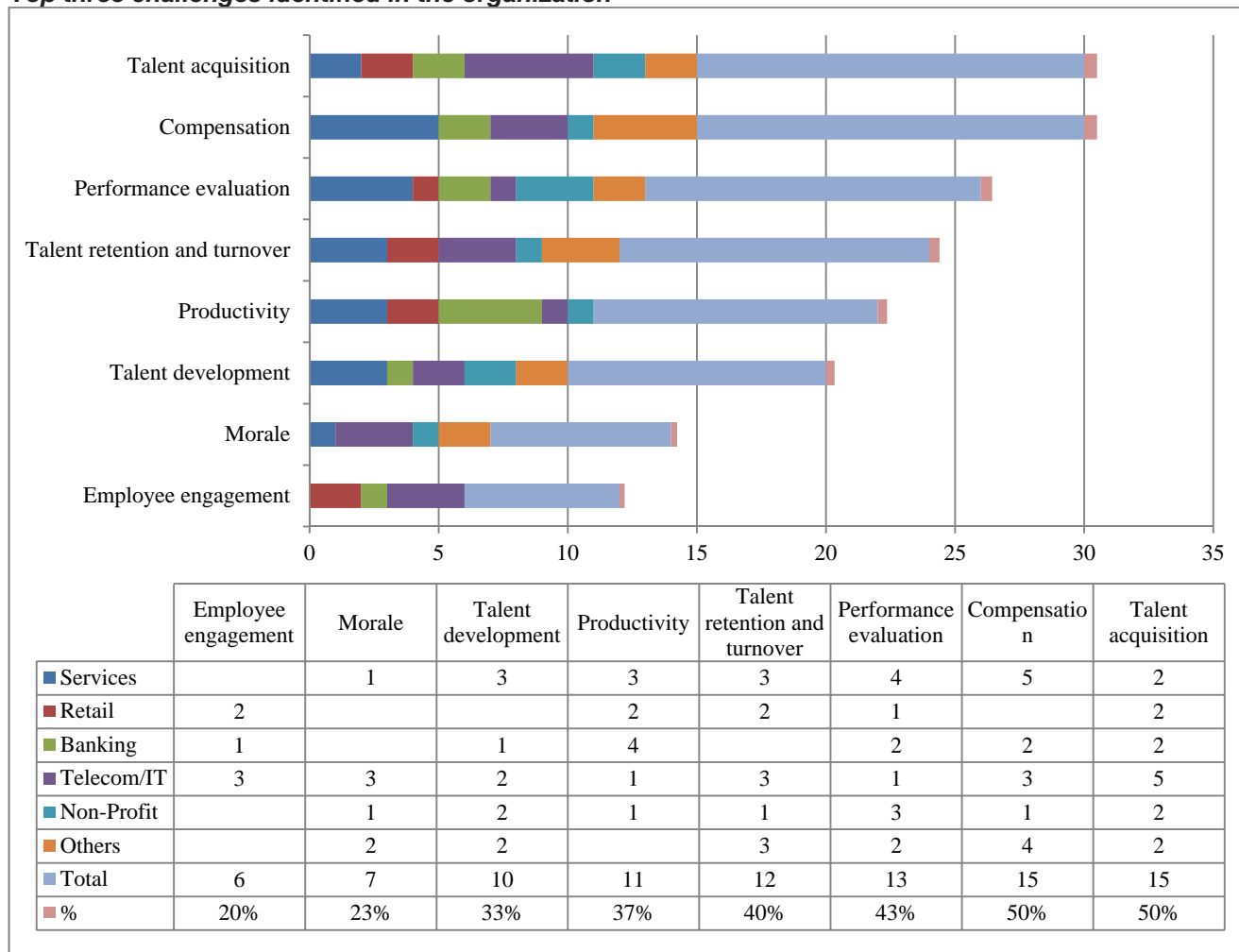*Top three challenges identified in the organization*

	Employee engagement	Morale	Talent development	Productivity	Talent retention and turnover	Performance evaluation	Compensation	Talent acquisition
■ Services		1	3	3	3	4	5	2
■ Retail	2			2	2	1		2
■ Banking	1		1	4		2	2	2
■ Telecom/IT	3	3	2	1	3	1	3	5
■ Non-Profit		1	2	1	1	3	1	2
■ Others		2	2		3	2	4	2
■ Total	6	7	10	11	12	13	15	15
■ %	20%	23%	33%	37%	40%	43%	50%	50%

***Figure 3.** Top Talent Management challenges*

According to Figure 3, the top three challenges identified by the respondents are:

➢ The first challenge is "Talent Acquisition" – 50%
➢ The second challenge is "Compensation" – 50%
➢ The third challenge is "Performance Evaluation" – 43%
➢ The fourth challenge is "Talent Retention and Turnover" – 40%

CONCLUSION

Although the survey show that that the majority of organizations have specific talent management strategies in place, there are varying degrees as to the success of the implementation of these strategies. The development of comprehensive talent management systems and commitment to these systems are important in order to meet the aforementioned challenges and attain organizational superiority. Here, Heinen and O'Neill, 2004) contend that sustained competitive advantage comes from talent management practices, in other words, how the organization attracts, develops, retains, motivates, manages, and rewards its talent. Furthermore, Kagwiria Lyria (2013) asserts that the "collective skills of the talent employed in an organization largely comprise the organization's core capabilities. An organization's talent injects capabilities that are very difficult for competitors to benchmark and replicate" (p. 287).

CULTURE

Results show that almost all organizations surveyed have a culture that supports TM initiatives, and that they have a culture that makes employees want to stay with the organization and come to work every day. 50% of the respondents said that the first competency valued by their organizations is "management and leadership". This shows the commitment of leaders in Lebanon, and the realization that culture is the center and the identity of the organization. Lockwood (2006) stresses the fact that "effective talent management calls for strong participatory leadership, organizational buy-in, employee engagement and workplace scorecards with talent management metrics" (p. 9).

Talent Management is a natural evolution of HR. It is a series of business processes – not a "product" or "solution" that can be bought–based on that leaders should embrace the TM as part of the organizational culture.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Almost all the organizations surveyed said that they have a formal budget for recruitment, but feel that limited vacancies are identified and created as their companies advance and expand. This is indeed a strategy for optimizing the use of the current workforce. Nowadays, companies are reluctant to increase their workforce; they would rather go for outsourcing or the use of contractual. The aforementioned practices will decrease the cost without trying to handle the burden of a big workforce especially in the current economic situations which is not limited to Lebanese market only.

RETENTION

Almost half of the surveyed organizations said that they do not have a formal budget for retaining their employees, especially in the services sector which relies mainly on customer care more than technical skills. 60% of the organizations also said that they do not have a strategy or plan in place to deal with competitors that try headhunting their employees. On the other hand, 63% of the respondents said that their organizations rarely or have never attempted to recruit employees from their competitors.

Tansley, Harris, Stewart, &Turner (2006) assert that "it's important to get the balance right with turnover because, although an organization needs 'new blood', it also needs its key talent to stay" (Para 18). However, few organizations seem to take account of the issue of talent leaving the organization, which is a serious issue. Kagwiria Lyria (2013) states that "talent turnover is harmful to a company's productivity because costs of attraction of new hires are high" (p. 286). Moreover, what makes the retention a serious issue is the absence of a follow up system on exit interviews' results which are necessary to identify the possible reasons employees have as arguments for leaving their organizations. This fact is worth noting since exit interviews are very important to identify and analyze the internal weaknesses and strengths of HR strategies in place. It could also lead to a work plan that really tackles the turnover issue. According to Geddes (2015), "proper exit interviews are an excellent opportunity to learn about both the strengths and weaknesses of the manager and the organization, to help understand how best to satisfy and retain employees" (Para 1). Only 57% of the organizations said that they conduct exit interviews, which is very low considering that 70% have TM initiatives. 40% of the respondents said that their organizations rarely or never utilize a formal approach to identify why employees leave the organization. The analysis of exit interviews should also be comprehensive and be supported by employees' surveys and corporate priorities; otherwise, it would be misleading and could be the result of individual experiences and cases.

Nonetheless, the true impact of loss talent is still unclear to management. When a talent leaves the company, there are several categories of costs that the organization has to bear: "Administration of the resignation • Recruitment costs • Selection costs • Cost of covering during the period in which there is a vacancy • Administration of the recruitment and selection process • Induction training for the new employee" (Loquercio, 2006, p. 6).

Keeping talent is vital given the effort and investment taken to identify and develop them. People have needs which when organizations deal with, makes the working conditions attractive. However, these needs vary with changing times and situations, hence creating challenges to the organization to keep abreast of these changes. Consequently, employee's satisfaction with their job and organization change, but what an organization can do is to ensure that it makes leaving a difficult choice for their talent by offering the necessary arrangements to deal with all its employees' needs positively.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Jon (2014), from the Wranx team, posits in his blog titled, '*training and its impact on employee retention*', that "it is in a business' best interests to find ways to improve employee retention. Increasing salaries and benefits, introducing flexible working schedules or providing plenty of praise are fairly effective tactics, but even these can have a detrimental impact on employee motivation, daily operations and most importantly profit margins" (Para 3). However, Jon adds that as a result of the aforementioned, "more and more organizations are

prioritizing training, as it has a wealth of far-reaching benefits, which include boosting employee retention rates" (Para 4).

It is interesting to find that almost all the organizations surveyed invest a lot in training programs, and have a formal budget for that. Their employees are satisfied with the training and development opportunities given to them. The high turnover rate that faces the organizations under study made them invest in their workforce as a retention strategy, which seems not to be successful especially in the Telecom and IT sectors whose employees are becoming more and more attracted by competitors who are going after their technical skills.

Based on that, it could be concluded that training programs should be carefully studied before their implementation; each company has to look at the investment and its returns. They need not create a highly skills reservoir of employees at all levels; it might not be needed in the near future, because when employees feel that they have skills that are not needed for their current job, they will be de-motivated and feel overqualified. This is a real challenge for companies that cannot create promotion opportunities, and which have limited expansion rate. The second valued competency as seen earlier is technical knowledge (43%), which justifies the investment in training programs.

SUCCESSION PLANNING

Investment in human capital requires careful planning. "Under the talent management umbrella, succession planning and leadership development are important organizational business strategies to develop and retain talent. Succession planning is one of the key strategies to reduce turnover costs" (Lockwood, 2006, p. 5).

What is quite interesting in the survey is that 70% of the respondents said that their organizations occasionally or routinely utilize a formal approach to identify potential leaders, which is an interesting fact. This indicates that the Lebanese companies are encouraging internal recruitment and do value the promotion from inside the company. This emphasizes the need to support career management initiatives, and could also be a retention tool since employees are being considered for internal vacancies. The only negative effect of this practice is that less fresh blood would be entering the company, especially at the supervisory level. Sometimes hiring external candidates to fill high level position would add value to the company and would bring in people who have rich experience and a new vision, and who could adopt and support change.

Still based on the previous findings, the succession planning approach is not implemented formally even in the companies that have TM initiatives. In a previous research, Hejase et al. (2012a) contend that "most of the Lebanese experts complain that most of the family businesses in Lebanon do not have succession planning, career planning, and do not take into consideration performance appraisal applications" (p. 28). It is still a weak point in the Lebanese market, which is very important since both succession planning and talent management are dynamic processes occurring in changing times. This latter point is stressed by Tansley, Harris, Stewart, and Turner (2006) when they state that "succession planning needs to be aligned with other areas of HR management for this segment of the organization, including talent management, learning and development processes and performance and pay reviews. Lack of alignment can cause problems, such as having a transparent talent management process and a secretive succession planning process" (Para 9).

RECOMMENDATION

Talent Management is "forward-looking and proactive" (Shukla, 2009, p. 174). Not only talent management improves the organization's flexibility and performance, it gives the information and tools to plan for growth, change, and new product and service initiatives. Talent management is strategic in nature and form part of the strategic management process. According to Papulova and Papulova (2006), "effective strategic management involves more than just a few easy steps. It requires managers to think strategically, to develop the ability to see things in motion, and to make sense out of a cloudy and uncertain future by seeing the interdependency of key factors" (p. 2). Consequently, "talent management integrates the previously isolated functions of recruiting, retention, workforce planning, employment branding, metrics, orientation and redeployment into a seamless process" (Lockwood, 2006, p. 7). Thus, leading companies should make attracting, engaging and retaining employees a strategic business priority. However, senior leadership should focus on clearly communicating the business strategy to the workforce as well as defining the role employees across the management layers play to execute that strategy. Effective leaders are to have a clear understanding of what drives value in their organizations, what motivates their customers, and how to achieve growth in the future. Wellins, Smith, & Erker (2009) contend that "careful planning, culminating in a sound talent strategy that is tightly connected to the organization's overall business strategies and business needs, is required for talent management to become ingrained in an organization's culture and practices. Only when this happens is it possible for talent management to be both effective and sustainable" (p. 12).

Many companies have developed and built talent management metrics into the balanced scorecard to support business and financial measures. Through the performance management system, managers are held accountable for employee's retention, and for creating opportunities for high-potential employees (Lockwood, 2006, p. 7).

In the current ongoing war of talent retention, leaders should invest more in HR practices. In Lebanon, companies should free their HR units from personnel functions which is traditionally been associated to HR role. HR professionals are often criticized for wanting a role when it comes to organizational influence. In other words, HR people have a reputation for not being able to show the business impact of their initiatives. According to Wellins and Schweyer (2007), "HR has to do better, continuing to develop the skills and knowledge of financial tools and data required to reflect their contribution. contend requires that HR more proactively partner and seek counsel from experts from other functional areas, such as finance, sales and production, to determine the true value of HR's contribution to the organizational bottom line" (p. 6).

According to Hejase et al. (2012a), "the main gap in Lebanon is that most companies are applying some components of "Talent Management" but not all together in an integrated manner. The gap in 'Total Talent Acquisition' is that many Lebanese companies failed to identify their employees' talents; they should start considering anyone working for their company as a talent and should invest in it" (p. 31). Talent Management could be a competitive advantage for companies in case they allow for HR initiatives hire talented people, invest in fresh graduates, introduce management internship programs, invest in retention plans, introduce work/life balance initiatives, implement flexible compensation packages, and support career planning and HR development plans. Ultimately, according to Cheese, Thomas and Craig (2008, p. 9), "talent has become a precious resource fought over by competitors in a global war of talent".

This research has attempted to explore current Lebanese "Talent Management" strategies and practices, giving a thorough overview of the effective steps used in implementing talent management and the role of HR in this. In general, the findings provided support that Lebanese employees and managers, based on their characteristics, bring forward a fair and positive feedback to the study and take the process seriously despite the misperceptions of some. Moreover, the results show that a mild majority of the respondents (67%) do believe that Lebanese organizations have talent management initiatives, and suggest that more is needed to achieve satisfactory TM implementation. The current results conform to other researches performed on Lebanese managers where Hejase, Rifai, Tabsh, & Hejase (2012b) contend that "it is urgently recommended that strategically integrated human capital programs like talent management are to be adopted to capitalize on the new generation of better prepared future employees. If done, then there will be a noticeable performance boost, salary increases, promotions and inner accomplishments" (p. 37).

This paper contributes to the existing research on the topic within the Arab region, whereby results and findings add to the assertion that the Middle Eastern countries are undergoing a transformation from classical or traditional HR practices to Talent Management. Evidence provides mix signals as depicted by different reports and researches from the region. For example, Al Ruwaili, Bright, and Al-Hameed (2013) contend that "Talent Management" is a reality in Saudi banks, while Biygautane and Al Yahya (2014) conclude in their study about the MENA (Middle East & North Africa) and GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries that "while the developed western countries are undergoing a war for talent, the MENA and GCC countries are hampered with chronic socioeconomic challenges that are affecting true implementation of "Talent Management" practices" (p. 212). Moreover, Singh, Jones and Hall (2012) assert that in their research covering 4,599 workers from 40 companies in the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain, results show that "employee engagement in the GCC has typically been at low levels by international comparisons" (p. 100) and "expatriate workers currently hold an overwhelming majority of private sector jobs across the GCC" (p. 101), which negatively affect sound Talent Management practices. Finally, Aleron Partners' (2012) research found that there is "hard empirical data both globally, and in the UAE, that proves there are real financial benefits for businesses that invest in Talent Management (Para 4). Moreover, the challenge for UAE businesses is to find ways of combining their traditional decision making processes with international governance standards. It was found that businesses operating in the Emirates could improve decision making; most organizations decide to sacrifice achieving their strategy and goals in favor of controlling risk" (Para 9).

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