Talent Management Systems in Indian Pharmaceutical Firms: Exploring an Emerging Typology

Kirti Sharda

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT
AHMEDABAD-380 015
INDIA

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Kirti Sharda
Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad
e-mail: kirti@iima.ac.in

Abstract

In this paper, the researcher explored the implementation of talent management process in pharmaceutical industry in India through a case study approach. Data was collected from top management and senior managers in HR, marketing and sales, research and development, operations and quality functions through 30 semi-structured interviews. The data was examined using a conceptual framework derived from extant literature in talent management. The analysis dimensions included *talent management practices, talent management mechanisms, talent pool strategy,* and *relationship with business strategy, organizational performance and competitive advantage*. The dimensions were used to arrive at a framework which emphasized two drivers of talent management effectiveness – *degree of integration* and *organizational goal alignment*. The alternate systems of talent management which emerged from the combination of these two dimensions were labeled as *contingency-based, results-oriented, activity-based* and *vision-driven talent management*. Based on the emergent framework and extant research, a set of practices have been proposed which could enhance the effectiveness of talent management processes in organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian pharmaceutical industry enjoys a leading position in the global generic pharmaceutical space. A unique combination of opportunities and constraints characterize the industry. It has achieved global excellence standards in mass production of high-quality branded generics driven by world-class capabilities in formulations. These have been created by and sustained with continued investments in infrastructure and research and development by industry leaders. At the same time, the industry is highly fragmented with large number of small and medium-sized players. This has led to intense price competition and overall lower industry-wide margins. (Euromonitor International, 2015; MarketLine, 2015; McKinsey & Company, Inc., 2015) Further, the industry has also attracted increased surveillance and scrutiny on their manufacturing practices by regulatory agencies like the US FDA which creates additional pressure on the business plans of pharmaceutical firms.

In 1970, the Government of India restricted patent applicability to process patents while derecognizing product patents. This was a shot in the arm for the nascent industry which already had skilled manpower and proven manufacturing capability. The industry grew unhindered in both domestic and select export markets till 2005 when India brought back product patents and IP protection by implementing the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement of WTO. There was considerable concern about the ability of the industry to cope with the new regulations, especially with 20 year-long product patents and limitations on reverse engineering. But the industry adapted quickly to the new patent regime and continued to grow strongly.

In the last decade, domestic markets have been buoyant with rising income in the country, creation of a 300 million strong middle class, expansion in medical infrastructure and wider penetration of medical insurance. The rise in disposable income has also accompanied by increased prevalence of lifestyle and chronic diseases adding to the demand buoyancy. The industry has also benefitted from the global outsourcing trend as export markets became a major destination for Indian manufactured generic APIs (Euromonitor International, 2015; McKinsey & Company, Inc., 2015).

The size of the Indian pharmaceuticals market was estimated at $12.8bn in 2014 making it the tenth largest market globally in terms of value and third largest in volume. The industry is expected to maintain its leading position and is projected to grow to $55bn by 2020, which will make it the second largest market globally, next only to US (McKinsey & Company, Inc., 2015).

Industry experts believe that talent management and employee excellence will be a critical enabler in achieving this projected growth (McKinsey & Company, Inc., 2015). However, the path is not going to be easy. The industry continues to face critical challenges with regard to human resource management. It is plagued by a dearth of talent and high attrition rates (Unnikrishnan, 2008), with average attrition rates estimated to be as high as 35% (Dhotre, 2010), even as salaries have grown at a CAGR of approximately 12% since 2009. Labour costs have kept pace and have increased at a CAGR of 19% in the same time period (MarketLine, 2015).

Industry leaders have identified talent acquisition, employee retention and management as some of the critical challenges faced by the industry. They aver that availability and retention of skilled manpower is the single most critical factor which will determine success in the pharmaceutical industry in the years to come (Express Pharma, 2012). Pharmaceutical firms require high-skilled employees especially in sales and marketing and research and development (R &D) functions. High attrition rates in sales and marketing functions can be attributed to perceived lack of growth opportunities within organizations and increasing opportunities in the market due to competition. The industry's reputation as a mediocre paymaster has not helped either. The overall growth experienced in India in the past 15 years has facilitated the migration of qualified professionals to better paying industries like FMCG, telecommunications and similar others. In R&D function, the industry is hobbled by the low volumes of highly skilled researchers that Indian educational system produces every year. The critical shortage of skilled workforce raises a serious question mark on the tenability of the projected industry growth. Attracting and retaining talent has become a paramount issue holding great significance for pharmaceutical firms.

This research explored the talent management (TM) practices and systems of pharmaceutical firms and examined their relationship with organizational performance parameters in order to

arrive at an in-depth understanding of talent management in pharmaceutical firms. The primary data and background research was also used to articulate a conceptual framework of talent management dimensions and explore the varied forms of talent management systems existing in pharmaceutical organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND AIMS OF RESEARCH

The review of literature revealed that many different approaches have been used for defining, understanding and modelling talent management. There is no clear consensus on the definition of talent or talent management amongst researchers and consultants. Some of the primary areas of investigation have included issues around meaning of talent management (Hughes & Rog, 2008), focus and fit (Garrow & Hirsh, 2008), difference between talent management and HR practices (Hughes & Rog, 2008), nature of talent (Meyers, van Woerkom & Dries, 2013), talent management strategies for accelerated growth (Eyring, 2014), talent philosophies (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014), models and frameworks of talent management (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Morgan & Jardin, 2010; Lewis & Heckman, 2014) and similar others.

Despite the ambiguities and equivocalities, one issue that researchers and practitioners unanimously agree on is that talent management is paramount for organizational and employee growth. For instance, employee productivity and motivation positively impacts the achievement of organizational goals. Similarly, attrition or intention to leave reduces when intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction and organizational commitment is high. Talent management can serve as a bridge for linking organizational goals with employee aspirations and ambitions. In a highly competitive business environment, talent management serves as a very useful mechanism to attract, identify and retain critical talent, and develop the same for enhanced organizational performance.

This research was launched with an objective to explore and integrate talent management issues encountered in practice and highlighted in literature. For this purpose, the pharmaceutical industry was chosen as the context given that it faced unique opportunities, challenges and constraints with regard to talent management. The first order objectives of the research were to explore the talent management practices of pharmaceutical firms, to examine their strengths and

constraints, to identify the effectiveness of TM practices and systems, and map their relationship with organizational performance parameters. The second order objective was to derive a conceptual framework of talent management based on primary data and extant research, and articulate different systems of talent management used by organizations. The research also aimed to propose a set of practices based on the emergent framework and extant research which could further enhance the effectiveness of talent management processes in organizations.

METHOD

A combination of exploratory and descriptive research designs was used to collect data from Indian pharmaceutical organizations on their talent management strategies. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to collect relevant primary data. Secondary sources of data such as past records, internal documents, and reports available in public domain were also referred to wherever available or provided by sample firms. Data was collected from top management and senior managers in HR, marketing and sales, research and development, operations and quality functions through 30 semi-structured interviews in order to understand and explore TM processes and their relationship with organizational performance parameters. The interviews lasted between 135 to 150 minutes each. The interviews were recorded either through a recorder or through detailed hand-written notes based on the respondents' comfort. The recorded interviews were transcribed for further analysis.

Extant literature was consulted to derive the guidelines for data collection and the analytical dimensions for the collected data. In particular, Lewis & Heckman's (2006) critical review of talent management, Garrow & Hirsh's (2008) work on focus and fit issues in talent management, Iles, Chuai and Preece's (2010) propositions on focus of talent management, Morgan & Jardin's (2010) integrated talent management framework, Eyring's (2014) talent management strategies for accelerated growth, and Meyers and Van Woerkom's (2014) research on talent philosophies served as the foundational studies for understanding the dimensions which could have a critical impact on the effectiveness of talent management processes.

Accordingly, the semi-structured interview schedule included questions on the history and evolution of TM in organization, philosophy driving the TM, TM initiatives and mechanisms in

organization, goals and focus of TM, TM architecture, linkage with business strategy, organizational performance, organizational culture, TM challenges given the industry context, TM challenges given the organizational context, communication around TM, employee response to TM, tensions and managerial dilemmas, employee engagement, impact on job-related attitudes, definition of talent, measuring effectiveness of TM, costs of not investing in TM, future concerns, future goals and initiatives and similar others. The schedule was used as an indicative guideline and the researcher allowed the respondents to express themselves unencumbered by any strong interviewing protocol.

Data Analysis

As mentioned in the previous section, the analysis was driven by extant literature in the field of talent management. The author reviewed leading research papers on talent management and derived a set of dimensions which defined talent management processes in organizations. A content analysis of the data was undertaken with the help of these dimensions.

Based on review of research, it can be postulated that it is important for any talent management process to include the following components:

1. Core elements of TM practices (based on human resource management principles)
2. Mechanisms and architectures which support individual and system-level analytics
3. Identification and analysis of talent pools and their linkages
4. Practice-outcome relationship, that is, relationship with business strategy, organizational performance and competitive advantage

These dimensions overlap largely with Lewis & Heckman's (2006) conceptual framework on hierarchy of strategic talent management components and relevant questions across levels. Accordingly, Lewis & Heckman's (2006) conceptual framework was modified and condensed to create 4 lenses for data analysis: talent practices, talent management mechanisms, talent pool strategy, and relationship with business strategy, organizational performance and competitive advantage. The modified conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1 below:
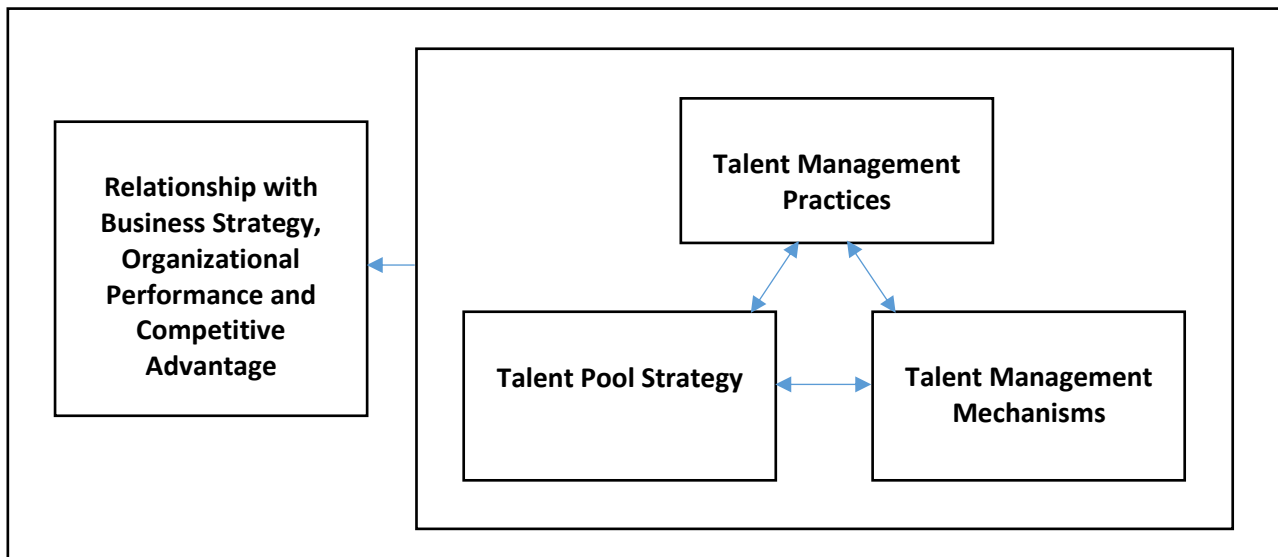
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Talent Management Process

Talent Management Components	Exploratory Areas
Talent practices	Practices to meet an organization's talent goals: - Recruitment, Selection - Induction - Compensation and incentives system - Performance management system/process - Training and development - Career Management - Succession planning
Talent management mechanisms	Architecture and tools to support implementation of talent management strategy: - Competency architectures - Management information systems
Talent pool strategy	Identification and positioning of talent and talent pools: - Identification of critical, median, and high-potential talent - Understanding required combination of performers - Differential compensation and incentive policy - Linking talent pools to career paths - Preparing talent pools for future roles and skill requirements
Relationship with business strategy, organizational performance, and competitive advantage	- Analysis of how improvements in talent quality and will drive strategic gains and create and sustain competitive advantage - Understanding of which talent resources will yield advantage in current and future market scenarios

Source: Adapted from Lewis & Heckman (2006)

When all four aspects of talent management are linked they form an integrated talent management process which is expected to have a deeper impact on organizational performance. The relationship between the 4 components can be depicted as follows in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Relationship between components of talent management process

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│                              │        ┌──────────────────────┐         │   │
│                              │        │   Talent Management   │         │   │
│  ┌─────────────────────┐     │        │       Practices       │         │   │
│  │   Relationship with │     │        └──────────────────────┘         │   │
│  │  Business Strategy, │◄────│           ↕            ↕                 │   │
│  │    Organizational   │     │  ┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐ │   │
│  │  Performance and    │     │  │ Talent Pool  │↔ │ Talent Management │ │   │
│  │     Competitive     │     │  │   Strategy   │  │    Mechanisms     │ │   │
│  │      Advantage      │     │  └──────────────┘  └──────────────────┘ │   │
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To elaborate, talent management practices need to be supported by and provide data which can be analyzed through talent management mechanisms. These analytics can form the foundation of a coherent and internally linked talent pool strategy, which can subsequently help refine the practices. mechanisms and architecture. Together, the practices, mechanisms and talent pools need to be linked with the organization's strategy and must contribute to the organization's performance and competitive advantage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The conceptual framework derived from extant research guided the first level of analysis. This research found that organizations differ in the way they define talent. For example, some organizations looked at it in terms of effective HR practices while others defined it as succession management and yet others as building a leadership pipeline. Within the same organization itself, different managers had a different understanding of what talent management means. This finding is supported by the reviews of prior researchers in this field, namely, Lewis & Heckman (2006), Collings & Mellahi (2009), Morgan & Jardin (2010), Ariss, Cascio & Paauwe (2014), Collings, Scullion & Vaiman (2015) and others. As a first step then, the researcher combined the perspectives available from prior research and the responses shared by top management leaders through their interviews to derive a conceptual framework which articulated the important

components of a talent management process. This framework closely appropriated Lewis & Heckman's model of strategic talent management components. Hence the same was used for subsequent analysis with minor modifications in the components and associated questions. The components and associated areas of exploration have been articulated in Figure 1.

Next, the components and associated exploratory areas given in the conceptual framework were used to analyze the interview transcripts. The analysis revealed that different organizations had a different understanding of the focus of talent management, the practices they use, the supporting mechanisms and architecture they have put in place, and the degree of link with business strategy and firm performance. The analysis gave rise to two dimensions which seem to have a critical impact on effectiveness of talent management: degree of integration between talent management practices, mechanisms and talent pool strategy, and alignment of the same with organizational goals.

Alignment with the organization's goals and business strategy has a twofold impact on the robustness of the talent management program. While goal alignment increases the motivation and engagement levels of employees across levels, it also ensures that the program is forward-looking and dynamic in nature and evolves with the strategic vision of the organization to create sustainable competitive advantage.

These two dimensions of *degree of integration* (of talent management practices, mechanisms and talent pool strategy), and *organizational goal alignment* gave rise to four types of talent management systems: *contingency-based, results-oriented, activity-based and vision-driven talent management*. These are depicted pictorially in Figure 3.

This typology provides a framework to assess various approaches to talent management along the two dimensions discussed above. While this typology explores the various forms that a talent management process can morph into, in actual practice it does not claim to be exhaustive. However, it does provide a basis to understand the various options available to organizations with the intent to help them to conduct a more differentiated analysis of talent management systems.

Figure 3: *Emerging Models of Talent Management*

	high	INTEGRATED APPROACH TO TALENT MANAGEMENT	
ORGANIZATIONAL GOAL ALIGNMENT		**Activity-based talent management**	**Vision-driven talent management**
		Contingency-based talent management	**Results-oriented talent management**
	low	low	high

1. *Contingency-based talent management:*

Organizations in this category put in place standard HR practices related to recruitment, induction and performance appraisal. Some amount of coaching and mentoring is provided by seniors to new entrants, however this is done on an ad-hoc basis. The HR processes are not well-documented, rather management proceeds by providing broad guidelines to administrative staff. While performance appraisal is conducted at scheduled intervals, identification of talent and potential appraisal is not conducted. There is no mechanism for succession planning or creation of leadership pipeline. Talent is identified on a case-by-case basis and when a need arises.

These organizations want to invest in and improve their systems but experience vacuum with regard to managerial depth. Hence, even while talent-related discussions happen at strategy table, no deep insights are generated. These organizations face high attrition at all levels. Talent gap arising out of poor technical skills at entry level and high attrition at middle management

level seriously impedes the achievement of business goals. Discontent among employees is frequent as HR systems are not comprehensive, well-defined, transparent and supported by robust performance analytics. In the absence of well-defined HR system, employee dissatisfaction with HR issues is managed when the need arises on a case-by-case basis. Such organizations primarily have a hierarchy culture with elements of clan culture as well (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). This implies that while the focus is on internal maintenance and stability, there is concern for and sensitivity towards employee issues.

Alignment between organizational goals and talent management is low. Organization's vision and mission is not communicated to employees through proactive interventions, and hence there is little evidence of employees' connection with the larger vision and mission. Organizations in this category usually have their talent management practices suited to short-term organizational goals. Such organizations are weighed by immediate and short-term business concerns which also leave very little managerial bandwidth to focus on talent management. Focus is on operational excellence and achieving a leading position in a niche market. These organizations face high constraints due to low growth or low turnover. The primary concern of such organizations is to increase sales turnover.

2. *Results-oriented talent management:*

Organizations in this category have in place basic human resource management practices ranging from recruitment, selection, induction, performance management to training programmes. However, their efforts at employee management are highly focused on performance appraisal through use of performance metrics and analytics. The focus is on holding employees to stringent performance measures and on identifying top performers. Rewards systems in results-oriented talent management are designed based on relative grading. Thus, the performance bar is continuously raised and employees are expected to perform to a set of new standards in each cycle. Such a highly structured performance appraisal process which categorizes employees at frequent intervals, and 'rewards' and 'punishes' them accordingly, tends to create a high degree of dissatisfaction and low morale in employees. Under such a system, organizations seek to mitigate the resulting stress and motivation problems by offering incentives in the form of training opportunities, higher designations, and extrinsic motivation-driven rewards. But many employees perceive these incentives as superficial as they do not

address the underlying causes of stress and discontent. In the results-oriented system, talent management is sacrificed at the altar of performance measures that are highly biased towards numerical targets.

Such organizations recruit people with domain specific skills at entry level and provide them with basic technical skills. However, employees are primarily responsible for their performance and future growth in the organization. Organization provides formal and informal developmental opportunities to high-performers who demonstrate excellence in their work.

The talent management practices are linked with each other, for instance recruitment is linked with induction and mentoring, while performance management is linked with training. However, competency frameworks, succession planning, creating career plans and critical success paths, and building leadership pipelines are missing. Talent pools are not identified clearly. Talent identification is done on an informal basis. In some cases, performance appraisal data is used to identify high potential talent and to groom them for higher responsibilities.

The link between talent management initiatives and organizational goals and strategy is weak. An attempt is made to link talent management activities to organization's goals with the help of performance analytics, however impact and effectiveness of talent management is not studied. Organizational culture is usually a hierarchy culture which is focused on internal maintenance supported through stability and control (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). Such organizations follow a centralized approach to management, while holding nostalgia for the relationship-oriented culture of the yore. However, there is clarity that performance orientation and discipline takes precedence over collaborative relationships and congenial work culture. High degree of concern with cost-management leads to a lack of innovative practices and entrepreneurial climate in these organizations.

3. *Activity-based talent management:*

Organizations which adopt this approach are focused on high-growth and need their talent management system to keep pace with the requirements of their ambitious growth goals. Significant investments are made in implementing comprehensive talent management practices such as recruitment, selection, induction, performance management, training and development.

Required talent management architecture and mechanisms are in place and are used for most talent related decisions at entry level through middle management. Culture building and articulation of organizational values serve as yet another mechanism to drive talent management. Some of the talent management practices are integrated with each other. However, the number of practices multiply quickly and tend to increase to a level such that their linkages with each other and with the overall goal becomes questionable. There is a danger of redundancy given the large number of initiatives that are launched frequently.

Domain specific skills continue to remain a preference at the recruitment level. There is high emphasis on performance management similar to a results-oriented system, however the organization also emphasizes and supports the development of competencies for future roles. Talent pools are identified till middle management levels and high potentials are groomed for higher responsibilities accordingly. However, a formal talent pool strategy for senior and top management levels is missing. Talent identification at top management level is done in an informal manner.

The practice-outcome link is weak and accountability frameworks are not in place. In other words, the relationship of the talent management initiatives with the business strategy and organizational performance is not explored. Though internally the organization has high degree of formalization driven by a need for internal stability and control, the organizational culture is closer to a market culture where the organization is more focused on increasing productivity, profits and results (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). Such organizations promote innovative thinking and actions, however within limited boundaries.

4. *Vision-driven talent management:*

Organizations with vision-driven talent management system are high on both integration of talent practices, mechanisms and talent pool strategy, and its link with organizational goals and business strategy. Bundles of talent management practices form an integral part of an internally consistent strategy aimed at systematic employee development. There is active investment in building a leadership pipeline and proactive succession planning. Such organizations integrate talent management practices with analytical frameworks and mechanisms and with talent pool strategies across levels. While work is performance-intensive, it is supported by a collaborative

ecosystem which is characterized by team work and peer-support for problem-solving and personal concerns, and leadership strategies which combine task and relationship orientation. The organization's vision and mission is proactively communicated and internalized by employees.

Under such a system, candidates with non-domain specific skills are also recruited and groomed into requisite roles and positions. Talent pools are clearly identified and talent practices are customized to talent pools. The talent management architecture is proactively simplified to respond to user needs. It captures the required data and feeds it back into the system for performance evaluation and employee development purposes. Developmental tools such as 360-degree feedback are used and assessment centers are organized where talent is assessed and feedback is given to critical, median and high-potential candidates.

An effort is made to link talent practices and talent pools with business strategy and organizational goals. Such organizations are deemed as attractive employers and they have lower attrition compared with industry average. Their culture is more entrepreneurial in nature which offers flexibility and opportunities for expression of individuality, while maintaining industry leadership. Such organizations are typically resource-rich and do not face the constraints faced by the organizations in contingency-based talent management type. They tend to be associated with innovative, visionary or values-driven management style.

Enhancing effectiveness of the systems:

The systems shared above illustrate that a talent management process can be defined with regard to its components (talent practices, mechanisms, talent pool strategy and relationship with business strategy, organizational goals and competitive advantage). The data collected as a part of this research shows that pure types of these organizations do exist; at the same time some organizations also practice a hybrid model consisting of a combination of more than one type. Such hybrid models are generally seen in organizations which are transitioning from one growth phase to another phase of growth.

Talent management processes require close attention and frequent communication. They need to incorporate mechanisms to capture the grievances and discontent or discomfort of employees. Instead of rejecting employee discomfort as complaints of disgruntled and lazy employees, organizations need to understand how the narrative can be framed so that organizational requirements make more sense to dissatisfied employees. Sometimes employees are not aware of their own special skills (blind spots) and sometimes organizations erroneously identify high performers on select metrics as high potentials. This can create issues when these false positives are promoted to positions which require leadership behaviours or specialized skills. It is also important not only to identify talent pools, but also allow opportunities for development of critical path talent skills to all employees.

Interestingly, all organizations in the sample had linked their employee value proposition with talent management, but most organizations did not track effectiveness or impact of talent management on the organization or on employees, nor had they put in place an accountability framework. Since most organizations are highly focused on "fixing' employee performance, in the process they lose understanding of what talents and skills will be required for the new "unknowns" they might encounter in their competitive space. Organizations also fail to devote resources towards exploring new pastures which could give them an edge over their competitive rivals.

 The data also shows that in practice, talent management strategies can be effective only when they are supported by high-quality, employee-oriented processes. Those organizations that have well-defined and well-communicated supporting mechanisms appear to perform better than others in the sample. These supporting mechanisms include an employee-oriented and innovation-driven organizational culture, well-articulated higher-order organizational values and sensitivity towards employees' ambitions, aspirations and creativity. When the cultural ethos of the organization is upheld and psychological contracts are honoured, organizations are privileged to acquire a set of employees who are high-performing, committed, creative, and go beyond task requirements to engage willingly in organizational citizenship behaviour. Thus, some significant questions for organizations are: Will our talent management system reflect our organization's core values, purpose and underlying ideology? (Garrow & Hirsch, 2009) And, does the current

management have the capability, capacity and credibility to make the chosen talent management process work? (McGuire, 2005)

Many organizations forget to take into account employees' perspective while implementing talent management programmes with a missionary zeal. Organizations are beginning to recognize the individual employee as an important stakeholder in the talent management system. Organizational needs alone cannot drive a successful talent management process; the individual employee's goals, motivations and expectations also exist as critical inputs which could have a significant impact on the outcome of the process. As McGuire (2005) states, "employees stay with organizations where they feel they add value and their work is valued." A sustainable talent management process should be designed to take both organizational and individual perspectives into account and ensure that all stakeholder needs are met.

CONCLUSION

This paper clarifies the definition of talent management with the help of extant research and primary data. It defines talent management as a combination of 4 components: talent practices, talent management mechanisms, talent pool strategy and linkage with business strategy, organizational performance and competitive advantage. The paper also outlines the two critical parameters that could define effectiveness of talent management process in organizations i.e. degree of integration between practices, mechanisms, and talent pools and the alignment of the same with organizational goals. The systems of talent management which emerged from an in-depth analysis of primary data and available research highlights that organizations design their talent management processes in heterogeneous ways based on organizational goals, constraints and business environment. Each of these systems bring certain benefits to the organization, however vision-driven talent management system appears to be more effective with regard to reducing employee attrition and enhancing employee motivation and retention. These systems of talent management are not limited to pharmaceutical industry. Such models can be discovered in many more industries. These models and systems of talent management are not exhaustive in nature and many new or hybrid forms of talent management could exist. However, the model proposed here does provide a useful framework for further research in this area.

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