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**Global Entrepreneurial Talent Management  
challenges and opportunities for HRD**

**Talent Management in European SMEs: Case  
Analysis Between Slovenia and Poland**

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Organizations are investing significant efforts and resources into recruiting, developing, and retaining key talent with the potential to contribute significantly to performance. However, the talent management (TM) process is difficult and despite all the efforts, many organizations struggle to effectively manage these valuable people. The main objective of this research is to examine the implementation of TM in SMEs in Europe. Our research responds to calls for more evidence of how TM is implemented across different contexts and which approaches are more prevalent. Europe is a dynamic collective of countries with distinctive political, social and economic histories that frame the present context in which SMEs operate. We present the findings from two case organizations in post socialist economies, one in Slovenia and the other in Poland. This research shows that in these post socialist contexts there is a strong need to approach TM from the perspective of SMEs, where their size and contextualized knowledge of their internal and external environment elicits local solutions to TM challenges. Furthermore, this demonstrates the value of foregrounding the individual needs and aspirations of talent when designing and implementing TM practices in SMEs, in order to create a sustainable future for all stakeholders.

*Key Words:* talent management, SMEs, Poland, Slovenia, talent management practices

**Introduction**

In today's business environment, it is mostly employees — not technology, not factories, not capital — that are believed to create value for organizations, in that they are now the main determinant of organizational performance (Crain, 2009). Therefore, organizations are investing significant efforts and resources into recruiting, developing and retaining top talent with the potential to contribute significantly to organizational performance (Collings et al., 2018). However, the talent management (TM) process is difficult and despite all the efforts, many organizations struggle to effectively manage talent (Minbaeva & Collings, 2013).

Although a review of the literature by Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013) shows that TM is a growing field, the effectiveness of TM and its added value have still to be accurately stated or evidenced. Moreover, research on TM strategies and organizational performance is somewhat lacking; specifically, whether the right strategy would achieve the desired impact on organizational performance (Lawler, 2008).

Additionally, research on TM is still lacking in its theoretical foundation and the definitional clarity to explain what really constitutes talent, and how to manage it effectively (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Scullion & Collings, 2011; Tansley, 2011; Boselie & Fruytier, 2013; Festing and Schafer, 2014). Moreover, Collings et al. (2011) argue that with some notable exceptions (Vance & Vaiman, 2008; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Farndale et al., 2010; Makela et al., 2010) much of the theoretical and empirical base upon which TM is premised is based on North American thinking and research. As a result, there is evidently a great need for empirical research to investigate the dynamics and impact of TM from different perspectives and outside of the North American context.

Collings et al. (2011) suggest that the context of Human Resource Management and Development (HRMD) is significantly different in the European context than in the US context, where much of the extant theorizing has emerged with exogenous factors playing a particularly significant role in influencing management behaviour with regard to the management of employees. For example the benefits (paid parental leave and mandated vacation time) that EU companies offer to their employees are distinctly different compared to the US which is the only advanced developed country who does not provide legislated vacation time.

There is also a consistent critique of human resource management and development literature that research and implications for policy and practice largely reflect the needs and resources of large organizations. This is in contrast with the disproportionate volume of SMEs prevalent in many countries and their impact on regional and national economies (Harney & Dundon 2006). Similarly, while government human resource development (HRD) policies often reflect the interests of large employers, there is some evidence of specific policy initiatives to stimulate HRD in SMEs (Berhad, 2018).

Therefore, the main objective of this research is to examine the implementation of TM in SMEs in post-socialist Europe with an in-depth case study approach involving the key individuals (HR Directors) of two SMEs from Slovenia and Poland. In doing so, our research will respond to calls for more evidence of how TM is implemented across different national contexts (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Furthermore, it contributes to the specific debates on how we can explore Human Resource Management and Development (HRMD) and specifically TM and development strategies within SMEs in a European post socialist context. The HRD literature has predominantly focused on both large firms and formal practices, and as a consequence HRD in SMEs is often considered deficient. Often large organizations have more resources and thus time to allocate for HRD practices which puts SMEs in a disadvantaged position. Therefore, it is argued that the current knowledge base is flawed as research has not moved beyond the deficiency model to explore and explain HRD in the SME setting (Nolan & Garavan, 2016a; Nolan & Garavan, 2016b).

## **Towards Understanding the Concept of TM**

Effective TM is considered a critical determinant of organizational success (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010), and imperative for the sustainability of organizations. However, in spite of its growing popularity and more than two decades of debate, the construct of TM suffers from conceptual confusion in that there is a serious lack of clarity regarding its definition, scope and overall goals (Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Tansley, 2011). It

has been argued that the lack of theoretical foundations and conceptual development in the TM literature can be attributed in part to the fact that most of the literature in this field is practitioner- or consultancy-based (Iles, Chuai & Preece, 2010). This latter finding also accounts for the literature's focus on practices (the 'how') rather than on 'who' is considered talented and 'why' (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013).

There are, ongoing controversies (Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010) about whether TM is about managing the talent of all employees (inclusive or strengths-based approach to TM), or whether it is about the talents of only high-potential or high performing employees (exclusive approach to TM). However, the questions we might need to ask is whether these two positions are mutually exclusive and whether there is value in standardizing practices across all organizations. How each company approaches the concept of TM is contingent (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) upon how they believe they should manage their particular talent in order to achieve their specific goals. Therefore, it is not about how to agree on what talent and TM is (or is not) but about how companies can use it to the best of their advantage when considering a number of factors that characterize their company and the environment in which they operate. The same applies to countries, in terms of managing their international skilled workforces (Turchick-Hakak & Al Ariss, 2013; World Economic Forum, 2011).

Moreover, Iles et al. (2010) believe that attracting and retaining talent are the two fundamental necessities, while Poorhosseinzadeh and Subramaniam (2013) do not consider the issue of retention. Consequently, talent is recruited at great expense but the organization fails to gain a return on their investment through neglect or misaligned policies and practices, resulting in the talent leaving their organization. Therefore, organizations need to understand why their talent leave the organization and implement practical solutions to mitigate against potential losses (Boštjančič & Slana, 2018). There is a diverse range of HRMD strategies adopted to retaining talent (Collings, Scullion & Caligiuri, 2018). According to Poorhosseinzadeh and Subramaniam, (2013) we can identify some dominant country specific TM trends:

- In Brazil, France and Netherland, they stimulate passion;
- In Japan, trust and respect are extremely important in nurturing relationships;
- In Italy, companies conduct effective performance assessments;
- In South Korea, organizations retain people by performance targets; and
- In Canada, it depends on employees' satisfaction, motivation, retirement benefit, long-term success of organization, and so on (Hughes & Rog, 2008).

It is essential to align TM practices and activities with the internal and external environment of the organization as the above trends might be observed as part of the institutional context of each country and they will be based on the individual national culture or the countries priorities, demands and aspirations. Al Ariss et al. (2014) urge researchers to understand TM as a multilevel relational construct between individual, organizational, institutional, and national/international contexts that shape the management of talent. The individual dynamic comprises the subjective experience of the individual. For example, this includes the perceptions of managers and employees about how their talent are being managed in their firms. A second feature of this perspective is the intermediary role of organizations where TM policy and practice takes place. A third is a country's institutional context that enables/constrains TM, such as norms, values, and regulations. Either consciously or unconsciously, these impact TM policies and practices. Finally,

the national/international and even sectoral contexts account for the potential transferability of TM process across business sectors and national boundaries (Al Ariss et al., 2014).

Joyce and Slocum (2012) identified four critical capabilities for successful TM implementation: in strategy, structure, culture, and execution. They argued that senior managers should manage talent in light of the strategic needs and opportunities of their firms where an innovative structure will enable firms to operate effectively. Linked to this, a supportive corporate culture will provide employees with a sense of cohesion and simultaneously deepen their understanding and practice of the norms/ideals of their organization. Finally, executing unique TM processes enables companies to gain a competitive edge, and allows them to meet or exceed their customers' expectations (Al Ariss et al., 2014).

From a different perspective, Schuler, Jackson, and Tarique (2011) identify several barriers to TM implementation. These include: time dedicated to TM by senior managers, organizational structures, lack of involvement by middle managers, lack of willingness to acknowledge performance variances among employed workers, lack of HR/D knowledge in how to properly address TM challenges and the discrepancy between knowledge and action that limits managerial ability to make the right TM decisions. Those barriers are important and overcoming them is key to any successful TM strategy (Sidani & Ariss, 2014). Although a great deal has been written about the virtues of TM from an employers' perspective, there is a scarcity of corresponding empirical research on the actual implementation and evaluation of TM in practice (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016).

This section has highlighted the weak theoretical foundations of TM, reflecting an emphasis on TM practices in the literature. Whether talent is understood as elite or egalitarian frames an organizations' TM practices which often focus on recruitment rather than retention and may lack integration with internal organizational structures and cultures and HR practices. Finally, the external environment is integral to developing effective TM practices, however, this has been explored and examined predominantly in the context of developed countries while research in a post-socialist context is limited.

## **TM in (Post-Socialist) Europe**

Europe is a vast and diverse region covering an area of some 9,839 square kilometres (roughly equivalent in size to the USA), approximately 800 million inhabitants, 45 nation states and more than 70 languages (Mayrhofer and Holt Larsen, 2006). The region includes the 27 member states of the European Union (EU), which are working towards greater economic integration through reducing trade barriers and other policy interventions aimed at facilitating the free movement of people, goods, services and capital (Dicken, 2010).

One direct impact of membership of the EU is that the substantial legal and administrative requirements for foreign workers do not apply to transfers between EU countries and has led to strong talent flows between European countries (Collings et al., 2011), with some minor restrictions for some recent entrants. Collings et al. (2011) state that the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) represent a further important part of the region. While the boundaries of this region are open to question, it includes countries such as the Czech republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, and the countries constituting the former Yugoslavia, Soviet Union and countries formed after the break-up of the Soviet model (Vaiman & Holden, 2011).

Post-socialist countries have different endowments and show significant variations in preferred approaches to HRM as a result of distinct cultural and developmental trajectories (Kohont & Brewster, 2014; Kohont et al., 2015; Morley et al., 2018). Despite their common socialist legacy and subsequent Europeanization, their distinct heritage, culture, degree of industrialization, influence of religion, and post-socialist developmental paths make these countries rather disparate, which has also led to some divergence in their current HRM policies and practices (Morley et al., 2016).

Morley et al. (2016) suggest that there were at least three different traditions in the management of labour market dynamics framed by the prevailing controlling role of the state/party (Ignjatović & Svetlik, 2006). First, the ex-Yugoslav tradition, which is marked by high unemployment, self-management, non-alliance movement, more open borders for travel and work and outward FDI, which contributed to more openness and direction to the Western markets (Pološki-Vokić et al., 2017). Second, the Orthodox Soviet System in Russia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia marked by a strong emphasis on rules and the absolute power of the Communist party. And, third, a moderate intervention model found in Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. These labour market differences are reflected still in much stricter labour legislation in Slovenia and Russia as in Poland and Hungary (Groux, 2014).

In the socialist period, union membership was close to 100 per cent; however, unions performed a social and welfare role rather than dealt with employee relations (Sippola, 2009), and were unprepared for a new role. Therefore, reduced trade union density is an important characteristic of post-socialist countries (Groux, 2014; Psychogios et al., 2013). However, trade unions still have an important partnership role and significant power in organizations, for example in Slovenia, Czech Republic (Kazlauskaitė et al., 2013; Stanojević, 2017) and Croatia (Pološki Vokić et al., 2017).

Therefore, the research suggests that post-socialist countries demonstrate a cross vergence rather than a convergence with Western HRM practices, (Milikić et al., 2012; Psychogios et al., 2016), and can be characterized as combining both post-socialist and western features. Indeed, Horowitz et al. (2014) conclude in their analysis of TM and HRM practices in the post-socialist region that a simple import of Western solutions and HRM practices is unworkable and unproductive, therefore distinctive types of managing HR are needed. Vaiman et al. (2012) suggest that in Western Europe the talent supply will decline continuously, leading to “almost empty talent pipelines beyond 2020” (World Economic Forum, 2011), creating challenges for managing the labour force for example in Poland (Ward, 2011).

Similarly, Vaiman and Holden (2011) highlight that TM in CEE countries remains relatively underdeveloped in comparison to many western countries and still influenced by their socialist legacy. For example, the competencies and skills that are typically regarded as key in identifying high potentials in western organizations are not currently used in organizations in a post socialist country like Poland, particularly in domestically owned firms (Skuza et al., 2013).

Furthermore, this presents challenges for researchers due to the lack of knowledge of management practices and work relationships in post-socialist countries (Suutari, 1998). The convergence of Western and Eastern practices was widely assumed in the post transition period, yet while economic transition might be considerably advanced (Alam et al., 2008), the cultural processes influencing managerial practices are still in a period of change and believed to be far from converging with Western models (Vaiman & Holden, 2011; Skuza et al., 2012). This



supports Luthans et al. (2006) argument that there is an urgent need to empirically investigate the relevance and operation of constructs to critical organizational issues in non-Western cultures (Vaiman et al., 2012).

## **TM in SMEs**

SMEs play an important role in the European economy, where more than 16 million companies, 99% of which are SMEs, account for more than two-thirds of the total workforce (Festing et al., 2013). Across the OECD, SMEs account for 99% of all businesses, in which almost one person out of three is employed in a micro firm with less than 10 employees and two out of three in an SME under 250 employees (OECD, 2019). SMEs also have an important role in the redistribution of income, which helps strengthen the economy and promote sustainable economic growth (Phoemphian et al., 2015).

The Bish and Jorgensen (2016) analysis of SMEs in Denmark suggests that employees are highly cognizant of the explicit external TM branding, in other words, descriptions of the TM programmes conveyed through, job announcements, and websites. Their findings suggest that a strong external TM message can be a highly effective way for SMEs to attract and recruit job candidates.

Skills development is a crucial element of any strategy to improve productivity and competitiveness within a firm. Lange et al. (2000) identified that the most significant barrier to skills development among SMEs was the prevailing culture and then issues of finance, access, and provision. However, these barriers are influenced by specific country level government strategies, which frame the difficulties and opportunities that SMEs face in deciding to advance the skills of their workforce (Berhad, 2018).

The problem for many SMEs is not learning itself, but their ability to allow staff already at stretched capacity to take part in formal training away from the workplace. Currently, micro SMEs and their owner/managers view training as something that happens when necessary and has an immediate impact and not as part of a continuous skills development process (Panagiotakopoulos, 2011). However, Nolan and Garavan (2016b) argue that the deficit model of HRD for SMEs in comparison to large employers, underplays the more effective emergent, informal approaches to learning often evidenced in SMEs.

Additionally, SME entrepreneurs are very often reluctant to invest in people, bearing in mind the possibility of skilled labour being “poached” (i.e. employees may move on, taking the value of any training investment too). In contrast, imperfect labour markets may encourage SMEs to “buy in” skilled employees rather than invest in developing their in-house competence base. The business strategy adopted by an organization can also act as a key barrier to workforce training. For example, if a small company is competing on the basis of low cost strategies with little emphasis on product innovation, then employers are likely to demand few labour skills. Therefore, they will have few incentives to offer their employees training and development opportunities (Hendry et al., 1995; Panagiotakopoulos, 2011). Consequently, our research will endeavour to gain a better understanding on aspects such as how organizations identify and develop talent, what barriers to TM are they currently facing and from there we will discuss a number of future steps for TM.

## Methodology

The literature review highlighted that there is limited research of TM in the context of SMEs. Therefore, we considered a qualitative, interpretive, exploratory research model to be the most appropriate strategy to understand TM from the point of view of local managers of SMEs in the specific European contexts. This approach is also consistent with the recent call by Al Ariss, Vassilopoulou, Özbilgin, & Game (2013) to pay attention to societal contexts and multilevel factors at work in order to understand strategic TM. Therefore, we adopted the interpretive in-depth case study approach with key individuals to investigate TM in SMEs in a post-socialist European context. This research strategy provides rich understanding of the context in which phenomena take place (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1995). A case study can be classified as single case, multiple case, embedded case, or holistic case (e.g., Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). The present study adopts the multiple-case strategy, using cross-case analysis. Cross case analysis is useful for understanding similarities and differences across cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). By doing so, a holistic picture was developed to understand TM in the post socialist European SMEs' point of view.

In order to understand TM practices it is important to capture the nuances of practitioners, therefore the use of semi structured interviews were chosen to elicit feedback from practitioners for this study. Interviews were conducted involving two senior human resource executives responsible for TM (one per SME) from SMEs in Poland and Slovenia. We recognize that the Polish case study does not have a perfect fit to all SME definitions, however, this case study offers a critical context for interpretation given the limited research/SME knowledge from a Polish perspective. Both respondents were asked to answer questions which derived from the literature, questions such as:

- How does the organization identify and develop talent — related questions: What do you think TM means? How do you identify and develop talent in your company? Who are considered to be talent in your company? How do you identify them? What makes them a talent? What impact does it have on them that they are considered talent? How do the other employees feel about that? Impact on them? How do you deal with any issues that might arise? Does your company have any TM schemes or particular HR practices in order to manage talent? If yes, what are they? If no, then why not? How effective are these schemes/HR practices? How do these help your company? Do they give you a competitive advantage? What do your competitors do? Do they do anything differently?
- What barriers to TM are they currently facing — related questions: What barriers do you currently face regarding TM? Individually, organizationally and country related? How do you overcome these barriers?
- Future steps for TM — related questions: What else do you need in order to be more successful with TM?

The data was collected as part of Global Entrepreneurial Talent Management (GETM3), Horizon 2020, Research and Innovation Staff Exchange (RISE) project (see guest editors introduction) and each interview lasted around one hour. The interviews were recorded and then later transcribed. Interview coding followed the theoretical concepts suggested by the data, an approach consistent with the inductive philosophy adopted by the researchers and in accordance with key academics in the field of management research (King, 2004). The approach to data



structuring and analysis, undertaken by means of a manual template analysis, involved the development of initial categories, grouping the data according to these categories, identifying patterns within the data and making comparisons across records to uncover shared elements and properties (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). Once the transcripts were available for analysis, the authors summarized the main themes that appeared in each interview, according to three main areas: how does the organization identify and develop talent, what barriers to TM are they currently facing and future steps for TM.

## **Findings**

### **Slovenian SME — Company A Profile**

The company was established in 1954 as a business, which specializes in the export of health related products. Twenty years later they became the largest health related product retailer in Yugoslavia. In 1991, the company lost 70% of its markets due to the breakup of Yugoslavia, however, by 1992 it transformed itself to become a stock corporation. The 1990s brought new opportunities for the company and they opened a new production line on alternative products which created new directions for the company. In 2007 they were awarded the Super brand title and two years later they expanding abroad becoming one of the leading niche companies in their sector. The company currently employs 150 people and as the company continued growing they realized that they had to make more strategic HR decisions. The HR department is currently very small consisting only of two people and getting support from other colleagues as and when needed.

#### ***Identifying and developing talent***

TM is finding the right people and then nurturing them to become the best they can be. TM is considered a strategic function however, it is not yet incorporated formally in the organization but is definitely considered in the short term plan. For example “when we see certain talents we try to educate them or send them to different projects”.

We usually recognize one by their education but also there are other skills that one has that could be considered as talent i.e. one person can be really professional and have expert knowledge, but then the other person could have the soft skills to be a leader — it depends on the individual.

So if we notice someone is highly educated we assume that they already have the knowledge required to perform the role and we try to encourage them to incorporate this knowledge into our processes and to transfer the knowledge to others.

However, usually talented people lack certain soft people skills

so we try to support them to attend certain courses with soft managing skills. For example colleagues are reluctant to share their ideas sometimes — but here in this company they like to work as a team and they try to encourage communication and trust. Sometimes though some colleagues are more suspicious and they lack the skills to do this so they have to train them.

This highlights the importance to view TM at an individual basis and enable organizations and individuals to identify and develop unique skills and capabilities.

## ***Barriers to TM***

Currently they lack the expertise and the knowledge to introduce and implement TM but they hope they will get there with time. A major issue is that the culture of the future employees is changing: it used to be “you can be happy that you are working for us” but now you know it’s the other way around, “what can you give me that I would come to work with you?” therefore the company is trying to change their mind-set to fit this new environment by putting things in place to attract the new young workforce. They ask themselves: What can we offer them? How will we help them grow? And this cultural shift can be challenging for some organizations till they find their footing. In the case of Company A they have a good reputation and this helps them as an employer. They have high standards and they look after their employees with various benefits such as a company tour event travelling around Europe, with additional health care and retirement/pension contribution systems in place.

## ***Future steps for TM***

“In the future we are thinking to introduce a performance review in order to see who stands out, who wants to progress and develop further”. Not everybody wants to develop and progress, some colleagues are happy with what they are doing and they do not want to change that. For example the millennials usually are more interested in developing and improving. The older generation often is not bothered as much. “One of my aspirations is to establish a mentoring system, so that we have internal mentors that can then mentor younger colleagues and pass their knowledge, expertise, experiences to new talents coming in.” TM is part of their strategic vision for 2025 because they started realizing that if they want their people to contribute to the maximum and engage in their organization, the organization must also nurture and support the employees appropriately. For example they have a number of colleagues that the company supports to complete their MBA degree. Their vision is to employ better performing individuals who can bring new ideas, who want to do and learn more, understand and appreciate how to work as a team for the benefit of the organization and not just for themselves. If they manage to implement a TM programme they will be the leader in their industry and they feel that this will give them a competitive advantage since it will improve the way that the company is operating as well as how it is perceived internally and externally.

The recruitment process will have to change. For example, right now a manager says I need a new employee and then we follow four steps for recruiting new people. First, they prepare an advertisement and it is the HR manager’s job to check all the CVs and shortlist people for interviews. Then, at the interview, she sits with the relevant manager of the department and they interview the candidate in order to find out more about them and decide if they fit in their organization. The next step is to give them some tests to write and finally if they do well in all stages they make them an offer. If they are to implement a more thorough TM process they need to ask questions such as

what exactly are we looking for? Are we looking for someone with these kind of skills or these kind of skills? Do we need someone who will just work with [technical] Excel or do you need someone who can talk to the clients? and so on.

Another important aspect is the job description. “I mean I will probably not apply for the job, if I saw a job description as it is now”. For example the previous job descriptions were too basic, with no clear details of the role and the skills required while it was not providing an attractive

route for career progression and personal development. The last time we tried to employ someone we tried to improve that and we saw a lot of benefits. “For example our last few job descriptions were much better, more interactive, and more approachable for the younger crowd.”

We also need appropriate tests for the different roles for example we need to explore different skills for a strategic position in the company and we need different set of skills for a sales person ... not for everyone of course but for more strategic positions in the company.

Importantly, they want employees open to change “when things work well then that is good but when some aspects do not work as well then somebody needs to tell you that so that you can take action.”

## **Polish SME – Company B Profile**

The company is a mix of a private-state-owned domestic SME established in 1952. The SME employs 230 people and is a part of a large Polish energy group. They represent a business centre of the group. The group produce electricity from coal, wind farms, hydropower plants, thermal energy production, and in biogas plants, and then transmit and sell it to homes and businesses. Their services are available to consumers all over Poland. Their transmission lines are located in the north-western part of the country. The company is listed on the Stock Exchange in Warsaw. Their mission is to build customer confidence and increase the value of the Group through the expansion and modernization of power plants and transmission lines, and for the development of green energy sources. Heat engineering is one of the directions of development of an innovative resource and energy group. They have their own HRM department and a member of the Board responsible for General affairs and HRM.

### ***How do you identify and develop talent?***

In this organization ‘expertise’ is a valued talent. HR manager states

Talents are the ones that are specialized, have important business position or have a big potential to get to a high position in the company. The people, who are very important for the company, who have operating features, the people who get quickly what I am talking about ... These are the ones that are working for the special tasks, not for the simple ones.

The recruitment offer includes good salaries, promotion, and other financial and nonfinancial bonuses.

The company is clear on their selection criteria, first is “the appropriate education level and their prior study performance” and then second is “personal-organizational fit and orientation to employee competences development.” They then have a three step TM on-boarding process. “We employ them for two months first, then for one year, after that we offer them a permanent contract.” Each technical worker and engineer has a mentor in place. An important part of selection is the mentor’s opinion about the worker. They also work with universities to identify talent by organizing competitions “for talented students and we offer them scholarships. Based on that we offer permanent positions to very prominent students”. Furthermore, they also collaborate “with University of Technology at doctoral and MBA level and we agreed with them on the content of the study programmes”. In this way the company is involved in the development of competencies aligned to their own needs. Within the company, there is a programme for exchanging knowledge

between old and young employees. The company offers additional money to employees who are close to retirement and are prepared to be mentors and exchange knowledge. Finally, they have a system “in which two people are always doing the same thing; they are interchangeable (in case of maternity leave, holidays, fluctuation, etc.). This programme also helps us in identifying talents for new positions and in cases of internal movements”.

### ***Barriers to TM***

The company finds it very hard to recruit low-level skilled physical workers. Therefore, “Now we are thinking about cooperating with high-schools, technical high-schools to find the physical workers. Young people do not want to come, since they do not find physical work interesting.” The company’s average age of physical workers is 55 years, so they have to attract younger physical workers. Their approach to managing these employees is reflected in the following comment “our leaders have to motivate and to control workers, because they are used to work slowly, they are not oriented to efficiency, and there are too many employees (state owned company).” Another issue is that often there are concerns regarding uneven distribution of workload, which may result in performance and retention issues, “We had some cases, where talented employees, were stressed and overburdened, because they were helping others too much, and they were doing their co-workers workload.”

### ***Future steps for TM***

There are actions the company is preparing to overcome these barriers and make new steps in TM. “First we have a bigger budget for employee attraction, and secondly, we want to offer them, not only money, but also extra payment for health care, and fourteen salaries pro year and financing the kindergarten”. The extra ‘13’ month salary is not mandated but customary for some employees in Poland e.g. government workers, so ‘14’ months is perceived as an incentive above the norm. Furthermore, they are organizing social events to promote positive relations and worker engagement “two times a year in which we go to one lake on sailing, on kayaking, or on walking, and have some presentations there, and the »heater day« — special day celebrating electricians and heaters in the company.”

They reorganized work in cases of overload and offered flexible working schemes and home-based work.

In cases of overload and stress mentioned, I talked to employees and to talents, and explained their expected contributions, division of work and the workflow. Key employees now have much more time for their family, for free time

An illustrative example was cited

In one case I offered one of the talents more money, a premium system. We agreed she’ll work 8 hours daily and only on special tasks and I gave their ordinary tasks to someone else. And the situation is much better now.

They understand that they have TM issues but feel confident that “we have many interesting challenges and offerings for them”.

Table 1 summarizes the main findings of our study and highlight the main barriers that organizations currently face. Our findings show that SMEs are challenged in their efforts to

identify talent and companies have a good awareness of what they need to do in the future to improve their TM. The next section will draw on these findings and synthesize them in line with the existing literature.

Case from	Slovenia	Poland
Company Overview	<b>150 employees</b> SME  Private owned company & a stock corporation  bee-based products	<b>234 employees</b> SME  Private-state owned company & a stock corporation  a business-centre of a larger energy group
Respondent	HR manager	HR manager
Context	Post-socialistic, part of non-alliance movement (Groux, 2014)	Post-socialistic, moderate Soviet intervention model (Groux, 2014)
Identification of talent	Important but not formalized into HR policy but put into practice.  Target initially education, or soft skills and develop leadership potential	Talent focus on small group,  Target expertise qualifications, potential, then organizational fit.  HR practice — special on-boarding, 3 step selection and mentor to identify talent. Incentivize older workers to mentor younger ones. Work with university to offer scholarships and shape MBA/Doctoral programmes.
Barriers to TM	They have a good employer brand and benefits package. However, changing younger employee requirements requiring company to change recruitment strategy.	Ageing workforce — Hard to attract manual labour, not motivated to do physical work. Difficult to dismiss staff and uneven distribution of workloads left talent overburdened
Further steps for TM	Want to introduce a TM programme will give a competitive edge. Plan to overhaul selection process and introduce a performance review system to identify talent. Focus on younger employees assume more ambitious and motivated to progress. Desire to introduce a mentoring system, supporting colleagues development e.g to complete MBAs	Need to target younger workers. Increase budget to incentivize recruitment targets and employee benefits including flexible working, kindergarten, social events to support work life balance

Table 1: Summary table of findings

## Discussion

The TM process is difficult (Turchick Hakak & Al Ariss, 2013) and requires the commitment of key organizational stakeholders in order to achieve strong vertical and horizontal alignment of TM practices and activities with the internal and external environment of the organization (Al

Ariss et al., 2014). As outlined in our case studies, SMEs struggle to manage talent effectively (Schuler, Jackson & Tarique, 2011), and neither followed a specific inclusive or exclusive approach to identifying talent (Iles, Chau & Preece, 2010), which reflected their focus on 'how' rather than 'who' or 'why' (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). This approach was often due to lack of expertise in TM and time (Lange et al., 2000). Although an explicit TM strategy may be absent, there is evidence of an emergent approach to TM in adopting specific TM practices to suit their specific requirements, "when we see certain talents we try to educate them or send them to different projects" (Slovenian company). This reflects a more 'contingent' approach (Collings & Mellahi, 2009), indeed, Nolan and Garavan (2016b) would argue that their emergent approach to TM is not a deficiency but reflects the contextual factors that facilitate more effective informal practices. The four critical capabilities for successful TM implementation identified by Joyce and Slocum (2012), i.e. strategy, structure, culture and execution resonated with the experiences of the case organizations. Both companies specifically mentioned the changing cultural shift required to accommodate the changing aspirations of talent. The Polish company were aware of an increasing issue in recruiting younger low-skilled physical employees but understood that "young people do not want to come, since they do not find physical work interesting". However, their current culture which understood the leaders role to "motivate and control workers, because they are used to work slowly, they are not orientated to efficiency", suggests that there would need to be accommodation by both parties. Recruits are not seen only as employees but rather as key stakeholders and a strong cultural fit was increasingly relevant between the case organizations and their talent (Collings et al., 2018). There is evidence in both case organizations of an appreciation of the multilevel relational framing of TM, however, there was evidence of a focus on the individual and to a lesser extent, and although still relevant the organizational, institutional and national level factors in framing and implementing their TM (Al Ariss et al., 2014).

The use of TM practices is highly dependent on the context, staffing needs and size of the organization. However, as illustrated in our case studies, employees' perspectives and aspirations have changed were previously companies could assume "you must be happy to work for us" (Company A, Slovenian) nowadays the stance is "what are you going to give me to come and work for you". This suggests that the labour dynamics have changed drastically from the socialist era and organizations are required to adapt quickly in order to remain competitive. As can be seen from Figure 1, there are diverse approaches to defining talent framed by their specific needs. However, they both, prioritise education and qualification requirements for selection criteria, and identify education institutions, as key sources for very different types of talent, and plan to work with these institutions to build their own talent pipelines. Both organizations financially sponsor employees or selected students to complete their studies. The Polish organization work closely with a local university contributing to curriculum development of the MBA and offer facilities for technical training for students. These discrete TM practices can be very helpful to SMEs, in designing appropriate, effective, context specific TM solutions (Nolan & Garvan, 2016a). They are acutely aware of the need to develop, attract and retain talent, however, their current TM practices are often not coherently aligned with other HRM/D practices and confirm the need for contextualization and a more coherent approach to TM (Boselie & Fruytier, 2013; Collings 2011).

A lifelong learning and training culture is critical to knowledge-based industries and to regional economic development (Lange et al., 2000), where a highly skilled and agile workforce is essential to economic development (Collings et al., 2018). Consistent with a dominant view in the literature, our study highlighted that planning for and providing training within SMEs can often be challenging, complicated by such factors as recruitment levels, lack of in-house training,



weakness of internal capabilities to plan and access to formal training (Panagiotopoulos, 2011). In the context of key talent shortages the case organizations have illustrated how they are shaping the development of their future talent pools in at least two key ways. Firstly, by influencing the formal education programmes offered by local education institutions to potential new employees. As discussed earlier they achieve this by forming close partnerships with the local universities, they request specific programmes tailored to their needs and future aspirations and then they sponsor their talented employees to attend these programmes. Secondly, by incentivizing an effective informal approach to upskilling by leveraging the existing knowledge of experienced employees, for example the Polish company offers additional money to employees near to retirement to mentor new and less experienced colleagues. This means that when new employees join the organization they closely work with existing employees with more experience and exposure to the organizations operations as mentors so they always have a point of contact in order to familiarize them with organizational norms and practices. Therefore, demonstrating how SMEs can leverage their internal organizational knowledge and local contextual knowledge to develop specific local solutions to remain competitive. In this context their familiarity and agility are distinct advantages (Noland & Garavan, 2016b)

Retaining talent is an area often given lower priority in both TM research and organizations (Boštjančič & Slana, 2018). Our findings show that on the one hand TM can include the various benefits and rewards that organizations can offer to their employees such as good pension, health insurance and holidays benefits. However, companies also have to realize that TM also needs to be approached on an individual basis, recognizing the broader needs, abilities and aspirations of employees in order to improve their chances of retaining their employees. Company B (Polish) introduced flexible and home-based working and provided an example of an individualized retention package for a female talent including premium pay, fixed hours and reallocation of workload to prioritize the special tasks she excelled at completing. At the end of the day, not everybody wants to progress, promoted and follow a career plan. SMEs can be more agile in considering the individual needs and circumstances of individual employees e.g. flexible hours and less constrained by corporate procedures, to offer more tailored solutions. As Gallardo–Gallardo et al. (2013) argued, it is not about how to implement TM practices but rather who is considered talented and why, and sometimes size for SMEs can be advantageous in providing novel solutions to the specific needs of key employees.

The European Union has also played a contributor factor in the rise of the TM need for organizations. While post-socialistic countries benefit from the free-trade area and the free movement of employees, consequently this has led to a strong talent flow between the member countries (Burrell, 2016). So that businesses experience higher competition for talent and employees are more mobile, change employers more frequently and negotiate and demand more benefits (Collings et al., 2011). This can have a detrimental impact on businesses who are more susceptible to losing skilled and knowledgeable employees (Skuzza et al., 2012). Employees in post socialist economies now have to fund additional health, education and social services that were once offered for free or heavily subsidized by the state. Their employment in certain state sectors and enterprises may also have allowed them to leverage access to these services or other privileges. For example, it was a common practice in some post socialist countries in Europe to offer public sector employees a 13th month salary, however, while this is still mandated for public sector workers, private sector enterprises are not obliged to provide this extra payment (INFOR, 2014). Employees of the Polish organization, which was once a state enterprise in the energy sector, were able to leverage this privileged access and recruit top talent, however, they

are now experiencing talent shortages amongst highly skilled technical workers. Although now a private sector enterprise, they still offer the 13th month salary, and indeed are considering offering a 14th month salary in addition to extra payments to incentivize the recruitment and retention of talent. “First we have a bigger budget for employee attraction, and secondly, we want to offer them, not only money, but also extra payment for healthcare, and fourteen salaries per year and financing the kindergarten”. Therefore, their plans for TM are framed by their understanding of historical, cultural, political and economic norms, which are prompting them to adopt a ‘cross-vergent’ approach to TM (Milikić et al., 2012; Psychogios et al., 2016).

Our research showed that having a good reputation can overcome some of the issues mentioned above and it can be a strength in attracting and retaining new employees (Bish & Jorgensen, 2016). Additionally, SMEs due to their size they have the flexibility to adapt quickly to environmental and economic changes as well as have the potential to grow and expand which again can be considered an attractive characteristic for some employees (Phoemphian et al., 2015).

For SMEs every appointment is critical and to improve their potential in attracting and retaining talent they need to reframe and realise a different relationship with their workforce, based on an appreciation of their reciprocal needs. Although the SMEs may lack a formal strategic TM approach, their size can be advantageous, their familiar knowledge of their own employees and their local contextual conditions, allows them to provide novel solutions to meet their specific requirements (Nolan & Garavan, 2016a). They can develop relationships with key sources of talent i.e. education institutions, incentivize knowledge productivity between colleagues and customize retention packages for individual key talent. For employees to be engaged and productive they also need to feel that they are valued and nurtured according to their individual needs and capabilities, an approach which may be more accessible to SMEs. Finally, in order for SMEs to create value through novel TM solutions, they need to ensure that their approach to TM is aligned to organizational structures and cultures and integrated with other HRMD practices.

## **Conclusions**

TM is still in its infancy as a field of study and whilst the practitioner and academic community is recognizing its value, there is a slow progression in addressing the theoretical and practice gaps, particularly in specific contexts (Collings et al., 2018). Therefore, this paper analysed the TM practices of SMEs within a European post-socialist context. While, organizations increasingly appreciate the importance of recruiting, nurturing and retaining those with particular knowledge or attributes in their specific field as talent for the organization. There are still many organizations who do not have a clear TM programme in place. However, Nolan and Garavan (2016 a, b) argue that size determinism is misleading, and that successful organizations are not determined by their large size and procedural formality. There was evidence to support this perspective, demonstrating that if SMEs can leverage their organizational and local contextual knowledge and respond quickly and creatively to their HRM/D challenges, their size can be their advantage.

### ***Implications for research policy and practice***

The conclusions from our study supports Nolan and Garavan (2016, a, b) argument that SMEs should not be framed as deficient by virtue of their size and lack of formal HRMD procedures. Therefore, further research should explore and seek to explain how SMEs are

leveraging their size, agility and informality to develop novel approaches to their specific TM challenges. Additionally, future research should endeavour to include the views and opinions from an employee perspective. This study supports further investigations into national policy interventions that reflect the historical, political, economic and cultural contextual dynamics of countries to support development of talent in the labour market through SMEs (Berhad, 2018). Finally, TM practices are often framed from the perspective of large and international organizations with grand TM strategies, corporate expertise and abundant resources, however, this study supports the development of our understanding of emergent TM practices in SMEs that are often localized, individualized and contingent upon a deep knowledge of their internal and external contexts.

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