RESPONSIBLE TALENT MANAGEMENT: "THE SWEET SPOT IS WHERE THESE TWO THINGS COME TOGETHER: WHAT THE EMPLOYEE WANTS AND KNOWS, AND WHAT THE COMPANY NEEDS"

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Author: Miia Konttinen
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Supervisor: Monika von Bonsdorff

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO
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ABSTRACT

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Talent management (TM) is an organizational system that encompasses a range of practices, processes and activities contributing to the overall employee experience. Reportedly around 70% of all organizations have it in some form another but it has been estimated that less than one in ten organizations find their own TM effective. This is likely due to the complex nature of TM as it tends to be a multi-layered weave of managerial aspects and leadership issues, while also bringing together a range of stakeholders with their own TM ambitions, expectations, and duties. As a result, TM highlights many responsibility issues.

Therefore, the present study set out to examine how talent management that is responsible is defined by talent management professionals. The roles of different stakeholders in responsible talent management (RTM) were also studied. Additionally, current RTM strengths and challenges were deemed of relevance to shed light on RTM in practice. These research questions were on a theoretical level approached through the concept of responsible talent management and stakeholder theory. The empirical part consisted of twelve semi-structured interviews conducted with experienced talent management professionals working in large, globally operating companies. The data was analysed with qualitative content analysis.

As the key findings, it was discovered that the participants' understanding of RTM very much mirrored previous scholars' definition of RTM being a combination of inclusivity, corporate social responsibility, and equality and equity. However, the participants emphasized strategy and use of resources as signs of RTM far more, if compared to previous studies. In respect to stakeholders, the present study concurs with earlier studies as RTM was viewed as everyone's business in the company. However, some of the participants had an outward-looking approach to RTM, instead of only deeming it as an internal process, like in earlier scholarly works. Finally, companies seemed to be mostly pleased in how inclusive their TM is, and how clear their TM processes are, whereas issues of talent assessment criteria, and lack of digital solutions that would support TM, were raised among the most pivotal concerns.

Key words

Responsible talent management, stakeholder theory, qualitative content analysis

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'Talent management' voitanee vapaasti kääntää suomeksi parhaiden kykyjen tai lahjakkuuksien johtamiseksi. Se kattaa laajan kirjon eri käytänteitä, prosesseja ja toimintoja, joilla pyritään monipuolisesti vaikuttamaan työntekijäkokemukseen. Joidenkin arvioiden mukaan yli 70 % organisaatioista hyödyntää sitä, mutta vain alle yksi kymmenestä organisaatiosta pitää omaa lähestymistapaansa tehokkaana. Tämä johtunee ainakin osittain siitä, että kykyjen/lahjakkuuksien johtamiseen nivoutuvat niin monenlaiset eri prosessit ja käytänteet, ja se koskettaa useita eri sidosryhmiä heidän omine tavoitteineen ja odotuksineen, että kyseessä on lähes poikkeuksetta monimutkainen organisatorinen kudelma. Tästä syystä vastuullisuus on siinä keskeinen teema.

Tämä Pro Gradu-tutkielma lähti kartoittamaan miten kokeneet ja globaaleissa yrityksissä toimivat talent management-ammattilaiset (n=12) määrittelevät sen, mitä on vastuullinen kykyjen/lahjakkuuksien johtaminen ja millaista roolia eri sidosryhmät siinä näyttelevät. Näitä ammattilaisia pyydettiin myös valottamaan yrityksensä vahvuuksia ja kehittämiskohteita tällä saralla vastuullisuuden näkökulmasta. Teoreettisena lähtökohtana oli sidosryhmäteoria, ja empiirinen osuus koostui puolistrukturoiduista haastatteluista, jotka analysoitiin laadullisen sisältöanalyysin keinoin.

Tutkielmassa huomattiin, että näiden ammattilaisten määritelmät vastasivat aiemman kirjallisuuden ymmärrystä aiheesta: vastuullisuuden nähtiin kilpistyvän inklusiivisuuteen, yrityksen yhteiskuntavastuuseen, sekä tasa-arvoon ja yhdenvertaisuuteen. Tutkielmassa taloudellinen vastuullisuus ja kykyjen/lahjakkuuksien johtamisen strateginen taso nousivat kuitenkin aiempaa vahvemmin esille, ja myös ulkoiset sidosryhmät nähtiin sisäisten rinnalla aiempaa keskeisempinä toimijoina. Yritysten selkeäksi vahvuudeksi nousi nimenomaan inklusiivisuus, kun taas 'talentin' määrittely ja mittaaminen, sekä riittämättömät digitaaliset ratkaisut haastavat yrityksiä käytännössä.

Asiasanat	
vastuullinen kykyjen/lahjakkuuksien johtaminen, sidosryhmäteoria, laadullinen sisältöanalyysi	
Säilytyspaikka	
Jyväskylän yliopiston kirjasto	

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations of all sorts have undoubtedly throughout the history been interested in notably talented and valuable employees. Nonetheless, ever since the "War for Talent", i.e. a battle in which organizations are fiercely competing against each other in terms of getting the best employees, was declared by the McKinsey consultants at the turn of the millennium, talent management (in brief TM) has become one of the most fundamental processes at companies (see more e.g. in Pyszka & Gajda, 2015; Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Ibrahim & Daniel, 2018; Alamri et al., 2019; Claus, 2019; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2019; Kwon & Jang, 2021). According to a recent estimation by Wikhamn, Asplund and Dries (2021, pp. 957-958), around 60-70% of organizations have some form of talent management.

TM is typically seen and used as a 'weapon' when fighting for competitive positions at markets. A range of companies reportedly fear that the lack of talent will be one main obstacle blocking them from reaching their strategic goals (see e.g. Kwon & Jang, 2021). In fact, Pyszka & Gajda (2015) have even suggested that TM holds more value than money, market share or the management team when it comes to a company's success.

According to Claus (2019, p. 208), once an individual joins the company, TM is the "organizational architect" of the entire, holistic employee experience. Even if a range of scholars have voiced their concerns about a lack of a universal definition of 'talent management', the following definition by Collings and Mellahi (2009, p. 304), is one that has, nevertheless, been quite widely used in talent management literature (see e.g. Ingram, 2016).

> "…activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continue commitment to the organization." (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 304)

This definition to a great extent also appears to simultaneously embed, in just one sentence, a range of ideas, processes, purposes and pivotal sub-concepts of talent management, which have been apparent in various other definitions of talent management (cf. e.g. Ewerlin & Süß, 2014; Bhatia & Baruah, 2020). Therefore, to an extent, the definition by Collings and Mellahi (2009, p. 304) can be deemed as a useful umbrella definition for this complex, at times even myth-like, yet widely common area of human resources (hereafter HR).

Indeed, TM is often, especially in large companies, its own entity, for instance in a form of a TM role/team, *within* HR (see e.g. Alamri et al., 2019; Bhatia & Baruah, 2020). Even if at first glance, many of the TM practices and processes, appear to be just regular HR practices and processes, according to a range of scholars, they are not. TM is, for instance, considered to be targeted across the entire enterprise without being strictly limited by organizational boundaries, instead of focusing solely on one business unit or division. Also, at the core of TM, in contrast to the so-called regular HR, are the strategic key positions in the organization: it boils down to capability and capacity building (e.g. Ansar & Baloch, 2018; Bhatia & Baruah, 2020).

However, as will become apparent, in addition to Collings and Mellahi's (2009) definition, various other approaches to TM have also been both theoretically, and in practice, adopted across academic research and organizations. Evidence of this can, for instance, be seen in the conceptual framework by Meyers and van Woerkom (2014, as cited in Meyers et al, 2020, p. 565). Their understanding is that TM can take varying forms, some of which are in clear contrast to the definition by Collings and Mellahi (2009).

Therefore, TM is seemingly a highly intriguing, yet simultaneously an evidently complex, theme, which would surely entail a range of interesting research topics and questions left unanswered (see also Khoreva, Vaiman & Kostanek, 2019). However, as with all research, the research focus needs to always be narrowed down to meet the scope of the given study.

1.1   The present study's scope and research problem

During the time when I was simultaneously doing general background research on talent management and taking my initial steps as an aspiring talent management professional, I was, on one hand, exposed to various TM-related theories, empirical studies, and suggested frameworks, while on the other hand, I was also witnessing a range of TM activities unfolding in front of me in practice. However, fairly early on, I was starting to detect one element embedded in many of the talent management aspects around me. There was a common denominator which seemed to, both positively and negatively, affect many TM aspects, with which I was getting acquainted. This denominator was responsibility.

Responsibility, or the lack of it, can manifest itself as part of talent management in the following ways. For instance, a great deal of scholarly literature has brought to the fore the practical and ethical issues related

philosophies guiding, both consciously and unconsciously, the TM processes (e.g. Sparrow & Makram, 2015). Dalal and Akdere (2018) also highlight the role of transparent communication plays in TM and how it is also a pivotal sign of responsibility. Also, the vagueness of 'talent' as a concept has raised concerns among scholars as it results in the dilemma of how employees can be responsibly labeled as talents, or non-talents, if at the core of it all lies of fuzzy understanding of what is being assessed and how (e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015; Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Lai & Ishizaka, 2020; Wikhamn, Asplund & Dries, 2021). In addition, the typical sub-concepts of talent, i.e. potential and performance, have been critically examined. Moreover, the aftermath of TM, i.e. what exactly happens after someone is being labelled a 'talent', has raised concerns from the viewpoint of possible false promises made to employees (see e.g. Dries, Marescaux & van Zelderen, 2021; Sumelius & Smale. 2021), without ignoring the possibly needed damage control of dealing with the non-talents (e.g. Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020; Lai & Ishizaka, 2020; Dries, Marescaux & van Zelderen, 2021). All in all, expectation management plays a seemingly notable role in TM (e.g. Hughes, 2019). Finally, and as already noted earlier, there remains the question of TM actually being also economically sustainable (e.g. Ewerlin & Süß, 2014; Mensah, 2019a; Collings & Minbaeva, 2021; Kwon & Jang, 2021), and adequately strategy-driven (e.g. Dalal & Akdere, 2018). Is it something that companies can responsibly invest in and get the desired ROI and are they able to plan and execute TM in relation to their business strategy? Obviously, these highlights only scratch the surface of TM from the viewpoint of responsibility, but they do bring the evident connection to the fore.

According to Langmead, Land and King (2020), 'responsibility' and 'management' should never be seen as something separate from each other, rather, they state that responsibility is already inherently embedded in all management. Of course, this is ideally the case but in reality, for instance, talent management has been listed among the most difficult managerial challenges of leaders and executives, as well as HR professionals (see e.g. Minbaeva & Collings, 2013). Managing in a responsible manner a complex process, like TM, with all its organizational, legal, cultural, social, and psychological elements, to name but a few dimensions, can indeed be easier said than done. Therefore, simplifying that talent management is always, or even most of the time, inherently done responsibly translates, at least in my opinion, into cutting the corners. Adopting an overly simplified approach to TM, can easily result in more harm than good (Rotolo et al., 2018), especially if considering that, for instance, globalization, diversity and other societal phenomena and trends are increasingly challenging organizations to treat all their employees with fairness (Hughes, 2019). At the moment, a range of disparities can still be detected across organizations (Hughes, 2019), and organizations have been reported to really struggle with it (Minbaeva & Collings, 2013).

Considering that talent management literally refers to managing talents at the company, the core ideas of responsible management clearly cannot be ignored. According to Laasch and Conaway (2014), responsible management in

general refers to managerial activities that optimize the overall *stake*holder value, i.e. ensuring the best possible outcomes for all parties involved. In other words, the main goal of responsible management is not only to maximize *share*holder value, but to also manage through practices, structures, procedures, and norms that exemplify and further foster responsible behavior within and outside the company. It entails building trust and cooperation among stakeholders, thus also boiling down to enhancing the company's overall sustainability and ethics (see e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015; Marques & Gomes, 2020). All in all, it is about minimizing negative impacts, while maximizing the positives (Pyszka & Gajda, 2015). Responsible management is evidently and strongly connected to stakeholder relationships, thus inherently linking to social dimensions at companies (Laasch et al., 2020).

If these lines of thought are mirrored against managing talents, it becomes evident that TM ought to also be examined, both in theory and in practice, through the lens of responsible management. Pyszka and Gajda (2015) have brought to the fore that responsibility, especially social responsibility, can function as a pivotal moderator when it comes to not only examining which processes or elements should be excluded from TM, but also in detecting which abstract values, or more tangible features, such as programs, ought to be included in TM.

As noted earlier, TM as an internal system, consists of various (HR) activities and processes that pierce through the organization, thus evolving a range of different stakeholders (e.g. Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Theys & Schultz, 2020). For instance, there are stakeholders identifying the strategically pivotal key positions, stakeholders determining which criteria is used for detecting the right people to these positions and stakeholders using the given criteria for assessing people's potential and performance, as well as stakeholders being recognized as talents, and others who are left outside these talent pools. There are also people facilitating this whole process. It is indeed evident that all the stakeholders as part of TM, are inherently required to make an ample amount of both small, daily choices, and larger decisions, and perhaps hence, TM had been deemed a "socially unpredictable process" by Pyszka and Gajda (2015). Adler and Laasch (2021) emphasize that choices and opportunities, and how they are dealt with and communicated about, form the backbone of responsibility. In connection to this, it has been suggested that well-established and socially responsibly driven TM has a positive impact on how engaged in the company the employees are, thus resulting in a lower turnover rate (e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015).

Furthermore, on top of all these stakeholder roles, and sort of at the other end of the TM continuum, there are also the *share*holders as one group of stakeholders, although, they may not directly be seen by others, or by themselves, as TM stakeholders. However, if one considers that TM is typically used to a) detect and enhance individual competencies to contribute to competitive advantage, b) to ensure both short-term and long-term success of business strategies through talents, and c) enable the entering and surviving in various

markets globally with the help of talents (see e.g. Sparrow, 2021, p. 21), it becomes evident that shareholder value is also one component of TM.

According to Pyszka and Gajda (2015), establishing a balance between profitability and social responsibility ought to be at the heart of TM. By summarizing highlights from earlier research, they also conclude that companies thoroughly considering their stakeholders are bound to act more responsibly, and hence also become seen as more responsible. This ideally results in, for instance, better stakeholder loyalty, improved corporate resilience, increased transparency, strengthened organizational identity and overall higher efficiency (e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015). Undisputedly, these have the potential to positively feed into the aforementioned goals typically set for TM (Sparrow, 2021, p. 21).

With the focus on *responsible* talent management and the role of different stakeholders, the present study can be positioned to represent the more critical approaches to TM research, which according to Sparrow (2021, p. 11) have gradually started to gain more foothold over the past decade. According to Sparrow (2021), the first two decades of this century were to a great extent colored by the aforementioned war narrative of talent management, and globalization, but more recently the TM researchers have wanted to focus more on TM-related limitations, contextual and conceptual issues, as well as TM in relation to strategy. In this sense, the present study is in line with the current trend of critical TM research, while at the same time bringing new insights to it from the viewpoint of responsibility and stakeholders.

1.2   The research questions

Against this backdrop of responsible management, and with that the fundamental roles of different stakeholders, being crucial viewpoints to talent management, the present study set out to dive deeper into what *responsible* talent management currently is in large, globally operating companies, and what it should, or could be in the future. What is more, the evident prevalence of stakeholders also led to stakeholder theory (see e.g. Freeman 1984 in Freeman 2010) being chosen at the very early stages of the research process as the present study's theoretical lens. Stakeholder theory was adopted for examining who are the stakeholders of responsible TM, and what their role appears to be.

The aim of this research is to provide a descriptive qualitative analysis of the current state of affairs of responsible talent management, as well as its future directions, in the twelve globally operating large companies of the present study. This approach is novel on two levels. First, responsible talent management is an understudied branch of talent management, and secondly, the present study's focus on the Nordic context of TM contributes to the evident geographical gap of TM research as the majority of earlier research has been conducted elsewhere. All the twelve companies in the present study are either headquartered in the Nordic countries, or they at least have a very strong presence in the region.

The present study set out to find answers to the following three research questions.

- RQ1: How is responsible talent management defined by the talent management professionals?

- RQ2: Who are reportedly the stakeholders of responsible talent management and how are they involved?

- RQ3: In which ways is the companies' talent management reportedly responsible at the moment?

- RQ4: How do the companies reportedly wish to make their talent management more responsible in the future?

The answers to these four research questions will, on one hand, broaden the conceptual understanding of responsible talent management in general as we are dealing with a fairly new and less studied area of TM. On the other hand, the present study seeks to provide valuable food for thought and concrete directions for action for companies keen on making their talent management more responsible.

This thesis has been organized as follows. In Chapter 2, a general literature review on talent management is given by discussing the concept itself and elaborating on its relevant sub-concepts, such as 'talent'. Chapter 3 narrows down the topic to responsible talent management. Also, the study's theoretical lens, i.e. stakeholder theory, and some of its interrelated theoretical viewpoints (organizational justice theory and social exchange theory) are additionally discussed and mirrored against the present study in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 provides a detailed outline of the research process of the present study. The study's findings are presented in Chapter 5 and discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. Finally, the thesis is concluded in Chapter 7, in which the study is also evaluated as a piece of qualitative research by following the six criteria, i.e. trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, transferability, conformability, and authenticity, by Lincoln and Guba (1985, 1994), and Elo et al. (2014).

2 TALENT MANAGEMENT

Prior to moving on the discussing the present study's approach, i.e. responsibility, to talent management, it is worthy of establishing some common ground on the stem concepts of the present study, i.e. 'talent management', and 'talent', as well as the different 'talent philosophies' typically underlying the management of talents. I will begin by revisiting the fairly widely used definition of 'talent management' by Collings and Mellahi (2009, p. 304).

> "…activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continue commitment to the organization." (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 304)

First of all, and as highlighted above by Collings and Mellahi, talent management brings together in a systematic manner a range of HR activities and processes. These typically include talent attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment (see e.g. Yarnall, 2011, Bhatia & Baruah, 2020). In this sense, what appeals to me in talent management is its holistic nature, i.e. the way it brings together such a wide range of key areas in HR in an attempt to literally manage talents from the initial steps of evoking their interest in the company all the way to supporting their growth on a path towards strategically pivotal positions, and perhaps even individuals' ultimate dream positions and career goals.

Secondly, talent management is an interesting, and undisputedly demanding, combination of not only looking out for the best of the company and its competitive edge, but simultaneously dealing with very personal issues on the level of individuals. In other words, it is an area where the company's strategic 'big picture' meets the smallest nuances of individual potential and performance. Indeed, I cannot help but be keen on learning more about balancing between these two levels both in theory and in practice.

Thirdly, a certain level of secrecy (see e.g. De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2017; Dries, Marescaux & van Zelderen, 2021; Lacey & Groves, 2021; Malik & Singh, 2021; Sumelius & Smale. 2021; Nijs et al.,2022,), and a sense of exclusivity (e.g. Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020; Bhatia & Baruah, 2020; Meyers, 2020; Kwon & Jang, 2021; McDonell et al., 2021) are often attached to talent management. Furthermore, according to Collings and Mellahi (2009), Collings and Isichei (2018), Burgess and Pichler (2021), as well as Sumelius and Smale (2021), to name but a few, talent management often translates into its own differentiated form of HR. Hence, I find it rather natural that I as a researcher am drawn to this differentiated area, and above all, inspired to see what is behind this reported veil of secrecy and exclusivity.

Finally, due to the fact that talent management is so widely conducted in a range of companies globally, while at the same time there have been speculations about it being merely a passing 'fashion' of HR (see e.g. Ewrlin & Süß, 2014; Dries, Marescaux & van Zelderen, 2021), undisputedly draws attention to it as a phenomenon. What makes this even more interesting is that a range of scholars have critically called for more empirical evidence to back up the fact that with talent management companies can in fact reach the goals that have been set for talent management.

For instance, according to Ewerlin and Süß (2014), it is possible that talent management's economic utility is more of a generally shared belief, rather than a proven fact. Indeed, tracking the return of investment (ROI) in relation to talent management, ought to be done in a systematic manner both prior and post to any TM actions (see e.g. Kwon & Jang, 2021). However, if taking into account the complex talent management process flow by Rotolo et al. (2018, p. 183), in which everything starts from the company's external environment, which is often already in itself volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous (in brief VUCA), and on which the company's strategy and through that also their strategic TM needs are created, it is no wonder that also in an otherwise hectic business environment, many companies resort to a faster and more simple approach to TM. Thus, more easily ignoring actual evidence. After all, a more evidence-based approach to TM would require thoroughness and rigor: in other words, more time, more resources, and more expertise (see also Rotolo et al., 2018; Kwon & Jang, 2021). Therefore, perhaps not surprisingly, Mensah (2019a), as well as Collings and Minbaeva (2021), among others, are critical when it comes to there being adequate amount of evidence of the positive impacts of talent management as a form of differentiated HR.

If TM is not automatically a road to success for the company running it, it is neither a straightforward process nor a neutral theme from the viewpoint of the employees. For instance, TM can bring to the fore the underlying issues related to certain individuals being labelled as talent, thus leaving others without that label (see e.g. Bhatia & Baruah, 2020; Dries, Marescaux & van Zelderen, 2021). This can indeed have significant (positive and/or negative) professional, social, and even psychological implications for both groups of employees. TM can result in employees actually being, or at least perceived to being, in two different camps

at the workplace: the privileged and non-privileged (see e.g. Dries, Marescaux & van Zelderen, 2021).

From the viewpoint of employees, both talents and non-talents, TM is an additionally complex organizational theme, as it entails the assessing of individuals. Performance ratings, forced rank lists of employees and relative assessments of fellow employees as referents, to name but a few, are all possible parts of TM. On the level of individuals, they are reportedly linked to feelings of jealousy, or conversely arrogant behavior. Also, TM literature often brings to the fore, on one hand, the "Pygmalion effect", i.e. the talent label resulting in positive affirmation which then, as planned, leads to improved self-confidence and role commitment, and hereby, better performance at work (see e.g. Daubner-Siva et al., 2018; Swailes, 2020; Dries, Marescaux & van Zelderen, 2021; Krebs & Wehner, 2021). On the other hand, one can speculate whether realizing that one is possibly seen as a non-talent in the work community can also result in the opposite self-fulfilling prophecy (see e.g. Lai & Ishizaka, 2020). In addition to these, Dries, Marescaux and van Zelderen (2021) discuss the so-called crown prince syndrome, in which someone labelled as talent finds too much comfort in their status, and thus ends up losing their motivation to work hard to continue to earn the given status.

Indeed, the social exchange-assumption embedded at the core of TM, in which the label 'talent' is given to an employee in the hopes of getting continued good performance and materialized potential in return, is by no means as simple as TM as process perhaps assumes, and requires, it to be (see e.g. Kanabar & Fletcher, 2020; Dries, Marescaux & van Zelderen, 2021; Koch & Marescaux, 2021).

Furthermore, there is an ample amount of research (see e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015; Claus, 2019; Festing & Schäfer, 2021) discussing the new approaches to post-modernist, boundless careers, whereas TM to some extent relies on the traditional and bound organizational career, i.e. people working loyally in one organization over a long period of time. Some say that such a career orientation is dead, while others claim that hierarchical advancement within just one company is still an ideal that thrives (see e.g. Dries, Marescaux & van Zelderen, 2021). In these career-related changes and trends lie also pivotal reflections for TM: how do today's employees want to be managed when it comes to their careers?

In order to bring the above-mentioned insight to talent management together, it certainly becomes apparent that TM is, or ideally at least ought to be, a very holistic approach to HR: it is all about optimizing in both short-term and long-term, not only the company's overall performance, but also the individual employee experience and careers. Therefore, TM requires actions, practices, and processes targeted at building the overall organizational culture to foster engagement, capability and capacity (see e.g. Yuniati et al., 2021). TM requires that a talent mindset is ingrained in the entire organizations, and that there are literally people, for instance, competent line managers, who want to and know how to lead and manager their talents (see e.g. Mayo, 2018).

In practice, talent management can happen, for instance, through (see e.g. Yarnall, 2011; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Ewerlin & Süß, 2014; Ingram, 2016; Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Ibrahim & Daniel, 2018; King & Vaimer, 2018; Mayo, 2018; Painter-Morland et al., 2019; Hughes, 2019; Marrybeth et al., 2019; Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020; Dries, Marescaux & van Zelderen, 2021; Jindal & Shaikh, 2021; Khoreva & Vaiman, 2021; Theys & Schultz, 2020; Ahmed, Khan, Khan & Sohail, 2021; Yuniati et al., 2021):

- talent analysis: company's needs and existing/potential talents now, and in the future

- especially internal (*but without completely ignoring external*) recruitment and selection programs

- talent retention programs

- deployment and global mobility

- reward policies: both monetary benefits and non-materialistic acknowl-edgements

- job designing to foster people's professional growth and development

- talent development programs & other development actions (e.g. job rota-tion, coaching, mentoring)

- talent review process: incl. e.g. talent assessments, performance/poten-tial ratings, possible (cross-functional) calibration, development discus-sions, decision analytics

- talent pipelines and/or pools: e.g. for leadership roles, specific expert roles or other strategically key positions

- succession planning

As becomes evident, talent management is, in itself, an umbrella term for a wide range of organizational, and often HR-driven, practices and process, each of

which could easily be a vast and valid research topic in their own right. Typically, a company's talent management architecture, i.e. what is done and how, and by whom and when, is a some type of a combination of these items on the list. TM is, therefore, a weave of systems, practices, and processes (see e.g. Sparrow & Makram, 2015).

Since TM is deemed to adopt such varying types of forms in practice, and since these practices and processes differ notably across industries, and individual organizations (see e.g. Ewerlin & Süß, 2014; Sparrow & Makram, 2015; Theys & Schultz, 2020), they will be not discussed in more detail in the present study. Nonetheless, the one thing that pierces through all of them, and hence likely underlies the variation, is the concept of 'talent', and therefore, the present study will next do a deep dive to this pivotal component of talent management.

2.1   Talent and talent-related philosophies in TM

"…"talent" must be defined before it is managed" (Chuai et al., 2008, as cited in Alamri et al., 2019, p. 163)

"the beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms."   (Socrates, as cited in Cerna & Chou, 2019, p. 823)

Considering the quotes above and taking into account that the concept of 'talent' is at the very core of talent management, this study will also next address the issue of defining talent by presenting alternative definitions, underlying 'talent philosophies', and their implications for talent management in general, and responsible talent management in particular. After all, as noted by Bhatia and Baruah (2020), understanding, and not to mention implementing TM, precedes that the theoretical underpinnings of 'talent' have been thoroughly examined.

2.1.1   Defining 'talent' as a concept

The concept of 'talent' can be traced back all the way to ancient Greece, the Roman empire, as well as earlier version of English: its meaning has varied across time, people and contexts (see e.g. Cerna & Chou, 2019; Tobon & Luna-Nemecio, 2021), but according to Cerna and Chou (2019), the connotations attached to it have typically been very positive. Talent is equated with excellence, competitiveness, economic and company growth, creativity, as well as innovation, to name but a few (pp. 825-826).

Broadly speaking, 'talent' is often nowadays defined as someone's ability to excel at something, and quite often 'talent' is connected to doing something on a level that is deemed to be above the average (Alamri et al., 2019; Nijs et al, 2022). Built-in the concept is often a line of thought of peer comparisons (see e.g. Nijs et al, 2022) and often also ideas of "natural ability", "special aptitude" and "high mental ability" are attached to it (see e.g. Cerna & Chou, 2019, pp. 827-828). On one hand, talent refers to someone's inherent possibilities to master (skill-wise and/or knowledge-wise) something even somewhat automatically, but on the other hand, talent is also seen as an innate ability to learn that something new with ease (Sharma, 2021; Tobon & Luna-Nemecio, 2021).

Based on these fairly general definitions, the concept is considered to take various forms and meanings across different disciplines: talent is a concept used in the fields of art, science, education, and sport, as well as organizational contexts through talent management (e.g. Cerna & Chou, 2019; Sharma, 2021; Tobon & Luna-Nemecio, 2021). The connection between organizations and the concept of 'talent' has its origins in the aforementioned (see Chapter 1) declaration of "War for Talent" (see e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015; Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Ibrahim & Daniel, 2018; Claus, 2019; Kwon & Jang, 2021). At the end of the 21st century when the competition for market shares intensified, so did also the competition for the "critical talent", "talent mindset", "talent surplus" (Cerna & Chou, 2019, pp. 827-828). Finding and keeping workforce, and especially employees, "who make valuable contributions to organizational objective" and "key individuals without whom the company would not operate so effectively" (see e.g. Sharma, 2021, pp. 57-58) became yet another pivotal arena for competition between organizations (Cerna & Chou, 2019, Sharma, 2021). According to Sharma (2021, pp. 57-58), and continuing with the war theme, talents are each organization's "competitive weapon".

As a result of the so-called "War for Talent", the HR area of talent management gradually evolved to what it is today in a range of organization, which conversely led to the concept of 'talent' being embedded in a range of organizational practices and processes, such recruitment, selection, formation, evaluation, promotion and remuneration (see e.g. Tobon & Luna-Nemecio, 2021).

Nonetheless, even if 'talent' as a concept has been attached to these regular, and even mundane, organizational HR practices and processes, a clear and unified definition of it is still after decades lacking (McDonnell et al., 2021; Sharma, 2021). Questions, such as, what is included in the concept, how much of a relational and contextual concept it is and how it can be detected in practice, remain still to a great extent unanswered (Cerna & Chou, 2019). Sharma (2021) and Nijs et al. (2022), among various others, have also brought to the fore that being talented through skills and/or knowledge is not enough, also commitment, motivation, willingness to grow, and loyalty need to be involved. On top of this, also social capital, i.e. abilities to develop and maintain networks, has been deemed as one pivotal element of talent in an organizational setting (Sharman, 2021).

As aptly noted by Swailes (2013, as cited in Sharma, 2021, pp. 57-58), "definitions of talent are not fixed…and they may vary from organization to organization". Thus, considering that there is no definition for talent which would be universally agreed upon, the present study will neither aim for finding one. This very deliberate decision was also made due to the fact that at the core of the present study is to foster understanding of responsible management on a more *general* level, rather than on the level of *one specific* organization.

Therefore, as an attempt to summarize talent-related organizational literature, the present study set out to gather some the most commonly attached features and dimensions of scholarly definitions of talent (see Table 1). In this table, the vertical column represents all the found talent dimensions, features and characteristics starting from the most often mentioned ones at the top, whereas the horizontal row indicates the sources (starting with the most recent ones on the left), in which the given dimensions have (possibly) been included as part of the definition for 'talent'.

	*1	*2	*3	*4	*5	*6	*7	*8	*9	*10	*11	*12	*13	*14	*15
The "X" factor: Something unique; innate giftedness; something difficult to imitate				x	x	x		x				x		x	
Knowledge				x			x					x	x	x	
Skills				x			x					x	x	x	
Abilities	x	x			x	x									
Commitment	x				x	x	x								
Social capital (incl. networking, relationships, collaboration, sociability)	x		x							x					
Cognitive abilities (e.g. complex thinking, judgement)			x										x	x	
High potential				x									x	x	
Competencies	x		x												
Motivation	x	x													
General intelligence															x
Loyalty & Engagement	x						x								
Performance		x		x											
Adaptability	x														
Attitude														x	
Character														x	
Context-specific behaviour & qualities									x						
Continuous improvement			x												
Drive														x	
Ethics			x												

Experience													x		
Future leadership potential										x					
Laboriousness		x													
Learnability	x														
Problem-solving		x													
Resilience	x														

Table 1: DEFINITIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS OF TALENT: AN OVERVIEW

*1) Kabalina & Osipova (2022); *2) Nijs et al. (2022); *3) Tobon & Luna-Nemecia (2021); *4) Swailes (2020); *5) Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2015); *6) Dries (2013); *7) Valverde, Scullion & Ryan (2013); *8) De Vos & Dries (2013); *9) Hoglund (2012); *10) McDonnell & Collings (2011); *11) Mäkelä, Björkman, & Ehrnrooth (2010); *12) Cappelli (2008); *13) Tansley et al. (2007); *14) Michaels et al. (2001); *15) Schmidt & Hunter (1998)

Table 1 indeed showcases how differently scholars have defined and observed the concept of 'talent' being used in practice, and a more extensive summary is available, for instance, in Dalal & Akdere (2018, pp. 345-346).

However, if some general conclusions were to be drawn from Table 1, it appears that most often features, such as, knowledge, skills, abilities, commitment, social capital and cognitive abilities are listed as pivotal elements of talent. Also, the element, of 'high potential' comes across as a somewhat fundamental aspect. Nonetheless, perhaps the most interesting highlight of this brief review, is the fact that the so-called "X-factor", i.e. that uniqueness that is perhaps difficult to pinpoint in individuals, and that something innate that is impossible to imitate, was so prevalent across multiple scholarly sources. In the light of this, it makes sense that according to Swailes (2022), talent can refer to both more visible, and even measurable, features, but it can also be based on perceptions. Hence, talent ought to also be viewed as a socially constructed idea (McDonnell et al., 2021).

As becomes apparent, the discussion around this concept is very multi-layered and complex: attempts to clearly define 'talent' clearly lead to more questions than answers. According to McDonnell et al. (2021), trying to find one single definition for talent can, in fact, be counterproductive. For this reason, instead of stubbornly trying to provide only one definition of talent, the present study resorts to another talent-related frame of thinking, which has the potential to be more fruitful for the purposes of this study, in which TM, including talent, is discussed in the context of multiple organizations and through analyzing the thoughts of a group of individuals.

For instance, King and Vaimer (2019), Meyers et al. (2020), and McDonell et al. (2021), approach the conceptual complexity of talent by grouping talent-related beliefs and assumptions under the umbrella term of 'talent philosophy'. In general, a so-called HR philosophy guiding the organizational processes is deemed to be an overall understanding, or prioritization, guiding the ways in

which human resources are perceived, connected to business, allocated resources to, as well as treated and managed (Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020). Therefore, instead of focusing solely on the definition of 'talent', the present study makes a brief dive into talent philosophies.

2.1.2   Different talent philosophies behind TM

When it comes to talent management, De Boeck, Meyers and Drier (2017), likely among many others, claim that all TM policies and programs, i.e. the concrete manifestations of talent management, are always, either consciously or unconsciously, rooted in the prevailing talent management principles, which consist of values, beliefs and norms regarding managing employees as talents. In connection to more abstract level of TM, Meyers et al. (2020) bring to the fore the concept of 'talent philosophy'.

According to them, talent philosophy entails individuals' or even entire organizations' understandings of the nature, value and instrumentality of talent. In essence, talent philosophy is not only about giving answers to the talent-related 'what' questions, rather, it also addresses the 'why', the 'how', and the 'who' questions. The prevailing talent philosophy of an organization, or at least the philosophy held by the key TM stakeholders, is thought to both shape the organizational discourse around TM and contribute to the ways in which TM is operationalized in practice (Meyers et al., 2020; McDonell et al., 2021). To shed further light on the dimensions of talent philosophy, a conceptual framework originally by Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) (as cited in Meyers et al, 2020, p. 565) will be used (Figure 1).
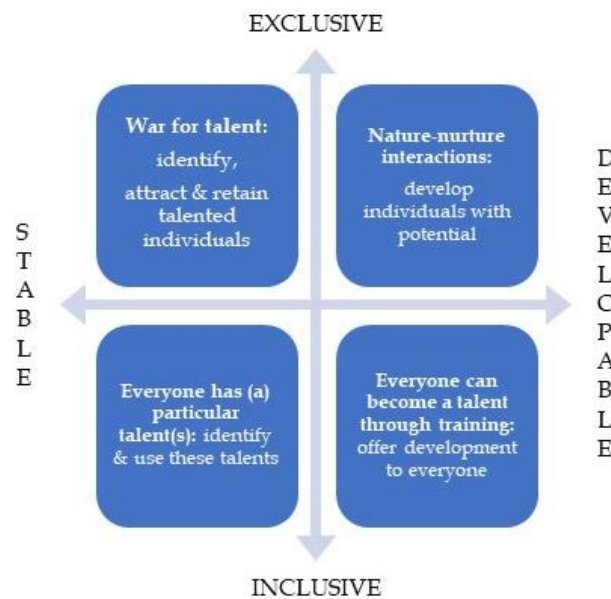

Figure 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF TALENT PHILOSOPHIES

To further elaborate on Figure 1, I will first shed light on its two dimensions, and their two extremes.

On the horizontal dimension, one can see that talent philosophies are deemed to range in respect to how stable or developable they perceive talent to be. In other words, how inherently innate it is, or is it conversely something that can be acquired (see also Cerna & Chou, 2019). The first interpretation likely posits those considered as talents on a pedestal: they are seen as a rarity. Therefore, due to the fact that their talent, i.e., for instance, their skills, knowledge, abilities, ways of socializing with others, are seen as special, innate giftedness, they are also typically seen as a particularly valuable asset for the company, and hence, deemed to rightfully deserve special treatment as part of TM (see e.g. Meyers et al., 2020). Whereas, if talent is seen as something that can be developed and cultivated, it potentially leads to more people being viewed as talents, and it quite likely results in more systematic investments in active talent development.

If moving on to the vertical dimension, talent philosophies, according to Meyers & van Woerkom (2014, as cited in Meyers et al, 2020, p. 565), vary from exclusive to inclusive approaches to TM: the first literally meaning that TM only concerns a certain, curated group of top-ranked employees, when the latter involves larger groups of staff, even the entire workforce, in the company's TM processes and activities (see also De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2017; Holck, 2018; Mayo, 2018; Alamri et al., 2019; Bhatia & Baruah, 2020; Lai & Ishizaka, 2020; Theys & Schultz, 2020; McDonell et al., 2021; Tobon & Luna-Nemecio, 2021; Wikhamn, Asplund & Dries 2021). Even if at first glance one may automatically consider certain pros and cons attached to these two extreme forms of TM, according to a range of scholars, things are not as black and white as one might think. As noted by Bhatia and Baruah (2020, pp. 196-197): the relationship between the implemented TM and how it is perceived by, and reacted to, different stakeholders, remains still "a black box".

For instance, exclusive TM is typically accused of creating two separate talent camps at organizations, the talents and the non-talents, and this differentiation is often viewed to be unequal and an elitist form of workforce segmentation. Naturally, this is considered to result in negative feelings (e.g. demotivation, bitterness, even retaliation against the talents) and actions (e.g. withdrawal, poorer performance) among the so-called non-talents (Bhatia & Baruah, 2020; Krebs & Wehner, 2021). Also, some have suggested that the talents can equally face some unexpected negative outcomes, such as stress and burnout, because of their status and the pressure to live up to it According to Lai & Ishizaka (2020), it is certainly not unheard of that for a range of reasons a talent fails to meet the set, typically high, expectations (see also Daubner-Siva et al., 2018; King, 2021; Krebs & Wehner, 2021).

Nonetheless, companies may find the more exclusive approach appealing due to its potential of being more cost-effective and more easily implementable in practice (Bhatia & Baruah, 2020). The chance to foster the talents' work motivation, loyalty and increased work efficiency can also tempt companies to pay the price for potentially letting down the non-talents (e.g. De Boeck, Meyers

& Dries, 2017), even if, for instance, Khoreva, Vaiman and Kostanek (2019) have warned companies that the positive reactions of the few talented may in fact be outweighed by the negative reactions of the non-talents, i.e. typically the majority. However, according to De Boeck, Meyers & Dries (2017), many of these potential losses and possible gains of inclusive/exclusive TM remain empirically untested.

King and Vaimer (2018) state that the organization's talent philosophy, together with the talent strategic are at the heart of all talent management-related practices and processes (see p. 20). Meyers et al. (2020, pp. 564-565) concur by noting that they are the mental models of TM, which are based on the TM decision-makers' and facilitators' understanding of the reality, thus, guiding their choices and actions, and functioning as their TM filters through which everything TM-related is typically unconsciously interpreted.

Therefore, it is of the essence to do a deep dive into the above mentioned four talent philosophies, i.e. exclusive/stable, exclusive/developable, inclusive/stable, and inclusive/ developable (see also e.g. Meyers et al., 2020, p. 563). These can either become apparent in organizations by themselves, or as some sort of hybrid philosophies, which combine ideas and ideals from more than one philosophy (see e.g. King & Vaimer, 2019).

2.1.2.1   "War for talent" philosophy

The so-called "War for talent" philosophy is according to Sharma (2021), among many others, the most commonly adopted talent philosophy in organizations. This "mainstream" philosophy can be found from the top left-hand corner in Figure 1 as it scores high on both exclusivity and stability. This philosophy has two very clear ideas as its building blocks. First, it entails the belief that all organizations have only a limited number of talents, hence the exclusivity (e.g. Cerna & Chou, 2019; Tobon & Luna-Nemecio, 2021). Second, it considers talent to always be something innate, i.e. something that people are born with (e.g. Pantouvakis & Karakasnaki, 2019). Therefore, talent is seen as something stable, and not as something that can notably develop over time: one either has it or not. Talent is thought to translate into "a select group of employees – those that rank at the top in terms of capability and performance – rather than the entire workforce" (Stahl et al., 2007, as cited in McDonell et al., 2021).

All this typically tends to result in sort of "superstar" thinking at organizations (Holck, 2018), and elitist discourse surrounding the so-called A-players (e.g. Bhatia & Baruah, 2020). These employees are seen to bring added value to the company, e.g. in the form of economic results, and play pivotal roles in respect to strategic goals (McDonnell & Wiblen, 2021; Tobon & Luna-Nemecio, 2021).

In the light of this, organizations fuelled by this "War for talent" philosophy find it, therefore, logical to invest resources on these talents. Typically, they have then talent strategies with very clear aims, programmes and other actions targeted at their small group of talents (Theys & Schultz, 2020).

Despite this particular philosophy being called the "mainstream" approach of modern organizational TM (see e.g Sharma, 2021), Pruis (2011) has critically call to the fore its long-term effects. Namely, according to Pruis, this type of TM that only centers on the few top talents can be profitable for companies over a short timespan (approximately 2-5 years) but after that its benefits are in fact quite questionable, especially if compared to the long-term benefits of a more inclusive TM system. Indeed, one is entitled to question how the entire company benefits from such mere focus on a small percentage of its employees, for instance, if 90% of talent management resources are allocated to only 5% of the employees, as exemplified by Lai and Ishizaka (2020). Furthermore, Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020) have suggested that exclusive TM may have some hidden costs embedded in it deriving from high turnover rates and possibly high levels of non-talent employees' disengagement. In this sense, the remaining three talent philosophies are indeed worthy of examining in more detail.

2.1.2.2 "Nature-nurture interactions" philosophy

This philosophy relies on the conceptual framework's dimensions by combining the lines of thought of exclusivity and developability (see e.g. Meyers et al., 2020). Similarly to the first philosophy, it deems talent to be something that only concerns some employees, but in contrast to the aforementioned first philosophy, it assumes that the talent of the few can be developed, i.e. talent as such is not innate, but it is, nevertheless, something rare. Attached to this philosophy is also a sense of certain urgency: due to its rareness, talent must not be wasted but it must be actively identified and fostered through a range of developmental activities. It is pivotal to understand that the nature-nurture philosophy is first and foremost driven by the need to detect potential and promise in individuals, not something deemed as 'ready'.

This type of philosophy has, therefore, a strong connection to a learning mind-set, although, as noted it not all employees are taken into account in this respect. Rather, individuals to be considered as "high potentials" need to demonstrate ability, engagement and a certain type of aspiration for learning and developing (see e.g. Cerna & Chou, 2019). Interestingly, Kabalina and Osipova (2022) have recently brought to the fore results indicating that TM stakeholders tend to struggle to define and select these employees with high potential. For instance, difficulties in using past performance to accurately forecast future performance have been named as sources for this dilemma. Also, personal biases seem to make finding the "right" high-potential individuals challenging.

Nonetheless, at the core of this philosophy is the idea that some employees can become something beyond their current self. Supporters of this talent philosophy, will, therefore, as part of their TM, invest resources in this exclusive group of potential (see e.g. Hughes, 2019).

2.1.2.3 "Everyone has (a) particular talent(s)" philosophy

Inclusiveness and stability are the core dimensions of the next talent philosophy, i.e. "Everyone has (a) particular talent(s)". The philosophy, located at the bottom left-hand corner of the conceptual framework, draws on positive psychology since at the crux of this philosophy is the idea that every single individual has some possible traits, i.e. strengths (see e.g. Tobon & Luna-Nemecio, 2021). Not only are these strengths seen as an asset for the company, but putting them into good use at work, is also viewed to contribute to the individuals' well-being (Meyers et al, 2020).

This philosophy also strongly adopts ideas from managing and leading diversity as an emphasis is put on all kinds of employees having their own talent(s): "seemingly 'ordinary' people can become extraordinary performers" (Meyers et al, 2020, p. 566). Clearly, this philosophy is well-rooted in a quite humane approach to TM: it drives on the belief in everyone's growth. Hence, training and development opportunities are considered to be worthy of offering for all.

Nonetheless, it is pivotal to understand how this inclusive/stable approach of this philosophy differs from the fourth and last philosophy, i.e. the inclusive/developable: the key here is the word 'particular'. In other words, according to this philosophy each talent has to find their own place at the organization based on their strengths, thus, TM guided by this philosophy centres on person-job fit (Meyers et al, 2020). In clear contrast to the following fourth philosophy: not everyone is cut out for everything, but everyone has talent for something.

2.1.2.4 "Everyone can become a talent through training" philosophy

Continuing with inclusivity but switching from the stable end of the dimension towards the other extreme, developability, I will next shed light on the talent philosophy. This approach views everyone to be a potential talent if they are given a chance for training. This last philosophy is located at the bottom right-hand corner of Meyers and van Woerkom's (2014, as cited in Meyers et al, 2020, p. 565) conceptual framework of talent philosophies. This philosophy is rooted in the idea that all employees can add value for the company's performance, and therefore, none of them ought to be excluded from the TM process (e.g. Theys & Schultz, 2020). Hence, it boils down to getting opportunities through participation (e.g. Holck, 2018).

Contrary to the previous inclusive/stable philosophy, this philosophy is not only interested in people's strengths, but also keen on supporting them from

the viewpoint of their weaknesses (Holck, 2018): individuals are, therefore, accepted more holistically as part of their company's TM activities. Moreover, embedded in this type of thinking is also an understanding of *how* talent evolves within individuals (see e.g. Swailes, 2020). On one hand, it is accepted that it always takes time, on the other hand, there is also a sense of acknowledgment of the fact that different traits evolve at varying paces, and across contexts and social environments

As aptly highlighted by Holck (2018), the lack of a pre-determined threshold for becoming a talent, leaves more room for a genuinely learning-oriented TM. Simultaneously, all this is viewed to feed into the company's overall working climate. Evidently, opposite to some of the other philosophies, this last one sees TM as something positively fostering motivation and equality, instead of creating negative undertones as a result of it. Ideally, inclusive and development-oriented TM can also have a positive impact on the workplace diversity.

At this stage, one may wonder why so many companies seem to choose the more exclusive TM systems, instead of adopting a more inclusive TM philosophy. Unsurprisingly, according to Holck (2018), the answer may very well be resources, i.e. either the lack of them or companies deciding to prioritize other things over inclusive TM.

3 RESPONSIBLE TALENT MANAGEMENT THROUGH AND STAKEHOLDER THEORY

As has become evident when discussing what is meant by with 'talent' in the first place, how employees labelled as talents, or non-talents are handled at organization, and how all this translates into the big picture of talent management in practice, there is indeed one common denominator underlying all these aforementioned TM issues, and that is responsibility.

According to Pyszka and Gajda (2015), together with some other scholars, managing talents in a responsible manner translates into both non-economical and economical responsibilities. It is about not only taking non-economical responsibility for the ways in which people are defined and measured as talents, and how they are treated as talents, or non-talents, for instance, through developing and rewarding, but it requires companies to also adopt economical responsibility. TM has to, therefore, be both ethically and strategically sustainable creating value both to employees and the company itself (e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015). Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020) concur in stating that responsible talent management is a means towards both the improved work experience of employees, but also an integral process for fostering the company's financial prosperity and innovativeness. In sum, this is thought to holistically add up to a company which has better chances at navigating the rough waters of competitive business markets and the constantly changing global contexts (Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020).

Therefore, the present study seeks to construct a more profound understanding of the role of responsibility in talent management and to do so, the concept of responsible talent management is introduced. Once a more solid conceptual understanding of responsible talent management is established (Chapter 3.1), the theoretical lens consisting of the stakeholder theory, organizational justice theory and social exchange theory is applied to this theme (Chapter 3.2).

3.1   Responsible Talent management

Talent management has tended to evoke some critical discussion from the viewpoint of responsibility, and ethics in particular, although, according to Painter-Morland et al., 2019, p. 135), ethics is still the "elephant in the room" when it comes to discussion on talent management. Some scholars argue that talent management is inherently an unethical process because from the viewpoint of duty ethics, TM views people as a means to an end, rather than approaching them through human dignity. Other scholars interpret TM, and especially exclusive talent management, to be unethical as it fails to meet the utilitarian goals: it typically caters to the needs of the few, instead of benefiting the majority (see e.g. Painter-Morland et al., 2019; Kwon & Jang, 2021). Nonetheless, if we assume that as many as 60-70% of all organizations globally are doing some form of TM (see e.g. Wikhamn, Asplund & Dries, 2021), it is worthy of examining how can they do it as responsibly as possible (see also Painter-Morland et al., 2019; Kwon & Jang, 2021).

According to Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020, p. 284), responsible talent management (hereafter RTM) is defined as:

> "TM practices and strategies that emphasise an organisation's responsibility to identify, develop, and nurture the unique and diverse talents of all workers by expanding access to available talent development opportunities, by fairly managing their weaknesses and by recognising their contributions while giving them equal opportunities to flourish as valued employees to ensure their commitment to the organisation so as to achieve mutual sustainable outcomes for employees and their organization."

In the light of this definition, talent management that is responsible, consists of inclusivity, corporate social responsibility, as well as equity and equal opportunities. They note that these guiding lines of thought need to pierce through all the TM practices and processes, such as talent identification, talent development and talent retention. Although these aforementioned common organizational practices already inherently entail a range of ethical underpinnings (see e.g. Painter-Morland et al., 2019; Swailes, 2020). Embedded in TM, especially in its exclusive form, are always the questions of, for instance, how ethically sound it is to judge people and how reliably this can in practice be executed. Also, an ethical dilemma is also inherently part of determining that some employees deserve more organizational attention than others. On top of these, TM can often turn into a politicized practice in organizations: it brings to the fore issues of personal interests and the role of power, among many other complex social phenomena (see e.g. Painter-Morland et al., 2019; Swailes, 2020).

Finding the balance between people's needs and business aims is the fundamental twin goal of responsible talent management, and organizations should ideally not only adopt RTM for the sake of pleasing external stakeholders,

such as shareholders or regulators, but also because it is the responsible thing to do also internally. RTM sustainably benefits not only the employees, but also the organization at large (Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020).

These core tenets outlined by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020), i.e. inclusivity, corporate responsibility and equality/equal opportunities, will also function as the backbone of the present study's understanding of this concept, while also other scholars' ideas are used to expand on the concept.

3.1.1 Inclusivity

As the first component of responsible talent management, the present study will discuss inclusivity, which was already strongly brought to the fore in relation to the various talent philosophies (see Chapter 2.1.2). Evidently, the inclusive approaches to TM are deemed as more responsible options than the two more exclusive talent philosophies, and in fact, exclusive TM has even been accused of creating a fruitful ground for *ir*responsible and *un*fair employment practices (see e.g. Alamri et al., 2019; Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020). Exclusive TM is considered to entail the following challenging, thus, making inclusive TM a better option (e.g. Swailes, 2021).

First, since exclusive TM requires that certain stakeholders decide who is a talent, this inherently means that some stakeholders hold the power to determine the threshold for talents, and hence, managers can easily, and at worst in hiding, become the ones creating the rules (see e.g. Swailes, 2021). In a worst-case scenario, decisions based on guesswork or the managers' gut feeling, can become a determining and long-term factor affecting the careers and lives of various individuals (see e.g. Minbaeva & Collings, 2013). McDonnell and Skuza (2021) referred to research, which discovered that closer to 70% of companies have admitted to misidentifying their talents. An even more negative scenario was portrayed in a study mentioned by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020). Only a bit over 10 % of organizations using TM can accurately determine who their companies so-called A-players are. This would mean that basically only one in ten companies can responsibly implement exclusive TM and reach the goals set for it. In addition to this, this implies that the absolute majority of employees is excluded from TM on very shaky grounds.

In the light of duty ethics, this type of TM does not add up to equal treatment of all employees (Swailes, 2021). If exclusive TM is approached from the viewpoint of virtue ethics and the TM stakeholders', especially the decision-makers', moral character is brought to the fore, then one is faced with the socially complex and potentially politicized nature of TM. The fundamental question lies in the fact that how honestly and with integrity and justice the stakeholders are acting (see e.g. Cerna & Chou, 2019; Swailes, 2021). Are they driving their own interests? What role does their ego play in TM? To what extent are they comfortable in transparently standing behind their decisions and arguing for their choices? Tobon and Luna-Nemecia (2021) call for all TM stakeholder to not

only drive their own ambitions and foster their own development but to also aspire to do those for others. Finally, in respect to care ethics, exclusive TM raises valid concerns of how all employees are cared for, if only a certain small group of them is included in TM (Swailes, 2021).

To further strengthen this argument, Cerna and Chou (2019) also question to financial responsibility of exclusive TM by noting that it may in fact be a zero-sum scenario in most cases. The investments made in the few become losses in the form of the greater mass becoming disengaged and unmotivated, or even entirely exiting the company. On another financial note, Koch and Marescaux (2021) reported on a study, according to which, a negative stock-market reaction has been linked to more exclusive TM. This finding is explained through the logic of the high-potential A-level employees being at larger risk of leaving the company: the company's competitors are also deemed to understand their value and thus be inclined to lure them over. Hence, exclusive TM investments in the company "superstars" can be viewed as wasted resources by the investors.

Drawing on the three ethics-centered approaches to TM (see Swailes; 2021), and considering the economic responsibilities embedded in TM, one can fairly easily concur with Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020): inclusive TM indeed comes across as more responsible than exclusive TM.

3.1.2   Corporate social responsibility

As the second core component of responsible talent management, according to Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah (2020), is corporate social responsibility (in brief CSR), which is simply put thought to translate into doing good works (see e.g. Freeman & Velamuri, 2006).

Similarly, to responsibility being a so-called add-on to management in general (see e.g. Langmead, Land & King (2020), CSR has been accused of unnecessarily separating responsibility from corporations. The two should be inherently connected without any additional definitions (Freeman & Velamuri, 2006). Nonetheless, CSR has made its way to business and organizational discourses at large, as well as in connection to TM. Therefore, it cannot be ignored in the present study as a concept.

World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2008) has defined CSR as follows:

> "the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the work-force and their families as well as of the local community and society at large" (as cited in Rahman, 2011, p. 172).

The CSR definitions and emphases have varied across decades, but during this century the focus has especially been on integrating social and environmental

concerns, ethical behaviour of companies, human rights, transparency and accountability, to name but a few (see e.g. Rahman, 2011). Furthermore, at the heart of CSR in general is the idea of companies acting, making decisions and communicating with honesty, transparency and ethical values. In other words, simply making profit and bringing value to shareholders is not enough: it has to be done with these things in mind (see e.g. Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020). Pyszka and Gajda (2015) have particularly called for transparency and altogether clear articulation of TM practices due to TM's socially unpredictable nature (see also De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2017; Khoreva, Vaiman & Kostanek, 2019; Mensah, 2019a). As noted, multiple times before: TM is a complex intermixture of various stakeholder beliefs and assumptions (see e.g. King & Vaimer, 2019; Meyers et al., 2020; McDonell et al., 2021), and the resulting actions, decisions and cognitive, as well as emotional reactions of the people involved (see e.g. De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2017).

Therefore, not surprisingly, CSR on the level of an individual company is by no means a simple concept nor a straight-forward endeavor (see e.g. Freeman & Velamuri, 2006): a company can simultaneously be excelling at one thing, while failing in another department of CSR. In this sense, companies portraying themselves as socially responsible companies, even if they did a range of other things responsibly, are not in fact socially responsible throughout, if their TM is executed by ignoring honesty, transparency and ethics. Hence, TM is a fundamental part of every company's CSR.

As noted by Pruis (2011), companies ought to not be expected to do TM as so-called pro-bono, but they can, nevertheless, be required to do it in as morally, ethically and legally sound manner as possible (see also Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020). Borrowing the line of thought from Freeman and Velamuri (2006), CSR in connection to TM ought to also be viewed through the lens of the following question: How does the company's TM make all its stakeholders better off?

3.1.3   Equity and equality

Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah (2020) state that TM, when it is responsible, has immense potential for improving the overall employee experience of the people working at the company. However, companies cannot succeed in this without profoundly incorporating the following three equity and equality viewpoints.

First, equity theory can shed light on this theme. This theory suggests that employees tend to weigh in on their inputs in connection to the outcomes of these inputs, and as long as they deem these to be in a fair balance, they are pleased and motivated. However, the minute they detect an unfair trade-off and get a sense of inequity, for instance, if their salary is not well-proportioned in respect to their hard work, or their colleague receives some extra benefits with less effort or lower level of expertise, this fairness is no longer experienced, thus resulting

in demotivation and lack of interest in developing oneself further (see e.g. Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020). Therefore, even it is likely financially unattainable to shower all employees with all forms of talent development, compensation and benefits, among various other perks, Khoreva, Vaiman and Kostanek (2019, pp. 35) provide a helpful guideline: "if you can't give people the outcome they want, at least give them a fair process".

Secondly, and in direct connection to one of the present study's theoretical lenses, i.e. social exchange theory (see more in Chapter 3.2.2), equity and a sense of equality is also inherently connected to the reciprocity between an employee and their employer. When the employee detects that the company invests in them and their career, well-being and professional development, they want to return the favor with, for instance, hard work. However, a lack of perceived investment tends to translate in the opposite reactions (Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020).

Thirdly, Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020) call for equal employment opportunities, for instance, through transparent talent identification system, open development activities, fair compensation and fair recognition systems. This is considered to translate into respectful and dignified treatment of all employees. Furthermore, when all employees are equally invited to join TM, this is thought to result also in more equal representation of different types of employees (e.g. Pruis, 2011). The large pool of talents will, hence, automatically entail people of different generations, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation and academic/professional backgrounds, as well as employees with varying personal attributes and (dis)abilities (see e.g. Daubner-Siva, 2021; Festing & Schäfer, 2021; Kwon & Jang, 2021).

This line of thinking brings talent management closer to diversity management, i.e. the "organizational activities to reduce intergroup inequalities with the aim to enable equal development and career progression for all employees" (Daubner-Siva, 2021, p. 253). This is, according to Daubner-Siva (2021), and Kwon and Jang (2021), in fact something that TM literature has typically lacked.

Both Pruis (2011) and Daubner-Siva (2021) are strong advocates of diversity aspects being embedded to TM. Pruis, first and foremost, from the viewpoint of equal career opportunities and overall equity bringing to the fore a range of different types of role models, thus, further fostering organizational diversity. Employees from all walks of life need exposure to different ideas of talent, and in this more inclusive TM can strengthen internal representations. Daubner-Siva (2021) promotes TM with a strong focus on equity and equality, as it has tremendous potential to knock down the talent-related paradoxes often negatively affecting the minorities at workplaces. Certain groups of employees, for instance women in male-dominated industries, or ethnic minorities in organizations dominated by one or two more "mainstream" ethnicities, often face very contradicting requirements in their effort to become perceived as talents: they need to work harder or reach higher levels of expertise if they wish to be considered as talents in comparison to the dominating sex or ethnicity. They need

to show their ambitions, but not by any means in a way that is interpreted as too threatening for others. Indeed, hidden inequalities continue to characterize TM, thus undermining its responsibility (see e.g. Alamri et al., 2019; Kwon & Jang, 2021; Swailes, 2020).

Ideally, companies should not only settle for giant proclamations about their equity and equality actions, rather, they should actively seek to genuinely make their TM across the board more favorable for all employees (see e.g. Alamri et al., 2019): prioritizing diversity throughout TM is the key to unlocking everyone's potential, not just that of the selected few (see e.g. Hughes, 2019).

3.2   Theoretical lenses to RTM

According to King (2021), talent management research has often been criticized for the lack of a theoretically sound basis (see also Ansar & Baloch, 2018). At the heart of the criticism is often that TM research is theoretically too vague, or either that the theoretical approach is too narrow and one-dimensional. In an effort to overcome such possible theoretical gaps, the present study resorted to a three-fold theoretical lens, in which the stakeholder theory is the main driving force, and organizational justice theory and social exchange theory are used to complement it whenever needed. This way, the theoretical foundation of the present study is neither too vague, nor too unidimensional.

As discussed already earlier, an RTM component of utmost importance is how organizations take into account all their TM stakeholders in the best possible way (see e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015; Laasch et al., 2020). A pre-requisite of successful work among talents is that all stakeholders are recognized, assigned their own roles and made aware of these roles (e.g. Dalal & Akdere, 2018). This, of course, requires that the concept of 'stakeholder' is first understood. According to Thompson (1967, as cited in Freeman, 2010, p. 46),

> "a stakeholder in an organization is (by definition) any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives".

Against this backdrop, talent management's responsibility, or the lack of it, cannot be examined without examining all the stakeholders involved, i.e. people who have an effect on TM and/or effected by the TM and its outcomes. A provenly useful theoretical lens for this, is the stakeholder theory (see e.g. Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020; Bhatia & Baruah, 2020).

According to James and Priyadarshini (2021), the business world of today and the modern organizations are inherently so multi-layered and altogether so complex, that they simply do no longer leave room for the discourse of the "great man" theory, nor for any type of "hero" approaches to management and

leadership. Managing in a responsible way requires that management is aligned to the greatest extent possible, with the needs of all stakeholders involved (see e.g. Laasch & Conaway, 2014). Therefore, today's business contexts are coloured by the need of coordination and characterized by stakeholder evolvement. This all applies also to the holistic process of talent management understood in the light of the definition by Collings and Mellahi (2009, p. 304):

> "…activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continue commitment to the organization."

As becomes evident, TM entails, for instance, a range of activities, processes, managerial decisions, identification needs and criteria, as well as reactions and actions of the talents, and non-talents. Clearly, the TM process is not something that anyone in the organization can do entirely by themselves, nor do its implications only concern just certain individuals or one group of stakeholders. The successes and failures are in one way or another likely witnessed on many levels of the organization (see e.g. Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Theys & Schultz, 2020).

According to King (2021, p. 47), TM concerns individuals, their teams as well as the entire organization around them. Thus, perhaps not surprisingly, Theys and Schultz (2020, p. 5) have brought to the fore the importance of co-responsibility and co-ownership of TM stakeholders, who, according to them are the following:

- the organisation's board of directors;

- the chief executive officer (CEO) and senior executives;

- the HR department and talent professionals;

- line managers; and

- individual employees

Barzantny and Clapp-Smith (2021) have reviewed TM literature from this angle and as a result summarized very similar types of lists of TM stakeholders. Furthermore, Hughes (2019, pp. 69-70) has also done a deep dive to TM from the viewpoint of one pivotal responsibility aspect, i.e. diversity, by shedding light on the range of decisions and choices embedded in TM. This one deep dive alone, already manages to place various stakeholders at the core of TM: their varying expectations, needs, capabilities, ideas, and perceived outcomes of TM all play a role in how TM is perceived, built, and executed.

Successful TM is a result of the contributions of all the listed stakeholders (see e.g. Theys & Schultz, 2020, Barzantny & Clapp-Smith, 2021). Pyszka and Gajda (2015) concur: company performance and decision-making, also in respect to TM, are the outcomes of actions and decisions of a range of stakeholders.

In these reflections lie to core reason for combining responsible talent management with stakeholder theory in this thesis. Interestingly, according to De Boeck, Meyers and Dries (2017), theoretical lenses centring on ethics, stakeholders, and corporate social responsibility, have indeed been used in non-empirical studies on TM, but there is an apparent lack of using them as part of empirical TM research.

In the following sub-chapter, and its sub-chapters, the stakeholder theory will be presented and discussed in more detail, and to strengthen the present study's theoretical foundation, also some interrelated theoretical viewpoints are discussed. After all, if considering the present study's topic, and its research questions, for instance the CSR theory, relational signaling theory, social exchange theory and organizational justice theory, were deemed as pivotal additions to stakeholder theory to bring theoretical rigor to this thesis.

3.2.1 Stakeholder theory

The roots of the stakeholder theory are ingrained in the following history. First of all, the concept of 'stakeholder' originates back to the 1960s, and according to Freeman (2010, p. 32), the concept started to gradually become incorporated in the theories of corporate planning, systems theory, organization theory, and most interestingly from the viewpoint of the present study: in relation to corporate social responsibility. Even if the concept of 'stakeholder' was understood and used in varying ways across these theories, there was still one common denominator. They were all deemed to feed into strategic management, i.e. incorporating stakeholders in the companies' decisions and actions was seen as something strategics (see e.g. Freeman, 2010, p. 32, pp. 38-39). Following the line of thought from Freeman (2010, p. 46), 'strategic' is here understood as something that is connected to the company's direction In the light of this, it makes sense that stakeholders were gradually understood to be "those groups which make a difference" (Thompson, 1967, as cited in Freeman, 2010, p. 46), and those that can have an impact on the company's direction and how the company gets there (Freeman, 2010, p. 46).

Secondly, as during the final decades of the 21st century, social responsibility of business started to gain foothold in the field of business ethics, this also brought stakeholders even more to the fore (see e.g. Bowie, 1991; Freeman, 2010). According to the neoclassical view, companies were deemed to be allowed to make profit, but not at any cost, rather, issues related to honoring moral standards, respecting individual rights and fostering a sense of justice were brought more prevalently to the fore (see e.g. Bowie, 1991).

As one outcome of this type of thinking, was the stakeholder theory by Freeman in 1984 (see e.g. Bowie 1991, Freeman, 2010; Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020). At the heart of the theory was no longer to solely maximize shareholders' profits, but to also include other stakeholders in the process of making decision and the ways in which practices and processes are run. All in all, looking out for the interests of the many, not just certain few was deemed important. This shed light on the role of employees, customers, suppliers, the surrounding community, and society, as well as the managers themselves without forgetting the shareholders (Bowie, 1991).

Bowie (1991) highlights that the theory provided a platform for two somewhat separate interpretations of it: the so-called unenlightened version, understands the stakeholder theory from the viewpoint of managers exploiting all possible stakeholders to maximize profit, whereas the enlightened approach interprets the theory from the angle of genuine concern for stakeholders' health, safety, and personal life. The former approach can potentially serve short-term goals, while failing to foster stakeholder engagement in the long haul. The latter is typically seen as a more sustainable approach: both socially and financially (Bowie, 1991).

The present study, which has holistic responsibility of TM at its core, will, therefore, approach to the stakeholder theory from the viewpoint of the more enlightened approach, i.e. responsible stakeholder management and more long-term profitability. It is of the essence, to bear in mind that this decision does not exclude the so-called ultimate corporate aim, i.e. profit-making, but it rather sets its sights on also including the corporate means to the RTM discourse (see also Bowie, 1991).

To bring the stakeholder theory closer to the present study's context, i.e. responsible talent management, a line of thought from Freeman (2010, p. 45) could be adopted. Namely, if applying Freeman, the so-called legitimate TM stakeholders are those who literally have something at stake when it comes to talent management, and those whose inclusion in TM, in one way or another, is deemed as worthy of the company's time and other resources.

As can be seen, the stakeholder theory provides a valuable theoretical lens for examining talent management. Nonetheless, it also raises an ample number of valid questions and concerns, as also noted by Freeman (2010). Certain valid, and especially responsibility-related, aspects of TM remain untouched if the stakeholder theory is used as the only lens. For instance, in addition to recognizing who their TM stakeholders are, companies need to decide how equally stakeholders are to be involved in TM and how will contrasting needs and expectations be negotiated when managing talents.

Bhatia and Baruah (2020) remark that at the core of the stakeholder theory is the idea of managers and leaders ensuring that their company prioritizes respectful and well-functioning relationships with all stakeholders, however, they also needed to resort to some complementary theoretical lenses to enrich the stakeholder theory's perspectives. According to Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020), there have been a range of scholars calling for TM research

through not just one, but multiple, theoretical lenses. To ensure this adequate level of theoretical rigor, additional two theoretical lenses were included in the present study.

3.2.2 Complementary theoretical lenses: Organizational justice and social exchange

In addition to viewing responsible talent management from the viewpoint of all the stakeholders involved, i.e. stakeholders with both economic and social needs and expectations, as well as economic and social inputs, the present study requires a somewhat broader horizon to responsibility. Therefore, also the organization justice theory and social exchange theory were adopted for the present study to complement the stakeholder theory. In the following, these complementary theories are briefly discussed and connected to the present study's scope.

First of all, in an effort to shed light on the abovementioned question of how companies should involve their TM stakeholders and in which ways they should balance between possibly overlapping, or even contradictory, stakeholder viewpoints, the present study consulted the organization justice theory (see e.g. De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2017; Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020; Bhatia & Baruah, 2020; Kwon & Jang, 2021).

In brief, this theory addresses individuals' general perceptions of the fairness of their employment. According to Bhatia and Baruah (2020), perceived unfairness, or experienced workforce discrimination, can have severe effects on employees, both talents and non-talents. Such perceptions and experiences can, for instance, manifest themselves in "higher absenteeism, turnover, stress, insecurity, psychological breach of contract, and lower levels of commitment, satisfaction, engagement, motivation and work effort" (pp. 201-202). According to Hughes (2019), employees have a tendency to rather leave the company, instead of sticking around the challenge the system, hence, getting it right with TM being responsible, is of the essence. For this, the organizational justice theory brings to the fore profoundly relevant viewpoints.

The perceived fairness is typically a combination of the following three aspects (De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2017, p. 202; Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020, pp. 283-284; Bhatia & Baruah, 2020, pp. 200-201). The procedural justice refers to individuals' judgement of how fair, for instance, the TM the process itself has been, i.e. whether the way in which it was conducted, and the guiding lines of thought, were deemed fair. According to Leventhal (1980, as cited in Kwon & Jang, 2021, p. 103), ideally procedural justice:

- applies consistently across people and time;

- is free from bias;

- is based on accurate information in decision-making;

- entails some mechanism for correcting inaccurate decisions;

- conforms with personal ethics or morality; and

- ensures that the opinions of various groups are represented

Individuals also tend to assess the fairness, from the viewpoint of how equally resources have been shared between people: this element of disruptive justice can in the context of TM, for instance, be linked to how talents and non-talents perceive the outcomes of talent management, e.g. how much time, effort, rewards and other resources are allocated to employees under these two labels. Finally, interactional justice is more directly connected to the interpersonal levels of TM, such as the quality and quantity of feedback given as part of TM, and the overall level of respect of other TM stakeholders.

Secondly, a theory which is closely interrelated to organizational justice, is social exchange theory (see e.g. De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2017; Khoreva, Vaiman & Kostanek, 2019; Mensah, 2019b; Festing & Schäfer, 2021; Kwon & Jang, 2021). As the name implies, at the core of the theory is the exchange between the employer and the employee. The exchange can entail, for instance, perceived promises, commitments and obligations from both parties involved (see e.g. De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2017; Mensah, 2019b; Khoreva, Vaiman & Kostanek, 2019; Festing & Schäfer, 2021).

In the context of TM, this refers to the company labelling someone as a 'talent' and providing them with all the perks of that status (e.g. opportunities for career advancement, chances to participate in different types of development programs or other forms of differentiated treatment at the workplace), while expecting the talent's increased work effort, eagerness for continuous professional development and loyalty in return (see e.g. Mensah, 2019b; Festing & Schäfer, 2021; King, 2021; Wikhamn, Asplund & Dries, 2021). What is more, in this reciprocity is also inherently embedded the idea of TM not only being one process among a range of other HR processes conducted at organizations, but it is also something far more symbolic. It conveys the idea that the individual in question is important for the company, and through this status the company wished to establish a more psychologically intertwined relationships with that talent (Festing & Schäfer, 2021; King, 2021; Wikhamn, Asplund & Dries, 2021). It all boils down to higher emotional involvement and interdependency (Festing & Schäfer, 2021) and it undisputedly requires loyalty and trust from all stakeholders involved (e.g. Mensah, 2019b).

As all contracts, also this psychological contract, can be fulfilled (i.e. when both parties meet the set expectations), breached (if one party perceives the other to have ignored their end of the deal), or even violated (meaning that someone completely fails to deliver what they have promised). Whether the contract resulting from the social exchange is fulfilled, breached or violated, undisputedly has an effect on how the parties involved react (Festing & Schäfer, 2021). Therefore, responsible talent management never ends at the stage when someone

is labelled as a 'talent', rather, in the light of the social exchange theory, the mutual responsibilities of the stakeholders involved are after that even more prevalent. Furthermore, if organizations invest in all their employees, i.e. not just a small group of so-called A-level employees or superstars, this social contract can thus be extended to the workforce as a whole. As a result, reciprocity is fostered across the organization (Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020).

In sum, in an effort to approach responsible talent management from the broadest possible angle, that considers both social and financial responsibility (see also Pyszka & Gajda, 2015), the present study resorted two this three-fold theoretical approach, i.e. the combination of stakeholder theory, organizational justice theory and social exchange. In the following chapter, i.e. Chapter 4, the present study's research process is outlined in detail.

4 THE STUDY

This chapter starts with the present study's research questions, as they have created the foundation for all the other decisions made as part of this research process, including the way this study has been positioned in relation to positivist and post-positivist thinking, the research strategy that was chosen and the methodological choices that have been made. Also, the research questions have had an effect on who needs to be involved in the data collection, how the data collection itself ought to be conducted and through which analysis method it needs to be processed.

After having established these, I will, on one hand, discuss the research ethics related to the present study, and on the other hand, I will provide a detailed outline of the research process of this study as I elaborate on the study's methods, participants, data collection and data analysis.

4.1 The research questions and guiding lines of thoughts

As in all research, also the concrete process of the present study has its roots in the research questions, which were set at the very early stages of this thesis process. According to Claus (2019), it is of the essence that academic researchers anticipate upcoming TM trends and proactively examine them to contribute to TM happening in the field of HR. Sparrow and Makram have even declared back in 2015 that TM as a field is at a juncture, in which a range of values, assumptions and philosophies are materializing in practice without adequate evidence and theoretical soundness to back up their suitability for TM, and Khoreva, Vaiman and Kostanek (2019), as well as Claus (2019) fully concur: there is an evident gap between TM practice and theory. In a similar vein, Rotolo et al. (2018) state that practitioners have lost sight of theory, and theorists are too far from practice. When it comes to TM, this is a gap, which the present study sought to contribute to with the cycle of conducting research of what happens in practice in the field

of TM, and then feeding the present study's findings back into that cycle to enrich TM practice.

Once the present study's scope was narrowed down to *responsible* talent management in particular, and once stakeholder theory was adopted as the study's main theoretical lens, it fairly soon became apparent that earlier research is in fact quite limited in respect to this combination, or actually any studies which would combine TM with responsibility and/or ethics. This same discovery was quite recently made by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020), and it can be connected to Claus (2019) altogether promoting the broadening of TM-related discussion: there is a need to reinvent the concept and the practices related to it.

The present study's four research questions are the following:

- RQ1: How is responsible talent management defined by the talent man-

  agement professionals?

- RQ2: Who are reportedly the stakeholders of responsible talent manage-

  ment and how are they involved?

- RQ3: In which ways is the companies' talent management reportedly re-

  sponsible at the moment?

- RQ4: How do the companies reportedly wish to make their talent man-

  agement more responsible in the future?

and next I will provide a short overview of the reasons behind each of them, i.e. the logic behind deeming these particular questions as relevant for studying responsible talent management from the viewpoint of stakeholder theory.

The study's first research question, i.e. RQ1, is: **How is responsible talent management defined by the talent management professionals?** and it was seen as a pivotal angle to this topic for the following three reasons. First, considering that according to Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020), responsible talent management is a novel, yet undisputedly needed, approach to talent management, it was deemed crucial that the present study would also feed into RTM on the conceptual level. Hence, to contribute to the ongoing construction of the concept, and to enhance general understanding of RTM, the talent management professionals' definitions of the concept were seen pivotal. Secondly, the present study wished to properly acknowledge that TM in general is understood and executed in a range of ways across organizations. This variation derives, for instance, from key stakeholders' varied TM philosophies (e.g. Meyers et al., 2020), and strategies (e.g. Sparrow & Makram, 2015),

differences in HR architecture (incl. TM) (see e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015; Dalal & Akdere, 2018), and at times also diverse and contextually bound legal and ethical underpinnings (see e.g. Sumelius & Smale, 2021). Therefore, I wanted to allow the present study's participants to define what RTM is and means to them and their organization. Thirdly, even if Meyers et al. (2020, pp. 579-582) report on some previous studies conducted on HR managers', and other TM stakeholders', TM views, philosophies, and practices, it became quite evident that there is a particularly limited amount of this type of TM research conducted in the Nordic countries. For instance, Meyers et al. (2020) bring to the fore examples of studies in which TM comparisons have been made across cultures (e.g. Anglo countries, Germanic countries and Latin countries), and according to King (2021), there is possibly even an overflow of studies conducted in the US context, but no reference was made to TM in the Nordics. In this sense, the present study provides a novel regional approach to TM, and RTM in particular.

The second research question (RQ2), is: **Who are reportedly all the stakeholders of responsible talent management and how are they involved?** This question was formed first and foremost to allow access to the relationship of responsible talent management and all its stakeholders. After all, and as already highlighted in congruence with a range of scholars (e.g. Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Pyszka & Gajda, 2015; Bhatia & Baruah, 2020; Theys & Schultz, 2020), stakeholders are an integral component of both TM practice and research. Hence, the present study was keen on discovering how its participants report on this issue.

Thirdly, the present study seeks an answer to the question of: **In which ways is the companies' talent management reportedly responsible at the moment?** After all, even if talent management has not been widely studied from the viewpoint of responsibility, companies are nowadays both formally and informally required to make a range of their operations responsible. Hence, it is interesting and important to see how this is reflected on their talent management. Furthermore, considering the previously mentioned pressure to reinvent talent management (see e.g. Sparrow & Makram, 2015; Claus 2019; Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020), and make it, for instance, more responsible, one cannot ignore the importance of first understanding the starting point, i.e. what RTM reportedly is today and in practice. This has the potential to bridge the gap between (R)TM theory and practice as called for by Rotolo et al. (2018), Claus (2019), as well as Khoreva, Vaiman and Kostanek (2019).

Finally, the study sets out to discover what type of future directions of responsible talent management the TM professionals bring to the fore. The window to this issue is RQ4: **How do the companies reportedly wish to make their talent management more responsible in the future?** This question plays additionally an important role in terms of mirroring the companies' desired future realities against the more theoretical RTM insights and ideals. Also, RQ4 can be seen as a pivotal source of inspiration and ideas for not only the companies of the present study, but also for the nearly 70% of all organizations having some form of TM running (Wikhamn, Asplund & Dries, 2021). Indeed, new approaches and fresh ideas are needed globally, if considering that according to Hughes

(2019) only less than every tenth company is pleased with the effectiveness of their talent management.

However, prior to moving on the study from the perspective of its process, I want to briefly touch upon its position in the larger scheme of conducting research. After all, it is of utmost importance to be transparent about the underlying lines of thought guiding the research process. Hence, in the following, the present study is positioned in relation to a) positivist and post-positivist thinking (see also Trochim, 2006; Tuomivaara 2005), b) quantitative and qualitative research methods (see e.g. Varto, 1992; Töttö, 2000, Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006; Shuttleworth,2008), c) inductive and deductive reasoning (see also Tuomivaara, 2005; Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006; Trochim, 2006), as well as d) the chosen research strategy, i.e. phenomenology (see e.g. Smith, 2009; Rouhiainen, n.d.).

First of all, if one considers that at the core of the present study are people's own definitions of responsible talent management, their ideals related to it, as well as the stakeholders, i.e. other people and their interconnectedness, involved in responsible talent management, and furthermore, if one takes into account the inherent complex nature of talent management in general and the conceptual vagueness of *responsible* talent management, one cannot help but position this study on the more post-positivist camp. After all, in contrast to positivist thinking, according to which the world, including people and their thoughts, feelings, actions and relationships, are easily measurable and in fact quite simple phenomena, the present study clearly needs to resort to something different.

Indeed, as noted earlier (see also Collings & Mellahi, 2009: 304; Sparrow & Makram, 2015, Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2019; King, 2021), not only is there a lack of a universal definition of talent management, and not to mention *responsible* talent management, talent management is also viewed to take several different forms in practice across different organizations and other prevailing contexts (see e.g. Sparrow & Makram, 2015; Ansar & Baloch, 2018; Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Khoreva & Vaiman, 2021). Post-positivist thinking is precisely keen on tapping into people's perceptions and observations by acknowledging that they are always, at least to some extent, subjective and biased, instead of expecting them to portray the world in perfect, measurable manner like the more positivist camp of thinking (Trochim, 2006; Tuomivaara, 2005). Therefore, a post-positivist approach was adopted to better reflect on the study's research questions' complexity and the likely varied meanings connected to responsible talent management.

Secondly, a research strategy was needed for the present study, and for this phenomenology was deemed most suitable. Phenomenology is a strategy which is strongly rooted in the post-positivist ideas of describing and portraying things as they are, rather than attempting to theorize them in overly artificial way (see e.g. Rouhiainen, n.d.). This decision was made for the following two reasons. First, considering that there is a limited number of theories and frameworks on responsible talent management, there present study had no choice but to start contributing to them, i.e. by seeing what makes, or doesn't make talent

management responsible in the 'real-world'. Secondly, and by following this line of thought, phenomenology is particularly suitable for the present study as researching, for instance, people's experiences (see e.g. Smith, 2009) is at the core of phenomenology. Phenomenology, as summarized by Smith (2009) and as taken to the level of the present study in the parentheses, is centering on individuals' perceptions and thoughts (*RTM professionals' definitions and understanding of the current state of affairs in respect to RTM), their connections to others and their social activity (*RTM stakeholders),* and their imagination and volition (*RTM ideals and future directions*).

Thirdly, Töttö (2000) and Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka (2006) emphasize that the decision between positivism and post-positivism, and the accompanying research strategy, should always also be reflected in the choice of methodology, i.e. whether the research is conducted with qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods. Therefore, the decision to view responsible talent management from the more post-positivistic angle, had an impact on the choice of methodology also in the present study. According to Tuomivaara (2005), post-positivist research tends to methodologically adopt a more qualitative approach as these two approaches together have perhaps better potential for to viewing the world, and with that also knowledge construction, in a unified manner.

Qualitative research methods, in a similar vein with the post-positivist thinking, are especially targeted for shedding light on people and their actions and behaviors, as well as the outcomes of these. Moreover, qualitative research, in comparison to quantitative research, better excels at bringing people's values, emotions and thoughts to the fore. Based on these, qualitative methods were deemed to be a good match with the present study's interest in the talent management professionals' own understanding and definitions of RTM, and the stakeholder relationships they deem important for RTM (RQ1). To take this decision in very concrete terms even closer to the level of the present study's research questions, Shuttleworth's (2008) line of thought was followed as according to Shuttleworth, qualitative research is especially well-suited for studies in which one is keen on finding answers to questions starting with *how* or *in which ways*, like the present study, instead of seeking simple *yes* or *no* answers.

Finally, as part of the present study and its foundation as a piece of research, its form of reasoning was to be determined, i.e. whether the study would follow inductive or deductive reasoning or the combination of them, abductive reasoning. In brief, inductive reasoning boils down to allowing themes and aspects to freely derive from the data, whereas deductive reasoning uses a chosen theory or a certain framework as a sort of filter for going through the data (see e.g. Tuomivaara, 2005; Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006; Trochim, 2006). However, as noted by Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka (2006), these two should not be seen as complete opposites but rather as complementary approaches. In fact, there is even a combination of these, i.e. abductive reasoning, which adopts aspects from them both, thus resulting in a more balances approach, which combines inductive reasoning's open-endedness with deductive reasoning's narrower, top-down approach (see e.g. Tuomivaara, 2005; Trochim,

2006). In the present study, this combination approach was out of the three options deemed as the most suitable approach: responsible talent management themes can otherwise inductively derive from the data during the analysis process but through the research questions, the RTM-related definitions, ideals and stakeholders will be used as pivotal deductive analytical lenses.

As can be seen, the foundation of a research process is created through an unfolding process, in which everything starts from the research problem and research questions which then guide all the decision-making embedded in the research process. In sum, the present study has a strong connection to the post-positivism as a research philosophy, and phenomenology as its research strategy, and these were accompanied with qualitative methods. On top of these, the present study resorts to abductive reasoning for its data analysis stage. Having established these choices, and why they have been made, I shall now move on to the study in more detail.

4.2   Research ethics

Before diving into the details of the present study and how it was conducted in practice, I want to briefly outline the research ethics of the present study. First of all, before embarking on any data collection, Kuula's (2006) guidelines of collecting, utilizing and storing data were taken into careful consideration. Also, even if I had already earlier successfully completed our university' online course on personal data processing during academic research, I, nevertheless, carefully revisited the practical and ethical guidelines of both the Finnish Advisory Board of Research Integrity (2012) and our university. Therefore, I can guarantee that all the steps of the present study have been conducted in conformity with the University of Jyväskylä's prescribed and recommended ethical standards, as well as by respecting the ethical principles provided by the Finnish Advisory Board of Research Integrity.

To shed some light on how these principles and guidelines were taken into account in practice, I would like to highlight the following activities. For instance, all the interview participants were given adequate amount of information about the study in question and what it meant for, or required from, them. I also gave them my contact information and encouraged them to reach out to me should they have any questions or concerns. They were told that taking part in the study was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from it at any point. Throughout the process, it was highlighted to them that their anonymity would be respected and only the necessary amount of personal data was collected as part of the study. Their anonymity was made a top priority when storing and disposing the data. Moreover, it was respected when publishing and presenting their interview quotations or other data samples: every single data entry in this thesis has been thoroughly evaluated from the viewpoint of the risk of

identification, and whenever it has been needed, all possibly harmful identifiers or details have been either masked or omitted.

Finally, on a slightly different note on research ethics, I want to bring to the fore the concept of researcher's own reflexivity. Namely, I fully concur with scholars such as Berger (2015) in deeming reflexivity as an integral component of research ethics. In brief, reflexivity refers to a researcher being internally aware and externally transparent when it comes to their own position in connection to the research topic and their role in the research process (see e.g. Etherington, 2004; Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014; Berger, 2015). Therefore, instead of hiding behind the illusion of a researcher being something separate from the process, their inherent situatedness is not only consciously internalized, but also openly communicated as part of the reporting process. After all, I as someone with my own study and professional background in talent management, as well as with my own biases, beliefs and experiences related to this topic, have been the one to make all the decisions in this research process. Hence, I simply cannot be removed from the equation.

The way in which reflexivity has been apparent in the present study's process is two-fold. On one hand, I have, as advised by Berger (2015), consciously self-monitored my own thinking, reactions and decisions throughout this research process. I have, for instance, mirrored my research questions, the interview script (see Table 2 as an appendix) as well as my thematic data analysis against my own preconceptions and possible biases. On the other hand, whenever it has been possible, logical and well-fitted with the text, I have attempted to shed light on these when reporting on this study.

Contrary to some notions of this type of reflexivity being a sign of poor research, which lacks objectivity and ends up been contaminated with the researcher's own position and perspectives, I as a researcher believe that de-mystifying the research process and the role of the research makes it all far more ethical (see also e.g. Etherington, 2004; Berger, 2015).

On a final note on research ethics and my responsibilities as a researcher, it should already at this stage be mentioned that the entire research process will be assessed through the lens of trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, transferability, conformability, and authenticity in Chapter 7 (see also e.g. Lincoln & Guba, 1985; 1994; Pyett, 2003; Elo et al., 2014).

4.3 Methods

Considering that the present study's research questions are fairly open-ended and centering on describing and understanding, instead of quantifying, the talent management professionals' definitions and ideals of responsible talent management (*'how'*, *'what type'*), their talent management-related stakeholder relationships (*'for whom'*, *'for what'*), as well as their own talent management contexts from the viewpoint of responsibility ('what type'), it was fairly evident

that interviews as a data collection method would be very suitable for this thesis. Generally, interviews have been grouped into three different types: unstructured, semi-structured and structured (see e.g. Trochim, 2006). As their names quite aptly describe: the first is an interview with very limited, if any, structure, thus resembling more a regular conversation, whereas the third type of an interview is very formally structured and the flow of it is often clearly pre-determined. Logically, a semi-structured interview is a hybrid version combining elements from the two extremes: it typically entails a loosely pre-determined outline of questions to ensure that all relevant themes are covered during the interview, thus also enabling a somewhat structured approach also to the analysis, but it does not rigidly tight to a strict format. Rather, both the interviewer and interviewees have some liberty to step away from the script: additional clarifying questions and comments can be made, things can be added or lines of thought revisited during the interview. For these reasons, the present study resorted to semi-structured interviews that were organized as individual online meetings with a small selection of talent management professionals.

Moreover, it is worthy of taking into account that since talent management in general, and *responsible* talent management in particular, are two very vague areas both on the theoretical level (see e.g. Painter-Morland et al., 2019; Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020; Meyers et al., 2020; Kwon & Jang, 2021), as well as on the practical level of how different companies actually organize and do talent management (see e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015; Sparrow & Makram, 2015; Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Meyers et al., 2020; Sumelius & Smale, 2021), the interview format, especially the semi-structured approach, was deemed to allow more room (if compared to, for instance, a survey) for the talent management professionals' thinking, ways of phrasing their thoughts as well as the distinctive features of each of their contexts. In addition to this, there is no denying the fact that since talent management is often an HR area of which there is very little information available internally, not to mention externally, the talent management professionals, i.e. the HR stakeholders, who themselves are at the heart of talent management, were seen as an important gateway to learning more about the topic.

These methodology-related reflections on the topic and contexts of the present study, further consolidated the decision to use semi-structured interviews in particular and in the form of individual interviews.

4.4 Participants

Considering that according to Freeman and Laasch (2020, p. 116), the management level is always the so-called "motor of responsibility", the stakeholders developing and running the TM process were deemed as the right group of participants for the present study. Typically, it is the people working in HR, and often particularly talent management professionals, who are in practice facilitating TM at organizations. Swailes (2020) highlights that they are also the ones who should be best able to explain the logic behind the chose TM system, and mange to

elaborate on its details. The decision to have TM professionals at the core of the present study was further reinforced by Meyers et al. (2020) as according to them, the actions, perceptions, talent philosophies of HR stakeholders, e.g. HR managers and heads/vice presidents of TM, form the gateway to understanding TM in more detail. Hence, the next step in the process of finding answers to the present study's four research questions, was to find a suitable small group of talent management professionals. To map out potential interview candidates, I, on one hand, made use of my own professional networks, and on the other hand, used the LinkedIn search tool to map out possible interviewees.

The criteria for deciding on who would be invited for an interview was simple. First, prospective interview candidates were singled out by taking into account that in most companies, talent management is framed as some type of differentiated HR, i.e. something separate from 'regular' HR that deals with all employees. Therefore, it was rather evident that the interviewees would likely come from larger companies where the entire HR system is already quite extensive and well-established, and above all, that there is in fact someone, or even a group of HR professionals, who work with talent management. Secondly, I narrowed down potential candidates by seeking professionals who have 'talent management' as part of their current title or at least as part of their current line of work. Thirdly, due to the holistic nature of the study's research questions, I decided to prioritize talent management professionals working in somewhat higher positions. This decision was based on the assumption that these professionals working at the more strategy-oriented ladders of the company hierarchy would quite likely have a more overarching understanding of their company's TM strategy and the lines of thinking behind it.

As a result of this purposive sampling technique, altogether 30 talent management professionals were invited to take part in the semi-structured individual interviews with the help of the cover letter available as Appendix 1. Out of these 30, twelve volunteered to participate in the present study.

Considering that in Finland there is only a limited number of adequately large companies with talent management roles in their HR, this sample size was deemed suitable for this inherently small-scale TM context. Furthermore, acknowledging that this is a qualitative study, in which data saturation is not dependent on numbers as such (see also e.g. Fusch & Ness, 2015), this sample size was considered adequate for a study completed on the master's level.

To adhere to the guidelines of Finnish Advisory Board of Research Integrity (2012), as well as our university's data protection guidelines, the anonymity of the participants, as promised in the invitation letter, was made a top priority from the very beginning of the research process. This was deemed particularly critical due to the delicate nature of my thesis topic. After all, talent management, as noted in a range of literature and based on my real-life experiences, is often an area of HR which translates also inside organizations into limited sharing and restricted access: it is often (un)intentionally something that is done, at least to some extent, behind the scenes.

Therefore, the only background information on the study's participants that was deemed as pivotal, yet also safe to share, is the amount of talent management-related work experience that they had at the time of the interviews. The participants' TM-related work experience ranged from 5 to 30 years, and the average of work experience in this group of interviewees was approximately 15 years, and the median ended up being 14 years. Therefore, it is worthy of noting that the present study's participants represent quite solid expertise, and extensive experience in respect to talent management.

Other than this, *no* personal data (such as name, title, job description, professional background, nationality etc.) will be shared about this study's participants. Rather, each interview participant was immediately after the scheduling of their interview assigned a randomized identification code. This code as such does not provide any indication of them as persons, but it was only used to keep track of them throughout all the various stages of this research process, including when referring to them when reporting on the results. The identification codes were constructed by using the words "talent management professional," and then assigning each participant a number at the end of the code (e.g. Talent management professional 1, Talent management professional 2, Talent management professional 3 and so on). Each participant is referred to with the same exact code throughout the present study, and for writing purposes the codes were abbreviated to TMP1, TMP2, TMP3 and so forth.

However, to portray an overall image of the present study's context, i.e. talent management in large companies operating globally, some insights into the participants' companies are shared. For instance, the present study managed to attract participants from a range of different industries, such as retail, energy, agriculture, telecommunications, manufacturing, and technology. Also, the companies involved in the study represent varied size ranges if measured in the number of employees. There was one company with less than 1,000 employees, while at the other extreme there were two companies with over 100,000 employees. In between, the majority of the companies had around 5,000 to some 25,000 employees. Finally, considering that the present study was interested in companies operating globally, I wish to point out that there were only a couple of companies, which operated in less than 10 countries, whereas the most of them had employees operating in 20-50 countries, a handful even in more than 100 countries.

Having established these carefully considered details about the companies involved in the present study, it is worthy of emphasizing that *no* further details, i.e., for instance, key figures or exact locations, can be given without jeopardizing the full anonymity of the study participants.

Yet, based on the background information on both the participants, and the companies they represent, it was deemed that this research sample was well-suited for researching responsible talent management in large, globally operating companies.

4.5   Data collection

The data collection round itself was conducted over a one-month timespan in the second half of 2022, and it consisted of 12 semi-structured individual interviews, which all followed a pre-determined interview script (see Table 2 as an appendix).

This script is the outcome of my cyclic process during which I fine-tuned my final research questions and accordingly edited this script to ensure that I would be able to have my research questions answered. This cycle of editing and revising was also strongly based on talent management, and responsible talent management literature, as well as scholarly work related to stakeholder theory. During the process I also consulted by supervisor by showing her some of my earlier versions of the research questions and the interview script. Moreover, I had some preliminary informal discussions within my own talent management network to map out which aspect of talent management seem to puzzle them in their daily work, and which areas of responsible talent management they would want to know more about.

According to Berger (2015), this type of a reflexive script creating process with multiple steps and different stakeholders involved, ensures that fresh insights and different perspectives are adequately fed into the script forming, instead of the script ending up being too heavily based on solely my ideas as a researcher. Berger (2015), therefore, highlights that possible blind spots can be better avoided, and the outcome is a likely more balanced script: no unnecessary things are overemphasized, and integral components of the interview are not ignored.

While on the topic of reflexivity, I wish to also note that my role as the interviewer was fairly minor during the online meetings as I only posed the interview questions, i.e. the three main questions and the two to four sub-questions accompanying each of them, and facilitated the discussion only by keeping track of time to make sure that all questions could be covered during the interview and that I would have data that is adequately in sync with my research questions. Other than this, during the interviews the focus was first and foremost on the interviewees' thinking and free flow of speech.

The interviews were conducted in English via Microsoft Teams, thus allowing both recording and automatic transcription of the interview data. These were deemed as pivotal elements for the study's data collection as they not only helped to ensure accuracy when reporting on the results, but they were also notably timesaving.

Each interview was scheduled to last the maximum of one hour. This interview session included also time for the unrecorded introductory part of the interview, in which the participants were explained the core idea of the research, elaborated on data privacy issues and informed about their rights as study participants. Also, they were given a chance to ask if there was anything unclear in terms of the research prior to the recording starting. The actual duration of the

recorded interview, in which the interview questions were covered, ranged from around 18 to 38 minutes.

The concrete outcomes of the interviews were the spoken protocols, i.e. the interview recordings, and the written protocols, i.e. the automatic transcripts of the interviews. In practice, this meant that the present study's data consisted of approximately 5 hours of video recordings, and altogether 261 pages of transcripts, on average one interview transcript being around 21 pages.

4.6   Data analysis

As is evident based on the study's research questions, this study aimed to first and foremost describe and understand what the talent management professionals' general understanding of responsible talent management is, and with whom and for what talent management is reportedly organized and conducted at their company. Furthermore, the study sought to gain insights to the responsible talent management-related strengths and development areas of the participants' companies, i.e. to foster understanding and describe in more detail which aspects of their talent management are already on a good level in terms of responsibility and which elements appear to challenge globally operating large companies in this sense.

In the light of these goals set for the research, and considering the clearly qualitative, and not quantitative, orientation of the research questions, the approach to data analysis in this study was quite self-evidently also qualitative. To be more precise, it was deemed that there would be a suitable match between the study's research questions and qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis as a method has been fairly widely used and discussed by a range of scholars (see e.g. Mercer, 2011; Graneheim and Lundman, 2004; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Schreirer, 2012; Cho and Lee, 2014; Elo et al., 2014).

In brief, content analysis in a more general sense refers to analysis, which categorizes data to highlight meanings in the given material (see e.g. Cho & Lee, 2104), and qualitative content analysis (hereafter QCA) a as a method does this via a "systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

There were two main reasons for choosing precisely QCA. First, according to Schreier (2012), one of the main benefits of QCA is that it allows researchers to do deep dives into their topics and gain beyond-daily life understanding of the themes under scrutiny and this is exactly what is needed here as talent management is indeed something that is constantly done at various companies all across the world, yet research is still lacking insights into how it is defined and understood at these companies, and which philosophies, ideals and stakeholder relationships are driving it. What is more, since many companies are managing their talent behind the scenes (see e.g. De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2017; Dries,

Marescaux & van Zelderen, 2021; Lacey & Groves, 2021; Malik & Singh, 2021; Sumelius & Smale. 2021; Nijs et al.,2022) evidently also the companies TM successes and challenges are often left in the dark. Cho and Lee (2014) aptly also note that QCA is particularly well suited for studying this type of social realities and phenomena.

Secondly, QCA as an approach to data analysis, appealed to me also on a very practical level: it is simultaneously systematic and flexible, and therefore helpful when one wishes to have a clear process for reducing data to really bring to the fore what is relevant for the study in question (see e.g. Schreier, 2012). After all, as an outcome of the individual interviews, I had over 5 hours of audio data which translated into over 260 pages of written transcripts, and hence, a systematic focus was needed for the analysis.

At this stage, it is worthy of mentioning in QCA, similarly to many other approaches to analysis, the meaning making through classifying, coding and identifying is always a subjective process, and hence, this is again where the importance of reflexivity comes in. According to Byrd Clark and Dervin (2014), a researcher simply cannot avoid starting to make sense of the data already at the data collection stage, nor is it possible to completely ignore immediately emerging interpretations of data while going through it the first time around.

Naturally, for someone like myself, who has been reading about responsible talent management quite extensively over the past couple of months and someone who is on a regular basis involved in talent management discussions as part of my current line of work, this automatic interpreting and intuitive sense-making started right away. However, Byrd Clark and Dervin (2014) emphasize that this is not automatically a negative thing: it is simply something that the researcher must acknowledge and be transparent about. Indeed, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) highlight that the researcher, their data and the chosen methods are always inherently intertwined and similarly to this, Etherington (2004) describes it as circulating energy. According to Elo et al. (2014), researchers can tackle this all with the help of solid self-criticism and good analytical skills. Considering that I personally have a fairly solid background in using QCA as a researcher, I felt confident enough to approach the complex theme at hand, i.e. responsible talent management, with this demanding analytical approach.

To assist me in this endeavor, I first of all resorted to using a computer software called Atlas.ti (see e.g. Friese, 2014), which is particularly tailored for systematic qualitative data analysis. It allowed me to stay on track of all the already existing codes while also seamlessly guiding me to allocate all data highlights from the interview transcripts under the correct coding headings. This part of QCA is, according to Kondracki, Wellmand and Amundson (2002), as well as Cho and Lee (2014), a typical hurdle, which Atlas.ti helped me to overcome.

Secondly, another concrete 'tool' used in the present study is the visualized process of inductive QCA (see Figure 2 below), which was adopted from Cho and Lee (2014: 11) for the purposes of the present study.

Figure 2: QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

This clearly visualized process allowed me to have multiple consecutive steps in my analysis to ensure data saturation, i.e. adequate richness and thickness (see e.g. Fusch & Ness, 2015) by gradually coding all themes under suitable coding headings. Indeed, this part of the qualitative content analysis is often undisputedly quite laborious, and time-consuming (see also Kondracki, Wellmand & Amundson, 2002; Cho & Lee, 2014), but at least with the help of the steps in Figure 2, the process was well-outlined, and thus easy to break into smaller parts.

In the following, Figure 2 will also be used when I give a more detailed step-by-step account of my QCA process. As is easily seen in the figure, the entire process starts when the researcher has access to their entire data, in this case all the automatic Microsoft Teams written transcripts of the 12 interviews, which were downloaded from there, and saved as completely anonymized versions to Atlas.ti.
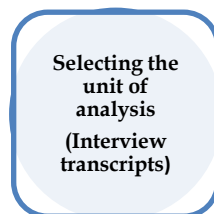
Prior to doing any type of coding, it is of the essence to determine what the units of analysis of each study are (see e.g. Mayring, 2000; 2003; Cho & Lee, 2014). According to Graneheim and Lundman (2004), this relates to deciding on how clearly manifested, i.e. apparent meanings, and/or how latent content, meaning more underlying meanings, are embedded in the data analysis. In the present study, I decided to include both as it was considered that both types of content could be informative, and thus valuable, for the present study's research questions. For instance, instead of only focusing on the talent management professionals' actual answers to how they would define the concept of 'responsible talent management' (i.e. clearly manifested content), the present study also resorted to data excerpts with more latent content, such as parts of the interview transcripts where they were not directly defining talent management

but rather continuously highlighting certain aspects of responsible talent management. At this stage, it is also worthy of mentioning that data analysis did not occur on the level of individual words, rather, only actual full utterances or responses, which could also be understood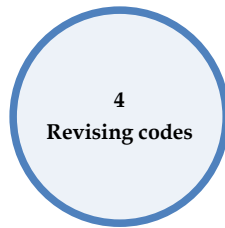 on their own and have relevant information on their own, were included in the study's analysis (see also Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Schilling, 2015).
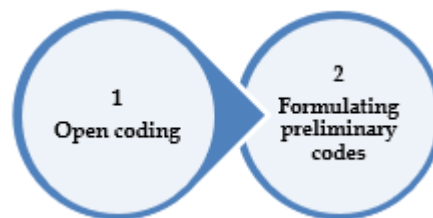
First, during the 'Open coding' step, I simply went through all the 12 interviews by thoroughly listening to all the 5 hours of audio data, and reading all the 260 pages of written data, while simultaneously openly coding all above-described contents (both apparent and latent). In practice this meant that all utterances and responses, which contained content and could stand on its own, were assigned to one or many preliminary codes in Atlas.ti. In the spirit of open coding, I did not want to exclude anything at this first stage. Not censoring the data too much too early on is of utmost importance when it comes to QCA (see e.g. Berger, 2015). As a result of this, I ended up having the preliminary codes (see Step 2) readily available for further analysis rounds in Atlas.ti.
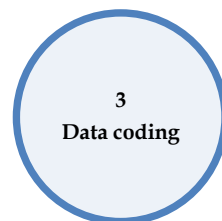
The third step of the analysis process boils down to really immersing oneself in the data through multiple data analysis rounds, which is something strongly advocated by Berger (2015), among many others. This is where the added value of Atlas.ti especially comes into play, as it allows the researcher to continuously, yet systematically, edit the codes: more codes can be added, unnecessary codes can be removed and contents within codes can be either combined to form larger entities or split into smaller chunks of data. What is more, all existing codes can be viewed either separately or at a single glance thus enabling the researcher to not only keep track of what is included within individual codes, but also to maintain a good understanding of the bigger scheme of the data analysis.

4
Revising codes

The fourth step entails the refining of existing codes (Mayring, 2000; Mayring, 2003; Cho &Lee, 2014). At the core of this part of the process is that the researcher turns the lens to so-called relevant data, i.e. data that helps, either directly or indirectly, the researcher to answer their research questions (see e.g. Soler-Carbonell et al., 2017). To this end, the present study's four research questions were embedded in the coding scheme and the existing preliminary codes were gradually gathered under them, thus allowing both the narrowing down of the vast number of original categories, and a systematic approach to fine-tuning and organizing them. At this point, the newly organized codes were also given more descriptive names to accurately represent the data, which they entail.

5
Developing final themes

As a result of the process thus far, I reached the fifth and final stage of the QCA process. However, even if this is the last step of the QCA process, Mayring (2000; 2003) with Cho and Lee (2014) unanimously highlight that the processing does not stop here, rather, the researcher still needs to continue preparing and interpreting the results in order to present them in a suitable order and format. What is more, the results need to be presented in a manner that leaves room for the readers' own interpretation of the data, thus allowing them to also judge the study's trustworthiness themselves (see e.g. Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In the present study, this was taken into account by using a range of quotations from all the study's participants (see the upcoming Chapter 5) to shed light on the data and its richness, and also the analysis process in practice (see also Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Elo et al., 2014).

5   FINDINGS

In this chapter I will go through the results of the data analysis process described earlier by focusing on one research question (RQ1-4) at a time. Therefore, it should be noted that this chapter will follow the order of the research questions, and not the interview script used in the present study.

To shed light on the themes deriving from the interviews, while also increasing transparency of the analysis, I will accompany the results with some direct quotes from the study participants, as suggested by Graneheim and Lundman (2004), and Elo et al. (2014). What is more, I have also paid special attention on using quotes from all twelve participants so that their voices are represented as equally as possible in the reporting of the results. For instance, in this Findings chapter, the number of quotes used per participant ranges from 6 to 13, and on average, around 9 direct quotes are used per participant.

As noted earlier, to protect the participants' identity, only their anonymized abbreviations (TMP1, TMP2, TMP3 etc.) will be used in the reporting and no further details nor background information is attached to any of the quotes. However, whenever possible and relevant, I have attached theoretical frameworks, and viewpoints, to the arising themes in order to bring them closer to the three research questions.

Prior to moving on to the actual research questions and themes related to them, the present study wishes to include some additional background understanding of talent management in general, which arose from one of the more warm-up type of questions of the interview, i.e. *For whom and/or for what is it (talent management) done at companies*? Namely, to be able to understand the participants' thoughts on *responsible* talent management in particular, it is pivotal to first grasp their thoughts on the core purpose of talent management *in general*.

Quite interestingly, the twelve participants very almost without an exception surprisingly unanimous in this respect: they all adopted a sort of a dual approach to talent management's reason of existence. It is reportedly, on one hand, done for the company, meaning to support its strategy and to result in

profitable business, and on the other hand, it is for the people and their development and career paths.

The only notable difference was whether TM was deemed to first and foremost cater to the company as, for instance, noted by TMP7:

> **TMP7** I would say it's uh for the company in the first place, yes, but of course it's for the people as well because it's for their own development.

or whether the approach was more centered on the people, and only after that on the company, as aptly described by TMP11:

> **TMP11** So it is mainly for the employees so that they can….find their sort of we call it a sweet spot where the employee knows, know their own values, like what is my value system and what is important for me to understand the company values to see if they match and also understand these are my skills and my competencies and this is what I want to do. This is where I try the best. This is what feels great for me… And at the same time, matching that with what the company needs so the sweet spot is sort of where these two things come together, what the employee wants and knows and what the company needs.

All in all, TMP11's idea of talent management translating into a sort of a "sweet spot" where both the employees' needs and personal goals come together with the needs and aims of the company, quite seamlessly summarized the thoughts of all the twelve participants. This line of thought about the sweet spot has also been brought to the fore by Claus (2019).

In this sense, the foundation of talent management portrayed by the present study's participants is to a great extent in line with TM literature stating that both profitability and social responsibility (see e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015) are the core components of TM, and both company and individual short-term and long-term goals ought to be steering TM decisions and actions (see e.g. Sparrow, 2021).

The reason why this out-of-research-scope data insight was shared at this point of the present study is that this shared understanding really sets the stage for examining *responsible* talent management from the viewpoint of the study participants. After all, they evidently have a shared understanding of why talent management exists in their company in the first place and now it is time to move on to unveiling their more detailed insights to responsible talent management.

5.1   Defining responsible talent management

While starting to unpack the answer to RQ1, i.e. *How is responsible talent management defined by the talent management professionals?*, it should first of all be highlighted that basically all the participants of the present study made it somehow

known during the interviews that even if they were experienced talent management professionals, the concept of responsible talent management was new to them, thus immediately highlighting the importance of examining the concept in more detail.

However, as all the interviews progressed it was evident that even if RTM was unfamiliar to them on a conceptual level, the participants responses and reflections were very much repeating the RTM literature discussed earlier in this thesis. Despite some differing ideas and varying viewpoints, the present study's participants are fairly unanimously mirroring the RTM definition by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020, p. 284):

> "TM practices and strategies that emphasise an organisation's responsibility to identify, develop, and nurture the unique and diverse talents of all workers by expanding access to available talent development opportunities, by fairly managing their weaknesses and by recognising their contributions while giving them equal opportunities to flourish as valued employees to ensure their commitment to the organisation so as to achieve mutual sustainable outcomes for employees and their organization."

If considering that Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020) list inclusivity, corporate social responsibility, as well as equity and equality to be the foundation of responsible talent management, the data at large, meaning all the twelve interviews combined, clearly manifests these three aspects, but it becomes quite evident that almost none of the participants' definition alone covers all the three. The only exception to this is perhaps the thorough definition by TMP5:

> **TMP5** Well, I would define it as a…Let's say something that is driving a company towards their potential CSR goals. In our company, we are committed or have been already for many, many years towards the…uh CSR goals and at the moment, how we define, for example, our strategic priority in the CS strategy period that we currently have, it is that we are working all the time towards ethical responsibility and collaboration within the company. And for this it means kind of on a broad scale. First of all, that we have, our people have an opportunity to do customer centric meaningful work. Our people have an equal, diverse and safe work community…Of responsible talent management would be to open up equally or new opportunities within the company for all our staff. With the practices that that you put together with the processes that you put together. It also means that, you know, let's say in our leadership practicalities or leadership principles that they also are designed to support responsibility or responsible actions when it comes to people and in here also in the talent management, it is truly something that all the let's say leadership teams and all people leaders do together. So it's not…something that you can kind of drive from only HR, but all the people either should be included and drive to the same targets so to speak.

In sum, TMP5's definition of responsible talent management ticks all the boxes: it elaborates on the CSR aspects of their talent management, it highlights that TM is targeted at all their employees, and that it also involves a range of stakeholders in the process otherwise too, hence evident inclusivity. Furthermore, it brings to the fore the concept of equal opportunities for all.

In order to dig deeper into the participants' understanding of responsible talent management, closer look at the emerging themes is done in the following.

5.1.1 "You run those processes consistently, fairly and transparently"

An aspect which seemed to color the majority of the participants' answers when asked about what responsible talent management is, was that responsibility was often equated with fairness, inclusivity, general human rights and human-centric values, to name but a few. More thorough insights into the participants' definitions are demonstrated in a selection of quotes below:

> **TMP1**: Well, talent management overall as such... I relate it to the career paths and the competencies that we as a company need and we want to offer or gather from our support or employees in developing in that sense that they can develop in their careers and develop their competencies. And what I think is essential to make all these responsible is then that there…That it's fair. And like personalities, don't play too big roles, and that them evaluations based on which people can move on in their careers. So that's as objective as possible. And it's not like," Oh, I like you, let's promote you so"…so fair fairness and objectivity… And and then, of course, diversity inclusion, I I think these are like quite related topics, so that it's equal equal for people from different backgrounds

> **TMP2**:… enable career opportunities and development opportunities…to kind of including diversity. And gender, ethnic background, people with disabilities, for example, how we are kind of maintaining that the kind of these different aspects are included in our kind of talent management and development perspective… So that everyone should be included in in talent development, so it's not…it should be kind of strike through the whole company and with all individuals. And from the company's perspective, that would mean that we actually harness a whole company's potential from all individuals and not focus on only on certain employee groups that we have identified.

> **TMP5**: Uh, so our philosophy is that that we see that every team member has talent and that everyone has the potential to learn and to develop. Uh, we want to focus on everyone's strengths, foster diversity and encourage to professional growth to continuous learning, innovations and creativity.

> **TMP6:** I think that kind of the core is that we believe that all people have potential to grow and learn and we all have certain kind of strengths and of course also development areas, but kind of…that kind of positive psychology there behind of this, that kind of we all have potential and talent development is kind of the all the access that we want to kind of promote and boost those strengths that people have and also offer new opportunities.

> **TMP7**: We should consider talent quite broadly…Not only, uh, let's say certain kind of people, but for example take diversity dimensions into account when we define talents and probably also that we should offer learning opportunities and career opportunities to all of our employees and not only those that we define as talents….probably take definition of talent a little bit more broadly than historically maybe we have done.

TMP8: Human rights, equality…I would say this kind of a fair game. To-wards all employees.

TMP9: When it comes to the talent practice as such, that is this talent practice inclusive is it allowing diverse talents to be considered and generally is our process enabling equitable experiences or equitable opportunities for our talents

TMP10: Is to have humane values, I would say. So that relates to because we need people and that's the talent really the talent is people so we need to be very human centric, I would say in everything we do and that's something we really keep in mind…And that for me is responsible of course, what does that mean really what is a human perspective. For me it's about justice. It's about equity and equal treatment of people, I mean…very kind of basic humane values. Treating people well, respecting respectful behavior, for example.

TMP11: …whenever talking about responsibility, I would think it is...all has to do with equal opportunities, equality as a whole in terms of the talent management processes or ways of working or how we formulate certain processes or certain communication, or how do we treat individuals in terms of talent management. So equal opportunities I would think is one…probably I would go for inclusion and diversity related things…in terms of how we, for instance recruit people that like minorities, for instance, foreign people, refugees, people coming from the countries where they don't speak, the language that we speak in whatever countries we operate in, people with different religious backgrounds, people with maybe disabilities…how can we as a company in terms of recruitment for instance take care of those people and kind of have them in our focus separately. How do we manage them? How do we manage the specific talent? And that maybe process is different types of things that hinder them. At one point in time during their career or employment with us…or where they may be need extra support or extra kind of possibilities or whatever it could be.

TMP12: Responsible is fair, I would say. Talent management…that is fair, that is consistent. That is with mitigating bias and inclusive. So I would… that you wouldn't just… so for me that's responsible that you take the whole process seriously that you have good processes in place and then you run those processes in a consistent, fair and transparent manner.

If these responses are mirrored against the four different talent philosophies presented earlier, it is evident that the more inclusive talent philosophies appear to reign in these companies, thus creating the core foundation for responsible talent management.

Interestingly, even if there was a generally strong agreement among the participants of these type of ideals and values creating the very core of talent management that is responsible, also more critical approaches were raised during the interviews regarding the feasibility of materializing such things in practice. For instance, both TMP3 and TMP12 brought up challenges related to openness and transparent communication around TM:

TMP3: A certain type of transparency and I want to point out that I haven't. I have never been working in a company where this particular process would have been super transparent. I have been benchmarking some

companies when I have been working with this topic and no company so far has kind of pointed out that they would do this super transparently and that it would work well in that way. I think it requires so much competence from the line managers and kind of from the people communicating about the process that it hasn't been. I think it's possible, but I think it hasn't been done very well in in any big companies so far.

TMP12: But then we are not able to include everybody. So I think people should be informed why we have our processes in a certain way. So to be responsible, we're explaining the context upon which we are doing this talent management and what we are using it for.

Furthermore, some of the participants, for instance TMP3 and TMP4 were contemplating on balancing between equality and equity:

TMP3: I think this maybe just something that I've been thinking a lot is kind of how to tackle the kind of the challenge of not translating people into numbers… So this is kind of because always when we are looking at things in a big picture, it's so much easier to look at things from number perspective. And then kind of how this same process could at the same time serve the individuals and the employees and kind of make sure that they get more good out of this than bad?

TMP4: Of the planning would be done so that that the company defines the needs that the company has for its life cycle, and it's not a…It's a state that it's not the one fit for all kind of method, and also so that the people are taken into their own career path…

As becomes apparent in these quotes, the participants are attempting to find the balance between having a clear TM process that is equal and data-driven, and in the best possible way looks and feels the same to everyone, while at the same time they do not want to turn TM into something that ignores equity, and thus translates real people with all their diverse backgrounds and career paths into mere numbers.

Indeed, it may be easier to plan and execute RTM that is equal, but the challenge perhaps lies in making it also equitable. In connection to this, both TMP2 and TMP12 advocate strongly for solid and active reporting of people data.

TMP2: And we also kind of do reporting that what is kind of the, what are the statistics that what kind of group these are, how many men, women, what is the age and all the ethnical backgrounds. So that versatility is something that we kind of continuously follow up.

TMP12: I often look at the demographics. So what? What is happening here? Do we have an improvement in women? Do we have an improvement of in the nationalities? Do we have a good balance in the gender and the age profile? And then I'm also looking at the perception of diversity and inclusion through the lens of the different stakeholders under the talent management process…Is it working? So therefore, we measure to what extent people rotate within the company, to what extent people stay, to what extent people leave because they think we don't have fair practices.

After all, if people as talents with their background and future directions are turned into numbers, the company needs to be, first, motivated to, and secondly, capable in turning those numbers also into responsible talent management actions. Nowadays, many companies possess a great deal of data about their employees. As noted by the participants above, they can have access to their talent demographics, as well as their talents paths within the company, and even their talents' reasons for leaving the company. Perhaps the hurdle indeed lies in turning that knowing into doing, and hence it is not surprising that so few companies define their talent management as effective (see e.g. Hughes, 2019; Krebs and Wehner, 2021).

5.1.2 "We need to make sure that we're doing it based on a business need"

Speaking of effectiveness, in an interesting contrast to the definition of responsible talent management by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020, p. 284), some of the present study's participants, especially for instance, TMP3, TMP4, TMP6, TMP9 and TMP10, brought the strategic and financial responsibility to the front fore in their definitions of RTM. In other words, responsibility in talent management should manifest itself also in TM actions resulting in something and having a positive impact on the company strategy (see also Ewerlin & Süß, 2014; Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Mensah, 2019a; Collings & Minbaeva, 2021; Kwon & Jang, 2021).

Although Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah's (2020, p. 284) definition also states that TM needs to result in sustainable outcomes for the organization, the aforementioned participants clearly put more weight on this type of responsibility as exemplified in some of their quotes below:

> **TMP3** So we need to kind of make sure that when we are evaluating people, we are doing it with a business need a based on a business need and also to kind of support them on their career journey. So this is kind of a two-fold thing in my mind that we have to kind of look at the company perspective and the needs from the company and make sure that we are covering all aspects without…necessarily doing too much in a sense that we would evaluate people or give ratings without a deeper meaning behind it… we are at the moment only looking at certain strategic key positions and then kind of handpicking the one that we want to evaluate against those positions and to kind of probably include in the succession plans.

> **TMP9** One of the objectives of our talent management processes to ensure business continuity and kind of build the talent to defeat the future needs. So then of course we need to…I think that responsible talent management is something that links to sustainability and sustainable growth and kind of enabling business continuity. So that's maybe one like to responsible talent management.

A further contrast evident in the present study's data, if compared to the definition by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020, p. 284), is the fact that the present study's participants, especially TMP4, TMP6 and TMP8 highlighted the long-term planning, decision-making and actions of RTM clearly more than

Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah. They, for instance stated very clearly that RTM ought to boil down to long-term investments in people and their development (TMP4), and longstanding visions of what the company wants to be somewhere down the road (TMP6), or as noted by TMP8: responsible talent management need to be future proof.

The importance of such foundational key questions related to the companies' current state of TM affairs and desired future directions, was also brought to the fore by TMP10 as they highlighted that talent management that is responsible should always start and be guided by such questions, instead of becoming a process that is based on ad-hoc decisions and gut feelings:

> **TMP10** For me the first thing is that we should understand in the organization, just the basic questions….what kind of talent do we need? That's kind of the very basic understanding that we need. What should the talent kind of look like? Then we should also have a strategy of where do we get the talent. Do we already have it or not? Also understanding the gaps that we have or I think every organization has those gaps. And then where do we find the talent? Do we already have it? Can we develop it? Or should we get it outside the organization in one way or another? So this is… and then of course kind of having different kinds of processes supporting that.

All the aforementioned quotes in one way or another mirror a more strategic approach to TM, thus aligning with Theys and Schultz (2020) as according to them TM has become one of the most pivotal key strategies in today's corporations. Of course, it does not become strategic automatically but rather it requires conscious and clear alignment with the business strategies and other operational goals. Therefore, TM in itself needs to be also managed as a core business practice (see e.g. Theys & Schultz, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2021).

Borrowing the ideas of Barney (1991) on competitive advantage, talents can also be seen as strategic resources of companies. In the light of this, companies need to find, develop, and retain talents, who: a) bring added value to the company, b) are something rare c) have know-how that is not easily imitated by the company's competitors d) are basically irreplaceable (adopted from Barney 1991; see also Barney, 2001; Barney, Wright & Ketchen, 2001; Koch & Marescaux, 2021).

Therefore, it is of the essence to also examine how talent is connected to the larger scheme of things at organizations. Talent as such is not automatically a value-adding resource, it must be systematically managed and used (cf. Barney 1991; see also Barney, 2001; Barney, Wright & Ketchen, 2001). Such a more strategic approach the talent, and hence, also talent management, has been adopted by a range of scholars, such as Mayo (2018), Mensah (2019a), Swailes (2020), Collings and Minbaeva (2021), Krebs and Wehner (2021), Sparrow (2021), as well as Mujtaba, Mubarik and Soomro (2022).

In brief, this more strategic viewpoint to talent encompasses the idea of not only detecting who are possible talents at organizations, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, understanding which are the strategically fundamental

roles at the organization that need require employees with talent (see e.g. Collings & Minbaeva, 2021; Koch & Marescaux, 2021; Sparrow, 2021).

In this sense, this type of exclusive TM with strategy as the main ingredient and fundamental starting point of this top-down process (see e.g. Koch & Marescaux, 2021). Instead of merely focusing on the so-called A-level talents, the lens is first and foremost turned to A-level positions that need to be filled with the most suited A-level employees (see also Minbaeva & Collings, 2013). As noted by McDonell et al. (2021), mere talent is often of little use if the company fails to understand the important follow-up question: talent for what exactly?

For instance, Krebs and Wehner (2021) have brought to the fore this approach to talent by summarizing that it boils down to allocating disproportionate resources on certain strategic roles by investing in certain employees who are deemed to have the best possible potential for succeeding in these roles (see also Haeruddin, 2018; Mujtaba, Mubarik & Soomro, 2022). Collings and Minbaeva (2021), also emphasize that such roles can be deemed to be roles in which the difference between a so-called average performer and top performer is noteworthy. Moreover, this type of TM ought to adopt a far more context-specific approach to understanding 'talent' in the first place (vs. the four talent philosophies of the contextual framework). In addition to talent on more generic terms, it needs to also be seen as someone who, for instance, thinks and behaves according to the company values and who possesses company-specific know-how that cannot easily be found elsewhere, nor suddenly taught to someone else (e.g. Minbaeva & Collings, 2013).

According to Mayo (2018. p. 248), this type of strategic, and role-driven exclusive TM, can in practice, for instance, focus especially on pivotal leadership roles and otherwise strategic key roles (see also Sparrow, 2021). At the end of the day, strategy is of limited use without the people driving it (see e.g. Minbaeva & Collings, 2013; Khoreva & Vaiman, 2021).

Adopting the ideas of Freeman (2010), TM can in this sense be seen something beyond of just pondering what or who is a 'talent'. It is inherently connected to a company's strategic direction by being a strategic system, or a structure, in its own right, without forgetting adequate alignment of the company strategy and their TM. Without alignment the latter is thought to result in isolated actions and haphazard practices and processes (Swailes, 2020; Theys & Schultz, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2021). In a similar vein, Ibrahim and Daniel (2018, pp. 4247-4248) emphasize that having the strategically right talents in the strategically right roles is a core prerequisite for a company wishing to cope successfully in the competitive markets and constantly changing globalized contexts (see also Haeruddin, 2018; Holck, 2018; Mensah, 2019a; Sparrow, 2021).

5.1.3 "Keep track of what's happening in the (business) environment, the society…"

As noted earlier, Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020) include company social responsibility as one of RTM's core building blocks. If considering that according to World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2008, as cited in Rahman, 2011, pp. 172) CSR connects to how a company exists and acts in its larger social environment, it can be concluded that perhaps only TMP4, TMP6, TMP10 and TMP11 alluded in some ways to this broader perspective when pondering on how to define RTM.

TMP4: The one thing that comes to mind is that we are taking young people in with the great enthusiasm, and they are able to go quite fast to the positions that they want once they show their attitude and learn the tasks. So this is something that…It's easy to be proud of the people we are finding…people who don't yet have a background on the area, but still are eager to learn and they are able to get the employment that they want and be positioned in a position that is really interesting for them…we are discussing with the different schools in the area and cooperating on these kind of situation. So I think that this is the most responsible that I can identify from the process.

TMP6 So I very much link this topic to the overall corporate responsibility and then kind of what it means in in the talent management field at the end. So if we kind of start from the corporate responsibility, so it of course includes the economic environment that and social responsibilities, those areas and kind of those all three elements can be included also in talent management.

TMP10 Uh, that really also connects to responsibility, at least in our company, but also what's responsible, I think, is to kind of keep track of what's happening in the environment, the business environment, the society, for example. Also environment, of course. But then kind of…Umm always be sure that we know what is our kind of the environment and the business setting that we are working in. What should we as a company do in that setting, in that environment…So those are kind of the basic building blocks for me, not just…Something to add like a responsibility block to add in in talent management, but to take it into account in the very core and the very basics of how we do this, what do we do, how we do things…I would probably at this moment because the last couple of years have been so crazy and a lot has been changing…because we have such big changes in work life and very kind of different demands to people than before. I think responsibility is also assuring that we have such a working life in place in each organization that people can really succeed in their jobs, of course, be successful in those, but also about maintaining balance in work and life…As an employer, we are putting effort into defining what the work life should look like. Because that's like a like a very big theme overall in society.

TMP11: …we are doing activities where we are taking the groups that I previously described, maybe refugees…they find very little possibilities to work in their educational field and we take them and we organize certain activities to introduce them into our company from different points of view, depending on what is the activity, basically some of them get a job with us. Some of them have very thriving careers…Population that struggles finding a job. They have great brains. They have great talent, great skills and

competencies, but they have the "wrong" nationality or a "wrong" language or whatever…but we understand that they struggle in finding those opportunities that they should find. So we help them with that. And we've done some with the autism spectrum…providing better opportunities for people with those qualities. Because they also struggle sometimes because they are slightly different in terms of their social skills, for instance, or how they present themselves, and that should not be that way. It's about understanding and kind of creating your…Building awareness, basically.

It appears that for these participants talent management that is responsible indeed translates into, on one hand, actively reaching out to talent segments outside the company, such as young professionals without that much work experience, as well as potential employees with immigrant backgrounds and different types of cognitive and social challenges, for instance. As noted by TMP11: TM can also mean managing talents from a "population that struggles finding a job" otherwise, and this way making a difference in the society at large. On the other hand, the CSR approach to RTM appears to mean that the company's TM is not in its own bubble, rather, it exists as part of the larger scheme of things, and hence, contributes to wellbeing of people, as well as the ideals and demands of working life in general.

After all, as highlighted by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020), the modern business world and today's organizational life are so inevitably colored by ethics, sustainability, and responsibility, that TM simply cannot afford to ignore them.

5.2   RTM stakeholders and their roles

In addition to examining how the participants understand the concept of responsible talent management, the present study centers on the RTM stakeholders in the form of RQ2: *Who are reportedly the stakeholders of responsible talent management, and how are they involved?*

Ten out of the twelve participants in the interviews almost immediately stated that it is everyone's business at the company, whereas only TMP2 and TMP7 view it as process in which people leaders/line managers, business unit leaders and HR are the sole stakeholders. However, as noted, the absolute majority viewed talent management being responsible when it includes a range of stakeholders.

5.2.1   "My answer would be everyone"

First of all, a commonly shared understanding appears to be that the top management (be that of the entire company or the leaders of a business unit or

division) plays a pivotal role, not only in creating and fostering a company culture that holistically supports talent management (as noted by e.g. TMP6), but their role also, for instance, entails goal-setting, strategic big picture thinking and equal treatment of everyone in the company:

> **TMP3**: …actually understand and you know understand the why and that they would have the ability to look at the strategy of that division or business unit and kind of look at strategy and translate that into pointing out the key strategic positions that we need to look for example talent pipelines. So I think they are playing a crucial role in kind of building this big picture.

> **TMP8**: I would say business management in in general. So…support business development for the future…They are the persons who make the decisions. So I think the senior business management is our key stakeholder in in the broader picture. If we go in the tactical.

> **TMP10:** …it's always first the leadership team. There's not. We cannot, you know, get away from that. That's just something that we should have in place to start if we want a responsible organization, if we want a responsible talent management system, processes and so on, we need to have the right leadership team. There's no way around it.

> **TMP11**: It should start from the management leadership team basically because if it doesn't, then we are risking that there are certain parts of the organization that are very much on equal opportunities for all, whereas the other part of the organization doesn't.

Also, TMP5, TMP6 and TMP8 talk about the top management's role in terms of providing the general financial framework and resources for talent management:

> **TMP5**: And the leadership team also has a stakeholder role to play because, for example, if you need a budget, for example, so then evidently those budgets for talent management or events and so forth are accepted by the by the company's leadership team. So they would be a stakeholder there as well.

> **TMP6**: I say that it's very essential that the top management is very much engaged with this topic…. We want to give, develop our people and we also put some efforts and money that these activities.

> **TMP8**: I would say we invest a big money to people. I'm very happy that we, the company's management, see talent management, very important area and is willing to invest a lot of money to develop its people and the future competencies so that one that is really, really important. And I think it started actually from the company's board. I don't know how the story is with the other companies, but when it was founded, it was actually the Board of Directors who were defining…the culture of the new company, and we specified that if we want to be industry leaders, we need to have a strong talent management. We need to have high-end training courses and training opportunities and that was actually a little bit surprising. So because it actually started from the board, not from the executive team

Secondly, the majority of the participants seem to share the opinion that HR is the developer and driver of the TM process (e.g. TMP5, TMP9), as well as the stakeholder responsible for ensuring other stakeholders' capabilities and competencies related to responsible talent management, e.g. through training and support (e.g. TMP1, TMP3):

TMP1: HR are having like that be like raise awareness and train people to like think this and make this like happen in practice

TMP3: In my in my world, the process owner in this normally lies in group HR. So I would say the group HRD team is the one kind of making sure that the guidelines and frameworks are in place and also kind of making sure that the evaluation criteria is built to serve the business need and together with the business is kind of agreed that this is what we want to see when it comes to potential and performance.

TMP5: And then I would say as a stakeholder then to actually carry out talent management in a systematic way in a company, you need some processes. So then you would need a stakeholder also those process owners whose responsibility is to is to kind of collect information and insight that is this process working, is it supporting our strategic goals and if there are improvement areas takes the responsibility of those improvements as well. So then this let's say talent management processor stakeholders or ownerships usually land into somewhere in the people and culture teams. So in the let's say in old terms those HR teams.

TMP9: Well, obviously I think obvious answer is of course HR, who's kind of developing and driving that process. But like…or just as important is then of course the leaders. So this is not something that is only driven by the HR, but the leadership has an important role in the process.

TMP11: And then of course HR and the talent management organization that is providing those processes and concepts and ways of working, they need to be very aligned. This is what we want, and this is what you're expected to do. And this is why…

Conversely, the people leaders/line managers are the ones enacting the process in practice among their employees through individual performance planning, goal setting, and development discussions, to name but a few ways.

TMP1: And then of course who in practice are doing like the decisions and the work related to this. So are the direct managers and supervisors. So I think they have the biggest impact

TMP3: But then the next stakeholder would then be the line manager actually giving the preliminary ratings. So I would, I would say that ideally the one giving you the ratings…the preliminary ratings would be your line manager, the one that you are working closest to instead of somebody that you might have not ever met, for example. So, but I also find it really important that this is only the preliminary evaluation so that we would have this through calibrations, for example, be more objective than just somebody's idea of you

TMP5: Naturally, they (*employees*) need support in doing that. So I would say that the second stakeholder group really is the people leaders of those people.

TMP10: …the people who are of course, very much involved in talent management are our team leaders.

Furthermore, with only two exceptions, i.e. TMP2 and TMP7, all the study participants called for the active role of every single employee: they need to be taken onboard in the TM process but they themselves also need to take conscious responsibility for their own learning, development and careers. This line of thinking is illustrated, for instance, in the following direct quotes:

TMP3: …how people should be, at least to some extent aware of the evaluation criteria, I see them as being one stakeholder as well, at least for when it comes to performance evaluation, so that they would understand that these type of behaviors are needed to be seen for you to reach…exceed target or rating. So I see them being one stakeholder as well.

TMP5: Well, I think that first of all, everyone of us, every employee is responsible for their own kind of professional development and learning. So I would, I would name everybody working in the company as a responsible or at let's say as a stakeholder in this, let's say, talent management process.

TMP6: …other end of this scale, so I would say that each one of us, each one of employees are somehow responsible of that…What is actually your own responsibility? What you can do, how you can take care of kind of the development items and plans and everything. So that is more and more important.

TMP10: But then again, we cannot forget every individual. For me, it's very important that everyone in the organization kind of plays their part in a way, and understand their responsibilities too, and the ways we want to operate. So kind of thinking it through different kinds of roles that we have…Uh leadership team has a great responsibility, but not forgetting everyone else too.

TMP11: But my thinking goes directly we're all responsible because we're all in the company

Also, both TMP5 and TMP8 note that individual employees not only play a role in TM related to themselves but also in the learning and development of their colleagues, thus portraying TM even more concretely as a shared endeavor:

TMP5: I would also put some, uh, let's say responsibility to the working teams themselves, because as we know, a lot of learning happens while you are working or while you are working together with your team. So also if we think about learning point of view. So I would also put some stakeholder effort to the working teams themselves. So learning from peer-to-peer and onboarding new colleagues, for example, and so forth.

TMP8: …we here in talent management, so it's on our table to develop a feedback culture. So we have tools in which you can send a 'high five' to any of your colleagues globally, and we are developing that kind of a mind-set.

These quotes are in line with Nijs et al., (2022), who ponder on the option of placing even more weight on the role of peers in talent management. They have, for instance, brought to the fore suggestions about peer ratings and nominations. After all, peers are often at the core of someone's daily work, thus witnessing firsthand their performance and potential. Of course, one cannot help but also call for critical reflection on the use of peers as such peer evaluations likely require not only competency from the peers, but also the right social dynamics in the team in order for the pee element of TM to be more fruitful than harmful.

Finally, to broaden discussion on the role of individuals, TMP1 also particularly brings to the fore the importance of considering the employees' perceptions and experiences of talent management: TM affects them in one way or another, and hence they need to have a voice in the process that is taken seriously:

TMP1: Well, I think all the people in the organization like I think it, it affects everyone but of course I think everyone has also the people like… or the employees have the role, and they need to be aware because then…yeah it's in culture somehow, and if they are like feeling that it's unfair and it's not responsible. So then that's the reality. What they are experiencing and then no matter how much we try, so then we have not succeeded in that. If their experience is something else.

In a similar vein, TMP9, draws special attention to the employees, over the other TM stakeholders, by noting that in their company, the entire TM process starts from the employees.

TMP9: So our talent management process starts with the employees. So we start by asking employees themselves like. What? What kind of, you know, work experience do you have? What skills? You know, what kind of experiences do you have? What kind of work history you have before joining our company and… What are you interested in? How would you like to see your career progressing…it's, you know, it's not like everybody wants to go vertically up. People might want to broaden their current role or do something different in a different function. Or so we want to understand what their aspirations are. And also, how they would like to develop so that's… they are also important stakeholders in the process.

To conclude on the theme of who are the stakeholders of responsible talent management, it is worthy of revisiting the TM stakeholder list by Theys and Schultz (2020, p. 5), as according to them TM is process in which, the organization's board of directors, the chief executive officer (CEO) and senior executives, the HR department and talent professionals, line managers, and individual employees are all included as stakeholders with their own roles,

including the rights and responsibilities that come with the roles. Clearly, the data of the present study frames a very similar image of the stakeholders of talent management that is responsible. This holistic approach resonates very strongly also with the core ideas of stakeholder theory, according to which the interests of many, not just any one stakeholder, ought to always be guiding the decision-making, as well as the practices and processes (see e.g. Bowie, 1991).

However, one of the participants in the present study managed to even widen the already broad scope of stakeholders discussed by Theys and Schultz (2020), Barzantny and Clapp-Smith (2021), and King (2021). Namely, according to TMP12, the list of stakeholders is as follows:

> **TMP12:** The people, managers, the management board, the board of directors, the employees themselves. And then of course also our investors and the wider community because people want to know…to understand how is talent management in the company and how is it managed in a responsible way. So from that point of view, the stakeholder group starts to become quite wide.

TMP12's line of thinking mirrors very strongly with the aforementioned ideas of responsible management in general (see e.g. Laasch & Conway, 2014) as responsible management is interested in the shareholder value, and the ways in which the company comes across to current shareholders, and potential new shareholders, as well as the general public.

5.2.2 "We have ongoing discussions and dialogues"

In the spirit of stakeholder theory, it is of the essence to understand the stakeholder theme also beyond the question of who they are and shed light on *how* they are involved in the twelve companies of the present study. The relevance of a clear and well-structured TM process was something that the majority of the participants brought to the fore in connection to this, as demonstrated below:

> **TMP1:** Well, I think it's important that there's a clear structure and schedule like we have it on yearly basis. Some companies have it more often, but we have like this yearly schedule for it and I think that's important, that it's continuing. It's like every year and that we are communicating openly like when do we evaluate, how do we development…

> **TMP4:** Then also the yearly discussions with the employees, whatever format that is. But so that that employees have a have a clear timeline when they are reviewing their position and the situation and their happiness and satisfaction is actually asked about. So the yearly discussions with the managers and then about the processes, I think that it's never a bad thing to ask the employee like how the employee sees their position and if they want to identify something that they would be more interested or interested in trying.

TMP6: …then it's also quite that we identify those potential successors or high potentials. So that is typically one process that is under current management to make sure that kind of all the critical roles we have successors in place or if we don't have internally. So some kind of plan how to make sure that we still have all the kind of strategic competencies and critical persons in place. And of course, it's also related to engagement. So that kind of we can really keep those critical persons, as well as other employees as well. That is one process and then…Of course, those kind of official trainings and training programs are part of this.

TMP10: What is responsible is that the company really has the kind of the basic building blocks and processes and ways of operating in place. That's kind of the basic thing that we need in order to be responsible. Responsibility is not something that we can add on in a way, but we need to have kind of a…you know the basic things in place in a responsible manner, in a transparent manner and that's responsible.

As can be seen, for the participants cited above, responsible talent management very much boils down to a clear, often annual process cycle. Some of the participants also brought to the fore the idea of a clear process and took it a step further to describe the pivotal role of individual development plans:

TMP2: We have a development plan basically for most of our employees. So that's one of the kind of basic processes we have so that we have ongoing discussions and dialogues about the career aspirations, the development needs and also we are kind of…we have a good track record about our successors and they're kind of development needs and how they are also…I would say for a whole employee group with the development plan is the core and then we have also more. I would say thorough processes for talents and successors within the company.

TMP3: So when we are doing a performance planning and kind of looking at the strategic goals of each business unit and function, then we need to define in that spot what are the key position at key positions are set and also what are the strategic capabilities that we need to build? So that's one process, a yearly process and regular process that we are we are doing where this kind of all ties back to. I think when we have defined those key positions and kind of the key strategic capabilities, then we can kind of go forward and run the talent develop and the talent evaluation processes. And calibrations and cross functional talent pool checks.

TMP7: Well, how we do it is probably the first state is that the line manager? That's potential rating and performance rating at the same time, and they do write their subordinates. From there, we consider A and B..'A' as potential to grow to more challenging roles. And 'B' someone who can grow in her in her or his current role…and after that we list those who have been considered as talents and we actually we have this people review sessions where management team members, they collect those talents or the, you know, at the least of the talents of their respective organization, and they present them to others in the leadership team. And the purpose of those people review sessions are like "OK, they we want to recognize the talents and OK introduced to others" so that we could probably allocate them also to other roles in other functions. And then also to think together, what could be the, you know, good ways to develop them.

TMP11: … development, target setting so that targets are clear and things that you can actually achieve, then it goes to leadership, so you get the support that you need. We need to have a process in place where we ensure that the employees as to how to then practically go about with the development and how to kind of ensure that you are building on the maybe readiness to take on new kind of roles if that's something that you're aspiring to do?

Evidently, individual development plans, as well as the discussions around and development actions around them, appear to an extent be a pivotal TM instrument, which makes sense. Clearly, in these companies, the individual development plan is often instilled from the larger company-wide, unit-specific and team-level goals, thus linking the dual levels of talent management discussed earlier.

Also, some of the participants deemed it particularly important that different TM stakeholders understand their own role in the process, master the skills to in respect to that role, and act according to it:

TMP7: Nowadays we have open top market policy, and we don't do this kind of successor planning anymore. At least for the purpose that we would promote someone fast because of, you know, we have different, we have a defined someone to be successful and then promote. But now we have the open job market policy, and the people need to apply themselves for their roles, and it's open for everyone and that way successor planning is not that relevant anymore.

TMP8 And then I would say the responsibility is build in the roles. So everyone within their companies and employee some of the company they are manager, so they are leading people. So we have the role in for both of the roles there is personal development. So of yourself and then from the company point of view and the managers point of view. So responsibility to develop others. So and then within HR, within talent management we have the company hat on us and then our job is to give a learning experiences and possibilities to everyone.

TMP10 Identifying now what's important, there is also to take care that the people that are doing the processes or supporting them, not just HR but for example, the team leaders. And how what kinds of skills and know how should they have? So I think this is kind of an essential part of all of the processes that I that I mentioned.

Indeed, the active stakeholder role, especially of the line managers and employees themselves, can be connected to the idea of too much top-down management resulting in people detaching themselves from the practices and processes at hand (see e.g. Langmead et al., 2020). Following this line of thought, one can ponder whether talent management, in addition to being translated into a range of managerial practices and process, inherently ought to be seen as leading of the talents, not only managing them. Leadership, both in respect to leading oneself and others, centers on issues, such as sense of direction, motivation and involvement (see e.g. Adler & Laasch, 2020; Marques & Gomez, 2020). In the light of this, perhaps stakeholders of successful talent management,

are ultimately leaders of talent, both in respect to their own careers, and those around them be that either as line managers, or simply as peers.

5.3   Companies' RTM strengths and challenges

The present study's final two research questions were the following: *In which ways is the companies' talent management reportedly responsible at the moment?* (RQ3) and *How do the companies reportedly wish to make their talent management more responsible in the future? (RQ4),* and these two questions will be discussed in combination in this chapter.

In order to elaborate on the study's findings in this respect, a visualization (see Figure 3) was drafted. The RTM areas which were mostly reported as the companies' strengths in the present study, are the items included in the green circle, whereas the areas which were discussed as evident RTM challenges in the interviews, are presented in the red circle. However, already at this stage it should be noted that due to the overall complex nature of TM, not all strengths and challenges are as clear cut as portrayed here: some, evoked praise among certain talent management professionals, when they were asked about how their company's TM is responsible at the moment, whereas the almost same exact items were among the main concerns for some of the other participants.

Clear TM practices & processes

Developing managers & leaders

Strengths

Inclusivity in TM

Talent assessments

Issues with transparency in TM

Challenges

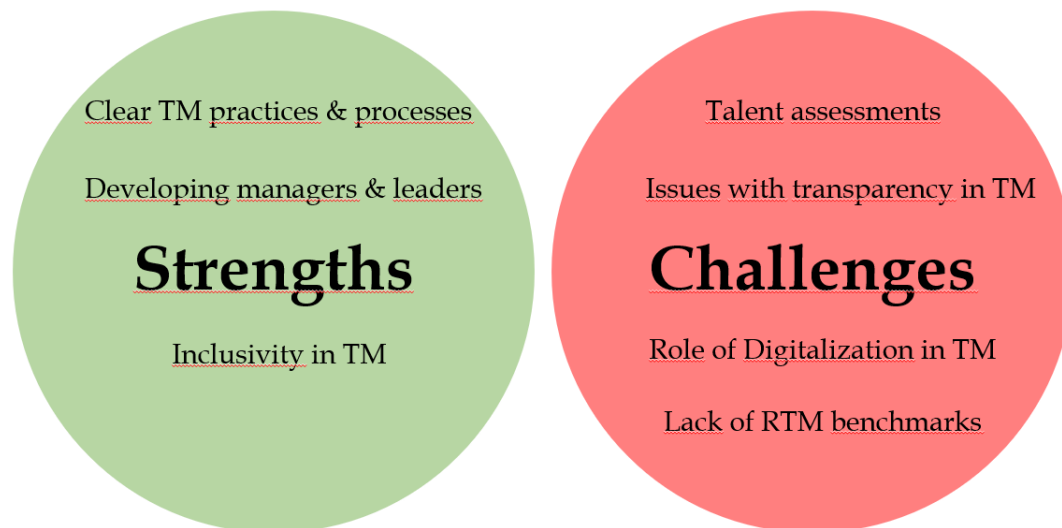Role of Digitalization in TM

Lack of RTM benchmarks

Figure 3. RESPONSIBLE TALENT MANAGEMENT: REPORTED STRENGHTS AND CHALLENGES

In the following, a deep dive into the strengths (green cycle) will be made first, and after that, the challenges raised in the interviews, will be addressed.

5.3.1 Companies RTM strengths: "We walk the talk"

In order to learn how the participants view the current state of affairs in terms of responsible talent management at their company, they were asked to reflect on what they are proud of when it comes to RTM, and what are the things that currently make their TM responsible. As a result of these reflections, two evident themes appeared: clear TM practices and processes, as well as taking inclusivity and diversity issues into account as part of TM.

5.3.1.1 "Twice a year we go through the whole organization"

First of all, an area, which was deemed as something that definitely makes the company's current talent management responsible, or conversely at the moment hinders it from being responsible was the TM practices and processes. According, to TMP1, TMP9, TMP10, and TMP12, their TM-related practices and processes were among the top things which they felt they could lean on when running TM in a responsible way. This is manifested in the selection of quotes below:

> **TMP1:** In my opinion, well, we have quite clear competence model. So that's what we evaluate in talent management process and about what we give feedback to our people and it's openly communicated. So I think that's one point. And then in this real talent management process…It's never only one manager's or supervisor's opinion that matters, but we have this talent review sessions where there are always more than one manager. Like often managers from one department and so who are somehow related to each other's work and then a moderator from HR who are discussing the evaluations and making kind of calibration that their criteria has been same. Same for everyone. So I think that that makes our process more objective and that's how I want see it's also responsible…we are making effort to be objective and fair, fair and calibrated evaluation so that that's maybe what I'm proud of.

> **TMP9:** And when we do succession planning for different roles. So we have kind of created a process where we are looking at different aspects of the potential. So we are not just evaluating certain dimension, but we are looking different things like, for instance, you know potential is, of course, one but then we are also thinking about what is the retention risk of this person, like the risk of them leaving us, or and if they were to leave, what kind of impact would it have on us. So we are kind of looking at it from the different angles and we are educating how to do this kind of assessment.

> **TMP10**: … maybe I go to the development and career parts. For example, twice a year we have a process where we go the whole organization through…everyone in the organization and look into their career interests, their strengths and how they are doing at the moment. Of course, in their role and what could be their kind of future role. And we have kind of very big machine working behind that in seeing that when we get from the

process the information of where each one of our employees would like to go and where we see the potential in them…so that we can arrange those opportunities for them to kind of take their next career step either here in Finland or abroad. So that's really, really special to put that much effort into that because every team leader attends and takes the discussions with their team members and every member of the leadership team also attends. So it's kind of a strong process from which we get input into assuring that we have the right people in the right places, of course in the organization, but also that they are kind of matched with the interests and the potential of the people.

TMP12: I would say we run two main processes in the year, one is talent identification and the other one is succession. And they are taken very seriously, very responsibly and in that way what we do very well is that I'm not doing it from our HQ. We have empowered our leaders to make evaluations and then we have given them the frame to say, you know, be aware of your bias, try to mitigate your bias. And the other thing we have made very well using some information that we had from *(mentions a consultancy company)*, is that we should consider cross functional cross segment people. So what we have done is we have identified 68% of our executive positions have two successors within two years, so I'm proud of that. And secondly, then 54% of our positions have candidates outside the organization that the manager is sitting in. So if I have positions, 54% of my positions are from people coming from other teams, not just mine. So it's really nice because we are then making sure that and that's something we've had to work very hard in……and right through COVID we didn't lose anybody during two years because we had very good talent management practices.

What these four selected quotes demonstrate, among a range of details, is that these companies' TM practices and processes are evidently inherently embedded in their annual plans, ingrained in transparency, driven by data and shared criteria, and based on the competence of leaders and line managers. TM is not haphazard, it is planned, prepared, and transparently and systematically run, and hence responsible. As noted earlier, Pyszka and Gajda (2015) have described talent management as a "socially unpredictable process". Nonetheless, through the above-described planning and transparency, as well as the systematic nature of TM, these companies can, if not entire omit all social unpredictability, at least diminish the potential for it. Hence, these strengths reported by the participants can play a fundamental role in making their TM more responsible in practice (see also Adler & Laasch, 2020).

However, some of the things quoted and summarized above, were also in fact an Achilles heel for some of the other companies in the present study. For instance, TMP6 raised the concern of their company really lacking harmonized TM process:

TMP6: But about the system, so that includes also other tools and processes…Kind of harmony on a global scale. There are not too much harmonized processes and tools, so that would be probably one thing. It would also kind of gave us better quality on certain things…

TMP7: …in this global company as we have quite complex organization…I think sometimes when we have global reporting lines, and you know, if you don't see people every day or at least every week, and of course they do the hybrid work as well…that might be something that, you know, "out of

sight, out of mind"…And in a very big company it's quite difficult to make it objective. And how can we really notice everyone who should be noticed. And I don't have the solution for that.

It appears that TMP6 and TMP7 are contemplating on how their TM works, across the company, i.e. whether people working in different locations, and in different time zones, are receiving equal treatment in respect to talent management. Similar concerns have been recently voiced by Eisenberg (2021). According to some estimations about 30-45% of employees globally work to some extent in virtual teams, whereas other estimations have placed the volume even higher at 80%. As noted by Eisenberg (2021), this virtual element has had, and will continue to have an effect on talent management. For instance, globally scattered employees are not necessarily as easily seen by those assessing their talent status and development needs, nor is it necessarily as easy for the talents to show their worth through their performance, if both the support that they need, and the feedback that they require is not physically present in their daily work (see e.g. Eisenberg, 2021).

On another note, TMP1 brought to the fore the issues arising from too rigid global TM processes, which at worst can hinder the TM taking place at a local level, and result in the company not being able to compete with its local competitors, for instance, in the talent market (see also Ahmed et. al, 2021):

TMP1:…as I said we are a global company and a huge company so the processes are coming from our like from the headquarters there. So then we sometimes struggle with the processes related, for example, to promotion because there are some strict processes and opinions that comes from there, from above, and then in (*mentions a country)*, those don't really work, like because of culture…the HQ wants us in every country doing in same way. So and we are struggling with that…It must be equal and done same way in every country but then how it comes along with this equality…I understand that that if we do have different practices in every country, so that's not then then equal in like whole company level but then then again how much…the culture and the like practice in every country, country needs to be taken into account? It's not easy to find the path there. But how I think it's like the generic guiding principles should be like the fairness, objectivity, diversity, inclusion, equality. And then we could have support for that in countries that then I think it maybe would be more responsible that we could make more decisions in the country, and effect in our own practice and then take into account the culture and also the market like we the companies with whom we are like competing about the employees.

The dilemma of balancing between global and local perspectives of talent management in a large world-wide company has also been addressed by Barzantny and Clapp-Smith (2021), among many others. According to them, there appears to be no one clear-cut solution, rather, managing talents in such an environment and with the aim of doing it in a strategic manner, undisputedly requires a multiple-actor model, which engages a range of stakeholder, and a very solid systems perspective to talent management. Collings, Mellahi and

Cascio, (2019), also call for the use of a transnational talent strategy and the use of truly global talent pools. The company indeed needs its very own HR architecture to master the complex entity. In this system, HR, or talent management professionals, play a pivotal role in setting up the system and overseeing its implementation (e.g. Minbaeva & Collings, 2013). Nonetheless, at the daily-level the line managers are the ones enacting it in practice (see e.g. Barzantny and Clapp-Smith, 2021), which leads to the next notable strength mentioned in the interviews.

5.3.1.2   "We're developing managers' and leaders' capabilities"

According to a range of research (see e.g. Pantouvakis & Karakasnaki, 2019), line managers' own talent philosophies and perceptions can, both in good and in bad, play a notable role in the talent management process. After all, they are often at the heart of doing the talent assessments and supporting and guiding their team members growth and development, and even their entire career paths. Likely due to this, and in order to further decrease the unpredictability levels of TM as a social process, the participants reported on investing in the competencies and capabilities of the people involved (especially the line managers).

> **TMP1:...**like the really clear criteria and measurements so that we can explain, explain…we like, transparent and open to people, why they are put where they are put. Then we can train managers because these things are discussed in the development discussion. So then then of course train managers like how to bring the message and how to discuss these topics and that we are doing. We are training, training all, or like new managers, and then reminding them every year…because it's, of course, a big difference if you just stare at the numbers or if they like the main point in discussion is in some feedback and the development plan. So there of course like reasoning and where that numbers are based on and not just like: "OK you are here" and that that's it.

> **TMP2**:…what is already on our table is the role of our people leaders. And we are doing a lot of efforts how we can kind of support that they are kind of taking their role more thoroughly or have they got clear ownership about that leadership role, taking care of our people and their development? And also, what is their role to kind of…help our people to move towards their kind of objectives in their career or their work. So that's kind of some angle that we have bit traditional products that we…talent processes within the company that the HR is kind of delivering but the idea would be that that's not sustainable. We need to kind of be on the pulse with our employees and then it kind of comes down to the manager's role that we are kind of supporting. But we're actually doing already… we are developing our managers' and leaders' capabilities to discuss and lead talent management and talent development related activities. So just to kind of increase the competence levels, and then we are also…we have plans so we can kind of build better ownership to our business units and operative units that they take more responsibility of these issues and they understand their role from the people perspective but also from the business and operative perspective. Just to understand the importance of this area.

TMP4: So basically we have a schedule and we have the processes in place, but it is still something that the new organization with the new leaders and these kind of things we do have to still do a lot of training…And is ongoing process that the leaders are trained for the discussions.

TMP9: I think that's always…room for improvement in the readiness of the managers to do assessment. So that's maybe one thing that that we continuously want to work on. We always get new managers and it's also a process that is not happening every day. So people need to be reminded and people need to be educated.

TMP10: It's never the situation that we kind of have too much skills or competence in team leaders so that we could really assure that the team leaders are in line and they have everything they need. We have quite a strong structure when it comes to HR business partners supporting the team leaders. Then again, I think that that's something that's so essential because they are the ones who really communicate with the people and so on. So I think there should be maybe something more systematic… We do have a lot of trainings that the, for example, if a new team leader starts, we do have a training for that. But when it comes to kind of developing all the time. So that's something we could maybe have more…

Based on the quotes it becomes apparent that especially the line managers are seen as key players in making sure that the process is implemented, on one hand, in the spirit of the organizational justice theory, i.e. employees feel that they have been treated, and for instance, assessed in a fair and non-discriminative manner (see e.g. Bhatia & Baruah, 2020). On the other hand, in connection to social exchange theory, line managers need to be able to explain what the talent status, or in some cases the lack of it, means to the employee, i.e. what kind of opportunities and obligations that translates into (see e.g. De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2017; Mensah, 2019b; Khoreva, Vaiman & Kostanek, 2019; Festing & Schäfer, 2021; King, 2021; Wikhamn, Asplund & Dries, 2021).

Furthermore, line managers are required to ideally also give feedback and provide guidance to their team's current and potential future talents, while at the same time they need to lead them in their daily work so that the talents can deliver on the expectations set for them (see e.g. Mensah, 2019b; Festing & Schäfer, 2021). Hence, line managers play an integral role in not only communicating, but also implementing the psychological contract involved in talent management, and thus, training them can indeed be deemed as a noteworthy action towards more responsible talent management.

5.3.1.3 "It's open for everyone"

A range of the participants brought their inclusivity-driven TM to the fore as their vital strengths in responsible talent management. Indeed, in the spirit of the RTM definition by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020), TM that is inclusive was seen to equal responsibility.

TMP2: I would say that what I already mentioned about the thinking or the fundamental belief is that that all our employees are kind of talents… that we want to provide development opportunities for everyone and that's in the core and that's kind of part of our social responsibility.

TMP5: I could say uh, where I feel that we already are some level of responsible… So at my company we have the habit of the process of always opening up new positions internally and then also decide if we open the new positions externally but always it is important that we always bring out those opportunities for our own people…I think we are doing quite well because of the positions almost, let's say, 55 percentage is fulfilled from internal people and so I think that that shows that we can actually create good rotation within the company and people can have new opportunities…all the job descriptions are always designed in a way that they can suit, let's say, whatever six people might have…and also we ensure that the tasks and qualifications. And all the titles that we use within the company also gender neutral.

TMP7: Well, one thing what I mentioned is this that this talent program that was launched I think 2019 or 2020 first time and then it was only for those talents…potential A…But nowadays it's open for everyone, and there are really many different kind of ways or events that they that people can if they just try to register in the program there are different offerings for them that they can pick and choose what is relevant for them… career counseling, different kind of webinars…And I think the open job market also what I mentioned is one that we don't limit ourselves to those talents that we, you know, consider…because we only know what we know, we can see some… but we then might miss some good candidates also…and now when we have this policy to that, we need to all post every job internally at least for two weeks. So everybody is allowed to apply and then the best candidate will be chosen. And that's also why we don't do this succession planning anymore or we can do it, but it would be only for development purpose. So that we think we kind of think that "OK these employees would be good successors if we develop them in this way", and then it helps maybe to define the development actions for them.

TMP9: Well, I would first start with the fact that we are involving the employees. So it really starts from them and everybody is involved basically. So we are not assuming, we are asking people to share what they would wish to for their career and how would they like to develop. And also maybe one thing that is making our process responsible is that we are putting focus on diversity. So, for instance, that's part of the process we are trying to increase certain diversities. And we have openly said that we want to increase the share of females in the leadership roles. So obviously that is something that we need to take into account when we plan for succession in their leadership roles or how many females do we have currently growing from within. So like what actions do we need to take either to hire or promote females in order to do that, of course, always still hiring the best talent and also one other thing that we are looking at is to how to increase cultural diversity. And so how do we make sure that in global business units we have more diversity. All cultural diversity.

TMP10: A strong theme that we have here is diversity, inclusion, equality. So those themes are something that we are currently working on, but looking into the future, we should kind of focus on those more and more and see…We do have targets related to those themes, for example, they are kind of overarching themes too, relating to all of the processes…So that's something we are globally working on, and will be even a stronger theme in the future for us too.

TMP11: But we have training camps where we train managers for inclusion, diversity and equal opportunities, and be unbiased also in recruitment processes or in leadership. So those are the things that I'm especially proud of. And also, that we are basing our decisions based on skills rather than who you are, and how you look like, for instance…You want the skills, regardless of who you are. So those are the things that I think I'm extremely proud of.

TMP12: And then what are we doing very well? Well, we have really progressed the gender balance. And we started with something like a 10%...And now we have it 69% and 31%. So in that way, it's really become even in that way we are more and more aware of women and were also more aware of nationalities and were more aware of is this a balanced pool of people that we're bringing forward. So we calibrate, which is also a very important process for us. We don't just leave it up to the managers. Then we have an open job market internally and based on that we have really strong rotation. So if I can use an example, last year we didn't hire one executive externally, but we had 16 positions that needed to be filled and we filled them all internally.

Clearly, inclusivity as an RTM strength manifests itself in including the internal employees in TM through transparent internal job markets and talent development opportunities on offer for anyone who is interested in them. In this sense, the quotes above mirror the talent philosophy "Everyone can become a talent through training" discussed earlier in Chapter 2.1.2.4. Also, the diversity and equity themes, which are inherently connected to inclusivity, are apparent in the quotes through the examples of actively monitoring and improving, for instance, gender equality issues at the company.

However, the flipside of the inclusivity coin entails some prevalent challenges, which were, to a great extent, brought to the fore by these same inclusivity advocates cited above. Namely, including everyone in the TM practices and process, poses the challenge of fulfilling the psychological contract discussed earlier in connection to social exchange theory. In brief, when everyone in the company is labelled as a talent, for instance, through the company's general talent discourse, or even more concretely through the annual talent processes, it creates expectations in the minds of the employees, as noted by Festing and Schäfer (2021), among some others. Of course, this inclusivity in TM is considered to have a range of positive implications as well, such as increased work effort, motivation to develop professionally and loyalty (see e.g. Mensah, 2019b; Festing & Schäfer, 2021; King, 2021; Wikhamn, Asplund & Dries, 2021) but it also creates pressure to accompany the mere talent status with something concrete, as reflected on below:

TMP2: We would like to kind of focus more and invest more to our people and their development. Boosting learning and development and also enabling more career opportunities. That's just said, the operative environment has been so challenging during the recent years, so that that we haven't been able to do that much as we would have wanted, or we have seen as an important thing to do. We haven't been kind able to focus on that area. It's been more like kind of, as I said, focusing on business continuity.

TMP4: I would say that the company wide training possibilities and a training calendar that would be available for everybody to choose trainings from that would be awesome. But at the moment…it's with the timelines, it's not possible to open up something that, "hey, we have this kind of trainings, please participate". It has to be organized very detailed level, who can attend at what time, and prioritize where the time is used. But I would open a lot more training possibilities, and also the possibilities for not only company-wide trainings, but the individual trainings for people to participate.

TMP5: And we have a wide scope of content that we can use and in trainings…I think that, let's say it's still a work in progress, but all the time understanding that even though that the majority of the companies staff work in (*mentions an unit at the company)* that we at the same time also offer equal training opportunities for those people who were, let's say, are in (*mentions another unit within the company*).

TMP6: Well, of course they are always several things that I would like to develop and what I see already now, but kind of…this is also an area where you need to be realistic in many places, so kind of how much you can kind of put money on certain things and so…

TMP8: …building this kind of a continuous learning culture so that we are giving the opportunities but also…How we can attract people to find them themselves?

Catering to the needs of talents, when everyone is included, naturally requires resources, and an infrastructure of, for instance, talent development that truly involves everyone. As noted above, no matter how inclusive companies strive to be with their talent management, it is costly and something that can be easily outweighed by other focus areas, especially when times are tough financially. What is more, inclusive talent management can evidently still have its own blind spots, be that in the form of talent segments that are not catered to (as noted by TMP5), or the company struggling to actually make its learning and development offerings known and motivating to its employees (as alluded to by TMP8).

Therefore, in the light of this more critical approach to inclusive talent management in practice, TMP3's ideas provide an interesting sounding board as TMP3 was perhaps the only participant in the present study pondering on the perks of their notably more exclusive form of talent management:

TMP3: Our company does this in a bit different way than the previous companies that I have worked for. So instead of evaluating everyone, or everyone above a certain career level, we are actually handpicking, and we are kind of only looking at the positions or employees that we need to look at and evaluating those people. And I would say that in a way that is being responsible. So we're not kind of evaluating anyone in vain or without then kind of providing the next steps or doing some actions because I see that being one maybe a downside when we evaluate people on a bigger scale because that then leads to these people that the ones evaluating them not being as aligned maybe as we are now being. So when it's a smaller group of people doing the evaluations we are kind of building consensus in a better way and it's easier than if you would need to make sure that 500 line managers are all using the same criteria and doing it in a in a responsible

way…Looks like we are actually doing pretty good job in evaluating people that we are kind of respecting everyone and the ones that are kind of lifted up for discussions in leadership teams or in our top management, they are being handled in a very respectful way, in a sense that we are only looking at things from the perspective of how can we help these people to grow? How can we support them in their career development? I think this is in a way when we are not translating people into numbers or averages.

The quote from TMP3 illustrates very clearly the possible benefits of more exclusive talent management, although exclusivity can in the light of Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah's (2020) definition be seen as a TM feature that does not result in responsibility. Namely, if TMP3's ideas are mirrored against the social exchange theory, according to which talent management should boil down to all parties being willing and able to keep their end of the talent deal (see e.g. Mensah, 2019b; Festing & Schäfer, 2021; King, 2021; Wikhamn, Asplund & Dries, 2021), TMP3's company appears to have built a TM system that enables this perhaps better than some of the other companies, which seemingly struggle to match their inclusive TM with the desired TM actions, for instance, talent development opportunities. In other words, even if the talent status is not inclusively given to everyone at TMP3's company, those who are deemed as talents, also get the feedback, support, and the development opportunities that come with the status.

Connecting this to Festing and Schäfer's (2021) ideas about the importance of fulfilling the TM-related contract between the company and their talents, TMP3's insight portrays exclusivity of TM in a far more responsible and positive light. Nonetheless, one should not fail to see also the flipside of the coin, and the reasons behind so many of the companies in the present study being advocates of inclusive TM. After all, exclusive talent management has been deemed unsuccessful in the long run, even if it may benefit the company during the timespan of a couple of years (Pruis, 2011), as the high turnover rates and disengagement of the majority, i.e. the so-called non-talents, can prove to be costly for the company (see e.g. Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020).

5.3.2 RTM challenges: "Everything is running, nothing is ready"

In an effort to discover what are the challenges related to responsible talent management in these twelve companies, the study's participants were directly asked how their TM is at the moment not responsible, and what should they develop in order to become more responsible in the future. With the help of these interview questions, the present study managed to unveil the following four themes: struggles with talent assessment, issues with TM transparency, inadequate digitalization hindering visibility to talents, and lack of general RTM benchmarks.

5.3.2.1 "We could have better ways to measure the performance"

According to previous research, it appears that over half of the organizations running talent assessments as part of their talent management, struggle to identify their talents, hence, talent identification is too often based on subjective perceptions, and simply a gut feeling (see e.g. Pantouvakis & Karakasnaki, 2019). Thus, not surprisingly, the first development area, which was brought to the fore in the present study by many of the participants, in one form or another, is the challenge of, on one hand, assessing people as talents, for instance, their performance and potential, and on the other hand, translating those assessments into something concrete, such as acknowledgement and future steps when someone as reached their goals and developed themselves as planned. These assessment dilemmas are discussed below:

> **TMP1:** Well, I think that we could be better in recognizing that potential and maybe the substance competencies in our employees. Now that I mentioned that we have these competence model and it's like really good, but it's quite common level because there are competencies that are needed in every role, like it's communication skills, and like business thinking skills, and problem solving…skills that when we need to give feedback to our employees about their like their professional substance, so then it's often just colleagues or the direct manager or supervisor who knows that and then we come to that. So it's never quite objective because it's one people and we could have better measurements, measurements or ways to measure the performance. Also, feedback and evaluation about that side of the work would be more objective and fair and true that responsible…the evaluations are made by people and then the objectivity and experience of objectivity comes up every year, even though we…that's our goal and we aim to that end, we do a lot to get it better and be good in that. But yeah, there's always room for improvement and even though, yeah, we as HR as part in those discussions and we try to challenge and ask questions and coach their supervisors and managers like: "Are you sure how you thought…how have you thought this?"…but that's the fact that we don't know the people and then in the end it's based on them…experience and description of the manager…at the best, it would be a criteria that can be measured, and for different roles so that in nutshell I think would make it more responsible.

> **TMP3:…**we are not maybe seeing the employees who are more introverted or who are maybe hidden in the organization. So there is a big possibility that we are identifying or lifting people that are, you know, that get a lot of leadership team exposure, for example in their business unit. So, of course, they are kind of top of mind employees when the leadership team members then, you know, start to handpick…One thing that I have been also reflecting upon, is that we still have, we, of course, are more and more diverse in the leadership teams as well as we speak. But what we still have a big group of white male, you know, middle-aged men in our leadership teams and I'm kind of thinking that we must have at least to some extent an unconscious bias problem…and people tend to look at the aspects that they like about like in themselves, they want to kind of reflect that upon when they are picking successors or identifying talents. And that's of course a really human thing to do. But I think that's also one problematic area when doing this in a way that we are doing the handpicking.

> **TMP7**: Well, for one thing, is that it's of course subjective that evaluation that line managers do and they evaluate or assess potential…and maybe someone would be missed…maybe we…I don't know if we have some bias,

like we consider certain personality as talent…Then we also might miss some.

TMP11:…skills-based discussions. So that needs to be developed for sure, and we need to take bigger steps there. But also I think we need to take bigger steps where we'll look at talent as a whole. We still tend to think sometimes that the talent we need lies outside the company. Which is not very responsible towards the people within the company…because they have been performing, they have been developing themselves… They have maybe taken time out of their…even from free time, to develop and learn. And what are the opportunities that we as a company provide for them when we asked them to develop?... So we need to somehow take responsibility over catering for those people that are actually performing and achieving their goals year to year all the time, and develop themselves but they don't really get anywhere within the company. Which means that they leave because people want to, you know, advance in their career.

The quotes above tap into to the very core of TM, and not to mention talent management that is responsible, as according to a range of scholars there is not only a lack of understanding of the concept in organizations, but also in academia. A clear and easily transferable definition that would suit a range of contexts and organizations, and not to mention the varied roles within these, simply does not exist (see e.g. McDonnell et al., 2021; Sharma, 2021), and hence it is no surprise that companies are challenged by assessing it (see also Cerna & Chou, 2019). Furthermore, even if there were such a generalized set of criteria available, McDonnell and Skuza (2021), remind companies to refrain from resorting to it, as they entail a risk of the company ending up only with talent clones, i.e. employees who are too similar. This undisputedly limits diversity within the company.

Therefore, as alluded to by McDonnell et al., 2021, instead of companies waiting around for a general talent definition, it may be more fruitful for them to spend time on figuring out *their* own definition of talent, while also keeping diversity issues in mind. After all, it is a question of striking a balance between a set of criteria that orients the ones doing the assessments to look at things as objectively as possible, and without reflecting their own biases in the assessments (see also Hughes, 2019), while at the same time not turning the process into a talent cloning system (see McDonnell & Skuza, 2021).

For all this, Table 1 of the present study, and especially the extensive overview by Dalal & Akdere (2018, pp. 345-346), provide a helpful basis for determining what is crucial for talents in the context in question. Perhaps, in the light of the strategy-driven approach to TM discussed in Chapter 5.1.2, each companies' talent definition, and the means of assessing it, should first and foremost be connected to that company's overall strategy, and each division's, unit's or team's short-term and long-term goals, i.e. what type of talent is needed at the moment and what type of talent will be needed in the future. At the end of the day, talent management is always contextual (Minbaeva & Collings, 2013).

Drawing on this core strategic foundation of talent management can prove to be useful, as ideally the talents' skills, knowledge, commitment, motives, networks, willingness and abilities to grow and develop, to name but a few talent-related areas highlighted by Sharma (2021) and Nijs et al. (2022), ought to

be deducted from the company's strategy, and have the potential to contribute to it. Nonetheless, it goes without saying that outlining this is in every organizational setting is not only time-consuming, but likely also easier said than done. Therefore, not surprisingly, another challenge that was notable prevalent in the present study's interviews are the difficulties in making talent management as transparent as possible. Understandably, as discussed above, assessing talents is a multi-layered process, prone to be guided by human biases, and hence, communicating about something that is a bit vague, or undefined, in an open manner is by no means an easy thing to do.

5.3.2.2　　"We're taking steps to increase the transparency"

The level of transparency in relation to TM has raised concerns widely among scholars (see e.g. Khoreva, Vaiman & Kostanek, 2019; McDonell et al., 2021), and hence it is not surprising that theme also surfaced in the present study.

> **TMP3:** I would probably want to make the performance evaluation a bit more transparent. I am not sure about doing the same to the potential evaluation. Just because in my mind that might be a little bit more vague in kind of explaining to people, I would want people to receive feedback on those topics, but I wouldn't want them to maybe…understand that they would be rated against those, but I think I would want line managers to be more aware of those evaluation criteria and for them to be able to support their employees and give them feedback based or kind of reflecting that that criteria…my feeling is that this is very much about communication, like many things are. And the way that we are able to actually…when we are communicating about this kind of topics that we are actually able to get people to understand why we are doing this kind of things and how these can be of service to these people that are being evaluated so that it wouldn't be us showing ourselves as, you know,…that we will see people as resources or that we would only look at people as numbers, but to actually be able to communicate that this is something that you can really benefit from and that's, of course, comes back to your feedback and leadership. But it's kind of whole loop of communication and the stakeholders in the process. So that's something to that I think is not easily solved, but I think there it's not rocket science either so…

> **TMP9**:…we have now increased the transparency of the process. So we have started to communicate to our people about the different roles that we see them as potential candidates for in the future. And also, we've been communicating now to our high potentials that that they have been identified. So we're kind of taking steps to increase the transparency. So that has been one thing that we have recognized that we want to do. So that's why we want to now see that what can we learn from it, and what are the needs then going forward, and then then planning what are the next steps there?

> **TMP11**: As opposed to a manager evaluating a performance because that is one person's view. So instead, we have several people evaluating the performance and providing different views…And I think that's responsibility because then you get different viewpoints from different people and it's more equal, but it's also more open in a way.

In addition to the participants cited above, many scholars also recognize the complexities involved in being transparent around TM (see e.g. Khoreva, Vaiman & Kostanek, 2019). Issues related to who is involved in TM (exclusivity vs. inclusivity), how responsibly and socially sustainably the entire process is done (CSR), and how equity and equality are embedded across the board, are also inherently connected communication. Open communication on these is deemed as a prerequisite for fair and responsible TM.

However, often communication around TM is characterized by strategic ambiguity: things are purposefully left unclear, and openness is deliberately avoided (see e.g. Sumerlius & Smale, 2021). Such approach was alluded to above by TMP3. The problem is that according to a study over 90% of TM-related information is in one way or another leaked in organizations, thus typically amplifying the negative effects of the secrecy, and resulting in increased levels of confusion (see Khoreva, Vaiman & Kostanek, 2019).

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why TMP9 and TMP11 voice their efforts to at least gradually unveil their TM practices and processes in the company. Indeed, as noted by Sumelius and Smale (2021), it is important that companies assess the optimal amount of information that they wish to share as part of their TM, and then manage this sharing successfully through communication. According to them, TM entails such a wide range of pieces of information, for instance, regarding the talent status, or the lack of it, as well as the duration and implications of that status, that companies need to meticulously examine what are the pros and cons of sharing and withholding each piece of information (see e.g. McDonell et al., 2021; Sumerlius & Smale, 2021).

5.3.2.3 "One development area is using technology to get better visibility to our talent"

According to the widely used definition by Collings and Mellahi (2009, p. 304), talent management entails, for instance, identification of both key positions and people, and it requires that TM stakeholders, especially those running and implementing the process, have solid insights into the people at the organization: their performance, potential, and career aspirations, to name a few examples. Information and insights are the key so that talent management practices and processes, or their outcomes, such as talent development actions or rewarding, are not haphazard, but responsibly based on something.

However, according to Minbaeva and Collings (2013), talent management is typically run with incomplete information, and this appears to apply also to the companies of the present study. Especially, in the companies in which talent management was reportedly quite inclusive, there was an apparent lack of visibility to the talents, as discussed below:

> **TMP2:** I would say one important development area for us is, how we use technology as a tool to get better visibility to our talent. We are not satisfied

with the current systems that we are using, so we're lacking a bit of the visibility to that talent. What are the aspirations and what kind of hidden potential we actually have within the company? And we're also working from the talent perspective a little bit in, in silos as well. So as I said, we need to kind of have this internal mobility working better, and now we are kind of not satisfied with the with the current reality in in that…And of course, if we don't have the visibility to our individual people and their potential on the level that we would desire that we are just missing a lot of information that would actually help us and help the individuals.

TMP5: In general, HR should be better in also understanding how the data or insight could be used. Also, to analyse where should we go…We might be looking into little bit too much to how did it go rather than thinking where should we aim? And understanding that if we want to go somewhere what data analytics could we use to understand how to reach the goals?

TMP6:…something I would like to develop here is that kind of assistance around this because… even though it may not sound like the most relevant thing, but also thinking from the sustainable and responsible point of view, so systems actually quite often allows to kind of work…so that we actually can take all employees into account. So it's more equal if we have good system to follow up…so systems kind of enables us to be more equal in many ways… I really can't see the big picture regarding different processes and discussions that are held all over the organization.

TMP8:…And perhaps to use artificial intelligence or this kind of robots there which can customize your learning experience

TMP11: We have good starting point, and we are getting there, but we need a lot of both the digital systems to support it, to make it easier for the managers to make it possible for the managers.

As becomes apparent, acquiring, managing, and utilizing massive amount of talent data, especially in this type of large, globally operating companies is by no means easy. Therefore, it makes sense that the participants are calling for better digitalized solutions for helping them, not only to see the talent in their company, but to also grasp what needs to be done with the talent, for instance, through talent development and supporting their learning and growth.

Indeed, visibility to talent and their needs through technology, and other types of digitalized solutions, can be seen as a sort of prerequisite for successful inclusive TM. Moreover, both equality and equity, i.e. the third key component of responsible talent management, can be deemed to require that TM decisions and actions are based on accurate information on people. Through visibility to people, is it also possible to determine whether this has been the case. This allows actions and decisions to be discussed together among relevant TM stakeholders, and necessary corrections to be made as part of the process. All these things enabled by people data and talent insights are in fact closely connected to procedural justice discussed earlier as part of the organizational justice theory (see e.g. Leventhal, 1980, as cited in Kwon & Jang, 2021). In sum, lack of visibility to people can definitely be viewed as a hindrance in respect to responsible talent management.

5.3.2.4   "If we are really serious about RTM, then we should have a standard"

According to Rotolo et al. (2018), among many others, companies are constantly having to develop and re-invent themselves in order to cope in the current VUCA environment, i.e. under circumstances which are volatile, uncertain, chaotic, and ambiguous. What is more, in today's world, it is particularly the employees who are the most important asset of the companies (see e.g. Ewerlin and Süß, 2014; Dalal & Akdere, 2018). Therefore, not surprisingly, something that was clearly present in many of the responses of the participants, was their own, but also their company's eagerness to develop their TM in general, and especially from the viewpoint of responsibility. TM is not immune to VUCA, in fact, it is at the very core of it as it evolves around the companies' most fundamental asset: the people.

This is in line with Kwon and Jang's (2021) note on many companies fearing that talent-related issues will become a notable hurdle for them on their paths towards reaching their strategic goals. Hence, talent management, and its further development, is understood as something worthy of investing effort and resources in. What is more, likely the talent war discourse around the topic has for decades created an atmosphere of companies not wanting to lose the "War for Talent" (see e.g. Pyszka & Gajda, 2015; Dalal & Akdere, 2018; Ibrahim & Daniel, 2018; Alamri et al., 2019; Claus, 2019; Kwon & Jang, 2021), thus leaving them with no choice but to make their TM the best it can be.

In the present study, this continuous effort, their readiness to question existing ways of thinking and doing in TM, as well as the actions-oriented approach to development, are demonstrated below:

> **TMP4:…**we are all the time viewing what are the options for the career path and how to, for example, how to see the job rotations and these kind of things so. Nothing is ready at the moment. Everything is running, nothing is ready.

> **TMP6**: So now this company is putting a lot of efforts that we boost our organizational culture…we want to kind of refresh our current thinking kind of regarding these cultural beliefs and I think even though it's not under talent management, but that is kind of the base also for a good base also for kind of sustainable talent management activity.

> **TMP8**:…we are a very straightforward company. So I would say that if someone points out that "well now we should move from A to B" so we are very good in moving to B. So it is very straightforward. The whole organization…"Let's see how we will do it", and then we just execute. So this kind of a capability to execute new things

> **TMP10**:…making sure that we are continuously doing things better, also looking a bit outside because we have very strong ways to operate and very strong processes. But then could we have something else too?...because the environment is more changing so much…I would maybe take some time to think through, if all of the processes that we have are really serving the meaning, why we have those processes, how should the processes look like? Not to kind of lose the meaning of the processes, but to really keep track

when are we doing the things that we should be doing? Should we do something differently?

TMP11: Maybe to add that our leadership team, our global leadership team is very engaged into certain diversity inclusion and related sustainability targets as well towards the communities. And how do we want to present ourselves as a company.

TMP12: What I'd like to do better is that in the current talent management, it's a bit top down. And I'd like to now bring in also the employees in that if people want to accelerate themselves. So if we think of ability, aspiration and engagement that's based on the manager's perception of what we see in the evidence. But now I'd like to introduce this, you know employee promote type of process, so more engaging, more inclusive and I could self-select myself to be considered for the talent pool. So that's something that we are looking to do. There isn't many case studies…There's one in (*mentions an organization*). I used to work there, and have something…so we have to figure that out and then I think I would like to be more inclusive.

However, in relation to developing their TM even more towards responsibility, there was yet another prevalent theme. Namely, the lack of clear benchmarks for responsible talent management. This highlight from the data is not surprising, if considering that not only is responsible talent management a fairly new TM area with only limited amount of research on it, but talent management in general has also been widely criticized for its unethical underpinnings (see e.g. Painter-Morland et al., 2019; Kwon & Jang, 2021). It is widely known that TM entails some complex ethical and responsibility-related issues, but due to its complex, contextual and relational nature (see e.g. Cerna & Chou, 2019), it is likely difficult to address them. Nonetheless, it is understandable that companies would need something more tangible to support their developing of TM.

TMP8: Then I would say, well, partly relating to that one is, is this kind of a benchmarks? So global benchmark so where we stand against the benchmarks? So I would say that what we have been lacking is that as especially with the HR and talent management is that there is no this kind of a sustainability or responsibility audit… that doesn't exist. I haven't even heard that any company would help us in in making this kind of responsibility audit… it's very difficult to develop, if you don't have anything to compare with. So we don't know whether we are really good or really bad…How to measure are you doing the right things or should you do something more or less? So that is missing.

TMP10:…if we talk about responsibility, and the responsible talent management…To really understand what that entails, what does that include?

TMP12: I think we could do better with what is the return on investment of talent management and how does it support a better culture. and more inclusive culture. So I still have more to do there. So I think responsible talent management is also that…do people understand what it is?…It would be very nice to have a standard. So what is the standard? So what is considered to be good? I think it would be something that if we are really seriously about responsible talent management, then we should have a standard.

Because without a standard, it's hypothetical and I can talk up the story…and then I think when you have a standard, and you are working with auditors or you're working whatever group of people you are working with, then everybody forms part of that ecosystem and it's easier. So I find it very difficult to get benchmarks. Unless I'm prepared to pay 100,000 (euros) for a benchmark for some external…it shouldn't just be for the elite, big companies who can afford to pay for these things. And I should not have to pay for a badge…we should set a standard and we should have some kind of process that companies who really want to be responsible and take it seriously could have, like, "Hey, that's a responsible company."

According to the participants quoted above, lack of benchmarks results in lack of direction and focus of the development work. Furthermore, it naturally can make the assessing of the current situation quite challenging, and hinder having insights into progress, i.e. whether the things that have been done have improved TM's responsibility, or even worsened it. In the light of this, it is no wonder that TMP8, among some others, was keen on gaining some helpful guidelines for RTM based on the present study.

TMP8: We can talk about it like we have done here in the interview about these things, but this kind of how to measure are you doing the right things or should you do something more or less so that is missing and that is I think one of the key things and hopefully after your thesis for example…there would be this kind of a list of things that "yeah these are the things we should measure and then identify what to do more and do less".

In the following, in Chapter 6, the findings of this study are discussed, as called for by TMP 8, from the viewpoint of their implications for responsible talent management, as well as in the light of the present study's recommendations for companies seeking to make their talent management more responsible.

6 DISCUSSION

Now that the findings deriving from the study's data analysis have been presented, it is time to revisit the key takeaways of them in the light of the study's research questions. This will be followed by discussing the practical implications and recommendations of this thesis.

6.1 Key findings revisited: research questions answered

The present study set out to discover answers to the following four research questions:

- RQ1: How is responsible talent management defined by the talent management professionals?

- RQ2: Who are reportedly the stakeholders of responsible talent management and how are they involved?

- RQ3: In which ways is the companies' talent management reportedly responsible at the moment?

- RQ4: How do the companies reportedly wish to make their talent management more responsible in the future?

and the summarized answers deriving from the study's findings are discussed one by one below. Furthermore, a deep dive into them is done by utilizing, whenever possible, the present study's triple theoretical lens, i.e. stakeholder theory, organizational justice theory and social exchange theory.

First of all, RQ 1 will be addressed. Even if basically all the twelve participants at some point during the interview expressed their lack of prior knowledge on responsible talent management as a concept, their definitions of RTM interestingly very strongly mirrored the definition by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020, p. 284):

> "TM practices and strategies that emphasise an organisation's responsibility to identify, develop, and nurture the unique and diverse talents of all workers by expanding access to available talent development opportunities, by fairly managing their weaknesses and by recognizing their contributions while giving them equal opportunities to flourish as valued employees to ensure their commitment to the organisation so as to achieve mutual sustainable outcomes for employees and their organization."

The interviews as a whole brought to the fore the core components of RTM: consistent, fair and transparent TM processes (see Chapter 5.1.1). Also, the second component of RTM, CSR, became apparent in the participants' interviews, as some of them clearly view their talent management existing as part of its larger social environment (see Chapter 5.1.3). For instance, the role of the company as enabling careers for groups of people who would not necessarily automatically be deemed as talents, can indeed be seen as one form of CSR.

However, something that was perhaps more prevalent in the present study's definition of RTM, in comparison to that of Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020), was the business-related responsibility of talent management (see Chapter 5.1.2). In this sense the present study's participants highlight far more strongly the idea of responsible managements translating into optimizing also the *share*holder value (see e.g. Laasch & Conaway, 2014), whereas Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020) merely briefly allude to the "sustainable outcomes for the organization".

According to Alamri et al. (2019, p. 182), far too many organizations are driving their TM guided by the question of "*How can we make the best use of the talent we have?*", whereas, in their opinion, and now also in the light of RTM definitions deriving from the present study, talent management ought to be guided by the question of "*How can individuals develop their talent and become more useful to the organization?*". These questions become even more valid if one considers that only around 6% of organizations reportedly deem their own TM to be effective (see e.g. Hughes, 2019).

Indeed, the allocation of resources is likely a pressing TM issue across organizations. As noted by Pruis (2011, pp. 210-212), companies very rarely have the extra resources to do TM actions, such as developing their talents, as something "pro bono" for their employees: they need to know that there are some types of strategically relevant returns on their investments. As highlighted also

by Sparrow (2021), TM is not only about the individual employee experiences, but it also an important means to a corporate-level end.

Secondly, when it comes to the study's RQ2, which evolved around stakeholders, the participants, perhaps due to their extensive talent management experience, were notably unanimous with the list of Theys and Schultz (2020, p.5). According to the list, TM stakeholders are the following: the organisation's board of directors, the chief executive officer (CEO) and senior executives, the HR department and talent professionals, line managers, and finally individual employees, and the study's participants in Chapter 5.2.1 seem to agree.

Nonetheless, the list by Theys and Schultz (2020), portrays a somewhat inward-bound orientation to TM, which to some extent was also mirrored in the responses of many of the study participants. Yet, as discussed towards the end of Chapter 5.2.1, especially one participant, in contrast to many TM scholars, had a far more outward-looking take on talent management, i.e. they viewed the *share*holders as an important group of RTM stakeholders. Furthermore, this talent management professional also brought to the fore the interest of the general public, and indeed many companies, especially large, listed companies are under scrutiny. Nowadays, companies often simply cannot afford to ignore relevant stakeholders, or otherwise act in an irresponsible manner, and TM is no exception to this.

While on the topic of stakeholders, a notable finding was also that among the participants, there was a difference in terms of their varying ideas whether TM should be first and foremost oriented top-down, or bottom-up, i.e. whether it all starts with the big strategic scheme of things portrayed by top management, or whether it all boils down to individuals' hopes and dreams for their careers.

Finally, through RQ3 and RQ4, the present study managed to shed light on the twelve companies' reported RTM strengths and challenges. Perhaps most notably, the majority of the participants are proud of how they are taking one of the three components of RTM (as defined by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020), namely inclusivity, into account in their talent management. In this sense, most of them showed signs of their company operating based on either of the two more inclusive talent philosophies, i.e. everyone inherently having a talent, or conversely at least having the ability to become a talent through training.

To support this inclusivity, most of the participants also reported on having clear TM practices and processes and investing resources in developing and supporting the line managers at the company so that they are tuned in and equipped to lead their team as a group of talents, who all have their own career aspirations, and combinations of strengths and development areas.

However, quite interestingly, also some more critical thoughts were voiced in respect to this inclusivity-driven orientation to TM. It was openly questioned whether the TM practices and processes, despite, for instance, the aforementioned investments in managerial training, can truly work in a large, globally operating company. Indeed, one if forced to wonder whether including everyone and aiming to be as equal as possible, no matter how nice of ideals these are, come at the cost of equity. After all, equality means the same treatment for

all, whereas equity aims to take, for instance, individual circumstances and needs into consideration.

Following this line of thought, the interviews portrayed somewhat negative consequences of having both too much, and too little, company-wide TM guidelines and rules. The former can, of course, result in equal practices and processes, but lack in necessary localized and individualized solutions in TM, whereas the latter can create a basis for *too* localized and individualized TM practices and process, thus hindering equality.

To further amplify this challenge, many of the participants voiced their concerns about having to deal with not only limited criteria for determining and measuring talent, i.e. reportedly typically performance and potential, but also struggling to have visibility to their talents due to the lack of a digitalized HR system that would support also talent management in particular.

In the light of these, it is, therefore, no wonder that talent management professionals are either quite hesitant to make the communication around TM more open, or the steps taken towards increased transparency are at least very gradual. After all, it is by no means easy to communicate about something that is not necessarily based on a clear set of criteria, nor supported through solid ways to measure, for instance, performance and potential.

In sum, based on the present study it could be deduced that experienced talent management professionals, such as the ones interviewed for this thesis, have a fairly good understanding of what responsible talent management is, even if they all highlighted that the concept as such was new to them. Perhaps, as noted already in the interviews, since responsibility should not be anything separate from the so-called regular talent management, rather, it should always be inherently embedded in all TM practices, processes, structures and norms, the TM that has already taken place in these twelve companies, has been quite responsible.

Nonetheless, considering that almost none of the participants alone defined the concept as holistically as, for instance Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020), the RTM understanding co-created based on the interviews of all the twelve of them, and mirrored against previous research, will surely provide a good basis of a checklist not only for the participants of the present study, but also talent management professionals globally. After all, inclusivity, CSR and equality together with equity will undoubtedly create a pivotal foundation for one of the core goals of talent management, i.e. "a long-term and stable relationship with an employee" (see e.g. Mensah, 2019a, pp. 330-332). Furthermore, the strategic emphasis and economic mindset highlighted by the study's participants, brings a valuable addition to the original definition by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020).

In connection to stakeholders of RTM, the study's participants were to a great extent on the same page with earlier research: talent management that is responsible, is everyone's business in the company, and all stakeholders need to, first, be aware of what their TM role entails, and second, actively do their part of the TM deal. RTM is ideally dialectic and co-operative. However, something that

the present study's participants brought to the fore more than earlier research, was the role of external TM stakeholders, and through this, the present study portrays a far more outward looking TM to be one sign of responsibility, than what has been outlined by other scholars in the past.

If considering the key components of RTM, i.e. inclusivity, CSR, as well as equality and equity, the study's participants managed to, on one hand, very aptly spot the things, which were already on a good level in terms of their company's talent management, on the other hand, they were also evidently very in tune with their RTM challenges. Typically, at the core of any organizational development work, ought to be an understanding of the current state of affairs, i.e. the organization's strengths and challenges, and in this sense, the participants seem to have a good basis for developing their current TM towards improved responsibility. However, as expressed by many of them, they would still wish to have more clear general benchmarks and shared criteria for determining where they are at with their RTM.

6.2   Practical implications and recommendations

Even if the present study portrays a fairly positive image of responsible talent management in the context of this thesis, i.e. large companies operating globally, but mostly headquartered from Northern Europe, it also alludes to the very real challenges of RTM: running an inclusive, CSR-oriented, and both equal and equitable, talent management system, which is additionally strategic and financially reasonable, is easier said that done. Hence, no wonder only 6% of organizations think that their talent management is effective (see Hughes, 2019). Furthermore, if taking into account that modern organizations are under a great deal of pressure to combine a streamlined TM system, with cost-efficiency and high level of impact (see e.g. Rotolo et al., 2018), the equation is far from easy.

Therefore, the present study wishes to make the following recommendations, and share some possible practical implications. Although, as emphasized by Theys and Schultz (2021), at the end of the day each company needs to determine for themselves, what suits and works best in terms of their talent management. Yet, the following insights can surely be used as a source of inspiration and a soundboard for reflection.

First, to tackle the issues related to the dilemma of TM's inclusivity versus exclusivity, the present study suggests that companies resort to a hybrid strategy to combine the best of both sides of the same coin, i.e. the somewhat 'softer' RTM visible especially in Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah's (2020) definition, and the more business-driven RTM apparent in the present study. The hybrid TM practices, and processes have also been promoted by King and Vaimer (2019), and in fact also touched upon by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020) themselves. A hybrid approach to talent management has been defined as follows:

"…an integrative approach to talent management in that it considers both the overall organizational workforce as its foundational talent pool, as well as the identification and management of specific workforce segments as specific talent pools for business strategic capability requirements "(King & Vaimer, 2019, p. 196).

The reason why this definition in particular, and a hybrid approach to TM in general, mirrors *responsible* talent management in such a holistic way is two-fold. The hybrid TM, on one hand, takes seemingly holistically responsibility of *all* the employees of the company, as according to Malik & Singh (2021), it is unlikely that a company can succeed only through developing their top talents, rather, actions need to also be made to boost the skills and careers of other employees: their supporting role helps to create the backbone of the entire company's performance. On the other hand, it also adopts responsibility for the company's strategy, thus resonating with Freeman's (2010) emphasis on the need for companies to think strategically, i.e. keep their direction in mind and make decisions that are also economically-sound. After all, as noted by Morris, Oldroyd and Bahr (2021), top talents, or so-called star employees, have been proven to play a substantially notable role in contributing to a large percentage of the company's outputs.

To take the hybrid TM strategy towards a more practical level, the following things are worthy of considering. For instance, certain talent management practices and processes, such as making and following individual development plans will automatically concern every single one of the employees in the company, and certain talent development activities, for instance, are on offer for anyone who is interested. In other words, the inclusivity elements of TM are strongly accompanied with an emphasis on involving the individuals as active stakeholders in the process: they have the right and responsibility, with the help and support of their line managers, to plan their own careers and learning paths, and make decisions to contribute to these.

The open job markets, and talent development programs mentioned in the interviews are good concrete examples of this orientation, and in fact something that has been also promoted by Alamri et al. (2019). Also, in many ways TM activities, such as global mobility, job rotation, and mentoring, can be added here as well (see also Pruis, 2011; Malik & Singh, 2021): anyone can apply, and everyone can be encouraged to take initiative in this sense. Involving all employees through this type of active agency, and maybe even embedding more actively the role of peers (see e.g. Haeruddin, 2018; Nijs et al., 2022), would expand the talent management avenues in companies, as promoted by, for instance, Haeruddin (2018), Swailes (2020), as well as Lacey and Groves (2021).

However, instead of completely ignoring the strategic aspects when discussing inclusive, and perhaps more individual-centered TM, it is worthy of bearing in mind that the individual development plans should be also made, enacted and reflected on within the context of the company's strategy: very few, if any, companies have the resources to cater to the individual career aspirations and development needs and desires that have no connection to their operations and strategic goals. All in all, as highlighted by Kwon and Jang (2021), TM should

be first and foremost approached from the holistic and collective capabilities of the organization, not merely through individual competencies. Therefore, individual development plans ought to be inherently inspired and guided by the scope of the individuals' current, and possible future roles within the company and the needed overall capabilities (see also Kwon & Jang, 2021). However, within this scope, individuals can, and ideally should, of course, be given room to make their own decisions and voice their own preferences.

The exclusivity component of hybrid TM, as also suggested by King and Vaimer (2019), is then even more clearly strategy-driven, thus tackling the problem of companies tending to invest too much in non-strategic employees, and too little in strategically important ones (see e.g. Minbaeva & Collings, 2013). In this sense, talent would be seen more through the lens of those employees who have expertise in "one or more strategic capabilities", and are hence, "mission critical" (see e.g. Mayo, 2018, p. 248). Therefore, rather than looking at certain traits of individuals as a sign of talent, strategic capabilities and roles would play a far more pivotal role in the exclusive talent management practices and processes. These talents would then be included, for instance, in talent pools and succession planning, as well as certain talent development programs that are only offered to people in strategic key positions, or who are in the process of growing into such positions.

Secondly, once the company has the TM infrastructure, in which the inclusive and exclusive talent management practices and processes co-exist side-by-side, it should also ideally communicate about this talent management system in the most transparent manner possible. According to a large-scale study conducted by Björkman et al. (2013) on the issue of talents and non-talents, the crux of the matter is not whether someone is labelled as a talent, rather what is more destructive is the uncertainty around one's talent status. In fact, transparency across the talent management system seems to boost people's motivation and decrease their turnover intentions (see also Yarnall, 2011; Björkman et al., 2013).

In the light of the social exchange theory, this is probably in some way connected to the fact that clearly divided and enacted talent management practices, both those that are more inclusive, as well as the ones that are more exclusive, help companies to better manage the expectations of employees. It is made clear, for instance, in a form of a talent management roadmap, that what is expected from the employees in different talent segments, and what is provided to them. In other words, promises, commitments and obligations, are not merely *perceived*, rather, they are consciously communicated throughout the talent management system and process.

Also, if the system is transparent across the company, i.e. also the more exclusive TM practices and processes are communicated about, it has the potential to unveil what the exclusive TM *actually* entails and requires, thus minimizing unnecessary secrecy and misunderstandings (see also Lai & Ishizaka, 2020). As reported by Khoreva, Vaiman and Kostanek (2019), over 90% of information relating to talent management is somehow leaked in organizations,

thus resulting in uncontrolled narratives on exclusivity, and completely self-inflected confusion on the topic. Sumelius and Smale (2021) concur by noting that if information is withheld, or even (un)intentionally translated into so-called white lies, i.e misinformation, the truth tends to come out through the grapevine, and very rarely rumors, be they true or false, work in the favor of any TM stakeholders.

Hence, one cannot help but wonder whether it would be better to simply communicate, for instance, why there is a strategic need for more exclusive forms of TM, and how and on what grounds people can become part of the more exclusive talent system within the company. Also, what the more exclusive talent management translates into both on the level of the opportunities on offer for such talents, but also what is expected from them due to their strategic importance, is surely worthy of sharing. After all, in this way, those who are not yet for some reason talents in the exclusive system, but are interested in becoming ones at some point, would immediately become stakeholders of this exclusive system in the form of potential future-talents, not some outcasts, who likely cannot help but feel that the system is unfair, when they do not know any better as they are purposefully kept in the dark. This way at least some of the core challenges highlighted by organizational justice theory (see e.g. De Boeck, Meyers & Dries, 2017; Anlesinya & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020; Bhatia & Baruah, 2020), could be more easily tackled: the process would be clear and consistent, and hence more fair, and decisions would be made, and argued for, based on strategy, not only possibly biased pieces of information.

In sum and in the light of all these viewpoints, the present study advocates for companies to not only settle for inclusivity, CSR and equity and equality as key drivers of responsible talent management, rather, RTM must also feed into the company's competitive edge and connect to business strategies. Indeed, the key to successful responsible talent management appears to be in finding the sweet spot where the TM aspects on the level of individuals, are in the best possible way synced with those of the entire company. Perhaps only this way, talent management can be fully responsible, and genuinely contribute to the ways in which the employees thrive, and the company handles itself in global markets (see also Claus, 2019; Sparrow, 2021).

7 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to, on one hand, through qualitative analysis offer a descriptive insight into responsible talent management in large, globally operating companies. An attempt was made to also shed light on the TM stakeholders and their current roles in responsible TM. On the other hand, based on the these, the study set out to additionally provide future directions for companies' responsible talent management, i.e. what they should particularly focus on to make their talent management more responsible in the long run.

In order to conclude on the topic of responsible talent management, including its definition, stakeholders, and how it successfully, and at times less successfully, manifests itself in companies, the previously shared definition of responsible talent management by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020, p. 284) will be revisited once more:

> "TM practices and strategies that emphasize an organization's responsibility to identify, develop, and nurture the unique and diverse talents of all workers by expanding access to available talent development opportunities, by fairly managing their weaknesses and by recognizing their contributions while giving them equal opportunities to flourish as valued employees to ensure their commitment to the organization so as to achieve mutual sustainable outcomes for employees and their organization." (Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah, 2020, p. 284),

If looking at the definition, words such as, "develop", "nurture", "managing their weaknesses", "recognizing their contributions", "opportunities to flourish as valued employees", "ensure their commitment", allude to something way beyond of managing. After all, management translates into practices, processes, structures and norms, whereas leadership has its focus on setting directions, motivating people and evolving all relevant stakeholders (see e.g. Adler & Laasch, 2020; Marques & Gomez, 2020). Interestingly, according to Langmead et al. (2020), management has the potential to de-responsibilize stakeholders, i.e. instead of having autonomy and readiness to take initiative, people become

passive. This something that is bound to have a negative impact on talent management, which, based on both theoretical knowledge and the present study's empirical insights, ought to be everyone's business in the organization.

Therefore, even if this entire thesis has evolved around the concept of responsible talent *management*, at this stage one cannot ignore the fact that in reality, at its very core, it perhaps ought to be understood as talent *leadership*. Namely, even if TM as a system is based on a range of managerial practices and processes, the crux of the matter is that it inherently boils down to leadership. It is about talents leading themselves towards their career aspirations and development goals, it is about leading in teams so that one's peers and employees can thrive now, and in the future, it is about supporting line managers so that they have a clear sense of direction and can make connections between their team's talents and the strategic goals set for their team. It is about understanding at the very top of the company, what type of talents the company strategy requires.

In the light of this, perhaps the most responsible form of talent management is the leadership of talents on all levels from the individual themselves, to their team, unit, division, and finally the entire company's strategy. This line of thought leaves room for active leadership on all levels of TM stakeholders: it does not portray talent-related activities as something that can only be outsourced somewhere else or be done by someone else, rather, the entire TM process requires all its links for it to work.

Therefore, the present study advises anyone, who is involved in designing and implementing talent management in their organization (i.e. for instance, HR and talent management professionals), to really ponder on which aspects of their talent management are *managerial* aspects, i.e. practices, processes, structures and system that can be created from scratch, or fine-tuned in their current forms, and which talent management perspectives are *leadership* issues, i.e. higher-order social dynamics and power issues, which relate to people's sense of direction, motivation and relationships. Quite frankly, successful talent management likely requires both: no amount of mere managerial work can replace leadership in talent management, and not even the best possible leader can on their own compensate for the lack of shared practices and processes.

As a key takeaway for anyone, who plays another type of talent management role in their organization, be that, for instance, as an employee or as a line manager, the present study advocates for these people to get to know and internalize their own role in the TM system: what is actually offered to them and in return, what is required from them. As noted above, if the TM process entails someone, who does not keep their end of the TM deal, the entire process suffers from that.

Finally, the present study urges all top management stakeholders to use talent management as a pivotal lens when creating, implementing and reflecting on their strategy. Even if it is such a cliché, strategies do not come to life without the right people, working in the right positions at the right time, and with the right capabilities.

At this stage of the present study, it is worthy of briefly considering its core merits, and potential limitations, and in order to do this, the six criteria for assessing qualitative research (see e.g. Lincoln & Guba, 1985; 1994; Elo et al., 2014) will be consulted. The criteria consist of trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, transferability, conformability, and authenticity.

First, in respect to trustworthiness, which in brief alludes to the study's findings being worthy of paying attention to, it should be noted that the present's study's findings, on one hand, help to reinforce the fairly recent, and hence less studied, definition of responsible talent management by Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020). On the other hand, the study's findings also bring something new to the definition, thus also enriching the concept and broadening the discussion on responsible talent management.

In respect to credibility, the present study shared as much information on the participants as was possible without jeopardizing their anonymity within this fairly small TM context in the Nordics. In connection to this, and in relation to the third criterion, dependability, i.e. the data's stability over time and different conditions, the present study attempted to include as much contextual information as was possible while also respecting the anonymity of the participants and their companies. Even if only a very limited amount of background information on the participants, and their companies was shared, the interview quotes were provided in more extensive formats so that the participants themselves were able to contextualize their answers as much as they felt comfortable doing in the interviews. Although, of course, all possibly too revealing details, such as names and places, were carefully omitted during reporting.

Nonetheless, within the scope of respecting anonymity, an effort was made to provide an adequate lens for readers to interpret the results, which relates to the fourth criterion, transferability. The fact that the present study's twelve participants doing talent management within companies, which already vary quite notably in terms of the number of employees (less than 1,000 to over 100,00), in respect to how many countries they operate in (less than 10 to over 100), and the industries they represent (e.g. retail, energy, agriculture, telecommunications, manufacturing, and technology), their definitions, thoughts and experiences of responsible talent management, were surprisingly similar. Furthermore, they resonated quite well with previous (R)TM research conducted globally, and hence there is a reason to believe that the findings are potentially very applicable, and transferable across other TM contexts and settings.

The fifth criterion is conformability, which connects to objectivity and how people in addition to the researcher themselves, views the study's data accuracy, relevance and meaning. As discussed in Chapter 4.2, in all research, and especially in qualitative research, the researcher is always inherently at the core of the process, as they design the study, conduct it, and finally interpret it. In the present study, this meant that the study was conducted by someone who, to a great extent, shares a similar cultural, educational, and professional background as, for instance, many of the study participants. On a positive note, this means

that many of the meanings conveyed in the interviews are likely somewhat shared among the participants, and the researcher, but on a more critical note, this can in some ways hinder objectivity. However, in order to constantly work towards better conformability, as advised by Berger (2015), a great deal of time was invested throughout the research process on mirroring, for instance, the research questions, the interview script (see Table 2 as an appendix) and data analysis, against extensive background literature to become better aware of my own biases and preconceptions as a researcher. Also, discussions with the thesis supervisor and relevant peers, were actively used as a means to self-monitor the process.

Now, as noted by Etherington (2004), among a range of others, it is time for the readers to examine this study and decide for themselves how they view the study's data and findings. In addition to conformability, this also relates to the very last criterion, which is authenticity. In brief, it refers to how much the research leaves room for alternative realities of the research topic, and hence it requires that the research is fair and faithful in empowering the study participants. In the present study, the usage of a range of, at times even quite lengthy quotes, equally from all the twelve participants, is a concrete sign of working towards better authenticity (see e.g. Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Elo et al., 2014). After all, this allows the readers to not only see my conclusions drawn from the data excerpt, but they themselves can also re-interpret the data, if they wish to. This adds an element of openness to the research, thus making it also more authentic (see e.g. Mauthner and Doucet, 2003).

One could conclude that the present study succeeded in many ways as a sample of qualitative study, as it managed to navigate its way despite its own small scale, and the overall small scale of its larger research context. The participants' anonymity was prioritized throughout the study, even when sometimes difficult decisions about omitting, for instance, interesting background information and company-specific details, had to be made. Also, even if some very detailed discussions on some specific talent management phenomena had to be kept to minimum due to the scope of the present study, it still managed to bring up something new that enriches the contemporary RTM literature.

All in all, the study can to a great extent be deemed to meet the six criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985; 1994), as well as Elo et al. (2014), especially if considering that according to Byrd Clark and Dervin (2014), in research, certain things typically tend to succeed, whereas other aspects intentionally, or unintentionally become the study's limitations. Attia and Edge (2017) concur by noting that this applies particularly to qualitative research as the researcher often plays such a make it or break it- role in it. Hence, a notable amount of humility is required from someone doing qualitative research, and qualitative researchers need to always be prepared for taking in new perspectives and adopting their thinking and standpoints later (Attia and Edge, 2017). This leads to examining the future directions of RTM research that can be deemed relevant based on the present study.

As noted earlier, responsible talent management is a very young area of research, and hence, in the future, it is bound to offer a range of very interesting and widely important research topics for academic scholars, as well as TM practitioners wishing to broaden their talent management horizon. Considering the complex nature of talent management, and responsible talent management in particular, and taking into account all the range of practices and processes that are embedded in it, it would be likely very fruitful for future research to look into specific talent management practices and processes, such as talent assessments, talent pools or rewarding, from the viewpoint of responsibility. This would allow research to shed light on what happens on a very practical level within talent management and how responsibly talents are assessed and rewarded, to name but a few different angles, which could not be addressed within the scope of the present study.

Furthermore, examining even to a great extent similar themes as in the present study, a larger group of participants researched either with quantitative or mix-methods, would likely allow new insights to appear and enable the making of some generalizations. Perhaps due to its short history as a research topic, responsible talent management would particularly benefit from such broad viewpoints to it. Especially interesting would be to learn more about hybrid and transparent talent management systems that appear to work, as this would shed light on the true potential of the present study's suggestions for responsible talent management.

Finally, as with all research, this study is also ingrained in its context, i.e. large, globally operating companies mostly headquartered from Northern Europe. This likely has some effects on what talent management is in the first place, and how responsibility is viewed as part of it. According to Alamri et al. (2019), talent management with all its manifestations and challenges is bound to take different forms across societies, economies, sectors, and organizations. Therefore, responsible talent management research conducted in other cultural and geographical settings would surely provide further insights into this fairly new theme within talent management research. Also, what is distinct in the present study, is the fact that it entailed companies from different industries, but the limited scope of this study, and the anonymity issues, hindered any comparative approaches to these industries' RTM. This, alongside with single-industry analyses, would also potentially enrich theoretical and empirical understanding of responsible talent management.

Once a study comes to an end, such as this thesis, and its background, research process, and findings, as well as implications and recommendations are covered, it is then completely up to the readers to make the best use of it as they see fit in their context (see e.g. Schegloff, 1993; Etherington, 2004; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Therefore, considering the self-evident reminder by Schegloff (1993) about one being also a number in its own right, the readers, especially those who are in one way or another involved in talent management, are urged to be inspired by this thesis, even if it is just in the form of a one theoretical insight discussed in the thesis, one single inspiring idea from a participant, or one

recommendation made by the researcher. The process of making talent management more responsible in an organization is quite likely closer to a marathon, than a quick dash, therefore during that process all actions, even individual shifts in TM stakeholders' thinking, or changes in actions, can have a positive impact in the long haul.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Interview invitation

Dear Talent Management professional,

My name is Miia Konttinen and I am currently studying Management and Leadership at the Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics. As part of the final steps of my two-year master's degree, I am now working on my master's thesis (supervised by Associate Professor Monika von Bonsdorff) related to **responsible talent management**. For this reason, I am now contacting you.

In order to get insights into this theme, I would like to interview a small selection of talent management professionals working in large global companies. The interviews will be max. 1-hour individual interviews in English, and they will be conducted online via Microsoft Teams as this will allow both recording and automatic transcription of the interview data to ensure accuracy when reporting on the results. All information and data will be handled with **absolute anonymity**, which means that:

- your name, position and (professional) background will remain completely hidden throughout the reporting process of this study
- your company's name will neither be revealed as part of the study; only the general field/industry and a size range of the company are included as background information

I will also make sure to properly delete all interview materials as soon as they are no longer needed for the reporting purposes of this study.

If you are available for an interview, please contact me via e-mail or LinkedIn chat as soon as possible to book a timeslot for your interview. My preliminary plan is to conduct all the interviews by the end of October 2022 so feel free to suggest any suitable one-hour timeslot(s) for any of the given dates below:

- September 15: any time after 12pm
- September 16: any time
- September 21: any time
- September 22: any time after 12pm
- September 23: any time
- September 28 any time
- September 29: any time after 12pm
- September 30: any time
- October 3: any time after 16
- October 4: any time after 16
- October 5: any time after 16
- October 6: any time after 16
- October 7: any time after 16
- October 10: any time after 16
- October 11: any time after 16
- October 14: any time after 16

Please note that final dates and times for the interviews, as well as the Teams meeting link, will be e-mailed to each participant as soon as they are confirmed. The interview does **not** require any preparation on your behalf.

Your thoughts and experiences related to responsible talent management are highly appreciated as a valuable contribution to my thesis. Moreover, this interview is hopefully an interesting opportunity also for you to reflect on the topic in more detail by discussing the interview questions.

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the interviews or this study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best regards,

Miia Konttinen
e-mail: X
tel. +358 *XXXXX XXXX*
LinkedIn: X

**

Supervisor:
Monika von Bonsdorff, Associate Professor (JSBE)
e-mail: X
tel. +358 *XXXXX XXXX*

APPENDIX 2: Interview script

Getting started	- Welcome to the interview!
	- Interview practicalities and highlighting issues related to anonymity
	- Informing them that they can stop the interview at any point or refuse to answer questions
	- Checking: Does the participant have any questions or concerns?
	- Verifying the pre-gathered background information on the company:
	    o industry
	    o size range (number of employees)
	    o number of countries in which they operate

Question 1	**How do _you_ understand the concept of <u>RESPONSIBLE</u> TALENT MANAGEMENT: How would _you_ define it?** **SUB-QUESTIONS:** 1a) What type of lines of thought or ('talent') philosophies should ideally be guiding it? 1b) Who are all the stakeholders of responsible talent management? 1c) For whom and/or for what is it done at companies? 1d) Which practices, processes etc. would you consider being part of it?
Question 2	**To bring the concept of <u>RESPONSIBLE</u> TALENT MANAGEMENT to the context of your company in particular: Why/How is your company's TM responsible?** **SUB-QUESTIONS:** 2a) What are you particularly proud of? 2b) What do you do notably well at the moment?
Question 3	**Conversely, why/how is your company's TM <u>NOT</u> responsible at the moment?** **SUB-QUESTIONS:** 3a) What would you say that are your company's biggest challenges when it comes to RTM? 3b) What is possibly next on your company's agenda when it comes to making your TM more responsible?
	Anything else you would like to add/comment or elaborate on/revisit etc.?
Wrap-up	- Thank you for the interview! - Revisiting the anonymity issues - Checking: Does the participant have any questions or concerns?

Table 2: INTERVIEW SCRIPT