

Opening the black box of talent management in the public sector

Public-sector influence on HR differentiation into strategic target groups in a Dutch municipality

Joost Monster, Utrecht University, Netherlands

First supervisor: Prof. Dr. Paul Boselie (UU) | Second supervisor: Prof. Dr. Bram Steijn (EUR)

Abstract

Purpose – Talent management (TM) is one of the most popular themes in contemporary human resource management (HRM). Most organisations, including public sector organisations, use practices that can be classified as talent management. Previous studies found public sector characteristics that seem at odds with employee differentiating TM practices. This leads to the expectation that the public-sector context might shape TM practices. Hence, the central aim of this study is to uncover the influence of the public-sector context on talent management practices. This is done by studying the TM practices of recruitment, selection, development, retention and deployment in two cases in one public sector organisation.

Research design – A large Dutch municipality is selected as the public-sector research setting. Within this organisation two cases are selected based on a priori data that revealed the presence of HR differentiating talent management practices: a university graduate trainee program and a program for project managers within one department. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 respondents. Data were analysed based on open and theoretical coding.

Findings – The findings indicate that the public sector does -to some extent- shape the talent management practices in the cases. This influence is found in the predominantly inclusive view of talent management, the importance of public service motivation in the recruitment of talents, the cultural bias limiting intended recruitment and selection practices, the internal problems with retention due to equality questions and lack of financial resources, and the unwillingness to perceive the project managers pool as a differentiating, exclusive program.

Originality/value – This study is among the first to focus solely on the influence of the public-sector context on talent management practices. This makes it a stepping stone for future research on talent management in the public sector.

Keywords - HRM, HRM Process, HR Differentiation, Talent Management, Public Sector, Municipality, Graduates, Trainees, Managers

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of human resources (HR) as a source of competitive advantage for organizations (Boxall and Purcell, 2016). However, demographic changes, such as an ageing population and dejuvenation, cause an increasing scarcity of human resources (Calo, 2008). Additionally, this scarcity is strengthened by market forces, the current economic growth (OECD, 2018) and technological developments (Gratton, 2014). This situation is especially pressing regarding high value employees, who can play a pivotal role in gaining competitive advantage. To attract and retain those important employees, organisations regularly adopt human resource management (HRM) strategies that categorise employees in target groups. The HR architecture model of Lepak and Snell (1999; 2002) provides a basis for such HR differentiation. In their model they group employees based on their uniqueness and strategic value, which they pair with congruent HRM configurations (Lepak & Snell 2002, p. 520). Following from the model, organisations are urged to categorise their employees and adjust their HRM accordingly. This is in line with the human capital tradition (Becker, 1994), in which scarcity stimulates organisations to invest in their human resources to retain the knowledge and skills within the organisation (Boon, et al., 2018).

The scarcity on the labour market and the subsequent adaptation of the HRM strategies triggers an intensifying competition for high value employees. These unique and scarce workers are often labelled as ‘talents’. A frequently used expression to describe the competition for these employees is ‘the war for talent’ (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). Consequently, labelling the differentiating HRM practices targeted at these talents as ‘talent management’ (TM), which has received increasing attention in practice (e.g. Schollaert, et al., 2017) and research in both public and private sector organisations (e.g. Collings, 2014; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). Definitions differ per study and practice, but Boselie and Thunnissen found that “*Talent management is often described as the systematic attraction, identification, development,*

engagement/retention, and deployment of talents” (2017, p.8). The attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment are abstract categories of practices that together constitute the target group HRM strategies for high value employees. This approach to talent management is often regarded as exclusive, because attention is paid to the high value individuals instead of inclusively considering every employee as possibly talented (Buttiens & Hondeghem, 2015). Hence, organisations apply talent management approaches to differentiate in their HRM practices, in order to compete for the most unique and strategically important employees.

1.1 Talent management and the public sector

Despite the general attention for the topic, there are considerably little in-depth and rigorous empirical studies about talent management in public-sector organisations (Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen & Buttiens, 2017). This is remarkable since public-sector organisations are highly dependent on their human resources, making them important players in the intensified competition for strategic and high-value employees (Khan, 2018). Moreover, since employee differentiation in this sector is not a new phenomenon, the lack of studies is even more surprising. Public sector organisations that do, for example, use HR differentiating practices are hospitals and the Dutch ministry of foreign affairs. The former are known to use programs to attract and retain medical specialists and other crucial staff (e.g. Turner, 2017; Van den Broek, et al., 2017) and latter has a longstanding, institutionalised program for future diplomats (Kiene & Sahadat, 2006).

Although these examples show the usage of employee differentiating HRM practices in public sector organisations, the differentiating nature of exclusive talent management is often ascribed to its private sector origins (Buttiens & Hondeghem, 2015). Some scholars even found that the private sector inheritance of talent management is at odds with typically public-sector values such as equality (Boselie & Thunnissen, 2017). The study by Harrisr and Foster (2010)

even shows that the usage of differentiating HRM practices in a public-sector organisation resulted in opposition against the exclusive nature, rooted in the principle of fairness. Such opposition can lead to the expectation that talent management practices in the public sector are subject to public-sector influences, such as diversity ambitions (Wise & Tschirhart, 2000), and politicians and other stakeholders (Vandenabeele, Leisink & Knies, 2013).

However, because of the context dependency of talent management practices, the precise implications of the contextual influence remain ambiguous (Boselie & Thunnissen, 2017, p. 435). Moreover, opposed to the expectation that the public sector does shape talent management practices, the impactful study of Boyne concludes: *“the available evidence does not provide clear support for the view that public and private management are fundamentally dissimilar in all important respects.”* (2002, p. 118). This includes potentially HRM and TM influencing factors such as managerial autonomy and public interest motivations. These contradictions in the literature show the importance of understanding and studying talent management in the public sector, which too little scholars have done till now. This paper aims to uncover the contextual influence of the public sector on talent management practices.

1.2 Approach and research question

In disclosing the ambiguous relationship between the public-sector context and the talent management practices, the Wright and Nishii HR process model (2013) is used. With this model, a distinction can be made between how practices are intended, actually executed and perceived (see chapter 2). Disentangling those phases enables to see what shapes the practices: whether it is the influence of the public sector or the effect of the regular HRM process. To examine these shaping effects, a qualitative, multiple case study (N=2) approach is adopted, which is executed within one large Dutch municipality to enable sufficient contextualisation. By adopting this approach, this study answers to the call for sound empirical research into talent management in the public sector (Boselie & Thunnissen, 2017).

To provide this addition to the existing literature, the central question is: *to what extent does the public context shape the talent management practices in a large Dutch Municipality?* To answer this central research question, four additional sub-questions will be answered. The first question is SQ1) *How do employees within the municipality define and view talent management?*. The goal of this question is to uncover what the respondents see as talent management and what their opinion is on the topic, which is interesting in the light of the aforementioned opposition to HR differentiating practices. The other three sub-questions are: SQ2) *What are the intended talent management practices in the studied cases?* SQ3) *What are the used talent management practices in the studied cases?* SQ4) *How do the respondents perceive the talent management practices in the studied cases?* This three-tiered set of questions follows the Wright and Nishii HRM process model (2013) to study the intended- (SQ2), the actual- (SQ3), and the perceived practices (SQ4). Disentangling the phases of the TM practices enables this study to identify public sector influences, separate from influences that are a result of HRM process mechanisms. Thus, by answering the four sub-questions, public sector shaping effects can be identified.

To answer the questions, in the next section the HR process model by Wright and Nishii is explained. Additionally, literature is used to conceptualise the public-sector context, to show its influences, and to elaborate on talent management. Empirical evidence regarding the questions can be found in the findings sections, which will be assessed using literature in the discussion, eventually leading to the conclusion. Suggestions for future research are provided.

2. Theory and literature

2.1 Talent management

Due to the increasing scarcity of high value employees, much attention is paid to talent management in HRM literature. An important part of this is the conceptual debate about the definition of talent management. Therefore, in order to answer the research questions about the

definitions and views of respondents and the usage of practices of talent management, it is important to understand this debate. The fundamental question to this is how talent is defined. The attempts of various scholars to provide a definition (e.g. Nijs, et al., 2014), remain highly conceptual (Thunnissen & Van Arensbergen, 2015). Dries (2013), however, has provided an overview of elements that constitute the concept of talent in organisations. She formulated five questions regarding these elements: 1) Is talent a characteristic or a person? 2) How prevalent is talent among the workforce? 3) Can talent be taught or is it innate? 4) Is talent about skill or motivation? And, 5) is talent transferable or context dependent? The answers to these questions construct the definition of talent and the subsequent talent management approach (Dries, 2013).

Based on the constructed definition of talent a wide array of possible TM approaches can be build. In talent management literature this multitude of possibilities is partly simplified by categorising the approaches in two traditions: the inclusive and exclusive talent management approach. This divide is strongly linked to whether talent is regarded as a subject or an object (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & González-Cruz, 2013). If talent is regarded as an object (i.e. talent as a trait), an inclusive talent management approach, that enables all employees to maximise their performance, is the most likely route. On the other hand, if talent is regarded as a subject (i.e. talent as a person), the exclusive approach of HR differentiation, specifically aimed at the high performers and / or high potentials is best suited (Gallardo-Gallardo, et al., 2013). Although both approaches can be valuable, the increasing scarcity of (valuable) human resources and the intensifying competition for talent seem to call for the exclusive, employee differentiating approach, to attract and retain strategically crucial talents (i.e. individuals). Moreover, it could be questioned whether inclusive talent management differs from regular HRM which is meant to enable the entire organisational workforce. Hence, this study recognises the value of the Lepak and Snell (2002) like HR differentiation, and therefore regards talent management as an exclusive practice: target group human resource management.

Specific practices that constitute this (exclusive) talent management approach, can be derived from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development definition: “*the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment of those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to an organisation.*” (CIPD, 2006). This shows that talent management includes the HRM practices of recruiting (i.e. external attraction and internal identification), selecting (i.e. identifying through a selection process), developing (e.g. coaching and training), retaining, and deploying talents (i.e. individuals). Following this widely adopted definition, this study regards these practices as constituting talent management programs. Hence, the case selection of this study was based on the a priori display of these exclusive, HR differentiating practices. Moreover, the findings from these cases are structured using the same categorisation of talent management practices.

2.2 The HRM process model

The aforementioned talent management practices seem rather straightforward. However, HRM practices are known not to be single layered processes. The initial design of a policy or practice does not immediately result in the desired outcome. The implementation and perception are thought to be much more important for the outcome of a practice (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Wright & Boswell, 2002). Hence, to fully grasp the functioning of talent management practices, the HRM process model of Wright and Nishii (2013) is used, with which the different phases of a practice can be disentangled. In their model of input-throughput-output, they identify three crucial phases in the HRM process. The first phase entails the *intended practices*: the initially devised policies and subsequent practices derived from the organisational HRM strategy. The next phase consists of the *actual practices*. These practices consist of the actual execution, which may be in line with- or may differ from the intended practices. Lastly, the actual practices largely shape the *perceived practices*, which are the individual employee perceptions of the practices. The model consisting of these phases is depicted in Figure 1.

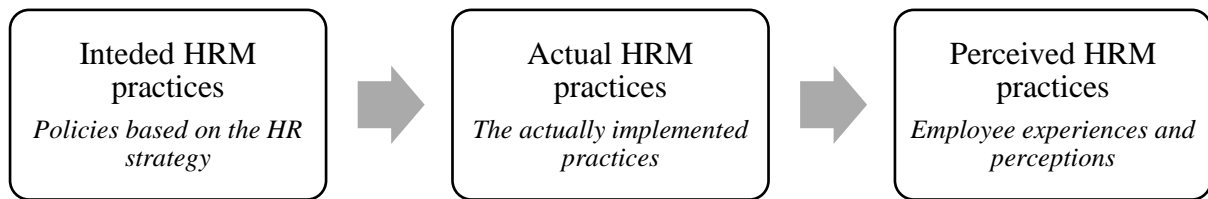


Figure 1: The HRM process model, see Wright & Nishii (2013) for initial model, see Boselie (2014, pp. 62-64) for description per phase

Differences that occur between the phases can be ascribed to different actors playing their part in the different phases (Wright & Nishii, 2013). For example, Paauwe (2004) found that top-management is often responsible for the strategies and intended practices, whereas Knies (2012) identified the line managers to be generally responsible for the actual practices. The perceived practices can be found with the employees subject to the practices (Boselie, 2014), which is a large group of employees including regular employees and line managers. Moreover, the perceived practices can also include the perceptions and experiences of colleagues of the employees subject to a practice. The fact that an actor plays a role in multiple phases, for example, line managers who are involved in both the actual and perceived practices, could indicate that the distinctions between the phases are not as sharp as the model might suggest. Hence, to understand the functioning of the talent management practices, it was imperative to identify actors involved in the different phases and specifically question them regarding their role in one of the phases. Additionally, the model is used in the analysis of the practices.

2.3 HRM in the public-sector context

Despite the usefulness of the general model of Wright and Nishii (2013), previous research into talent management has emphasised the importance of context (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013). Moreover, since the aim of this study is to uncover the influence of the public context on the talent management practices, it is important contextualise the generic HRM model to the public sector. An influential description of the public sector is provided by Bozeman (1987), who plotted organisations on a continuous scale of publicness ranging from private

organisations to completely public organisations. The three characteristics that constitute this publicness are ownership, funding, and control (Perry & Rainey, 1988), which shows that selecting a municipality as a public-sector research setting is justified.

The implications of publicness on the HRM process were transformed into a model (see figure 2) by Vandenabeele, Leisink and Knies (2013). They incorporated the HRM process model of Wright and Nishii (2013) into the public context. The model shows that HRM policies and practices in public sector organisations are influenced by an authorising environment (i.e. politicians and stakeholders) and public values originating from the institutional- and cultural frameworks (Vandenabeele, et al., 2013). Even more specifically, this contextualised model was applied to talent management in the public sector by Boselie and Thunnissen (2017), who found possible public-sector implications for talent management practices. They question to what extent public sector elements affect talent management practices and vice versa. This includes questions involving the influence of bureaucracy, regulation, governmental cuts, public service motivation and the focus on values such as being a good employer, equality, and (organisational) performance (Boselie & Thunnissen, 2017, p. 430). This list shows so many well-grounded public-sector factors that possibly shape talent management practices, that there is a sizeable possibility that -in preliminary answer to the central research question- the public context does (to some extent) shape talent management practices within public organisations.

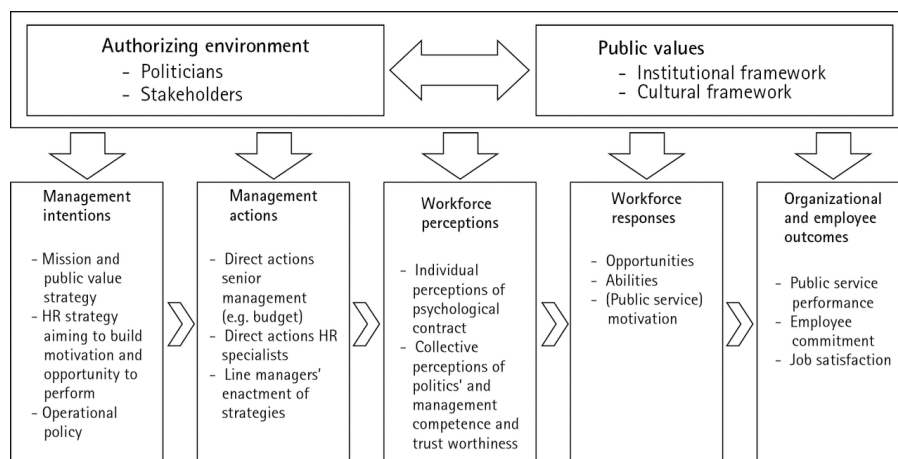


Figure 2: Integrated model of HRM in the public sector (Vandenabeele, Leisink & Knies, 2013, p. 48)

2.4 Expectations

Following from the chapter of Boselie and Thunnissen (2017) and other literature, three indications for the shaping effects of the public sector on talent management practices were found. First, the differentiating practices of exclusive talent management might cause tensions within public organisations, regarding questions of equality. This can be illustrated by a study into the UK health service, NHS. In this case researchers found that “*despite an acknowledgement that the sector needs to attract, develop and retain the most talented individuals [...], interventions which require singling out those individuals for special treatment challenges many of its established practices for recruitment and selection, employee development and career management.*” (Emphasis added; Harrisr & Foster, 2010, p. 422). The fundamental focus on equality and diversity described by the researchers, leads towards the first expectation of this study: *when describing talent management respondents will predominantly focus on inclusive talent management approaches and practices.*

However, this might not hold for every employee. Higher managers, for instance, are found to display more preference for the exclusive practices, due to their distance to the actual- and perceived practices (Harrisr & Foster, 2010). The actors involved in the actual execution of the practices, on the other hand, are more likely to express opposition to differentiating practices. Line managers, for instance, are often responsible for the implementation of the practices (Clarke & Scurry, 2017; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), making them more reluctant to differentiate between their employees (Harrisr & Foster, 2010). Hence, they might be inclined to favour inclusive talent management practices providing every employee with special HRM practices. This leads to the second assumption: *the more distance to the actual talent management practices, the more preference for exclusive, differentiating TM practices.*

Lastly, it can be reasoned that in an environment that favours values related to inclusive talent management practices, such as equality and fairness, the differentiating exclusive

practices will display noise in the HRM process. In other words, the practices might be intended to be exclusive, but the actual practices (by the line managers) turn out to be more inclusive, resulting in a troubled HRM process. Hence, the third expectation of this study is: *due to the favour for inclusive talent management practices, respondents will indicate de-alignment in HRM process regarding the exclusive practices*. These expectations will be used in the process of answering the research questions, by testing them with the data that was found

3. Methods

3.1 Case selection

This study adopts a qualitative multiple case study design, consisting of two cases of HRM target group practices within one large Dutch municipality. The importance of context (Thunnissen, et al., 2013) and the lack of sound research designs and theories in talent management research (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016), make a case study approach particularly suited for this study (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). The selected organisation provided an interesting public-sector research setting because it is well-known for its focus on diversity minded politicians and subsequent policies, as well as their -sometimes contested- HRM interventions (e.g. anonymous job application). Therefore, rendering it a suitable context to study specific HRM policies and practices.

Following the case study approach, cases within the municipality were selected using purposeful sampling, which is opposed to random sampling strategies (cf. Kalton, 1983). Specifically, the theoretical sampling approach was used to select the cases, because of its match with the abductive and iterative process of this qualitative study (Coyne, 1997; Draucker, Martsof, Ross & Rusk, 2007). This means that: *“the initial sample is determined to examine the phenomena where it is found to exist.”* (Coyne, 1997, p. 625). Following this sampling strategy, two preliminary interviews with employees of the municipality were conducted to uncover cases of differentiating HRM practices, such as targeted recruitment and development.

The interviews revealed two interesting cases that a priori matched the description of HR differentiating talent management: a program for university graduates (i.e. trainee program) and a pool of project managers. Both programs proved to be an a priori match because the interviews revealed that both groups have a strategic value for the organisation and that a tailormade HRM approach was used for them, including targeted selection and specialised development. The similarities between the cases and the theory provided a solid basis for the selection of the cases, which was strengthened by the differences between the cases. On one hand, the trainee program exists for 20 years and consists of a group of relatively young employees who are commonly labelled as talents. The project managers pool, on the other hand, has a much shorter history since it was officially started mid-2017 and entails a group of experienced project managers who are generally seen as important for the organisations, but not as talents per se. Hence, studying both cases provides valuable insights about HRM target group policies: the views on talent for two groups of high-value employees can be uncovered, the practices instated for those groups can be compared, and the public-sector influence can be studied from multiple perspectives. This provides a richer image of talent management in the public sector than studying only one case, or two very similar cases.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Data was gathered by interviewing 18 respondents. Purposeful, theoretical sampling was applied to select respondents based on their involvement in one or both cases and their role in the HRM process. Using the model of Wright and Nishii (2013) interesting respondents were identified based on their expected role in either the intended, actual or perceived practices. For example, the coordinators for the intended phase, a coach for the actual practices, and trainees and project managers for their perceptions. Via two entry points and using the snowball sampling strategy (Bryman, 2012), 18 theoretically interesting respondents were found. Figure 2 shows the list of respondents, their connection with the cases and their role.

Trainee program (6)	Project managers program (7)	Involved in both cases (5)
Trainee (3)	Project manager (5)	Former trainee & project employee (1)
Coordinator of the program (1)	Manager of the pool (1)	HRM director (1)
Coach (1)	HR manager (1)	HRM advisor (2)
Former trainee (1)		Project employee and colleague of trainee (1)

Table 1: Respondents per case, numbers between brackets represent the amount of respondents

The data from the 18 respondents was collected using semi-structured interviews, with an average duration of 50 minutes. In this method a topic list is used to provide structure during the interview, while it leaves enough room for emerging topics (Qu & Dumay, 2011; Boeije, 2014). The topic list was based on the talent management practices of recruitment, selection, development, and retention, and included questions about the respondents' job, role and views on talent management. The topic list remained largely the same over the different interviews but was adjusted to match the case and the presumed role of the respondent. The interviews with the respondents representing the intended phase emphasised the ideas behind the program and the intended translation to the actual practices. Respondents involved with the actual practices were asked to tell about their actions regarding the program, and how they thought that corresponded with the intended and effected the perceived practices. Lastly, the perceivers were asked to share their experiences with and role in the program. These different approaches to the interviews yielded varying insights about the HRM process of the TM practices.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Every respondent was offered the possibility to check the transcript to check for errors. Nine respondents checked their transcript, but none had any remarks. Hence, the analysis was performed with the complete dataset, by coding the transcripts separately per case, using the NVivo software. The initial coding scheme was based on the combination of Wright and Nishii (2013), the talent management practices derived from the CIPD definition (CIPD, 2006) and other literature

concerning talent management in the public sector. However, before this scheme was used for the analysis, it was complemented with codes that emerged from an open coding process. This entailed reading the transcripts and searching for categories that were not yet derived from the literature (see Boeije, 2014). This yielded emerging codes such as ‘mentoring’ as a part of the development practices. With the addition of these codes, the coding scheme was completed (see Table 2). Then, this scheme was used to categorise the data from the 18 transcripts of which the findings are presented in the next chapter

Main category	Sub code	Main category	Sub code
Intended	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Goal</i> - Recruitment - Selection - Development - <i>Mentoring</i> - Retainment - Deployment 	Talent management in public sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diversity - Equality - <i>Representation</i> - Tensions
Actual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recruitment - Selection - Development - <i>Mentoring</i> - Retainment - Deployment - <i>Money</i> 	Talent management general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Definition of talent - Definition of talent management - Opinions about the concepts
Perceived	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Goal</i> - Recruitment - Selection - Development - <i>Mentoring</i> - Retainment - Deployment - <i>Atmosphere in the group</i> - <i>Expectations</i> - Added value 	Case specific	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For example: - <i>Profile of employees</i> - <i>Activities</i> - <i>Other</i>

Table 2: general coding scheme (codes in Italics emerged from the initial coding phase)

3.3 Research quality

The quality of this study, in terms of internal validity was assured through two steps. Firstly, the study focusses on differentiating HRM practices. A popular way to describe such practices

is with the concept of exclusive talent management. Using both general literature about differentiating HRM practices (e.g. Lepak & Snell, 2002) and insights from talent management literature (e.g. Gallardo-Gallardo, et al., 2013) it was made sure that emerging interpretations and definitions of respondents would fit within the study. Therefore enlarging the internal validity. Secondly, the internal validity was strengthened by applying the theoretical sampling approach (Robinson, 2014). Using this technique, it was ensured that differentiating HRM practices would be found in the selected cases, which would make the cases suitable to study the public-sector influence on HR differentiating talent management practices.

The other part of validity, external validity, is less relevant for this study, since the aim of the study is not to generate generalisable results, but to deepen the understanding about talent management in the selected municipality and specifically in the cases. The reliability of the study was enhanced by using a general topic list, which meant that respondents would answer roughly the same questions resulting in comparable data. Additionally, the quality of analysis was ensured by recognising the position of the researcher as his own most important tool in the analysis of the qualitative data (Yanow, 2000; Boeije, 2014). Since no conflict of interest or other distorting factors were present, the quality of the analysis was not threatened. Moreover, by providing the respondents with the possibility to check the analysis before publishing, it was confirmed that the analysis painted an image that was recognisable. Hence, this helped to ensure the quality of representation of the analysis.

4. Findings – definitions and notions of talent management

The central aim of this study is to uncover the shaping effect of the public sector on talent management in public sector organisations. The findings generated from the data analysis are presented in the upcoming sections. The first part provides data regarding the question: *How do employees within the municipality define and view talent management?* Data about this

question was gathered by asking the respondents to provide their definition and view of talent and talent management, without providing them with a definition used by the researcher.

4.1 Defining talent (management)

When discussing talent and talent management the respondents' definitions displayed many commonalities. Almost all respondents regarded talent as an object: talent as a trait that anyone can have for a particular skill or expertise. A considerably smaller group mentioned talent as a subject: high performing - high potential employees. Only a few thought that the two definitions could be combined, resulting in talents as individuals that have an excess of talent (i.e. a trait) for something, making them employees with a strategic value. Despite the variety of definitions, it is interesting to note that talent as an object was the dominant views.

This translated into the definitions of talent management. It was common for the respondents to provide definitions that resemble the inclusive approach, in which everyone's talents should be managed. Most often this was related to the development of the talents of all employees. Additionally, employee motivation was frequently indicated as an important aspect of this TM approach, supported by the reasoning that someone's motivation most likely indicates their talent. Just like the talent as a subject definition, the differentiating, exclusive talent management approach was scarcely discussed. However, when mentioned, respondents explained it to constitute of practices such as attraction and retention of high-value employees. Lastly, a few respondents stated that talent management should be regarded as both inclusive and exclusive: being a good employer for all, while attracting strategically valuable employees.

4.2 Views on talent management

The second segment of questions entailed the respondents' views on talent management. Interestingly, not much opposition to the use of the words talent and talent management was found, except for one intensely opposing respondent. He indicated that the use of the word

talent imposes pressure instead of enabling extra development and value. The others generally agreed to the usage of the words, probably because of their own inclusive notion. By viewing talent management as, for example, inclusive competency management, respondents were more willing to adopt the concept. The exclusive talent management approach was much less frequented, showing the reluctance regarding the differentiating practices. However, the findings do not show any remarkable differences among different groups of respondents. Despite the fact that HR managers were more likely view talent management in an exclusive, differentiating manner, the hierarchical rank within the organisation did not seem to matter.

4.3 Talent management in the cases

Besides the general insights discussed above, the pertinence of talent management per case was addressed as well. In line with the preliminary interviews, the respondents revealed a strong difference per case. Respondents from both cases indicated that they saw the trainee program as an exemplary talent management practice. The trainees themselves also regarded their program as talent management, but -culturally unsurprisingly- they were hesitant to label themselves as talents. The managers pool as talent management, on the other hand, was heavily disputed. Some, for instance, pointed at the specialised development and the strategic value for the organisation, which -for them- indicated talent management. Others, however, explicitly denied the program to be talent management, for example, because of the unclarities regarding the added-value and selection criteria. Thus, despite the ex-ante classification of the project managers pool as (exclusive) talent management, the respondents did not agree unanimously.

5. Findings – Trainee program

After the previous section provided findings answering the first sub-question of this study, the next two chapter will be used to presented findings regarding the three sub-questions involving the intended, actual and perceived practices of the two cases. These findings are shown per case

and are structured along the categories of talent management practices in the different HRM process phases: recruitment, selection, development, retention and deployment in their intended, actual and perceived form.

Before presenting the data per case, two general observations yielded from the analysis should be noted. First, interviews proved to be a difficult technique to uncover the actual practices. Quotes from the transcripts indicated some actual practices, but the evidence was limited. Hence, the findings will mainly display the intended and perceived practices since these were easily expressed in words. Second, a sharp distinction between the HRM process phases was relatively invisible in the cases. Many respondents played a part in multiple phases of the process, resulting in many commonalities between the phases. This and the limited evidence for the actual practices can be found in the presentation of the findings. In tables 3 and 4, the findings per case are summarised and supported by illustrative quotes. After the presentation per case, the findings are accumulated into the discussion where the cases are compared and related to the literature.

5.1 Trainee program - general

The first of the two groups is the graduate program, this group consists of around ten trainees each year who get recruited and selected. After the selection they are assigned to their first position for one year and in their second year the trainees switch to a position in another department. During this two-year program the trainees receive training and coaching for their personal and professional development. At the end of their program, trainees are not granted a permanent contract. However, they can apply to internal vacancies.

This long-standing practice of the trainee program is intended to boost organisational performance and to serve the organisational goal of rejuvenation, by attracting high-potentials with an out-of-the-box mindset. Besides, many respondents also highlighted the intended

individual aspect of the program's goal: providing the young employees with a safe haven for personal and professional development. The perceived goal of most respondents followed the intended aspects, but the trainees emphasised the performance delivery as a goal set by their daily managers to be especially important.

5.2 Trainee program - recruitment

The first part of the program entails the practices used to recruit trainees. The intended and actual practices were targeted at university students and graduates, by showing the unique selling points of the program, such as the focus on development. The used practices mainly consisted of visiting universities, inhouse-days for interested candidates, and social media deployment, executed by the program coordinator and current- and former trainees. The trainees recognised these instruments, but perceived another practice to be much more persuasive: mouth-to-mouth advertisement. Even more so, the possibility to contribute to the public cause and the individual attention during the program, were indicated as crucially recruiting factors.

Some criticisms on the on the recruitment practices were expressed as well. Although building a diverse and representative workforce is one of the key target group priorities of the municipality, the recruitment practices were thought to be insufficiently effective for this goal. For example, the fixed trainee-profile that reflected mainly western, well-educated values, was claimed to be biasing the recruitment, resulting in a homogeneous, mould-fitting pool of candidates. Despite the seemingly diverse current group of trainees and the ambition to better align the actual recruitment with the diversity goal, many respondents recognised this criticism.

5.3 Trainee program - selection

Both the intended and actual selection practices of the trainees were largely based on the organisational and individual goals: performance, organisational rejuvenation through an out-of-the-box mentality, and individual development. The goal of added-value was reflected

through general tests of capabilities and intelligence, and mental rejuvenation was tested through the displayed audacity during the interviews and selection days. The developmental goal was apparent through the personality tests and the interviews. Interestingly, practices related to the goals of performance and rejuvenation were seen as the rudimentary selection process, while the willingness to develop was perceived to be the major focus of the selection process. Some trainees experienced this emphasis on development as intense, but it encouraged them to strive for acceptance to the program. Another frequently mentioned experience was the perceived competitiveness of the selection, because of the number of candidates relative to the available positions, which for some resulted in feelings of unease.

In the selection process the central actors are the program coordinator and the coach. They are largely responsible for the intended and actual practices, resulting in a perception in line with the practices in earlier phases. Additionally, line-managers were indicated as prominent actors in the selection process because of their influence on the availability of assignments and their say in which candidate eventually gets the position. This entire process was subject to a criticism similar to the recruitment practices, namely that the current selection practices are moulding the trainees, by favouring certain western, well-educated candidates.

5.4 Trainee program - development

As is reflected in the recruitment and selection, an important aspect of the graduate program is the personal and professional development. The intended and actual development practices consist of trainings regarding skills such as time- and project management, coaching by professional coaches, peer-to-peer coaching, mentoring by the line managers, and development days. These aspects are intended to profit both the personal development as well as the added value for the organisation. The intended trainings are mainly determined by the coordinator, in consultation with the trainees and their daily managers. The actual execution lies with different actors, such as the coaches, managers, and the trainees themselves. Central to this process is the

appraisal cycle in which the (individual) development program is partly shaped. This development program is perceived as exceptional, by both the trainees as well as the other respondents. The trainees indicated that they had high expectations of the development at the outset of their traineeship and that these expectations were met or exceeded. This resulted in a perception of true personal growth, mainly because of the personal coaching and mentoring. Moreover, it was also generally perceived that the development program increased the trainee performance and added value. Nevertheless, despite this positive perception, respondents also indicated some tensions between the interests of the employee and employer. The importance of the development practices forces the trainees to invest much time in this part of the program, which sometimes impedes them from working the necessary hours for their positions. One respondent, for example, told about burdensome peak periods in which he spent over thirty hours a week on development practices, resulting in limited performance and dissatisfied colleagues and managers. Interestingly, the coordinator downplayed this by emphasising the trainees' responsibility to prioritise and divide their time between daily operations and the developmental assignments.

5.5 Trainee program - retention

When entering the program, the trainees get a temporary contract. Hence at the end of the two-year traineeship, they are not automatically retained for the organisation. Reasons for the intentionally intended absence of a permanent contract mainly involve risks, financial costs and ancillary problems with equality. Nonetheless, because of their added value and the large (financial) investments made in the trainee program, there is an intended strategy to retain the trainees. In the first six months after the program the trainees can apply for internal vacancies and -if requested- career counselling can be provided. However, respondents indicated that eighty or ninety percent of the trainees who wish to stay, easily find a position within the

organisation. Hence, the actual retention practices primarily involve managers selecting trainees who might stay after their traineeship and trainees using the network they have built.

Despite this easily achieved retention, the trainees varied in their perception of this practice. Multiple trainees and colleagues indicated that they understood the idea behind the current construction, because they saw it as the final test of their capabilities. Others, on the other hand, regarded the situation as challenging. Some even expressed displeasure with the current contractual situation, because they would have liked to have a guaranteed position. Moreover, they said that permanent contract should automatically follow from the large investments in the program. Despite these varying perceptions of the retention practices, the (ex-)trainees expressed confidence about their future career path, either at the municipality or elsewhere. Hence, the retention practices encourage trainees to stay, but seem unnecessary as trainees easily arrange their next position themselves.

5.6 Trainee program – deployment

At the core of the trainee program are the two assignments during the program. Whether a position becomes available depends on the responsible line manager who takes multiple factors into account: 1) the availability of resources to hire a trainee and pay its wages, 2) the - predominantly positive- previous experiences with trainees, 3) the suitability of the position for a trainee, which is determined by the coordinator in dialogue with the responsible manager, and 4) the wishes of the trainees, possibly resulting in unmanned vacancies. Additionally, trainees sometimes arrange a new position for themselves through the network they have built.

[Text of 5.6 continues after tables 3A and 3B]

	Intended	Actual	Perceived
Goal	<p>Finding: To rejuvenate and add value to the organisation, while developing the talents.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“The organisational goal is rejuvenation and talent management. This is about attracting young people who can add something to the organisation or have the potential to do that, and to guide them in their development to enable them to achieve these results.”- Coach</i></p>	<p>Finding: N.A.: no data about the ‘actual’ goal was uncovered. It is thought that the actual goal is determined by the set of actual practices.</p>	<p>Finding: Emphasis on performance and (personal) development.</p> <p>Quote: <i>The goal is to engage with your strong and weak points. To become aware of those. – Former trainee</i></p>
Recruitment	<p>Finding: Multitude of practices are instated, however favouring a particular type, limiting the diversity.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“A diversity target was instated for the trainees, which is very good, but you’re dependent on who replies to the vacancy. [...] So, we discussed if we should do more about that with our recruitment instruments.” – HR diversity manager</i></p>	<p>Finding: Targeted at university students and graduates, with multiple tools.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“They visited my university to tell about the traineeship” – Trainee</i></p>	<p>Finding: Public service motivation focus on development and mouth-to-mouth are the most recruiting factors.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“Someone told me about the traineeship, because I was looking for a job and because I love the city. So, I started checking the program and I found out that personal development was an important part, which was very alluring for me.” – Trainee</i></p>
Selection	<p>Finding: Practices strongly related to the goals, focus on development.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“First you must do a test about intelligence, for which we expect a minimum score. Then, in the personality test we don’t look for perfect people, but people who are willing to develop.” –Coordinator</i></p>	<p>Finding: Consisting of multiple tests, in-depth interviews, an assessment day and an interview with a line manager</p> <p>Quote: <i>“It is something we emphasise during selection meetings: to what extent does the program match your expectations and are you really willing to work on your development?” - Coach</i></p>	<p>Finding: The practices were perceived as intense and biased towards a particular type of candidates, limiting the diversity.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“The selection here was as intense as at large consultancy firms. I didn’t expect that, so I thought: ‘I need to step up my game’. Which made the traineeship much more interesting.” – Trainee</i></p>

Table 3A: Trainee program - findings per practices per phase and illustrative quotes

	Intended	Actual	Perceived
Development	<p>Finding: Practices aimed at strengthening the persons behind the professional for additional value.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“The idea is that we develop the trainees into solid professionals, which requires an investment in their professional development and skills, and their personal development.” – Coach</i></p>	<p>Finding: Substantive trainings, peer-to-peer coaching, mentoring and a coaching trajectory</p> <p>Quote: <i>“I collect info about the trainees from everyone who is involved with them. For example, about their development, mentoring and training. [...] for the appraisal cycle.” – Coordinator</i></p>	<p>Finding: (Positively) intense, but sometimes asking too much time.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“The development is rather intense. Sometimes even too intense. You also have the regular job, but the reflection assignments and so on, need to be done as well, so then it is tough. But normally, when you look back, you think: ‘this has been useful’.” – Trainee</i></p>
Retention	<p>Finding: No permanent contract, but help with applying for internal vacancies.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“Look, their idea is that after two years as a trainee you have enough tools and skills to take care of your retention yourself.” - Trainee</i></p>	<p>Finding: The program provides the trainees with a firm basis of skills and confidence. The trainees build their own network, which they use.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“Although there is no job guarantee, we see that around ninety percent stays and finds a job. The experience is that trainees build such a network, that it is easy to find a position after the traineeship.” - Trainee</i></p>	<p>Finding: Lack of permanency is a good test of competencies, disputed because of feelings of insecurity and the investments done.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“It would have been nicer to have the guarantee. It is easy to say: ‘I understand this strategy’. But we have worked really hard, tears and all, so why aren’t we awarded? Especially compared to programs at other municipalities.” – Former trainee</i></p>
Deployment	<p>Finding: The program consists of two assignments, one year each, both in different departments.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“So, our trainee program is divided in working four days a week for the assignment and one day per week for trainee activities such as trainings.” - Coordinator</i></p>	<p>Finding: The positions are available via (line-)managers and the network of the trainees. The assignments are assessed by the coordinator.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“I ask managers in the organisation and then some offer positions, which I judge on its suitability for trainees. The trainees apply for these positions followed by a selection procedure” – Coordinator.</i></p>	<p>Finding: The deployment of a trainee is mostly seen as useful by their colleagues. Trainees attribute this to their outside position.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“I see no difference between my assignments and development. My contract states that I have 32 hours to spend on my job and 8 hours for my development. Who am I to change this division? – Trainee</i></p>

Table 3B: Trainee program - findings per practices per phase and illustrative quotes

During the assignments the trainees often have an outsider role and deploy an out-of-the-box mentality, which they can retain due to their position in a group of peers, their trainee group. This group was perceived as a tight bond with an excellent atmosphere providing a safety net, which the trainees perceived as enabling for their development and added value. The added value and the desirability of trainees were perceived throughout the entire organisation, especially among employees in higher positions, who were experienced as more understanding to trainees, compared to lower level colleagues. The latter sometimes (intentionally) mistake the trainees for interns, because of the intense developmental program and temporary positions.

6. Findings – project managers pool

6.1 Project managers program – general

The second case in this study involves a group of project- and program managers (simplified as project managers) within the department of social security, who are hired either in a permanent position or for a project and who are deployed accordingly. The pool was founded by a new director of the department, as the solution to inadequate project results. A group of specialised project managers was to increase the quality of the project-based work through the execution of projects, the development of project management excellence among the professionals, and by educating department employees. Despite this seemingly unambiguous goal to be of added value, the perceptions differ. One project employee, for instance, stated that the central goal is to prevent the (unnecessary) hire of external human resources. Whereas, the project managers emphasised method uniformity and retaining autonomy as core objectives.

Due to the short history of the program the goals are yet to be achieved by further constructing and professionalising the pool. Both the manager (i.e. coordinator) of the pool and the project managers play an important role in this process of developing the pool. For example, four subgroups consisting of project managers work on the focus areas of public relations, training and development, portfolio management, and method standardisation, leading to

intended and actual practices. This approach -instated by the coordinator- is seen as a possibility to show the department the pool's position and added value, which seemed necessary as some respondents outside the pool perceived the pool's function and goal as unclear.

6.2 Project managers program – recruitment

The interviews painted a remarkable picture of the recruitment strategy and subsequent practices. By the start of the pool the intended and actual recruitment consisted of the identification of suited internal candidates who were compellingly asked to join the pool, which was devised by the directors, executed by the line-managers. Currently, the intended and actual recruitment practices differ per vacant position. Recruitment of permanent members of the pool is initiated and enacted by the pool coordinator. Whereas the recruitment practices for project-based vacancies are designed and applied in dialogue between the pool coordinator and the responsible line-manager. The ad-hoc nature of these practices and the similar actors who are involved, resulted in little differences between the intended and actual practices.

Although this may seem to be a well-aligned process, the dominant perception of the recruitment practices was a lack of strategy - expressed by project managers hired in different periods of time in different position. The managers who joined at the start of the pool in mid-2017, just remembered being asked to join the pool and then being transferred from their former team. Project managers who recently joined the pool were commonly recruited through generic practices such as job-vacancies on websites. The only strategy they all did perceive was the focus on a particular profile of experienced project managers.

6.3 Project managers program – selection

Like the recruitment process, the selection practices can be divided in two generations. First, at the start of the pool, the intended and actual selection were based on the judgement of line-managers. The directors asked these managers to identify and select suitable candidates for the

central project management pool. Afterwards, the directors selected project managers from the created longlist, based on an equal spread over the originating teams of the candidates. When the pool became operational, the intended and actual practices changed. Since then, the selection practices are designed and effectuated by the pool coordinator, often in dialogue with the managers responsible for the projects. Crucial to these practices is the selection profile that has recently been constructed in a collaboration of the pool manager, the project managers in the pool, the HR department and an external bureau. This profile represents the intended selection and is being used in the actual selection of new project managers.

The project managers perceived this profile as the central part of future selections, possibly because they themselves were involved in the construction of it. However, remarkably, they - almost unanimously- experienced their own past selection process as unclear, partly because of the lack of a selection profile. These unclarities resonated well with a colleague who expressed confusion about who was allowed to join the pool and who was not. So, despite the efforts to structure the selection practices, this was not (yet) entirely perceived in that way.

6.4 Project managers program – development

One of the key-aspects of the pool is the development of the project managers. Initially the pool coordinator made a list of basic project management skills that pool members needed, which was later validated using the constructed selection profile. Based on this list, the intended development practices were designed, consisting of specialised training, quarterly team days and a buddy program. These practices are now effectuated by an external bureau, who provided the trainings, and the project managers themselves, who are involved in the team days and the buddy program. The involvement of project managers in these practices shows that they are not only perceivers, but -to a large degree- also executors in the actual practices of development.

However, despite the apparent development practices, the respondents did not unanimously perceive individual development as an important part of the pool. Although, the pool members

recognised the value of development, it was not seen as distinct from other employee groups. Some indicated that it is common for employees in comparable salary grades to receive such development practices, hence downplaying it as a regular HRM practice. Oppositely, other respondents, pointed out that the development was specially designed and provided for the pool, making it an important for its existence. Two developmental subjects the respondents did agree on were the importance of educating the department to work with a solid project-based approach and the positive influence of the pool coordinator. The latter was often emphasised as crucial to the individual development, because of his stimulating management style.

6.5 Project managers program – retention

The intended retention practices for the project managers are limited. The recruitment and selection process in the start-up phase of the pool, resulted in a group of project managers with permanent contracts. Hence, retention practices were deemed unnecessary. However, the coordinator indicated that he wanted to instate retention practices, mainly for the newer project managers with temporary contracts. Unfortunately, these ambitions were negated by the lack of funds and the current business-case. Nonetheless, by composing a new type of contract the pool coordinator did try to retain the project managers (at least) until the end of their projects.

Interestingly, the perception of retention differed greatly. Some respondents questioned the necessity of retention, as they indicated that the limits of the current business-case to support a larger group of permanent members. Others perceived retention as a necessary and underdeveloped practice. Especially the employees on temporary contracts expressed the wish of having more job security. Moreover, related to adding value to the organisation, multiple respondents stated that retaining the high performing project managers should be a priority.

[Text of 6.6 – ‘Project managers deployment’, after tables 4A and 4B]

	Intended	Actual	Perceived
Goal	<p>Finding: Adding value to the organisation through project execution, developing the project managers and department education.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“The goal is to support the department and the city by working on the projects with a high level of complexity. By doing so translating the ideas and policies into feasible practices.” - Coordinator</i></p>	<p>Finding: N.A.: no data about the ‘actual’ goal was uncovered. It is thought that the actual goal is determined by the set of actual practices.</p>	<p>Finding: Adding value to the organisation, limiting the unnecessary hire of external human resources and developing project management excellence.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“The goal? Change. Effectuating change through a project or program, by taking it out of the line organisation, and leaving them at their daily operations.” - Project manager</i></p>
Recruitment	<p>Finding: First, internally identifying suitable project managers; currently specific approach with generic tools.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“The directors decided to ask their subordinate managers to oversee their sub-departments and identify the suitable candidates.” - Coordinator</i></p>	<p>Finding: First, line-managers asking suitable candidates to join; currently an approach per vacancy in collaboration with line-manager.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“At some point I was talking to the initiator of the pool, who told me what it was about and the methods they were intending to use, and I got enthusiastic.” – Project manager</i></p>	<p>Finding: Perceived lack of specific strategy for the pool.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“When I was working at my former job, the department contacted my manager to intensify the collaboration, based on secondment. But as this wasn’t possible, I was hired.” – Project manager</i></p>
Selection	<p>Finding: First, internally identifying the suitable project managers; currently using a specifically constructed profile.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“Lately we constructed a competency [selection] profile for project managers in certain salary grades.” - Coordinator</i></p>	<p>Finding: First, line-managers determining suitability of candidate and director making an equal distribution; currently a process per vacancy based on the profile.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“The coordinator has the selection interviews for vacancies, with both internal and external candidates.” – Project manager</i></p>	<p>Finding: Selection profile perceived as useful, the process as fuzzy.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“There are also project managers in lower salary grades. [...] But they are part of the line organisation, or not officially project managers. I don’t know how that selection works.” – Project manager</i></p>

Table 4A: Project managers program - findings per practices per phase and illustrative quotes

	Intended	Actual	Perceived
Development	<p>Finding: List of competencies based on selection profile, transformed into development program.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“Because they wanted to make progress with their professionalisation, together we looked at: ‘what is the essence of your role and what skills are needed to do that’? And then we constructed a development plan.”- HR manager</i></p>	<p>Finding: Development through training, team days and buddy program.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“The interesting thing with this group is that their projects have little in common. So that requires specific attention [of us and the subgroup] to develop the right competencies.” – HR manager</i></p>	<p>Finding: Not unanimously seen as part of the pool, nonetheless seen as important for the performance. Mentoring by the coordinator especially appreciated.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“The coordinator helps us to work following the new methods. For example, he told me to quit a project, because I wasn’t fit for the job, but I didn’t, and he let me discover the mistake myself.” – Project manager</i></p>
Retention	<p>Finding: No strategy for permanent members, wish to retain high performing temporary members.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“On the one hand, ideally the project managers are employed in the pool. But at the same time the business case becomes very challenging. - Coordinator</i></p>	<p>Finding: The formation of a better retaining temporary contract.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“When my contract ends, we will see whether there is a spot available for a permanent contract or, if not, I have to leave. Those are the [ad hoc] options.” – Project manager</i></p>	<p>Finding: Questions of necessity are asked. Perception that it is necessary for high-performers. Some call for job-security.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“That bothers me. I want to know what I can expect. Now it is unclear, because nobody knows exactly when the project will end.” – Project manager</i></p>
Deployment	<p>Finding: The best suited project manager for the project that wants to deploy a project manager.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“I recently got the question of a client: I want a project manager. So, then we worked out what he needed [and who would fit in the project].” - Coordinator</i></p>	<p>Finding: Permanent members on assignments that need specialised human resources, temporary managers exclusively on their project.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“It happens that if a project has no budget left, they cannot hire an internal project manager, so then they just get them out of the pool, because their wages are already paid. – Project employee</i></p>	<p>Finding: The deployment is generally perceived as advantageous.</p> <p>Quote: <i>“There was a need. The of the issues at hand were very complex, which led to the experience of that it was not feasible anymore to work with the former construction.” – HR Manager</i></p>

Table 4B: Project managers program - findings per practices per phase and illustrative quotes

6.6 Project managers program – deployment

To add value to the organisation, the project managers need to work on projects. On what projects they are deployed depends their preferences, abilities and -most importantly- their contract. The intended and effectuated strategy is that project managers with a permanent contract are deployed in complex projects that require assistance of specialised human resources. The practice of deploying the project-based pool members is different. When no permanent member of the pool is available for a project, a new project manager is recruited, selected and then exclusively deployed on that project.

Despite the fact that others recognise the added value of a project manager in both deployment strategies, the perceptions differ. The fact that the wages of the permanent members are paid by the pool and the temporary managers are funded by the project budgets, causes the former group to be perceived as more advantageous. The project managers themselves mainly ascribe their added value while being deployed to their relatively detached and autonomous role. The separation of the hierarchical manager (i.e. pool coordinator) and the substantive client, strengthened by their position in a pool of peers, reportedly provides the project managers with a position that enables them to be more autonomous, which results in better performances. Hence, they perceived the external deployment as a possibility to be of extra added value to the department, municipality and the city.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The central aim of this study is to uncover the influence of the public-sector context on talent management practices. By exploring the respondents' definitions and notions of talent management, and by explicating the intended, actual and perceived talent management practices in the two studied cases, this study sought to answer the sub-questions and central research question. To do so, in this section, the descriptive findings of the previous sections are accumulated, compared and related to literature.

7.1 Public sector notions of talent management

The first part of studying the public-sector influence, was to find how employees within the municipality view and define talent management. It was hypothesised, mainly using the study of Harris and Foster (2010), that due to public-sector influences most respondents would display a preference for the inclusive definition of talent management, but that this would differ between groups of employees depending on their distance to the actual practices. The findings showed a preference among the respondents to define talent management as practices involving every employees' talents. They often described talent management using the words competency management, which follows a rich tradition in the human resource literature of defining and developing the skills and knowledge that employees need to successfully fulfil their tasks (Draganidis & Mentzas, 2006). This illustrates the respondents' disposition to view talent management as an inclusive practice, thereby confirming the first expectation. However, the findings did not show substantial differences in the definitions and views of talent management between groups of actors. Even though HR related respondents were slightly more inclined to stress the importance of applying both inclusive and exclusive practices. Therefore, no clear rejection or corroboration of the second expectation was found. In conclusion to the first sub-question: talent management is mostly defined as an inclusive practice of developing the talents of every employee, notwithstanding the respondents who also indicated the importance of using HR differentiating exclusive talent management practices. This conclusion indicates a public-sector influence in defining talent management, based on the expectations derived from Harris and Foster (2010).

Interestingly, when questioning respondents about the applicability of the concept 'talent management' on the cases, the trainee program was generally accepted as talent management, whereas the project managers pool was disputed. This could be explained by the differing levels of institutionalisation. Talent management practices can become

institutionalised by having a long history of gaining legitimacy, for example through showing its added value (Huang & Tansley, 2012; Preece, et al., 2011). Although the data in this study is inadequate to draw definitive conclusions about institutionalisation, some indications of its influence were found. The twenty-year history of the trainee program has provided it with much legitimacy and hence an institutionalised status. The project managers pool, on the other hand, has not yet obtained such an institutionalised position, due to its much shorter history. Hence, this possibly explains why the trainee program is commonly seen as talent management, while the managers pool is contested.

7.2 Public sector influence on the practices

The second segment of this study consisted of explicating and exposing the talent management practices in the different parts of the HRM process. To answer the descriptive sub-questions regarding the intended, actual and perceived practices, the findings presented before showed the recruitment, selection, development, retention and deployment practices in these phases. These findings also provided indications for public sector influence on the talent management practices, which is used to answer the central question of this study. The first shaping effect was found in the aforementioned definitions and notions of talent management. However, despite the overall preference among the respondents to define talent management as an inclusive practice, the studied practices displayed a rather exclusive, HR differentiating nature. A reason for this can be found in the theoretical assumption of this study that talent management is exclusive in nature and the subsequent theoretical sampling strategy that led to the selection of cases with HR differentiating practices.

The exclusiveness of the practices can be found in the targeted focus of the programs. The practices for the trainees were specifically designed and executed for this target group. The same goes for the project managers practices. However, despite the fact that the practices for the latter group were specifically designed as well, the perceptions of this group displayed

doubts about whether the program was truly differentiating. An explanation for these differing perceptions could be found in the aforementioned institutionalisation.

The fact that both programs use differentiating practices nonetheless, is explained by its goals. The project managers pool was instated to solve the problem of inadequate project performances, which is a common problem in public sector organisations, due to increasing complexity of public sector issues (Bannink, 2013). And the trainees were attracted as future leaders and were to generate rejuvenation. Such goals -of both programs- call for exclusive practices, singling out the individuals suited to achieve the goal.

Within the HR differentiating practices, three public sector influences on intended and actual practices were found. First, an HR diversity manager indicated that the actual recruitment and selection practices for the trainees were seen as having a cultural bias. She told that changes in the intended recruitment and selection practices were forthcoming to limit the effects of the bias. Second, much attention was paid to an equal spread among the originating teams in the intended and actual recruitment and selection of the first-wave project managers. Although the focus on diversity (e.g. limiting cultural bias) and equality (e.g. equal spread among teams) are not restricted to public sector organisations (see e.g. Cox, 1994), it was found that public-sector organisations are prone to emphasise such goals, because of their disposition for those values (Boselie & Thunnissen, 2017). Hence, the changes in the intended recruitment and selection practices for the trainees and the focus on equality in the first-wave selection of project managers show that talent management practices are influenced by the public-sector context.

The third apparent public-sector influence was found in the difference between the intended and actual retention practices of both cases. The ambitions displayed in the intended practices were higher than was possibly effectuated with the actual practices. Respondents indicated that this was mainly due to limited financial resources and the need to legitimise the retention practices. Since the public sector is often stereotyped as offering comparably low wages (Hartog

& Oosterbeek, 1993), due to its limited financial resources, and the sector's tendency to emphasise equality and fairness (Boselie & Thunnissen, 2017), the problems with retaining talents show that this practice is influenced by public-sector traits.

Additionally, two shaping effects were identified in perceived practices. As indicated in the perception of the programs, some respondents questioned the exclusiveness of the practices of the project managers pool. This can be explained by the public-sector influence in the dominant preference of regarding talent management in an inclusive manner. By not regarding the practices as differentiating, feelings of inequality can be limited. Lastly, the public-sector influence was found in the recruitment practices of both cases. The trainees and project managers indicated that they were attracted to the organisation, because of its public-sector context. They were highly motivated to work for the municipality because of the public impact they could make. In the literature this is identified as public service motivation (Perry, 1996), which shows that the perceived recruitment is evidently influenced by the public sector.

These apparent public-sector influences can be accumulated to answer the central question of this study, which is: *to what extent does the public context shape the talent management practices in a large Dutch Municipality?*. In answer to this question it is concluded that the public sector does to some extent shape the HR differentiating talent management practices in the cases of the university graduates trainee program and the project managers program in department of social security. The shaping effects entail 1) the predominantly inclusive view of talent management, 2) the changes in the intended recruitment and selection practices to limit cultural bias, 3) the selection of project managers based on an equal distribution among their originating teams, 4) the problems with retention due to equality questions and lack of financial resources, 5) the unwillingness to perceive the project managers pool as an exclusive program, and 6) the importance of public service motivation in the recruitment of talents.

7.3 Exclusive practices in an inclusive environment – the HRM process

Interestingly, the conclusion indicates that the public sector does to some extent shape the HR differentiating practices, while their exclusive nature persists. It was hypothesised that the difference between the exclusive practices and the public-sector influences would cause de-alignment between the intended, actual and perceived practices. However, remarkably, this study finds indications of alignment between the phases instead. This is concluded from the similarities between the intended and perceived practices that were found. The only hinderance in the HRM process found in this study entails the role of the line managers who needed to balance the conflicting interests of allowing room for development and demanding job-performance, reportedly resulting in sometimes dissatisfied managers.

The role of these and other actors involved with the practices in the different phases, explains the similarities found in this study. First, as was expected from the literature (e.g. Clarke & Scurry, 2017; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), the findings show that line-managers play an important role in the HRM process of the cases. For example, their influence in the selection of the trainees shaped the perceptions of the candidates in line with the intended practices of selecting high-value trainees. The second reason for the seemingly aligned HRM process is the role of the talents themselves. For example, the trainees engage in peer-to-peer coaching and a sub-group of project managers is responsible for the development of the training program. By being involved in both shaping the intended practices and the execution of the actual practices, the talents play a double role, which is likely to influence the perceptions of themselves and their peers, resulting in the seemingly aligned process.

7.4 Limitations and future research

Future studies could draw lessons from this study. First, the aforementioned findings of the actors with overlapping roles and the consequential similarities between the practices, can also

lead to the question whether the model of Wright and Nishii (2013) is too rigorous in its categorisation of practices and actors. However, this study focussed on two cases with a limited amount of human and financial resources, which increases the likelihood of finding overlapping actors. Moreover, the adopted qualitative case study design implies a limited external validity, which should impede from making generally applicable statements and definitive claims.

Secondly, this study did, however, experience the advantage of using the HRM process model of Wright and Nishii (2013), because it enabled to disentangle the effects of the general HRM process and other influences. Future studies on HRM in general and talent management in particular, should also adopt this framework. This could especially be useful to contribute in closing one of the big gaps in the current body of talent management literature: the lack of evidence regarding a relation between talent management and performance (Beer, Boselie and Brewster, 2015; Boselie, Thunnissen & Monster, forthcoming). Despite efforts by many scholars (e.g. Mtshali, Proches & Green, 2018; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016; Van der Wal, 2017), such a relation is not yet conclusively found. By applying the HRM process model, future studies can better determine the effects of talent management policies and practices on individual and organisational outcomes.

Third, future studies should consider adopting another research design. The case selection through theoretical sampling (Coyne, 1997) did provide a solid basis for high internal validity (Robinson, 2014), but the current case study design did also impede from making any generalisations. Futures research could adopt a sound quantitative design to overcome that problem. Another possibility would be to select private sector cases alongside public sector cases, in order to determine the differences between public and private sector talent management, which could lead to more knowledge about the shaping effect of the public sector.

Lastly, the exclusive use of interviews in this study limited the possibilities of gathering data about the actual and -to some extent- the intended practices. Hence, future research should use a multi-method approach: policy documents could be used to validate the intended practices expressed in the interviews and (participant) observations could be used to uncover the actually used practices.

Despite the fact that future research is needed to find conclusive evidence about the influence of the public sector on talent management practices, this study serves as a stepping stone for understanding the public sector shaping effect.

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