Research Paper

Employee Engagement: Weapon in the hands of HR practitioners for challenges of talent war about to begin

Kishore Chandra Das
Former Director (Personnel) & CMD
Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd.Visakhapatnam
&
Ph D Research Scholar
Department of Personnel Management & Industrial Relation
Utkal University, Bhubaneswar

I.   Introduction:

Ever since 1998, when a group of McKinsey consultants coined the expression 'war for talent' and posited that a fundamental belief in the importance of talent is needed to achieve organizational excellence (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001) the practitioners have always in search of weapons to win that for themselves. It is even more relevant now as preparedness of business and industry for the unprecedented challenges to be faced in the HR-front by virtue of talent war about to be fiercer in future. All most all the industries arewitnessing a very uncertain path over the last decade in the face of global recession and fluctuating market conditions. With 4G era round the corner and technology dominating the business in never before manner, it is evident that the talent pool which is an asset in the hands of the HR-mangers yesterday is not only considered obsolete to day but also overtaking the so-called succession strategy. The human resources are now being evaluated from various perspective; also new ways and means are being figured out to keep them fighting fit in this era where you should create a talent faster than you lose a talent. Hence continuous search for tools to manage the talent or human resources in macro sense is a night mare for HR practitioners. Current study will be very much instrumental in addressing this issue because we have chosen a very strong tool called employee engagement which has fascinated many HR professionals for its exhaustive germane to the cardinal driving forces in people at work. Managing talent with a fare degree of accuracy will be the key to achieve the talent war across the business and industry.

Managing talent through employee engagement demands the clear understanding of the business domain in which it is to be applied. Because it has been observed that peculiarities of managing talent vary from industry to industry in terms of nature of job, hardship involved and the exact onus is on the HR-group to address issues related to human factors to manage the business.

At times through informal discussions, we have observed that we are grossly confused among the terms like skill, talent, efficiency and effectiveness. This paper taken an attempt to bring to the notice of the practitioners the real identity of talent the extent to which our professional are ready to face a war for it which is going to intensify very soon. We have some phenomenal conceptual conclusions which will compel the HR-managers who have been working under an illusory backdrop of talent management, confused with either skill or knowledge or efficiency etc.

Talent: A practitioners' dilemma:

Quite surprisingly, Talent Management scholars are rarely precise about what exactly they mean by talent, probably because there are widely held implicit theories about what talent is all about (Barab &Plucker, 2002). Scoutingof various literatures will definitely show a path to identify the real elements of talent for which a war is really worth. Questions persist, do we really have understood what it is and why at all we are fighting for it?

A summarised study of works of various learned scholars will give us an insight to understand the real meaning of talent.

According to Gagné (2000) talent is superior mastery of systematically developed abilities or skills. Describe those people who do one or other of the following: regularly demonstrate exceptional ability – and achievement – either over a range of activities and situations, or within a specialized and narrow field of expertise; consistently indicate high competence in areas of activity that strongly suggest transferable, comparable ability in situations where they have yet to be tested and proved to be highly effective, i.e., potential. (Williams 2000). Buckingham and Vosburgh (2001) have expressed the meaning of talent from behavioural point of view in their famous book "First break all the rules". According to them, talent should refer to a person's recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behaviour that can be productively applied.

Apart from these scholars the following are some of the conceptual frame works of different thinkers who have expressed their views on talent in the following ways.
Jericó (2001) "The implemented capacity of a committed professional or group of professionals that achieve superior results in a particular environment and organization." (p. 428)

Michaels et al. (2001) "The sum of a person's abilities—his or her intrinsic gifts, skills, knowledge, experience, intelligence, judgment, attitude, character and drive. It also includes his or her ability to learn and grow." (p. xii)

Lewis and Heckman (2006) "(…) is essentially a euphemism for 'people'" (p. 141)

Tansley, Harris, Stewart, and Turner (2006) "Talent can be considered as a complex amalgam of employees' skills, knowledge, cognitive ability and potential. Employees' values and work preferences are also of major importance." (p. 2)

Stahl et al. (2007) "a select group of employees – those that rank at the top in terms of capability and performance – rather than the entire workforce". (p. 4)

Tansley et al. (2007) "Talent consists of those individuals who can make a difference to organizational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer-term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential." (p. 8)

Ulrich (2007) "Talent equals competence [able to do the job] times commitment [willing to do the job] times contribution [finding meaning and purpose in their work]" (p. 3)

Cheese, Thomas, and Craig (2008) "Essentially, talent means the total of all the experience, knowledge, skills, and behaviours that a person has and brings to work." (p. 46)

González-Cruz et al. (2009) "A set of competencies that, being developed and applied, allow the person to perform a certain role in an excellent way." (p 22; translation ours)

Silzer and Dowell (2010) "In some cases, 'the talent' might refer to the entire employee population." (p. 14)

Silzer and Dowell (2010) "In groups talent can refer to a pool of employees who are exceptional in their skills and abilities either in a specific technical area (such as software graphics skills) or a competency (such a consumer marketing talent), or a more general area (such as general managers or high-potential talent). And in some cases, "the talent" might refer to the entire employee population." (pp.13–14)

Silzer and Dowell (2010) "An individual's skills and abilities (talents) and what the person is capable of doing or contributing to the organization." (p. 14)

Bethke-Langenegger (2012) "we understand talent to be one of those workers who ensures the competitiveness and future of a company (as specialist or leader) through his organisational/job specific qualification and knowledge, his social and methodical competencies, and his characteristic attributes such as eager to learn or achievement oriented" (p. 3)

Ulrich and Smallwood (2012) "Talent = competence [knowledge, skills and values required for todays' and tomorrows' job; right skills, right place, right job, right time] × commitment [willing to do the job] × contribution [finding meaning and purpose in their job]" (p. 60)

The above definitions or conceptual theme of talent has given us a way to at least find some constructs or ingredients forwhich the talent war takes place. It is observed that the most commonly used term in the above lot is "skill" and "competence". In our view talent can be defined as "The skill and competence in an individual worker which he repeats time and again to give an edge to the organization over its competitors". When we talk about inter-industry or intra industry talent war we would refer to retaining and attracting the people who are skilled and competent enough to drive the organization through an adverse force of competition growing at a faster rate.

Employee Engagement: A tool for winning a talent war

Only recognizing constructs of the talent and understanding the dimensions of the fight about to begin is not enough if the practitioners are not equipped with some latest tools generating from research to counter it.

Age old retention strategies are not being effective for long as people have many gateways to enter into new jobs because of advent of new conceptual business-like start-ups, faster privatization, mobility convenience and new job roles. Hence, we have considered to introduce this new concept called employee engagement and tried to fill the gap between scholarly evolutions in the field of HRM and practitioners' ignorance or practitioners doing it in a half-hazard manner.

Employee engagement is still in an evolution stage and is yet to be taken seriously by the practitioners to apply it for any strategic move. In this context using it to win the talent war will also be considered as an overemphasized idea.

While taking the conceptual out line of employee engagement it will be worthwhile to analyse the different views of scholars and practitioners in the field. The following table shows a consolidated report to find out various constructs of employee engagement.

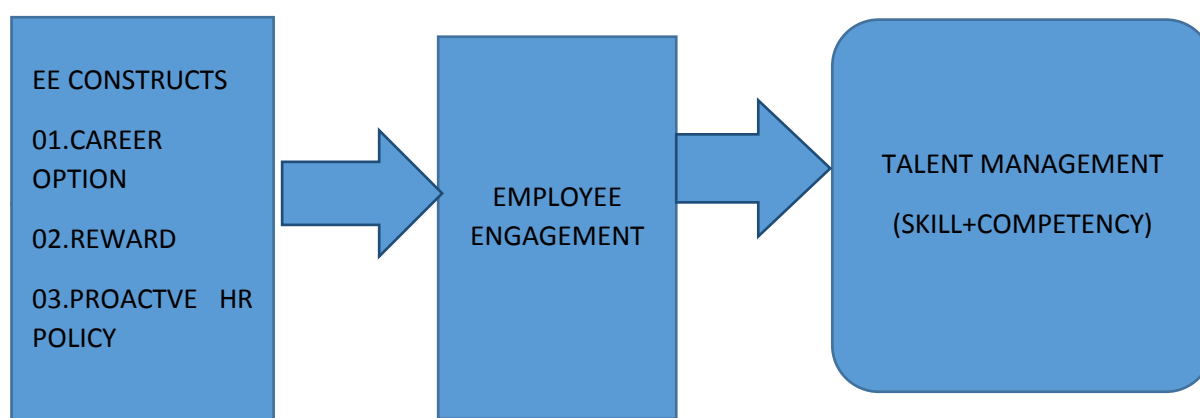**Table-1 Identified Seminal Works of Employee Engagement**

Article	Major Contribution to the HRD Field	Definition of Engagement	Research Type
Kahn (1990)	Published early theoretical framework of personal engagement and disengagement. First to define engagement as a separate concept using research. Conceptualized that the domains of meaningfulness, safety and availability were important to understanding the development of engagement	"Personal engagement is the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred' self in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence, and active full role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p.700)	Empirical: Ethnographic research with 16 summer camp counselors and 16 financial firm members
Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter (2001)	Was the first major work on employee engagement after Kahn (1990) and is the other of the two early developmental theories on employee engagement. Maslach et cl. (2001) pioneered reaching across academic boundaries for definitions of employee engagement, conceptualizing the concept as the positive antithesis to burnout.	Maslach & Leiter (1997) defined employee engagement as positive scores on the Maslach Burnout inventory, whereas Schaufeli defined employee engagement as "a persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment in employees that is characterized by high levels of activation and pleasure" (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 417)	Conceptual
Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes (2002)	Published first study looking at the business unit level between the employee engagement-satisfaction and business unit outcomes (profit). One of the first to mention a profit linkage to employee engagement.	"Employee engagement refers to the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter et al. 2002, p. 269)	Empirical: meta-analysis of 7,939 business units across multiple fields.
May, Gilson, & Harter (2004)	First published empirical research testing Kahn's (1990) conceptualization of employee engagement.	Engagement is never explicitly defined although Kahn (1990) is referred to as saying that "in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances (May et al. 2004, p. 12)	Empirical: survey of 199 employees in a large Midwestern insurance firm.

Table 1. (Continued)

Article	Major Contribution to the HRD Field	Definition of Engagement	Research Type
Saks (2006)	First explicit research to test antecedents and consequences to employee engagement in the academic literature. Prior to Saks (2006), particularly research was the only body of work connecting employee engagement drivers to employee engagement consequences.	"A distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance" (Saks, 2006, p. 602)	Empirical: survey of 102 employees working in a wide range of occupations in the Toronto, Canada, area
Vance (2006)	SHRM's first major publication on employee engagement and commitment.	Employee engagement and commitment are never defined although various definitions and conceptualization are discussed throughout the article.	Conceptual

Czarnowski (2008)	ASTD's first major publication on employee engagement.	"Employees who are mentally and emotionally invested in their work and in contributing to their employer's success" (Czarnowski, 2008, p.6) are defined as engaged.	Empirical: survey of 776 human resource and learning executive globally.
Macey & Schneider (2008)	The first to conceptualize trait, state and behavioral engagement as separate but related constructs. Presented various organizational concepts that might feed the development of employee engagement within organizations.	Trait engagement is defined as the "inclination or orientation to experience the world from a particular vantage point" (Macey & Schneider, is defined as antecedent to behavioral engagement (encompassing the constructs of satisfaction, involvement, commitment, and empowerment; pp. 5-6) Behavioral engagement is "defined [d] in terms of discretionary effort" (p.6)	Conceptual

From the above contribution schedule by various scholars, it can be concluded that employee engagement is all about emotional attachment to the job and involvement beyond satisfaction.

```
EE CONSTRUCTS
01.CAREER OPTION
02.REWARD
03.PROACTVE HR POLICY
```
→ `EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT` → `TALENT MANAGEMENT (SKILL+COMPETENCY)`

The talent war or the war for competent and skilled employee who have a proven track record can be attracted and retained through employee engagement. In other words,talented employees should be emotionally inclined, committed and involved to their job roles for a longer period. The creation of lot of engaged employees or how to engage the employees to the fullest capacity is beyond the scope of this paper. We have conceptually signified whether the HR-practitioners are really aware of the tool called employee engagement for managing talent? If yes how they are prepared or are taking a step towards it.

II.   Discussions:

Managing talent is a tedious task as identification of talent ingredients is not easy. The discussions above have depicted that the conceptual clarity of the meaning of talent can be the first step in talent management. Similarly, when employee engagement has been identified as a tool it should also be properly dissected and the cardinal bases to be related to find talent management ways and means. Practitioners should be very much conversant with both the terms through the analytical path shown in this paper.

III.   Conclusion:

It has been understood that the talent management process involves a lot of delicate observation and application of various HR tools. Employee Engagement is one of those finer aspects of HR which can be a real tool of a very sensitive and delicate issue like talent management.

References:

[1].   Bhatnagar, J. (2007 a). Talent management strategy of employee engagement of Indian ITES employee: key to retention. Employee Relations, 29(6), 640-63.
[2].   Barab, S. A., & Plucker, J. A. (2002). Smart people or smart contexts? Cognition, ability, and talent development in an age of situated approaches to knowing and learning. Educational Psychologist, 37(3), 165-182.
[3].   Buckingham, m and Coffman, (1999), First break all the rules: what the world's greatest managers do differently New York: Simon and Sc
[4].   Bethke-Langenegger, P. (2012). The differentiated workforce: Effects of categorization in talent management on workforce level. Unpublished working paper, No.18. Switzerland: Department of Business Administration, University of Zurich.

[5].   Cheese, P., Thomas, R. T., & Craig, E. (2008). The talent powered organization: Strategies for globalization, talent management and high performance. London: Kogan Page

[6].   Czarnowsky, M. (2008). Learning's role in employee engagement: An ASTD research study.Alexandria,VA:American Society for Training & Development.

[7].   Castellano, W.G. (2006).A new framework for employee engagement Centre for human resource strategy; Rutgers University www.chrs.rutgers.edu.

[8].   Glen, C (2006). Key skills retention and motivation, the war for talent still rages and retention is the high ground. Industrial and Commercial training 38(1), 37-45.

[9].   Harter, J.K. Schemidt, F.L. and Hages, T.L, (2002). Business unit level relationship between employee satisfaction employee engagement and business outcomes: A meta-analysis.Journal of applied psychology,87(1) , 268-279.

[10]. Higgins Nicholas, J. Cohen, G (2007). Employee engagement. Journal of applied human capital management, 1(1), 43-56.

[11]. Jericó, P. (2001). La gestión del talento: Enfoque conceptual y empírico. Boletín de EstudiosEconómicos, LVI(174), 423–441.

[12]. Kahn, W.A. (1992).An exercise of Authority. Organizational behavior teaching, 14(2),28-42.

[13]. Lockwood, Nancy R. (2006). Talent management:Driver for organization at success HR content program. SHRM research quarterly.

[14]. Lockwood, N.R. (2007). Leveraging employee engagement for competitive advantage (2007 SHRM research quarterly), Alendadria, VA: SHRM foundation.

[15]. Lewis, R. E., & Heckman, R. J. (2006). Talent management: A critical review. Human Resource Management Review, 16(2), 139–154.

[16]. Maslach,C.,Schaufeli,W.B.,&Leiter,M.P.(2001).Job burnout.Annual review of Psychology,52,397-422.

[17]. May,D.R.,Gilson,R.L.&Harter,L.M.(2004).The psychological conditions of meaningfulness,safety,and availability and the engagement of the human spirit at work.Journal of Occupational Psychology,77,11-37.

[18]. Macy, W., &Schneider,B.(2008).The meaning of employee engagement. Industrial and organizational Psychology.1,3-30.

[19]. Michaels, E., Handfield-Jones, H., & Axelrod, B. (2001). The war for talent. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

[20]. Saks, A.M. (2006). Antecedents and consequences of employee engagement. Journal of managerial psychology. 35, 600-619.

[21]. Shack, Brad, Wollard, Karen (2010). Employee engagement and HRD: A seminal research of the foundations, Human resource development.

[22]. Stahl, G. K., Björkman, I, Farndale, E., Morris, S. S., Paauwe, J., Stiles, P., et al. (2007). Global talent management: How leading multinationals build and sustain their talent pipeline. INSEAD Faculty and Research Working Papers, 2007/24/OB.

[23]. Silzer, R. F., & Church, A. H. (2010). Identifying and assessing high-potential talent. Current organizational practices in R. F. Silzer, & B. E. Dowell (Eds.),

[24]. Strategy-driven talent management: A leadership imperative (pp. 213–279). San Francisco: JosseyBass.

[25]. Tansley, C., Harris, L., Stewart, J., & Turner, P. (2006). Talent management: Understanding the dimensions. Change Agenda. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

[26]. Tansley, C., Turner, P., Carley, F., Harris, L., Sempik, A., Stewart, J., et al. (2007). Talent: Strategy, management, measurement. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

[27]. Ulrich, D., & Smallwood, N. (2012). What is talent? Leader to Leader, 63, 55–61.

[28]. Vance,R.J.(2006).Employee Engagement and Commitment:A guide to understanding,measuring,and increasingengagement in your organization.Alexandria, VA: The SHRM Foundation

[29]. Williams, D. G.; Baruch, Z, 2000. African grass invasion in the Americas: ecosystem consequences and the role of ecophysiology. Biological Invasions, 2: 123–140