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**Lawless, A, Panya, F, O'Brien, S and Kok, SK (2019) Talk-about Talent: Underlying Philosophies on Talent in Thai SMEs. Human Resource Development International, 22 (5). pp. 553-572. ISSN 1367-8868**

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**Talk-about Talent: Underlying Philosophies on Talent in Thai  
SMEs**

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**Abstract**

This paper provides insight into talent philosophies, the fundamental assumptions and beliefs about talent that are held by key decision-makers, in three award-winning Thai Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Interviews were conducted with fifteen key decision-makers: the owner-manager of each SME and four managers the owner-manager identified as 'talent'. A discourse perspective informs the research and we draw on community of practice (CoP) theory as a heuristic device, enabling insights into decision-makers talk-about talent and the implications of this talk. We highlight shared fundamental assumptions regarding the exclusivity of talent and beliefs that talent is both stable (natural ability) and developable (mastery). We reveal an emerging dilemma between the 'talent community' and 'wider community'; in particular a tension between decision-makers' beliefs that talent are 'promotable' and expectations in this cultural context. We contribute a conceptual representation of talent philosophies within this Thai context and discuss how this discursive construction of talent enables and constrains participation and learning in these SMEs.

**Keywords:** Talent, Talent Philosophies, SMEs, Thailand, Discourse analysis, Communities of practice.

Word count: 9,131 including references and abstract excluding table and figure

**Introduction**

This paper provides insight into talent philosophies, the fundamental assumptions and beliefs about talent that are held by key decision-makers in three award-winning Thai Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). A discourse perspective informs the paper as we

analyse interviews with fifteen key decision-makers: the owner-manager of each SME and four managers identified by the owner-manager as 'talent'.

In Thailand, SMEs play a crucial role in contributing to the nation's economic growth. The majority of Thai organisations (99%), encompassing more than three million enterprises, are defined as SMEs, which employ over ten million people, representing around 80 per cent of Thailand's workforce (OSMEP 2017). The SME sector in Thailand contributes 42 per cent of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) (ibid) and is acknowledged as the major driving force behind the Thai economy (Ramcharran 2017). Targets are in place to increase this contribution to 50% by 2021 (Ramingwong, Wapee and Varattaya 2019). The pivotal role of Thai SMEs has been recognised by several authors (for example: Pruetipibultham 2010; Chittithaworn et al. 2011, and Kluaypa 2013), and they have been identified as creators of new jobs (Swierczek and Ha 2003; OSMEP, 2016).

In recognition of the need to nurture and develop SMEs, and the talent within them, the Royal Thai Government introduced policies and mechanisms to support 'good' practice (Swierczek and Ha 2003). Further, the SMEs Promotion Act 2000 established the Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion (OSMEP) as a government agency. OSMEP have undertaken numerous initiatives to enhance the capability of SMEs and to nurture talented employees.

However, as is the case in the UK (Nolan and Garavan 2015; Short and Gray 2017), Thai SMEs remain under-researched. Two key problems underpin this research: one; Thai SMEs fear the loss of talented employees, especially young talent, who use SMEs as a stepping-stone to larger organisations or more rewarding jobs (Phoemphian, Sakulkoo and Tubsree 2015) and two; there are substantial gaps in understanding the conceptualization of talent in SMEs. Therefore, a necessary first step in retaining talent is to explore how and why people are designated as 'talent' in this Thai context.

We focus on a key government initiative, the SME National Awards Competition, in which SMEs are judged against weighted criteria that incorporate a specific focus on an organisation's development of talent. Following the inauguration of SME awards in 2006 they have been held annually, although at the time data was generated, 2016, only thirty SMEs had received the SME National Award (OSMEP 2017). During 2016 only eight SMEs achieved the National Award and three of these (one in each sector: manufacturing, trading and the service) provided access for the study. The aim of this paper is to gain insight into the underlying philosophies on talent in these three award-winning Thai SMEs. A focus on key decision-makers: the owner manager and those managers identified as talent, enables us to contribute to the SME literature by extending the focus beyond the owner-manager (Short and Gray 2017). Discursive analysis informs the paper, as we draw attention to the tensions in key decision-makers talk and address the following research questions:

- Who do key decision-makers identify as talent, in the three award-winning SMEs?
- Why are these individuals identified as talent?
- What does discursive analysis reveal with regard to talent philosophies within this Thai SME context?
- What are the implications of our analysis for future research and practice?

The contribution of our paper is threefold. First, we provide new theoretical insights into how talent philosophies can be better understood as discursive practice, thus enabling a closer examination of dominant repertoires and emerging dilemmas. Second, our paper contributes to the scant research on Human Resource Development (HRD) in SMEs by providing a conceptual representation of talent philosophies within this Thai context. Third, by drawing on communities of practice theory, we offer provisional explanations as to why these dominant repertoires have emerged and what the implications of this are for theorizing talent in this Thai context.

## **Theoretical Grounding**

We present an overview of relevant literature which informed data generation, analysis and interpretation. First, we discuss the pivotal role of the owner-manager and other key decision-makers in SMEs. Second, we discuss the continued popularity of talent management and review arguments regarding key tensions and conceptual confusion within the field. Third, we introduce ‘talent philosophies’ (Meyers and van Woerkom 2014) as a meaningful framework that enabled data analysis and the framing of our conceptual contribution. Fourth, we introduce communities of practice (CoPs) theory as a heuristic device, enabling a conceptualization of talent philosophies as discursive practice within a community of practice.

### ***Key decision-makers: the owner-manager and other managers***

Within the SME context the term owner-manager is frequently used to denote the founder of the business and the key decision-maker who influences business success (Lloyd-Reason and Mughan 2002; Baum and Locke 2004; Feltham, Feltham and Barnett 2005). The owner managers’ beliefs pervade most managerial aspects and the strategic direction in SMEs (Entrialgo 2002), to which Lloyd-Reason and Mughan (2002, 120) add that: “the owner manager largely determines the behavioural characteristics of SMEs”. In addition, the owner managers’ motivations, values, attitudes and abilities tend to dominate organisational culture (Culkin and Smith 2000) and shape how communication, and knowledge flow within the business (Martin and Halstead 2003). With regard to development activities, the ultimate organisational responsibility held by owner-managers’ accords them a particularly significant role in developing their employees (Valkeavaara and Vaherva 1998; Shelton 2001).

However, other managers also play an important role in the learning process within SMEs (Noori and Lee 2006). This learning often relies on informal and incidental processes (Matlay 2000; Nolan and Garavan 2015; Lange, Ottens and Taylor 2000; Tam and Gray

2016) with development activities being informal, reactive and short-term in outlook (Saru 2007; Stewart and Beaver 2004). This paper focuses on key decision makers; the owner-manager and those managers identified as talent by the owner manager, and explores their fundamental beliefs and assumptions about talent.

### ***Talent Management***

The concept of talent management was introduced in 1997 by McKinsey and Company (Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod 2001) and continues to be hailed as a business strategy that leads to business success (Iles 2008; Iles, Preece and Xin 2010; Devins and Gold 2014; Sparrow and Makram 2015). Talent management and development have attracted particular interest within emerging market economies (Dirani and Nafukho 2018), including Thailand.

Talent management revolves around the activities that aim to attract, develop, motivate and retain employees within an organisation (Iles 2013), with the process leading to a widely held view that talented employees are a critical factor in organisational success (Porkiani, Beheshtifar and Moghadam 2012; Phillips, Phillips and Elkeles 2016). However, the majority of research on talent management has been conducted in large organisations and Elkeles, Phillips and Phillips (2016, 176) highlight that: "...many organisations carefully review and manage a small segment of their talent as high potentials". However, within an SME context an exclusive approach could be extremely detrimental (Hornsby and Kuratko, 2003; Swailes, Down and Orr 2014).

Despite the seeming popularity of talent management and development, several scholars argue that the construct suffers from conceptual confusion, with there being a lack of clarity in its definition, scope and overall goals (Iles, Preece and Chuai 2011; Tansley 2011). This ambiguity can be attributed to the inadequate operationalisation of the underlying construct, 'talent'. Indeed, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalez-Cruz (2013) argue that the literature has focused on practice (the 'how') rather than addressing 'who' is considered as talent and 'why'.



The research field is marked by debates and tensions surrounding who is considered as talent and why (Dries 2013; Meyers and van Woerkom 2014; Sparrow and Makram 2015). A key debate is whether talent is exclusive or inclusive (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalez-Cruz 2013; Swailes, Down and Orr 2014; Wilcox 2016). From an exclusive perspective, talent is a great employee who has high potential and demonstrates high performance, whilst the inclusive perspective views talent as the whole staff (Iles, Preece and Chuai 2010). Wilcox (2016, 40) argues that: “the notion of everyone as talent is laudable, but neither realistic nor sustainable in most organisations”. This ‘subject’ approach to talent, (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalez-Cruz 2013) enables a focus on ‘who’ is identified as talent (Iles 2013). Considering talent from this perspective draws attention to talent as: “an elite subset of the organisation’s population” or “talent as all employees” (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalez-Cruz 2013, 297).

A second key debate is whether talent is stable or developable. Some argue that talent is an innate component of individuals; a stable and enduring trait (Peterson and Seligman 2004) and a natural ability (Buckingham and Vosburgh 2001). Others argue that talent is a potential that can, and should be, developed (Cohn, Khurana and Reeves 2005; Barab and Plucker 2002); achieving ‘mastery’ through deliberate practice and learning from experience (Ericsson, Prietula Cokely 2007). This ‘Object’ approach to talent (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalez-Cruz 2013) enables a focus on ‘why’ individuals are identified as talent (Iles 2013). Considering talent from this perspective also draws attention to talent as: “commitment ... to one’s position and one’s employing organisation” and talent as: “fit...being in the right organisation and in the right position at the right time” (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalez-Cruz 2013, 297).

The construct of ‘talent philosophies’ has proved fruitful for this paper. Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) argue that ‘talent philosophies’ are an essential, yet so far overlooked, factor that impacts the effectiveness of talent management in practice. They define talent

philosophies as: “the fundamental assumptions and beliefs about the nature, value and instrumentality of talent that are held by a firm’s key decision-makers” (Meyers and van Woerkom 2014, 192). Two key tensions influence talent philosophies: 1) whether talent is viewed as an exclusive or an inclusive concept and 2) whether talent is viewed as innate (stable) or open to development (developable). A focus on these two tensions:

“leads to four distinct talent philosophies: exclusive/stable; exclusive/developable; inclusive/stable and inclusive/developable” (*ibid*, 194). These four distinct talent philosophies have been diagrammatically represented in a four by four matrix and have provided a useful theoretical framework for our research.

IINSERT FIG 1 HERE:

### ***Talent philosophies as discursive practice within a community of practice***

We draw on community of practice (CoP) theory as a heuristic device, enabling insights into decision-makers talk-about talent and the implications of this talk. CoP theory focuses our attention on situated practice and how participation in communities of practice becomes the fundamental process of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). The theory remains influential in several fields of research, for example: management education (Warhurst 2012); leadership (Brinck and Tanggaard 2016); and SME research (Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss 2018). CoP theory enables a conceptualisation of informal learning activities and explores learning as occurring through and on the job (Rigg and Trehan 2004; Gold and Thorpe 2008; Geldenhuys and Cilliers 2012; Tam and Gray 2016). While “such issues have been recognized for decades” (Short and Gray 2017, 8) there remains limited empirical data that illuminates the complexities of situated practice (Gray and Gabriel 2018).

Learning viewed as situated practice has a core concept, and analytical perspective; legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). Lave and Wenger (1991, 29) argue that LPP: “provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers...”. It

concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice and draws attention to language use. A discourse perspective enables us to research practice through studying the talk in use. How key decision-makers 'talk-about' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) talent supports communal forms of memory and reflection; and signals membership. This highlights that language does not just describe things, it does things, (Potter and Wetherell, 1987); and the things that it does have important implications "individually (in terms of identity), socially (in terms of social construction) and politically (in terms of the distribution of power)." (Trowler, 2001, 186) Therefore, how key decision-makers talk-about talent has important implications for LPP.

While acknowledging the fundamental and enduring contribution of community of practice theory, various commentators, for example: (Brinck and Tanggaard 2016; Barton and Tusting, 2005, Contu and Willmott, 2000, Contu and Willmott, 2003), have questioned some of the ways in which the concept is being developing and how it is being applied. A particular concern are "pre- and descriptive applications" (Brinck and Tanggaard 2016, 374) which detract from the analytical potential of the theory.

Concerns have been expressed regarding the idealisation of 'community' (Richter 2003) and unacknowledged pressures to conform (Hodgson and Reynolds 2005).

Commentators also caution that it is vital not to assume consensus or to abstract the community of learners from the wider field of social relations (Contu and Willmott 2003; Lawless and McQue 2008).

In response to these criticisms Barton and Tusting (2005) have developed CoP theory by incorporating a model of language-in use. This focus on discursive practice draws attention to issues of power and conflict. Discursive psychology informs this paper and in analysing the interviews we focus on the: "...active and creative use of discourse as a resource for accomplishing social actions" in this SME context (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 21). From a discourse perspective conversations are made up of a patchwork of

'quotations' from various interpretative repertoires. Edley (2001, 198) argues that interpretative repertoires are "... part and parcel of any community's common sense, providing a basis for shared social understanding". An interpretative repertoire being viewed as: "a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events" (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 138). In this paper we focus on the terms and metaphors decision-makers draw upon to characterise and evaluate 'talent'.

Although the focus is on everyday discourse we acknowledge that individuals are both products of discourse and producers of discourse in specific contexts of interaction. Our focus is therefore on how decision-makers use the available discourses flexibly, in creating and negotiating representations of 'talent' and what this reveals with regard to talent philosophies within this Thai SME context. By focusing on LPP we are reminded that COP theory is: "a way of looking, not a thing to look for" (Lave 2008, 290).

Therefore, LPP provides an analytical tool for understanding learning. While Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasise that each aspect of LPP is indispensable in defining the others, and that the concept should be taken as whole; they do discuss the constituents of LPP and how this translates into a specific analytical approach to learning. LPP shifts the analytical focus from the learner as an individual, to learning as participation in the social world. Therefore, a focus on talent philosophies as discursive practice focuses our attention on decision-makers discursive constructions of talent and enables us to explore the implications of this construction for learning and participation within this Thai SME context.

### **Methodological Considerations**

This paper draws on data from a larger study which explored HRD through coaching practices for talent. The second named author (a native Thai speaker - the field researcher)

generated data from three Thai SMEs, in three sequential periods over an eighteen-month period. The OSMEP, which coordinates the SME national awards, enabled access to the three organisations. The selection criterion for each SME was threefold: (1) registered as a Thai SME, (2) would grant research access and (3) received a SME National Award in the study year, 2016. These award-winning SMEs were considered examples of ‘good practice’ (Hamlin 2007) and a fruitful site to undertake the field research. During the eighteen-month data generation period the four authors had monthly meetings; this ‘peer debriefing’ and questioning shaped the field research in a systematic manner (Cho et al. 2016).

### ***Key decision-makers and interviews***

In this paper we focus on the interviews with key decision-makers in order to illustrate how they talked-about ‘talent’, and the implications of this talk. Key decision-makers, in this study, are the owner-manager of each SME and four managers who were nominated by the owner-manager as ‘talent’; in total fifteen key decision-makers. Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue that small samples, or a few interviews, are generally quite adequate for investigating an interesting and important range of phenomena.

The owner-manager in each SME was initially approached via a gatekeeper information sheet and asked to provide access to the SME. During interview the owner-manager was asked to identify four managers they considered as ‘talent’. Each manager identified as talent was approached via a participant information sheet and during interview was also asked to identify four employees they considered as ‘talent’.

All interviews were conducted in Thai and face-to-face at each SME. Each interview lasted approximately 40-60 minutes and was voice-recorded and transcribed in Thai. Member checking, where the interview transcripts were given to participants to ensure fair representation and confirmability was utilized (Choi and Roulston 2015). Following this check, the interviewer translated the transcripts into English, noting pauses and

hesitations, so they could be understood and read by her co-authors. We are aware that translation involves a degree of analysis and interpretation (Xian 2008) and our reading of the transcripts has been tackled reflexively. Due to word constraints we have not included the full interview schedule as this relates to the larger study. However, this paper focuses on two key questions asked during the interview:

- Can you please identify four managers who you consider to be talent?
- Why have you identified these people as talent?

Using interviews allowed the field researcher to more readily access culturally available interpretative repertoires (Riley and Wiggins 2018) and during interview she took available opportunities to probe responses to the above questions. Our analysis sheds light on these repertoires, these familiar ways of talking – about talent.

### *A discourse perspective: analysis*

Within discourse analysis there is not one analytical method, rather a broad theoretical framework, which focuses attention on the constructive and functional dimensions of discourse, coupled with the reader's skills in identifying significant patterns of consistency and variation (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates 2001). Therefore, analysis commenced with all authors reading and re-reading the translated interview transcriptions searching for consistency and variation. We used template analysis (King 2012) to allocate sections of the transcribed interviews to pre-defined codes. The aim was not only to identify themes that derived from the theoretical frame (talent philosophies) but also to be open for new themes that could be found. Interview excerpts were copied onto a template, which initially had four a-prior codes deduced from the literature and our research questions: who is talent – inclusive or exclusive, why are they identified as talent – stable or developable. During this process it quickly became clear that decision-makers talk-about talent did not fit neatly into the quadrants suggested by Myers and van Woerkom (2014). We therefore created a new template with two main codes: 'fundamental assumptions' (inclusive/exclusive) and 'beliefs about talent' (stable/developable). With regards to

beliefs about talent we included three sub codes from the literature: natural ability and mastery, commitment, and fit (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalez-Cruz 2013).

We used a 'crisis points' technique (Potter and Wetherell 1987), searching for signs that something had gone wrong in the interaction. These signs reflect conflicts between different discourses. For example, a key decision-maker repeating a statement, or 'disfluency', where the participant hesitates or repeats utterances, or a sudden change in style. We drew on three key concepts which enabled us to organize and make sense of the data: interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and positioning (Edley 2001). Repertoires draw attention to a community's common sense while ideological dilemmas alert us to tensions which exist as different repertoires of the 'same' social object are themselves constructed rhetorically. Revealing the struggle between opposing ideals (for example, inclusive/exclusive) and how decision-makers positioned 'talent' draws attention to subject positions (Althusser 1971), the identities made relevant as decision-makers talk-about talent; we have labelled this the 'talent community'. Through these iterative processes we identified an emerging dilemma and created a new code, which we have labelled the 'wider community'.

Exploring the consistencies and variations within and between accounts was analytically useful as it reminded us of the danger of taking accounts at face value; as accurate descriptions. Therefore, accounts were viewed as serving a function and tracing the 'dilemmas', the structuring effects of competing or contrary themes, provided insight into competing repertoires and the struggle between opposing ideals. This re-familiarization with the interview data enabled us to progress to stage two; the functional level of analysis.

The analysis of function was not simply a matter of us categorizing pieces but depended on us 'reading' the context (Potter and Wetherell 1987). We have read the context from the perspective of talent philosophes within each SME and CoP theory. It is for this reason we have initially presented the data for each SME as 'illuminating extracts of speech'

(Bell and Thorpe 2013). This highlights issues related to the research questions and the 'positioning' (Edley 2001) which occurred, as key decision-makers actively took up positions within different and sometimes competing repertoires. The process of producing the illuminating extracts was iterative and involved a process of all authors engaging in reflexive discussion about the composite content and fit with the research questions and themes identified at stage one.

### *Criteria for evaluation*

The evaluation of qualitative research remains a complex area (Anderson, 2017; Wetherell, Taylor and Yates 2001). However, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) discuss three criteria which are of particular relevance to this paper: coherence, transparency and fruitfulness.

In discourse analysis, the extracts are not characterisations or illustrations of the data, they are examples of the data itself. Therefore, within our data section we have presented a 'coherent' argument, persuading rather than leaving the quote to speak for itself. We have achieved this by presenting how decision-makers talk-about talent within each SME, showing 'crisis points' as gaps (...) in the flow of the conversation. To ensure 'transparency' we have detailed the process of analysis. In addition, the inclusion of lengthy extracts of talk highlights the ideological dilemmas (the tensions between competing repertoires) and positioning (identities made relevant) which occurred during the interviews. This contextualised detail helps the reader to judge our interpretation of the data.

'Fruitfulness', concerns the explanatory potential of the analytical framework, including its ability to provide new explanations; to make sense of new kinds of discourse and to generate novel explanations (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). Therefore, in table one we draw together our findings across the three SME, summarising the key terms and metaphors utilized by decision-makers to construct 'talent'. Within our discussion we present a critical review of our findings from the perspective of CoP theory and talent



philosophies. We conclude by discussing the implications of our discursive analysis for future research and practice.

### **Talk-about talent: talent philosophies**

The unit of analysis is talk-about talent and we present the data as extracts of decision-makers talk, using our narrative to guide the reader. We illustrate how decision-makers in each SME utilized the available discourses flexibly in creating and negotiating representations of ‘talent’.

To ensure confidentiality we have removed unnecessary identifiable information from the presentation of the data. Each SME is referred to by number SME 1 - 3 and sector. The key decision-makers are identified as the owner-manager (OM), OM1 - OM3 or the manager (M), M1 - M4. We draw attention to the positioning which occurred during the interviews, as we focus on who was identified as talent (exclusive or inclusive) and why (stable or developable). We also draw attention to an emerging dilemma with regard to this discursive construction of a ‘talent community’ and the ‘wider community’.

In SME One key decision-makers positioned themselves within an exclusive/stable and developmental talent philosophy. The extract reveals a dilemma between the ‘talent community’ and the ‘wider community’; in particular family preferences for government work and individuals’ reluctance to manage relatives.

#### **SME One: Trading Sector**

The owner-manager of SME One initially appeared to advocate an inclusive view of talent and during interview stated: *“I look upon all my employees like my children and siblings; I look upon all employees as equals.”* However, he then continued: *“...there is a different gap between high and low potential.”*

For this owner-manager ‘talent’ was exclusive and referred to: *“...the individual who prefers to stand and fight shoulder by shoulder with the company. ...good people with honesty and integrity.”* He viewed academic qualifications as less important than being: *“eager and enthusiastic to learn new things”* stressing that he would always select: *“the honest person before the genius person.”* His talk draws on a stable and a developmental repertoire of talent.

This exclusive/stable and developable talent philosophy was also shared by the managers who had been identified as talent by the owner-manager. M1 shared his view that academic qualifications were less important than personal qualities: *“It is not necessary to recruit engineers with an honours degree, ...but they need to be able to speak clearly and to follow me in my work.”* The ability to follow and learn from the manager was considered an important factor in identifying talent as expressed by M4: *“talent learn quickly...When I am not free, I trust them to do the work.”* M 3 expressed the view that: *“The important thing is that their ideas are congruent with ours.”*

All participants agreed that it was ‘good’ to develop talent. However, an emerging dilemma is illustrated by M2: *“We have talented employees and they can do everything, but whenever their parents want them to become a Government officer, they follow and resign.”* The influence of the family was acknowledged by several managers as illustrated by M4: *“...I will promote a talented person, but some talent have their aunts or uncles working here and when promoted to a higher level, they will not dare to act because they are worried about their relatives.”* This highlights that the ‘talent community’ is situated within other CoPs, other social relations of participation and learning.

The extract for SME Two also illustrates positioning within an exclusive/stable and developmental talent philosophy. The extract reveals a dilemma with regard to the positioning of talent as promotion; in particular, individuals’ poor performance when promoted and a reluctance of some individuals to attend external training. This may be due to expectations within the ‘wider community’.

## SME Two: Product Sector

The owner-manager of SME Two initially appeared to advocate an inclusive view of talent, stating: “A factory or a company is like a second home as you may live at the workplace more than at your own home. If employees work happily and live together like a family, there is unity.” However, not everyone in ‘the family’ was identified as talent and as the interview progressed, the owner-manager advocated an exclusive view of talent. For him ‘an indicator’ of talent was someone who had worked in the SME for more than three years. He justified his statement by clarifying: “first you understand the culture, second you understand your job and third you are ready to be another’s supervisor.” He continued: “I do not select people from a high-quality university, ...I select the person who has passed the difficulties of life; patience is the first thing, then ability and skill can come later.” For this owner-manager, talent was: “...different from a general employee; different in terms of budget. ...someone who will be invested in...through training, study trips and time.”

Managers shared the owner-managers exclusive/developable talent philosophy. This is illustrated by M1 who stated that talent had: “...*positive thinking, ...later they have agility, patience and high responsibility, ...they are my representatives. When I am not free, they can work instead of me.*” (M1). The notion of talent being ‘*positive*’ and able and willing to do the manager’s job was widely shared by all the managers interviewed. Indeed, M3 stated: “*Talent is my representative, like my right and left hand.*” In addition, talent were identified as those who were: ‘*ready to learn... all the time.*’ (M2) and M4 commented: “*For me, both job performance and attitude will be outstanding in talented people, and they understand quickly.*”

It became apparent from the interviews that talent were expected to accept development and promotion. M3 commented: “*I assign them to train outside; I push them to go, but I am surprised that they sometimes do not like to attend ... I have tried to force them to go.*” This reinforces expectations that talent are required to continuously learn and surfaces an emerging dilemma with the ‘wider community’. Indeed, it was acknowledged that not all talent wanted to be promoted. M1 commented: “...*we have talented employees who are skillful sewers, ...However, when we promoted them to be supervisors, there was poor performance. ...If they cannot take advantage of the opportunities, they can go back to their last position.*” This tension between talent as ‘promotion’ and a reluctant to accept external development or promotion opportunities has implications for LPP within the ‘wider community’. We discuss this further in our conclusion.

The extract for SME Three also illustrates positioning within an exclusive/stable and developmental talent philosophy. The extract reveals a dilemma between the SME ‘talent community’ and the ‘wider community’ due to the positioning of talent as promotion; in particular individuals’ reluctance to be seen as ‘prominent’ and concerns regarding ‘envious people’.

### SME Three: Service Sector

The owner-manager of SME Three advocated an exclusive view of talent; stating that only five per cent of his employees were talent and he identified talent as having:

*“expertise in their work”* and the ability to be: *“ready to work hard.”* He stated that an important element of talent was a: *“positive attitude towards the organisation ...positive thinking ...a winner type not a loser.”* He also stressed the importance of a *“culture match”* being more important than being a *“genius”*. Talent were viewed as those who could *“work with others”* he stated: *“My organisation has team work; we respect working together.”* He also identified talent as those: *“who always see opportunities, even though they are in hard times ...”*

All the managers interviewed shared the owner-manager’s exclusive view of talent and had developed a shared view of talent. This is eloquently illustrated by M4 who stated: *“Talent has to have a positive attitude, which is the first important thing and they need to be ready to work hard. We want people to make it happen, not wait for it to happen. They have a good attitude, good skills from their development and good performance – these three things added together are talent.”*

A shared view also existed that talent was different as expressed by M2: *“...dominant like a star.”* The managers expressed the view that talent could do the managers work as illustrated by M1: *“Talent ...can be my representatives ...they are my successors.”* However, M3 raised a potential dilemma: *“...some talent are worried about family and colleagues around them, about how they will look at them if they are more prominent and they are worried about envious people.”* This tension between talent as ‘promotion’ and the ‘wider community’ was also evident in the other SMEs.

In table one below, we illustrate within the three SMEs the key tensions identified by Meyers and van Woerkom (2014): inclusive/exclusive and stable/developable. We identify cross-cutting themes and illuminate how decision-makers positioned their talk about talent within an exclusive/stable and exclusive/developable talent philosophy. In illustrating why individuals are identified as talent, we draw on Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalez-Cruz (2013) and their conceptualization of talent as a combination of: natural ability and mastery; commitment; and fit. This enables a more nuanced presentation of the data and illustrates how different repertoires were utilized by these key decision-makers. In addition, we reveal an emerging dilemma between the discursively constructed ‘talent community’ and the ‘wider community’.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE:

Our analysis reveals a high degree of consistency and little variation; a dominant interpretative repertoire and fundamental assumptions and beliefs, which are congruent with an exclusive/developable talent philosophy (Meyers and van Woerkom 2014). However, our discursive analysis also reveals the subtleties, and how decision-makers draw on both a stable and a developable repertoire, viewing talent as both natural ability and mastery (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalez-Cruz 2013).

In addition, 'commitment' to the SME and 'fit' within the SME were considered important characteristics of talent.

Therefore, we challenge the 'exclusivity' of Meyers and van Woerkom's (2014) talent philosophies and present table one as our conceptual contribution; a nuanced representation of talent philosophies within this Thai context.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

Talk concerning 'who' is identified as talent reveals fundamental assumptions and a dominant, and largely unquestioned, 'exclusive' repertoire. In all three SMEs, talent were identified as '*different from a general employee*' and promotable. This talk positioning talent as 'different' (Wilcox 2016) was particularly evident in SME three:

*'winner type not a loser'*. How decision-makers 'talk-about' talent signals membership (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and who they identify as talent constructs a 'talent community' which could be viewed at the talent pool.

Talk concerning 'why' individuals were identified as talent reveals a more complex picture of beliefs regarding the 'stable' and 'developable' dimension of Meyers and van Woerkom's (2014) framework. Beliefs align with a stable view of talent (Peterson and Seligman 2004) and include terms such as: '*the good person*' and personal characteristics such as: '*honesty and integrity*'; '*positive thinking*' and '*patience*'.

However, decision-makers also talk-about talent as ‘mastery’, and align this with a developable view of talent (Ericsson, Prietula and Cokely 2007). Key terms focus on continuous learning with talent being identified as those who were: ‘*eager and enthusiastic to learn*’ and who could: ‘*learn quickly*’; indeed: ‘*ready to learn...all the time*’. This talk-about talent as ‘natural ability’ and talent as ‘mastery’ aligns with (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalez-Cruz 2013).

Talk concerning ‘why’ individuals were identified as talent suggests that continuous learning and commitment co-existed with a fighting metaphor: ‘*sees opportunities...even in hard times*’ and ‘*stand and fight shoulder by shoulder*’. This talk signals a requirement for ‘commitment’ (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalez-Cruz 2013). In addition, decision-makers talk-about talent as ‘fit’ (ibid): ‘*ideas congruent with ours*’ and a ‘*culture match*’.

Our discursive analysis reveals emerging dilemmas’, a potential tension between the ‘talent community’ (individuals who are ‘promotable’ and who want to continuously learn) and the ‘wider community’ (other employees). While the exclusive few were considered ‘talent’ decision-makers talked-about how they valued all employees. A family metaphor was used in SME One ‘*children and siblings*’ and Two: ‘*...live together like a family...*’. While a team metaphor was used in SME Three. Therefore, a fundamental assumption that all employees were valued within the ‘wider community’ co-existed with an ‘exclusive’ talent philosophy.

Decision-makers in SME One talk-about pressure from family and how individuals promoted as talent would ‘*not dare to act*’ because they are ‘*worried about relatives*’. In SME Two talk-about ‘*poor performance when promoted*’ and not taking ‘*advantage of the opportunities*’ resulted in promoted individuals going ‘*back to their last position*’. In SME Three decision-makers talked-about talent refusing promotion because they were ‘*worried about envious people*’. Decision-makers also talked-about parental pressure

which resulted in the resignation of talent because: *'parents want them to become a Government officer'*. This parental pressure to work in the public sector has previously been noted in Thailand (Phoemphian, Sakulkoo and Tubsree 2015) and in other emerging economies; for example, Oman (Al-Harthy, Lawless, and Mouzughhi 2017). Indeed, Thailand has a rapidly aging population and a culture of parent responsibility (Akaraborworn 2018). This provides some insight into the potential conflict between the 'talent community' and the 'wider community' and reminds us that CoPs are situated within other CoPs, other social relations of participation and learning; the 'wider community'.

From a communities of practices perspective, talk signals membership (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This may account for the high degree of consistency within each SME, as decision-makers talk-about talent. Their consistency in language use signals that they have 'learnt to talk' and that they are a 'community'. Indeed, the high degree of consistency across the three award-winning SMEs is also indicative of a shared repertoire. Interviewees may have positioned themselves as 'award winners' and their talk-about talent may have been influenced by the language of the SME National Award and the context of the interview.

Decision-makers in SMEs play an important role in the learning process (Noor and Lee, 2006; Nolan and Garavan, 2015) and, their talk-about talent, positions some employees (talent) as being on a trajectory towards full participation of the 'talent community', while others are potentially excluded from achieving this full participation; remaining on the periphery. This talk has implications, in that some employees, no matter how valued, will be excluded from full participation in the 'talent community'. SME's are cautioned that an exclusive approach could be extremely detrimental (Hornsby and Kuratko, 2003; Swailes, Down and Orr 2014).

Considering the social consequences of these different discursive representations of 'talent', we draw attention to 'peripherally' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) an empowering position; a place moving towards more intense participation, 'full' rather than 'central' participation. This differentiation highlights that there is no place that can be deemed the 'centre' of a community and acknowledges that there are multiple ways of being engaged in the fields of participation, defined by a community. Therefore, positioning some employees as 'talent' but all as 'valued' may not be problematic. However, our discursive analysis has revealed tensions and peripherally is disempowering when it becomes a place where one is kept from participating more fully.

Thai SMEs fear the loss of talented employees (Phoemphian, Sakulkoo and Tubsree 2015) and there are substantial gaps in understanding the conceptualization of talent in SMEs. We argue that the consensual positioning of talent, in particular talent as 'promotion' has the potential to construct a powerless position; as illustrated in talk-about employees who are '*worried about relatives*' and '*envious people*'. Community of practice theory reminds us that participation is the fundamental process of learning and that we must not abstract the community of learners from the wider field of social relations. Within this Thai SME context, we suggest that a more inclusive and heterogeneous talent philosophy would be advantageous for the SMEs. Talk-about talent as commitment, fit, natural ability and mastery can have an 'inclusive' potential. In particular questioning promotion as a pre-requisite for being included in a 'talent community' could be fruitful. This re-focusing could address, to some extent, the identified dilemma with the 'wider community' and reduce the loss of talented employees.

### **Research and practice implications**

We are conscious that any analysis needs to be treated with caution and research limitations need to be stated. The three SMEs which provide a focus for our study were award-winning Thai SMEs. Therefore we are cautious in suggesting that our analysis is



transferable to other SMEs in Thailand, or other parts of the region. We are also aware that our paper could be criticised for focusing (only) on talk. Indeed, we reveal a high degree of consistency within key decision-makers talk-about talent and this could indicate a limitation in the selection of the cases.

However, from a discursive perspective, a high degree of consistency illustrates a shared interpretative repertoire. From a CoP perspective a shared repertoire signals membership. In adopting a discursive perspective we have surfaced how key decision-makers use discourse to talk-about talent and highlight a dominant repertoire. Therefore, key decision-makers 'talk-about' talent signals membership (Lave and Wenger 1991), or exclusion from membership. Can SMEs (indeed can any organization) afford to exclude some employees from membership and does full membership have to align with being promoted and continuously wanting to learn?

These questions have research and practice implications and our conceptual representation of talent philosophies provides a framework for researchers and practitioners. The utility of this representation will be decided by our readers and the decision-makers who participated in the interviews. We agree with Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) that underlying talent philosophies are a critical issue that need to be discussed. This discussion with key decision-makers can surface dilemmas and reveal unacknowledged tensions. We suggest that our framework can be used, and adapted, by decision-makers in other contexts, enabling them to discuss and share with each other, their philosophy on talent. This representation of talent philosophies enables the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions regarding 'who' is identified as talent, 'why', and the implications of this for the CoPs which constitute the SME and the communities they serve.

Similar questions need to be asked at a national level. We suggest that a discursive analysis on the SME National Award would be a fruitful avenue for further research.

This analysis would reveal how talent is talked-about in this context and if there is an unacknowledged tension. Discursive analysis at this national level may reveal that the talk of our key decision-makers was constrained by this discourse, as they positioned themselves as ‘award winners’ during the interviews.

In summary, our paper responds to a call for further research on HRD in SMEs and provides a conceptual representation of talent philosophies within a Thai SME context. This framework can contribute to further research and practice within Thai SMEs and SME’s generally; enabling key decision-makers to become more aware of the consequences of ‘who’ is identified as talent and ‘why’. We argue that community of practice theory remains relevant and, when integrated with discursive analysis, can reveal more than ‘just talk’. This approach enables a focus on learning and participation; fundamental concepts for HRD practitioners.

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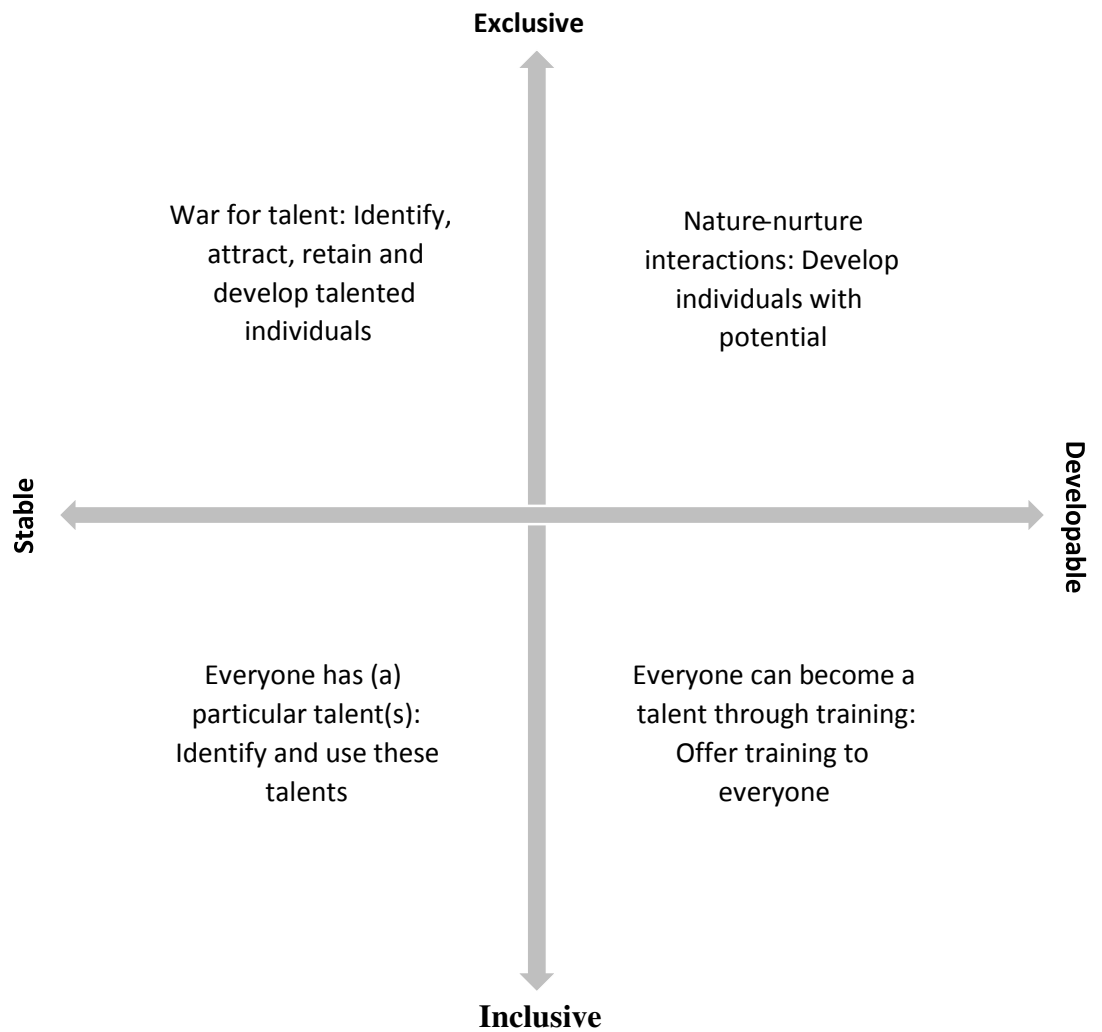
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<b>Key Tensions/ Repertoires:</b>	<b>SME One</b>	<b>SME Two</b>	<b>SME Three</b>
<p><u>Who is talent?</u></p> <p>‘Talent community’</p> <p>Inclusive / <b>Exclusive</b></p>	<p>Talent gets promoted</p> <p>Gap between high and low potential</p>	<p>Ready to be another’s supervisor - accepts responsibility</p> <p>Different from a general employee / Different in terms of budget</p> <p>Outstanding job performance and attitude</p> <p>Manager’s representative</p>	<p>A winner type not a loser.</p> <p>Manager’s representative / successor</p> <p>Only five per cent of employees</p> <p>Dominant like a star</p>
<p><u>Why?</u></p> <p>‘Talent community’</p> <p><b>Stable &amp; Developable</b></p>	<p><b>Natural ability and Mastery</b></p> <p>Good people</p> <p>Honesty and integrity</p> <p>Eager and enthusiastic to learn</p> <p>Learn quickly</p> <p>Honest person before the genius person</p> <p>Trust to do the work</p> <p><b>Commitment</b></p> <p>Stand and fight shoulder by shoulder</p> <p><b>Fit</b></p> <p>Ideas congruent with ours</p> <p>Follow (manager) in work</p>	<p><b>Natural ability and Mastery</b></p> <p>Passed the difficulties of life: patience first</p> <p>Positive thinking</p> <p>Ready to learn...all the time</p> <p>Understands quickly</p> <p><b>Commitment</b></p> <p>Over three years’ service</p> <p><b>Fit</b></p> <p>Understand the culture &amp; job</p>	<p><b>Natural ability and Mastery</b></p> <p>Positive attitude and thinking</p> <p>Expertise in their work</p> <p>Attitude, skills and performance</p> <p>Good performance</p> <p><b>Commitment</b></p> <p>Sees opportunities - even in hard times</p> <p>Ready to work hard</p> <p>Make it happen - not wait for it to happen</p> <p><b>Fit</b></p> <p>Culture match: more important than a genius</p> <p>Work with others</p>

<p><u>Emerging dilemmas</u></p> <p>‘Wider community’</p>	<p>Employees like: children &amp; siblings ‘</p> <p>Promoted employees: not daring to act, worried about relatives’</p> <p>Parental expectations of government work</p>	<p>Employees: Live together like a family</p> <p>Poor performance when promoted</p> <p>Not taking advantage of opportunities</p> <p>Not wanting to be trained outside the organisation</p>	<p>Team work: respect working together</p> <p>Promotion refused: worried about envious people.</p>
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**Table 1: Talent Philosophies in three award-winning Thai SMEs**

**Fig 1: Talent Philosophies**

From Meyers and van Woerkom (2014, 194)

<b>References - noted and needing amendment</b>	<b>Amendments</b>
Short and Gray is erroneously given as Gray and Short.	Short Heather J., and David E. Gray. 2017. "HRD in SMEs-A research agenda whose time has come." Human Resource Development Quarterly 29 (1): 7-13. doi: 10.1002/hrdq.21305. In references and in main text.
R Carbery's surname is misspelt in Garavan, T., A. McCarthy, M. Sheehan, Y. Lai, M.N.K. Saunders, N.Clarke, R.Cranbery, and V. Shanahan 2019 - R.Cranbery should be R Carbery.	Searched the document but couldn't find any reference to Cranberry or the reference you mention?
	Gallardo-Gallardo, - noted some slippage in text and have amended.
	Noticed inconsistence use in talent management philosophies - have now consistently used talent philosophies.