

Inclusive Development in Africa – Harnessing Youth Potential through Talent - Driven Human Capital Development

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ABSTRACT

In Africa, there is need for a more inclusive and holistic approach to development. Such a vision should have at its heart the enhancement of productive employment for the continent's bulging youth population. To achieve this goal, it may be desirable to shift to a talent-driven approach to human capital development. But, globally, talent management remains an under-researched topic: the concept of talent is ambiguous, and, while exciting, talent identification is a challenge for many institutions. As such, tactical alignment of talent identification practices with specific talent definitions, and ultimately, distinct developmental aims, is needed. This paper presents two initiatives: the African Regional Postgraduate Programme in Insect Science (ARPPIS) and Nematology Africa (Nem Africa), as examples of talent co-anchoring frameworks. Both have been successful in identifying individuals that are willing, able and motivated to work in specific fields of scientific research and development, and to match supply and demand in those areas. Further investigations of these two initiatives could help unravel underlying mechanisms of talent identification. In addition, and drawing from personal experiences, this paper proposes two ideas that could enable holistic talent identification. First, is the incorporation of the biographical method, a technique that aims to understand and attribute meaning to stories of individuals. Second, is the acceptance of the importance of the "gut instinct" factor, the intuitive judgements made by talent managers without conscious thought.

Keywords: *Talent management; talent development; Africa; inclusive development; youth; Africa socio-economic transformation; science, technology and innovation*

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Africa has been on the rise registering average annual economic growth rates of more than 5 percent, which is above the 3.6 percent global average¹ (AfDB, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Against this background a number of narratives have emerged based on the realisation that economic growth on its own is not enough for Africa’s transformation (Atta-Mensah, 2015; Moshi, 2014; UNCTAD, 2017). For this goal to be achieved, a number of shifts are necessary.

First, is the shift towards a more inclusive and holistic approach to development in Africa. This means incorporating all segments of the population into development processes, to ensure that all people not only benefit from economic gains, but that they have opportunities to unleash their own potential, for their own prosperity and that of the wider society (Reinders, Dekker, Kesteren & Oudenhuijsen, 2019; Ncube, 2015).

Second, is the recognition that for sustainable and inclusive growth to be attained in Africa, the continent’s economic structure must diversify from simple resource extraction, towards manufacturing and services. Closely aligned, is the realization of the potential of transformative technologies in Africa. In turn, it has also become clear that a range of technical and institutional improvements are necessary to enhance scientific capacity and to create a critical mass of scientists, innovators, researchers and entrepreneurs (Kuada & Mensah, 2017; Asongu & Tchamyu, 2019; UNCTAD, 2017).

AFRICA’S ECONOMIC GROWTH AND THE YOUTH

At the centre of these issues is the need to generate productive employment for the youth. Currently, Africa has the youngest population in the world with more than 400 million people aged between 15 to 35 years, and this figure is expected to double by 2045. In fact, Africa has the youngest population in the world. But, while young people make up 40 percent of the continent’s workforce, they also comprise 60 percent of the unemployed (AfDB, 2018; Gyimah-Brempong and Kimenyi, 2013).

¹ According to the African Development Bank (2020), Africa’s economic growth had stabilized at 3.4 percent in 2019 and was expected to pick up to 3.9 percent in 2020 and 4.1 percent in 2021.

However, the COVID-19 crisis has disrupted this progress.

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Indeed, accelerating more and better investments in young people in Africa is recognized as a critical pillar in the continent's future. This inherent potential of the youth as a resource for innovation and transformation is underscored by continental and global frameworks such as Agenda 2063, the African Continental Framework on Youth Development, the African Youth Charter, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

SHIFT FROM KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY TO TALENT ECONOMY

To translate this latent potential of Africa's youth into reality, strategic interventions are needed in the development of human capital in the continent. In other words, it is necessary to re-examine the power relations that control people, processes, and issues that constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of capacity.

This goal will be achieved through a critique of predominant approaches, significantly the knowledge economy discourse. This is the idea that the transition to the knowledge economy depends on development of higher level skills (Durazzi, 2018; Robertson, 2005). But this discourse overestimates the ability of countries to create mass high-skilled employment, and also reinforces a false promise of the inter-relation between education and skills development. In effect, this ideology has placed immense pressure on individuals and institutions of higher learning, and led to a disconnect between the quality and the relevance of skills. It has also resulted in a mismatch between demand and supply of skills, with a widening gap between upgraded skills and the ability of national economies to absorb the emerging capacity (Brown et al., 2001).

Moreover, there is a misalignment between skills and available opportunities. On the one hand, even with a large portion of unemployed graduates, organizations are unable to find the right skills. On the other hand, individuals often do not have access to opportunities linked to their training and end up settling for jobs that they are not qualified for, or where they are not able to apply what they have learnt (Arias, Evans & Santos, 2019; Brown et al., 2011).

In view of the above, there is a growing realization that the acquisition and use of skills must go beyond human capital approaches. Therefore, new narratives are arising on skills development and investments in new

technologies to promote quality jobs and workforce competitiveness (AfDB, 2020). And in response, globally, there is rising advocacy for a change to talent-driven economic development. In other words, there is a push for talent management as a critical cog in sustainable economic growth. This approach aims to align economic agendas with good leadership and entrepreneurial capabilities, especially those of the young generation (Parilla and Liu, 2019; talentagendaseries.com). Against this scenario, the “war for talent” has quickly become “the war to develop talent” (Garavan, Carbery and Rock, 2012).

In fact, the demand for talent development is becoming one of the greatest opportunities in emerging economies. Nowhere are the opportunities for talent management more real than in Africa. The continent’s young population can be harnessed for more optimal contribution to the continent’s socio-economic transformation, and as a global resource. Indeed, talent is also seen as the key factor that will link innovation, competitiveness, and growth in Africa (Muiya, Wekullo and Nafhuko, 2018; UNDP, 2015).

But, based on the available literature, the concept of management is yet to be embraced and it is also poorly researched in Africa (talentagendaseries.com). In fairness, globally, there is no ready-made guide for talent management either in policy or practice.

TALENT MANAGEMENT

Talent management involves the identification, development (nurturing) and retention of high potential (Dries et al., 2012; Dries, 2009). Talent identification is the process and activities that define and discover the sources of talent (Davies & Davies, 2010). This is perhaps one of the most exciting, and also most difficult parts of talent management. This is because, often, the process is based on antiqued ideas of what talent is.

Therefore, as a first step, it is important to problematise current definitions of talent and the common reduction of the concept, especially in education, to academic or intellectual giftedness (Preckel & Thiemann, 2003; Smart, 2005; Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 1998). Other common descriptions of talent include: a high level of competence and outstanding abilities and excellent performance; and are often derived from psychometric measures that focus on achievement of a certain score. This emphasis creates

imbalances and leads to “exclusion” of young people that might not demonstrate academic prowess as per the defined standards. Talent is also viewed as a set of particular skills and capabilities identified and evaluated by the organizations as being critical for success (Preckel & Thiemann, 2003; Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 1998; Tansley et al., 2016).

Instead, a change is necessary, to embrace understanding of talent as the “innate abilities of individuals that are deployed in activities they like, find important, and in which they want to invest energy” (Nijs et al. 2014, 182). There is a growing acceptance that each person is bestowed with a “talent” ... at least one skill that they can be good at, if it is nurtured. In accordance, it is necessary to identify the desire of young people to enter, work in, and thrive in certain fields. This means not only knowing what young people can do (their abilities, capabilities); but also, what they desire to do (their aspirations, interests, needs, and motivations). It is also important to move from looking for “stars”, but instead for potential. Hence, talent identification includes the search for specific individuals with outstanding levels of performance, and those seen to possess attributes and skills valuable for the organization and hard to replace.

Talent differs from skill: while the latter can be taught, talent is about mindset and approach (Parilla and Liu, 2019). Therefore, having talent is not sufficient; strategies are necessary to expose talented individuals to new ideas. Therefore, talent management should involve a number of components: it should be about unpacking gaps between current and potential performance in individuals, and developing systems to address such deficiencies. Talent management should also be adjustable to fit circumstances. And as such, talent management frameworks (tailor-made, targeted indicators of potential in different fields) are necessary in Africa. Such systems should focus on strategic planning and linkages with quality education, as well as the ability to attract, and retain talent.

EXAMPLES OF FRAMEWORKS FOR TALENT MANAGEMENT AND IDENTIFICATION

The African Regional Postgraduate Programme in Insect Science (ARPPIS) is a framework for building entomological capacity in Africa. Established in 1980, ARPPIS is a collaborative initiative between the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (www.icipe.org), the only institution in Africa working primarily on insects and other

arthropods. ARPPIS was founded against the background of the African Crisis of the 1980s and its detrimental impact on Africa's emerging scientific structures, communities and outputs. For example, the continent witnessed massive brain drain as huge numbers of African scientists joined other professionals in migration to various parts of the world. In this complex context, ARPPIS set itself the insurmountable task of nurturing and retaining indigenous African insect science capacity, trained in Africa according to global standards.

The format of ARPPIS is innovative: scholars conduct research at *icipe* receiving a scientific, research and technological base, working alongside renowned scientists. They are registered in African universities that provide theoretical instructions and award degrees. The result is a rare model for postgraduate training that enables the students to gain experience in the entire continuum – from strategic basic research, technology development and validation, through to community-based adoption, while also building their global networks.

Over the recent years, ARPPIS has undergone significant transformation. While retaining its primary goal of imbuing scholars with technical skills in specific research areas, the programme also provides a more extensive range of academic, professional and research leadership capabilities. *icipe* also ensures the presence of qualified and motivated supervisors and mentors, as well as strategies for progressive interactions among them and the students.

The identification of ARPPIS scholars is primarily through open calls that are highly publicized across the region and indeed the world, via various strategies including advertisements in traditional and digital media, networks of alumni, academia and scientific communities, and word of mouth. The idea is to identify the best students from across the continent, while ensuring geographical and gender diversity. The interview process assesses knowledge in the scholar's chosen area of study, and also their ability for critical and innovative thinking; and logical, clear communication.

ARPPIS has become one of the most important capacity building programmes in Africa. Hundreds of scientists have been trained directly through ARPPIS. Almost all had remained working on the continent in

research, development or higher education in universities, national and international research institutes, other national systems, government, and private sector organisations across the continent.

Nematology Africa (NemAfrica) is a network started in 2016 by a group of researchers and academics. In Africa, nematology is an under-researched topic, and there is minimal academic and technical capacity. The goal of NemAfrica is to provide a platform to build a critical mass of nematology expertise in the continent, while generating relevant activities and publicity around the challenge. The vision is to provide multi-faceted collaborative capacity building, through partnership with industry, public sector, research institutes, regional and international universities and research institutions, farmers, institutes, universities and private sector partners.

In terms of talent nurturing, rather than providing unlinked individual support, NemAfrica aims to develop a welcoming and supportive network that encourages, supports and builds integrated interaction. The idea is to welcome students at all levels: interns, Bachelors, Masters, PhD, and to support them to efficiently and effectively conduct thesis practical work, or to undertake internships that initiate them into advanced studies, or careers in nematology or broader agricultural areas. The identification of NemAfrica scholars is through links to universities, personal referrals and word of mouth. Within a few short years, NemAfrica has developed the largest active nematology group in sub-Saharan Africa, and is now a recognised hub of nematological capacity building. In four years, scholars attached to NemAfrica have won 10 international scholarships for MSc studies, with five moving on to PhD studies in Africa, Europe, USA and Australia; published over 20 peer reviewed journal articles; and received about 20 national, regional and international awards.

CONCLUSION

In emerging economies like Africa, there is need for a shift from predominant modes of human capital development, for example the knowledge economy discourse, to achieve holistic and inclusive development. One desirable strategy would be to move to a talent-driven approach – that is, a strategic investment in talent identification, selection, development, planning and retention.

But, globally, talent management remains an under-researched topic: the concept of talent remains ambiguous, and, while exciting, talent identification is a challenge for many institutions. As such, tactical alignment of talent identification practices with specific talent definitions, and ultimately, distinct developmental aims, is needed.

This paper presents two initiatives: ARPPIS and NemAfrica, as examples of frameworks to co-anchor talent. Both have been successful in identifying individuals that are willing, able and motivated to work in specific areas of scientific research and development, and to match supply and demand in those areas. Further investigations of these two initiatives could help unravel underlying mechanisms of talent identification, for example revealing how talent assessments are influenced by various factors that are not immediately obvious.

In addition, and based on personal experience, this paper proposes two ideas that could be useful in to achieve holistic talent identification that measures ability, motivation and interests, especially in the non-corporate sector. First, and due to the fact that it is often not possible to capture the complex nature of motivations and interests, it might be useful to incorporate the biographical method (Kelchtermans, 1993), a technique that aims to understand stories of individuals and attribute meaning to them. This recommendation is based on testimonies from a considerable range of highly successful scientific talent in Africa, of the role of people's experiences in their choice, motivation, dedication and excellence, in a chosen field of study. Using the biographical method will enable talent managers to probe key moments, dreams passion and values.

A second proposal is the incorporation of the “gut instinct factor” in the decision-making complexity in talent identification process. Gut instinct is the intuitive judgements made by talent managers without conscious thought, and one that is commonly employed to identify potentially successful athletes (Roberts et al., 2019; Vaeyens et al., 2008). This strategy will enable mentors and decision-makers to combine “instinctual” decisions; subjective expert knowledge and/or opinions based on their experience, and the contextual information of specific talent (Roberts et al., 2019; Weber & Johnson, 2009).

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