

**Is it ok to be different? Positioning workforce differentiation for perceived organisational justice**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The purpose of this conceptual paper is to explore the implications of differentiated talent practices on perceptions of organisational justice. The risk of perceptions of organisational injustice is causing practitioners to approach differentiation with trepidation. A greater understanding of which approaches to differentiation limit negative employee response is needed. A two-dimensional typology of differentiation was developed from a literature review. This typology serves as the basis for considering a number of hypotheses focused at establishing which modes of differentiation are perceived more favourably by employees in relation to organisational justice. Empirical enquiry upon these hypotheses will increase the understanding of the impact of differentiated talent practices upon organisational justice and allow practitioners to design their practices to greater effect.*

**Keywords:** Talent management, HR architecture, HRM theory, Strategic HRM

‘Talent management’ is a now well-accepted term in the human resource management (HRM) vernacular (Iles, Preece & Chuai, 2010). However, a growing number of writers have noted that the term lacks an agreed definition and consensus about its construct (Ariss, Cascio & Paauwe, 2014; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006). For the purposes of this paper, talent management will be used in reference to differentiating between people in organisations. In other words, an exclusive (differentiated) rather than inclusive (involving the management of all employees) approach to talent management (Cappelli & Keller, 2014; Festing, Schafer & Scullion, 2013; Iles, Chuai & Preece, 2010; Poocharoen & Lee, 2013).

Despite talent management’s potential to impact existing paradigms of HRM and contribute to the discussion about how, when and why to invest in human resources for strategic advantage, there is a dark side: the potential to create perceptions of organisational injustice (Gelens, Hofmans, Dries & Pepermans, 2014). Primarily, these concerns relate to two elements of organisational justice. Firstly, distributive justice, in the sense that employees may have negative perceptions of the ‘justness’ of the rewards applied to those receiving preferential treatment under differentiated talent management practices. Secondly, procedural justice in the sense that employees may have negative perceptions of the process(es) by which differentiation occurs.

What is the real impact of creating an ‘organisational elite’ through differentiated treatment (Swailles, 2013) and, is the risk greater than the reward? Research is still grappling with these questions (Capelli & Keller, 2014; Malik & Singh, 2014; Marescaux, De Winne & Sels, 2013) however the issue seems a somewhat critical one if organisations are to adopt differentiation. Practitioners design differentiated approaches to improve organisational performance, yet if an unanticipated consequence of these designs is an increase in perceptions of organisational injustice the value of these designs may be compromised.

In the quest to understand more of the implications of differentiated talent management practices some scholars (e.g. Huselid & Becker, 2011) have called for greater exploration of the micro level impact of differentiated talent practices on employees while others (e.g. Gelens et al., 2014) have called for more general principles to understand the positive and negative impacts of talent management, particularly on employee perceptions of organisational justice.

This paper aims to contribute to an understanding of differentiated talent management practices as they relate to negative perceptions of organisational justice. Approaches to differentiating and enacting differentiation are examined in order to categorise the various modes of differentiation. A typology is then used as a lens for how various practices may impact perceptions of organisational justice. A number of lines of enquiry for future research aimed at clearly establishing which modes of differentiation provide the most favourable perceptions of organisational justice are proposed. The paper concludes with implications for human resource practitioners should the presented hypotheses be validated by future research.

### **DIFFERENTIATING AND ENACTING DIFFERENTIATION**

Differentiation between people is inherent in the way HRM operates in organisations (Marescaux et al., 2013). The question really isn’t whether to differentiate, but rather on what basis should differentiation occur and why? There is likely to be merit in a more purposeful variation to human resource activities and functions (Huselid & Becker, 2011). For instance, an organisation’s modes of human resource differentiation may contribute to its economic goals (e.g. minimising cost

and/or maximising the return on money spent) or other objectives such as industry/market parity or sustained competitive advantage (Boxall & Purcell, 2011) and therefore create value.

### **The basis of differentiation: Two broad themes**

In a 2009 review of strategic talent management, Collings and Mellahi (p. 304) provided the following definition of strategic talent management:

*activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to an organisations sustainable competitive advantage, the development of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents...*

Using this definition we find two inter-related ways differentiation occurs: (1) on the basis of the role within an organisation (by virtue of its relationship to achieving a sustainable competitive advantage) and (2) on the basis of the individual employee occupying a role (by virtue of their capability to contribute to the role). Following this definition, organisations differentiate between individual employees based on their contribution (or potential contribution) to the roles they have already identified as offering differentiating value. However, this is not always the case, differentiation is often considered either on the basis of the role *or* the person (Cappelli & Keller, 2014).

The first school of thought focuses heavily on role-based differentiation (Lepak & Snell, 1999). Individual employees possess differing strategic value based on the knowledge and skills acquired as a result of the role they perform within the organisation. Their ‘employment modes’ segment cohorts of roles for differential treatment rather than individual employees who differentiate themselves from others in their cohort based on a given attribute (or set of attributes) (Lepak & Snell, 2002).

This work aligns with that of Boudreau and Ramstad (2005), who point out the importance of identifying role-based talent pools that can offer the greatest ‘impact’ for the organisation e.g. those closest to a point of sale. Impact roles should optimally be filled with impactful individuals (as articulated in Collings and Melahi’s (2009) definition) however their idea of a ‘talentship decision

science' is sufficiently flexible to account for alternative scenarios. A return on investment might, for instance, come from spending additional time and effort increasing the performance of all employees in a segmented cohort regardless of the differing contributions (or potential contributions) of the individual employees occupying roles within the cohort. In 'A Players or A Positions?' Huselid, Beatty and Becker (2005) also highlight the importance of differentiating on the role, or, more to the point *first* on the role *then* on the individual employee.

The role-based approach also prevails in the thinking surrounding strategic staffing/workforce planning. Thomas Bechet (2000, p. 470) advocates identifying key positions when developing staffing strategies going as far as to state that 'not every job even needs to be addressed from a strategic perspective', a clear reference to the differing strategic value of various roles. In further evidence of this trend, one recent practitioner white paper on strategic workforce planning dedicated 6 out of 12 'deadly traps' in one way or another to a lack of role-based differentiation (Beams, 2014).

The second school of thought focuses more heavily on the individual employee rather than the position or role they occupy. Much of the literature on this perspective of differentiated talent management comes from practitioner-orientated publications and takes a more inclusive (all employees) rather than exclusive approach (see for example Cappelli, 2008; Gutheridge, Komm & Lawson, 2008). There are however a number of writers (also predominantly in practitioner publications) advocating for workforce differentiation on an individual employee basis (see for example Fernández-Aráoz, 2014; McKee, 2015; Parrey, 2014; Robison, 2013). Commonly, this type of differentiation relates to high potential (HiPo) and/or high performing individual employees. These employees gain attention for their promise of providing differentiated value to the organisation either via their current performance or the promise of succession into differentiated roles (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Malik & Singh, 2014).

In critique of the available body of literature, there is much talk of maximising potential value (e.g. having high performers in strategic roles) and minimal on mitigating risk. This mitigation of risk may include transitioning poor performers into 'less strategic' roles (roles where the impact of underperformance may be less damaging), managing people out of the organisation (Axelrod,

Handfield-Jones & Michaels, 2002) or, only developing a moderate pool of HiPos then buying in proven performers when the demand presents (Capelli, 2008).

Employee-role alignment in the context of differentiation should extend from having great performers in high value roles to moving indifferent performers into low value roles. While Lepak and Snell (1999) address the idea of contracting out transactional services of low strategic value and low uniqueness the individual employee-based perspectives have an advantage here, often examining the management of ‘C Players’ as well as those who might be ‘A or B players’ (e.g. Axelrod et al., 2002).

### **Enacting differentiation: Flexible decisions and systematic approaches**

Whether differentiating on the basis of the role or the person, there remains the question of how the differentiation should occur. Should the approach be flexible and contingent upon circumstance or planned, systematic and highly structured?

Perhaps the most well-conceived concept of enacting a flexible approach to talent management is ‘Talentship’ (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). These authors argue for a more robust approach to managing talent, drawing on the idea of a decision science. By underpinning differentiation with criteria for decision making, they encourage a link to business impact (similar to the notion of focusing on strategic jobs; Cappelli & Keller 2014; Huselid, Beatty & Becker, 2005) but allow for flexibility. The result is the empowerment of managers to make talent based decisions. The flexibility of the decision science also bridges the gap between an approach that focuses on individual employees and one that is focused at the role. A manager may choose to invest in a high performing individual employee regardless of the role they occupy within the organisation however the manager would also be encouraged to move that individual into a role where they can have more impact for the organisation.

Much of the individual employee-based perspectives also centre on flexibility. Indeed the idea of focusing on HiPo employees as opposed to those just currently excelling in their given role stems from an acknowledgement that a great degree of pliability is required of individuals to be able to transition between roles (for example into more senior and impactful jobs) and operating environments

(for example across national boundaries or as new modes of business emerge) and remain successful (Fernández-Aráoz, 2014).

In contrast, Lepak and Snell's (1999) HR architecture provides a more systematic approach with clearly segmented cohorts of roles. Identifying entire groups of roles that may be performed outside the organisation provides a higher degree of structure to differentiation than considering the variability of individual employees' contributions to particular roles and making decisions accordingly. Huselid, Beatty and Becker (2005, p. 112) also advocate for a more systematic approach to identifying strategic roles by not working 'backward from organisational charts or compensations but forward from strategy' considering variability of performance. In terms of enacting their approach the authors suggest treating people differently based on the position they occupy, going as far as to note that some companies are so structured in terms of the role-based differentiation that they are willing to eliminate jobs that are not of strategic value regardless of the performance of the individual employees occupying them.

### **A TYPOLOGY OF DIFFERENTIATION APPROACHES**

The discussion above has focused on the basis for differentiating between individual employees and/or roles and how this differentiation might be enacted. Figure 1 provides a two-dimensional typology of workforce differentiation. The dimensions are the basis upon which differentiation occurs (role-based versus individual employee-based) and how it is enacted (flexible versus systematic approaches). Four approaches to differentiation on these two dimensions are provided.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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A 'personal' approach involves making flexible decisions about individual employees in the organisation based on their potential/performance. Examples may include decisions about investment in professional development, informal succession identification and informal HiPo programs.

A 'purposeful' approach involves taking a flexible/decision based approach to talent management based on the role. Examples may include role-based decisions about investment in professional development, time spent addressing concerns raised by particular role-based cohorts and variable strategies for performance in high impact/strategic roles.

An 'architectural' approach to talent management involves creating systematically varied HR practices for different roles in an organisation. Roles may be identified by various means, for positive reasons (e.g. high strategic value, uniqueness, variability of performance, proximity to direct business impact) or negative (e.g. job roles of low impact, susceptibility to issues). Examples of architectural approaches to talent management may include outsourcing particular roles, creating job cohort based policies or creating specialist compensation schemes for certain jobs.

A 'general' approach involves putting in place systematic processes to appeal to/mobilise high potential and/or performing individual employees. The focus here is on a highly structured approach to differentiating between individual employees. Examples may include formal HiPo programs, identified talent pipelines for leadership and structured succession strategies.

### **DIFFERENTIATION: THE DARK SIDE**

The increasing attention on talent management has led to concerns about the downside of differentiation. Principally, a concern that the negative impacts of heavily differentiated practices (such as perceptions of organisational injustice) outweigh the rewards organisations might experience by discerning between investments in their human resources.

A growing number of proponents of an exclusive (differentiated) approach are acknowledging the need for a greater understanding of the negative impact of differentiated practices on employees (Huselid & Becker, 2011). There is also some evidence that talent management in an exclusive/differentiated sense is, in practice, rare in comparison to more inclusive approaches particularly given socio-cultural factors outside the United States (Festing et al, 2013; Poocharoen & Lee, 2013). In further evidence of practitioner trepidation in implementing differentiation, some companies are taking a secretive approach to identifying talent, opting to informally notify those who



have been identified as high potential rather than risk the negative response from those not identified (Silzer & Church, 2009).

Marescaux et al. (2013) contend that differentiation in any fashion causes comparison between groups: those identified as possessing differentiated value and treated accordingly, and those not. In their study of employee perceptions of differentiation they found that while receiving preferential treatment can lead to increased affective commitment so too can comparisons from those not receiving the treatment lead to negative responses and outcomes.

Others have raised concerns about the ethics of talent management. Swailes (2013, p.33) articulates a range of ethical considerations when differentiating between people, particularly by creating a 'managerial elite'. Concerns arise, the author says, in relation to the fairness and objectivity regarding decisions about how talent is identified (such as the validity of a performance appraisal system used as the basis for identifying 'talent') and then about executing the management of identified individual employees in contrast to others.

### **Differentiation and organisational justice**

Organisational justice as a construct has been organised into three key components: distributive justice (the fairness and equity of how rewards, compensation and benefits are distributed), procedural justice (the fairness, consistency and validity of processes used to determine distribution) and interactional justice (the appropriateness of the treatment employees experience from authority figures within the organisation; Cropanzano, Bowen & Gilliland, 2007). Positive perceptions of organisational justice have been found to have a number of positive impacts in organisations, likewise, negative perceptions have been shown to produce negative effects (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter & Ng, 2001; Colquitt, Rodell, Zapata, Wesson, Scott, Long & Conlon, 2013; Viswesvaran & Ones, 2002).

Differentiated talent practices present a number of risks for organisations in relation to negative perceptions of organisational justice. At the core, differentiated talent practices seek to disproportionately distribute the investment in human resources. Thus, it has the potential to violate perceptions of distributive justice if the distribution is viewed as unjust (e.g. those receiving high

investment are not perceived as warranting the investment based on their contributions). Given what is at stake in terms of distribution, perceptions of procedural justice will also be heavily at play as processes are undertaken to determine who it is that receives preferential treatment.

In evidence of the impact of differentiated talent management practices, Gelens et al. (2014) have found important links between perceptions of organisational justice and outcomes from differentiated practices. When looking at both employees identified as high potential and those who were not they found that perceptions of distributive justice were higher in the high potential group and that these perceptions were linked to subsequent job satisfaction and work effort. Thus, those not identified as high potential could have reduced job satisfaction and work effort as a result of their perceptions of distributive justice being lowered.

Malik and Singh (2014) provide further discussion of the impact of differentiated practices on employees not identified in the elite group. Focusing on the group of good performers outside the select few (i.e. 'B Players') they posit a number of lines of enquiry, for instance that negative perceptions of organisational justice in relation to HiPo programs from those outside the program will lead to negative attributions and therefore negative outcomes.

In summary, there is agreement that there are potential risks as well as rewards in applying differentiated talent management practices, that these risks primarily relate to negative perceptions of organisational justice (distributive and procedural) and that these perceptions should be mitigated if organisations are to achieve better outcomes from their talent management practices.

### **MODES OF DIFFERENTIATION AND PERCEIVED ORGANISATIONAL JUSTICE**

In acknowledging the need for generalisability of findings about the potential negative impact of differentiation Gelens et al. (2014) suggest pursuit of some general principles for how the implementation of practices are perceived from an organisational justice perspective. For example, they call for future research to consider the degree of exclusiveness applied to differentiation in relation to perceptions of justice, noting that the degree of exclusiveness may positively impact perceptions in two ways. One is that reduced exclusiveness may result in fewer employees feeling marginalised and applying perceptions of unfairness to the practices. The other is that increased

exclusiveness may result in increased perceptions of rigor in the process and therefore better perceptions of fairness.

### **Questions for future research**

This paper has presented a typology of approaches to differentiation: architectural, general, purposeful and personal. This typology provides a framework for studying which differentiated talent practices are perceived more favourably in relation to organisational justice.

Role-based approaches are likely to be less ambiguous than individual employee-based approaches. Whether or not an employee sits in a role within the organisation is more easily observable than how well they perform that role. If certain roles are assumed to provide greater contributions to organisational outcomes, it may be perceived that preferential treatment of employees on the basis of the role they perform is commensurate with expected contribution and therefore be perceived as having a greater degree of distributive justice. Further, given the observability of whether or not an employee is performing a particular role, the process by which employees are identified for differential treatment is likely to be more consistent, have less bias in decision making (as opposed to relying on more subjective observations) and be more accurate thus resulting in higher degrees of perceived procedural justice.

*Hypothesis 1. Role-based approaches are perceived with a greater degree of distributive and procedural justice than individual employee-based approaches.*

The systematic versus flexible approaches to enacting differentiation also provide a point from which distributive and procedural justice can be considered. Systematic approaches rely more heavily on structured processes for determining who should receive differentiated treatment. These processes are likely to be more consistent and accurate than flexible approaches relying more on subjective decision making to meet circumstance. It is therefore likely that systematic approaches will be met with a higher degree of perceived procedural justice than flexible approaches. How systematically differentiation is enacted is also likely to result in better perceptions of rewards and

compensation commensurate with contribution and therefore result in more favourable perceptions of distributive justice.

*Hypothesis 2. Systematic approaches are perceived with a greater degree of distributive and procedural justice than flexible approaches.*

Which dimension (role-based versus individual employee-based or enacting differentiation systematically versus flexibly) results in better perceptions of organisational justice may be harder to discern. It is likely that systematic application of differentiation will be of greater importance to perceptions of distributive and procedural justice than on what basis this differentiation occurs (on the role or on the individual employee). Role-based differentiation still has the potential to be viewed negatively in relation to distributive justice as employees will contribute differently to the roles they occupy. It is likely that employees performing poorly, but receiving the benefit of occupying a differentiated role, will lead to concern in relation to the fairness of reward and compensation distribution. Systematic application of differentiated talent practices on the other hand are likely to consistently provide more apparent links between contribution and outcome in a reward/compensation sense (distributive justice), and a greater level of consistency (procedural justice).

On the premise role-based approaches meet with greater perceptions of distributive and procedural justice than individual employee-based ones, systematic approaches meet with greater perceptions than flexible ones and that systematic application is more important for these perceptions than the basis of differentiation, the following hypothesis should be explored.

*Hypothesis 3. Architectural approaches have a higher level of perceived distributive and procedural justice than general, purposeful and personal approaches.*

*Hypothesis 4. General approaches have a higher level of perceived distributive and procedural justice than purposeful and personal approaches.*

*Hypothesis 5. Purposeful approaches have a higher degree of perceived distributive and procedural justice than personal approaches.*

### **Implications for human resource practitioners**

Practitioners are wise to approach heavily differentiated talent practices with caution. While there are many espoused benefits of differentiating, negative perceptions, particularly from those not on the favourable side of differentiation (e.g. good but not great performers, high performers in roles of low strategic value) may mean attempts to implement differentiation provide poor results. The discussion above has led to a number of hypotheses aimed at gaining a greater understanding of these impacts. Should these hypotheses be found true, they will form a road map for those involved in designing differentiated practices.

To guide the design of talent programs; systematic differentiation on the basis of the role (architectural) should be pursued as the most favourable approach followed by systematic differentiation on the basis of the individual employee (general), flexible differentiation on the basis of the role (purposeful) and flexible differentiation on the basis of the employee (personal) respectively.

### **CONCLUSION**

Given the risks associated with negative perceptions of organisational justice, practitioners and scholars alike are approaching heavily differentiated modes of talent management with trepidation. This paper has contributed to the debate by outlining a new typology for the various modes of talent based differentiation. It has also used this typology to establish clear hypotheses to guide future research for more acceptable and less acceptable approaches to differentiation as they relate to perceived organisational justice. Considering differentiation in relation to the systematic versus flexible and role-based versus individual employee-based approaches will assist in developing a greater understanding of differentiation in the organisational context. Critically, developing this understanding will lead to more effective talent programs that account for the impact of perceptions of organisational injustice.

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**FIGURE 1: Typology of differentiated talent management practices (developed for this paper)**

