

Beyond performance and potential in talent management: exploring the impact of mobility on talent designation

Personnel Review

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to a grounded understanding of how mobility impacts talent designation and with what consequences.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory qualitative case study was conducted of a global medical technology corporation, based on interviews with HR managers, line managers and non-managerial employees.

Findings – The findings illustrate that mobility plays a significant role in how employees are assigned talent status, and that mobility manifests and impacts talent designation through two types – geographical and lateral mobility. Mobility is not determined based on abilities and competencies, but rather on an employee's overall personal situation, including age, family status and relationship status. Two main practices emerged through which these determinants were decided: direct questioning and guesswork. The consequences that follow are that individuals are left with little room to influence their own talent situation, and that there is a risk of discriminatory and exclusionary consequences arising.

Originality/value – The study makes two main contributions. First, it provides a more nuanced understanding of how talent designation unfolds in practice, showing that performance and potential alone cannot explain the process and emphasizing the consequential role of mobility. Second, it contributes with knowledge about the consequences of basing talent designation heavily on mobility. Individual employees are left with significantly less room for enacting agency and playing active roles in relation to TM than has been suggested. Added to this are the potential discriminatory and exclusionary consequences.

Keywords Talent management, Talent, Talent designation, Talent status, Mobility, Careers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Talent management (TM) has become increasingly important among researchers and practitioners (Collings *et al.*, 2022; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2020). One integral part of TM is talent designation – that is, an organization's assignment of talent status to an employee (De Boeck *et al.*, 2018). Understanding on what basis talent status is assigned, and developing relevant processes for identifying talent, are vital to effective TM, and have been highlighted as key to transforming talent as resources that help organizations sustain competitive advantage (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017). Despite its emphasized relevance and several advancements made in the TM literature, scant empirical research has been devoted to this (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017, 2023). This is a major shortcoming because while most existing studies maintain that talent designation is mainly determined based on the two dimensions of performance and potential (e.g. Clark-Ambrosini *et al.*, 2022; d'Armagnac *et al.*, 2022), an emerging stream of the literature has instead argued

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that it is more intricate than previously thought (Meyers, 2020; Tyskbo and Wikhamn, 2022; Wikhamn *et al.*, 2021).

In line with the contingencies of today's working life, where careers and job markets are becoming more border- and boundaryless, and organizational and occupational changes more common (Lyons *et al.*, 2015; Santos *et al.*, 2020), there are significant pressures and expectations on employees to become more flexible, willing to move, and accept increased career mobility (Kirk, 2019; Loacker and Śliwa, 2016; Sgourev and Operti, 2019). These pressures reflect deeper organizational norms that value adaptability and global readiness as key indicators of potential (Kirk, 2021; Sautier, 2021; Tyskbo, 2021), which align with broader trends where professional identities are increasingly shaped by the demands of organizational contexts (Waring, 2014). These trends are also consistent with insights from the broader Global Talent Management (GTM) literature, where mobility is frequently emphasized as a strategic tool for organizations to develop talent pools, transfer knowledge, and respond to the demands of a globalized economy (Collings *et al.*, 2019; Sousa *et al.*, 2024). Building on these insights, recent studies suggest that employee mobility may play an important role in how and why some employees are labeled talent (Jooss *et al.*, 2021; Tyskbo, 2021), but little is known from a multiactor perspective about how this unfolds and with what consequences, in practice, in organizations. Studying this is important as we can expect a certain degree of complexity and tension to emerge, especially since it can be difficult to discover whether an employee is mobile or not, as many organizations seem to avoid open communication, maintaining an element of secrecy about who is talent (Sumelius *et al.*, 2020), and because mobility is often related to one's personal situation (Jooss *et al.*, 2021; Rushing, 1964; Tyskbo, 2021). In addition, we know that not all potential talent wants or has the opportunity to move, and that many prefer more traditional career paths within their current location and organization, which raises potential issues around ethics, inequalities, and inclusiveness (Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2019; Dries *et al.*, 2012; Minbaeva and Collings, 2013; Swailes, 2020).

This study aims to advance understanding of this topic. We adopted an exploratory qualitative case study of a global medical technology corporation, investigating how mobility impacts talent designation and with what consequences. The findings illustrate that mobility plays a significant role in how employees are assigned talent status, and that mobility manifests and impacts talent designation through two types – geographical and lateral mobility. Mobility is not determined based on abilities and competencies, but rather on an employee's overall personal situation, including age, family status, and relationship status. Two main practices emerged through which these determinants were decided: direct questioning and guesswork. The consequences that follow are that individuals are left with little room to influence their own mobility status and talent situation, and that there is a risk of discriminatory and exclusionary consequences arising.

Through this, the study makes two main contributions to the literature. First, it advances a more nuanced understanding of how talent designation unfolds in practice. Particularly, it shows how the two taken-for-granted dimensions of performance and potential cannot fully explain how talent designation unfolds in practice. Instead, it stresses the consequential role of mobility, shaped by underlying organizational norms and values. This finding aligns with broader observations in the literature regarding how elite and professional identities and roles are increasingly shaped by organizational demands (see Hoyer, 2022; Kamoche and Leigh, 2022; Waring, 2014). Moreover, it advances the theoretical understanding of what is meant by mobility and how it is determined. Thus, it answers the call for more empirical research, investigating on what basis talent status is assigned (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017; McDonnell *et al.*, 2023), and the role of mobility (Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2019; Tansley and Kirk, 2018; Tyskbo, 2023). This contribution is particularly relevant to the broader GTM literature, which often frames mobility as a strategic tool for enhancing knowledge transfer and driving talent flows across borders (Collings *et al.*, 2019; Farndale *et al.*, 2010). While the GTM literature views mobility positively as a strategic enabler, this study demonstrates that it also serves as a key criterion for talent designation, shaped by

personal and situational factors. Second, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the consequences of basing talent designation heavily on mobility. More specifically, it theorizes the decisive role that mobility plays as a form of coercive persuasion, leaving individual employees with significantly less room for enacting agency and playing active roles in relation to TM than has been previously suggested (Meyers, 2020; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013). This analysis highlights the potential discriminatory and exclusionary consequences that arise when mobility is determined largely by an individual's personal situation, such as age, family, or relationship status. By examining these dynamics, the study uncovers the underlying organizational and professional norms and values that influence who is recognized as talent (Waring, 2014). It provides a critical perspective on how mobility, rather than being a neutral or purely strategic criterion, can reinforce power imbalances and limit employees' opportunities for career progression. This study thus responds to calls for more critical and nonmanagerialist studies on TM and talent designation (Böhmer and Schinnenburg, 2021; McDonnell *et al.*, 2023; Swailes, 2020; Swailes and Lever, 2022; Tyskbo, 2021), especially highlighting how mobility, while central to TM, can have unintended and ethically complex consequences.

The article is structured as follows: the first section presents a literature review with an emphasis on talent designation and mobility. The method is then outlined, followed by a presentation of the findings. A discussion of these findings follows, including theoretical and empirical contributions, practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key insights from the study.

Literature review

Talent management and talent designation

TM, often described as the activities and processes involved in identifying and developing a pool of high-performing and high-potential employees, and in implementing an HR architecture to facilitate their career growth and retention (Collings and Mellahi, 2009), continues to attract substantial attention from both academics and HR practitioners (Collings *et al.*, 2022; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2020). One critical aspect of TM is talent designation; an organization's assignment of talent status to an employee (De Boeck *et al.*, 2018; Mellahi and Collings, 2010). Developing an understanding of on what basis talent status is assigned, and formalizing relevant processes and practices for identifying talent, are vital to effective TM, and have been highlighted as key for transforming talent as resources that help organizations sustain a competitive advantage (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Collings *et al.*, 2019).

The complexities of talent designation

Despite its emphasized relevance, talent designation is seldom featured in the current empirical TM literature (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017, 2023; Nijs *et al.*, 2022), and existing studies often support arguments claiming that the two dimensions of performance and potential are common, and serve as explaining factors for the basis on which talent is assigned and how talent designation unfolds in practice (e.g. Clark-Ambrosini *et al.*, 2022; d'Armagnac *et al.*, 2022). However, these studies often rely solely on formal descriptions from and the perspectives of HR and senior managers, neglecting the more informal and second-stage factors more likely to be subject to bias, as well as the perspectives of other important organizational actors such as line-managers and employees (McDonnell *et al.*, 2023; Nijs *et al.*, 2022; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2010). As such, these studies are too simplistic to advance our understanding and cannot completely explain how talent designation works in practice (Collings *et al.*, 2018; Tyskbo, 2021).

Importantly, an emerging stream of TM research points to a far more complex and multifaceted talent designation process than has been assumed (Meyers, 2020; Tyskbo and Wikhamn, 2022; Wikhamn *et al.*, 2021). For instance, some studies show that informal

aspects, biasing effects, self-interest, a lack of instruction, and information all play a role in shaping how the talent designation process unfolds in practice (Peterson *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, there is a growing recognition that the underlying assumptions, values, and beliefs that shape actors' engagement in talent designation must also be understood and considered (McDonnell *et al.*, 2023; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020). These studies have demonstrated that the day-to-day processes of talent designation are influenced by contextual factors, deeply rooted local institutional arrangements, and inherent assumptions and beliefs that organizational actors enact and utilize, which are all aspects that go beyond the simplistic dimensions of performance and potential (Meyers, 2020; Thunnissen, 2016; Tyskbo, 2021). These underlying norms and values, as seen in studies on elite and professional identities and organizational demands (Hoyer, 2022; Kamoche and Leigh, 2022; Waring, 2014), suggest that talent designation may be influenced by the broader organizational context in which elite and professional roles are enacted.

Mobility in talent designation

Mobility as a factor in talent designation. In addition, recent studies have suggested that mobility plays an important role in talent designation, which is in line with the contingencies of today's working life, where significant changes are facing the world of work, e.g. technological advances, increased competition for talent, borderless job markets, and more boundaryless careers with more job, organization, and occupation changes (Lyons *et al.*, 2015). In this context, there are significant pressures and expectations on employees to become more flexible, willing to move, and accept increased career mobility (Kirk, 2019; Loacker and Śliwa, 2016; Sgourev and Operti, 2019). This is also consistent with the broader GTM literature, where mobility is frequently discussed and considered both increasingly common and essential in organizations (Collings *et al.*, 2018; Khilji *et al.*, 2015; King, 2015). Mobility is typically viewed positively, with GTM often positioned as a strategic tool to facilitate and enhance mobility. In the GTM literature, mobility serves various purposes such as the translation of ideas, enhancing learning, filling skills gaps, and stimulating knowledge flows within organizations (Collings *et al.*, 2019; Farndale *et al.*, 2010, 2014). A recent systematic literature review (see Sousa *et al.*, 2024) emphasizes the close interconnection between GTM and mobility, highlighting the potential of GTM practices to strategically influence talent mobility patterns. This expanded perspective reveals how GTM can enhance the global talent pool and increase the competitiveness of organizations within the broader global labor market. Building on this view of GTM as a strategic tool for fostering mobility, it is evident that GTM plays an important role in increasing mobility and driving talent flows across organizational and geographical boundaries (Collings, 2014).

Empirical insights on mobility and talent designation. Despite mobility being a central theme in the GTM literature—especially as globalization drives more frequent cross-border movements—the TM literature has not extensively explored this aspect. Few empirical studies explicitly link mobility and talent designation; however, there are some notable exceptions. For example, in their interview study of large Polish organizations, McDonnell *et al.* (2023) showed that mobility (readiness to relocate at any time) was an important aspect with regards to how talent was interpreted and identified in practice. Still, it was much less frequently mentioned compared to the three core dimensions of performance, potential, and commitment, and the authors also argued that mobility appeared to be more common as a secondary identification factor coming into play once the requirements for the primary factors were fulfilled. Another example is the study by Jooss *et al.* (2021) that focused on what factors impact talent designation. Based on interviews with senior organizational leaders in three multinational hotel corporations, they similarly found that talent was mainly viewed as a two-dimensional construct including performance and potential but that mobility became a crucial contextual factor for being labeled as talent or not. Other studies have raised more critical points regarding the importance of mobility for being designated as talent, e.g. Tyskbo (2021)

examined how talent designation unfolded in practice at both the headquarters and a subsidiary of a large Swedish organization. Tyskbo argued that the way actors identify talent is grounded in their respective institutional logics. Mobility was an important aspect in talent identification only for those actors invoking a business logic, while those invoking an engineering logic experienced mobility as excluding, foreign, and almost contradictory to their engineering values and norms. Another example is the study by [Böhmer and Schinnenburg \(2021\)](#) who used a qualitative research design based on interviews with internationally experienced Indian business professionals to show that, due to family situations, participants experienced mobility restrictions, having exclusion and detrimental consequences for their career decisions and talent opportunities.

Limitations and paths forward. Despite these studies starting to shed light on mobility with regards to talent designation, and providing some important insights, there are still a number of limitations. First, previous research has not particularly focused on mobility, but has mostly included it as an incidental finding or afterthought in the analysis. This may also explain why existing studies do not describe and analyze in more depth how and in what form mobility manifests itself and is expressed in different practical situations, and with what consequences, but rather stop at descriptions of whether and to what extent mobility is mentioned. However, what is meant by mobility and how an employee's mobility is determined and what it is impacted by, in practice, merits further attention ([Crowley-Henry et al., 2019](#); [Tansley and Kirk, 2018](#); [Tyskbo, 2023](#)). Exploring and focusing on how mobility impacts talent designation is especially important given that mobility can take many different forms, even though in existing TM research it has mainly been referred to as the opportunity and willingness to relocate internationally ([Feldman and Ng, 2007](#); [Ng et al., 2007](#)). The GTM literature highlights that mobility can encompass a wide range of dimensions and is continuously evolving ([Kirk, 2021](#)). It can include long-term or short-term assignments, global commuting, frequent international travel, flexpatriate and inpatriate roles, and even virtual global mobility ([Collings, 2014](#); [Mutter and Thorn, 2021](#)). Furthermore, mobility can also be understood as internal (job assignments or promotions within an organization) or external (recruiting talent from outside the organization) ([Collings et al., 2018](#)). This broader perspective on mobility stresses the importance of not relying on predetermined definitions but rather exploring the specific dimensions and types that emerge within particular organizational contexts. Thus, more empirical studies are crucial in substantiating these claims and providing a deeper understanding of how mobility unfolds in practice, beyond conceptual arguments ([Khilji et al., 2015](#); [Kirk, 2019, 2021](#)).

In addition, since mobility is often linked to an employee's personal situation, it is likely to be sensitive and difficult to ascertain whether an employee is considered mobile or not ([Jooss et al., 2021](#); [Rushing, 1964](#); [Tyskbo, 2021](#)). Mobility may also shift over time as personal circumstances evolve throughout an employee's career ([Böhmer and Schinnenburg, 2016](#); [Huang and Tansley, 2012](#); [Kirk, 2021](#)). Furthermore, and closely connected, much of the existing empirical research has focused on a single perspective within organizations, HR managers and/or senior management teams in particular ([Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016](#); [Thunnissen and Van Arensbergen, 2015](#)). This limits our understanding of how mobility impacts TM in practice because organizations consist of multiple actors with frequently different interests, motives, and experiences ([Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010](#); [Thunnissen, 2016](#)). While the GTM literature has primarily taken an organizational and management perspective, in which mobility is seen as something positive and strategic, it has also started to acknowledge tensions when considering additional perspectives. For example, not all potential talent wants to move, and others may not have the opportunity to move or experience barriers, many also seem to prefer more traditional career paths within their current location and organization ([Crowley-Henry et al., 2019](#); [Dries et al., 2012](#)), while others are likely to feel pressured to become mobile ([Kirk, 2019](#); [Huang and Tansley, 2012](#); [Farndale et al., 2014](#)). To capture the expected complexity and tensions that are likely to emerge when basing talent designation on mobility, we need to adopt a pluralistic approach by including multiple internal

actors, and line managers and employees in particular (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013). In this paper, we address these limitations by adopting an exploratory, multiactor qualitative case study approach to explore how mobility impacts talent designation and its consequences, building on insights from the broader GTM literature, and the few TM studies that explicitly focus on this relationship.

Setting and method

To study how mobility impacts talent designation and with what consequences, which is a novel research area and a new field of inquiry, an exploratory and grounded qualitative case study was deemed appropriate (Swedberg, 2020). MedTech is a global medical technology corporation headquartered in Sweden, specializing in technological innovation and advancement in the field of healthcare, care of the elderly, and the life sciences. It operates in more than 40 countries, employs nearly 11,000 employees worldwide and had net sales of approximately SEK 27 billion in 2021. With most key positions having been recruited externally, MedTech recently implemented changes to and prioritized the TM system on the HR agenda to better identify and develop talent internally. This TM system, launched in 2013, involves a structured and standardized process for identifying and developing talent across the organization, with a strong emphasis on performance and potential. MedTech's TM approach is exclusive, focusing primarily on higher-level talent such as business area managers and division leaders. No official total number of talents has been determined. The overall TM approach reflects an exclusive-people perspective, concentrating on identifying the most talented employees within the organization. The talent identification process includes a Performance Development Dialogue (PDD) matrix, where employees are evaluated on two dimensions: "what" they achieve (performance) and "how" they achieve it (adherence to company values). Employees are then placed on a nine-box grid, with those in the top-right corner being designated as talent. This process is further refined through calibration meetings involving multiple managerial levels, ensuring that the identification of talent aligns with broader organizational goals. Talent pools are then utilized for compensation and career development planning.

MedTech was selected as a research site as it fulfilled the criteria of (1) having an exclusive approach to TM, (2) being a large multinational organization, and (3) affording researchers extensive access to the site and contact with employees at multiple levels. Basing the selection on these criteria is in line with the scholarly explanations of TM and talent designation as sensitive topics (Geleus *et al.*, 2014). Adding to this the changes it had made to its TM system, MedTech serves as an information-rich case (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and an ideal context for observing the dynamics of how mobility impacts talent designation—thus constituting a revelatory setting wherein the dynamics of interests would be more transparent (Patton, 2002).

Data collection

In total, 23 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR managers (10), line-managers (eight), and non-managerial employees (five) working at MedTech. These interviews were carried out in 2015. The number and distribution of interviews are within the recommendations for workplace studies and large enough to reach data saturation and potential variability in qualitative research (Guest and Chen, 2020; Saunders and Townsend, 2016). Adopting a multiactor approach is important because the actors at the different levels represent different perspectives. HR managers were interviewed in order to gain a top-down perspective and to obtain information about the organization's TM approach and the intended talent designation practice. The line managers were interviewed because they have been shown in the literature to have an increasingly significant role in how HRM practices in general, and TM practices specifically, are implemented and unfold (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink, 2018; Tyskbo, 2020). To widen our understanding and to adopt a more pluralistic

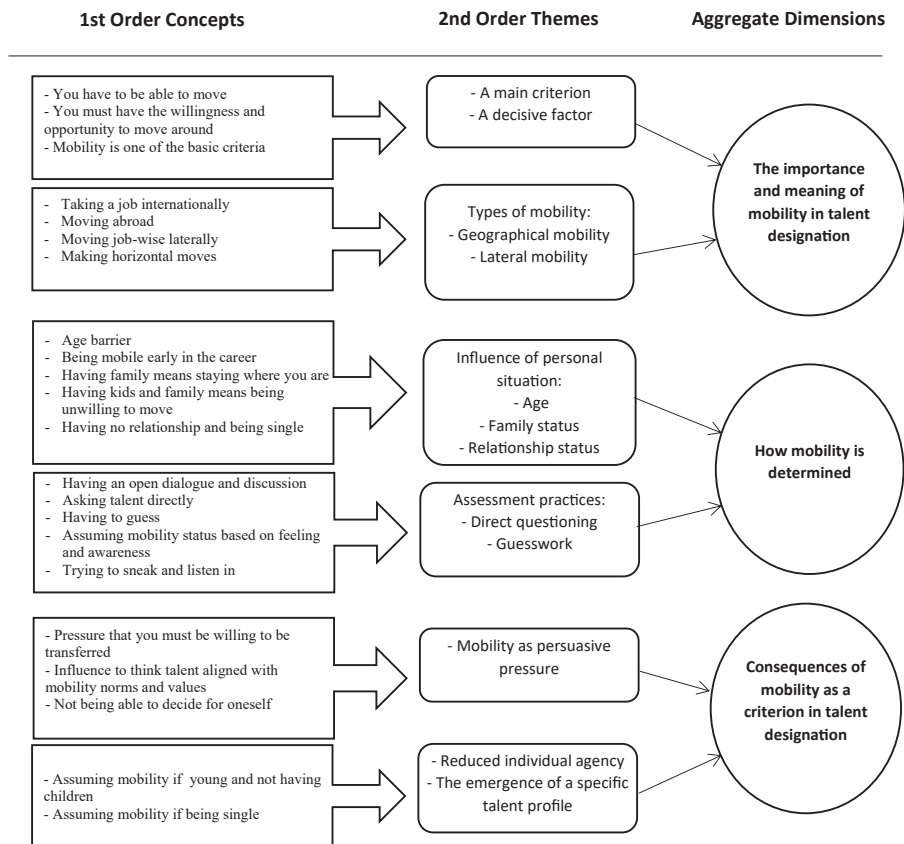
perspective (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013), we also interviewed nonmanagerial employees for whom TM practices are designed. This approach is in line with recent methodological arguments made within the broader HRM and TM literature (see Beijer *et al.*, 2021; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2020), adding nuance to much of the existing TM research, which has focused mainly on one perspective (often HR managers or senior-level managers) (Collings, 2014; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017). All interviewees were promised anonymity and we emphasized the voluntary nature of their participation. In qualitative research, particularly in sensitive areas such as TM within specific organizations, maintaining the confidentiality and trust of participants is paramount. To guarantee this anonymity, we had to compromise with regard to contextualization, meaning we were unable to provide detailed demographic information about the participants, such as age, gender, and ethnicity (see Saunders *et al.*, 2015). This decision acknowledges scholarly descriptions of TM and talent designation as sensitive topics (e.g. Ehnrooth *et al.*, 2018; Gelens *et al.*, 2014; Sumelius *et al.*, 2020).

All the interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasted between 60 and 90 min, were audio-recorded, and later transcribed verbatim. The interview questions were open-ended in order to allow for the interviewees to talk freely about their understanding of and work with talent and TM. We did not start out from a predefined conceptualization of TM, talent, and mobility, as we intended to explore the conceptualization of the studied organization. The interviews included questions about the interviewees' work situation in general, their understanding and definition of what talent was, and their experiences and interpretations regarding talent designation in practice and the role of mobility. In addition to interviews, we also collected various organizational documents used in the designation of talent, e.g. performance appraisal reviews, TM-guidelines, talent pool documents, PowerPoint presentations, and performance and potential designation guidelines. These documents, amounting to over 150 pages, provided us with valuable information about the background and the formal TM process, and supplemented the interviews, allowing for within-methods triangulation (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009).

Data analysis

We analyzed the data using a three-step process similar to that described in Gioia *et al.* (2013). In step one, we began with open coding, reading each interview transcript multiple times and coding these line by line. Documents were coded in a comparable manner, and compared with interviews in order to triangulate the interviewees' narratives (Silverman, 2011). Although all the data were systematically coded, the interviews were the main source in both the analysis and the findings, with the documents adding contextual background and corroborating support. Concept cards were worked with, as mentioned by Martin and Turner (1986), allowing us to write down in vivo codes derived from the interviewees' own descriptions (Locke, 2011). These codes represent first-order concepts, consisting of both the descriptive details of the studied research context and the interviewees' interpretations and experiences of talent designation and how mobility impacts this. Examples of first-order concepts included: must having the willingness and opportunity to move around, mobility as one of the basic criteria, moving abroad, making horizontal moves, age barrier, having no kids and family, pressure that you must be willing to be transferred, not being able to decide for oneself, assuming mobility if young and not having children. In step two, our analysis shifted to axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), comparing the relevant first-order concepts with each other in order to identify similarities and differences. By constantly comparing the data, we could reduce the first-order concepts to second-order themes, clustered in relation to their main essence. Examples of second-order themes included: mobility as a main criterion, types of mobility: geographical mobility and lateral mobility, influence of personal situation, assessment practices: direct questioning and guesswork, mobility as persuasive pressure, reduced individual agency, and the emergence of a specific talent profile. In step three, we engaged in a more frequent iteration between the data and relevant literature, which allowed us

to distill our findings into three aggregate dimensions: the importance and meaning of mobility in talent designation, how mobility is determined, and the consequences of mobility as a criterion in talent designation. This iterative process ensured that our dimensions were grounded in both the empirical data and existing research, while also contributing new insights to the literature. By continuously revisiting both the data and the literature, we were able to enhance the abstraction level of our analysis, ultimately linking our findings more closely with broader theoretical debates in the TM and GTM literature. The generated dimensions help to structure our findings and provide a cohesive foundation for the subsequent discussion. The analysis process is visually represented in our data structure, as seen in Figure 1, which illustrates the progression from first-order concepts to second-order themes, leading to the final aggregate dimensions. To ensure reflexivity during the analysis process, we continuously challenged our interpretations by considering alternative viewpoints (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018). To improve intra-rater reliability, a test–retest approach was used, through which the data were analyzed twice by the same researcher and re-ordered until there was complete agreement. To increase the trustworthiness of our interpretations, we also conducted “member checks” with our interviewees to gain confidence that the data structure was sensible to, and affirmed by, those living the phenomenon being studied.



Source(s): Created by the author

Figure 1. Data structure

Findings

The importance and meaning of mobility in talent designation

Mobility as a main criterion and a decisive factor. According to the formal TM documents at MedTech, talent is mainly identified based on performance and potential as the two principal indicators. However, in practice, these two dimensions alone could not explain why and how talent was selected. A recurring aspect found on all levels (HR management, line-management, and nonmanagerial employee level) was mobility and the importance of being able and wanting to move as an employee in order to be the subject of talent discussions:

We need to fill in a talent form, and there were different criteria to write down for employees. One thing that was questioned was the desire to be able to take a job internationally. (Line manager)

This quote alludes to the fact that, while performance and potential are the primary criteria, mobility is also explicitly considered within talent designation. It indicates that mobility is formally acknowledged as a significant factor in talent evaluation, supplementing the core indicators of performance and potential:

It takes more than just performing at a high level and having potential. And it may be that you stay where you are and make it easy for yourself, but to really be appointed as a top talent, you have to be able to move. Both geographically abroad but also job-wise, laterally. (HR manager)

Here, the HR manager emphasizes that excelling in one's current role is not sufficient on its own; mobility is crucial for being recognized as top talent. This suggests that, while performance and potential are necessary, the willingness and ability to be mobile—both geographically and within job roles—are essential for attaining talent status:

In order to advance and be appointed as talent, you must have the opportunity and willingness to move around within the company. And everyone knows that; that is my feeling. (Talent employee)

This statement from a talent employee stresses the broad awareness that mobility is expected for career advancement. The understanding that “everyone knows” this requirement points to the deep cultural integration of mobility as a key factor in talent designation, reinforcing its formal and informal importance within the organization. At MedTech, employees are therefore expected to demonstrate flexibility and readiness to relocate or shift roles to be recognized as top talent.

Types of mobility: Geographical and lateral. Based on these quotes, we begin to understand how “mobility is one of the basic criteria for being designated as talent” (Line manager), but also that the meaning attributed to mobility can differ. First, mobility is about having the opportunity and the will or desire to move. Second, while the possibility and willingness to accept international assignments and be transferred abroad formed an important part of the concept, it was also about mobility in the form of opportunity and willingness to be moved laterally, within the current work location, into new work tasks:

Mobility is not only about being sent abroad, but also about broadening, developing and testing new things and moving within the current work location. (Line manager)

Mobility is also about changing jobs, talent making horizontal instead of just vertical moves. So, talent also needs to have that capability for horizontal moves, either within a country or business area or across those. When it comes to talent, we have clear targets for internal rotations. (HR manager)

These quotes illustrate that mobility at MedTech is multifaceted, encompassing both international assignments and lateral moves within the same location. This broader understanding of mobility highlights its role not just in global relocations but also in encouraging career development through varied experiences and responsibilities. Importantly, it was clearly noticed that mobility was not just an optional criterion that came in a second-step, but a main criterion with direct consequences for how talent was appointed. One HR manager even associated mobility with the essence of what TM is about, “I think the whole intention

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with TM and labelling someone as talent, is of course to move this individual at some point in time” (HR manager). Another HR manager pointed out how decisive mobility could be, “if you’re not prepared to move, you have a rather small chance of being designated as talent” (HR manager). Other interviewees also expressed this in general terms:

It’s rather clear why mobility is a criterion. If you’re not transferable as a talent, you can’t be offered many development opportunities. (Talent employee)

If you want to develop and advance further, and want to take the next step having an active drive and commitment to move, then you’re well ahead in being selected as a talent. But if you don’t want to move from your country and feel that that this is what you want to do right here, then it’s very difficult for me as a manager to select you as talent. (HR manager)

These statements further emphasize that mobility is not just about willingness but is seen as a prerequisite for accessing development opportunities within the organization. The requirement to be “transferable” highlights how mobility is integral to the organization’s processes for recognizing and nurturing talent. Others used and referred to specific situations and examples:

I have a talented guy but he can’t get any further because he can’t move. He would have to be open to being moved, yes, basically anywhere in the world. I would like to move him to China; unfortunately, that is not possible. (HR manager)

A person in my group wanted to work internationally and was ready to move. It became clear when we had to appoint talent that she got a clear profile in the talent templates. So it affects who you appoint and so on. (Line manager)

These examples provide specific illustrations of how mobility influences talent decisions in practice. They reveal that even highly talented employees may find their career progression stalled if they are unable or unwilling to meet the mobility requirement, thereby demonstrating the tangible impact of mobility on talent designation.

How mobility is determined

Influence of personal situation. Since mobility is described as an important criterion for talent designation, it becomes vital to find out what impacts whether an employee is considered mobile. We found a number of such determinants which we describe next, and then go into how these determinants are decided upon. While one HR manager mentioned language skills as an important determinant, abilities and competencies were not mentioned at all in relation to mobility. Instead, the overall *personal situation* emerged as an important and decisive aspect to employees’ mobility. For example, *age* was commonly described as affecting whether an employee was considered to be mobile:

We have a requirement that to become a talent, you must have a desire to act in and be exposed to more than the country you’re in. Otherwise, the danger is that you get someone who is too narrow-minded. So we have to bring in perspectives from diverse cultures, or diversity in different ways, and therefore I believe very much in mobility. But, if you set that requirement too late, it won’t happen. So you can’t go out and tell people when they start to get into their 40s and 50s that they have to move, because they have settled down and those moves don’t happen. But I think you should get mobility a little earlier in your career. (HR manager)

This quote suggests that mobility is seen not only as a requirement but as a developmental necessity. The emphasis on initiating mobility earlier in an employee’s career stresses the belief that younger employees are more adaptable and willing to relocate, making age a critical factor in determining mobility:

Or an age barrier, that you have four years until retirement and don’t have the slightest interest in moving as you have family and children. So even if you have a very high performance, but lack aspiration, you are not promotable. (HR manager)

This comment reinforces the idea that age and life stage, including proximity to retirement and family responsibilities, can significantly diminish an employee's perceived mobility. It indicates that older employees, regardless of their performance, may face limitations in their career profession if they are not perceived as mobile:

Those too young, say 30–32, may not have the ability to move because they have to work for a few more years within their current territory. Or maybe you are at a stage of life with toddlers and daycare pickups and VAB [care of a sick child]; then it can be difficult to move and take on more challenging roles and assignments that the talent status entails. (Line manager)

This statement illustrates how younger employees, especially those with young children, may also be perceived as less mobile. It highlights that the challenges of balancing personal and professional responsibilities at different life stages can impact mobility and, consequently, career advancement:

At 50 you can still be identified as talent. But you would need something else than if you were 30. Or if you were 60. So there is some sort of age limit to being identified as talent, and you have to be really careful about their development plan depending on age. I have also seen a couple of cases where you identify someone as talent and push them through too fast, too young, e.g. if you're in your 20s and you're starting a family and there is lots of other things going on, then you're not mobile and in a different position than when you are in your 40s. (Line manager)

This quote further emphasizes the complexity of how age intersects with mobility. It suggests that there are nuanced expectations and limitations based on an employee's age and life stage, with both younger and older employees facing distinct challenges in being perceived as mobile. As we can see, age seems to affect in diverse ways whether an employee is considered mobile or not. Too young means that you are not mobile because you are considered to need more experience in your existing role or you are more stationary as you are likely to have small children. At the same time, being too older is associated with low mobility as one has settled down, feels comfortable and generally has lower ambitions to move. As we can see from these quotes above, age in many cases seems to be intricately linked to *family status*, which was highlighted by others as an additional important determinant in itself:

If you have a family, you often want to stay where you have your family and so on, and then you are restricted and not moveable. (Talent employee)

This comment highlights the significant impact of family status on mobility. It suggests that having a family creates strong ties to a particular location, making relocation more challenging and less desirable:

When you try to identify talent, you also have a personal development plan set up for an individual, and then you have to take into consideration the 360 of that particular individual. So if you're a mother of three small kids then maybe your path to the position you would like doesn't entail travelling 300 days a year. And I think it would be irresponsible if we didn't raise and stay critical to the question about mobility then. If that particular potential talent says it's not going to be an issue, I'm going to accept that. But I still think it would be irresponsible of us to pretend this will not be a potential issue. (HR manager)

This quote stresses the complexity of balancing career aspirations with personal responsibilities. It shows that while mobility is a key criterion, it is also acknowledged that personal circumstances, such as being a parent, can significantly constrain an individual's ability to meet mobility expectations:

Many are not willing to move and it has to do with being at an age when you should start having a family and so on. (Line manager)

People who have kids, family, are not willing to move. People who are married to someone who has a good career – they are not willing to move. (Line manager)

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These statements reinforce the idea that family responsibilities and spousal career considerations are critical factors that limit mobility. They suggest that an employee's family situation is a major determinant in whether they are viewed as mobile, and consequently, whether they are recognized as talent. In addition to family status, *relationship status* was also described as an important mobility determinant. As one HR manager commented, "the talent that I selected were all fully mobile, as they had no relationships or anything like that". Another HR manager continued:

It's clearly different if you're single with no kids because then you're much more mobile. Those are important things that you need to address in a talent plan, compared to if you're married and, say, a mother of three. You have to take the whole package into consideration when you identify a talent. (HR manager)

This quote highlights the holistic approach taken in assessing mobility, where personal circumstances such as marital status and parental responsibilities are factored into talent designation. It suggests that single employees are viewed as having fewer constraints, making them more desirable candidates for talent designation.

Assessment practices: direct questioning and guesswork. We found two main practices through which these determinants were decided upon, which we call *direct questioning* and *guesswork*. The first practice was used to a lesser extent and was simply about HR managers asking individuals directly. As two HR managers described:

I have an open discussion with the talent. You have to be really careful because if you don't ask you can have managers saying that "oh no, she is a mother of three, she is probably not mobile", without asking her. (HR manager)

We ask "are you mobile, yes/no". But I know it's different and individual from manager to manager; some have this openness while others don't. And then they can guess if an employee is mobile or not, and then identify talent without having that dialogue with their subordinates or employees. (HR manager)

These quotes illustrate that while some managers take a transparent approach by directly discussing mobility with employees, others rely on assumptions. This direct questioning method ensures that managers do not make incorrect assumptions about an employee's willingness or ability to relocate. Thus, while some managers asked potential talent directly about mobility, others did not. Instead, they used a less transparent process where guesswork and gut feeling were important aspects. As one line manager commented, "It's clear that I have a feeling for and awareness of which people are mobile and which are not". Another HR manager similarly explained:

Our assessment is often this way that you're not willing to move because you know quite a lot about the person – they have children who go to kindergarten and that whole bit. You have quite a long history where you work so we get a good feeling for this. But, perhaps they could be more willing to move, so I don't really know for sure whether it's good not to talk to them. (HR manager)

These statements highlight the reliance on intuition and subjective judgment in the absence of direct communication. They also reveal the potential risks of relying on assumptions, as managers may misinterpret an employee's willingness to be mobile. Some managers simply explained that "we guessed", and others elaborated why this was so:

Mobility was one of the basic talent criteria, but it was very difficult to decide because without asking the person, you don't know and have to guess. This was in order not to reveal that I was going to nominate them as talent, so I guessed. (Line manager)

This statement highlights the secrecy and lack of transparency in the talent designation process, where managers resort to guesswork to maintain confidentiality. It indicates that the fear of prematurely revealing talent nominations leads to a reliance on assumptions rather than open discussions:

I usually bring it up more generally during small talk or in a more general development conversation, where I try to sneak and listen in. (Line manager) Personnel Review

We filled in a box that they were mobile and could take a job globally. We have to sit and assess that without having spoken to the person about it. (HR manager)

These quotes together illustrate the indirect and often covert practices managers employ to assess an employee's mobility. The first quote highlights a cautious approach where managers subtly probe during informal conversations to gauge mobility without directly addressing the issue. This reflects the delicate balance managers try to maintain between gathering information and avoiding premature disclosure of their intentions. The second quote stresses the lack of transparency in the process, as decisions about an employee's mobility are often made without direct communication. Talent themselves also noticed the practice of guesswork and the enclosed nontransparent process:

It was not a transparent process, but the manager who had taken it upon himself to pick out individuals they saw as promising and decide if they were mobile. Here it was included that you had to answer questions about geographical movement, where an employee could imagine living etc. (Talent)

Mobility is not something I have been asked about. However, I heard afterwards via my previous manager that when she was asked to appoint talent she included me, and in this she had indicated that I was mobile, because she said that afterwards. But she didn't ask me before submitting my name. (Talent)

These quotes from employees highlight the consequences of the lack of transparency in the process. They reflect feelings of exclusion and suggests that decisions about mobility, and thus talent designation, are made without the involvement or input of the employees concerned.

Consequences of mobility as a criterion in talent designation

Mobility as persuasive pressure. A prominent consequence of mobility as an important dimension in talent designation is that there is a compelling and persuading pressure and influence on involved managers as well as potential talent to embrace the meaning and relevance of the concept of mobility. This pressure can be understood as a form of coercive persuasion, where individuals are subtly but powerfully influenced to align with the prevailing norms, even if it conflicts with their personal circumstances and preferences. For example, one talent noted the implicit pressure to be willing to relocate, stating, "*There is, of course, an awareness and certain degree of pressure that you must be willing to be transferred, at least for a couple of years*". This comment highlights how mobility is not presented as a mere option but as an expectation that one must meet to be recognized as talent. Similarly, line managers knew that mobility was demanded and expected, and therefore started to enact mobility as part of the talent designation process:

I have noticed that mobility has increasingly started to be highly valued in the context of talent and it's something everyone knows. I would say that I have therefore been influenced to think along these lines. (Line manager)

Mobility has come up more often regarding talent management. And I've started to understand why this is important; we are what my managers usually remind us of, an international company, and so mobility is important. (Line manager)

These quotes illustrate how the organizational emphasis on mobility influences managers' thinking and actions, leading them to internalize and reproduce these expectations.

Reduced individual agency and the emergence of a specific talent profile. With this awareness it was also common among managers to try to motivate and persuade employees to being willing to be mobile:

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Potential talented employees need to be exposed to the opportunity in other locations, so they will need to accept being willing to move. (Line manager)

I think it's clear your chances of being selected as a talent and being part of development opportunities are greater if you are willing to move. Thus, if you're a talent . . . the more willingness you have to relocate and to change your personal situation, the more likely you will be part of the talent pool and the more opportunities we as a company can offer you. (HR manager).

These examples highlight how the organizational emphasis on mobility creates a scenario where employees are pressured to adjust their personal lives to fit the organization's expectations, effectively coercing them into compliance. In addition to understanding how the importance of mobility contributes to a consequence in the form of pressure and influence, we also start to understand that a prominent consequence is that individual agency does not alone determine mobility, but that it is strongly defined by structural and organizational norms and values. For instance, when a nontalent indicates he considers himself mobile but then capitulates when it contrasts with the surrounding norms, and the external pressure becomes too great:

All potential talent has been classified based on how mobile they are. If someone has lots of small children, this person is not so mobile right now. It's a discussion between the manager and the employee. My manager made that assessment of me; I have four small children and was not considered to be particularly mobile. Although I thought I was, and said that, my manager didn't think I was mobile. (Non-talent employee)

This nontalent employee described how their manager disregarded their self-assessed mobility due to preconceived notions about their personal situation. Thus, this example illustrates how organizational assumptions about what constitutes mobility can suppress individual preferences and decisions. Another talent employee also described how she had not been involved in deciding whether she was considered mobile or not, but rather how this was governed by assumptions rooted in structural and organizational norms and values:

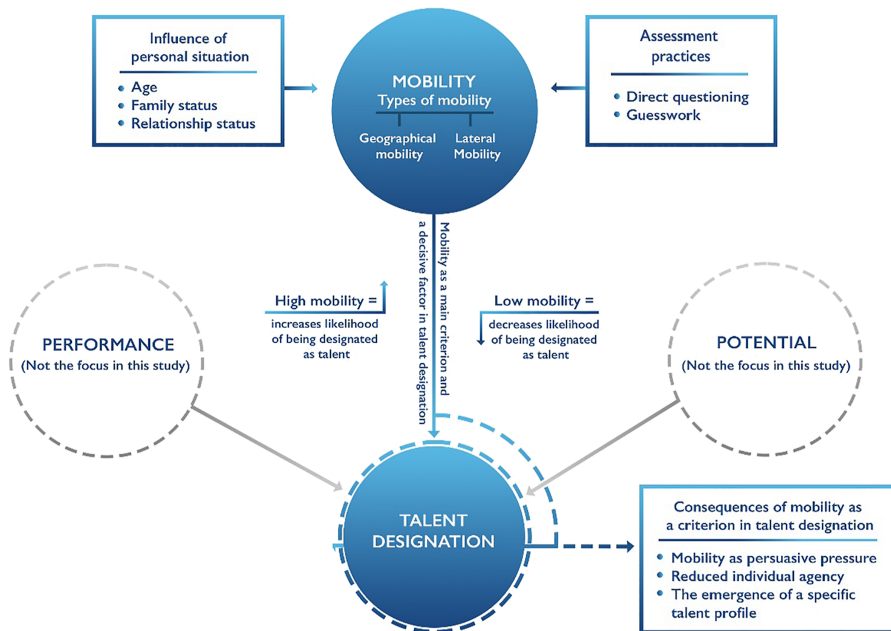
It becomes excluding and condemning not to be able to decide this yourself or to be asked, because certain things cannot be known for sure if you don't ask the individual. With mobility, for example, nobody knows for sure if I'm mobile or not if they don't ask me straight out. And the way I understood it, they assumed I was mobile because I'm young and don't have any kids and stuff. It's certainly not a transparent or impartial process in any way. (Talent employee)

This quote illustrates how talent may feel excluded from the decision-making process regarding their mobility status. This lack of transparency and the reliance on assumptions further reinforces the idea that employees are being subtly coerced into conforming to organizational norms about mobility, rather than being allowed to assert their own agency. Together, these examples illustrate how mobility as a criterion for talent designation does not merely reflect a preference or guidelines but acts as a form of coercive persuasion. The organizational norms exert significant pressure on both managers and employees to conform, often at the expense of individual autonomy and personal circumstances. This not only shapes how talent is designated but also that mobility contributes to the emergence and preservation of the talent concept as embodying a particular meaning and view of talent, that of being young, single, and anchorless.

Discussion

In this exploratory qualitative case study, we sought to explore how mobility impacts talent designation and with what consequences. To make sense of the concepts and their relationships in our data and to discuss our findings, we developed the model illustrated in [Figure 2](#).

The model summarizes and synthesizes our empirical analysis and emphasizes the central role of mobility in talent designation. It highlights how mobility, both geographical and lateral, operates as a key determinant in whether employees are identified as talent. The model



Source(s): Created by the author with graphic assistance from Caroline Karlsson

Figure 2. How mobility impacts talent designation and with what consequences

illustrates that personal factors, such as age, family status, and relationship status, are critical in shaping an individual’s perceived mobility, often assessed through either direct questioning or guesswork. High mobility increases the likelihood of talent designation, while low mobility reduces it, indicating that mobility functions as a decisive criterion alongside performance and potential. Furthermore, the model points to the consequences of emphasizing mobility in talent management, showing how this focus can lead to coercive persuasion, reduced employee agency, and potential discrimination based on personal circumstances. In synthesizing these relationships, the model provides a structured framework for understanding how mobility is enacted in practice and its broader implications for talent management processes. By illustrating these dynamics, the model not only captures the core findings of our study but also positions mobility as a central factor influencing talent designation decisions. Building on this, the following discussion will explore how these insights both align with and challenge previous research.

Theoretical and empirical contributions

While previous research has argued that mobility is a secondary or contextual identification factor (McDonnell et al., 2023; Jooss et al., 2021), our study shows that mobility plays a more significant role in how employees are assigned talent status. Mobility constituted, similar to that of performance and potential, a consequential dimension with a direct influence on whether an employee is considered talent. Thus, while this finding adds support to recent research that presents mobility as an increasingly important factor in talent designation (Böhmer and Schinnenburg, 2021; Jooss et al., 2021; McDonnell et al., 2023; Tyskbo, 2021), it also extends our current understanding by suggesting that mobility may serve as a key indicator of talent designation as opposed to only coming into play once the requirements for the primary factors are fulfilled, or as strengthening the relationship between the

traditionally-assumed key dimensions of performance and potential, with talent designation. This also aligns with the broader GTM literature, which views mobility as a strategic tool to enhance knowledge transfer, fill skills gaps, and improve organizational competitiveness (Collings *et al.*, 2019; Sousa *et al.*, 2024). However, our findings go further by revealing that mobility is not just a strategic enabler but also a key criterion for talent designation itself, alongside performance and potential.

In addition, we move beyond previous research that has stopped at formal descriptions of the importance of mobility, by also showing how the role of mobility and what is meant by it, unfold in practice. We found two types through which mobility manifests itself and impacts talent designation: geographical and lateral mobility. The former illustrates the opportunity and willingness to relocate internationally, thus largely reflecting the particularities of today's working life (Lyons *et al.*, 2015; Santos *et al.*, 2020). This type resonates with how mobility is typically referred to in TM literature and broader career literature, ascribing talent the characteristic of being an almost unproblematically rootless employee (Rushing, 1964). It also aligns closely with the GTM literature, which often emphasizes international relocations and talent flows across borders as essential for managing talent in multinational corporations (Collings *et al.*, 2019). Geographical mobility, central to GTM, has long been considered vital for facilitating knowledge transfer and increasing organizational competitiveness (Collings, 2014; Kirk, 2021). However, when HR managers described mobility, they went beyond this traditionally-assumed content and expressed a more nuanced understanding. Lateral mobility—defined as the willingness and opportunity to take on new responsibilities or move within the same organization—adds a more nuanced layer, illustrating that mobility is not solely about geographical relocation, as emphasized in the GTM literature, but also about the capacity to adapt and take on broader responsibilities within the same organizational context. Thus, while the GTM literature typically highlights geographical mobility as essential for transferring talent across borders to enhance organizational competitiveness (Collings *et al.*, 2019; Sousa *et al.*, 2024), lateral mobility focuses on flexibility within organizational boundaries. This type aligns with what previous research has described as a business logic, where the view of talent involves a focus on aspects such as mobility and broadness, thus ascribing talent the characteristic of being more a leader or manager with transferable and more general knowledge, rather than an expert or specialist with a more narrow and specific body of knowledge (Collings *et al.*, 2018; Fahrenkopf *et al.*, 2020; Tyskbo, 2021). This perspective also aligns with how elite and professional identities and roles are shaped by organizational demands and expectations (Hoyer, 2022; Waring, 2014). In showing this, we advance knowledge of what mobility implies and some of the different types it can take in practice (e.g. Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2019; Feldman and Ng, 2007; Ng *et al.*, 2007; Tansley and Kirk, 2018; Tyskbo, 2023), also connecting mobility with the broader expectations and norms within organizational contexts that define elite and professional identities (Hoyer, 2022; Kamoche and Leigh, 2022; Tyskbo and Wikhamn, 2022; Waring, 2014). This expands on the broader perspective on mobility as discussed in the GTM literature, which highlights its multiple dimensions, including internal, external, and virtual forms (Collings *et al.*, 2018; Kirk, 2021), further emphasizing the need for empirical studies to explore how these dimensions manifest in practice.

A further important finding concerns how mobility is determined. While much of previous research has been silent on how this happens, our study uncovered not only the determinants that impact whether an employee is considered mobile or not, but also the ways in which these determinants are decided upon. Abilities and competencies were not associated with mobility; rather it was the overall personal situation, including age, family status and relationship status, that largely determined an employee's mobility status (see Jooss *et al.*, 2021). These factors are generally considered less changeable, more stationary, and more difficult for individuals to influence, compared to, for example, skills and competencies (Van der Heijden, 2001; Hennekam, 2015), thus having important consequences for the extent to which employees themselves have the opportunity to shape their talent destinies. While the broader GTM

literature often views mobility as a strategic enabler for knowledge transfer and organizational competitiveness (Collings *et al.*, 2019), our findings highlight that mobility is also constrained by personal circumstances such as family responsibilities and life stages. This nuanced perspective suggests that mobility is not always a straightforward strategic choice but can be limited by individual factors, creating a more complex understanding of how it impacts talent designation in practice. In considering how these determinants were decided upon, two main practices emerged: direct questioning and guesswork. While the first seems more reasonable and acceptable, both practices are likely to be subject to sensitive aspects. Jooss *et al.* (2021) argue that it is critical to have accurate information about an employee's personal circumstances, but this is difficult, as organizations often lack awareness of individual factors such as family situations. If managers and organizations use direct questioning, the chances should increase for getting a fair picture and allowing the employees themselves to decide whether and to what extent they want to share such information. However, this would still include disclosure of potentially sensitive personal information, and there are therefore questions about the risk of invading privacy (Hall and Richter, 1988), and the uncertainty about the possible intrusiveness of raising family and personal issues for explicit talent discussions. Guessing, on the other hand, risks leading to misconceptions and prejudices arising and intensifying due to, for example, stereotypes and perceptions of blurred boundaries between work and family life (Jones, 2017). This is an avenue worthy of further examination in terms of how sensitive and delicate situation that determines mobility for talent designation is largely based on personal circumstance.

In addition, we add to the current understanding of how mobility impacts talent destination by going beyond only stating it is an important criterion, and exploring how this occurs in practice, and by theorizing some of its consequences. More specifically, the weight ascribed to mobility contributed to a compelling pressure and influence put on both managers and potential talent to embrace the meaning and relevance of mobility. This finding resonates with the study by Farndale *et al.* (2010), in which they used social context theory to argue for the important role of corporate culture in representing an organizational social environment that influences the establishment of an HRM system (Ferris *et al.*, 1999). They acknowledged that this is a form of social control which encourages behaviors and attitudes appropriate for an organization's members to display (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1996), and mentioned mobility as an example. However, they largely framed mobility as a free and individual choice, as they stressed the importance of creating a climate in which people feel encouraged to be mobile. In contrast, our findings suggest that the pressures on talent to become mobile can be understood as coercive persuasion (Schein *et al.*, 1961; Tourish *et al.*, 2009), leaving considerably less room for potential talent individually to decide and influence their desire and opportunity to move. This further highlights the importance of considering the relationship and interplay between agency and structure (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2020; Kirk, 2021; Swailes and Lever, 2022) in terms of talent designation and mobility. While an emerging stream of TM research (e.g. McKeown and Pichault, 2021; Meyers, 2020) argues that potential talent plays a more active role in gaining access to, and capitalizing on, talent management practices, we suggest that individual agency seems to submit to structural and organizational norms and values. These norms and values can be understood as guidelines that shape how potential talent makes sense of their situation and how they behave in ways considered appropriate, largely constraining agency. Finally, and as we have already touched on above, the negative attitudes and behaviors toward individuals regarding their potential talent status, strongly based on age, family status, and relationship status, can have discriminatory and exclusionary consequences (Bayl-Smith and Griffin, 2014; Jones, 2017). Taken together, based on these findings and our theorizing, we suggest that mainstream TM literature has provided an overly optimistic and simplistic picture, and we instead paint a potentially darker side of mobility, and raise a critical awareness of what mobility and some of its consequences mean in practice (Böhmer and Schinnenburg, 2021; Tyskbo, 2021).

Based on these findings, this study makes two main contributions to the literature. First, it shows how the two taken-for-granted dimensions of performance and potential, as highlighted in existing literature, cannot entirely explain how talent designation unfolds in practice. Instead, the article stresses the consequential role of mobility, thus advancing a more nuanced understanding of how talent designation unfolds in practice. In addition, it advances the theoretical understanding of what is meant by mobility and how it is determined. Thus, it answers the call for more empirical research on what basis talent status is assigned (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017, 2023), and the role of mobility (Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2019; Tansley and Kirk, 2018; Tyskbo, 2023), adding further support to the emerging stream of TM literature arguing that talent designation is far more complex and intricate than traditionally assumed (Meyers, 2020; Tyskbo and Wikhamn, 2022; Wikhamn *et al.*, 2021). We highlight how organizational norms and elite and professional identities and roles are shaped by broader institutional demands, influencing who is recognized as talent (Hoyer, 2022; Kamoche and Leigh, 2022; Waring, 2014). This contribution is particularly relevant in light of the broader GTM literature, which often frames mobility as a strategic tool for enhancing knowledge transfer, filling skill gaps, and driving global talent flows across borders (Collings *et al.*, 2019; Farndale *et al.*, 2010). While the GTM literature generally views mobility positively, our findings demonstrate that mobility is not just a strategic enabler but also a key criterion for assigning talent status. This stresses the need to consider how organizational competitiveness depends not only on facilitating mobility but also on how mobility is perceived and enacted at the individual level. In this way, we extend the GTM perspective by showing that mobility, while essential, is often influenced by personal and situational factors that shape individual talent's mobility capabilities and decisions. Second, it moves beyond much of existing research, which has stopped at formal descriptions of how talent designation plays out, and also contributes with knowledge about its consequences. More specifically, the study theorizes about, and looks upon, the decisive role that mobility plays as a case of coercive persuasion, leaving individual employees with significantly less room for enacting agency and playing active roles in relation to TM, than previous conceptual research has suggested (Meyers, 2020; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013). Added to this are the potential discriminatory and exclusionary consequences as a result of mobility being essentially determined based on an individual's personal situation. While the GTM literature generally focuses on the strategic benefits of mobility for organizations (Collings *et al.*, 2018), our findings provide a more critical perspective on how these broader organizational strategies intersect with individual realities, creating tension between strategic goals and personal constraints. This study, therefore, responds to previous research calling for more critical and nonmanagerialist studies that are sensitive to the ethical and darker sides of exclusive TM in general and talent designation in particular (Böhmer and Schinnenburg, 2021; McDonnell *et al.*, 2023; Swailes, 2020; Swailes and Lever, 2022; Tyskbo, 2021).

Practical implications

The findings from this study highlight several important implications for organizations and their approach to managing talent, particularly in relation to mobility. It is essential for organizations to approach mobility assessments with care, understanding that basing decisions on personal situations can lead to exclusion and bias. Rather than making assumptions about an employee's mobility, managers might benefit from implementing more transparent processes that allow employees to express their own mobility preferences, thereby reducing the potential for unfair exclusion. Organizations might also consider adopting a more flexible understanding of mobility, recognizing that an employee's circumstances can evolve over time. Regularly reassessing mobility criteria could help ensure that potential talent is not overlooked due to outdated information, thus fostering a more inclusive talent pool. Furthermore, it is important for organizations to align mobility expectations with broader organizational norms. Managers could find it beneficial to clearly communicate these

expectations to ensure they are equitable and do not disproportionately disadvantage any particular group. Promoting open discussions about the role of mobility in career development might also contribute to a more inclusive approach. To prevent coercive pressures, organizations may want to ensure that mobility decisions remain voluntary and that employees feel confident in expressing their preferences without fear of negative consequences. Lastly, enhancing fairness and inclusivity could involve providing training for managers to recognize and counteract biases, ensuring that mobility considerations do not unfairly disadvantage employees based on characteristics such as age, family status, or relationship status. In conclusion, organizations are encouraged to critically reflect on their approach to mobility within talent management. Ensuring that processes are inclusive, fair, and aligned with strategic goals could help mitigate the ethical and operational risks associated with poorly managed mobility expectations and improve the overall effectiveness of talent designation practices.

Limitations and future research

This study is tied to specific boundary conditions, i.e. situations to which the results are likely to be theoretically generalizable and have certain limitations, which together provide opportunities for future research. An important contextual factor that might impact on whether, and how, the role, meaning, and consequences of mobility observed in this study will occur, concerns the organization. Large and multinational corporations are generally thought of as being more pervaded by global mobility (Caligiuri and Bonache, 2016). However, different organizational forms and contexts can still imply the existence of and variations in how mobility impacts talent designation, which becomes important to consider when comparing different organizations. There are other important limitations to this study which future research could address. While our exploratory qualitative case study enabled a rich and grounded understanding, it only reveals certain aspects, and we encourage future research to take our exploratory insights further. For example, mobility emerged in our study as not being static but something that seems to change over time, likely influenced by an individual's personal situation. While we only touched upon this aspect, we encourage future studies to explore it in more depth. Finally, mobility also appears to be related to how talent status is communicated, which we suggest further studies should focus on.

As this was an exploratory study focused on understanding mobility and its impact on talent designation from a bottom-up perspective, future research could advance this work by integrating more established theories and adjacent literatures on mobility. On a similar note, since norms, values, and expectations about being mobile—and what it means to be considered talent—stood out in our findings, future studies might also draw on the institutional logic framework (e.g. Thornton *et al.*, 2012) to further examine how these factors shape talent designation processes across different organizational contexts. This approach could offer deeper insights into the interplay between organizational demands, professional identities, and talent management practices.

Conclusion

This exploratory, multiactor qualitative case study demonstrates the critical role of mobility, alongside performance and potential, in talent designation within organizations. Our findings show that both geographical and lateral mobility significantly shape talent designation, with personal factors such as age and family status often playing a decisive role. These dynamics constrain employee agency and can foster exclusionary practices, raising important ethical concerns around fairness in talent management. We advocate for more inclusive, transparent approaches to mobility assessments and encourage further research into how these issues manifest across different organizational contexts.

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