

# Talent — Its Application to the Thai Hospitality Industry

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**Abstract**—Talent is widely known as the main driver of business success. Therefore, the ability to manage talent effectively has become critical in the current business environment. However, there is lack of clarity on the concept of talent in different context. The hospitality industry is customer oriented and reliant on low skilled workers; and thus the lack of clarity of the concept of talent is more ‘pronounced’ within this industry. The research therefore investigates how the concept of talent is applied. The research used qualitative research methods to get an in-depth understanding of the subject matter. In total 38 semi-structured interviews were conducted with management level personnel. Data from the interviews was supplemented by documentation and observations; and this ensured triangulation of the responses and thus increased validity of the research. The research uncovered that the concept of talent was widely applied amongst the participating hotels. However, there is lack of consistency in how ‘talent’ is defined. Generally, talent is defined as high potential or high performance; and the qualities of talent included competence, commitment and contribution. Thus, talent is viewed as the sum of individual competence, commitment and contribution. Talent referred to key positions — that is, ‘talent’ implied some workers rather than all workers in the organisation. Moreover, talent was more an acquired rather than natural ability; and this depended on the organization’s context and the ability of the individual to transfer previous experiences to ‘fit’ with the current environment or situation.

**Index Terms**—AEC, hospitality industry, talent, talent management.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of talent has been of great interest to researchers and practitioners alike over the last two decades [1], [2]. This interest partially stems from the ‘great contribution to the organisation success’ which can be delivered by ‘talent’. However, the main challenge facing organisations is to fight for talent, especially in the age of globalization. Within the hospitality industry, there is also the additional challenge that the concept of talent is not usually applied within this domain area. This is because the hotel industry in generally, and hotels in particular are heavily labor intensive; with a varied labor force ranging from housekeepers to top managerial positions. Also, hotels rely a lot on low skilled or unskilled workers [3], [4]. Given this reliance on varied and mostly unskilled workforce, the

question therefore becomes: What is talent within the hotel industry and how is this concept of talent conceptualized? Through being able to define and operationalize the concept of ‘talent’, participating Thai hotels can fight-off competition likely to result from the establishment of AEC (ASEAN Economic Community). AEC is an economic union which will come into effect in 2015, and will bring member nations into a single market. This will lead to more competition between members states and globally.

The hospitality/tourism industry is one of the biggest contributors to the world economy [5], and more-so in some developing countries [6] such as Thailand. Thus, for example, in 2013 the hospitality industry contributed approximately 20.2 per cent to the Thai GDP, and also contributed to 15.4 per cent to total national employment (6,011,500 jobs) [7]. Over the years the tourism industry’s contribution to the Thai economy has been substantial (over 15 per cent); and this trend is expected to continue consistently in the next 10 years [7], [8]. Therefore this research chose the hotel sector in attempt to generate an understanding of the concept of talent within the hospitality industry based on empirical study.

## II. TALENT IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

### A. Concept of Talent

Talent management (TM) has become one of the most important strategies for managing talent; with talent believed to greatly contribute to organisational success and sustainable competitiveness. Its importance was illustrated by the results of the survey in 2014 of Towers Watson (consultant company) (based on respondents from around the world and also Thailand) which concluded that managing talent is one of the top concerns in today’s business (e.g. Changchit [9]). Consequently, it becomes imperative to be able define and conceptualize the concept of talent – fore, how can we use the strategic tool of TM to manage them if we do not know who is talent?

The word ‘talent’ has been used since ancient times, and the interpretation of the word talent differs according to different people, time and areas [10], [11]. The concept of ‘talent’ can be better understood if one traces how the concept has evolved over time. Tansley [10] noted that “*the word talent is more than thousands years old*”; and further noted that it has various interpretation and identification which are all dependent on time, people, and locality. The development of the word talent illustrate in Fig. 1.

Thus in ancient times (in the Western context), ‘talent’ generally referred to the amount/or unit of weight or money. This narrative originated from the ancient. This narrative originated from the ancient Greek word ‘talanton’ meaning ‘balance’ or ‘weight’. The Latin language then borrowed it as

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‘talentum’, and used it metaphorically to denote ‘mental inclination’ [12]. By contrast in the Eastern context (for example, Japanese), the equivalent term for talent was ‘saino’ meaning ‘ability and skill or accomplishment’. Tansley [10] views talent as an accomplishment acquired (developed) to attain perfection [10].

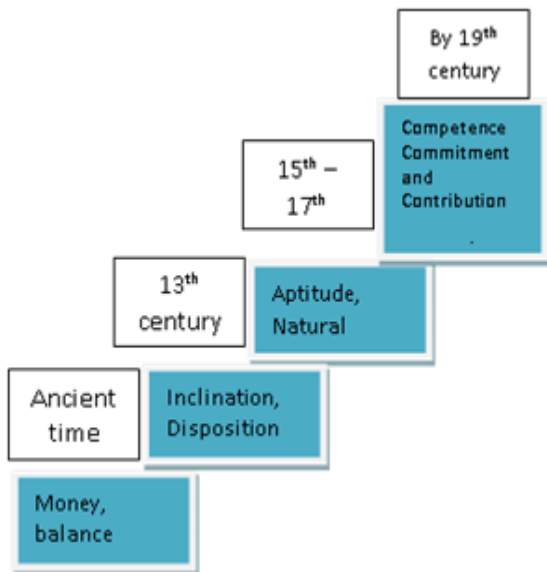


Fig. 1. The history of the term talent.

The view of ‘talent’ as combinations of ‘mental inclination’ and ‘talanton’ (‘balance’ or ‘weight’ of money) is also shown when the word is used in the parable of talents. In the parable (Matthew 25:14-30), the master gave his servants talents (money) based on their ability, in which two of them invested wisely and thus earned interest, and this earned them their master’s approval; while the other less enterprising servant simply buried his talent. According to Huang and Tansley [13] the word ‘talent’ was a synonym to the word ‘capital’ when the parable was translated from the Greek language to English. This led to the word ‘human capital’ and ‘talent’ becoming synonymous within the world of management.

In the thirteenth century, talent was more focused on the ‘inclination’ or ‘disposition’. According to Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries [14] talent was viewed as the interest of individuals of doing something, or the inherent quality characters of individuals; and they suggested that talent should be described as ‘subject’ (talent as natural ability, talent as a commitment, etc.) and ‘object’ (talent as all people, talent as some people, etc.) approach. It is in-line with the old French word of talent which viewed talent as ‘will’ or ‘desire’ that we therefore argue that talent in thirteenth century laid the background of the meaning of talent in today’s meaning where more aspects added (e.g. competence, contribution).

From the fifteenth to seventeenth century, talent meant a person's mental ability or particular special abilities or attitudes (gifted talent). According to this view, this gift was a gift from God. Though this was a gift from God, this gift could be ‘improved’ [14] which implies that there was a big element of learning (acquired skill). During this time, talent referred to the individual’s ‘aptitude or ability’. The focus was on the competencies of individual, and thus competence was very important.

By the nineteenth century when there was a more agreed definition of talent; the concept began to be ‘exported’ into the domain of management and in that regard was linked to human resource management (HRM). The issue of talent became more pronounced when the McKinsey Consultancy Company coined the phrase ‘war for talent’ because the lack of talent and as a means of referring to high potential worker who can contribute to high performance; and thus the business success [15]. To achieve high performance, Ulrich and Smallwood [16] notes that this entails ‘competence x commitment x contribution’.

There has also been considerable debate about the role of nature vs. nurture in talent development; however, this research is not concerned about how talent has arisen. In fact, the research takes the view that talent is not just the natural gift or skill, but more than that it is also a combination of practice and motivation. The McKinsey consultancy company highlighted the concept talent within the domain of business and management due to shortages of talent, and they defined talent as “sum of an individual's abilities, their intrinsic gifts, skills, knowledge, experience, intelligence judgment, attitude, character and drive” [15]. Furthermore, talent individuals can create value, and contributed above average value to their work place, and thus lead to organisation success in the short-term and long-term [1], [17]. Many other terms referring to talent (such as super-keeper) and definitions of talent have been proposed by other researchers like Berger and Berger [18] and Robertson and Abbey [19]. The general thrusts of these arguments are that, for future business success, talent is the most important corporate resource. This is because talents are smart, sophisticated, globally astute, and operationally agile [20]). Ready *et al.* [21] gave another notion of talent when referring to them as high potential and thus able to deliver strong results and also master new type of work quickly.

It can be concluded that the definition of talent is very fluid, and this was also observed by Tansley [10] who noted that the concept of talent varies for different people, time and organisations. Therefore, in this research will investigate how talent is defined and operationalized among members of the Thai hotel association? This is because it is claimed by Baum [4] that talent is hospitality industry might not be the same meaning compare to other industries.

### B. The Thai Tourism Industry

In order to apply the concept of talent in the hospitality industry we have to understand the nature of this industry. Gilbert and Guerrier [22] stated that understanding the nature of an industry (e.g. industry’s characteristics) is important for management; and in this research we argue that nature and image of hospitality industry might not be appropriate to use the term talent as the general definition of talent refers to high potential who can contribute great results to the organisation they are working for.

The hospitality industry is viewed as a low paying industry with poor working conditions, and as being operated by semi-skilled or unskilled workers [23]. However, this description of the industry is not shared by all the participants in this industry. Indeed there both positives and negative perceptions about the industry. For instance, Barron, Maxwell

[24] found that students perceived the hospitality industry as an exciting and dynamic environment with good career opportunities; and allowing the opportunity to work with public customers. Meanwhile, Gilbert and Guerrier [22] found that managers perceived the industry as having low status and image. Barron, Maxwell [24] also found that poor image of the industry was also due to difficulties in dealing with different types of customers (highly demanding customers) and also poor management of managers. For these reason, they suggested that individuals who want to stay in this industry have be competitive oriented, hard-working, and patient.

It can be seen that to deliver service quality to meet the satisfaction of customer, this target cannot be achieved without human resources. Pizam and Shani [25] and Baum [4] noted that the hospitality industry relies heavily on the human capital (people oriented) compared other industries, despite this being an era of technological advancement. Pizam and Shani [25] found that, this industry is slightly different from other service establishments, since it does not only provide for basic human needs but also fulfils visitor dreams. Through direct interaction between the employee and customer visitors' dreams can be fulfilled, although customers are unique and this has to be factored into the equation. Therefore, the ability to respond to the needs of customers in different situations creatively and imaginatively is needed in hospitality industry.

In conclusion, we argue that the hospitality industry relies heavily on labor because of the nature of work which is customer oriented. Moreover, the qualities needed of workers in this industry are different from other industries. Baum [23] argued that in many less developed countries (e.g. Thailand), particularly in the services sector need quality to deliver services to an international standard. We argue that the term talent might be applied to the hospitality industry, though its definition and operationalization may be different from other industries. Therefore, quality workers are needed in this industry and, thus the need to define and identify talent within the industry. The research therefore investigated how the term talent is applied within the hospitality industry among the participating hotels.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The empirical study is based on a qualitative approach. This research approach is appropriate when the research aims to investigate a subject-matter in-depth and to understand the research issue in real life context by allowing researcher to interact which subject-matter; and what is happening in the real life can be used to generate the theory [26]. Thirty-eight semi-structured face-to-face interviews with people in key positions (HR managers, line managers, and CEOs/General managers) in participating hotels were conducted. These positions were chosen because they represent a broad ranges of positions and experiences in the industry; and would thus provide greater depth about the 'subject-matter'. Semi-structured interview allows researcher to prepare the interview question which cover the research aim and objectives. The semi-structured interviews are supplemented

by documentations and direct observations.

Thirty-eight interviews were conducted in 29 hotels, the sample procedure of choosing sample was purposive and snowball sampling. As Berg and Lune [27] noted, purposive sampling is based on real purpose of the research to discover, gain and understand in particular phenomena (e.g. purpose in gaining view and experience from key position); participant hotels is under Thai Hotel Association (THA) as the main accreditation association of hotels in Thailand enable the researcher to better understand the contextual setting of standard organisation. Moreover, snowball sample was utilized from the first contact hotel and it recommend to other hotels which was worked well in hotel under umbrella of THA.

Thirty-three interviews were recorded and transcribed; while written notes were made with respect to the other five participants. In all the cases, the rights and confidentiality of interviewees was observed. Anonymity of the interviewees was also considered, and thus all the tapes were destroyed once transcribed; and any of transcriptions and notes were anonymized. Interview transcriptions and notes were then analyzed using the content analysis technique. This was done in order to describe the perceived patterns and themes of interviewees in hospitality industry of how the concept of talent is applied by organisations. It noted that this technique of analysis should be carefully detailed, systematically examined and interpreted in order to identify patterns, themes, categories, bias and meaning.

The credibility of the research was ensured through triangulation (using different sources of evidence such as interviews, observations and documentation). This is expected to reduce bias, and therefore using different methods help the researcher increase the chances of capturing all relevant data which might have been missed if using interviews only. Furthermore, the researcher had a list of themes and key questions to be covered (an interview guide), and these covered the research objectives; and also helped the researcher to consistently focus on what was being researched. However, the researcher cannot guarantee the transferability of the findings; and thus the findings provide sufficient information that can then be used by other scholars determine whether the finding are applicable to their new situation.

### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research found that the term talent was widely known among the respondents. However, the definitions adopted varied greatly across the respondents. This appears to mirror the views of Tansley [10], who observed that talent means different things to different people and different organisations.

We conclude from the finding that talent within participating hotel is defined as the sum of competence, commitment and contribution; and these are greatly influenced by the business strategy, culture and policies. Furthermore, the influences of the individual' perception, customer types, job tasks required, location of hotels, and economic situation were regarded as important considerations in this definition.

Despite these differences, we can categorize the responses on the definition of talent as below.

#### *A. Talent Refers to Acquired Ability Rather than Pure Natural Ability*

The debate on whether talent is an ability than can be acquired (learnt, nurture) vs. talent as pure natural ability (gifted) is not new; and indeed its one that has been raging in many other areas of research including education, etc. The findings as reported in Section 4.2.1.2 indicated that there is hardly any roles within hotels that depend entirely on pure natural ability or purely on acquired skills. Instead, it is the combination of natural talent ability, and nurture (acquired) that constitutes talent in this area. In fact, we concluded that talent within this industry is more an acquired ability than natural ability. The acquired (learnt) qualities/skills are gained from experience, training, or education. Most of the participants also viewed talent's abilities as being more heavily reliant on acquired (nurture) compared to natural skills.

Very few participants defined talent based purely on natural ability. In this category of talents are individuals who know everything about the work or need very little training as they can learn quicker than normal workers. This categorisation is in-line with Neihart [28] when he described gifted talented workers as the 'naturally able' with a high degree of giftedness to perform to the best practice [29]. However, it is debatable whether innate talent can be successful without being supplemented with the motivation and training on particular activities (e.g. study, work, sport) [30], [31]. If such talent exists; it will probably not surprisingly that individuals who satisfy this criterion are hard to find in any walk-of-life, and more-so within this domain of work. Therefore, talent as the purely gifted was never-considered among participating hotels.

Unsurprisingly, talent in the hotel sector or any workplace cannot be purely natural ability. This may be partly due to the fact that individuals need to understand the work processes and also understand the strategic view of the hotel; and this requires time and training. Even in areas where the idea of talent is viewed as natural ability such as education, sports, music, etc; there is still considerable debate and doubt about how it fits in with nurture [32].

In conclusion we note that talent within this sector can be acquired (nurture, train, educated, experience); and this has to be constantly done. These findings are in-line with Gagné [33] who concluded that talent is "...developed abilities (or skills) and knowledge in at least one field of human activity...(p. 120)." Gagné further argued that talent are built by enhancing innate gifts through learning and training. Furthermore, a study by Howe *et al.* (1998) concluded that no single person is successful without long period of studying, practicing, or training. Thus, participating hotels are more interested and rely on talent that is nurtured or acquired. This chimes with ideas expressed by Csikszentmihalyi [34] that "talent is not an all-or-nothing gift but a potential that needs to be cultivated." Similarly, while the western dictionary describes talent as nature, the Eastern part of the world (e.g. Japanese) defined talent as 'saino' - ability, skills and accomplishment. It set the position that talent is more an acquired and developed ability.

Therefore, since talent can be trained, it is necessary to set training programmes to meet the requirements of the industry. Also, organisations have to create work environments that are friendly for learning, and adapting to current and future needs. This allows talent to use their knowledge and skills to achieve the best performance [16]. 'Best performance' is achieved through using a combination of soft skills and hard skills; and thus Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2013) concluded that the quality of talent comes from 'natural ability + mastery + fit'.

#### *B. Talent Is More Managerial/Key Positions Rather Than All Workers*

According to Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries [14] talent is some workers; and specifically refers to high potential in managerial positions. Similarly, this research found that talent among the participating hotels meant some workers (managerial/key positions/ high potential worker) rather than all workers; and specifically those who possess the combination of competence (fit to the organisation), commitment, and contribution. Managing talent for these respondents was therefore more focused on employees who meet this profile rather than all workers; who are managed under the general human resource management strategies.

##### *1) Talent as the key positions/high potential workers*

The majority of participants considered talent as individuals who possess leadership, knowledge, skills and potential; and who are thus able to use these abilities to contribute good performance for the organisation. Talent will also supplement other available resources in the organisations [10], [15]. This ensures that they are thus able to contribute to great performance.

In this definition, talent referred to 'A' players in 'A'/key positions as noted by Becker and Huselid [35]. The term talent in this definition consists of the 10-20 per cent top performers in the organisation that are also have a great motivation to work and motivate other workers. The performance of talented workers in this respect is the same as performance categories described in the research by McKensy Company [15]. The workers were classified as 'A players' (top 10-20 %); 'B players' (competent 60-70%); and 'C players' (bottom 10-20%) respectively [15]. It is also in line with Ulrich and Smallwood [16] who defined this group of talent as the top leaders of their organisation (top 10-15 %). It is recommended that the organisation should choose just the 'A players' category and eliminate all the 'C players'; and this is because 'A players' can contribute to the great performance and motivate other people to work [15]. The participants indicated that when focusing on talent this implies key roles or senior levels like supervisors and managers. The rationale was talent need to be responsible for keeping the standard high, and act as a role model to the subordinate and motivate them to work more effectively. The definition given by Michaels, Handfield-Jones [15] was similar to this definition; and their reason for focusing on this group is that they possess the combination of strategic mind, leadership ability, emotional maturity, and communications skills. Furthermore, talented worker has the ability to attract and inspire other colleagues or subordinates, have entrepreneurial instincts, functional skills, and the ability to deliver results. A similar

finding of the majority of organisation, defined talent as the high potential and key position can be seen in the study of [36].

## *2) Talent as high competence*

The other characterization of talent which emerged from the research was that of individuals who are competent (that is, possess standard knowledge & skills); and are also willing to learn and grow in their particular job. This characterization is also supported by D'Annunzio-Green [37] who argued that talented workers are identified as promotable, and are valued by the organisation at all levels. In the thirteen century such talent was viewed as an 'inclination' or 'disposition'; and it was the 'will' or 'desire' (willingness) of the individual to learn and grow. Essentially, this view is attuning to the competent worker ('B players') in the definition proposed by Michaels, Handfield-Jones [15].

The 'B player' worker who has high competence and desire to do job was an extremely popular choice among the participants. This might be because the number of workers who fit the 'A player' profile are limited; constituting only just 10-20% of the workforce [15], [38]. DeLong and Vijayaraghavan [39] also noted that the emphasis on 'B players' could be due to the fact that organisations cannot afford to hire 'A player' workers in all positions; and thus for their long-term success have to instead focus more on the commitment and contribution of 'B' players. This may be the reality of the today's business environment.

Based on this discussion, it can be concluded that most of the hotels regard talent as some workers rather than all workers; and more specifically the view was that talent exists in key positions (from senior workers to general managers). Talents are defined as high potential individuals who possess the knowledge, skill (related to the job, acquired through work experiences or learning) and a great motivation to work (that is, motivation to work for the organisation and perform job role) and act as a role model. Furthermore, concerning senior management level, talents were viewed as individuals who act as role models in order to motivate subordinates. However, some hotels defined talented workers as individuals who had appropriate basic skills to work, commitment to learn and grow in the organisation. In this respect, talent referred to all employees. Hotels were more interested in talents who mostly possessed soft-skills (e.g. service-minded, motivation, team working) and hard skills (e.g. ability to use foreign language). The focus was more on soft skills.

Therefore, in the context of the hospitality industries, especially in hotels talent referred to high potential workers who work in key positions. This is because these positions can assist, coach, act as a role model for their subordinates to work well to meet the hotel goal. The findings are in-line with Phillips and Roper [40] who indicated that "talent (is) narrowly defined as a core group of leaders, technical experts and other key contributors"; and that respect implies not all workers can be talent. Particularly, those in key positions (high potential) were more popularly viewed as talented workers among the respondents. The other interesting findings are that hotels were more likely to develop their own talents in order to have the talent who understand the organisational values and ethos (learns and grows). With

regards to the likely threats of AEC (single market scheme), the respondents believed that having 'home grown talent' would drive and assist them to remain competitive.

While talent within participating hotels mainly implied some workers rather than all work; the literature review indicating focusing on some workers may send the wrong signal to other employees. The other workers might wrongly take that to imply that they are not important to the organisation [41]. The other danger might be that of bias; and the organisation may miss some workers who could potential contribute significantly in the future. These 'missed' workers might grow disillusioned and therefore leave the organisation because they are excluded from career opportunities.

Meanwhile Horowitz [42] takes almost the opposite view, and sees talent as the source of problems. His view is that having talent can reduce the performance in the organisation because they misbehave in some cases (e.g. complaining constantly, rebelling); and his recommendation is that any talent who misbehaves has to be fired rather than kept in the organisation. The other argument is that some talents stop trying once they have been labelled as such.

This research indicated that there are more benefits than drawbacks for hotel in having talent. Organisations need to define and identify talent in order to link it with staff decisions, investments in training & development, and compensations & rewards. Therefore, since talent within participating hotels referred to high potential/high performance in key positions; and these findings are similar to the study by Scott [43]. The study advocates rewards for professionals, primarily mid-to-senior professionals. As result, organisations have to invest heavily in developing talent; and this is evident in that 'home grown' talent is more preferred through 'building talent pipelines.'

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusion that can be drawn from the results of the empirical study is that the concept of talent is widely applied and adopted (to varying degrees) among the participating Thai hotels. However, it is noted that there are various definitions of talent that were proposed by the participating hotels. The concept of talent was perceived differently in different hotels and at different levels (even within the same hotel). This is consistent with researches of Iles, Chuai [1] which indicated that talent means different things to different people, organisations, places, etc. Thus, the different perspectives on the definitions of talent might be influenced by the characteristic of the organisations or organisational strategy, organisation type, type of customers, and/or the competition situation of the organization [1], [11]. This might also include the culture of the organisation. CIPD [11] also found that "organisations often find greater value in formulating their own meaning of what talent is rather than accepting universal or prescribed definitions"; and it appears that the hospitality industry is not different.

There are a variety of terms which are used to define and identify the concept talent within this area of study. This variety can be viewed as an indication of the richness of the vocabulary within this area hospitality industry in Thailand.

Meanwhile, this variety can also be pointed-out as an indication that there is lack of consensus on the definitions: See Iles, Chuai [1], Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries [14] and Tansley [10]. Despite these differences; there is also a lot of commonality and crossover in the definitions 'adopted'.

It is also noted that despite some differences in the definitions and understanding of the concept of talent among the participants; it appears that there is an attempt to align the application of the term talent to the company's strategy and values. This was evident from the proposed definitions of talent; which was 'proposed' to refer to individuals who possess the sum fit of competency, commitment, and contribution. Moreover, they are identified talent as the key positions (or key drivers) of organisational success. Thus accordingly, talent is high potential (or high performance) workers in key role position who possess high knowledge and skills; are committed and motivated to perform; and contribute to work performance and influence their counterparts as role models. The high performance and leadership will lead to business success. This definition fundamentally converged on the one proffered by Ulrich and Smallwood [16]. Ulrich and Smallwood [16] concentrated on the qualities of talent and argued that talent should have commitment, competence and contribution of work.

Therefore the findings in this research appear to be in line with the conclusions drawn by Stahl, Björkman [44] who argued that organisations cannot merely apply best practices of other top-performing companies, but rather that each organisation should align its practices with its strategy and values. Thus, the definition of talent should be directly aligned with the organization's strategy and value. Furthermore, the hospitality industry needs individuals who fit into the organisation and brings (or buys) into their values and ethos. Also, individuals who are committed (e.g. especially given the unsocial working hours) are needed. Therefore, talent within the context of hospitality industry would mean the combination of adequate competence and commitment to work; which should result in great contribution in service quality. In addition, the quality of motivation and acting as role model are an ideal combination.

As indicate earlier talent among the participating hotels referred to some workers rather than all workers. Also, the view of talent as trained or acquired was more popular; and this was evident in the push towards 'home grown talent'. This was also evident through the participants advocating the development of appropriate talent pipeline from which to build their future talent. The participants believed that talent's best contribution depends on the context. Therefore, identifying talent at early stage is important for the development of the talent to fill that strategic role. Through identifying talent, organisations can plan appropriate investment for the organisation. The process of defining and identifying talent should be considered carefully and strategically. This entails the systematic identification of strategic job roles, that is, job roles that can contribute to the organisation remaining competitive.

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