emerald**insight**

Journal of Organizational Ethnography

The talent paradox: talent management as a mixed blessing
Dagmar Daubner-Siva, Sierk Ybema, Claartje J. Vinkenburg, Nic Beech,

Article information:

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald
for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission
guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company
manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as
well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and
services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the
Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for
digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

The talent paradox: talent management as a mixed blessing

Dagmar Daubner-Siva
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Sierk Ybema
*Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands and
Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK*
Claartje J. Vinkenburg
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands, and
Nic Beech
University of Dundee, Dundee, Scotland

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an inside-out perspective on the practices and effects of talent management (TM) in a multinational organization.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts an autoethnographic approach focusing on the experiences of the first author during her employment in a multinational organization. This approach contributes to the literature by providing an insider talent perspective that thus far has not been presented in TM research.

Findings – Applying autoethnography as a means to address the inside-out perspective in TM reveals a tension. The authors label this phenomenon the "talent paradox," defined as the mix of simultaneously occurring opportunities and risks for individuals identified and celebrated as a talent.

Originality/value – The paper may be of value to TM scholars and practitioners, as well as to employees who have been identified as high potentials or talents in their organizations. In contrast with the TM literature's optimism, the findings illuminate that being identified as a talent may paradoxically produce both empowerment and powerlessness. Attending to personal aspects of TM processes is relevant for organizations as well as for individuals as it enables reflection and sensemaking.

Keywords High potentials, Talent management, Organizational change, Paradox, Organizational autoethnography

Paper type Research paper

We are very pleased to announce that Dagmar [Daubner] will be appointed in the position of Diversity and Inclusion Consultant, effective as of 1st May 2013. Dagmar will report to Ben Stein in his position of Global Director Personnel Development (PD). Dagmar joined SPARK in 2009 and made since then a significant contribution to the SPARK Learning and Development agenda. In her new role, Dagmar will be responsible for identifying a global diversity business case, defining focus areas, and linking them to talent management initiatives and processes. Please join us in wishing Dagmar the best of success in this new and challenging role (Global Director PD and Chief HR Officer).

When the above announcement was published on SPARK's intranet site in April 2013 I (the first author) thought: "I have finally made it […] now it is official!" A few moments earlier, my appointment in a new position was shared with the entire global human resource (HR) community, and I knew I would receive the first congratulatory e-mails soon. Everybody in the team knew that I had worked hard for this promotion, and that it was a natural next step

in my career. A year before I had been identified as a talent per SPARK's talent identification procedure and criteria. This story did not end as happily as I had thought in that moment. Whilst the venerable appointment initially made me feel incredibly empowered to drive organizational change, I later felt helpless and powerless. I had to rely on higher management to decide on my future career at SPARK. Here is where this study makes a contribution. It brings to the fore the odd mixture of power and powerlessness experienced by individuals identified and celebrated by management as talents. We coin this phenomenon the "talent paradox."

In the last decade, there is a sharp increase in publications on talent management (TM) (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017). Broadly defined, TM is concerned with the development and implementation of an HR architecture to fill key positions with high potential and high performing (i.e. talented) employees in order to sustain the organization's competitive advancement. TM has often been studied from a managerial or HR perspective (e.g. McDonnell *et al.*, 2017), using a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods such as surveys and interviews. To date, relatively little is known about TM from the talents' own perspective (McDonnell, 2011) and how being identified as a talent plays out in the interaction with other members of the organization. The objective of this study is to contribute to filling this gap by providing an account "from within"; that is, from the perspective of a talent herself. Our understanding of TM may benefit from autoethnography (AE) as a research approach that is ideally suited for exploring what it means for a person to be denoted as talent. AE is an innovative form of ethnography – an emerging style of social science writing that not only draws on the researcher's observations and involvement in a particular social setting, but also includes the researcher's own personal experiences of the cultural phenomenon being studied (Sambrook *et al.*, 2014). Applying AE as a means to address a talent's lived experience allows us to make a contribution to current thinking about TM by showing that, unlike the literature's predominant claim that TM empowers talents in an organization, being identified as a talent may simultaneously work to "disempower" them at the same time. Being selected and celebrated as a talent can be a blessing that is immanently mixed: it may be both positive and negative at the same time.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce the TM literature and identify the limitations of common approaches to study TM. Second, we present AE and consider its utility in researching the personal and dynamic nature of TM from an insider's perspective. Third, we describe five autoethnographic vignettes that enable us to carve out the talent paradox. Providing insights in the lived experience of a talent in a large, international organization (that we refer to as "SPARK") allows us to enrich the scholarly conversation on TM.

Debates in the TM literature

TM is a growing discipline (McDonnell *et al.*, 2017, p. 89) with a growing consensus on TM definitions, theoretical frameworks, and levels of analysis (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016). Three significant themes in the TM literature can be identified. First, there is discussion of exclusive or inclusive TM approaches (Dries, 2013). This debate concentrates on the question whether TM activities should focus on all employees (Ingham, 2006) or only on those select few identified as talent (Lewis and Heckman, 2006). While this debate in organizations has not yet been resolved, Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen (2016) and Swailes (2013) conclude that the exclusive approach is prevailing in theorizing and studying TM.

The second theme concerns the intended employee outcomes of TM with the implicit assumption of the "Pygmalion effect" (Eden, 1984). The Pygmalion effect occurs when others' expectations of high performance (e.g. from the talent's supervisor) positively influence actual/ perceived performance of talents (Dries, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013). Research on employee reactions to talent identification reports positive effects for talents on attitudinal outcomes, such as commitment to increased performance demands, building skills, and supporting strategic priorities (Björkman *et al.*, 2013). Conversely, Lacey and Groves's (2014)

analysis indicates that those who are excluded from the talent pool experience career disadvantages. Combined, these findings suggest that those who are identified as a talent experience more positive outcomes than those who are not identified as a talent.

The third theme critically addresses the conflation of TM practices and activities promoted by consultancy firms and practitioner associations (Stahl *et al.*, 2012; Swailes, 2013). Thunnissen *et al.* (2013) are critical of a "unitarist" (p. 1754), "top-to-bottom managerialistic" (p. 1755) orientation in which practices are implicitly based on the mutual gains assumption, assuming that the TM practices would equally benefit the employer and the employee (Susskind and Movius, 2009; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013), but with little focus being given to employee voice.

In the TM literature, the experience of TM at the personal level remains under-examined (McDonnell, 2011; Swailes and Blackburn, 2016) and insights provided by talents themselves are currently absent. Thunnissen *et al.* (2013) suggest to move towards a more pluralistic view of TM, and McDonnell (2011) argues that methods including ethnography may be of value. We seek to engage with these arguments and while in the current literature TM can be seen as including "talents" who therefore have a positive experience and excluding others who therefore are less recognized and who experience career-disadvantage, we question how far this represents the lived experience and suggest that the downsides and ambiguities of identified talents may be significantly underplayed.

Autoethnography
Applying autoethnography to TM
The term autoethnography (AE) was first introduced by Hayano (1979) and can be defined as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis *et al.*, 2011, p. 273). Defining organizational ethnography as "the ethnographic study, and its dissemination, of organizations and their organizing process" (Ybema *et al.*, 2009, p. 4) organizational AE can be seen as a contemporary approach offering "another lens through which to better understand organization and management" (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012, p. 83). The AE researcher "retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences" (Ellis *et al.*, 2011, p. 275), which are not necessarily experiences garnered in research activities. The product – a written AE – is then considered to include "esthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience" (Ellis *et al.*, 2011, p. 277). AE is thus a useful approach to understand social processes from an insider perspective – a lens that is often neglected in today's management research (Stewart and Aldrich, 2015).

However, AE is not free of criticism. Despite the contested potential for growth in AE within organization studies (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012), there is resistance to acknowledge AE as valid approach to scientific knowledge production and sharing (Wall, 2006). Building on personal experiences as a source of data, "AE has been criticized for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualized" (Wall, 2006, p. 155). In response to the criticism that AE is not "proper research" (Sparkes, 2000, p. 22), authors who support AE have argued that this approach "is more authentic than traditional research approaches, precisely because of the researcher's use of self, the voice of the insider being more than that of the outsider" (Reed-Danahay, 1997 in Wall, 2006, p. 155).

Linking the strengths of AE to TM, we consider organizational AE to be a relevant approach in order to respond to Dries' (2013) call for studying TM by "being open to a plurality of perspectives [...] rather than departing from normative frameworks advocating 'one right way' of approaching or studying talent management" (p. 269). It is increasingly acknowledged that researchers bring some (if not all) of their selves into their studies (Sambrook *et al.*, 2014). Rather than considering subjectivity and personal involvement as weaknesses, Sambrook *et al.* (2014) encourage researchers to consider their own involvement. This is how this paper contributes to an increased understanding of how TM is perceived from a talent's viewpoint.

Research approach
This paper stems from a broader longitudinal autoethnographic research project that formed part of the first author's PhD research. As an external PhD candidate, Dagmar followed academic obligations of conducting research while being employed at SPARK. Being in the double role of a "researcher-practitioner," adopting an autoethnographic research approach presents an opportunity to reveal "stories otherwise silenced" (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012, p. 83). Throughout her employment at SPARK, Dagmar systematically collected her experiences and reflections. She took field notes, recorded conversations with friends as she recalled the happenings at work, and reflected on the situations with the help of personal notes – all recognized as valuable tools in autoethnographic research in order to write about past experiences (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). To analyze the data, the authors followed an iterative, explorative process: Dagmar selected data excerpts that yielded relevance for TM research, familiarized herself with literature on TM and paradox theory, carved out the research gaps, and together with the second and third author, she analyzed the data to generate new insights. The fourth author then contributed by offering a critical reading, and further refinement of the empirical narrative and the theoretical argument. When pursuing autoethnography, one is never alone – the process is an "ensemble performance" (Chang *et al.*, 2013). In our case, the observation and experience came from the first author, but there was then a dialogical engagement which enabled interpretation from a close and a distant perspective. This meant that greater reflexivity was enabled and a more explicit explanation of the organizational cultural background was worked through to understand specific interactions, and hence derive the broader relevance for TM theory. This allows us to bring two aspects to the fore: an individual talent perspective and the interactive aspects of being selected as talent in a competitive organizational setting.

The vignettes describe personal experiences, yet, these occurred in interaction with other individuals. Therefore, it is important to consider ethical responsibilities to identifiable others. Similar to studies conducted by other autoethnographers (e.g. Winkler, 2013), we have followed Ellis' (2007) recommendation to reflect on relational ethics within our study. In doing so, we have related to both ethics of care and ethics of responsibility (Winkler, 2013). With regard to ethics of care, we have not published any parts that Dagmar would not show to those referred to in the vignettes (Medford, 2006) and we have anonymized the individuals we refer to by using pseudonyms and renaming departments (Ellis, 2007). Dagmar received formal permission to conduct an autoethnographic study, but did not actively seek consent from persons portrayed in the vignettes. Being employed at an organization characterized by internal competitiveness and an obligation to be obedient to hierarchy, she felt that asking consent could harm her career at SPARK. With regards to ethics of responsibility, we have taken as much care as possible not to harm the other individuals in the story (Winkler, 2013). In selecting the stories and quotes, we were guided by our responsibility to present the situation how Dagmar perceived it – and at no point intended to misquote or misrepresent actions of others. Being the central focus of investigation, we have turned the analytical lens on the first author and her interaction with others (Winkler, 2013). Although the vignettes do not aim to offer a realist account and rather contain evocative description, this paper uses this material for analytic and theorizing purposes. In this sense, this paper's autoethnography is an evocative-analytical blend (cf. Anderson, 2006).

Findings
We now introduce an autoethnographic account of the first author's personal experiences in a large international organization in which she has been identified as a talent according to the internal talent identification procedure and criteria. After describing the research context, we will present five vignettes which together describe a period of 20 months,

from April 2012 until December 2013. The vignettes highlight the first author's experiences during a time of transition from the Learning and Development Department to a newly established (and soon abolished) position of diversity and inclusion (D&I) consultant within the global HRs department at SPARK, a fictive name for the case organization.

Research context

SPARK is an international company headquartered in the Netherlands, operating in the fast moving consumer goods industry. The multi-brand organization is represented in more than 70 countries and employs more than 80,000 employees worldwide. As a large multinational corporation, it hosts a corporate culture of commercialism, competitiveness, and "clientelism" (Jackall, 1988). A culture of corporate commercialism at SPARK turned people, products, knowledge and values (as well as "talents") into an "asset" or a "business case" instrumental in advancing a corporation's performance. To improve performance, SPARK actively cultivated a culture of competitiveness by, for instance, promoting such "leadership principles" as "Drive to win," defined as "Plays to win, showing determination and resilience to beat the competition and succeed against challenging targets." As a large multinational, SPARK formed a patrimonial bureaucracy in which power was centralized at the top, credit flew up the hierarchy, and responsibility and blame was pushed down the line (cf. Jackall, 1988). Such an environment grew relations of sponsorship/patronage and clientelism between managers and employees in which "personal loyalty and obedience to one"s superior and dependence on his favour […] governed behavior' (Jackall, 1988, p. 11). At SPARK, this sparked intense competition between peers, and made informal relationship-building crucial for career advancement. SPARK was known for its "fun culture": many informal gatherings that were important for being well-informed and building a network.

In 2013, global HR issued an internal booklet on TM that was shared internally with the HR business partners and with senior managers. At SPARK, TM was defined as a coordinated process that involved collaboration between subsidiaries, regions, and global functions (InternalDocument, 2013). Talents were defined as "people with the potential to grow into a leadership position and to handle responsibilities of a wider scale and scope" (InternalDocument, 2013). There were no formal communication procedures for talents (or non-talents). Employees were assessed by their managers on their performance in the form of an annual performance review and on their potential to grow into higher leadership positions, focusing on three criteria: learning agility, leadership competencies, and ambition. Together, the objective of this "tool" was to provide a "consistent approach to assess people against the potential criteria that are most relevant to our business" (InternalDocument, 2013). In line with the dominant approach in the TM literature, SPARK thus applied an exclusive TM approach based on denoted talents contributing significantly to the business success. Talents were considered as successors for key positions. On the basis of the internal guidelines, Dagmar had been identified as a talent in SPARK. Her line manager had informed Dagmar about her selection. She was part of a globally identified group of leadership talents, who were granted increased visibility to senior management and who were invited to attend talent development programs.

First vignette: lunch with Ben

It is Wednesday in April 2012, 12:00, I am just about to have a lunch meeting with Ben, the director for the global personnel development department. I have prepared well for this conversation. My goal is to convince Ben of the idea to integrate D&I in the talent identification project. I would be the perfect project member to represent the D&I perspective: I have been in my current position for nearly two years, and received a very good performance appraisal in March for the previous year.

I meet Ben in his office on the third floor; we take the elevator together to the ground floor. The elevator doors open and Ben, as always, makes a small gesture with his hand to allow me to exit first. I start walking, and we both turn left to the canteen. There, we fill our trays, pay and find a table in the noisy dining area. I sit opposite of Ben, and we talk about D&I, its relevance for SPARK and the possibilities to include a D&I perspective in the talent identification project. Ben states:

Generally, I think that we have to work on the topic of gender diversity. However, I have the general tendency of accepting too many topics – adding another topic would complicate things. I have only started a couple of months ago, and I need to make the right choices about what our team can focus on.

A few days later, I walk into Ben's office and ask for his decision as a follow up from our lunch conversation: "Did you have a chance to think about whether we can integrate a D&I perspective into the talent identification project?"

Ben looks up, shakes his head and says: "Gender is an important topic, but not the most important topic at this point in time."

Then, Ben suggests that he is very busy and I assume that he does not want to talk about the topic anymore. With lowered shoulders I return, unhappy, to my desk. I write in my notebook:

I didn't say anything, although I disagreed. I missed the right words and arguments to counter his opinion. I am disappointed, but I have to accept that I cannot change the decision at this moment.

For career reasons, employees at SPARK need to be careful. Not stepping on bosses' toes can be more important than speaking up for a cause.

Second vignette: meeting with Steven and his leadership team
It is Thursday, September 27, 2012. I sit in a meeting with the HR leadership team (HRLT), as they discuss the three-year strategic plan for the HR function. I have prepared the presentation in cooperation with the HRLT during the past weeks, and this is the last meeting to discuss final tweaks before Steven, the Chief HR Officer (CHRO), will present it to the executive board. When Nick, my Manager, informed me in the beginning of August that Steven had chosen me to support him with this presentation, I had been surprised, flattered and slightly nervous. I knew from previous years how stressful this task was. Nick had told me that Steven and the entire HRLT had a very high opinion of me. I was seen as one of the few high potentials in the global HR function and that they had no doubt that I would succeed in supporting Steven with the development of the strategic plan. In the weeks before the meeting I had supported the HRLT members to blend their respective parts into the overall HR strategy, and together with Steven, I developed new initiatives for the next three years. D&I was one of the new initiatives. I had shared my interest in the topic with Steven and he had encouraged me to develop a proposal.

Now, in the meeting, I feel slightly nervous and very proud that I can be part of this conversation together with the senior managers. As we talk about the new HR organization blueprint, Steven uses the topic of D&I as an example for required change. He says to the group in a firm voice:

I'm 3.5 years in this position now and have not even touched the D&I topic yet. I'm aware that I have to start it – not because I'm socially oriented, but because we need it as a company and because the megatrends from the outside world will force us to do so. It's not just about gender, but D&I on a broader level.

Within SPARK's culture of commercialism, Steven is keen to present D&I as stemming from extrinsic pressures rather than a "social orientation."

As Steven talks about his plans for D&I, he often refers to me; and that I will be the person being in charge of the topic. His team does not raise any concerns, so we

quickly move on to the next topic. After the meeting, back at my desk I write in my notebook:

> I am so pleased and relieved that Steven found so firm and open words. This is such a big step, that I would not have imagined a few months ago. Ben seemed to be ok with it. Now he understands that there is a clear need for it at SPARK! He didn't comment on it at all and didn't seem to be angry.

80

Being blinded by the positive result, I read support rather than obedience into Ben's silence.

A few weeks later, the executive board approves the HR business plan. The presentation is considered to have been the best in years, and I receive many compliments and positive feedback that I have managed it so well. A new position focusing on D&I is established in the TM team, one of the units is Ben's area of responsibility.

Third vignette: conversation with Carl
After the board's approval to establish a D&I consultant position in the TM team, I am offered the new position in December 2012 that I will take on once a successor for my current position is appointed. In the new position, I will report directly to Ben for an interim period as Carl, who heads the TM team, will be leaving soon to take on another role in one of SPARK's subsidiaries. I feel that finally I can dedicate my full attention to working on D&I. This is my dream position, and now finally I can fully get started. That night, my excitement kept me awake.

It is May 29, 2013; I have a conversation with Carl in the coffee bar on the ground floor. Carl has told me many times how highly he thinks of me. Carl is very experienced and I value our conversations. Carl starts talking about diversity. In a monologue Carl shares his point of view:

> There is a trend in diversity to focus on gender. For me, this is the new form of feminism. My advice to you would be to watch out: you don't want to be perceived as a new feminist, this is a business conversation! You should find out about legal requirements, show what is likely to happen. You have to be practical and logical, use existing frameworks. See your role as a conductor of an orchestra. Your task is to show what trends we are facing.

As I listen to Carl's advice, I realize that I am becoming insecure and nervous. I don't know what to do next. When I am back at my desk, I scribble in my notebook: "I need advice, support and sponsorship. I haven"t done anything similar with a potentially big scope." My enthusiasm suddenly meets with a sense of insecurity. It seems I run against the "existing frameworks" at SPARK that tell me to treat diversity as a commodity and to orchestrate the "business." Am I being too soft, too idealistic, or too feminist?

Fourth vignette: Steven's departure, Pamela's arrival
It is June 11, 2013. This morning Steven sent an e-mail to the entire Global HR community, inviting everybody for a gathering in the afternoon at 4 p.m for an "important announcement." I am not in the office this week. Now, it is 8 minutes past 4 p.m , and my phone is ringing. It is Claire, the intern who is working with me on D&I. I had asked Claire to let me know what the announcement was about, and now she is telling me what Steven had shared with the group: He will leave SPARK at the end of July, due to family reasons. Claire also mentions that Ben will take over the HRLT coordination until a new CHRO is appointed. While I am still on the phone with Claire, Ben is calling. A few moments later I hang up with Claire and call Ben back. He shares the same news with me, and I ask:

> What will happen now?

> Ben: It depends on the decisions from the Executive Board, but I expect that they will look for a CHRO from outside. There are also other changes in the HRLT coming up; we are facing a period of transition now. But we have our agenda, and we will try to stick to that. We will see how far we get. At the same time we have to be realistic, as some things might be on hold in the coming period.

Me: Thank you for sharing the news with me.

When Claire told me the news, I was surprised and thought "oh no", I did not want Steven to leave! Now, an hour later, I have the feeling I cannot think clearly anymore, everything is blurred in my head. I want to cry in frustration, but I know that it would not change anything. Instead, I write to reflect on the situation:

> I am afraid that my role will not remain. This is really the worst that can happen to me in my new role! I see the entire D&I initiative at risk, and with that my career success at SPARK. Both Ben and the CEO do not have the language and vision to see how the change in the D&I field could look like – and without Steven I have no supporter and sponsor behind me. If Ben is still not convinced of the need to run a D&I initiative, the coming months will be the perfect opportunity to take this off his agenda! I am in shock, and I am afraid. My head is spinning.

Seven weeks later, on August 1, Pamela starts in the position as head of TM, reporting directly to Ben. She succeeds Carl and as agreed previously, I change reporting lines. Instead of reporting to Ben, I now report to Pamela, and Pamela reports to Ben. One month after her start, I reflect on the collaboration with Pamela, and record on August 30:

> I struggle with the way Pamela treats me. She does not involve me and only informs me after decisions have been made. In her approach towards me it is very clear that I am not part of the decision-making process. I find that very frustrating, I do not feel valued. I have to learn to adjust and get used to it. However, I feel as if the D&I initiative is taken out of my hands [...] Pamela has done a lot of work on D&I in her previous role and she is now taking the lead [...] and I am a puppet on a string that has to do whatever she comes up with.

My sponsor is gone and, clearly, I am not his replacement's confidante. Being an elected talent now works against me, because I am somebody else's protégée. In SPARK's culture of clientelism, this means I am excluded from the decision making and my position as an upcoming talent may be at risk.

Fifth vignette: Pamela's note and its consequences
It is Thursday, October 24, I return from a three-day vacation and get ready for my first meeting of the day, a conversation with Pamela. Before my vacation, I had agreed on this meeting to talk about my contribution and yesterday, I have sent Pamela my preparation notes. I want to share with Pamela that I feel I am currently not performing at my best. I do not mind working hard, but I want to create value, and currently I feel that the D&I topic is not adding value – neither to SPARK, nor to my career. I have various proposals how to enlarge my responsibilities in order to change this situation. Together we walk to the meeting room that I have reserved. It is a room with a large round table. We take a seat next to each other and Pamela starts talking, slowly, and carefully choosing every word that comes out of her mouth:

> Thanks for the notes, I just read through them this morning, and I can tell that we are absolutely on the same page, and your understanding is right. I have to tell you the decision was made that your position will end next year.

> Me: What does that mean?

> Pamela: We will not continue with Diversity & Inclusion and the position will end in March next year. But Dagmar, you are highly respected; you are highly respected by the HR leadership team and by Ben and by Nick [Pamela's peer, my former manager]. Our goal is to help you in finding something else that could be relevant for you. Now we just need to think what it is that you may want to do.

The conversation continues for another 30 minutes or so, the words pass over my head. I am in shock. Pamela explains to me that the reason to discontinue with D&I is due to decreasing company results. The business did not go as well as expected, and therefore top management has decided to eliminate some positions in the head office, and my position is one of those.

Later that day I met Nick, he says: "This is so ridiculous, you are the only talent in our department, and they do this to you. I don't understand, and I am really sorry about it. This is not what you deserve." As Nick is talking, I feel tears running down my face. I was composed the whole day, but now, I cannot hold my emotions back any longer. Crying in front of Nick is unexpected; I did not even bring tissues! I am embarrassed to cry in front of my former manager, and I am embarrassed not to be able to blow my nose.

By October 29, I have had more meetings with Pamela and Ben, and I record my reflections:

> With every day that passes by I feel that the information is sinking in a bit more. I find it relatively easy to distinguish between the fact that the D&I initiative was killed and the fact that I might lose my job at SPARK – even though I'm the only identified talent in our department. The latter concerns me more than the fact that D&I will not continue.

On November 14, I have a conversation with Anna, a Regional HR Director, to explore internal job alternatives, when I say:

> I struggle to make sense of the fact that because I was identified as talent, I was asked for the new D&I position. Ironically, that is now the same reason why I am left without a job.

> Anna: I agree that it is unfair […] but that is life. You have to look forward. If you are a talent, you move on and stay positive.

Throughout the following weeks, I keep reminding myself of Anna's advice. In January 2014, I commence a new position in a different department at SPARK.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings presented in this paper suggest that being singled out as a talent and being promoted to a new position can be a double-edged sword. It opens doors to projects with high visibility and access to senior managers in an organization. Yet, being (s)elected as a talent also places an individual in the "firing line" or "spot light", exposing him or her to the machinations of organizational politics. It could be argued that Dagmar was just unlucky. If the senior executive who supported her (project) had not left, perhaps this would have been a success story and Dagmar would have forgotten about her sense of insecurity and powerlessness. Yet, the point is that being lucky or unlucky is directly connected to being (s)elected as a talent. As a result, officially being identified as talent may lead to ambivalent feelings and, at once (a sense of) empowerment and powerlessness; a tension that we label as the "talent paradox."

On the one hand, the talent label may increase an individual's motivation, ambition, confidence and opportunities. It provided Dagmar with access to prestigious tasks and sponsorship from the upper echelons and it grew her resilience to overcome rejections. On the other hand, the talent label and the newly established position also created constant pressure to "act like a talent." It exposed Dagmar to high expectations and strong norms to exhibit ambition and drive to create organizational change and, paradoxically, to challenge the status quo, while also obeying the existing power structures and adjusting to higher ranked individuals. She needed to flex her style from being highly pro-active in some situations to being reactive in executing orders from senior management in other situations. As the organizational context changed, actions that could have been interpreted as innovative and breaking the boundaries for good reasons were open to a negative interpretation and, perhaps worse, to dismissal as irrelevant. From that moment on, the sense of empowerment started to wane and feelings of powerlessness, dependency on higher management, and uncertainty about future career possibilities took over, which exacerbated once the D&I position was terminated.

These findings are relevant for different audiences. Studying TM from a talent's point of view throws doubt on the durability of the Pygmalion effect (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013)

and the assumption of the talent label having only positive effects. Talents may not always be treated as winners (Dries, 2013) and it also throws doubt on TM's mutual gains assumption, which claims that TM practices equally benefit the employer and the employee (Susskind and Movius, 2009; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013). In the short term, the "feel good factor" (Swailes, 2013, p. 355) or Pygmalion effect may initiate extra-role behavior that benefits the organization (such as Dagmar's ambition to integrate D&I into new and existing HR projects), but these benefits are not automatically sustained when the organizational context changes and behaviors that first led to success become redefined as problematic.

As the effects of TM can be ambiguous, the TM literature may also benefit from adopting a paradox perspective. Paradox, defined as an apparent contradiction, acknowledges the complexity of organizational life, describing conflicting demands or opposing perspectives (Koot *et al.*, 1996; Lewis, 2000). Paradox theory addresses the complexity of organizational life and acknowledges the existence of various dimensions that – simultaneously, successively or situationally (Koot *et al.*, 1996) – co-exist (Westenholz, 1993). Applying a paradox lens supports organizational scholars to consider a both/and perspective, rather than conceive an either/or dilemma. Addressing a paradox is neither a compromise nor a split between competing tensions. Instead, an active response to a paradox implies to consider contradicting tensions to a more equal extent (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2013; Lewis, 2000). We argue that adopting a paradox lens provides analytical purchase in considering ambiguous reactions to TM practices (see also Daubner-Siva *et al.*, 2017), and autoethnography has shown to be a suitable research approach to identify tensions in the everyday working life of a talent.

Finally, this study shows that an appreciation of organizational culture is crucial for understanding the workings of TM. Dagmar's experiences can only be understood against the backdrop of a corporate culture of commercialism, competitiveness, and clientelism. Within the profit-seeking context of a large multinational, TM is used as a means to motivate people to enhance their performance. For an individual, being singled out as a talent may be seen as instrumental in advancing a career and boosting self-esteem, but, from a cultural point of view, a nomination turns talents into a commodity for the corporation and subjects them to the logic of economic performance and dependency on their superior's favours. The moment individuals are identified as corporate "talents," they are targeted to perform exceptionally well and expected to live up to their superior's demands. A talent is useful only insofar the talent is instrumental to enhancing the corporation's profits and managers' individual interests. SPARK's commercialism and competitiveness thus commodified TM and subjected the individual talent to the crude workings of an internal labor market and a culture of clientelism. In turn, as TM defined what behaviors were valued, it gave further fuel to the engines of competitiveness, commercialism and clientelism.

This research is also relevant for TM practitioners in organizations as well as for elected talents. The process described in this paper shows that TM may motivate and empower the individual talent to work to her full potential and simultaneously put pressure on her while leaving her to her own devices. The talent paradox increases awareness of the flipside of the "feel good assumption" and, when appointing talents into new positions, act as a reminder for TM practitioners to more seriously consider personal and political consequences (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2017). This study shows in particular the critical role of sponsors for the success of talents and warrants TM practitioners to create broader support networks for talents. In talent development workshops, addressing the potential downsides and tensions of being identified as a talent would enable participants to reflect on, and share the lived experience of being a talent. Talents may also benefit from the stress-reducing and revelatory effects of reflective writing about difficult experiences (Kets de Vries, 2014). Keeping a diary helped the first author to digest, understand, and come to terms with events.

Being based on a single individual's own account of her experiences as an identified talent, this study also has limitations. First, our findings may not be specific to TM. Employees who are not explicitly identified as talents may experience a combined sense of empowerment and powerlessness as well, perhaps those promoted into high-risk positions in particular. Likewise, the talent paradox might also be perceived by talents who do not risk redundancy, but who do experience uncertainty and an increased chance of failure in their working lives. Furthermore, TM might work out differently for different groups of talents. At least two of the indicators used in the talent identification process at SPARK (leadership competencies and ambition) have been shown to be gendered, meaning that it is easier for men than for women to be perceived as having leadership competencies (Koenig *et al.*, 2011) and as ambitious (Sools *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, the talent paradox might be more typical for the experience of women. In line with research that exhibits the double bind of "doing ambition" for women in multinational organizations (Sools *et al.*, 2007), "acting like a talent" might pose a particular challenge for women who carry the talent label because the way they express their ambition is constantly under scrutiny. Ben's rejection as depicted in the first vignette might have been influenced by the fact that he considered Dagmar's enthusiasm to implement D&I at SPARK as an inappropriate way of showing her ambition. Further research on gender differences in TM would enable to gain more insights on the effect of gender when it comes to "acting like a talent" and "doing ambition" (Sools *et al.*, 2007).

In a similar vein, promotion to particular positions may be more liable to risk than others. Working in diversity management may represent a particularly high-risk domain, more prone to expose the talent paradox than other domains. Paying lip service to the importance of diversity management but then failing to commit and to give a mandate for it has been reported previously for other organizations (Wentling, 2004). At SPARK, the position of D&I consultant was established in economically prosperous times and soon eliminated once the business imperatives changed, suggesting the position was merely a "fashionable diversity intervention" or "sweetener during good times" (Ostendorp and Steyaert, 2009, p. 379).

Clearly, there is room for additional research on the effects of TM. In this respect, an autoethnographic approach has shown particular promise. This study helped to advance a more nuanced and contextualized understanding that explains the backstage workings of TM. To extend the reach of an autobiography-ethnography combination, future researchers may consider to adopt collaborative autoethnography (Chang *et al.*, 2013) and to include as co-researchers a variety of nominated talents in a variety of organizational contexts. In order to explore the broader effects of TM, future researchers may not only include those who are nominated as a talent, but also their colleagues for whom such nominations, by implication, is a nomination as a non-talent.

Applying AE as a means to gain insider perspectives from a talent allowed us to make a contribution to current thinking about TM. We built on the critique that the TM approach is narrow and one-dimensional (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013) and exposed that TM overlooks the downsides and ambiguities in the lived experience of identified "talents." Based on five vignettes, we have shown that unlike the literature's predominant claim that TM empowers talents in an organization, being identified as a talent can be a blessing that is immanently mixed; it can be both positive and negative at the same time.

References

Anderson, L. (2006), "Analytic autoethnography", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol. 35 No. 4, pp. 373-395.

Björkman, I., Ehrnrooth, M., Mäkelä, K., Smale, A. and Sumelius, J. (2013), "Talent or not? Employee reactions to talent identification", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 52 No. 2, pp. 195-214.

Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F.W. and Hernandez, K.-A.C. (2013), *Collaborative Autoethnography*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA.

Daubner-Siva, D., Vinkenburg, C.J. and Jansen, P.G.W. (2017), "Dovetailing talent management and diversity management: the exclusion-inclusion paradox", *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, Vol. 4 No. 4, pp. 315-331, doi: 10.1108/JOEPP-02-2017-0019.

Doloriert, C. and Sambrook, S. (2012), "Organisational autoethnography", *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 83-95.

Dries, N. (2013), "Talent management, from phenomenon to theory: introduction to the special issue", *Human Resource Management Review*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 267-271.

Eden, D. (1984), "Self-fulfilling prophecy as a management tool: harnessing Pygmalion", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 64-73.

Ellis, C. (2007), "Telling secrets, revealing lives: relational ethics in research with intimate others", *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 3-29.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. and Bochner, A.P. (2011), "Autoethnography: an overview", *Historical Social Research (Historische Sozialforschung)*, Vol. 36 No. 4, pp. 273-290.

Gallardo-Gallardo, E. and Thunnissen, M. (2016), "Standing on the shoulders of giants? A critical review of empirical talent management research", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 38 No. 1, pp. 31-56.

Gallardo-Gallardo, E., Dries, N. and González-Cruz, T.F. (2013), "What is the meaning of 'talent' in the world of work?", *Human Resource Management Review*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 290-300.

Hayano, D. (1979), "Auto-ethnography: paradigms, problems, and prospects", *Human Organization*, Vol. 38 No. 1, pp. 99-104.

Ingham, J. (2006), "Closing the talent management gap", *Strategic HR Review*, Vol. 5 No. 3, pp. 20-23.

InternalDocument (2013), "Manager's Guide to Talent Management", SPARK, Amsterdam.

Jackall, R. (1988), *Moral Mazes*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Jarzabkowski, P., Lê, J. and Van de Ven, A.H. (2013), "Responding to competing strategic demands: how organizing, belonging, and performing paradoxes coevolve", *Strategic Organization*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 245-280.

Kets de Vries, M.F.R. (2014), "To get over something, write about it", available at: https://hbr.org/2014/11/to-get-over-something-write-about-it (accessed 2 May 2016).

Koenig, A.M., Eagly, A.H., Mitchell, A.A. and Ristikari, T. (2011), "Are leader stereotypes masculine? A meta-analysis of three research paradigms", *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 137 No. 4, pp. 616-642, doi: 10.1037/a0023557.

Koot, W., Sabelis, I. and Ybema, S. (1996), "Global Identity – local oddity? Paradoxical processes in contemporary organizations", in Koot, W., Sabelis, I. and Ybema, S. (Eds), *Contradictions in Context: Puzzling over Paradoxes in Contemporary Organizations*, VU University Press, Amsterdam, pp. 1-16.

Lacey, M.Y. and Groves, K. (2014), "Talent management collides with corporate social responsibility: creation of inadvertent hypocrisy", *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 33 No. 4, pp. 399-409.

Lewis, M.W. (2000), "Exploring paradox: toward a more comprehensive guide", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 760-776.

Lewis, R.E. and Heckman, R.J. (2006), "Talent management: a critical review", *Human Resource Management Review*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 139-154.

McDonnell, A. (2011), "Still fighting the 'War for talent'? Bridging the science versus practice gap", *Journal of Business and Psychology*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 169-173.

McDonnell, A., Collings, D.G., Mellahi, K. and Schuler, R. (2017), "Talent management: a systematic review and future prospects", *European Journal of International Management*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 86-128.

Medford, K. (2006), "Caught with a fake ID: ethical questions about slippage in autoethnography", *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 12 No. 5, pp. 853-864.

Ostendorp, A. and Steyaert, C. (2009), "How different can differences be(come)? Interpretative repertoires of diversity concepts in Swiss-based organizations", *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 374-384.

Petriglieri, J. and Petriglieri, G. (2017), "The talent curse", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 95 No. 3, pp. 88-94.

Reed-Danahay, D.E. (1997), *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, Berg, Oxford.

Sambrook, S., Jones, N. and Doloriert, C. (2014), "Employee engagement and autoethnography: being and studying self", *Journal of Workplace Learning*, Vol. 26 Nos 3/4, pp. 172-187.

Sools, A., van Engen, M. and Baerveldt, C. (2007), "Gendered career-making practices: on doing ambition or how managers discursively position themselves in a multinational corporation", *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 80 No. 3, pp. 413-435.

Sparkes, A.C. (2000), "Autoethnography and narratives of self: reflections on criteria in action", *Sociology of Sport Journal*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 21-43.

Stahl, G.K., Björkman, I., Farndale, E., Morris, S.S., Paauwe, J., Stiles, P. and Wright, P. (2012), "Six principles of effective global talent management", *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 53 No. 2, pp. 24-32.

Stewart, A. and Aldrich, H. (2015), "Collaboration between management and anthropology researchers: obstacles and opportunities", *The Academy of Management Perspectives*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 173-192.

Susskind, L. and Movius, H. (2009), *Built to Win: Creating a World Class Negotiating Organization*, Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston, MA.

Swailes, S. (2013), "Troubling some assumptions: a response to 'The role of perceived organizational justice in shaping the outcomes of talent management: a research agenda'", *Human Resource Management Review*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 354-356.

Swailes, S. and Blackburn, M. (2016), "Employee reactions to talent pool membership", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 38 No. 1, pp. 112-128.

Thunnissen, M., Boselie, P. and Fruytier, B. (2013), "A review of talent management: 'infancy or adolescence?'", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 24 No. 9, pp. 1744-1761.

Wall, S. (2006), "An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 146-160.

Wentling, R.M. (2004), "Factors that assist and barriers that hinder the success of diversity initiatives in multinational corporations", *Human Resource Development International*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 165-180.

Westenholz, A. (1993), "Paradoxical thinking and change in the frames of reference", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 37-58.

Winkler, I. (2013), "Moments of identity formation and reformation: a day in the working life of an academic", *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 191-209.

Ybema, S., Yanow, D., Wels, H. and Kamsteeg, F.H. (2009), *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday Life*, Sage Publications Ltd, London.

Corresponding author
Dagmar Daubner-Siva can be contacted at: d.daubner@vu.nl