



Motivating, developing and retaining talent through job enrichment: An exploration of 'side of desk' projects in a corporate environment

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3 **Motivating, developing and retaining talent through job enrichment: An exploration of 'side of desk'**
4 **projects in a corporate environment.**
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8 **Keywords: Talent Management Programme, Talent Management Interventions, Talent**
9 **Management Toolkit, Motivation, Skills Development, Retention, Digital Communications**
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13 **Abstract**
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15 Global talent shortages, new skills demand and rising numbers of unfilled posts are fuelling an
16 increasingly challenging job market, exacerbated by economic uncertainty and transformational
17 digital change. Seeking creative solutions in response, we examine Talent Management's (TM)
18 theoretical and conceptual foundations, specifically the identification and selection of talent, and TM
19 programme design to explore the challenges and benefits of side of desk projects as interventions.
20 Taking an inductive qualitative approach, questionnaires, focus groups and semi-structured
21 interviews gathered data from three employee groups in a UK digital communications organisation.
22 We reveal inconsistencies in the definition and selection of talent, highlighting programme quality
23 challenges to expose a direct correlation between participant experience and, motivation and
24 retention along with the longer-term challenges of balancing talented human capital, shareholder
25 expectations and sustainable workforce resourcing. We make recommendations to inform the
26 future design of TM programmes revealing new opportunities to develop hidden talent and present
27 a realistic and sustainable toolkit for future practice in the form of an organisational logic model. In
28 this way, our research extends existing knowledge concerning the effect of organisational culture,
29 context and workforce demands upon TM programmes, providing theoretical and practical
30 implications for leaders and policy makers in designing enrichment activities to motivate, develop
31 and retain talent.
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45 **Introduction**
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47 This case study explores the challenges and benefits derived from a talent management (TM)
48 intervention, a side of desk projects programme, implemented by a UK telecommunications
49 organisation operating within a rapidly evolving environment of mass digitalisation. Innovations such
50 as the 'always-connected lifestyle', the 'internet of things' and driverless vehicles demand ever
51 increasing internet speeds and reliable error-free connectivity. The organisation is at the forefront of
52 these innovations and plays a primary role in building what is considered the largest infrastructure
53 build of the last 100 years in providing the UK fibre networks that are required to meet current and
54 future demands (UK Government, 2021). Along with meeting these challenges, the organisation faces
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3 intense competition from over 200 alternative network providers which operate within the sector
4 (Plossky et al., 2021). Given the scale and complexity of this operating environment it is unsurprising
5 that the organisation has prioritised the attraction, retention, development and motivation of
6 talented employees.
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11 An organisation's ability to effectively attract, retain and continue to motivate talent offers an
12 opportunity for sustained competitive advantage in a turbulent macro environment (Biron, 2023;
13 Bonneton et al., 2022; Harsch & Festing, 2020). However, this has become more difficult as an
14 increasingly challenging global job market has emerged in a post-pandemic landscape, evidenced by
15 growing numbers of unfilled posts juxtaposed with a shrinking workforce of willing individuals to fill
16 them (Li, 2022; Manpower Group, 2022; Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2023). Prolonged periods
17 of pressure, continuous change and a lack of training also appear to be contributing toward a longer-
18 term workforce crisis, exposing a discernible shift in employee demand and personal agency, driving
19 post-pandemic demand for flexible, decent and meaningful employment warned of by Sull *et al.*
20 (2022). Allied to this, workplace attrition rates have remained stubbornly high due to retirement,
21 lifestyle choices and a sharp increase in levels of long-term sickness absence collectively leading to a
22 seventeen year high of global talent shortages disproportionately affecting technology roles
23 (ManpowerGroup, 2022; ONS, 2023). Reduced headcounts have impacted the organisation's
24 knowledge, experience and skills bank, weakening its ability to win new business and efficiently
25 respond to market demands, requiring a reassessment of talent retention interventions.
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38 In response, the organisation proposed a new talent development intervention in 2021, a side of desk
39 projects programme to engage its talent pool and increase leadership capacity by offering seventy-
40 eight middle and senior operational managers the opportunity to lead or participate in new, extra-
41 curricular projects to comprise between 10-20% of their workload. Many of the participants had
42 moved from engineering into management roles, yet remained in operational units, resulting in
43 organisational leadership skills gaps in strategy, transformation, project leadership, commercial and
44 customer service. Participants were nominated for the programme by line-managers and projects
45 were sponsored by senior executives who were available to support participants as they worked to
46 develop specific skills identified in their personal development plans (PDPs). Overall, the projects were
47 designed to ensure the completion of critical organisational transformation activities whilst preserving
48 financial resources and enabling participants to engage in experiential learning, skills development
49 and role enrichment that would not ordinarily experience in their day to today roles.
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3 Scholarly activity in the field of TM continues to attract significant academic and practitioner interest.
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5 Yet, despite the emergence of a renewed diversity of TM approaches within the literature, there
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7 remains a lack of consensus concerning its definition, objectives and scope (Luna-Arocas et al., 2020;
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9 Yildiz & Esmer, 2023), leaving organisations with contradictory guidance in terms of talent
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11 identification and selection, talent intervention design and its effectiveness upon motivation and
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13 loyalty to the organisation (Chatterjee et al., 2023). There is also a paucity of literature examining the
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15 benefits, challenges and outcomes of side of desk TM programmes, specifically within an increasing
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17 challenging global jobs market juxtaposed with a technological revolution and financial instability.
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19 Similarly, the impact of the organisational culture and context upon the definition, selection and
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21 implementation of TM interventions remains under-explored (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020).

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23 This lacuna reveals gaps in our understanding of the effectiveness of such programmes, and
24
25 specifically the processes, resources and support required to effectively source, develop and retain
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27 talented individuals, warranting further interrogative research and exploration to ensure that future
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29 programmes robustly meet organisational and workforce needs. Framed within the extant research
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31 on TM, this study seeks to contribute towards the literature by examining the effectiveness of a side
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33 of desk TM programme, implemented within an organisation operating in a highly dynamic and
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35 competitive environment, and the subsequent effect upon talent development. Reporting the findings
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37 of data gathered from questionnaires and focus groups with thirty-seven participants, questionnaires
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39 from thirty-three line managers, and semi-structured interviews with eight senior sponsors, the paper
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41 showcases the experiences of individuals who have participated in a side of desk TM programme in
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43 2021. Our empirical findings reveal the extent to which selection processes and TM programme design
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45 and delivery may impact upon mastery, exposing the associated benefits and challenges of the project
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47 for both selected and non-selected participants and the influence upon longer-term motivation and
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49 loyalty to remain, extending the work of Yildiz and Esmer (2023). We also build upon the gaps
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51 highlighted by Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2020), Sumelius *et al.* (2020) and Biron (2023) by illuminating
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53 several critical issues arising from the additional demands and expectations placed upon programme
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55 participants, juxtaposed with aspects of strategic ambiguity within a challenging corporate context,
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57 collectively influenced by an increasingly competitive and volatile macro environment. [This results in
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59 the development of a toolkit for future practice in the form of an organisational logic model.](#)
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62 The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the literature review examines TM's theoretical
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64 underpinnings and selection process and explores the opportunities for skills mastery and professional
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66 development through experiential learning and talent development strategies. Following this, the
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68 methodological considerations involved in this research project are outlined before the findings are
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3 presented and analysed; the discussion and conclusions follow, including an outline of the implications
4 of the paper's findings for practitioners and policymakers as well as the paper's limitations.
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9 **Literature Review**

10 ***Current Theoretical Underpinnings/Definition***

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12 Despite increased scholarly attention in recent years TM is still not conceptualised or defined fully so
13 a lack of consensus of its definition, objectives and scope remains amongst scholars (Luna-Arocas et
14 al., 2020; Yildiz & Esmer, 2023) resulting in ambiguity (Luna-Arocas et al., 2020) and an ongoing
15 practice- theory gap (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2017). Chatterjee *et al.* (2023) continue to
16 emphasise the unresolved opacity between scholarly theory and practical application, specifically the
17 need to redefine organisational strategies for attracting and retaining the best employees. Much of
18 the early literature is drawn from a practitioner or consultancy perspective and largely considers TM in
19 terms of nurturing high-performance individuals to ensure organisational survival and financial
20 performance, with less attention focused upon the employees' own interests (Meyers *et al.*, 2013;
21 Gallardo-Gallardo, 2018; Luna-Arocas *et al.*, 2020). Here, many companies primarily view their
22 organisational performance in terms of impact upon maximising profit and shareholder wealth,
23 forming a demotivating disconnect between employees and nameless financial beneficiaries of their
24 work (Collings, 2014). Indeed, Collings (2014) exposes significant limitations in the body of research
25 examining the non-economic value of human capital and success of TM measures, despite widespread
26 recognition that such a unique and invaluable asset is capable of providing organisations with an
27 unassailable competitive advantage (Yildiz & Esmer, 2023).
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41 Similarly, the work of Harsch and Festing (2020) and Kontoghiorghes (2016) reminds organisations
42 that a greater focus upon their culture would be a more effective strategy for talent attraction and
43 retention than the elitist, corporate approach commonly associated with TM programmes and
44 interventions (Swales, 2020). There is growing acknowledgement that a broader 'employee first'
45 approach which facilitates the setting and achievement of common goals within a nurturing,
46 supportive and ethical culture based upon mutual respect is much more likely to meet the needs of
47 all stakeholders and improve employee motivation compared to a model whose primary focus is
48 maximisation of shareholder wealth (Birkinshaw et al., 2014). Disruptive change through large scale
49 digital transformation is also forcing paradigm shifts in organisational hierarchies. Here, there is a
50 move to reengineer structurally-bound corporations in order to attract and retain talent by making
51 them adaptable, agile and more open organisations that foster cultures characterised by integrity and
52 trust (Kontoghiorghes, 2016; Harsch & Festing, 2020; Biron *et al.*, 2021). This contemporary approach
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3 is in stark contrast to early TM programmes which were constructed around traditional career paths,
4 elite job roles and extended timeframes (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018).
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8 ***Identifying Talent and Advantages/Disadvantages*** 9

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11 Disagreement over the definition of talent within the workplace continues to dominate the literature
12 with numerous authors highlighting the gaps between employee and employer views of talent,
13 resulting in low impact results and failed interventions (e.g. see Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2014; Harsch &
14 Festing, 2020; Luna-Arocas *et al.*, 2020). A range of talent philosophies and categories are described
15 within the literature, broadly drawn from either an inclusive or exclusive perspective (Meyers *et al.*,
16 2020). Whilst that which constitutes talent may be necessarily different across different industries or
17 even across different cultures and different time periods extant research suggests that large
18 organisations predominantly take an exclusive subjective approach to talent selection, largely focusing
19 upon elite performers whose talent is evident through specific competencies and its recognition
20 reinforced through meritocracy (Meyers *et al.*, 2020; Silzer & Dowell, 2010). However, this approach
21 also relies upon past performance as a predictor of future outputs which risks over investment in, and
22 unrealistic expectations of, those who are designated as talent. A further potential issue stems from
23 vested interests, behaviours and powers of managers and their individual perceptions and
24 interpretation of talent thereby risking favouritism and bias in selection processes. This in turn runs
25 the risk of creating poor returns, unpredictable outcomes and irrevocable damage to confidence if
26 previous high-flyers subsequently fail (Collings, 2014; Karakowsky & Kotlyar, 2021; King, 2016; Silzer
27 & Dowell, 2010). Likewise, Kulik (2023) argues that the star performer strategy is flawed, particularly
28 its myopic focus upon task completion and results generated by individual 'goal hangers' rather than
29 a more strategic approach to broader opportunities associated with citizenship and mentoring.
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45 Concurrently, there is an implicit expectation that individuals provided with development
46 opportunities should reciprocate with increased commitment to working flexibly beyond contracted
47 hours (Garrow & Hirsh, 2008) with loyalty to the organisation demonstrated by enhanced motivation,
48 proactivity, perseverance and performance, often entailing the acceptance of projects that others
49 would not contemplate (Gallardo-Gallardo, 2018; Meyers, 2020). However, repeated over-reliance on
50 a preordained group of talented individuals carries a high risk of project failure, exhaustion and
51 burnout, particularly in the absence of realistic workload planning and conflicting line manager
52 priorities (Meyers, 2020). It is also unclear to what extent talent is an innate characteristic or one that
53 can be developed. This perennial issue contributes to the problem that high potential individuals who
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3 are not part of TM initiatives may be ignored and overlooked. Indeed, it is estimated that up to 15%
4 of the workforce can be categorised as 'hidden' talent (Meyers et al., 2020; Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012).
5 In some instances, organisations adopt a secretive approach to talent selection raising ethical
6 questions around organisational intent in terms of delivering genuine opportunities for development
7 and subsequent career progression (Sumelius et al., 2020).
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13 ***Mastery and motivation through side-of-desk projects***

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16 Experiential learning is thought to be the foundation of TM development, with opportunities for
17 individuals to pursue mastery through cross-functional projects which also benefit the organisation in
18 terms of cost and efficiencies (Garrow & Hirsh, 2008; McCall, 2010). Drawing upon the methodologies
19 and frameworks of project management, formalised project management training alongside regular
20 opportunities for sharing and transference of learning and skills, represent tangible developmental
21 milestones for individuals with open discussion, critical reflection and feed forward built into the
22 performance appraisal process to enable the organisation to monitor progress on a quarterly or bi-
23 annual basis (Gray, 2007; Silzer & Dowell, 2010).
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32 Commitment and support from across the wider organisation are critical success factors in creating
33 high calibre experiences consisting of assignments which are deliberately designed for developmental
34 purposes, typically evidenced by champions, mentors and coaches drawn from role-models across the
35 senior management and line management teams who are willing to devote their time to identify,
36 support, challenge and develop talented employees throughout TM programme lifecycles to maximise
37 the chances of project success (DeRue & Wellman, 2009; Garrow & Hirsh, 2008; McCall, 2010). Highly
38 talented individuals are likely to thrive and grow in a challenging but safe learning environment where
39 they are unafraid to make mistakes (Pruis, 2011) yet such idealistic concepts rarely translate in practice
40 where the realities of the modern workplace constrict the time and space specifically required for
41 substantive and meaningful review, reflection and planning (Gray, 2007; Torraco & Lundgren, 2020).
42 Instead, the trend toward devolvement and decentralisation of HR activities is placing increasing
43 pressure upon leaders and managers as they adopt the role of change agents, underpinned by
44 organisational expectations that they can competently master, model and champion multi-faceted
45 new technologies and projects whilst acting as the "owners of talent" (Arunprasad et al., 2022; Link &
46 Müller, 2015; Torraco & Lundgren, 2020; Ulrich & Allen, 2014, p. 19).
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3 Where career development is at the heart of talent retention, well designed side of desk projects have
4 the potential to increase levels of motivation and reduce individual intention to leave, particularly
5 where individuals are able to continually adapt, learn and improve the quality of their work through
6 engagement with emerging technologies, processes and tasks (Dries & Pepermans, 2007; Ito &
7 Brotheridge, 2005; Kontoghiorghes, 2016). Yet, TM programmes commonly fail because little thought
8 is put into the individual's journey, or because the programme lacks career development or planning
9 context. Deliberate practice requires a sustained investment of time and support for talent strategies
10 to work for the individual, their mentor and the organisation itself, incorporating motivational
11 opportunities to review progress on and post post-project to encourage and celebrate personal
12 development and growth (Garrow & Hirsh 2008).

21 However, resource constraints combined with a paucity of sophisticated leadership skills and
22 commitment to inspire, support and develop talent often creates tensions within informal or transient
23 mentoring dyads, inadvertently sabotaging talented protege confidence and progression, resulting in
24 demotivation and disillusionment (Garrow & Hirsh, 2008; Menges, 2016). Assigned and fixed
25 mentoring dyads with territorial line managers can quickly sour as circumstances change, particularly
26 pertinent as mentees become the experts and their potential pool of role models shrinks (Naish &
27 Minton, 2015; Pruis, 2011), risking the production of a series of narcissistic corporate clones too
28 focused upon their own outputs and rewards to become mentors themselves to emerging talent
29 (Kulik, 2023; Swailes, 2020). A fruitful support mechanism may be derived from the participants or the
30 talent pool itself, in the form of action learning sets where individuals may discuss and explore a range
31 of organisational features, each bringing their own construct to inform the basis for collective action
32 and individual reflection (Gray, 2007; Schön, 1987), potentially extending to a relational set for all
33 stakeholders to solve 'wicked' problems and generate fresh perspectives and insights (Boydell, 2022).

45 Yet, despite the potential opportunities and issues associated with such interventions, there remains
46 remarkably little clarity in TM frameworks in terms of role model, mentor and action learning
47 facilitator skills required and the extent to which mentors, role models and facilitators might be
48 interchangeable in order for them to motivate, inspire, oversee multiple projects simultaneously, or
49 indeed a series of diverse projects, as well as the impact upon talented proteges. These challenges
50 juxtaposed with technological advances make it inevitable that organisations will continue to seek a
51 broader range of talent via global workforces for the completion of short-term projects on fixed
52 contractual basis, negating the need for extended employment relationships and expensive TM
53 programmes whilst affording employees a degree of flexibility regarding how, where and when to
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3 develop and apply their skills (Meyers, 2020; Moore et al., 2022). However, such an approach seems
4 likely to further damage the psychological contract and further challenge the motivation of core
5 organisational talent to deliberately pursue and systematically complete guided and defined activities
6 intended to improve performance (Meyers *et al.*, 2013).
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11 In summary, this section has explored the debates relating to, and weaknesses of, contemporary TM
12 and has highlighted that scholarly activity in the area is dominated by the discussion and exploration
13 of strategies that favour high performance elite individuals who typically have traditional job roles and
14 prescribed career pathways. Such 'exclusive' TM programmes are problematic because they have a
15 propensity to ignore the non-economic value of human capital and perpetuate an elitist corporate
16 approach to human resource development. This inhibits the growth and development of an 'employee
17 first' organisational culture which promotes flexibility, creativity, common goals, collaboration,
18 mutual respect and trust; and as a consequence, can result in 'hidden talent' being ignored and
19 overlooked. In examining the tensions, further questions have emerged concerning the contextual
20 influences upon the definition and selection of talent, the interventions which might serve to support
21 its development and the subsequent benefits and challenges to the organisation, participants and
22 wider stakeholders. Specifically, the extent to which side of desk projects may be embedded as a viable
23 and sustainable TM intervention and how that fits with corporate organisational structures, values
24 and principals in an increasingly competitive environment remains unclear. Therefore, how might the
25 findings from this research impact upon development opportunities for contemporary TM practice
26 within a corporate organisation setting? The next stage of the paper develops a methodology which
27 underpins a closer examination of these potential challenges and issues to reveal insights drawn from
28 a range of participants, line managers and senior sponsors.
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45 **Research Design**

46 This study adopted an interpretive research approach, giving voice to participants' interpretations and
47 perceptions of 'side of desk' projects as a TM initiative. The approach was designed to explore the
48 lived experiences of participants and was informed by an interpretive constructivist epistemology,
49 which enabled socially constructed data to be drawn from interaction and exploration of meaning and
50 understanding (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). The interpretivist paradigm advances that the researcher
51 and reality are inextricably linked and that knowledge is constructed through one's own conceptions
52 (Neuman & Kreuger, 2003; Tolley et al., 2016). A key aspect here is that interpretivism enables the
53 researcher to generate 'rich and textured evidence' and produce a 'rich picture' by exploring the
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phenomena from within, rather than independent of, 'real-world' contexts (Cameron & Price, 2009, p. 56; Gibbert et al., 2008).

Data Collection

The research site was a UK communications infrastructure company with over 30,000 employees. Access to employees at the research site was negotiated with the HR director by one of the research team who is employed by the organisation. In terms of ethical procedures and processes we sought and gained ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee. Confidentiality was protected by a written informed consent agreement with each participant. Participants were anonymised by coding comprising letters and numbers. We used a non-probability purposive sampling approach (Wolf et al., 2016). This involved identifying and approaching three employee groups involved with side of desk projects. These were individuals who completed the projects (primary participants), line managers of those who completed the projects and senior sponsors of the projects. Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the groups and collection methods employed.

Table 1 Participant Groups and Data Collection Methods

Group	Description	Group Size	Data Collection Methods	Response Rate
A	<i>Primary Participants – individuals who completed 'side of desk' projects</i>	78	<i>Questionnaire Focus Groups</i>	<i>48% (survey) 38 attended focus groups</i>
B	<i>Line Managers of individuals who completed 'side of desk' projects</i>	35	<i>Questionnaire</i>	<i>94%</i>
C	<i>Senior Sponsors of the 'side of desk' projects</i>	8	<i>Semi-structured Interviews</i>	<i>N/A</i>

Questionnaires

Anonymised questionnaire was distributed to Groups A and B. For Group A the focus of the questionnaire was to gather data relating to their experience of undertaking a side of desk project. The questionnaire distributed to Group B focused on managers' perceptions of the impact of the projects on staff behaviour. In particular, the questionnaire sought to investigate the effect of projects on the perceived productivity and engagement of staff in relation to their mainstream work duties.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with Group A participants. They lasted between 60- and 90-minutes dependent upon the number of participants (4-10) and were conducted via Microsoft Teams. This enabled the session to be recorded and automatically transcribed. Transcriptions were read and edited to ensure accuracy.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from Group C participants. Here the focus was on their thoughts, feelings and perceptions about how primary participants performed whilst undertaking the projects. In particular, whether or not projects were successfully completed, the manner in which they were completed and the barriers and enablers that impacted on the projects. Interviews were recorded using Microsoft teams and a transcript produced accordingly.

Data Analysis

We used thematic qualitative text analysis to explore the data generated by the questionnaires, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Here the focus was upon investigating similarities and differences between participants and groups and relationships within the data.

The data were analysed and evaluated using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase approach of thematic analysis framework and involved inductively coding the data to help identify any recurring themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was adopted because it provides a rigorous but flexible framework that facilitates: '...an iterative and reflective process that develops over time..' (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 4). The analytical process began with the application of descriptive codes to identify common themes, adding layers of meaning through underpinning interpretive and pattern codes and then progressed by continually refining discoveries made during the process to reveal latent themes. This systematic approach generated rich and varied insights that go beyond mere description. Throughout the process the analysis involved repeated readings of the data to reinforce reliability and required the research team to cycle back and forth through the material to achieve a holistic exploration of themes across the participant groups. This facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of respondents across the sample (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

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3 The research team were aware of the dangers of possible bias associated with the data collection
4 methods which could have potentially lead to spurious interpretations of the findings (Miles &
5 Huberman, 1994; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). As a result, the team worked closely to cross-check analysis
6 and align sensemaking interpretation of the data. The researchers acknowledge that the adoption of
7 general qualitative approaches means that these findings are not extensively generalisable but rather
8 they provide insights into emergent themes in the field (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Siggelkow,
9 2007).

16 **Findings and Discussion**

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20 The analysis has revealed several programme challenges and opportunities which emerged from the
21 data gathered from the three participant groups, resulting in a detailed exploration of the following
22 three themes: organisational definition and identification of talent; programme design and delivery;
23 and the impact upon motivation.
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28 ***Definition and Selection of Talent***

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31 The data indicates that at the outset the organisation did not have a pre-formed agreement as to what
32 constituted talent. This was problematic because when it came the selection of programme
33 participants it was unclear as to whether individuals should be selected by characteristics such as
34 motivation, attitude, passion, enthusiasm, tenacity technical skills, intellectual capability or numerical
35 dexterity or, conversely, whether it was necessary for candidates to exhibit a combination of these
36 attributes.
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44 Given the lack of a clear criteria it is unsurprising that the programme selection process was
45 inconsistent. In some instances, participants were selected based on convenience because of their
46 seniority and because their job role was deemed as important whilst others were selected because
47 they were regarded as being motivated high achievers and therefore potential talent that needed to
48 be nurtured. Surprisingly, 20% of participants did not have any involvement at the beginning of the
49 programme but were subsequently added to projects, despite not being considered 'talent'. The
50 casting of supporting roles seemed to occur most frequently where individuals were viewed as subject
51 matter experts closely linked to a particular programme and where project teams were short staffed
52 requiring additional nominees. This *ad hoc* approach to participant selection resulted in disquiet and
53 scepticism within the organisation. As one manager explained: "***I could have named the participants***
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3 ***without a list...the same people for everything” (AN1).*** This was mirrored by participants in the focus
4 groups with several discussing the stress of being continually involved in new initiatives: ***“we just keep***
5 ***piling the work on the busy, making busy people even busier” (NB2); “there were the same people***
6 ***actively participating” (MJ1).*** Participants also indicated that they felt pressurised to participate. They
7 felt that to be judged a high performer in end of year appraisals, it was necessary to be seen to engage
8 with and complete their allotted project. One participant confirmed that there was an inference of
9 compulsion stating: ***“my manager said it I needed it to justify a brilliant (rating)” (MD1).*** Conversely,
10 it appears that some people were ***“excluded because maybe they didn’t get a brilliant rating” (AC1)***
11 revealing a propensity for an exclusive subjective approach to talent selection, focused upon
12 preordained elite performers with recognition reinforced through meritocracy.
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21 A further problem caused by the informal selection process was that because of the lack of publicity
22 and advertising of the programme, participants did not perceive it to be prestigious and therefore did
23 not develop a sense of kudos or a clear understanding that the organisation was making positive steps
24 to invest in their growth and development, illustrated by two participants who commented: ***“it***
25 ***demotivated me a bit during the process...it was pitched to me as a development opportunity for***
26 ***talent and then when I joined...a lot of people involved were just picked for the groups” (SR1); “I’ve***
27 ***got not kudos out of it at all” (BC1).*** Furthermore, the selection process appears to have created
28 discontent amongst employees who were not selected for the programme. These individuals
29 continued in their ‘business as usual’ roles and were concerned that their performance was deemed
30 lacking, reinforcing the notion that selection processes have the potential to breach or enhance
31 psychological contracts established by the individual and the organisation for both successful and
32 unsuccessful candidates (Garrow & Hirsh, 2008; Sumelius et al., 2020; Yost & Chang, 2009).
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43 Similarly, the practice of linking outcome goals to PDPs and subsequent financial rewards rather than
44 learning goals warrant further consideration given the potential link to unethical behaviour cautioned
45 by Welsh *et al.* (2019). Weaknesses in selection and planning were particularly apparent where talent
46 projects were located within their own departments with one senior sponsor admitting: ***“we kind of***
47 ***stood on their toes a little bit when we tried to create a separate team” (HH2).*** Another manager
48 highlighted the flaws in the selection process and commented that: ***“a bunch of motivated people***
49 ***already come motivated, but you miss the middle of the organisation” (NB2).*** Clearly, the challenge
50 posed by those excluded from talent initiatives is considerable and needs to be managed carefully and
51 effectively (Peterson et al., 2022). Those charged with establishing such initiatives are advised to take
52 heed of the work of Sumelius *et al.* (2020) and Kulik (2023) who both emphasise that strategic
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3 ambiguity and mixed signalling around inclusivity and exclusivity are unlikely to enhance long-term
4 motivation or intent in either group, unless the organisation clearly articulates the value, content and
5 expectations, and subsequently delivers on promises of career development opportunities.
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8 In summary, from the outset the organisation did not have a clear agreement as to how talent
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10 should be defined. This made the identification and selection of participants for the side of
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12 desk programme problematic and amplified attendant challenges and issues such as handling
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14 expectations, dealing with ambiguity and managing inclusivity and exclusivity. These problems
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16 posed a threat to the longer-term sustainability of individuals and the programme itself, ultimately
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18 negatively impacting on the attraction and retention of staff in either group, and wider business
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20 performance. Yet, there is clearly a delicate balance to be struck as the findings counter the views of
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22 Whysall, Owtram, and Brittain (2019) who warn that middle managers who are best placed to enable
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24 effective change are often overlooked in favour of talented external hires, an increasingly relevant
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26 point given the current era of technological transformation. On this basis, consideration of both a
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28 definition of talent at the outset of any future programme alongside a different approach to selection
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30 is required to enable the identification hidden talent, improve diversity and motivation within the
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32 organisation.
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35 ***Programme Design and Delivery***

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38 In terms of the design and delivery the data indicates that there was a disconnect between key
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40 organisational support functions and the programme. Specifically, participants felt that the
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42 programme was established in isolation and that there was a lack of support, awareness and
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44 understanding by the HR, Finance and Communications departments. This was encapsulated by
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46 comments including: ***“The central functions must be brought on the journey and stood up to support
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48 this” (LH1)*** and ***“We needed communications support, and she didn’t know and she just didn’t have
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50 the bandwidth to help us”. (AW1)*** The latter quote also points to the additional problem that the
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52 programme was under resourced. Along with lack of resources from central support functions,
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54 participants also highlighted that they did not feel that they had sufficient time to complete the
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56 projects. Indeed, several participants complained of excessive time pressures with one commenting:
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58 ***“There was no 10-20% of my time, this was my job (MH2)”*** and another explaining that: ***“I found the
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60 whole thing really stressful to be honest because the asks were just massive for my area (NB2)”***.

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3 The data also suggests that there was confusion and misunderstanding between senior sponsors, line
4 managers and participants. For instance, there is evidence of inconsistent expectations from the
5 senior sponsors, exacerbated by a lack of communication between hierarchies and leading to
6 frustration over changes to the original project remit, demonstrated by two participant responses: ***“it***
7 ***became quite clear that we were not involved in the relevant conversations which were happening***
8 ***around the business” (MD1); “we weren’t linked into the more senior conversations” (LH1).*** Lack of
9 clarity over programme objectives also led to doubts over the need for the programme, with
10 participants feeling as though they: ***“were having to sell the ideas back to the exec” (RD1)*** even
11 though they were under the impression that the programme and briefs were: ***“proposed by the***
12 ***leadership team” (RD1)*** A further area of confusion was a difference of opinion regarding the overall
13 success and effectiveness of the programme. Overall, participants were positive about the outcomes
14 of the programme citing a 70% completion rate and identifying the successful professional
15 development for some individuals. One participant commented: ***“It was a massive success for us, look***
16 ***at (Name) and (Name) who got promoted during the year, I got to see more talent than I knew we***
17 ***had” (MH2)*** However, this stance was contradicted by senior sponsors and line managers who
18 suggested that there had been “no progress” and only 40-50% completion. Problems with completion
19 were caused by projects losing momentum because of misaligned team and project objectives,
20 illuminated by two participant remarks: ***“the project suddenly stopped...it was hugely frustrating...it***
21 ***all seemed to go off the boil a bit” (CL1); “in the end it just petered out unfortunately” (TK1).***

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37 Moreover, the data indicates that participants were disappointed that the programme had no formal
38 ending marked by a graduation or a celebration of some type. A further contributory factor that
39 adversely affected the completion rate was the size and complexity of projects. Respondents referred
40 to the excessive number of projects with one suggesting that the approach: ***“kind of grew arms and***
41 ***legs....spreading participants too thinly across bigger side-of-desk projects” (MH2),*** diluting the
42 potential for programme impact and ultimately stymieing the ability to effect sustainable high-quality
43 change. An additional unforeseen challenge for programme participants was the increased visibility
44 that the programme afforded them. In essence, by joining the programme participants became more
45 visible to senior colleagues and with this came increased stress and pressure to perform well and be
46 successful. One participant, commenting on the need to present project findings to senior colleagues,
47 said: ***“if presenting to execs you are not going to submit just any presentation, are you?” (DP1).*** High
48 levels of scrutiny and accountability meant that participants felt at risk of making mistakes that could
49 adversely affect their reputation and profile. Indeed, a participant recounted a conversation with a
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3 line manager who: ***“agreed that this was damaging my profile rather than improving it as things***
4 ***were just too much and I was going to fail” (NB2).***
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8 In summary, the findings reflect a high level of misunderstanding within the hierarchical structure of
9 the organisation, stemming from a lack of clarity and communication to all participants and their
10 managers concerning the strategic intent of the programme, extending the effect of strategic
11 ambiguity beyond Sumelius *et al.*'s (2020) exploration of status. Such stark differences in respondent
12 views seem to stem from a rather detached view of the reality on the ground, specifically in terms of
13 workload expectations, activities, and resource. Whilst there is recognition that the use of in-house
14 talent may produce varied results, the programme remains an attractive and low-cost option for the
15 organisation, especially where improved participant motivation and skills becomes the focus to create
16 the type of unique, motivated and highly skilled invaluable workforce described by Yildiz and Esmer
17 (2023) as the key required to provide an unassailable competitive advantage. Yet, the disconnected
18 views here potentially reflect the demands placed upon senior directors, highlighting the complex
19 balance that is required between shareholder profit, sustainable resourcing of the workforce and their
20 psychosocial well-being, echoing the concerns of Collins (2014) and Urbanaviciute *et al.* (2021). Whilst
21 limitations prevail in the body of knowledge in terms of how best to manage that balance between
22 non-economic value of human capital and organisational success driven through TM interventions,
23 the research here illuminates this particular issue well and provides an opportunity to build upon the
24 work of Yildiz and Esmer (2023) and Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.* (2020) in offering a realistic and
25 sustainable framework for future practice.
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40 ***Impact upon Motivation***

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43 The majority (92%) of primary participant questionnaire respondents recall being highly motivated
44 *prior* to the project commencement. Data analysis from the focus groups reveals overwhelming
45 participant pride in selection for the talent programme, typified by the comment: ***“it was really***
46 ***exciting to be part of” (MB2).*** Also, the focus group data confirms the motivational aspects associated
47 with expanded networks and the opportunity to connect with new people during the programme,
48 typically expressed by one participant: ***“the network that I built, the people that I got to know, that***
49 ***was motivating” (AC2) “and created that network ..that was really good for me” (WR2).*** High levels
50 of motivation at the beginning of the programme were also witnessed by line managers with 89% of
51 them indicating that they felt that participants were motivated to complete the project.
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3 Notwithstanding high levels of motivation at the beginning, the data suggest that motivation
4 significantly waned as the programme progressed, and it appears that reduced motivation was
5 experienced at both the individual and team level, evidenced by comments such as: ***“it demotivated***
6 ***me and the team that we felt like we presented to the regional directors against a list of stuff they***
7 ***wanted us to do and suddenly they were challenging us” (MD1); “it petered out unfortunately and***
8 ***all the motivation from that group dissipated” (TK1)***. Allied to this, only half of line managers saw a
9 positive motivational impact on the participants activities in their usual role further signalling the need
10 to align side of desk projects more closely with day-to-day tasks. More worryingly, by the end of the
11 programme 75% of participants had no increased intention to remain with the organisation. Only 8
12 individuals cited a high intent to remain, signalling the programme’s limited impact upon motivation
13 and longer-term commitment.
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23 In terms of the development of additional skills the findings reveal that 60% of participants felt that
24 they had gained a number of new skills as part of the programme describing them in the focus groups
25 as: ***“stakeholder management, executive communications, presentations skills, programme***
26 ***management, transformation, contracting conversations, difficult conversations, governance, and***
27 ***how to get things done”***. Yet as before, the data suggests that this skill development did not appear
28 to increase motivation, nor did it improve the intention to stay, perhaps because of the quality issues
29 cited above or because the individuals were highly motivated prior to commencing the programme.
30 Similarly, all the line managers suggested that participants had learned and more crucially applied new
31 skills, providing examples matching those cited by participants, however only half of the managers felt
32 that these skills would be highly important to participants’ future careers.
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42 In summary, the findings here clearly illustrate the critical impact that quality plays within the design
43 of talent programmes and learning experiences, revealing a direct correlation between programme
44 experience and reduced motivation and retention outcomes. The findings raise questions regarding
45 the effectiveness of isolated TM interventions once the excitement of selection has passed and expose
46 the limitations of transference of enthusiasm and intent to remain, recognising the difficulty in
47 sustaining motivation levels alongside the majority workload of a daily humdrum role. Instead, it
48 appears that a much clearer programme design is required, along with a deliberate cultural re-focus
49 and organisational commitment recommended by Harsch and Festing (2020) and Biron *et al.* (2021)
50 is required.
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3 Whilst the findings suggest that motivation and enthusiasm are dynamic states, the data here and
4 indeed the literature are less clear as to whether potential talent is largely an immutable characteristic
5 (e.g. see Meyers *et al.*, 2013; and Gallardo-Gallardo, 2018). However, it is clear that the effects of
6 contextual and situational factors such as project failure and variable manager and mentor support
7 align with Silzer and Dowell's (2010) view of "potential" as a relative concept which can be nurtured
8 within an appropriate setting. The data here also suggests that the programme aim of upskilling was
9 largely successful, yet the focus group exposes a weakness in the programme design insofar that a
10 lack of pre-defined learning objectives, sufficient structured cohort consolidation sessions and
11 journaling were missed opportunities to capture all learning and skills development alongside the
12 experiential learning. The findings reflect the lack of proactive behaviour described by Meyers (2020)
13 who argues that employees must share the responsibility for organisational TM, including the
14 development of meaningful learning targets and goals, concurrently forming personal habits and
15 attributes which are increasingly desirable in an era of short-term project work.

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18 In response, we offer a conceptual framework for future organisational practice in developing talent
19 through side of desk projects by drawing together the literature and findings to more clearly depict
20 critical inter-related activities and outcomes through logic modelling. The adoption of the logic
21 model in creating our toolkit is particularly fitting given the collaborative relationship between the
22 researcher as the programme evaluator, and the programme designers and implementers (Yin,
23 2009). Furthermore, the logic model approach has the potential for generalisability to other contexts
24 where the same logic applies, supporting organisational definition of programme vision and goals,
25 and clarifying the sequence of events required to achieve positive outcomes (Yin, 2009). Adopting a
26 linear design to reflect progression through the programme, our logic model encompasses the four
27 key stages of programme inputs, programme activities, programme initial outcomes and programme
28 subsequent outcomes. The logic model reflects the emergent themes drawn from the data,
29 specifically seeking to address the issues raised concerning the definition and selection of talent
30 within the programme inputs, the programme design and delivery within both the inputs and the
31 activities; and the impact upon motivation within the initial and intermediate outcome periods. We
32 recognise the complex range of actors, roles, resources, policies and time required for authentic and
33 effective talent management interventions in our model, requiring a degree of fluidity when
34 considering our recommended activities for positive individual and organisational outcomes.

35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 **Conclusion** 58 59 60

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3 Our work here provides an insight into the extent to which the contextual influences of the broader
4 macro-operating environment, the organisation itself, and the distinctive nuances within
5 departments themselves can continuously influence and characterise the definition, design and
6 development of TM programmes and interventions. In adopting a multi-level approach we have
7 illuminated the previously unexplored roles and experiences of the key stakeholder groups, by
8 gathering and analysing the views of participants, line managers and senior executives, responding
9 to Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*'s (2020) call for further exploration of the influence of organisational
10 culture upon the definition, selection and implementation of side of desk interventions.
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18 We have built upon the recommendation of Biron (2023) by completing this research during an
19 unprecedented period of uncertainty, combining financial instability, post pandemic recovery and a
20 technological revolution creating a multiplicity of challenges for the organisation, exacerbated by the
21 accountability to shareholders in a highly competitive and volatile operating environment. At the same
22 time, a complex mix of workforce issues have continued to manifest, including increasing diversity of
23 staff needs resulting from intergenerational differences, expectations of flexible working, the cost of
24 living crisis and renewed personal priorities, resulting in resource issues and a spate of industrial
25 action. As such, we acknowledge the remarkable progress made by the organisation in terms of
26 offering genuine opportunities for individuals to develop through a range of unique projects, and
27 indeed their willingness to support interrogative research to underpin a cycle of reflection, review and
28 revision.
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38 Whilst it is clear that several recommendations are required in order to improve the context in which
39 the programme operates (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2020), they are made in conjunction with Meyers
40 *et al.*'s (2020) reminder that the workforce must share the responsibility for their own professional
41 development, including the proactive design of meaningful learning targets and goals. Specifically, the
42 disruptive influence of work automation leading to transformational workforce trends and global job
43 losses in the sector (e.g. see Le Maistre, 2023) provides the strongest signal yet that individuals will
44 need to form motivational personal habits and resilient attributes in order to adapt, progress and
45 succeed.
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53 **Recommendations**

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57 Figure 1 draws upon the review of the literature and the analysis of the data gathered to provide a
58 conceptual framework for a side of desk toolkit to inform the recommended future TM actions for the
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3 organisation. The framework is based upon a programme logic model which visually connects the
4 proposed activities and expected outputs in a sequential manner, drawing together different strands
5 and relationships, as well as providing a roadmap with which to measure anticipated progress and
6 outputs. The model depicts the critical requirements for the development of new organisational
7 policies and procedures prior to the commencement of TM activities yet recognises the importance
8 of regular feedback and reflection in providing opportunities for continuous improvement resulting
9 from the programme activities. Equally, we acknowledge that logic modelling is based upon our
10 current understanding of the situation, however the logic model is a fluid concept which will evolve
11 and develop as TM activities take place, particularly as we learn from the experiences of participants,
12 providing opportunities for us to also reflect in and on action, and adapt our processes accordingly
13 (Gray, 2007; Schön, 1987).
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Figure 1 – Organisational Logic Model – A Toolkit for Side of Desk Projects for Talent Management

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Limitations and Future Direction

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33 Despite generating novel and interesting insights, we recognise the limitations of this study. Due to its
34 exploratory nature, it is not intended to provide a generalisable detailed analysis of talented middle
35 and senior managers' experiences and perceptions of side of desk projects as a talent development
36 intervention. Instead, it is intended to provide rich and descriptive insights into subjective human
37 phenomena as participants engage with and aim to complete extra curricula projects. Equally, it is
38 important to note that the research was carried out during 2021, therefore the respondents
39 themselves were operating in varying contexts within a challenging period of the covid-19 pandemic.
40 Here, it is recognised that the turbulence of the operating environment impacted upon working
41 patterns, home responsibilities, sickness levels and technological enablement of roles across different
42 sectors, all of which will have considerably influenced our findings. Similarly, respondent experiences
43 and views may have been influenced by the sampling strategy which resulted in some participants
44 responding as both managers of participants and programme participants themselves, in addition to
45 some manager responses based upon multiple participants.
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55 Moreover, this study is limited by the use of a monolingual, monocultural sample, which focuses
56 exclusively on talented middle and senior managers from one telecommunications organisation,
57 therefore a broader cross-section of employees from a wider geographical area may result in a deeper
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3 understanding of the varying benefits, tensions and challenges arising from side of desk projects as
4 TM interventions. Future studies might incorporate a longitudinal approach to capture the impact of
5 different lengths of projects or multiple projects over a longer-term. A further area of study could also
6 include action learning incorporating experiential learning opportunities and a clearly defined
7 mentoring programme to identify hidden talent and support the development of demotivated
8 individuals. Proactive investment in future research of this nature is likely to help policy makers and
9 human resource managers to reconstruct a deeper understanding of ways in which to collaboratively
10 develop cultures of integrity and trust, agree common goals to drive motivation and commitment, and
11 in turn, strengthen organisational and individual resilience and agility to perform.
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20 ***The supporting data is not publicly available due to the highly sensitive and commercial nature of***
21 ***the research. The data comprises un-redacted questionnaires and transcripts which contain***
22 ***information that could compromise the privacy of research participants and reveal the***
23 ***organisation's identity. No funding has been received in relation to this research.***
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Employee Relations

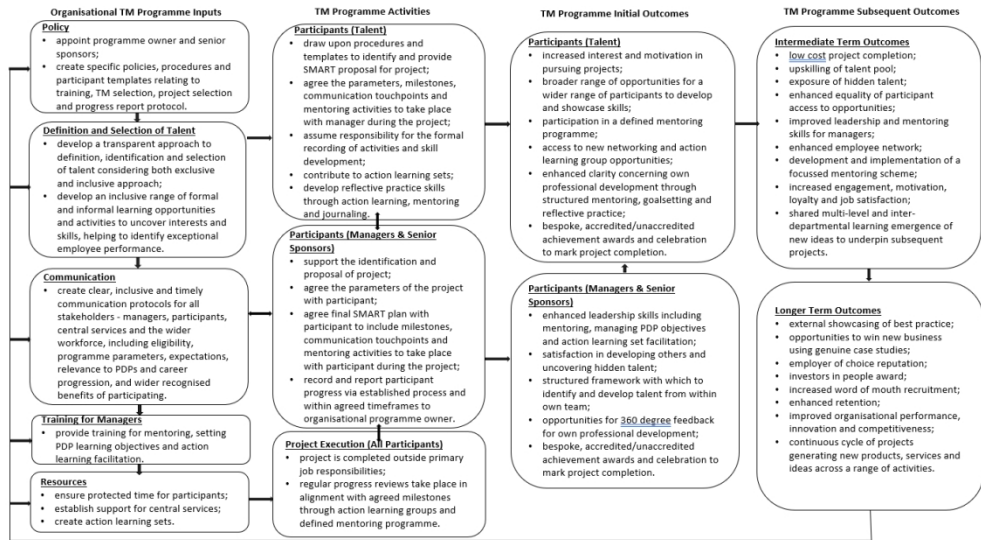


Figure 1 – Organisational Logic Model – A Toolkit for Side of Desk Projects for Talent Management (Source: Authors own creation)

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