Abstract

We examined how perceived organisational support affects the relationship between being designated as talent and affective commitment. Two studies were conducted in two different 'talent' populations. In study one, a questionnaire was distributed within one large company among employees who were designated as high potential, and a control group which was not (N=203). In study two, the same questionnaire was distributed within a different company among employees who were designated as management trainee, and a control group which was not (N=195). The results from both studies showed that perceptions of organisational support were significantly stronger for employees that were designated as talent. Moreover, perceived organisational support mediated the relationship between an employee's designation as talent and affective commitment in both studies. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords. Talent management, SHRM, High potentials, Management trainees, Affective commitment, Perceived organisational support, Signalling theory

Affective Commitment of Employees Designated as Talent: Signalling Perceived

Organisational Support

Affective organisational commitment is considered to serve as a 'powerful bridge' between talent management practices and organisational performance (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Langenegger et al., 2011). This is not surprising as affective commitment has repeatedly been linked to attitudes and behaviours such as job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and employee performance (e.g., Klein et al., 2009; Meyer et al., 2002). Specifically within the talent management literature, two studies have shown that affective commitment is especially high among employees who perceive to be designated as talent by their employing organization (Björkman et al., 2013), and more generally, among employees who believe to receive a more favourable treatment than others (Marescaux et al., 2013). While the existing literature has formulated multiple arguments for such between-group differences in affective commitment from a macro perspective (Collings and Mellahi, 2009), the underlying psychological mechanisms behind these differences are rarely studied, however. One theoretical framework that seems of particular interest in explaining these underlying mechanisms is signalling theory (Spence, 1973).

Signalling theory implies that employees' reactions to organizational practices (such as talent management practices) are shaped by employees' perceptions of these practices and not by the actual practices themselves (Rynes, 1991). Building on this key insight, the present paper explores the mediating role of perceived organisational support—one of the most important determinants of affective commitment (Meyer et al., 2002)—in the relationship between being designated as talent and affective commitment. We expect that being designated as talent serves as an organisational signal that will influence employees' perceptions of organisational support and, in turn, shape their affective commitment (Höglund, 2012; Suazo et al., 2009).

The current paper makes two distinct contributions. First of all, both studies on the relationship between being designated as talent and affective commitment (i.e., Björkman et al., 2013; Marescaux et al., 2013) relied on self-report measures instead of on archival data as to whether respondents were actually designated as talent by their organisations. While self-report data can be a useful source of information, they do not contribute to our understanding of the actual effects talent management practices may have on employees, due to their susceptibility to various biases such as common method bias or the Dunning–Kruger effect— i.e., the tendency for people to mistakenly rate their abilities much higher than average (Kruger and Dunning, 1999). In the two studies reported in this paper, we tackled this limitation by using archival data to measure respondents' being designated as talent (or not) by their employing organisations. Both participating companies informed employees openly about whether or not they were designated as talent. Following the basic assumptions of signalling theory (Suazo et al., 2009), we posit that 'knowing' you are designated as talent is a stronger signal of organisational support than 'thinking' you are designated as talent (which was the core variable in Björkman et al., 2013 and Marescaux et al., 2013). Specifically, we hypothesize that employees designated as talent will show high affective commitment in response to their designation as talent—which can be interpreted as a signal of organisational support—whereas those not designated as talent, in the absence of such a signal, will not show such high affective commitment.

Second, our knowledge of the underlying psychological mechanisms as to why employees designated as talent would differ in terms of affective commitment as compared to employees not designated as talent is limited at best. In the present paper, we address this gap by exploring the role of perceived organisational support as a mediator in the relationship between being designated as talent and affective commitment.

In what follows, we will first discuss the concept of talent management; subsequently, we will discuss the signalling effect of being designated as talent or not on perceived organisational support and, in turn, on affective commitment.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

(Employee Reactions to) Talent Management

Definitions of talent management vary considerably. Hence, talent management practices differ heavily across companies with various organisations approaching talent management in different ways (e.g., Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Meyers et al., 2013). Dries (2013) describes five ways in which organisations' approaches to talent management can differ, highlighting the 'inclusive versus exclusive approach' divide as the key differentiator. While the inclusive approach to talent management advocates that all employees should be encouraged to develop their unique talents to the best of their abilities and are thus entitled to egalitarian HRM investments in line with their needs and desires, the exclusive approach prescribes differential investment in different categories of employees according to their value and uniqueness as resources to the organisation (Iles et al., 2010). In the present paper, we focus on the exclusive approach to talent management, as it is the most widely implemented approach in practice (Collings and Mellahi, 2009). In particular, our paper focuses on the consequences of the exclusive approach because we will study differential employee perceptions and reactions that are associated with differential treatment conditions. In line with the HR architecture model (Lepak and Snell, 1999), we define talent management as the differential management of employees according to their relative potential to contribute to their organisation's competitive advantage—a practice referred to as 'workforce differentiation' (Becker et al., 2009).

Workforce differentiation is said to be "fundamental to talent management" (Ledford and Kochanski, 2004, p. 217) and to be the core principle differentiating talent management

from HRM more generally (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005; Chuai et al., 2008; Collings and

Mellahi, 2009). While talent management focuses its HR practices specifically on

employees—often referred to, within the exclusive approach, as 'human capital' (Farndale et

al., 2010)—who are pivotal in terms of value (i.e., the potential to contribute to an

organisation's core competences) and uniqueness (i.e., the extent to which the employee is

difficult to replace), HR practices in general aim at managing all employees in an organisation

(Chuai et al., 2008). In practice, high-value high-uniqueness employees are typically referred

to as 'high potentials' (Dries and Pepermans, 2008). High potentials are those employees who

are "recognised, at that point in time, as the organisation's likely future leaders" (Cope, 1998,

p. 15). Being designated as high potential, then, is the result of possessing highly valuable and

unique skills in the eye of one's employing organisation.

Overall, the idea of adopting workforce differentiation practices as part of one's

exclusive talent management strategy (Becker et al., 2009) can be understood within the

resource-based view which states that particularly the valuable, unique, and difficult-to-

imitate resources are key to long-term high performance and competitive advantage (Barney,

1991; Becker and Huselid, 1998; Wright et al., 1995). Workforce differentiation practices

have been linked to organisational performance, but scholars are now calling for more

research on the impact of workforce differentiation on employees (Huselid and Becker, 2011)

and, in particular, on employees' perceptions and reactions (Gelens et al., 2013).

In this respect, signalling theory argues that—especially under conditions of

incomplete information—employees revert to cues or signals from the organisation to

interpret the organisation's intentions and actions, and consequently shape their reactions

(Rynes, 1991). Whereas workforce differentiation practices may have beneficial effects

among the employees designated as talent, that is, those who receive a positive signal of

organisational support (Huselid and Becker, 2011), they may have unintended detrimental

effects among those not designated as talent, who do not receive such a positive signal. The underlying assumption is that employees' reactions to talent management practices will not only be influenced by the actual practices that are in place, but also by their perceptions of these practices (Wright and Nishii, 2013). Therefore, signalling theory (Spence, 1973) is suggested in order to understand how being designated as talent will influence affective commitment.

The Relationship between Being Designated as Talent and Affective Commitment

Affective commitment is defined as an "emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation" (Meyer and Allen, 1991, p. 67). The present paper focuses on affective commitment because it has repeatedly been related to a variety of positive work outcomes such as promotability, in-role performance, organisational citizenship behaviour, attendance, job involvement, job satisfaction, but also employee health and well-being (Meyer et al., 2002; Shore et al., 1995). In this sense, affective commitment serves as a relatively overarching phenomenon, that links to multiple beneficial organisational as well as employee outcomes. Moreover, implementing commitment-focused HR practices is recommended as the best HR strategy for employees designated as talent in the talent management literature (Lepak and Snell, 1999; 2002). HR practices such as empowerment, participation, and extensive training programmes should be targeted specifically towards talented employees as these will enhance their self-expression, influence, sense of personal importance, and degree of responsibility and, in turn, will trigger their long-term commitment to the organisation (Gong et al., 2009). In addition, it is suggested that talent management also increases commitment through the practice of workforce differentiation itself (Collings and Mellahi, 2009). That is, the differential management of employees facilitates the placement of pivotal people in pivotal positions, which increases the chances of fit between employee and

organisation and as such may foster an employee's commitment (Kristof-Brown, 1996;
Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

Lepak and Snell (1999, 2002) argue that employees who do not possess valuable and
unique skills should not receive commitment-focused investments to the same extent.
Therefore, it is claimed that while we might expect a positive impact of these investments on
employees designated as talent, a negative effect might occur in employees who are not
designated as talent, and thus do not benefit from such differential treatment (Marescaux, et
al., 2013), because they receive less (favourable) investments compared to talents (Kulik and
Ambrose, 1992; Skitka et al., 2003). Specifically, the few studies that have addressed
employees' differential displays of affective commitment found that employees who believed
to be in a more favourable group reported more affective commitment than employees who
felt treated equally compared to coworkers, while employees who believed to be in a less
favourable group showed less affective commitment (Marescaux et al., 2013). Similarly,
employees who believed to be designated as talent were more committed than employees who
did not believe to be designated as talent (Björkman et al., 2013).

> *Hypothesis 1: Employees designated as talent score higher on affective commitment*
> *than employees not designated as talent.*

The Mediating Effect of Perceived Organisational Support

Signalling theory implies that employees' perceptions of organisational actions will
shape their reactions to a larger extent than the actual actions, such as extensive training
programmes or being designated as talent (Rynes, 1991). When organisations designate an
employee as talent this may be interpreted as a signal of the organisation's appreciation. In
particular, the concept of perceived organisational support refers to the extent to which an
employee believes that the organisation values his or her contributions and cares about his or
her wellbeing (Eisenberger et al., 1986). When an employee receives a favourable result, such

as the designation as talent, he or she will experience it as a signal of the organisation's valuation of his or her contributions, which will increase perceptions of organisational support (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002).

Hypothesis 2: Employees designated as talent perceive stronger organisational support than employees who are not designated as talent.

Based on the so-called reciprocity norm, employees who feel that they are cared for by their organisation will be inclined to reciprocate by also caring for the organisation (Eisenberger et al., 2001). In particular, Rhoades et al. (2001) delineate three reasons for this positive relationship. First, through an increased sense of reciprocity, perceived organisational support stimulates employees' willingness to stay. This willingness to stay is said to be part of affective commitment. Second, perceived organisational support stimulates one's personal worth and perceived competence, enhancing one's positive emotions, which in turn increases affective commitment. Third, perceived organisational support has the tendency to fulfil an employee's social needs, such as the need of self-esteem, approval, and affiliation, and the fulfilment of these needs makes an employee more inclined to perceive the organisation as part of his or her social identity. In addition, Rhoades et al. (2001) show that perceived organisational support relates to temporal changes in affective commitment, suggesting that perceived organisational support leads to affective commitment. We conclude from the above that employees who are designated as talent will reciprocate such signals of organisational support with heightened affective commitment, while employees not designated as talent will receive no signal of organisational support and will therefore not reciprocate with heightened affective commitment.

Hypothesis 3: Employees designated as talent perceive stronger organisational support and will experience higher affective commitment than employees who are not designated as talent.

Study 1: Method

Research Context

Data were gathered in a large organisation in the financial sector with headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. The organisation opts for an exclusive approach to talent management as it believes that there is a group of employees who possess distinct potential to take on top positions. The talent management programme entails that employees who have been working in the organisation for a number of years can be designated as someone with high potential. The organisation identifies two broad levels of high potentials: junior high potentials (0.7% of the organisation's population) and senior high potentials (0.4%). The only two differences between both groups are that (a) junior high potentials have less work experience than seniors and (b) junior high potentials are on a fast track to take on middle management positions, while senior high potentials are being developed to become part of the top management team. The development tracks of these two groups of high potentials take four years for both, in which they all have to attain multiple final objectives. All high potentials should have, for instance, experienced an international assignment, and developed some expertise in a core topic. Specifically, junior high potentials should have had at least one supervisory experience, while senior high potentials should have taken on roles as people, strategic and operational managers.

The identification procedure is similar for all high potentials and involves multiple parties of the organisation. First, HR and direct supervisors have to reach a consensus about which employees they nominate as high potentials. Second, at the level of the business unit, the organisation decides who of the proposed employees will go through an assessment centre. The level of complexity of the assessment centres is higher for senior than for junior high potentials. Third, the management committee confirms the final group of high potentials by considering specific organisational policies (e.g., the required number of high potentials in

light of the organisation's succession planning). This designation as high potential is based on three main criteria; performance, potential, and job involvement. Performance is assessed through performance appraisals and the judgement of the supervisor. Potential is assessed through the assessment centres (i.e., high scores must be obtained on 20 competences, such as organisational efficiency, strategic thinking, and dealing with change) and through the judgement of the supervisor. Junior and senior high potentials are assessed on the same competences, but senior high potentials are expected to achieve higher scores. Job involvement must be demonstrated by the employees themselves as they have to create a personal portfolio in which they exemplify their involvement in their job.

After being designated as high potential, all of them receive additional training (e.g., a company MBA or a 5-week seminar focusing on the organisation's strategy and core values, and on increasing economical knowledge and insights), mentoring and counselling by special 'talent advisors', invitations to network events, and regular assessments framed within an ongoing talent review process (i.e., how did she or he evolve during the past year; are there new opportunities for this person; which competences require further coaching, …).

The organisation communicates openly about the talent management programme to employees. The two groups of high potentials are informed about their status and have knowledge about their progress in the programme. Moreover, the HR department explicitly explains to the senior and junior high potentials that their status is a signal of trust in their potential, but that it entails high expectations and job demands. Non-high potentials are informed that a talent management programme exists, that two groups of high potentials are identified within the organisation, and that there is an annual talent review with the aim of coaching and developing a select group of employees. They do not formally know, however, who are the members of the two high potential groups.

We wish to point out that in practice the designation of talents, and talent management in general, may be somewhat contested (Garavan, 2012), and HR managers often allude to negative reactions and opinions towards talent management (Dries and De Gieter, 2013). However, in this specific organisation, little contention and contestation is found. Based on the reports by the HR representative and the overt nature of the talent management programme, we infer that the atmosphere around the topic is not distinctly negative nor competitive. However, the organisation has continuously adjusted and improved its identification process over the past 15 years, and therefore we assume that contention may have been addressed earlier at appropriate times.

Participants

190 employees designated as high potential and a matched sample of 300 employees not designated as high potential received a questionnaire. The groups were matched based on their job level—i.e., all participants held managerial-level. 128 high potentials (67%), and 75 non-high potentials (25%) returned the questionnaire. 72% of the high potentials and 45% of the non-high potentials were male. Among the high potentials 6% held a Bachelor's degree and 95% held a Master's degree; among the non-high potentials 45% held a Bachelor's degree and 55% held a Master's degree. Overall, the age of participants ranged from 20 to 56 with an average of 37 ($SD = 7.54$ years). Participants' tenure ranged from 1 to 34 years with an average of 12 years ($SD = 7.03$ years).

Procedure and measures

We collected archival data provided by the HR representative of the participating organisation as well as self-report data. The latter was collected via an online questionnaire. We assured each respondent that participation was anonymous and voluntary.

(Non-)designation as high potential. For each participant, the HR representative indicated whether the employee was designated as high potential (1) or not (0).

Perceived organisational support. Our measure of perceived organisational support was based on Eisenberger et al. (1986). Participants had to rate their agreement with a series of eight statements (e.g., "The company would ignore any complaint from me") on a 7-point Likert-type scale *(1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)* (α = .88).

Affective commitment. Participants had to report their affective commitment by means of a 6-item scale developed by Meyer and Allen (1991) on a 7-point Likert scale *(1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)*. An example item was "The company has an important personal significance to me" (α = .86).

Control variables. We controlled for gender, tenure, and educational level as the high potential and non-high potential group differed significantly on these three variables.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed in SPSS statistics 22 using the process tool of Hayes (2012), which allows for the estimation of mediation models in a linear regression framework. In particular, we created one dummy variable to distinguish high potentials from non-high potentials, with non-high potentials being the reference category. Subsequently, we performed a mediation analysis for affective commitment. The mediation effect was tested using the product-of-coefficients approach, and we used bootstrapping (N = 5000 bootstrap samples) to test for statistical significance (see Preacher and Hayes, 2008).

Study 1: Results

In a first analysis, we computed the means, standard deviations and correlations for affective commitment and perceived organisational support (see Table 1). To test whether the high and non-high potentials differed in terms of their average level of affective commitment and perceived organisational support, we performed two ANOVAs. For both affective commitment ($F(1, 202)$ = 14.31; p<.001), and perceived organisational support ($F(1, 202)$ = 22.94; p<.001), a significant difference was found between the high and non-high potentials.

In line with hypotheses 1 and 2, the affective commitment and perceived organisational support of high potentials was significantly higher than that of non-high potentials.

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

In a second analysis, we tested the mediation effect of perceived organisational support on the relationship between an employee's designation as high potential and affective commitment. In line with Hypothesis 3, the effect of an employee's designation as high potential on affective commitment was mediated by perceived organisational support. In particular, high potentials (β=.43; p=.002) scored significantly higher on perceived organisational support than non-high potentials; and perceived organisational support was significantly related to affective commitment (β=.64; p<.001). The combination of these two significant relationships resulted in a significant indirect relationship (β=.28; 95% CI = [.10 - .52]). Nonetheless, the direct effect of being designated as high potential (β=.30; p=.039) on affective commitment remained significant, indicating a partial mediation.

Study 1: Discussion

Our results show that high potentials perceive more organisational support than non-high potentials and consequently experience more affective commitment towards the organisation, thereby confirming our hypotheses. These results add to the results that were previously found with respect to the relationship between being designated as talent and affective commitment (Björkman et al., 2013; Marescaux et al., 2013). Specifically, in our study, we demonstrate that these differences in affective commitment occur, at least partially, as a result of differences in perceived organisational support among employees designated as talent and employees who are not designated as talent.

Limitations Leading up to Study 2

Study 1 was conducted within one specific organisational setting and their specific (exclusive) talent management programme, which might limit the generalizability of our

findings. For example, it could be that different approaches to workforce differentiation would yield a different impact on employees' reactions. For instance, employees who receive differential treatment immediately (without any former experience in an organisation) upon entering the organisation might show different reactions compared to employees who only receive differential treatment after being a member of the organisation for some years. Moreover, it is possible that the affective commitment of high potentials was already higher than that of non-high potentials before being designated as high potential (especially because this specific organisation requires employees to demonstrate their involvement in order to be designated as high potential). Finally, the variables perceived organisational support and affective commitment are self-reported, which increases the possibility of common method variance (Lindell and Whitney, 2001).

Study 2: Method

To address the limitations of Study 1, we set up a second study in which we focused on management traineeships—i.e., junior employees in training for management positions (Porter et al., 1976). This is clearly a different situation as these employees were not a member of the organisation prior to being designated as trainee. As a result, they cannot show affective commitment towards the organisation prior to receiving the designation, which implies that finding a difference in affective commitment would support the idea that being designated as talent or not indeed influences perceived organisational support and consequently affective commitment, and not the other way around. Further, we measure perceived organisational support and affective commitment at two separate times, which reduces the risk that the results are affected by common method bias.

Research Context

Data were collected in a large company in the financial sector with headquarters in Brussels, Belgium (in a different organisation to the one in Study 1). The company hosts an

extensive management trainee programme, selecting and identifying a group of recently graduated students with a Master's degree who are believed to have the potential to perform very well. These trainees—less than 1% of the total workforce—are then prepared for a possible management function later in their career. The management traineeship in this company encompasses a five-year period during which the trainee carries out three different positions within the company (18 months each) and is sent abroad for a six months internship. In the course of these five years each trainee receives guidance from his or her direct supervisors (for each different position held) and from a 'trainee advisor' belonging to the HR department. For each of the three positions held over the five-year period, also a mentor is assigned to the trainee, that is, a senior manager who will share his or her knowledge and experience. In the first two years of their traineeship, trainees receive technical training in subjects such as handling insurances, bookkeeping, etc. as well as more general management training (e.g., lectures on Lean Six Sigma and Prince2). In addition, all trainees attend network events and a three-week seminar abroad once a year.

The selection of trainees occurs in multiple stages, prior to organisational entry. First of all, the company screens each applicant's curriculum vitae. Employees who are allowed to the programme can only have a maximum of two years working experience (in another company), should have at least one Master's degree and preferably one experience abroad. This screening is followed by an individual interview with an HR representative. The latter assesses the candidate's ambition, vision, team leadership, focus on results, energy, learning agility and persuasiveness. Next, the applicant has to participate in a group discussion exercise with other candidates, while being observed and rated by external consultants and HR representatives. Finally, the candidate has to give a presentation to a panel of senior managers as well as an HR representative about a given financial topic. This presentation is then followed by a series of questions concerning the presentation on the one hand and the

candidate's interests, ambition, and curriculum vitae on the other, resulting finally in being designated (or not) as management trainee.

Communication about the management traineeship programme is transparent. All trainees are aware of their status. HR explains that trainees receive more training and career opportunities that are accompanied with a greater responsibility, compared to employees who are not in the programme. Trainees are expected to work harder and perform better than other employees. Non-trainees also are aware that the management traineeship programme exists— for instance, they might read about the trainees' projects or experiences in the company magazine.

Similarly to study 1, little contention and contestation is shown from the transparent nature of the programme and from the reports by the HR representative. Multiple parties, such as top management and HR, all agree upon the objectives and the added value of the management traineeship programme. This is said to be partially due to its clarity and long existence within the organisation.

Participants

110 trainees and a matched sample of 276 non-trainees received the questionnaire. Participants were matched on age, gender, education level, and tenure, that is, we strived for a balanced mix of men and women and the majority of participants were younger than 30, had a Master's degree and maximum 6 years of work experience (depending on which stage of the traineeship they were in). 102 trainees (93%) and 100 non-trainees (36%) participated in the study. Seven cases were excluded from the analysis because of missing data. 110 of the respondents were male, 15 participants had a Bachelor's degree, and 186 had a Master's degree. The age of participants varied between 22 and 28 years with an average of 25 ($SD =$ 1.35). Overall organisational tenure was between 0.1 and 6 years with an average of 1.72 year

(*SD* = 1.37) and all participants were working for the company for 0.1 to 4 years with an average of 1 year (*SD* = 0.99).

Procedure and measures

We collected both archival data provided by an HR representative of the participating organisation and self-report data. Self-report data were collected with a paper version of the questionnaire during a three-week trainee seminar, while non-trainees responded to an online questionnaire. To minimize common method bias we used two measurement points with a one-week interval between the inquiry of perceived organisational support and of affective commitment. The data was linked via a personal code consisting of the answers on personal questions (e.g., "Give the second letter of your mother's first name). We assured each individual that participation was confidential and voluntary.

(Non-)designation as trainee. For this variable we relied on archival data provided by the organisation about whether respondents were designated as trainee (1) or not (0).

Perceived organisational support and affective commitment. We used the same scales for measuring perceived organisational support (α = .81) and affective commitment (α = .80) as in Study 1. In Study 2, all items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale *(1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).*

Data Analysis

We used the process tool of Hayes (2012) to test the mediation model. We created a dummy variable to distinguish between trainees and non-trainees, with non-trainees being the reference category.

Study 2: Results

We first computed the means, standard deviations and correlations for affective commitment, and perceived organisational support (see Table 2). To test whether the trainees and non-trainees differed in terms of their average level of affective commitment and

perceived organisational support, we performed two ANOVAs. For perceived organisational support (F(1, 198) = 12.38; p=.001) a significant difference was found between the two groups (i.e., trainees and non-trainees), while affective commitment (F(1, 195) = 1.32; p=.252) did not show a significant difference. Hypothesis 1 was thus not supported as the affective commitment of trainees was not significantly different from that of non-trainees. In line with Hypothesis 2, however, trainees did show a higher level of perceived organisational support than non-trainees.

[Insert Table 2 About Here]

Secondly, we tested the mediating effect of perceived organisational support on the relationship between an employee's (non-)designation as trainee and affective commitment. The results showed that the relationship between an employee's designation as trainee and affective commitment was mediated by perceived organisational support, which supports Hypothesis 3. In other words, the direct effect of being designated as trainee (β=-.01; p=.880) on affective commitment is non-significant while we did find a significant indirect effect through perceived organisational support. In particular, trainees (β=.29; p<.001) scored significantly higher on perceived organisational support than non-trainees, and perceived organisational support was significantly related to affective commitment (β=.39; p<.001). The combination of these two significant relationships resulted in a significant indirect relationship (β=.11; 95% CI = [.04 - .21]). While hypothesis 2 and 3 are supported hypothesis 1 was not, this hints at a suppression effect where no effect is found due to the combination of a negative direct effect and a positive indirect effect (Tzelgov and Henik, 1991).

Study 2: Discussion

Similar to Study 1, the results of Study 2 revealed that perceived organisational support mediates the relationship between an employee's (non-)designation as talent (in this case, trainee) and his or her affective commitment. Trainees perceive more organisational

support than non-trainees and consequently experience more affective commitment towards the organisation.

In addition to lowering the risk for common method bias, this second study decreased the possibility of reversed causality and points out that being designated as talent positively influences an employee's perceived organisational support, and consequently, one's affective commitment.

General Discussion

This paper set out to explore psychological mechanisms underlying the differences in affective commitment between employees who are and who are not designated as talent by their organisations. In two separate studies, we showed that perceived organisational support is a key mediator in this relationship. Drawing on signalling theory (Spence, 1973), we expected and found that being designated as talent is perceived as a signal of organisational support and consequently triggers affective commitment. By relying on archival instead of self-report data for the measurement of our focal variable (designation as talent), we increased the reliability of our results as we were able to decrease the influence of respondent biases. Furthermore, the fact that both studies generated largely the same results also increases the likelihood that the dynamics behind this mediating relationship can be generalised for different types of workforce differentiation, in particular for the (non-) designation to different types of favourably treated groups in organisations. However, due to a suppression effect, we found different results for our first hypothesis. We will further discuss this in our limitations.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

First, while all hypotheses were supported in Study 1, the findings of Study 2 did not support Hypothesis 1, in that there was no direct relationship between being designated as trainee and higher affective commitment. While Baron and Kenny (1986) originally determined that a mediation effect can only exist when a significant direct relationship is

found between the independent and dependent variable, statisticians are now saying that a direct relationship is not required for a mediation to occur (MacKinnon, 2008). In this particular case we are dealing with a suppression effect (Tzelgov and Henik, 1991). No significant relationship is found between the designation as trainee and affective commitment, because the direct effect is negative (β=-.01) and the indirect effect is positive (β=.11) which leads to a total effect equal to zero. We propose that employees designated as trainee might not be especially more committed to their organisations than non-trainees (i.e., negative direct effect) as they might see the management traineeship as a stepping stone to exciting opportunities outside of the organisation. In addition, the term 'traineeship' in itself implies that these employees can expect to receive an intensive training programme. Therefore, the fulfilment of this expectation (as evidenced by perceived organisational support) might be a necessary precondition for affective commitment in this particular group. Thus, we suggest that the path linking the designation as trainee, perceived organisational support, and affective commitment exists through the combined effects of the two former variables on the shaping of the latter.

This finding indicates that different types of favourably treated groups in organisations may differ in other aspects than the variables incorporated in this paper, and therefore that the effects of particular characteristics of being designated as talent (e.g., the specific nature of an organisation's talent management programme) should be further explored. For instance, being designated as talent may have a greater signalling effect in the context of a high potential programme than in a management traineeship. While a traineeship mainly signals future opportunities, the high potential label might also be seen as a 'reward' in itself for past performances. As the management trainees in Study 2 were not yet members of the organisation at the time of their designation as talent, the signalling effect in terms of

recognition from or caring by the organisation may be less strong than it is for those designated as high potential in Study 1.

Second, the results of these two studies are still somewhat inconclusive as to the causality of the relationships. A longitudinal study would provide additional insights, especially into the results found in Study 1. Affective commitment could then be tested before an employee is designated as talent and afterwards, when the employee is 'officially' designated. Any difference in affective commitment could then be weighed against the difference found among employees not designated as talent.

Third, and in a similar vein, our study does not allow us to be conclusive as to the nature of the differences between the employees designated as talent and the other employees. In particular, our results do not answer the question whether the difference in perceived organisational support and affective commitment between those designated as talent and those not designated as talent is caused by an increase among the 'talents', a decrease among the 'non-talents', or a combination of both mechanisms. It could be that those not designated as talent feel unfavourably treated in comparison to talents and therefore have the perception that they receive less organisational support and consequently experience less affective commitment. Again, a longitudinal study might clarify the specific dynamics of these differences.

Fourth, despite our attempt to study different types of favourably treated employees in our two studies, we still experience limitations in generalising our findings to other sectors than the financial sector, to smaller companies, and to companies with different organisational and national cultures or with different approaches to talent management. For instance, Dekker and Barling (1995) found that employees in large companies experience less organisational support than in small companies, and Langenegger et al. (2011) posit that talent management

will only impact on affective commitment when it is focused on talent retention and development instead of, for instance, corporate strategy.

The literature would thus benefit from multilevel studies in different types of organisations, but also from cross-cultural studies. In particular, studies could focus on the perceptions and reactions of talents and non-talents that are nested in different organisations or cultures. For instance, cross-level interactions may be found, if we assume that the size of the organisation moderates the relationship between designation as talent and perceived organisational support. Using SAS or Mplus one could analyse this type of multilevel moderated mediation models. In addition, future studies should also look into the effect of differential ways of communicating about talent management. Dries and Pepermans (2009) pointed out that the vast majority of organisations do not communicate openly about their talent management practices and their employees' designated talent statuses. Would talented employees experience a similar amount of organisational support and consequently, affective commitment when they are unaware of the fact that they are designated as talent? Similarly, further research might explore the differential effects of various degrees of workforce differentiation. For instance, will employees respond differently when 90% of all resources are invested in only 5% of the workforce compared to a situation when 50% of all resources are invested in 30% of the workforce? In the first case the majority of employees (i.e., those who are not designated as talent) are not likely to receive any training opportunities and thus might not experience any organisational support and affective commitment. In the second case, it is most likely that all employees receive some training opportunities, while those designated as talent receive additional training opportunities, or more exclusive (expensive) ones. It could be argued that in this case all employees will experience some degree of organisational support, possibly generating alternative or weaker differences between talents and non-talents.

Practical Implications

Our results indicate that exclusive talent management—and specifically, the practice of workforce differentiation—seems to be successful in enhancing the affective commitment of employees who have valuable and unique skills and that this commitment is particularly increased by heightened levels of perceived organisational support, caused by being designated as talent by one's employing organisation. This implies that organisations should invest in ways to heighten their employees' perceptions of organisational support. Huselid and Becker (2011) argue, however, that from a strategic point of view employees who are not seen as talented should receive disproportionately lower investments. Unavoidably, these employees will thus receive fewer to no signals of support by the organisation (Spence, 1973). Notwithstanding these authors' arguments, we believe that it is an organisation's social responsibility to also support their employees not designated as talent. Therefore, we wish to point out that in addition to designating employees as talent, organisations can also trigger feelings of support by being fair in decisions, providing supervisory support, giving organisational rewards such as recognition, and implementing better job conditions such as giving autonomy (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). In this way organisations can stimulate perceptions of organisational support and expressions of affective commitment among all employees while still making disproportionate investments.

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Table 1.

Study 1: Means, standard deviations and correlations for all Study 1 variables.

	High potentials	Non-high potentials		
	Mean *(SD)*	Mean *(SD)*	1	2
1. Perceived organisational support	5.50 (.73)	4.95 (.92)	*.88*	
2. Affective commitment	5.47 (.84)	4.93 (1.16)	.54**	*.86*

Notes. Alpha coefficients are displayed on the diagonal and shown in italic.
**p<.01; *p<.05

Table 2.

Study 2: Means, standard deviations and correlations for all Study 2 variables.

	Trainees	Non-trainees		
	Mean *(SD)*	Mean *(SD)*	1	2
1. Perceived organisational support	3.83 (.47)	3.56 (.62)	*.81*	
2. Affective commitment	3.40 (.64)	3.30 (.60)	.37**	*.80*

Notes. Alpha coefficients are displayed on the diagonal and shown in italic.
**$p<.01$; *$p<.05$