



# SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

## The battle for talent

*Exploring perceptions of talent and experiences of a talent war  
in the Swedish service sector*

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## Abstract

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This thesis is placed in the context of talent management and revolves around the phenomena of talent and talent wars. The two phenomena have received increased attention in the talent management discourse during the last decades as the international competitiveness for talents among organizations has become amplified. The purpose of this thesis has been to explore, analyze and compare different perceptions of talent and experiences of a talent war. The sample population included in house and outsourced professionals involved in recruitment in the Swedish private service sector.

This study has adopted a social constructivist perspective and an abductive approach. The empirical data was collected through 16 semi-structured interviews which subsequently were analyzed by the use of a qualitative content analysis in order to detect themes and patterns.

The results indicated that talent perceptions are highly individual and there seemed to not be any connections between professional belonging and talent perceptions. However, the diverse ways of defining talent did not indicate that the professionals actively worked with talent diversity. On the contrary, none of the participants responded that they have an organizational talent diversity framework to rely on in the attraction and recruitment of talents. The study found a discrepancy among the professional groups in regards to the existence of a talent war. The outsourced professionals believed that the talent war existed while the in house professionals were less certain. Different experienced factors contributing to a talent war were also discovered.

*Keywords:* talent, talent management, talent perceptions, war for talent, talent diversity, employee attraction, employee recruitment

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# 1. Introduction and background

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Is it not remarkable that a Google search for the term *talent* exceeds 1 billion hits? This proves that talent is a popular term which appears to generate great curiosity. The word derives from greek and is described as everything from “(someone who has) a natural ability to be good at something, especially without being taught” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020), “a special often athletic, creative, or artistic aptitude” and “general intelligence or mental power” (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Here, the common denominator is that talent is extraordinary and unique. The general association talent has with sports and arts (Merriam-Webster, 2020) further illustrates this stance. The word talent has gained such recognition within popular culture that one of Britain’s prime TV programs revolves around the word: Britain’s got *talent*.

Talent, however, is not only associated with singers and football players. Talent also plays a central role in economics, and a book on talent management begins with the following sentence: “Talent drives the global economy” (Ployhart, Weekley & Dalzell, 2018, preface). This sentence underlines the importance of talent in today’s society and compares talent to an engine that helps to power the economy. Hence, the notion of talent management has recently become more prominent for organizations (Nilsson & Ellström, 2011) since they need to effectively manage their talent pool to become successful (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

The proportion of talents, or highly-skilled labourers, in the workforce has grown over the last decades (Buera & Kaboski, 2012). These highly skilled labourers engage in skill-intensive services, which the authors believe to be the reason for the rise of the service sector (Buera & Kaboski, 2012). Nilsson and Ellström (2011) argue that this shift has resulted in a knowledge-based economy in which the demand for highly skilled workers is inclining. Thus, in a world marked by globalization and changing workplace demographics (Trost, 2014; Blass, 2009), companies are finding themselves in the midst of an international competitive business



environment where they struggle to recruit and keep talented staff (Tarique & Schuler, 2010). This phenomena was in 1997 labeled *the war for talent* by the consulting firm McKinsey & Company (Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod, 2001), which since its introduction has been a hot topic of debate in research.

The attractiveness of talent for organizations is not derived from nowhere. Rather, talents are associated with many factors which impacts the success of a company: competitive advantage (Brown & Hesketh, 2011; Klepić, 2019) innovation and knowledge creation (Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017) and differentiating the company from their competitors (Ployhart, Weekley & Dalzell, 2018). Klepić (2019) further illuminates how talent yields a competitive edge. In the quest for organizational success, a diverse workforce with employees with diverse backgrounds is regarded as a contributing factor (Hatun, 2010).

The recruitment process, as a part of the talent management process, is an important step for the efficacy of selecting the right employees (Klepić, 2019) in the goal to attract talents into the company. As a part of the recruitment process is the attraction phase, which aims to find a “suitable and substantial pool of applicants.” (Klepić, 2019, p. 15). The recruitment phase is important since it is here that organizations encounter new talents and have to “screen and select the most appropriate candidates, and ultimately [...] need to convince those selected to accept the job offer.” (Klepić, 2019, p. 15). Chamberlain (2016) argues that the bias of the recruiter is central in recruitment processes, for which some applicants might be overlooked. Recruitment processes can be carried out in various ways, usually they are conducted in house (Gilani & Jamshed, 2016). Though, with today's competitive market it has become more common to outsource recruitment processes (Gilani & Jamshed, 2016).

## **1.1 Problem formulation**

The areas of talent and talent wars are interesting fields of study since “[...] in an era characterized by workforce heterogeneity and fast-changing, fast-paced environments, talent has become an organizational issue of concern to top management, line managers, and human

resources alike. Everybody is, or should be, involved in managing talent.“ (Hatum, 2010, p.2). The author here emphasizes that managing talent should be an organizational issue, and not just concern a selected few.

In order to understand the organizational implications of talent, we first need to understand what the word entails. Hatum (2010) argues that the definition of the word talent appears to be highly individual. Many attempts have been made by scholars to define talent and a coherent understanding is yet to be reached. As Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalés-Cruz (2013) point out, a part of the ambiguity surrounding talent management lies in the limited definition of the word upon which it is built: talent. Hence, there still appears to exist a need to continue to define and understand the term talent. This thesis will reach out to practitioners working with recruitment, as opposed to human resource scholars, and seek to understand their perception of talent.

Further, the rise of the service sector (Buera & Kaboski, 2012) has resulted in an increased share of highly skilled labourers in the workforce (Nilsson & Ellström, 2011), for which these two areas appear to be intertwined. Klepić (2019) argues that the rise of the service sector and the attraction of talents have been individually researched, but not in correlation with each other. Thus, this thesis will be focused on exploring the Swedish private service sector, since it is dense with knowledge workers and will be an interesting arena to explore this topic. Furthermore, previous research within talent management has mainly been conducted in a US setting within larger, private organizations (Blomquist, 2019). Blomquist (2019) has also studied talent management in the Swedish public service sector, for which there appears to be a research gap in the Swedish private service sector, where our thesis will be placed.

Moreover, the thesis will also focus on the experiences of talent war. Ever since the coining of the term *war for talent* it has received the attention of scholars within the field of talent management. Some criticize the importance of the war for talent and state that groups exceed even the most talented of individuals (Pfeffer, 2001). Pfeffer (2001) means that a war for talent

approach in organizations will focus on individual skills and talent and thus will inevitably result in a lesser focus on the team and the organization as a whole. McDonnell (2011) emphasizes the important role of networks and relationships in order to ensure the competitive advantage of a company. Nonetheless, other researchers within the field still believe that the war for talent is not fading anytime soon (Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Trost, 2014). Since research regarding the phenomena of talent wars is diverse, this thesis strives to explore the topic and understand how practicing professionals dealing with recruitment experience it.

## **1.2 Purpose and research questions**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore, analyze and compare the perceptions of talent and experiences of a talent war through the lens of in house and outsourced professionals working with recruitment. The background and prior research has led to the following research questions which will act as the backbone of this thesis:

**(RQ1)** How do professionals involved in in house and outsourced recruiting within the private service sector in Sweden perceive talent?

**(RQ2)** How do professionals involved in in house and outsourced recruiting within the private service sector in Sweden experience the phenomena of a talent war?

## **1.3 Research demarcations**

This thesis is placed in the context of talent management. Talent management encompasses many different stages, from talent planning and attraction to development and transitioning (Tansley & Tietze, 2013). Though, this thesis will focus on the first steps of the talent management process, i.e attraction and recruitment. The other steps of the process will thus be left out.

The sampling in this thesis is narrowed down to professionals who in their professional role are involved in recruitment processes. One sample group is in house professionals and the other is outsourced professionals working with recruitment. Thus, this thesis will not investigate general

talent perceptions and experiences of a talent war held by other professionals in the organizations. Furthermore, talent attraction and recruitment are prominent in all sectors. However, this study is placed in the Swedish private service sector. Thus, this thesis will not explore talent perceptions and experiences of a talent war in other sectors or countries.

## **1.4 Thesis outline**

The thesis commenced with Chapter 1 which introduced the reader to the problem area of talent perceptions and experiences of talent wars around which this thesis will revolve. Chapter 2 will exhibit the existing theoretical framework within the research field of talent management and more specifically the phenomena of talent and talent war. The chosen method will then be presented in Chapter 3 where benefits and limitations with the method choice will be demonstrated. In Chapter 4 the results will be presented followed by Chapter 5 which includes an analysis and discussion of the empirical findings. The thesis will conclude with a conclusion in Chapter 6, with a discussion of research contributions and practical implications followed by research limitations and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical framework

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This chapter aims to provide the reader with existing knowledge within the field of talent management. Concepts such as talent, talent perceptions, talent shortage and talent war will be explored through the subchapters. The literature that has been employed for the theoretical framework has been of high quality, produced by prominent human resource and talent management scholars such as Eva Gallardo-Gallardo, Nicky Dries, Ibraiz Tarique and Randall Schuler. In order to access the most recent and high quality research, LubSearch and Google Scholar were employed. The majority of the included material consist of peer-reviewed articles derived from recognized academic journals. The search words addressed in the search process were as follows: talent management, talent attraction, employee recruitment, talent shortage and talent war etcetera.

### 2.1 Defining talent

There are many ways to define what the word talent encompasses. Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Gonzalés-Cruz (2013, p.291) write that “it appears that talent can mean whatever a business leader or writer wants it to mean, since everyone has their own idea of what the construct does and does not encompass”. According to Brown and Hesketh (2011, p.76) talent can be regarded as “the sum of a person’s abilities- his or her intrinsic gift, skills, knowledge, experience, intelligence, judgment, attitude, character and drive. It also includes his or her ability to learn and grow”. Thus, it appears that talent is a combination of characteristics a person is born with and the ability to absorb new learnings.

Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalés-Cruz (2013, p.291) have compiled an overview of talent definitions formulated by scholars in the field of talent management, some of which include: “[...] superior mastery of systematically developed abilities or skills” (Gagné, 2000, p. 67),

“a select group of employees – those that rank at the top in terms of capability and performance – rather than the entire workforce” (Stahl et. al, 2007, p. 4) and “[...] a person's recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied” (Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001, p. 21). Ulrich (2007, p.3) has also attempted to calculate the talent of a person, which is explained as follows: “Talent equals competence [able to do the job] times commitment [willing to do the job] times contribution [finding meaning and purpose in their work]”. These quotes encapsulate that there is no single, concise definition of what the word talent entails and it appears that there are continuous, ongoing attempts in the talent management literature to agree upon a definition.

### 2.1.1 Talent perceptions

Similar to the vast array of talent definitions, there are also various perceptions of talent. Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Sels (2014) separate talent into an ability and an affective component, based on extensive research on contemporary talent studies. Ability refers to high performance, which can be both innate and developed, while the affective component is more personal and behavioural and is constituted by interest and “motivation to invest” (Nijs et. al, 2014, p. 183). This division highlights that both ability and personal characteristics have to be in place in order for talent to occur.

As previously mentioned, scholars appear to disagree upon how talent should be defined. Dries (2013) has found five tensions in the talent literature that encapsulates different talent perceptions. The various tensions, according to Dries (2013), include regarding talent as inclusive or exclusive and innate or acquired, which is visualized in Table 1.

Key point of discussion	Practical TM issue	Tensions	Implications for TM policies and practices
What (or who) is talent?	What should TM manage?	Object  Subject	Competence management, knowledge management  Organizational career management, succession planning

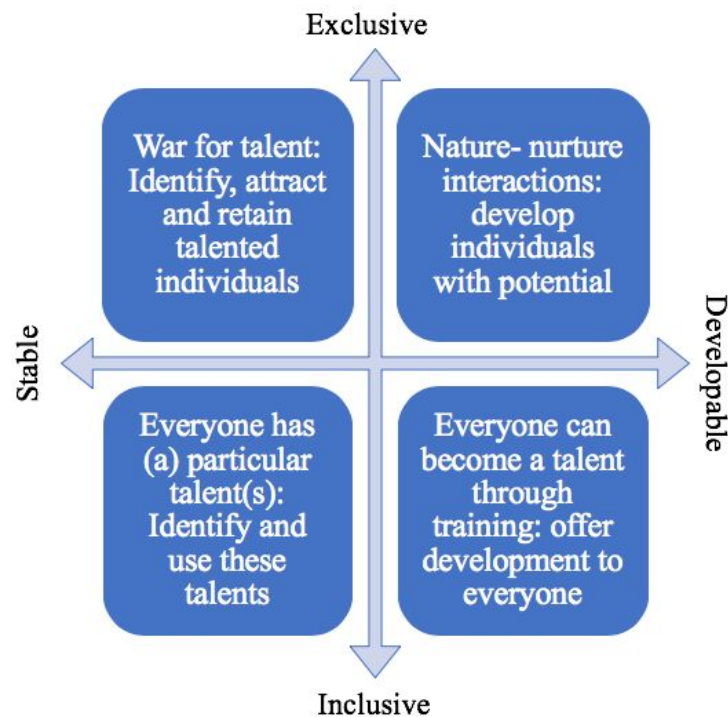
How prevalent is talent in the population?	By which principle should organizations allocate their resources?	Inclusive Exclusive	Strength-based approach Workforce differentiation
Can talent be taught (and learned)?	How can organizations tackle labour market scarcities?	Innate Acquired	Selection, assessment, identification Development, experience, learning
Is talent more about ability or motivation?	What should organizations select for?	Input Output	Effort, motivation, ambition, career orientation Output, performance, achievement, results
Is talent conditional on its environment?	Should organizations recruit externally or internally?	Transferable Context-dependent	Recruitment-identification prior to entry Fit-identification only after a certain socialization period

**Table 1:** Tensions in the talent literature, inspired by Dries, 2013, p.278

In Table 1, Dries (2013) illuminates the various ways of perceiving talent and underlines the key discussions within the talent literature and its implications for practitioners. The vast array of talent definitions makes the topic difficult to discuss since there are many tensions and differences in perceptions.

Furthermore, Meyers, Van Woerkom, Paauwe and Dries (2020) also discuss that different views of talent can be derived from the differences in talent philosophies. The authors define talent philosophy as “fundamental assumptions and beliefs about the nature, value, and instrumentality of talent that are held by a firm’s key decision makers” (Meyers et. al, 2020, p.564). They further argue that some main questions linked to the definition of talent is whether talent can be perceived in all humans or only in a selected few. Moreover, the authors also shed light upon the dichotomy of whether talent is stable or can be developed. This view is also shared by Scripp, Ulibarri and Flax (2013).

In order to make sense of these different conceptualizations of talent, Meyers and Van Woerkom (2014) in Meyers et. al (2020) have developed a framework which encompasses four different talent philosophies which are illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** A model of talent philosophies, inspired by Meyers et. al, 2020, p. 565

The inclusive talent philosophy indicates that anyone can be a talent, either naturally or through development. On the contrary, the exclusive approach indicates that talent can only be associated with selected people. The division of the term talent into innate and acquired is also mentioned by Scripp, Ulibarri and Flax (2013). According to Meyers et. al (2020), people who hold the exclusive talent philosophy are more likely to be fighting the war for talent, which will be presented later in this thesis.



### **2.1.2 The impact of subjective talent perceptions on talent diversity**

As aforementioned, talent can be perceived in various ways. Some talent perceptions are more diverse than others, such as the inclusive talent philosophy mentioned by Meyers et. al (2020). This sheds light upon the topic of talent diversity. Diverse employee backgrounds are believed to contribute to new ideas and initiatives (Hatun, 2010; Osman & Thunborg, 2019) which is beneficial for companies. Even though diversity in the workforce has proven to impact organizational success, bias still occurs in recruitment processes (Osman & Thunborg, 2019). Bias in recruitment processes affects many underrepresented groups, such as immigrants, women as well as young and old people (Osman & Thunborg, 2019).

One reason for which recruitment processes are believed to be biased is the emphasis that is placed on subjectivity in recruitment processes, which leads people to “hiring staff who look and talk just like them.” (Beattie & Johnson, 2012, p. 8). This belief is shared by Chamberlain (2016) who argues that bias plays a massive role in the recruitment process, for example when the recruiter relies on his or her first impression of a job candidate. Cartwright and Cooper (2012) highlight that these first impressions, based on the recruiter’s subjective evaluation of the candidate, are unlikely to predict how well they will be able to perform at their job.

Furthermore, Chamberlain (2016) illuminates that a person in charge of a recruitment process can rely on a bias checklist in order to mitigate the bias that inevitably exists when you are evaluating a candidate. Some excerpts from the list are as follows: “What assumptions am I making? How might I be stereotyping an individual into a particular group?” and “Am I resistant to certain subjects or aspects of diversity and inclusion? If so, which ones?” (Chamberlain, 2016, p. 202). This list can help recruiters to be more objective and less biased when evaluating a candidate for the purpose of increasing the talent diversity. The next subchapter will thus explore different approaches to attracting and recruiting talents.

## **2.2 Attracting and recruiting talents**

As mentioned in the problem formulation, this thesis has chosen to focus on the attraction and recruitment phases in the talent management process. As skilled employees are scarce in today's labour market, companies are investing heavily in attracting and recruiting talents from a narrow talent pool (Hatun, 2010). Employee attraction is defined by Rynes (1991, cited in Onah & Anikwe, 2016) as the attempt to portray the organization as a great place to work for potential new employees.

According to Hatun (2010), when attracting a new talent, identifying them is not enough. He argues that in order to be able to attract talents, the company needs to develop an employee value proposition (EVP). EVP is explained as “what employees can expect to receive from the company in exchange for the work they perform” (Hatun, 2010, p.37). Hatun (2010) argues that if the company has a good EVP, it eases the talent attraction.

As a natural second step following attraction is to recruit talents into the company. Employee recruitment is defined as “the process of identifying and hiring the best-qualified candidate (from within or outside the organization) for a job vacancy, in a most timely and cost-effective manner” (Sangeetha, 2010, p.93). Sangeetha (2010) further argues that by implementing an effective recruitment process, an organization can gain competitive advantage. Employee attraction and recruitment have not always been complex tasks, though talent shortages have made the tasks more complex and complicated (Hatun, 2010). Here, Hatun (2010) also conveys the candidates' role in complicating the process, arguing that candidates have become increasingly demanding and selective in recruitment processes. Furthermore, there are two ways that companies can recruit talents, which will be explained in the next subchapter.

### **2.2.1 In house recruitment and outsourced recruitment**

Recruitment processes are usually performed in house (Gilani & Jamshed, 2016), i.e conducted by professionals inside the organization. Though, recruitment process outsourcing (RPO) is a growing trend in today's labour market (Gilani & Jamshed, 2016). RPO can be explained as

“outsourcing of any activity concerning recruitment and selection” (Landay & DeArmond, 2018, p.183). Gilani and Jamshed (2016, p.304) argue that the growing trend of outsourcing the organization’s recruitment processes can be connected to skill scarcity and “the overarching talent crisis”. Wehner, Giardini and Kabst (2015) illuminate the benefits of outsourcing a company's recruitment processes as it reduces costs and is effective.

On the other hand, RPO has also received some critique. Researchers have claimed that outsourced recruitment processes can have a negative impact on the attractiveness of the organizations that adopt it, as it sends out the signal that applicants are not valued (Landay & DeArmond, 2018). Furthermore, Gilani and Jamshed (2016) shed light upon the difficult nature of having outsourced recruitment agencies representing the organization’s employer brand, a fact that has been proven to be pivotal in attracting talents. The next subchapter will place talent, talent diversity and talent attraction and recruitment in the broader subject area of talent management.

### **2.3 Talent management**

Talent management has become a prominent topic in the research field of human resource management in the last decades (Nilsson & Ellström, 2011). Even though the interest for the research field has increased, the terminology is still quite ambiguous (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Gonzalés-Cruz, 2013). Aston and Morton (2005 cited in Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 305) write that there “isn't a single or concise definition” of talent management. Furthermore, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries and Gonzalés-Cruz (2013) argue that the ambiguity surrounding talent management exists due to the variety of ways to define talent, which has been problematized in the previous chapter.

Although there is no universal definition of talent management, many researchers have defined their own view on what talent management encapsulates. For example, Armstrong and Taylor (2014, p.264) provide the following definition: “talent management is the process of ensuring that the organization has the talented people it needs to attain its business goals”. Tarique and

Schuler (2010) illustrate that crucial elements in talent management are to ascertain that there is the right amount of people who occupy the right positions and who possess the best set of skills and are prompted to do their job. This can be done through various activities such as talent planning, development and evaluation (Pandita & Ray, 2018).

According to Hatum (2010, p.4) “dealing with talent always has been, and always will be, challenging”. This quote sheds light upon how difficulties in talent management are not new challenges. Furthermore, Hatum (2010) writes that some decades ago, the labour market was more stable with continuous growth. The author argues that an employment was regarded as a lifelong commitment where employees often remained at the same company their entire career. Thus, talent was developed within the organization. Though, Hatum (2010) argues that times have changed and that this aforementioned scenario is no longer the case. Lifelong employment is outdated and there is an amplifying job-hopping trend among the new generations (Hatum, 2010). Moreover, Hatum (2010, p.2) illuminates that “a new business context has emerged, characterized by macro-environmental changes, changes in the way firms are organized, and demographic transformation”. Consequently, competition in the labour market is more prominent than ever. Hatum (2010) states that as a result, talent management has grown from a simple managerial matter into having a great importance for the whole organization as it is considered a vital success factor.

According to several researchers, talent plays a central role in gaining a competitive advantage (Hatum, 2010; Brown & Hesketh, 2011; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017; Ployhart, Weekley & Dalzell, 2018). Bhanugopan, Wang, Lockhart and Farrell (2017) write that organizations can achieve competitive advantage by successfully managing the employees’ knowledge, skills and abilities. Armstrong and Taylor (2014) highlight that in order to provide the organization with talents the strategic management of the organization’s talent pool has to be established while ensuring a constant flow of talents. Furthermore, talent management has, according to Brown and Hesketh (2011), increasingly influenced companies’

recruitment processes. The next subchapter will dive deeper into the increased complexity in the talent management processes today.

## **2.4 Increased complexity in talent management**

Today's business environment is signified by increased complexity, which affects the ways in which companies compete in order to become prosperous (Tarique & Schuler, 2010). Furthermore, increased complexity of the talent management process is highlighted as a challenge of contemporary talent management (Frank & Taylor, 2004). Tarique and Schuler (2010, p.123) accentuate that all organizations face the same challenge, i.e. "to attract, develop, and retain a needed supply of critical talent". Frank and Taylor (2004, p.34) argue that "workplaces everywhere are facing an increasingly complex and ever-changing landscape in their efforts to acquire, retain, motivate, and develop the talent needed to keep their organizations operating efficiently and competitively". Here, the authors paint a picture of the increasing complexity of the entire talent management process, which is important for the future survival of the organization. Preparation is by the authors proposed as a mitigation to the complexity issue as it is important to prepare the organization for the "roller coaster ride" that the future labour market is likely to be (Frank & Taylor, 2004, p.34).

The growing complexity of today's business environment increases the importance of talent, particularly in organizational knowledge and innovation creation (Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017). In knowledge societies it is particularly important to acquire, support and keep the right talents in order to make the organization stand out from its competitors (Ployhart, Weekley & Dalzell, 2018). In knowledge societies the importance of higher education is underlined, which the next subchapter will explore further.

### **2.4.1 Amplified significance of higher education**

The knowledge society we live in today (Nilsson & Ellström, 2012; Tholen, 2017) has resulted in a growing share of service jobs in which the significance of higher education is increased (Tholen, 2017). The notion that productivity is linked with skills and credentials has resulted in a

majority of developed countries investing more into higher education (Brown & Tannock, 2009). Subsequently, the proportion of workers who possess a higher education has increased (Buera & Kaboski, 2012).

Even though the supply of graduate workers has grown (Brown & Tannock, 2009), the global competitiveness for skilled workers has become amplified (Nilsson & Ellström, 2012; Frank & Taylor, 2004). Tholen (2017) underlines that higher education is important in order to cope with higher levels of complexity in the workplace. Tholen (2017) highlights that this has led to increased demand in the labour market for skills associated with this group. Educated workplaces are shown to reward educated workers (Tholen, 2017), which has resulted in a growing portion of workers who possess a university degree (Wilson et. al, 2014; Tholen, 2017). An increased number of university graduates and the growth of tertiary education (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2010) has amplified the competitiveness for talent, which is another current talent management trend which the next subchapter will discuss.

## **2.5 The war for talent**

The term *war for talent* was coined in 1997 by the global management consulting firm McKinsey & Company (Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod, 2001) to describe how companies fight for talented employees in a shallow pool of competent recruitants. Worldwide, organizations struggle to acquire and keep talents due to severe competition (Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Harvey, 2013). Ever since the term was introduced it has received immense attention from scholars within the field of talent management, some of which agree with the term while others disagree. This section will dive deeper into the different understandings of talent war and will conclude with some critique of the phenomena.

One prominent factor of the war for talent is the notion of talent shortage. Landay and DeArmond (2018, p.183) postulate that “firms around the world are facing the largest talent shortage in a decade, with 40% of firms reporting obstacles in filling jobs due to a lack of qualified applicants”. Ployhart, Weekley and Dalzell (2018) write that talent shortage is a major

challenge since the type of talent an organization needs is unlikely to be closely geographically located to the organization. Thus, the diverse talent an organization requires in order to continue to grow needs to be harvested through an effective talent management process which involves to “identify, recruit and hire the needed talent[...].” (Ployhart, Weekley & Dalzell, 2018, preface).

Another way to explain talent shortage is, according to Barnow, Trutko & Lerman (1998, cited in Richardson, 2007, p.12) “a market disequilibrium between supply and demand in which the quantity of workers demanded exceeds the supply available and willing to work at a particular wage and working conditions at a particular place and point in time”. Similarly, Schuler, Jackson and Tarique (2011) illuminate four major forces that organizations need to manage in order to cope with the market disequilibrium:

- Too little talent (with the desired competency and motivation) is available (shortage)
- Too much talent (with the desired competency and motivation) is available (surplus)
- The talent (with the desired competency and motivation) is available in the wrong place (or position)
- The talent (with the desired competency and motivation) is available at the wrong price (too expensive). (Schuler, Jackson & Tarique, 2011, p. 509-510).

Here the authors paint a picture of the balance that has to exist in order to effectively manage the talent process. For example, they highlight the importance of attaining the right balance of the inflow and outflow of talents as well as placing the talent at the right position at a reasonable price (Schuler, Jackson & Tarique, 2011).

Bhanugopan et. al (2017) write that the effects of talent shortages can be seen on an organizational level where it hinders the organization's performance, but also at a societal level, affecting economic growth. Thus, the authors argue that the problem of these shortages is a world wide phenomena but that the research field has not been developed enough. Tarique and Schuler (2010) illuminate that the utilization of the unique potential offered by individual workers is a contributing factor to gain competitive advantage. Hence, the competitive advantage is affected if the organization cannot access the right individuals to hire due to a talent deficiency. This can result in a war for talent.

Asplund (2019) elaborates on the topic of talent wars and underlines that talent management is a top priority for companies globally. The reason for which it has developed into a global phenomena is that talents are seeking opportunities beyond national borders, due to unevenly distributed economic growth (Harvey, 2013). Many companies struggle with recruiting highly talented individuals, in particular small- and medium-sized companies (Trost, 2014). Trost (2014) further argues that we are in an era of a great talent war with an acute talent shortage that will continue to rise. Tarique and Schuler (2010) and Beechler and Woodward (2009) emphasize that there are many reasons to believe that the competition for talent will continue to be a challenge in the future.

Tholen (2017) provides another perspective on the war for talent, which he describes as follows: “Many organizations increasingly rely on a limited number of graduate employees that are deemed ‘talented’.” (p. 4). Here, Tholen (2017) sheds light upon the importance of a graduate degree in order to be considered a talent. Carnevale and Rose (2015) share similar arguments and write that the higher demand for skilled workers has contributed to this situation. However, some scholars argue that this is only partly true for a fraction of the labour market, but illuminates that these highly paid and coveted positions are not accessed by the large share of the graduate labour market (Tholen, 2017; Carnevale & Rose, 2015).

Underlying mechanisms driving the war for talent can be found in macro trends such as changing demographics (Beechler & Woodward, 2009), a shift from manual work to knowledge work as well as the rise of digitalization and globalization (Trost, 2014). Changing demographics has resulted in many seniors terminating their work in order to retire which has left many young people to fill the vacant positions (Blass, 2009). The shift in workplace demographics is regarded as a contributing reason for the skill deficiency (McDonnell, 2011; Trost, 2014). Frank and Taylor (2004) believe that the labour market landscape is increasingly complex to navigate for organizations, however they illustrate that the war for talent has cooled down since its peak in the end of the 1990’s.



Although Beechler and Woodward (2009) believe that the war for talent will persist, the authors highlight that the discourse surrounding the phenomena should be reassessed. Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) are two prominent scholars who are opposed to the, according to the authors, exaggerated focus that is placed on individuals on achieving long lasting organizational performance. Furthermore, the authors believe that the assumptions upon which the discourse regarding talent war is built are misleading (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). One such assumption is that only a fraction of your employees can become talents, and if you believe this to be true you will enforce this view into your company it will probably turn out to be true (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Instead, the authors believe that systems overrule individuals, i.e that the performance of employees is dependent on the resources they have at hand in order to support their work (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006).

## 3. Methodology

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The purpose with this chapter is to present and explain the choice of methodology, i.e “how the research was accomplished” (Berg, 2009, p. 390). Methodology can be explained as what approach to adopt when conducting scientific research (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019). The concept *method* encompasses the collection of data through various data collection methods as well as data processing or analyses (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019). The choice of method will be argued for in relation to the intended outcome and purpose of this paper. The epistemological lens through which the material has been analyzed will be presented. This section will also dive deeper into what the data will consist of, how it was compiled and categorized as well as the ways in which it has been structured. Finally, this chapter will conclude by a methodological reflection.

### 3.1 Qualitative research approach

This research has adopted a qualitative approach, which by Ravitch and Carl (2020, p.4) is defined as involving “systematic and contextualized research processes to interpret the ways that humans view, approach, and make meaning of their experiences, contexts, and the world”. Qualitative research is not tied to any specific framework, but should rather be seen as “an umbrella term that encompasses many approaches” (Ravitch & Carl, 2020, p.5). Ravitch and Carl (2020) further convey that a qualitative study is not always a straightforward process, though it always starts with an interest in a specific area which will result in a research question. The research process for this thesis began with an interest in talent management which furthermore led to researching the topic and formulating research questions.

Furthermore, qualitative research can be connected to making sense of words (Bryman, 2004). Here, the human experience is studied which ties it close together with phenomenology, a word which can be used as an equivalent for qualitative (Roulston, 2014). The phenomenological

method uses data reduction in order to only focus on the data which is of relevance for the studied phenomena (Roulston, 2014). When the relevant data has been deduced from the gathered empirical material, Creswell (2003, p.18) writes that the researcher “often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives”. This involves to divert meaning from personal experiences with the purpose of deriving themes based on the collected data (Creswell, 2003). In this thesis, themes were derived based on the empirical data gathered from the interviews with the participants. Personal experiences are central in the social constructivist perspective (Creswell, 2003), which will be introduced below.

### **3.1.1 Social constructivist perspective**

The social constructivist perspective was developed in the early works of Berger and Luckmann in 1967 where they conceptualize the terms reality and knowledge as follows:

It will be enough, for our purposes, to define “reality” as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot “wish them away”), and to define “knowledge” as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics. (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p.17)

Through this quote the main meaning of social constructivism is understood from these separate terms: reality and knowledge. The central notion within the social constructivist perspective is that individuals strive to comprehend the world in which they are emerged, and through these impressions they derive their own subjective meanings (Creswell, 2003). As this thesis employs a social constructivist epistemological standpoint, the analysis will rest upon the “participants’ view of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2003, p. 8). Thus, the aim is to provide an insight into the complexity of the topic provided by the participants. Furthermore, Creswell (2003) illuminates that the purpose with a social constructivist approach is to engage in sensemaking of the meaning of others, which will be done in the data analysis of this thesis.

### **3.1.2 Abductive approach**

There are three different ways to approach research studies; deductive, inductive and abductive (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009). The deductive methodological standpoint usually derives from a

hypothesis which the researcher wants to confirm or disconfirm (Kennedy, 2018). Given (2008) highlights that this approach is at the core of quantitative methods. Though, this approach has been criticized for its high dependence on theory (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009).

On the contrary, the inductive methodological standpoint is widely linked with qualitative methods (Bryman, 2004) and is used for reasoning (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019). Miller and Brewer (2003, p. 154) argue that the inductive approach attempts to be “true to the data”, i.e no prior theoretical knowledge should be applied to the data. Rather, the data should convey its inherent meaning without the influence of theory (Miller & Brewer, 2003). Though, there has been a discussion regarding whether a researcher can be purely inductive, i.e conduct a research without any prior knowledge (Kennedy, 2018).

Lastly, the third approach is abduction. Given (2008) argues that this standpoint is the most recent one and is not yet widely used. This thesis has opted for an abductive methodological approach. According to Arbnor and Bjerke (2009), the abductive approach can be regarded as a combination of induction and deduction. Adopting an abductive standpoint allows the researcher to “constantly move back and forth between data and theories, and make comparisons and interpretations in searching for patterns and the best possible explanations” (Kennedy, 2018, p.5).

Furthermore, abduction is closely linked to interpretivism (Blaike, 2004). In order to interpret the data, the descriptions made by subjects to describe their way of life are transformed into scientific illustrations based on their descriptions (Blaike, 2004). This process encompasses two steps, the first is to describe the actions upon which categories are deducted (Blaike, 2004). The description of the actions will be presented in the data section (Chapter 4) of this thesis. Blaike (2004) further illustrates that these categories can act as a foundation upon which understandings can be formed, which will be done in this thesis’ analysis and discussion section (Chapter 5).

### **3.2 Research design**

The research design is according to Berg (2009, p.41) “the plan for how the study will be conducted”. Fejes and Thornberg (2019) illuminate how the process of designing research is not linear but rather includes a large amount of decisions that has to be made and re-made, which requires the alteration of already produced text.

There are different models used as templates for designing research. As Berg (2009) illustrates, research designs can be more or less planned. Berg (2009) sheds light upon the importance of asking yourself questions in the design phase of a research project, such as what type of data you intend to collect and through which methods. Other aspects that are important are whether the research should be guided by one or several theories and how the results will be analyzed (Berg, 2009).

The research process of this thesis commenced with the discussion of different intriguing research topics that could be of interest to analyze and research further. Literature was investigated and a research area, talent management, was identified. This approach illuminates the abductive nature of this thesis. Talent perceptions and talent wars were chosen as fields of focus for the thesis.

After the research topic had been solidified the next step was to identify the most appropriate data collection method to employ. For the purpose of answering our research questions, interviews were assigned as our method of choice in order to gather a deeper knowledge and understanding of the research field. The process of finding and accessing relevant interview objects to provide valuable insights into talent perceptions and talent wars followed. This process began with identifying relevant and interesting categories of professionals that supposedly held immense experience within the field. Following this step, our data collection could begin.

### **3.3 Data collection method**

This chapter will account for how this study has been conducted. The data selection and sampling, choice of method and data analysis will further be presented in depth.

#### **3.3.1 Selection and sampling**

The selection process is a strategic decision made by the researcher to determine which part of the study population to focus on (Denscombe, 2018). The nature of this thesis is explorative, which according to Creswell (2003) is one of the primary reasons to use a qualitative study. Hence, the sampling method of choice will be explorative. Explorative samples are mainly employed in small-scale research projects that deal with qualitative data, where the purpose is to investigate new subjects that can lead to interesting insights (Denscombe, 2018). Thus, the goal of exploratory sampling is not to get a representative cross section of the research area, but rather to be able to shed light upon samples that are interesting from a research perspective (Denscombe, 2018).

Furthermore, the sample size has been a widely debated topic in literature (Beitin, 2012). Scholars argue that a decent sample size can consist of everything from two (Boyd, 2001) to 25 (Creswell, 1998) participants. However, qualitative scientists are mostly “interested in a small number of participants who represent the phenomena of interest.” (Beitin, 2012, p. 248). The data collection in this thesis consists of 16 interviews and their transcripts.

Beitin (2012) argues that the sample can be composed of various groups of people that relate to the phenomena in various ways. Thus, the “participants or informants are purposely selected to represent rich knowledge about the research questions” (Beitin, 2012, p. 248). In order to understand which questions to ask our interview participants, we first reached out to an expert who possessed immense knowledge within the field of HR, as a professor and scholar within the research field. Based on the answers we developed an interview guide which we employed for the remaining interviews. The interview guide was also sent to our supervisor to be overlooked.

For this thesis, the sample consists of professionals within the Swedish private service sector who are involved in recruitment processes and have experience in recruitment. This broad categorization is then further narrowed down through classifying two different subgroups. The first category is in house professionals, which consists of middle managers and a CEO with recruiting responsibilities. The second category is professionals who work with outsourced recruiting, where their main job is to find suitable candidates to fill vacant positions for other companies. Tables 2 and 3 represents the selection of interviewees.

<b>Company name (fictive)</b>	<b>Description of company</b>	<b>Representative</b>	<b>Years of recruitment experience</b>
Company A	Company working within intellectual property	Head of HR	25
Company B	Company working within the payroll sector	CEO Middle manager Middle manager Middle manager	25 16 3 7
Company C	Company working with staffing and recruitment	Middle manager	2.5

**Table 2:** Overview of participants included in the study from the group of professionals involved in in house recruitment

<b>Company name (fictive)</b>	<b>Description of company</b>	<b>Representative</b>	<b>Years of recruitment experience</b>
Company Q	A staffing and recruitment company focused on roles within financial services	Consultant manager	2
Company Y	A staffing and recruitment company focused on roles within the service sector	Recruiter	3
Company Z	A staffing and recruitment company focused on roles within tech	Head of consultants	8

Company U	A staffing and recruitment company focused on recruiting specialists and managers within the service sector	Recruiter	16
Company X	A staffing and recruitment company focused on a variety of roles within the service sector	Recruitment consultant manager	13
Company W	A staffing and recruitment company focused on a variety of roles within the service sector	Recruitment consultant	4
Company M	A staffing and recruitment company focused on a variety of roles within tech	Talent Relation Specialist	8
Company T	A staffing and recruitment company focused on a variety of roles within executive search	Search associate	0.5

**Table 3:** Overview of participants included in the study from the group of professionals involved in outsourced recruitment

For this thesis a non-probability sampling methodology was employed in which the scientists have certain authority over the samples (Denscombe, 2018). This type of sampling is foremost employed due to reasons such as difficulties in getting into contact with the samples through conventional, random sampling methods (Denscombe, 2018). A non-probability sampling was chosen as professionals with a broad recruitment expertise within the above categories would be included. Hence, the goal was not to get a representative sample of the population. The goal was rather to get access to expertise possessed by only a small part of the population.

Study participants from both professionals working with in house recruitment as well as professionals working with outsourced recruitment were included. In these disperse categories



our separate networks were scanned in order to locate professionals within these respective categories. After our networks had been scanned, we reached out through posts on our personal LinkedIn profiles where we asked for recruiters interested in participating in the study. We received great interest from the target group, some of which were subsequently interviewed for this study.

### **3.3.2 Interviews**

This thesis employed interviews as a data collection method, which is one of the most frequently used data collection methods in qualitative research (Mann, 2016; Bryman, 2004). Individual interviews are frequently used in qualitative research since the interviewees can provide knowledge in regards to a certain topic (Beitin, 2012). Employing interviews as a data collection method allows for gaining a deep understanding of a person's experiences, values and beliefs (May, 2013). The centrality and the human presence of the researcher is a strength since it “allows for human insights and experiences to generate new understandings and ways to look at the world [...]” (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019, p. 37, our translation).

Interviews can be structured in different ways (Denscombe, 2018). This study employs a semi-structured interview technique which allows for a more flexible way of conducting the interview as the structure is a guide of different areas of investigation rather than a script (Mann, 2016; Bryman, 2004). This type of structure enables the researcher to change and develop the questions throughout the research process (May, 2013; Bryman, 2004), which allows for insightful interview responses to be incorporated into the results.

Some of our interviews were conducted face to face, and some virtually. The majority of our interviews were conducted together, but some of them were carried out by only one researcher present. Prior to our interviews we made sure to have informed consent of the participants' involvement in the study. The participants furthermore consented to being recorded. May (2013) highlights the importance of recording interviews. By recording our interviews, the focus would rest on the conversation alone. After the interviews the recordings were transcribed.

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), an initial phase of the analysis begins already with the transcription. Transcribing is evidently an important step, though it is also very time consuming (Bryman, 2004). Worth mentioning is also that our interviews were conducted in Swedish and some transcriptions were made in Swedish and others in English. Though, when we were conducting the empirical data results, we translated the quotes together in order to not miss out on any interesting insights.

### **3.4 Qualitative content analysis**

The data analysis in this thesis was conducted through a qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis seeks to describe a set of tools employed for systematic text analysis, which can be used for various kinds of text material (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). A qualitative content analysis places the analysis of texts as a focal point and systematically reviews them to derive themes and central topics (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). One of the main benefits of the qualitative content analysis is that it helps the researcher to minimize the material and divert attention to certain parts of the text (Schreier, 2014). Schreier (2014) writes that different parts of the material are allocated to different coding categories for the purpose of deducting meaning of the compiled data. In the analysis of our compiled empirical data, we assigned different coding categories to the different sections of the material in order to detect themes and correlations between the interviews.

Fejes and Thornberg (2019) illuminate that the scientist, in the process of analyzing the gathered empirical data, organizes and breaks it down to pieces that are easier to comprehend and get an overview of. Furthermore, the researcher codes the gathered material and seeks for repetitive patterns (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019). The data in this thesis was analyzed by meaning condensations. Meaning condensation refers to the condensation of longer interview quotes in order to retrieve themes. The number of derived categories from the text material can be plenty, but Schreier (2014) illustrates that it is restricted by the amount the researcher is able to cope with.

In order to practically approach the material, Creswell (2003) identifies three steps that the researcher can take to make sense of the gathered empirical data. The first step is to “organize and prepare” (Creswell, 2003, p. 191) the data, which partly is achieved through the transcription and organization of the interview material. The second step is to read the gathered data in order to make sense of it and start interpreting its meaning (Creswell, 2003). Lastly, the data should be coded and subsequently divided into categories that are labeled accordingly (Creswell, 2003).

When analyzing our data, we followed Creswell’s (2003) three steps. We began the data analysis with the transcription of our gathered material after which we read it through. Firstly, the material was read individually and then together in order to not miss any interesting aspects and make sense of the material. When similar data patterns were detected they were coded into different categories and different themes emerged.

### **3.5 Research quality**

The following section will present different quality aspects to consider when conducting qualitative research. Factors such as validity and reliability as well as research ethics will be presented. The chapter will conclude with a methodological reflection.

#### **3.5.1 Validity and reliability**

Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) argue that questions of validity and reliability bring epistemological concerns. Ravich and Carl (2020) illuminate the ongoing discussion of whether using the measurement of validity and reliability in qualitative research is compatible or not. They rather talk about using credibility and trustworthiness (Ravich & Carl, 2020). However, according to Schreier (2012), a qualitative content analytical approach focuses on the concepts of validity and reliability, as opposed to credibility and trustworthiness. Therefore these terms will be introduced below.

Validity aims to measure one aspect of the quality of a research, namely, the extent to which the methods employed measures what they are intended to measure (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019).

The themes in the interviews have revolved around different individuals' understandings, perceptions and experiences of different phenomena. Berg (2009, p. 16) highlights that research that relates to individual experiences "require consideration of an individual's own perceptions and subjective apprehensions". This can affect the validity of the respondents' answers as they may have underlying motives, which we will not gain access to. Nonetheless, we have attempted to uphold the validity in this study since the purpose with the interviews is to gain insight into the subjective experiences and perspectives of the respondents and not find a generalizable truth.

The reliability of a study refers to being consistent and precise in the data collection from each of the interview modes (Frey & Oishi, 1995). The majority of the interviews were conducted via online meeting programs, for example through the use of Skype, Zoom and Microsoft Teams. May (2013), writes that this type of interview is very similar to interviews being conducted face to face. Mann (2016, p. 87) highlights the benefits of conducting interviews online as it enables researchers to "access interviewees across distance and time barriers", which facilitates the data collection process. Some interviews were, however, conducted face to face. In order to achieve reliability, precision and consistency of the measurements need to be considered (Frey & Oishi, 1995). In our study, even though we have opted for different kinds of interview tools, we have opted to secure reliability since the same interview guides have been employed in all of the interviews.

### **3.5.2 Research ethics**

According to Denscombe (2018) there are four main aspects to keep in mind in regards to research ethics. Firstly, the interest of the participants should always be kept a priority. A part of this first step is ensuring that after partaking in the study, the participant should be able to go back to status quo or benefit from the study (Denscombe, 2018). This should be considered already in the formulation of the research problem (Creswell, 2003). Secondly, Denscombe (2018) writes that participation in the study should be completely voluntary and the researchers need to get informed consent, preferably in writing. Thirdly, he argues that a researcher needs to be open and honest about the purpose of the study and the role of the participant.

Denscombe (2018) illustrates that this also includes being objective and just in the data analysis. Lastly, he writes that the research has to abide by national laws (Denscombe, 2018).

Moreover, the study should be designed in a manner that secures the anonymity of individuals (Creswell, 2003). Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants should always be kept a top priority (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). The authors argue that you should not be able to connect specific statements to certain people. This could be accomplished through employing pseudonyms as a replacement for the participants' real names (Creswell, 2003). Furthermore, Magnusson and Marecek (2015) argue that it is the researchers' responsibility to keep interview transcripts and other materials from being disclosed to others, which we have abided by.

To uphold good research ethics in this study the above presented ethical aspects have been followed. When formulating our research question, we had in mind to research an area where we could contribute and benefit the participants with new knowledge in the field. As a part of Denscombe's (2018) third rule, the participants were informed about the purpose and topic of the research and the reasons for which they were asked to participate. Informed consent was achieved through emails with the participants. During the interviews we asked for further consent in regards to recording the interviews for transcription purposes. Furthermore, the data analysis ensured the anonymity of the individuals through the use of fictive names and the avoidance of connecting certain people with particular statements.

### **3.6 Methodological reflection**

All methods have advantages and disadvantages (Denscombe, 2018). In this section we will consider our choice of method. Reflecting upon the sample employed in this research, we aimed to include professionals with immense experience in recruiting. Based on this criteria we limited the sample to include two professional groups, the first of which is in house professionals involved in recruitment. This group consisted of middle managers and a CEO, all of which have long-standing experience in recruiting but do not necessarily possess an HR background. The other group was outsourced professionals, whose main work task is to find and recruit candidates

for other organizations. Some of the professionals in this group had an educational background in HR and others did not.

The reasons for choosing these two sample categories were that they shared experience of the same topic, talent recruitment, but they had different perspectives and professional backgrounds which provided interesting insights for analysis. After having conducted our research, we were content with our sampling group as we obtained interesting data. Though, if we would have re-designed the research we would have chosen other sample participants. For example, in house recruitment specialists and outsourced recruitment specialists, instead of the diverse groups we included in this study. We believe that these groups could share more similar backgrounds which could have made the comparisons more just. On the other hand, a more diverse sample group allows for rich data. Furthermore, worth mentioning is that four of our in house professionals working with recruitment were employed at the same company. This could affect the study as they might answer certain questions similarly in order to not deviate from company values. Thus, if we were to re-make the study, we would have opted for a greater organizational diversity within this group.

As accounted for, this thesis method of choice was interviews. Since qualitative research to a large extent involves human interference, this can comprise both a strength but also a liability (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019). Our experience of interviews as a data collection method is that it allowed for the interview participants to explain their subjective views in regards to a topic. Rather than using other methods, for example a survey with closed answers, the open answers in our interviews enabled interaction between the participant and the researcher where interesting data was derived. However, open-ended questions makes the data more difficult to generalize and the answers might not answer the question.

Some quantitative questions were also included in the interview guides, where the interviewees could place their experiences of different talent management processes along a scale of 1-9. However, since our research questions were amended during the course of the study, we decided

to not include the responses derived from the quantitative questions in our result since it was no longer of relevance to the research questions.

Moving on, one weakness of employing interviews as a method is its dependability on the previous experiences and knowledge of the researcher, which impacts the outcome of the research (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019). An immense responsibility is placed on the researcher to not influence the study by his or her chosen interview questions or interview technique (Alvesson, 2011). However, we have tried to mitigate this by doing research on the talent management area before conducting the interviews. Hence, we acquired knowledge in regards to the topic beforehand. We also thoroughly prepared for the interviews by reading methodological research about how to best conduct research interviews and important steps to follow. Furthermore, after formulating our interview guide, the guide was sent to our supervisor for feedback. We also tested our interview guide on an expert participant with a broad knowledge within the talent management field in order to determine whether the questions were understandable and if something needed to be altered.

Responsibility is also placed on the participants as they may possess knowledge but are unable to convey it, which acts as another limitation (Alvesson, 2011). Furthermore, Alvesson (2011) also underlines that the motives of the participants play a central role in the study. A common preconception is that the participant is acting in good faith, which may not always be the case (Alvesson, 2011). We tried to mitigate this limitation by giving the participants plenty of time to answer questions as well as rephrasing questions if they were not being understood. Although, whether the participants are acting in good faith is outside the control of the researcher.

The individual interviews differed from each other in some aspects. For example, we mixed video interviews with interviews conducted face to face. Furthermore, in some interviews we were both present while others were performed individually. This had an impact on the reliability of the interview material, since the results will be compared and contrasted with each other.

Face-to-face interviews makes it easier for the researcher to detect cues such as body language while this is left out in video interviews, which can impact the reliability of the empirical data.

Lastly, we are also aware that our sampling of 16 participants is not enough to represent all professionals working with recruitment in the Swedish private service sector. Therefore, we cannot derive general conclusions about perceptions of talent and experiences of a talent war from the acquired data. Although, the purpose with the study is to explore our participants' subjective perceptions and experiences of the aforementioned topics, for which the generalizability will not be the focal point.



## 4. Empirical results

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In this chapter, the empirical results from the interviews will be presented. Four profound themes were discovered in the data; perceptions of talent, talent war experiences, differences in talent war experiences between in house and outsourced professionals and lastly, experienced factors contributing to a talent war. The chapters are divided into different subchapters which will dive deeper into the aforementioned themes.

### 4.1 Perceptions of talent

According to the study participants, there is a discrepancy in what the word talent encapsulates. The perceptions of talent are scattered and vary from perceiving talent as integrated within a person to talent as a set of competencies which can be developed. Many participants find defining talent difficult, which is accentuated in the following quote:

There are many competencies but people find it hard to show that they are talents. It is difficult to perceive talent based on a CV. How should I as a recruiter find the talents? How do I discover talent? It is definitely a challenge. (Outsourced professional, Company Y)

Although many participants find it difficult to define and formulate their perception of talent, some common themes were discovered in the data. These are as follows: talent is innate, talent is developmental potential, talent is a combination of competencies and personality traits and lastly, talent is what the client wants. The participants were also asked to reflect upon their talent perception and its implications on talent diversity.

#### **Talent is innate**

One category discovered in the empirical data was a general association with talent as innate, i.e. skills that a person is born with and inherently exist within a person. One interviewee highlights talent as a natural ability:

It is more about being naturally good at something, like rhetoric or being a good leader or good at your job. (In house professional, Company C)

Here, rhetoric and leadership are illustrated as skills that you are naturally good at. But it is also linked to one's ability to be successful at work. Similarly, another interviewee describes that some job roles require innate talent and you cannot learn the skills required for these roles:

For me, being a salesperson is talent. This is not something that you can learn, you just have it. Talent is deeply rooted within a person. (In house professional, Company B)

This quote indicates how talent is something you are and there is no room for development. Likewise, talent is by many interview participants linked to personality traits such as ambition and curiosity, which further illuminates the personal nature of talent. This highlights that talent goes beyond skills and is more connected to personal characteristics. One interviewee underlined ambition and goal-orientedness as two natural attributes. The quote below accentuates mindset as a talent attribute:

Personally for me it is a mindset [...] It is an innate ability [...] (Outsourced professional, Company X)

Talent, according to the innate perspective, is deeply rooted within a person and is not a skill to be acquired or developed over time. Either you have it or you do not. One participant (Company M) illuminates how they look for key elements that gossip about a person's talent in the job application process, for example via the CV. If the job applicant has been dedicated to different causes, such as student associations or courses outside their field of study at university, this reveals a person's curiosity, which according to this participant is highly linked to talent.

### **Talent is developmental potential**

As opposed to regarding talent as innate, themes were detected in the data which indicates that some participants perceived talent as abilities that could be developed over time, which the quote below illuminates:

I always say, hire for attitude, train for skills. A lot of research has been done on the fact that it may not always be what type of background you have that matters, but more what kind of attitude and basic values you have as a person. Because you can learn most things if only you have the right attitude. (Outsourced professional, Company Y)

Here, the participant sheds light upon that factors such as academic and work-related background is not always vital, because talent can be developed. This view is also shared by another participant:

It is the will rather than the talent that matters, if you really want something you will be able to learn it. (In house professional, Company B)

Here, the interviewee highlights that everyone can learn and be developed into talents over time if the willpower is there. A majority of our respondents linked talent to willpower, i.e a willingness to further develop your skills and abilities. Here, the focus is not on possessing certain prerequisites to be deemed talented. Rather, willpower and developmental potential are highlighted as talent cornerstones.

### **Talent entails a combination of competencies and personality**

Another perception of talent that stood out among the interview participants highlighted talent as a combination of competencies and personality. One respondent (Company Z) answered that talent is partly constituted by an innate ability and partly by an interest which can be developed through for example education. They further illuminate that personality may accentuate talent. A similar notion of talent is shared by another interviewee who defines talent as follows:

It partly comes down to person and personality, we want to recruit the right people with the right values while you also possess some knowledge. So both parts have to be in place in order to label them talents. (In house professional, Company B)

The perception of talent as both encompassing competencies and personality is shared by other study participants. One interviewee (Company Z) believes that a combination of different factors, such as problem-solving ability and personal characteristics, are what renders a person talented. Another participant (Company Q) illuminates that the candidate primarily has to fulfill a set of

competencies, but when they meet a person for an interview, personality is also deemed important. Thus, talent appears to be a combination of competencies relating to the job itself but also personality traits.

### **Talent is what the client wants**

According to our research, some participants from the category of outsourced professionals highlighted the clients' central role in their talent perceptions:

I perceive talent based on how my customers define talent. It depends on which company I am recruiting for. How does the company view the concept of talent? (Outsourced professional, Company X)

This participant illustrates that their perception of talent is dependent on the client's talent perception. This quote also paints a picture of the variety of talent definitions which exist in different organizations. Four of our 16 interviewees shared this view and conveyed that in their recruitment processes, the clients and their candidate profiles determine who is regarded as a talent and who is not. Here, the responsibility of defining talent is transferred to a third party, the client, which is indicated in the following quote:

It depends on the company I am recruiting for. What is talent according to them? (Outsourced professional, Company M)

This outsourced professional accentuates that they are only searching for the talent that is defined by their client in the candidate profile, which further illuminates the prioritization of the client's talent perception above their own.

### **Reflections on talent perceptions**

After the participants shared their talent perceptions they were asked to reflect upon how their talent perceptions could affect who they deem talented. Also, if they attempt to include diversity in their attraction and recruitment of talents. One participant (Company T) expressed that if you have a tunnel vision in your perception of who you want, then you will miss many good candidates. Moreover, a majority of the respondents answered that they attempt to incorporate recruitment diversity in their daily work, though there were no clear organizational policies to

follow in relation to this. Some in house professionals (Company B) underlined that they instead rely on their gut feeling when recruiting, which the quote below illuminates:

Recruitment is a lot about feeling [...] the gut feeling weighs heavily. (In house professional, Company B)

In house professionals also emphasize the importance of the candidate's potential fit into the organizational culture as a criteria for who they deem talented:

What we are looking at is that you live up to our company values. (In house professional, Company B)

On the other hand, outsourced professionals rather relied on the client's desired candidate profile and the candidates' competencies, which the quote below illustrates:

We do not have any policies concerning this. It is the customer's candidate profile and needs that dominates our work. However, we are always careful to point out to the clientes that it is the competence that governs the candidate profile and not ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender. I keep reminding myself not to de-prioritize candidates for different reasons, it should be the competence you look at. (Outsourced professional, Company U)

Here, the participant highlights that they do not have any clear guidelines when it comes to recruitment of talents, though, it is the client's candidate profile that governs the recruitment process. Another participant shared the same experience and problematized this as follows:

If the company is a typical "talent company" I think that the war for talent is very much real. But if you are more open-minded and don't have the same amount of demands you will still be able to hire someone who is competent but who might not have the typical talent background. This person might be able to grow and become a talent. (Outsourced professional, Company T)

According to this interviewee, if you as a company have a diverse talent perception, you are able to find more talents that otherwise might have been neglected, i.e escaping the war for talent. This brings us into our next subchapter, different experiences of talent wars.

## 4.2 Experiences of a talent war

When the empirical data was approached, three distinctive experiences of a talent war were identified. While the majority of the interview participants were ascertained that the talent war was real, some had not personally encountered it. Two participants particularly stood out from the crowd as they were unsure whether the talent war exists or not. This following section will dive deeper into the interviewees' responses in regards to experiences of a talent war.

### The talent war is real

A majority, 11 out of 16 interview participants, answered that there is a real talent war in the Swedish private service sector which they are experiencing. Out of these 11 participants one was an in house professional and the rest were professionals working with outsourced recruiting. One outsourced professional (Company M) answered that the talent war encompasses their everyday life. The quote below paints a picture of how one outsourced professional is experiencing the phenomena of a talent war:

I have absolutely experienced a talent war. Let me give you an example: I was looking for an engineer with a certain set of competencies and called my experienced colleagues in the field. I told them that I was looking for a candidate with this specific profile. They laughed and said that I am not the only one hunting down this specific profile and wished me good luck. (Outsourced professional, Company U)

This quote sheds light upon talent shortage within certain business areas. It appears to be well known among recruiters who are looking for candidates with specific competencies how difficult these talents are to come by. The same experience is shared by another professional working with outsourced recruitment who highlights that the market belongs to the candidates:

Absolutely. We usually say that the market belongs to the candidates and that we have to adapt and work more with attracting talents in order to recruit them. (Outsourced professional, Company Q)

The difficulties in finding talent seems to lead recruiters into taking precautionary measures in order to reach talents, such as adapting and dedicating efforts into talent attraction. It appears that this is particularly evident in the consultancy sector. One outsourced recruiter shares their

experience of a talent war and mentions that in order to access the right talents you need to speed up the recruitment process and highlight their employer value proposition (EVP):

Yes, the real stars find jobs easily and you have to be quick. Especially in the consultancy field it's hard to recruit people for shorter contracts. How are we going to attract talents to our company instead of a company who can offer them a permanent position? (Outsourced professional, Company Y)

The outsourced professional here shares their concerns regarding how to approach talent attraction. The value that is offered to the candidates is here considered one of the main determinants of which company gets the talents and which does not. One in house professional who had experienced the war for talent believes that it takes place on the field in addition to the recruitment process:

Partly, we have had a talent war against our competitors but also when we stand at work fairs and so on, where everyone is fighting for the best candidates where we all have different strategies to try to attract them. (In house professional, Company C)

Evidently, the strategies employed by companies to handle the difficulties in finding and recruiting talent exceeds online job advertisements as it also exists on the field. The in house professional here illuminates how companies and organizations resort to other types of strategies in candidate attraction, for example via work fairs. However, the competition for talent appears to be strong here as well.

### **The war for talent exists, but not in this geographical area**

Three of the 16 interview participants responded that they were aware of the existence of a talent war, i.e a high degree of competition for skilled workers. However, they added that they had not personally been exposed to the phenomena. All of the three interviewees were in house professionals from Company B involved in recruitment. Some of the respondents who had not personally experienced a talent war believed that talent wars were more evident in bigger, urban areas. In the quote below the interview participant illuminates how they feel lucky that their company is located in a small town, since talent wars are not present there:

Yes, in the bigger urban regions I can recognize this [talent wars]: Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. Particularly in Stockholm, a salary consultant can earn a lot of money and they usually do not stay for that long at the same company. Now we are lucky to be positioned in a smaller town, no one wants to move here and no one wants to leave. (In house professional, Company B)

The same experience was shared by two other in house professionals working with recruitment. One of the participants presents that since they are located in a small town the competition for talent is not very evident and their strategy is to recruit people from the nearby area. Another in house professional shares their thoughts on geography and competition for talent:

We don't have that many competitors that we are competing against in this [geographical] area. If we would have been located in another city with more companies within this sector there would have been another type of competition [more competition] between similar companies. That could have resulted in salary wars and other types of wars, we still can experience that in the bigger cities with some of our competitors. (In house professional, Company B)

Salary wars are mentioned as a consequence of a high degree of competition for talents, particularly in urban areas. In order to attract the best talents, salary is employed as an attraction strategy. This, according to the interview respondent, also becomes a method of warfare between competing companies: who can offer the highest salary? One in house professional working with recruitment offers an example of a salary war that they had experienced in a bigger city in the past:

A few years ago they [a competitor] launched LinkedIn campaigns which said that 'no matter what salary you have right now you will get 5000 SEK more if you change to us'. This is one method to almost buy capacity from each other, which does not lead to anything good. (In house professional, Company B)

This excerpt illustrates how talent wars are pushed to their limit in the form of a salary war, where companies are attempting to attract talents from their competitors by offering higher salaries. The respondent highlights that this type of talent attraction is almost similar to purchasing capacity from the competitors, leading to wages piling up. The interview participant considers this talent attraction strategy unsustainable.



## **Uncertainties regarding the existence of a talent war**

The occurrence of a talent war was not shared by all interview participants. Particularly two interviewees stood out and questioned the existence of a talent war, which is illustrated by the quote below:

It's talked about more today, the war over talents. Whether that talk is an actual thing or if it is just talk, I don't know. Companies have always wanted talent and there has always been talent. (Expert participant )

Here, the expert participant brought to light that the phenomena of a talent war is more prominent today, though the participant was hesitant if it was real or not. It appears that the current discourse, according to the expert participant, to a larger degree revolves around the phenomena of talent wars. The second participant shared this hesitation and reasoned as follows:

I have always wondered about this. It depends on what you perceive as a talent. But I think that [talent war] is a concept sold by consultancy firms who want to earn money on talent management. [...] Absolutely, some roles are harder to recruit for, but they might be more niche roles. It is about being a nice employer and being good and communicating that. We have to be aware of our value proposition, is it competitive enough? We also have to live up to it. We cannot take any employee for granted. It might be more of a relationship war. (In house professional, Company A)

Here, the participant highlights that the affirmation of the existence of a talent war could potentially be a means for consultancy firms to earn money on talent management. The problem lies in the perception of talent, according to the interviewee. Furthermore, the participant highlighted that the war for talent rather is a relationship war where companies need to live up to their value propositions to be competitive in today's labour market. Through their value propositions they can attract talents. Hence, the organization that best manages their employer-employee relationships is the winner of the relationship (talent) war.

### **4.2.1 Experiences of a talent war: does in house or outsourced differ?**

A question that emerged during the interviews was whether experiences of a talent war differed depending on if you are involved in in house or outsourced recruitment processes.

Some participants responded that they believe that experiences of a talent war are more prominent when you work with outsourced recruitment:

I have worked with both in house and outsourced recruiting. In my experience, talent wars are more prevailing when you work with outsourced recruitment. There are plenty of recruitment companies and they are fighting for the same talents. A lot of recruitment firms also means a greater selection for the talents. (Outsourced professional, Company Z)

Other outsourced professionals agree that there is a distinction, and highlight that when working in house with recruitment you are an expert on that particular company. This expertise is hard to achieve as an outsourced recruiting professional when recruiting for several organizations simultaneously. Another outsourced professional (Company W) also sheds light upon that the size of a company could matter as well. As an in house professional at a smaller company, you might not recruit that many new talents.

Another aspect worth mentioning is that all of the participants in the sample outsourced recruiting professionals (eight interviewees), answered that they are experiencing a talent war. Meanwhile, only two out of six of the in house professionals involved in recruitment processes responded that they are experiencing a talent war. In the subchapter below, experienced factors contributing to a talent war will be presented.

#### **4.2.2 Perceived factors contributing to a talent war**

Scanning the empirical data, different experienced factors contributing to a talent war emerged. The factors were identified as: skewed educational supply and demand in the labour market, unrealistic client demands and the candidates' power in the labour market. The following subchapters will go deeper into these themes.

##### **Skewed educational supply and demand in the labour market**

Many study participants responded that a skewed educational supply and demand is a potential factor contributing to the talent war, a majority of which were outsourced recruiting

professionals. One of them elaborates that their company conducts a survey which indicates deficiency in some business fields, and surplus in others:

There is a skewed distribution. Our company usually conducts surveys, which are the candidates' dream positions? Where is the scarcity? This is skewed, today we have an extreme deficiency in the field of craftsmanship, a lot fewer people educate themselves to become craftsmen today. Many people on the other hand have an academic education, then the jobs have to match that. (Outsourced professional, Company X)

A similar position is held by another outsourced professional who is also experiencing that fewer people educate themselves to professions that are demanded in the labour market. An in house professional (Company B) shares that they experience difficulties in finding talents with the right educational background due to the company's geographical location in a small town. Some professions' lack of attractiveness combined with a large number of professionals' upcoming retirement lead to talent shortage within these fields:

If I think of my own recruitments within a certain field, a very small number of people are educated and a large number are retiring. This area might not be very attractive to educate yourself within. (Outsourced professional, Company U)

One outsourced professional, on the other hand, illuminates that the contemporary labour market has a large degree of educated workers. However, employers are looking for candidates with a combination of education and work experience, which is highlighted in the quote below:

I think that we often experience that the employer wants someone who has experience but also the right education. Then the labour market has a lot of educated people with not enough work experience. The situation then is that the educated people are not shaped the way you want them to. Here the employer needs to adapt to the supply on the candidate market. (Outsourced professional, Company Q)

This interview excerpt underlines the skewed educational supply and demand in the labour market and the outsourced professional states that it is the employer who needs to adapt to the supply, not vice versa. The high demands and requirements that employers place on candidates lead us to the next theme which concerns unrealistic client demands.

## **Unrealistic client demands**

A central perception among professionals involved in outsourced recruitment was the clients' influence on the experiences of a talent war. Several interviewees illustrated how the client's high demands on talents contributed to the talent war. Hence, the demands that the companies inflict on potential new employees are unmatched in the market, i.e they do not exist. The quote below encapsulates how the client's list with criteria is exaggerated and that people with these sought after backgrounds often do not exist:

We often get a list from our clients with criteria such as 'we are looking for a person who has done this and has this education.' Sometimes that list is 10 pages long. Then you have to be transparent and say 'this person you are describing does not exist'. (Outsourced professional, Company X)

Another outsourced professional reflects on the reasons for which companies have unparalleled candidate demands that do not exist in the labour market. This interviewee believes that some companies have a skewed company image and that they are unaware of their employer value:

In my experience there is often a discrepancy in what the customer wants. They have too high demands on candidates. You have to have an insight about yourself as a company. Who are we? What are we doing? How do we compare with other companies that attract talents and who have thousands of applicants? (Outsourced professional, Company Z)

One interview participant shares that, as opposed to the company imposing their demands on the candidate, that the relationship is in fact mutual. One outsourced professional (Company W) shares the notion of a strong and well-resonating employer brand for the purpose of attracting talents. Furthermore, this participant believes that the reasons for which clients have too high ambition levels when they recruit is because they are sitting on their high horses and they neglect the importance of the brand in order to attract candidates. The next theme, candidate power in the labour market, shifts focus from the high candidate demands of companies to the power of candidates.

## **Candidate power in the labour market**

Another topic that re-occurred in the data was the experience that candidates had a high amount of power in today's labour market, thus amplifying the war for talent. One in house professional

(Company A) highlights the importance as a company to have attractive talent offerings and a sound organizational culture which will spread a good employer brand even outside the organization. This underlines the efforts that companies have to put in in order to attract talents. One participant conveyed the following:

Currently, the market belongs to the candidates. Some companies live in the past and reason as follows: 'what can the candidates do for us?' rather than 'what can we do for the candidates?'. The companies who have not understood this shift also have difficulties in seeing and attracting talent. (Outsourced professional, Company W)

Here, the participant highlights that the labour market has evolved, from having a focus on what candidates can bring to the company, to what the companies can offer the candidates. In the current labour market the candidates are in power. Some outsourced professionals also convey that companies who still cling on to the old view have difficulties in seeing and attracting talent if they exaggerate their own attractiveness. Other participants have had the same experience and convey that companies have to listen to the needs and wants of the candidates and be more adaptable than ever before in order to attract talents. One outsourced professional (Company X) underlines that it has been the candidate's market for some years and that talents are aware of their own value. This is experienced by another participant in the quote below:

I have to say, in regards to the talent war, that the talent creates the war. If I think back when I worked at a travel agency, in the bigger cities you could change jobs every year and get a higher salary. There you as a candidate could create a war by continuously moving on. (In house professional, Company B)

Here, the interviewee states that the talents are the ones who create the war for talent. This is due to a changed labour market where candidates know their value and are changing jobs more often. This paints a picture of the power of candidates in the current labour market and their contribution to the talent war.

## 5. Analysis and discussion

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The purpose of this thesis is to explore, analyze and compare the perceptions of talent and experiences of a talent war through the lens of in house and outsourced professionals working with recruitment. This following chapter will analyze and discuss the results presented in Chapter 4 based on the four emergent themes discovered in the data. These findings will be analyzed using existing theoretical knowledge within the field of talent management, presented in Chapter 2, in order to discuss the results. The different subchapters are divided according to the themes, which are as follows: talent perceptions and experiences of a talent war.

### 5.1 Talent perceptions

Similar to the variety of ways in which talent is described in scholarly literature, our research participants also perceived talent in diverse ways. Four different patterns of talent perceptions were detected in our data; talent as innate, as developmental potential, as a combination of competencies and personality and lastly talent being what the client wants. These diverse perceptions are also mirrored in the literature, where for example Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Gonzalés-Cruz (2013) highlight that every individual themselves decides how to define what talent does and does not entail. We believe that this could become a problem since the talent definition relies on the subjectivity of the professional responsible for the recruitment, which could potentially result in many talents being neglected or overlooked.

Furthermore, the interview data revealed that there was no evident discrepancy in the answers provided by the two professional groups in regards to talent perceptions. Rather, at least one participant from each group was represented in each of the four talent perceptions, except for the notion that *talent is what the client wants*, in which only outsourced professionals were represented. We believe that this was the case since only the outsourced professionals recruit on

behalf of clients, as the in house professionals are themselves responsible for their recruitment processes.

We interpret the outsourced professionals' tendency to hand over the responsibility of defining talent to their clients as a means to renounce their own responsibility. This relates to the idea of diverse talent philosophies, which are the beliefs held by key decision makers within the organization in regards to who is deemed talented and not (Meyers et. al, 2020). Since the outsourced professionals strive to satisfy their clients, they need to abide by the talent definition held by the client in order for the recruitment to become successful. Hence, they need to be flexible and adaptable in their perception of talent, which depends on the company for which they recruit.

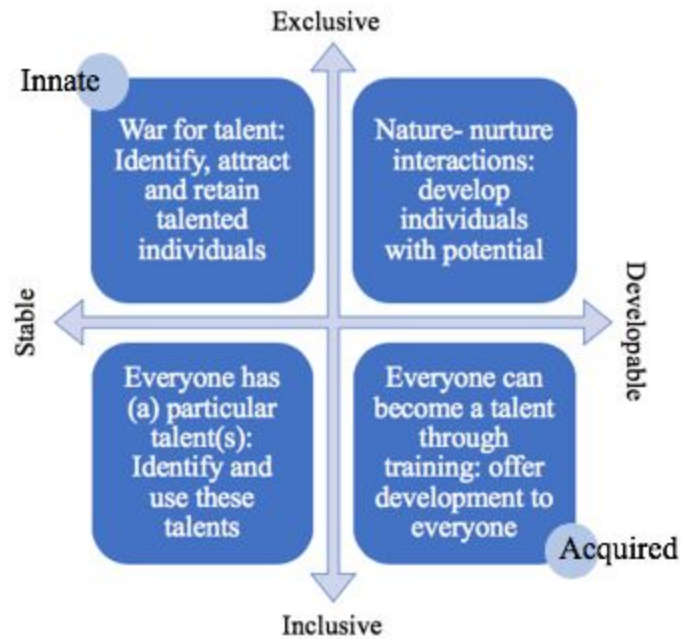
As previously mentioned, there was no apparent discrepancy in the two groups in their talent perceptions, as at least one participant from each group was represented in each of the four talent perceptions. We interpret this as talent perceptions are highly individual and are not strongly linked with whether you work with recruitment in house within an organization or with outsourced recruitment for other companies. The definitions of talent provided by the interview participants encompassed everything from strong rhetoric skills to a mindset and everything in between. However, in order to make sense of the vast array of talent perceptions provided by the interviewees, we employed Meyers et. al's (2020) model in which different definitions of talent can be placed. Meyers et. al (2020) illuminate the dichotomies in regarding talent as stable or developable and exclusive or inclusive, which is visualized in Figure 2.

We identified that some participants believed that talent is something you are born with (see quote on page 35, in house professional Company C), which Dries (2013) categorizes as a perception of talent as innate. This talent view is quite exclusive and rigid, as not everyone is believed to be born talented. This talent view furthermore underlines that talent cannot be developed. The innate and exclusive talent view ranks in the upper left corner of Meyers et. al's (2020) model. Meyers et. al (2020) highlight that people who belong to the more rigid and

exclusive talent view are more likely to believe that there is a talent war. However, we did not identify this correlation in our empirical data. For example, one in house professional (see quote on page 36, in house professional Company B) had the perception that talent is innate but they also believed that there is no apparent talent war in their geographical region. Similarly, one outsourced professional (see quote on page 36, outsourced professional Company Y) who answered that the war for talent is real, had an inclusive talent perception and believed talent could be seen in everyone and could be developed.

On the other hand, some interview participants held very open and inclusive talent perceptions where they believed talent to be developable, (see for example quote on page 36, in house professional Company B). This view was categorized as talent being acquired. Here, participants who defined talent as a mindset and willpower were included. Furthermore, these participants argued that the most important asset in a candidate was the willingness to learn, not that they were already fully developed. According to Dries (2013), regarding talent as developable skills belongs to the acquired view of talent, which if it is placed in Meyers et. al's (2020) model would be situated in the lower right corner. We have placed the different talent views provided by Dries (2013), innate and acquired, in Meyers et. al's (2020) matrix model below. This sheds light upon the tensions between the different talent philosophies that was also discovered in our empirical data.





**Figure 2:** A matrix model of talent philosophies, inspired by Meyers et. al (2020, p. 565), including talent tensions (innate and acquired) inspired by Dries (2013, p. 278)

Lastly, another talent perception that was discovered in the data was *talent entails a combination of competence and personality*. This perception of talent could be placed in the middle of acquired and innate since it encompasses both. We interpreted that regarding talent as being a combination of competence and personality is a diverse talent outlook. The notion that talent is a mix of personality and developable skills is also mirrored in the literature. Brown and Hesketh (2011) define talent as a mix of the abilities of a person as well as their developmental potential. We argue that this view is more balanced as it, instead of regarding talent as either completely innate or developable, rather merges these two talent perspectives.

## Reflections on talent perceptions

As previously mentioned, the participants were asked to reflect upon how their talent perception affects talent diversity. Research has shown that a diverse workforce is advantageous for companies since it contributes to increased ability to generate new ideas (Hatun, 2010; Osman & Thunborg, 2019). One outsourced professional in this study (see quote on page 38, outsourced professional Company T) believes that you will miss many good candidates if you adopt a tunnel vision in terms of who you deem talented and not. This is also mentioned in the human resource discourse, where scholars discuss the role of the recruiter in talent processes and emphasize that the recruiter's subjectivity affects which candidates are considered talented (Beattie & Johnson, 2012; Chamberlain, 2016). Chamberlain (2016) illuminates that bias is pivotal in the recruiter's assessment of the candidates and that the first impression is crucial. We argue that professionals involved in recruitment have an immense impact on talent diversity when recruiting, as they are responsible for determining which candidate will get a job offer or not.

A majority of the study participants claimed that diversity was highly prioritized during their talent processes and that they were not biased by gender, ethnicity and other identity markers of the candidate. However, many of the participants conveyed that there were no formal organizational talent diversity guidelines to rely on in the recruitment processes. This was particularly evident for the in house professionals. Some in house professionals in fact responded that they rely on their gut feeling when they determine which candidate is best suitable for the role (see quote on page 38, in house professional Company B). This can be misleading since Cartwright and Cooper (2012) underline that the first impression does not provide any reliable indications on how well the candidate will perform in the role. We believe that this suggests that if the professional working with recruitment is biased they are not held responsible for having a narrow talent view since there are no formal organizational policies that condemn it.

The outsourced professionals mentioned gut feeling to a lesser extent and underlined competency based recruiting as the foundation upon which they recruit, as well as the clients' desired candidate profile (see quote on page 38, outsourced professional Company U).

The outsourced professionals' emphasis on the clients' desires could be problematic since the talent perception of the client could also be biased. The outsourced professionals further illuminate that the candidate's competencies are always prioritized over factors such as gender or age. Nevertheless, they also highlight that they intervene and attempt to challenge the client if they identify that the client wants a candidate based on factors other than competence (see quote on page 38, outsourced professional Company U). Though, the extent to which the outsourced professionals question their client's demands could be a topic for further inquiry.

Lastly, something that was apparent to us when analyzing the data was that organizational culture could pose a potential threat against talent diversity. It was foremost the in house professionals who conveyed that they often prioritize candidates who they deem fit for organizational culture (see for example quote on page 38, in house professional Company B). We believe that this by default leads to candidates being deselected, even though they might be talented, due to that they are not suitable for the organizational culture. We argue that the emphasis on organizational culture can become problematic as the workforce then risks becoming homogeneous since only candidates that adhere to organizational values are hired.

## **5.2 Experiences of a talent war**

Evidently, the discourse around talent war is ambiguous, ranging from scholars arguing that the war for talent persists (Beechler & Woodward, 2009) to others who believe that it has calmed down since its glory days (Frank & Taylor, 2004). Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) on the other hand oppose the war for talent since they believe that it enlarges the importance of individuals in organizational success. The ambiguity around war for talent was also shared by the participants in our study. Three different experiences of a talent war emerged in our data which were divided into the subsequent categories: outsourced experiences, in house experiences and deviant responses. Lastly, experienced factors contributing to talent war will also be analyzed and discussed.

## **Outsourced experiences**

The data indicated that the urgency of the talent war was most prominent among outsourced professionals working with recruitment. Worth mentioning is that all of the outsourced professionals answered that they had experienced the war for talent and perceived it as urgent (see for example quote on page 40, outsourced professional Company Y). We argue that the large extent to which outsourced professionals experience the talent war suggests that they are more inclined to agree with the war metaphor, i.e that the high degree of competition for talents can be compared to a war. We suggest that this could be derived from the fact that big recruitment firms might have hundreds of active recruitments at the same time as opposed to an in house professional who might only be involved in a couple of recruitment processes a year (see for example page 43, outsourced professional Company W). Thus, the daily tasks of outsourced professionals are to find and recruit talents which might contribute to making the experience of a talent war appear more prominent.

Furthermore, another plausible reason for which the war for talent is experienced to a larger degree by the outsourced professionals, we believe could be a consequence of their struggles with attracting and recruiting talents to become employed by them instead of the firm immediately, (see for example quote on page 40, outsourced professional Company Y). Scholars argue that when recruiting firms recruit for their clients they have to represent their client's employer brand, and hence they can experience struggles in attracting candidates (Gilani & Jamshed, 2016).

Another topic of reflection while coding and analyzing the data was that if in house professionals have difficulties in finding talents, they can hand over the recruitment processes to outsourced recruiting firms instead. As Gilani and Jamshed (2016) highlight, the trend of companies' outsourcing their recruitment processes has grown as talent shortages continue to pose a threat. We believe this could impact how outsourced professionals experience the war for talent as more real and urgent as they can take over more complicated recruitments.

### **In house experiences**

Moving on to in house professionals, some of them also experienced the war for talent (see for example quote on page 40, in house professional Company C). However, a majority of the in house professionals answered that the war for talent exists, but not in their geographical area (see for example quote on page 41, in house professional Company B). This suggests that the talent war and severe competition for talent is more apparent in some geographical areas more than others, which is also illuminated by Ployhart, Weekley and Dalzell (2018). Our participants mentioned bigger urban areas as more likely to be a battleground for talent wars, and more scarce populated areas are not believed to experience the talent war to the same extent.

Furthermore, our study participants suggested that this could be explained by the fact that people are more prone to stay in the small town where they grew up, but on the other hand these rural areas are not as attractive to move to (see for example quote on page 41, in house professional Company B). We find this to be an interesting result since larger cities probably have bigger talent pools while smaller cities might not have the same talent supply. However, there might also be an increased number of competing organizations in bigger cities for which the competition can be experienced as more severe there.

Another proposed reason for which in house professionals do not experience the talent war to the same extent as outsourced professionals can be due to the differences in work tasks between the groups. We also believe that the in house professionals might encounter recruitment processes more seldomly and their work scope encompasses more tasks than just recruitment. They are also more involved in the other steps of the talent management process, such as development and retention. Thus, they might not be exposed to competition for talent in the same way as outsourced professionals, who only work with attraction and recruitment.

## **Distinct responses**

A distinctive talent war experience, perceived by only two of the study participants, was the questioning of the existence of a talent war (see for example quote on page 42, expert participant). Here the participant conveys that talent has always been on the agenda and there has always been talent available, thus the experience of a talent war can be questioned. To us it seemed like the expert participant tried to convey that there has always been competition for talent, though it is more spoken about today and therefore might be perceived as a buzzword.

Furthermore, one of the study participants, an in house professional, went one step further and highlighted that the term *war for talent* could be made up by consulting firms who try to make money on talent management (see for example quote on page 42, in house professional Company A). We found this view interesting and the critique has not been found in the scholarly discourse regarding the war for talent. It seems like many scholars within talent management believe that the war for talent exists (for example Beechler & Woodward, 2009), but there are less scholars questioning or criticizing it. The academics who criticize the war for talent do it on grounds such as enlarged emphasis on individuals as opposed to teams and groups (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006).

Even though these two study participants questioned the war for talent, a majority of the study participants still believed that the war for talent is real and had experienced it. The following section will move into depth in regards to the perceived reasons for which the talent war rages on.

## **Experienced factors contributing to the war for talent**

Our data also encompassed the participants' experienced factors contributing to the war for talent. Three distinctive patterns emerged; skewed educational supply and demand in the labour market, unrealistic client demands and lastly, the candidates power in the labour market.

Some research participants conveyed that they believed there to be a skewed educational supply and demand in today's labour market. Scholars define this phenomena as a labour market

disequilibrium (Barnow, Trutko & Lerman, 1998, cited in Richardson, 2007) where there can be too little talent in some fields while there is a surplus in others (Schuler, Jackson & Tarique, 2011). Our participants shared this experience and conveyed that there is a scarcity in people educating themselves within certain professions, such as craftsmanship. Meanwhile there is a surplus in other professions which require university degrees (see for example quote on page 44, outsourced professional Company X). Nilsson and Ellström (2011) argue that the rise of the service sector has resulted in a high demand for skilled workers, i.e highly educated workers. Though, our study participants conveyed that the talent shortage also exists in professions which do not require higher education, such as craftsmanship as mentioned above. We argue that this opposes the notion that only highly educated labourers are fought over in the war for talent.

Even though our data suggested that the real talent shortage is not only evident for candidates who possess a university degree, people seem to continue to pursue higher education (Wilson et al, 2014; Tholen, 2017). We believe that this is a consequence of higher education often being associated with a high demand in the labour market (Tholen 2017), which according to our participants is not always the case. Worth mentioning is that none of all the 16 participants conveyed that in order to be deemed talented by them, the candidate needed to have a higher education. They rather talked about mindset and willpower for which we believe these two factors are more important to recruiting professionals than higher education to be deemed a talent.

Furthermore, the outsourced professionals who participated in our study mentioned that their clients had unrealistic demands on the candidates, and they were looking for candidates with imaginary work experiences and skills which did not exist in the labour market (see for example quote on page 45, outsourced professional Company X). Even though the candidates might exist, the outsourced professionals highlighted that these talents are aware of their attractive power and thus are very selective in terms of where they want to work. We argue that as a result of this, companies need to work more with their employee attraction, i.e their EVP. The employer brand is illuminated by outsourced professionals as a pivotal tool to attract talents in the current labour

market. Therefore we argue that if companies effectively manage their EVP, they might not experience a talent war since candidates will seek themselves to the company instead vice versa.

Furthermore, according to our data, some professionals involved in recruitment expressed that in today's labour market, it is the candidate who possesses most of the power and not the companies (see for example quote on page 46, outsourced professional Company W). This is believed to influence the talent war since the competition for the talent becomes more acute. This is also brought to light by Hatum (2010) who argues that back in the days the power of the labour market belonged to the companies. Though, times now have changed and the candidate possesses more power (Hatum, 2010). He also argues that the candidates have become more demanding and selecting in their job-searching process. Since companies have high demands on candidates and candidates have high demands on companies, this relationship becomes imbalanced which we believe could affect the war for talent.

This chapter has analyzed, compared and discussed the findings that were discovered in the empirical data. The next chapter will conclude this thesis with summarizing insights, contributions and practical implications. The thesis will conclude with study limitations and suggestions for future research.



## 6. Conclusion

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The purpose of this thesis was to explore, analyze and compare the perceptions of talent and experiences of a talent war through the lens of in house and outsourced professionals working with recruitment in the Swedish private service sector. Two research questions acted as a guideline for the thesis, which will be answered below. Furthermore, contributions and practical implications will be brought to light. Study limitations and suggestions for further research will also be presented to conclude the thesis.

*(RQ1) How do professionals involved in in house and outsourced recruiting within the private service sector in Sweden perceive talent?*

In regards to perceptions of talent, the study participants expressed diverse comprehensions of the term. Our study found that there is still no single definition of talent. This is similar to the diversity of talent definitions expressed in scholarly literature. The different perceptions of talent expressed by the study participants included regarding talent as innate, as developmental potential, as a combination of competencies and personality and lastly talent being what the client wants. We identified that the talent perceptions are highly subjective and individual and found no emergent link between talent perception and professional group belonging.

Furthermore, even though the study participants' perceptions of talents were diverse, a minority expressed that they actively consider diversity when they recruit in order to not miss any talent. Rather, many in house participants referred to their gut feeling when they label a person talented, or fit for the organization, or not. Outsourced recruiters appeared to consider diversity to a larger extent, and they mentioned that competency based recruiting is important in their processes. However, they also mentioned that it is the client organization that in the end decides which candidate they want to recruit. Thus, subjective talent views, either the recruiter's own views or the views of the client, seem to be given a high priority when attracting and recruiting talents.

**(RQ2)** *How do professionals involved in in house and outsourced recruiting within the private service sector in Sweden experience the phenomena of a talent war?*

The diverse experiences of a talent war mentioned in the human resource discourse appeared to be apparent among the study participants as well. Our study found that professionals involved in in house and outsourced recruiting within the private service sector in Sweden experienced a talent war as follows; the war for talent is real, the talent war exists but not in their geographical area, and lastly, there is an uncertainty whether it exists or not. Nevertheless, the majority of the participants expressed that the talent war existed (11 out of 16). Here we could identify evident discrepancies in how the talent war was experienced by the two professional groups. All of the outsourced professionals answered that the talent war existed, meanwhile only one out of six participants in the in house professional group stated that the war for talent is real. The majority of the in house professionals, four out of six, answered that the war for talent exists but that they have not experienced it in their geographical area. Lastly, there were two participants who were uncertain if the talent war even exists, this group consisted of one in house professional as well as the expert participant.

Furthermore, our study participants illuminated different factors which they experienced contributing to the war for talent. These were as follows: skewed educational supply and demand in the labour market, unrealistic client demands and the candidate's power in the labour market. The supply of candidates in the market do not possess the right education for the jobs available, such as craftsmanship. Furthermore, the outsourced professionals expressed that their clients had unrealistic demands on the candidates, which made them look for imaginary candidates that do not exist in the labour market. Consequently, they to some extent experienced that there are no talents. This correlates with the last experienced contributing factor which is the candidate's power in the labour market.

## **6.1 Contributions and practical implications**

Similar to the literature, our research participants expressed a vast array of definitions of talents. Everything from seeing talent as something innate to believing that everyone can be a talent. Thus, who is deemed talented is subjective and could cause bias in the talent management process. Scholars suggested that having an exclusive view of talent could be the reason for which someone experiences a talent war. As illustrated by Meyers et. al (2020), those who possess an exclusive talent perception are also more likely to be battling in the war for talent. Perhaps the experience of talent shortage lies in the observer and could be mitigated by adopting a more diverse and inclusive talent perception. Though, our study found that there was no emergent link between talent perceptions and experiences of a talent war. Our study participants conveyed that it was rather skewed educational supply and demand, candidate power in the labour market and unrealistic client demands that contributed to the experience of a talent war.

Furthermore, our research found that experiences of an urgent talent war is more apparent among the outsourced professionals, which we did not detect in literature. The term war for talent was coined in the 1990's and this thesis has found that it still appears to be relevant among some professional groups to this day. We believe one reason for this could be that outsourced professionals are experiencing the competition for talent in their everyday lives in their roles as recruiters, and thus they experience the competition as more prominent compared to managers working in house. One could argue that outsourced professionals are keeping the war for talent ongoing in the 2020's.

Also, with the current pandemic, we believe that the battle for talent will shift in the future due to changed labour demographics since many people have become unemployed during the pandemic. Hence, the talent pool could increase in the future which makes the competition for talent between companies less urgent. With a larger and more diverse talent pool, companies ought to look over who they deem talented or not in order to not miss any talents. If companies succeed at doing this, we argue that the battle for talent could fade as there might be more

available talent than ever before. Thus, the candidate might not be the winner in the future labour market.

We believe and hope that our results, analysis and discussion of the empirical findings will be able to provide professionals involved in recruitment with broader knowledge and useful insights regarding talent perceptions and experiences of a talent war. Talent management is not only a task for HR practitioners but rather all members of an organization. Therefore we suggest that everyone involved in recruiting processes should reflect upon how their talent perception could influence their recruitment processes and in extension which candidates are allowed entrance into the organization.

We have also accounted for different experiences and contributing factors to a talent war. This knowledge could help practitioners reflect upon if they themselves are experiencing a war for talent and help consider the reasons for which they might experience severe competition for talent. Are there any measures they could take that might mitigate the battle for talent? Could they be looking for talents at other places than the conventional ones? These are questions that could be important for practitioners to ask themselves when they are involved in talent processes since it can increase talent diversity and give the organization competitive advantage in today's highly competitive business environment.

## **6.2 Study limitations and suggestions for future research**

A limitation of this study is that it focused on only some parts of the talent management process, namely attraction and recruitment. We identified other parts of the talent management process as interesting areas for future studies, as they might have shed light upon other important aspects of talent perceptions and experiences of talent wars in the Swedish private service sector. Furthermore, the thesis was limited to the aforementioned sector. Thus, this thesis is restricted to the Swedish labour market, specifically the private service sector. Therefore, the results do not account for talent perceptions and experiences of a talent war outside this narrow scope. This is

also an area for future research since we believe that the answers to the research questions might differ depending on which country and sector it is conducted in.

The theoretical frameworks regarding talent, talent management and talent wars are fairly young discourses and there were still ongoing scholarly debates and attempts to agree upon definitions. Thus, the research within these areas were scarce and might have influenced the theoretical background of this thesis which also had implications on the depth of the analysis as there was a limited number of theories to rely on. Another study limitation is the method employed, i.e a qualitative research approach. This limited the study since the results cannot be generalized to represent a broader population than the sample populations who participated in this study. It is also worth mentioning that this thesis had a social constructivist perspective, i.e striving to understand the subjective meanings of the participants. Therefore, the results provided by the participants cannot be taken for a single truth. Future research could adopt a quantitative approach and strive to make generalizations as to how talent and talent wars are perceived by a larger sample population.

Lastly, one interesting suggestion for future research that emerged during our interviews, but was outside our study scope, was the growth of artificial intelligence in recruitment processes and its implications for recruitment biases. One study participant conveyed that this was relevant in the current talent management discourse. Hence, artificial intelligence's impact on recruitment is interesting since it goes beyond human flaws but might give rise to new problems in the talent management processes.

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# Appendix

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## **Interview guide**

### **Background questions**

Tell me a bit about yourself and your professional role as a recruiter/ manager.

How many years of experience do you have within recruitment?

### **Talent questions**

How would you define talent?

Do you think that your definition of talent can affect your work as a recruiter/ manager?

According to you, what would you say is the most important asset in an applicant?

Would you like to tell me a bit about how your organization works to attract talents?

### **Diversity questions**

In your role as a recruiter/ manager, how do you work with diversity in your recruitment processes?

Do you believe that your view on diversity affects how you define talent?

### **Talent/ skill shortage questions**

In your role as a recruiter/ manager, have you experienced difficulties in finding talents?

In your role as a recruiter/ manager, have you experienced difficulties in recruiting someone with the right competencies?

In your role as a recruiter/ manager, how do you experience that the applicants' competencies correlate with the competency profile?

When you recruit, do you usually have to settle with applicants that only partly adhere to the competency profile or are there many applicants that live up to it?

### **Talent surplus questions**

In your role as a recruiter/ manager, have you experienced overqualified applicants?

In your role as a recruiter/ manager, have you experienced a talent surplus?

### **Talent war questions**

Have you experienced a talent war?

If yes, what do you think are the underlying mechanisms that affect the talent war?

Do you believe that the experience of a talent war differs depending on whether you work with in house or outsourced recruiting (for other companies)?

### **Quantitative questions**

On a scale from 1-9, to what extent do you experience difficulties in finding talent?

On a scale from 1-9, to what extent do you experience difficulties in attracting talent?

On a scale from 1-9, to what extent do you experience difficulties in recruiting talent?

On a scale from 1-9, to what extent do you experience difficulties in keeping talent?

On a scale from 1-9, to what extent do you experience talent scarcity?

On a scale from 1-9, to what extent do you experience a talent surplus?

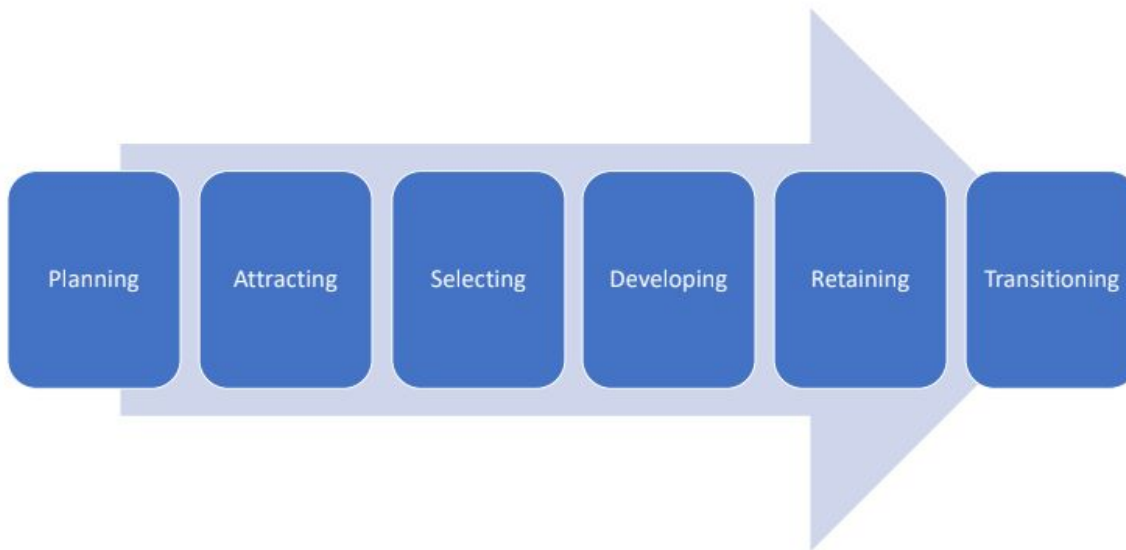
On a scale from 1-9, to what extent do you experience that the applicants are highly educated (university or equivalent) for the roles that you recruit for?

On a scale from 1-9, to what extent do you experience the competition for talents?

Where in the talent recruitment process (shows picture) would you say that you experience the most difficulties?

Where in the talent recruitment process (shows picture) would you say that you experience the least difficulties?

## Talent management process



Model inspired by Eghbal et. al (2017) and Islam (2018)