The State of Talent Management in Higher Education

MOR Associates has been supporting, advising, and inspiring leaders since 1983. In recent years we've seen the emergence of "talent management" within higher education, a specific system for maximizing the hiring, development, deployment, and retention of great people. In many organizations, these activities are pursued separately. Integrated talent management creates coherence, intentionality and value when looking across the full life cycle and adding other strategic elements such as succession planning and employee engagement to the mix.

We believe some university leaders see the value and necessity of talent management, but there is a need to build support to give it the appropriate focus. To capture a snapshot of the current state of talent management in higher education MOR Associates conducted a survey of executives and senior managers from seventeen universities, primarily Big Ten and Ivy+ schools[1]. The survey examined attitudes, practices, and outcomes related to talent management. It employed a six-point agreement scale.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Disagree Slightly 3	Agree Slightly 4	Agree 5	Strongly Agree 6

Respondents expressed confidence in the quality of current staff: 97% said employees were engaged (4.95 on a six-point scale) and 89% said employees did a great job. Looking toward the future, the results were considerably less rosy. While 78% agreed that their organizations were able to attract top talent (4.08), 35% *disagreed* that their organizations retained their best people (3.70), and 60% disagreed that there was a plan in place to deal with future labor and skill shortages (2.94). This is important. Although retirement plans have shifted for some, baby boomers are retiring at a rate of 10,000 per day, double the rate of the previous 20 years[2]—and the hemorrhaging of talent is projected to continue for the next 20 years. What this will mean is an open question for many: 38% of respondents disagreed that "The impact of retirements and people leaving are well understood." (3.62).

The gaps between respondents' sense of urgency about talent management and what their organizations were or weren't doing were also visible in a small number of questions related to the attitudes and practices of senior leadership. While three quarters of respondents agreed that "University leadership has a deep conviction that talent is the major factor to our success" (4.33), that leaves 25% who disagreed. Furthermore, valuing talent and focusing on talent management are separate issues: 43% disagreed that their executives' administrative and human capital strategies were aligned (3.57) and 89% disagreed that metrics were used to assess the strength of talent management (2.31 – the lowest rating of the survey). Perhaps worse, 65% disagreed that "Managers are held accountable for developing talent." (2.97).

Another thread in the survey revolved around how organizations managed existing talent. This was further subdivided into to narrower categories: putting people to their highest and best uses and staff development. The results suggested lots of room for improvement. Though only 11% disagreed that the best performers are known (4.64), 39% disagreed that "the best people are focused on the most important jobs" (3.70) and 38% disagreed with the seemingly innocuous "Employees are given the opportunity to do what they do best." (3.65) Another 44% disagreed that their organization was flexible in deploying talent. Some of the lowest ratings in the survey pertained to staff development. In addition to the previously noted poor ratings for "Managers are held accountable for developing talent" (65% disagreed / 2.97), 57% disagreed that everyone had individual development plans (3.06) and 44% disagreed that managers provided ongoing honest feedback to employees (3.50).

It is MOR Associates' conclusion that talent management is a critical area of focus—and a significant opportunity—for university leaders. Given unprecedented disruptions in higher education, the pace of change, and the need for increased agility, talent management will only become more important to a university's success.

1. Universities represented: University of California, Berkeley / Carnegie Mellon University / Columbia University / Cornell University / University of Illinois / Indiana University / James Madison University / Penn State University / University of South Carolina / Stanford University / University of Chicago / University of Iowa / University of Michigan / University of Minnesota / University of Pennsylvania / University of Washington / University of Wisconsin.
2. Pew Research Center, "Baby Boomers Approach Age 65 – Glumly" Survey Findings about America's Largest Generation, December 20, 2010, http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1834/baby-boomers-old-age-downbeat-pessimism

Selected Quotes

Central HR has many practices and programs in place, such as individual development plans. However, it does not always translate into reality due to poor managerial skills in developing talent.

"for many key positions, talented campus staff were passed over in favor of external candidates"

Woefully inadequate…. The university does a horrible job of improving or removing low performers."

"I don't think we spend the amount of time we should creating a strategy and putting into action best practices for talent management. It is so critical to everything, it should be our highest priority. It often doesn't appear to be that way. I think we just assume the talent is there and will always be there to execute our ambitious goals."

"University HR has been improving in their efforts to spearhead the business strategy and argue the strategic importance at the "C" level. It still does not seem to have the priority it needs to in order to clearly align with what executives are saying about the importance of the most crucial asset, its people."

"One leader, standards, shared services, better technology and an overall strategy is much needed in this area."

Agreement with Statements About Talent Management	Mean	N
10. Our employees are engaged and committed to the university.	4.95	37
9. The people we hire do a great job.	4.70	37
3. We know who the best performers are.	4.64	36
11. After hiring, people get up the learning curve quickly.	4.42	36
1. University leadership has a deep conviction that talent is the major factor to our success.	4.33	36
12. People are able to further develop their skills through strong development programs.	4.14	35
8. We are able to attract top talent.	4.08	37
5. Competencies for key positions have been defined.	4.03	37
14. The best people are focused on the most important jobs.	3.75	36
19. We retain our best people.	3.70	37

Agreement with Statements About Talent Management	Mean	N
15. Employees are given the opportunity to do what they do best.	3.65	37
6. The impact of retirements and people leaving the organization are well understood.	3.62	37
17. The organization is flexible in deploying talent.	3.58	36
4. The administrative strategy and human capital strategy of the most senior administrative officer at your university are	3.57	30
16. Managers provide honest and thorough feedback to employees on an ongoing basis.	3.50	36
2. Your most senior administrative officer spends at least 20% of his/her time on talent related issues.	3.39	31
13. Individual development plans are in place for everyone.	3.06	35
18. Managers are held accountable for developing talent.	2.97	37
7. A plan is in place to deal with labor and skill shortages in the future.	2.94	35
20. Metrics are used to assess the strength of talent management.	2.31	35

Question	Mean	SD	D	SD	SA	A	SA	Count	Std Dev	95% CI+-
10. Our employees are engaged and committed to the university.	4.95	0%	3%	0%	19%	57%	22%	37	0.81	0.26
9. The people we hire do a great job.	4.70	0%	0%	11%	19%	59%	11%	37	0.81	0.26
3. We know who the best performers are.	4.64	0%	3%	8%	33%	33%	22%	36	1.02	0.33
11. After hiring, people get up the learning curve quickly.$	4.42	0%	3%	19%	17%	56%	6%	36	0.97	0.32
1. University leadership has a deep conviction that talent is the major factor to our success.	4.33	3%	11%	11%	22%	31%	22%	36	1.39	0.46
12. People are able to further develop their skills through strong development programs.	4.14	0%	14%	9%	29%	46%	3%	35	1.12	0.37
8. We are able to attract top talent.	4.08	3%	8%	11%	38%	38%	3%	37	1.09	0.35
5. Competencies for key positions have been defined.	4.03	3%	8%	19%	30%	35%	5%	37	1.17	0.38
14. The best people are focused on the most important jobs.	3.75	0%	8%	31%	39%	22%	0%	36	0.91	0.30
19. We retain our best people.	3.70	3%	19%	14%	38%	24%	3%	37	1.20	0.39
15. Employees are given the opportunity to do what they do best.	3.65	0%	11%	27%	49%	14%	0%	37	0.86	0.28
6. The impact of retirements and people leaving the organization are well understood.	3.62	3%	16%	19%	41%	22%	0%	37	1.09	0.35
17. The organization is flexible in deploying talent.	3.58	0%	22%	22%	33%	19%	3%	36	1.13	0.37
4. The administrative strategy and human capital strategy of the most senior administrative officer at your university are closely aligned.	3.57	0%	23%	20%	40%	10%	7%	30	1.17	0.42
16. Managers provide honest and thorough feedback to employees on an ongoing basis.	3.50	6%	14%	25%	39%	14%	3%	36	1.16	0.38
2. Your most senior administrative officer spends at least 20% of his/her time on talent related issues.	3.39	0%	32%	16%	35%	13%	3%	31	1.17	0.41
13. Individual development plans are in place for everyone.	3.06	14%	17%	26%	37%	3%	3%	35	1.24	0.41
18. Managers are held accountable for developing talent.	2.97	11%	24%	30%	27%	8%	0%	37	1.14	0.37
7. A plan is in place to deal with labor and skill shortages in the future.	2.94	11%	26%	23%	37%	3%	0%	35	1.11	0.37
20. Metrics are used to assess the strength of talent management.	2.31	20%	40%	29%	11%	0%	0%	35	0.93	0.31