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Talent Management in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry: Evidence from Iran

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the notion of talent in the tourism and hospitality (TH) industry, proposing a comprehensive talent management (TM) model that is specific to this industry. This study primarily explores the notion of talent, TM, and the importance of these in the industry. A mixed method approach (qualitative and quantitative) was used to fulfill the research objectives. Qualitative content analysis was used to address interview responses from a panel of experts and a survey method was applied to collect data from a wider industry population through questionnaires. The data collected were analysed in SPSS and LISREL. Based on the findings, a model is proposed for talent definition in the Iranian TH industry.

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Talent management; hospitality industry; competency; Iran; human resource management; commitment

Introduction

Talent management (TM) refers to the process of identifying and developing new employees through processes of interviewing, hiring, orienting and successfully integrating them into the organization's culture (Barron, 2008). Our understanding of TM is characterized by the following: (a) it applies to organizations; (b) it depends on the type of industry and the nature of jobs in it; and (c) it is dynamic and subject to change over time, based on organizational priorities (Scott & Revis, 2008). Just as our interpretation of TM can be influenced by the nature of jobs, timing and industry type, so the broader notion of talent can be modified by the same factors. Talent is important because TM is primarily concerned with what talent is and how it can be defined in various areas and industries (Bergmann, 2016). The way that talent is defined shapes the foundations of TM.

Before implementing TM it is necessary, first, to decide "who" the talented person is. Yet, constructing a universal definition of talent appears to be a thorny task, because organizations normally rely on their own specific definitions (Zhang & Bright, 2012). Tourism is a service-based industry and TM appears to be vital to the industry, because it can help enhance performance and boost profitability and competitiveness (Nzozzo & Chipfuva, 2013). Yet, talent in the TH industry does not necessarily denote the same thing as in other sectors of the economy (Kaewsang-on, Kane, & Vundla, 2015). The fact that growth depends on professionals in TH suggests that the industry must formulate a strategic foundation for identifying, nurturing and maintaining its talent (Scott & Revis, 2008).

Despite the significance of the definition of talent and its underlying functions in TM, and despite the wide range of TM studies conducted in the tourism and hospitality (TH) industry, the

notion of “talent” remains ambiguous and there is no model that can support a comprehensive understanding of it in the industry. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to propose a model for defining talent in TH. More specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) what are the characteristics of talented individuals in the TH industry?, and if there are distinctive characteristics, how can they be categorized?

It should be emphasized that employing talented individuals in Iran is important because the TH industry is relatively immature and the challenged image of tourism in Iran, both domestically and internationally, adds to the concerns of policy-makers in the industry. These factors have, collectively, led to a particular situation that demands HR with specific capabilities to create desirable experiences for tourists. As a result, tourists may be able to positively represent the Iranian TH in their local communities, depicting a positive image of Iran to their fellow countrymen. In this paper, we provide a critical review of the literature on talent and TM. We then explain our methodological approach to data collection. Findings of qualitative and quantitative investigations are then presented, and, in the light of the findings, a model of TM is proposed. The model is applicable to the context under study (viz. the Iranian TH industry). The concluding remarks re-visit the implications of the study and share suggestions for further research.

Literature review

The TH industry is service-oriented (Hsu, 2015) and labour-intensive (Grolber & Diedricks, 2009), and it depends on identifying and employing superior talents (Barron, 2008) through TM (Meyers & Woerkom, 2014). As managers and employers engaged in this industry have acknowledged, talent can make it possible for a business to distinguish itself from competitors and ultimately contribute to the success of a business (D’Annunzio-Green, 2018). Considering the seasonality of the TH industry, Baum (2008) views TM as a subjective organizational tool that seeks to ensure access to suitable talent at the right time for the purpose of undertaking appropriate tasks.

Ever since the idea of the “war for talent” was introduced by McKinsey and Company in 1998 (Chambers, Foulon, Jones, Hankin, & Michaels, 1998), TM has come to the fore as a trending topic (Collings & Mellahi, 2010), and numerous descriptions have been proposed to conceptualize what it means (Storey, 2007). As a consequence, different authors have formulated context-specific definitions of TM (Cappelli & Keller, 2014). The challenge is how programmes related to this area should be organized and implemented in the field of TH (D’Annunzio-Green, 2018). This situation has made it difficult to arrive at a unified interpretation of TM (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Clearly, to fully understand TM, firstly the notion of talent must be explored (Sabuncu & Karacay, 2016). In the literature on organization management, talent usually refers to three dimensions (Silzer & Dowell, 2010): (a) an individual’s skills and abilities and his/her specific contributions to the organization; (b) a specific person; and (c) a group in an organization. Ulrich (2008) proposed the following formula for talent:

Talent equals competence * commitment * contribution.

Although some researchers look at TM from a human capital perspective (Cappelli, 2008), there are those who see talent as a key factor for organizational success (Mellahi & Collings, 2010). Others link TM to business strategy and corporate culture (Farndale, Scullion, & Sparrow, 2010; Kim & Scullion, 2011). As these observations suggest, there is no precise definition of talent and TM (Holden & Vaiman, 2013). The diverse nature of TH has influenced the notion of TM and, arguably, has created differences to the way in which the concept is understood in other industries.

In fact, TM in TH encompasses affective, aesthetic, and informational processes that are less significant in other industries. Dries (2013) believes that such factors, along with specific demographic and psychological determinants, have increasingly complicated the notion of TM in the industry. Dries (2013) further highlights issues such as stress, emotional exhaustion, employees’ personal characteristics, and different needs and behaviours of employees who come from different

generations. Meanwhile, internal and external pressures occurring over the past years have imposed challenges on TH organizations' HR units; problems such as downsizing, outsourcing, and layoffs will considerably affect TM in the TH industry (Deery & Jago, 2015). Yet one of the most serious challenges facing the TH industry is understanding the notion of talent (Baum, 2008). The problems relate to defining what talent is in this industry and explaining how talent can be effectively developed in the context of tourism employees (Baum, 2008). Furthermore, there is no specific model to assist our understanding of TM in the TH industry, although a number of studies have framed definitions in terms of managerial positions (see Baum, 2008). Warhurst and Nickson (2009) and Devereux (1998) have addressed such elements as emotional competency, organizational commitment, appearance, communication skills, among other dimensions. Despite the significance of human resources in the TH industry, the literature suggests that there is no particular framework to define the specifications of qualified people and talents, especially those who are employed for key positions.

There is also a gap in practice systems, especially in the case of managerial employees in the hospitality industry (Ahmad, Solnet, & Scott, 2010) where the level of turnover is noticeably high (Walsh & Taylor, 2007). As a result, many TH organizations themselves have developed specific training programs to nurture talent. However, although awareness of talent can have a pivotal function in TM (Sabuncu & Karacay, 2016), the literature on this topic shows that no sufficient and coherent framework has been proposed to identify and conceptualize the notion of talent in the TH industry. As Collings and Mellahi (2010) state, micro-level questions have been largely ignored in the literature, while most attempts have focused on TM systems/processes and on the management of senior personnel. Considering this gap, this study proposes a comprehensive model to define talent in the tourism industry, by investigating the context of the TH industry in Iran.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed research method, combining the collection of qualitative and quantitative data. In the qualitative part, the data gathered from the interviews with key experts were analysed through content analysis. In the quantitative section a survey method was employed. Iran is a country in which the TH industry is growing but continues to face significant challenges in a political and cultural sense and also as an employer of choice (Seyfi & Hall, 2019).

Informed by the literature, the researchers developed a range of interview questions, such as "What technical competencies must human resources in the TH industry acquire?" The interview population comprised key informants, managers and other tourism professionals employed in the industry in Iran, leaders from TH organizations, as well as researchers and professors familiar with the TH industry. Based on the 17 experts' responses, new questions were raised and the question-answer process was pursued until theoretical sufficiency was reached. Using an analysis of the interview results, researchers categorized the data based on thematic concepts, groups and categories. In the light of these categories, an initial model for defining talent in the TH industry was designed. At this stage, to confirm concerns observed in the qualitative part of the study, a paper-and-pencil questionnaire was devised for authorities, experts, and specialists in the field of the TH industry in Iran.

According to the information available about the targeted population, there were 320 individuals who met the selection criteria in this field (as members of the population, they were in substantial interaction with international tourists, and held positions key to the success of their organizations). The individuals were managers of 3-, 4- and 5-star hotels, managers of travel agencies, major guiding centre managers and experts, and those in the Cultural Heritage Origination, Handicraft and Tourism Sub-Organization. According to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, a statistical sample has to include 175 respondents, although given the geographical dispersion of the individuals, 220 questionnaires were distributed. Because some of the questionnaires were not returned or properly answered, 175 questionnaires were finally analysed.

For the qualitative section, snowball sampling was used, which focused on selecting individuals who were deemed to have appropriate expertise in the area under investigation. In the quantitative section of the study, to distribute the copies of the questionnaire, a stratified random sampling method was utilized to select from the population. As a result, the population was initially divided into the strata noted above, and then each stratum was randomly sampled. From these strata (considering the number of each stratum in the population), 25, 55, 70, and 25 potential respondents were selected, respectively. To measure the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was used and the data were analysed in SPSS 17 to measure the confidence coefficient. The obtained figure was 0.894, which showed the reliability of the questionnaire. The validity of the questionnaire was established through expert opinions. That is, after formulating the content, the experts confirmed the validity of the questionnaire. Furthermore, to measure construct validity, confirmatory factor analysis was run in LISREL 8.5 through structural equation model (SEM).

Results

First, all the interviews were analysed and key concepts identified. Then, they were listed and thematically grouped. More specifically, out of the 52 concepts extracted in the analysis stage, 18 groups were consolidated. Each of the groups was then divided into two categories: generic or sub-category (these procedures are reported in Tables 1–2 in Appendix). After the qualitative part of the study was completed and a qualitative model was reached, the questionnaires were distributed. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation values of the indicators used to define talent in the Iranian TH industry.

According to Falk and Miller (1992), the satisfactory level of factor loading values should be greater than or equal to 0.55, which is a value showing that the item in question is able to explain at least 0.30 of the changes it is used to measure. Based on the findings of this study, all of the 18 indicators were qualified as the final indicators to define talent in the TH industry under study (see Table 2 for factor-loads).

In the second step, to verify the goodness of fit index of the data and the pattern in them (the empirical pattern) against the pattern assumed in this study, some commonly used indicators were scrutinized to reveal any (in)consistency between the indicators. To determine the value of the model fit, the indicators were processed in LISREL software (see Table 3). As Table 4 shows, the indicators shaping the model displayed satisfactory values, because the indicators used for model fit through the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) verified the model fit.

Table 1. Means and standard deviation of the indicators of talent in the Iranian TH industry.

R	Category	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Technical language proficiency	175	4.3429	.67564
2	Familiarity with industry	175	4.5886	.65380
3	Specialized in areas of activities	175	4.3657	.70546
4	Familiarity with different cultures	175	4.6000	.59693
5	Being up-to-date	175	4.5029	.64214
6	Customer-centeredness	175	4.7200	.51013
7	Entrepreneurship	175	4.3714	.75375
8	Emotion management	175	4.2914	.79560
9	High public relations	175	4.4743	.65930
10	Effective communication	175	4.4400	.67432
11	Creativity	175	4.3143	.74938
12	Appearance	175	4.1943	.68395
13	Strategic approach	175	4.5714	.67320
14	Problem-solving	175	4.4514	.64921
15	Interest in job & its nature	175	4.5543	.63984
16	Belief in providing services	175	4.5200	.63282
17	Energy to face challenges	175	4.5543	.63984
18	Vitality	175	4.5200	.63282

Table 2. The indicators extracted from the qualitative content analysis along with their respective factor-loads.

R	MAIN- CATEGORIES	SUB- CATEGORIES	GROUPS	Factor-load	t	
1	Competency	Knowledge	Technical language proficiency	0.67	5.94	
2			Familiarity with industry	0.91	7.27	
3			Speciality in areas of activities	0.78	6.83	
4	Skills		Familiarity with different cultures	0.74	6.65	
5			Being up-to-date	0.69	6.13	
6			Customer-centeredness	0.70	8.32	
7			Entrepreneurship	0.78	8.07	
8			Emotion management	0.72	8.67	
9			High public relations	0.70	8.43	
10			Effective communication	0.81	7.84	
11			Personal characteristics	Creativity	0.87	9.47
12				Appearance	0.66	8.40
13	Strategic approach	0.68		8.65		
14	Commitment	Discretionary energy	Problem-solving	0.71	5.70	
15			Energy to face challenges	0.82	9.86	
16			Vitality	0.70	9.01	
17			Cognitive identity	Interest in job & its nature	0.66	5.78
18				Belief in providing services	0.79	6.31

Table 3. The status of the fit indicators used in the model measurement.

R	SUB- CATEGORIES	$0.9 \leq$	$0.9 \leq$	$0.9 \leq$	-	-	≤ 0.08	≤ 3	≤ 0.05
		GFI	AGFI	CFI	χ^2	DF	RMSEA	X2/DF	P
1	Knowledge	0.96	0.91	0.90	57.83	48	0.048	1.20	0.000
2	Skills	0.95	0.92	0.93	46.56	23	0.049	2.02	0.000
3	Personal characteristics	0.96	0.91	0.91	13.83	6	0.044	2.30	0.000
4	Discretionary energy	0.97	0.93	0.93	31.02	18	0.050	1.72	0.000
5	Cognitive identity	0.95	0.90	0.92	628.72	246	0.012	2.55	0.000

Table 4. The reliability and validity of the indicators under study.

R	SUB- CATEGORIES	AVE	Cronbach's alpha	CR	Maximum Shared Variance	Average Shared Variance
1	Knowledge	0.581	0.840	0.977	0.56	0.52
2	Skills	0.552	0.814	0.975	0.54	0.49
3	Personal characteristics	0.539	0.747	0.963	0.51	0.47
4	Discretionary energy	0.581	0.725	0.949	0.55	0.51
5	Cognitive identity	0.529	0.715	0.929	0.51	0.44

Moreover, to evaluate validity and reliability, construct reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), maximum shared squared variance (MSV), and average shared squared variance (ASV) were used. To establish goods rates of validity and reliability, the following relations had to be realized:

- Reliability: $CR > .7$
- Convergent validity: $CR > AVE$; $AVE > .7$
- Discriminant validity: $AVE > MSV$; $AVE > ASV$

A lack of convergent validity would suggest that the latent variable was not sufficiently explained by the observable variables; a lack of discriminant validity, however, would suggest that the latent variable could be explained by the variables of other factors even better than its own observable variables (Hair et al., 2010). The results in Table 4 show that all of the above relations were established in this study, and AVE was greater than .5. Furthermore, given Cronbach's alpha coefficient, it could be argued that the variables of the measurement model had an appropriate rate of reliability and validity. As the computation of values of ASV and MSV indicators required squared correlation coefficients across the variables, these coefficients are listed in Table 5.

Table 5. The correlation between the variables.

R	SUB- CATEGORIES	Knowledge	Skills	Personal characteristics	Discretionary energy	Cognitive identity
1	Knowledge	1				
2	Skills	0.90	1			
3	Personal characteristics	0.59	0.72	1		
4	Discretionary energy	0.66	0.59	0.70	1	
5	Cognitive identity	0.79	0.77	0.79	0.56	1

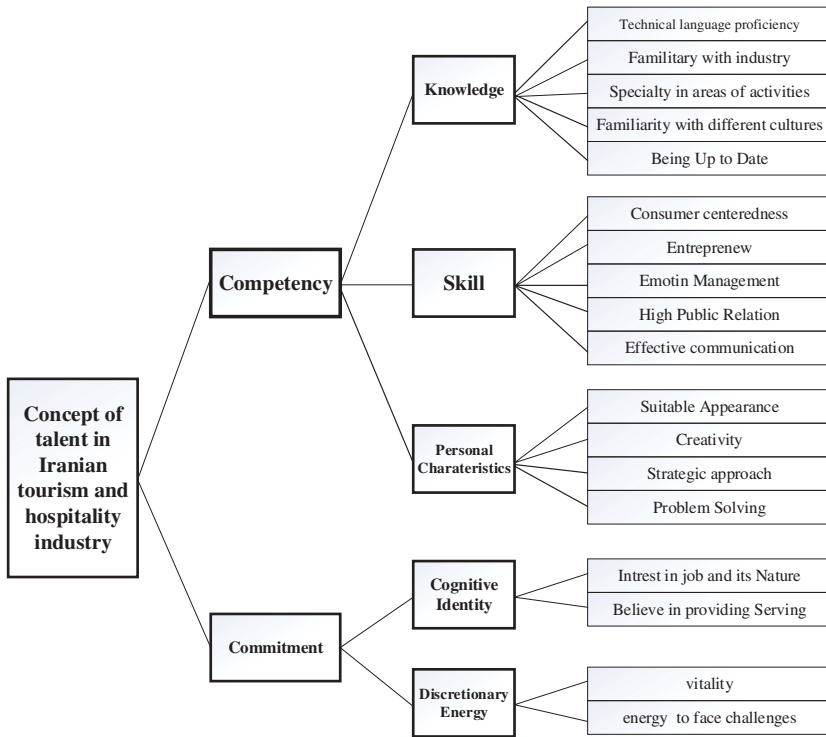


Figure 1. The talent definition model for Iranian TH industry.

Considering qualitative and quantitative results, the model in Figure 1 can be proposed as a talent definition model for the Iranian TH industry.

Conclusion and implications

In this section, the proposed model is explained and the indices are elaborated in the light of the studies concerned with talent in TH. Moreover, these following sections discuss the practical suggestions that can be implemented in tourism-related organizations and some proposals for further research on the notion of talent.

Model explanation

The first dimension to be investigated is Knowledge. In this research, the indicator “familiarity with industry”, with a factor loading value of 0.91, was one of the most important factors that showed a higher explanatory value compared to the other indicators. In fact, one of the important aspects of knowledge necessary for talent in the industry is familiarity with the industry and all of its chains

and activities. This knowledge provides an opportunity for those with such talents to have a systematic view of the situation.

The next important indicator of Knowledge was “speciality in areas of activities” (with a factor loading value of 0.78). TH involve different areas such as transportation, accommodation and marketing. As Nestoroska and Petrovska (2014) observe, employees must fit into their positions, gain the necessary knowledge through official educational courses, and develop themselves into professionals in their respective duties, to supply the services required by visitors. The third important indicator of Knowledge was “familiarity with different cultures” (0.74). Korjala (2012) explains that TH organizations work in a complicated and multi-cultural environment and must take into account culture and its functions.

One of the requirements of talent in the TH industry is that talented individuals should be up-to-date (with the factor loading value of 0.69) in all areas including general activities, political issues, economic conditions, and other relevant issues. The individuals involved should have sufficient information in all fields to be able to communicate more efficiently with tourists. “Technical language proficiency” (with the factor loading value of 0.67) represents another significant dimension of Knowledge. Sindik and Božinović (2013) explain that familiarity with foreign languages has a critical function in expanding tourism. Learning foreign languages for tourism practitioners is important for countries such as Iran, where English is not generally spoken.

Another dimension of talent found in the qualitative content analysis was Skills, which included these indicators: “customer-centeredness”, “entrepreneurship”, “emotion management”, “high public relations” and “effective communication.” Among these indicators, “effective communication” showed the highest explanatory value (0.81). In fact, talented personnel in the TH industry should observe politeness and organize their communication with due consideration of tourists’ background cultures. Kostić-Bobanović and Gržinić (2011) believe that communicative skills shape an important portion of the TH industry. Another important indicator of Skills was “entrepreneurship” (with a factor loading value of 0.78).

A further important indicator of Skills was “emotion management” (with a factor loading value of 0.72). Nguyen, Ladkin, and Osman (2016) point out that hospitality employees should effectively adjust their emotions in their face-to-face encounters with clients; this ability shapes a large portion of such employees’ work experience.

“High public relations” and “customer-centeredness” were the least selected Skills-related indicators (with a factor loading value of 0.70). This capability helps practitioners successfully communicate with tourists. Furthermore, HR in the TH industry is in direct contact with customers (tourists), and because of this interaction, it would be necessary for employees to learn the principles of customer treatment. The dimension of Personal Characteristics, as another constituent of talent in the TH industry, included the following indicators: “creativity” (with a factor loading value of 0.87), “appearance” (with a factor loading value of 0.66), “strategic approach” (with a factor loading value of 0.68), and “problem-solving” (with a factor loading value of 0.71).

Hornng, Tsai, Liu, and Chung (2015) have observed that, along with the rapid development of the TH industry, clients’ demands change. Tourism organizations increasingly try to expand the creativity potential in their employees, encourage creative outputs, and grant rewards for creativity and innovation development. Problem solving is highly important because unexpected events or problems are part of the TH industry. Talent in the industry must be prepared for emergent problems and must be capable of solving them.

“Strategic thinking” was able to explain 0.68% of Personal Characteristics. Talent in the TH industry is expected to demonstrate strategic thinking and have a forward-looking approach. This factor is highly important, considering the intermediate nature of tourism and its involvement in many other organizations. Finally, the least factor loading value was observed in the case of “appearance.” Nickson, Warhurst, Witz, and Cullen (2001) state that in industries such as the TH industry, the appearance and language of employees are highly important and they receive training about how to stand during work, what to wear, and even what sentences and words to use.

Organizational commitment is important from both employers' and employees' viewpoints. According to Kusluvan, Kusluvan, Ilhan, and Buyruk (2010), for employees, commitment to work and to the organization represents a positive relationship that can give a potential meaning to their lives. From the perspective of the organization, committed employees will bring about more profitability, because they can potentially enhance performance and reduce absence. Organizational commitment can be divided into two types: cognitive identity and discretionary energy. Bothma, Lloyd, and Khapova (2015) state that cognitive identity refers to the job-related properties that an individual selects and identifies with. This notion shows how dependent the employees are on the organization, how they accept organizational values and goals, how much they tend to stay in the organization, and how proud they feel to be part of the organization.

In this regard, two aspects, namely "interest in the job" (with a factor loading value of 0.66) and "belief in the services provided" (with a factor loading value of 0.79) were the characteristics of talents in the TH industry. This finding implies that talented people view tourism as a valuable work and service and they are interested to be involved in the industry, as it provides better services and interaction with tourists. Furthermore, based on Abo'allaei and Ghafari's (2009) report, Discretionary Energy shows how diligent and hard-working employees are, whether they spend more time at work when necessary, whether they accept the tasks they have been entrusted with, or whether they prioritize organizational interests.

As far as Discretionary Energy is concerned, two aspects, namely "tendency to face challenges" and "vitality" were found in the study. In this regard, Warhurst and Nickson (2009) state that in the industries with interactive services (such as the TH industry), employees should be positive/outgoing and have a sense of humour. As far as the two indicators of Discretionary Energy are concerned, the findings of this research revealed that "energy to face challenges", with a factor loading value of 0.82, showed a higher explanatory value than "vitality" (0.70).

As the investigation of the studies in the literature on TM in the field of TH reveals, although particular attention was paid to TM (Barron, 2008; D'Annunzio-Green, 2018), *talent development* (Aggett, 2017; Farbrother, 2017), and to *talent retention* (Scott, 2015; Tiwari, 2015) in this industry, no particular attempt was made to conceptualize talent and explicate its nature in TH. Meanwhile, numerous attempts were made to identify the effective specifications of employees in this field, such as work adjustment and having specialized knowledge (Nestoroska & Petrovska, 2014), familiarity with different cultures (Korjala, 2012), familiarity with foreign languages (Božinović, 2013), communicative skills (Bobanović & Gržinić), and creativity (Hornig et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, no study addressed the specifications that could comprehensively *define* talent in the industry, while including all of its required characteristics. Because of this, what distinguishes the present study from the other investigations concerned with this industry is that the present study sought to conceptualize "talent" holistically as a multifaceted construct in the TH industry. Considering the service-based nature of the TH industry and the key role of human resources in it, the present study outlined the characteristics of talented individuals in the industry. The following remarks represent some practical and academic suggestions for further research. As a practical guideline, public/private sector managers directing the TH industry can rely on the model as a basis for employing workers in the industry, especially as far as the key roles are concerned. The model can also serve the process of training and enhancing employees through evaluating their current status, particularly in the key positions, and through identifying their points of strength and weakness, with reference to the model indicators. In the same vein, practitioners can use the model to shed light on the employee recruitment system and on the employee training system, clarifying the policies/laws needed to further operationalize the model.

Similarly managers and policy-makers of educational and HR development programs in the field of TH at universities and other higher education institutions (either private or public) can include the talent-related specifications identified in this study when formulating their curricula. In doing so, they can operationalize the educational content offered, while providing the grounds for further

cooperation between educational institutions and the TH industry, with a focus on the industry's needs. The specifications identified for talents can serve as a guideline for enriching senior executive managers' development programs in this industry, while clarifying the important issues to the managers in this field.

Furthermore, researchers could probe into the processes regulating TM and talent in the sub-sectors of the TH industry, defining talent in such sub-sectors through the model. Researchers can also investigate the infrastructure (e.g. the employee maintenance system) required for attracting qualified individuals. Given the dynamic and rapid growth of the TH industry, researchers can assess the effectiveness of the model once in every five years, implementing modifications to it where necessary. Finally, as this model was developed in the context of Iranian TH industry, testing the applicability of the model in other tourism contexts could help reveal how effective other generalizations are in terms of TM in the TH industry.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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