



Managing Talented Professionals at the Ministry of Public Health of Thailand: Success and Challenges

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This study aims to analyze factors affecting the successful implementation of a talent management (TM) system at the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) of Thailand. The study employs qualitative research methods, particularly documentary research and in-depth interviews with 50 MOPH executives, policy-level officers, implementors, and public health professionals targeted by the ministry's TM policy. The results of this study indicate that the implementation of the MOPH's TM policy would not succeed without (a) transformational leaders serving as TM advocates and mentors and (b) effective communication methods, including the use of informal channels like instant messaging services. However, the lack of appropriate organisation exemplified by a highly hierarchical structure, formal rules and communication channels, and centralised TM decision-making and negative stakeholder attitudes towards TM regarded as an administrative burden, were associated with the failure of the MOPH's TM system.

Key words: *Talent management, Policy implementation, Public health, Thailand*

Introduction

In the modern era, human resources and especially talented, high-performing employees are considered among the most important factors in driving an organisation's success (Elkeles & Phillips, 2017). Numerous studies have also shown that talented employees not only help an organisation achieve its goals and boost performance but also make the organisation more



innovative and competitive. Because of this, one of the most important challenges for organisations is to run an effective talent management system.

In Thailand, the talent management policy of the public sector (TMPPS), links talent management with national policy on human resource development. The TMPPS was first established in 2002 as part of the implementation of the New Public Management (NPM) approach in Thailand. The main objective of the TMPPS is to gain a sustained national competitive advantage by employing high-performing civil servants. Under the TMPPS, Thai public agencies are allowed to design their own talent management system that fits their organisation's strategies and culture. In addition, the Thai Office of the Civil Service Commission (OCSC) and the Thai Office of the Public Sector Development Commission (OPDC) serve as consultants to those public agencies adopting a talent management system (OCSC, 2014).

The Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) of Thailand, which oversees national efforts to provide primary healthcare services and infrastructure to about 70 million Thai citizens, has been implementing a talent management system in its various departments since 2014. The main reason the MOPH has adopted the TMPPS is to deal with a severe shortage of public health workers in Thailand and to stymie the “brain drain” of public health professionals (Eiamsaard, 2009). For the MOPH, a talent management system constitutes an option for attracting and retaining high-potential public health workers in the public sector (MOPH, 2017).

However, even after half a decade of efforts to implement a talent management system at the MOPH, understanding of its effectiveness remains limited. Moreover, no empirical research has hitherto been undertaken to investigate success and failure factors. This research gap calls for a study of what factors might contribute most to the successful implementation of a talent management system at the MOPH. This is the research question that forms the focus of this study, which aims to make a contribution to improving the effectiveness of the MOPH's policies and practices for managing talent and for attracting and retaining qualified public health professionals in the Thai public sector.

Literature Review

Talent and Talent Management

Scholars have tried to define “talent” in the workplace in several ways. For example, Sparrow and Makram (2015, p. 250) describe talent as “valuable, rare, imitable, and non-substitutable employees who help an organisation to achieve its goals and create a sustained competitive advantage.” Talented employees are different from average employees, in that they possess unique abilities to contribute to the organisation's strategic goals and to deliver excellent

performance (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). Typically, talented employees might not represent more than 10–20% of an organisation’s workforce (Banfield, Kay & Royles, 2018). Because of the unique skills, abilities, and aptitudes brought by talented human resources, organisations need to devise apposite human resource schemes, usually designated as “talent management systems,” to attract, employ, and retain these top performers (Thunnissen, Boselie & Fruytier, 2013).

Banfield et al. (2018) indicate that talent management initiatives must be driven by organisational strategy. Furthermore, talent management practices function in a similar way to traditional human resource practices, which typically include 6 processes: planning, identification, acquisition, development, evaluation and monitoring, and retention (Collings, Scullion & Caligiuri, 2019) (Table 1). More in detail, talent management planning involves aligning a plan for attracting and retaining talented workforce with an organisation’s overall strategy and needs (Rothwell, 2010). Talent identification is concerned with finding those individuals that might make further progress within an organisation (Berger & Berger, 2018). Acquisition of talent is an on-going and proactive process linked to an organisation’s strategy to secure high-potential employees (Collings, Mellahi & Cascio, 2017). Talent development is used to improve the quality of exceptionally skilled human resources by aligning individual goals with organisational strategy (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & González-Cruz, 2013). Performance evaluation of talent focuses on reviewing past performance and determining future potential (Aguinis, Gottfredson & Joo, 2012). Last, talent retention involves the use of monetary and non-monetary incentives to retain top performing employees (Cappelli & Keller, 2014).

Table 1: Summary of Talent Management Practices

Talent Management System	Definition
Talent Management Planning	Aligning a plan to target talented workforce with an organisation’s overall strategy and needs (Rothwell, 2010).
Talent Identification	Targeting potential applicants or employees by reviewing job description job structure and organisational strategy and needs (Berger & Berger, 2018).
Talent Acquisition	Implementing an on-going and proactive process, linked to an organisation’s strategy, for securing human resources with high potential (Collings et al., 2017).
Talent Development	Improving the quality of exceptionally skilled employees by aligning individual goals with organisational strategy, and closing the gap between current performance and future needs (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013).
Performance Evaluation of Talent	Evaluating past performance and assessing future potential (Aguinis et al., 2012).
Talent Retention	Retaining top performers through monetary and non-monetary incentives (Cappelli & Keller, 2014).



Talent Management in the Thai Public Sector

Talent management systems in the Thai public sector take the form of the following 5 schemes: (a) the new wave leader (NWL) system; (b) the high performance and high potential system (HiPPS); (c) the public service executive development program (PSED); (d) the government scholarship system (GS); and (e) the talent management policy of the public sector (TMPPS) (Poocharoen & Lee, 2013).

The NWL system is administered by the OCSC and focuses on developing leadership skills in high-potential civil servants, preparing them for leadership positions. NWL participants join a 6-week workshop and training program and receive an opportunity to learn new leadership skills and managerial tools that might be helpful for their careers. The HiPPS is operated by the OCSC with the aim of developing and retaining high-performing civil servants in the Thai government. Each year, the OCSC invites civil servants working in Thai public agencies to apply for the HiPPS program. The estimated duration of the HiPPS program is 4 to 6 years, and those civil servants who are selected for it receive the opportunity to participate in a variety of on-the-job training and development programs (e.g., job rotation, training abroad, scholarships towards higher degrees in foreign countries). Civil servants participating in the HiPPS program also benefit from higher wages and a fast-track career path in order to be incentivised to remain in the public sector. Those civil servants who complete the HiPPS program will hold potential for advancing to managerial positions.

The PSED is founded on the same principles and processes as the HiPPS. However, the PSED is administered by the OPDC and targets members of the general public, holding at least a master's degree. The PSED lasts 22 months and its participants will benefit from ongoing learning and training opportunities to become change leaders in the Thai public sector. The GS is a scholarship program for Thai students, who meet the eligibility criteria, which helps them pursue higher education opportunities at leading universities around the world. Upon returning from their program of studies, GS recipients are contractually bound to work for the Thai government. Finally, the TMPPS allows every government agency to develop its own talent management system fitting that agency's strategy and culture. Table 2 summarizes the 5 talent management systems in place in the Thai public sector.

Table 2: The Five Talent Management Systems of the Thai Public Sector

Talent Management System	Objective	Target	Duration	Administrator
New Wave Leader (NWL)	To develop leadership skills for high-potential civil servants and prepare them for leadership positions	Current civil servants	6 months	Office of the Civil Service Commission (OCSC)
High Performance and High Potential System (HiPPS)	To develop and retain top-performing civil servants through on-the job training and development opportunities	Current civil servants	4–6 years	Office of the Civil Service Commission (OCSC)
Public Service Executive Development Program (PSED)	To attract and recruit potential talent to the Thai public sector and develop them through ongoing learning and training opportunities to become change leaders	Members of the general public holding at least a master's degree	22 months	Office of the Public Sector Development (OPSD)
Government Scholarship System (GS)	To support eligible students to pursue higher education at leading universities around the world	Members of the general public	-	Office of the Civil Service Commission (OCSC)
Talent Management Policy of the Public Sector (TMPPS)	To allow every government agency to develop its own talent management system that fits the agency's strategy and culture	Members of the general public and current civil servants	-	Administered by each public agency

Source: Adapted from Poocharoen and Lee (2013).

Managing Public Health Talent at the MOPH

The MOPH introduced a talent management system in the attempt to address a critical shortage of public health workers and to give implementation to the national human resource development policy (MOPH, 2017). Since 2003, the MOPH has been participating in 4 talent



management schemes: the New Wave Leader (NWL) system; the High Performance and High Potential System (HiPPS); the Public Service Executive Development Program (PSED); and the Government Scholarship System (GS) (MOPH, 2017). Nevertheless, problems of “brain drain” and shortage of public health talent endured. Therefore, in 2014 the MOPH put in place its own talent management system following TMPPS guidelines (MOPH, 2017). The MOPH’s talent management system is linked to the MOPH’s human resource strategy of people excellence (MOPH, 2017). This strategy comprises 3 main goals: (a) alignment between public health workforce planning and national health policy and plans, (b) balanced distribution of public health professionals across rural and urban areas, and (c) retention of public health employees in the public sector (MOPH, 2017).

To achieve the aforementioned goals, the MOPH launched the following 4 projects: (a) public health workforce planning, (b) professional development for public health employees, (c) enhancing effective human resource management, and (d) developing a network of public health professionals. The first focuses on developing strategies and plans for the anticipation, acquisition, and retention of MOPH employees based on national healthcare needs. Professional development for public health employees provides high-potential workers with coaching and mentoring opportunities. The third project aims at enhancing effective human resource management, such as by improving the MOPH’s recruitment and selection process and by creating tools to motivate and retain public health talent (e.g., rapid career advancement and job satisfaction programs). The last project implemented by the MOPH involves building a network with other organisations to share knowledge and experience about talent management. Figure 1 illustrates the talent management system implemented by the MOPH under the TMPPS.

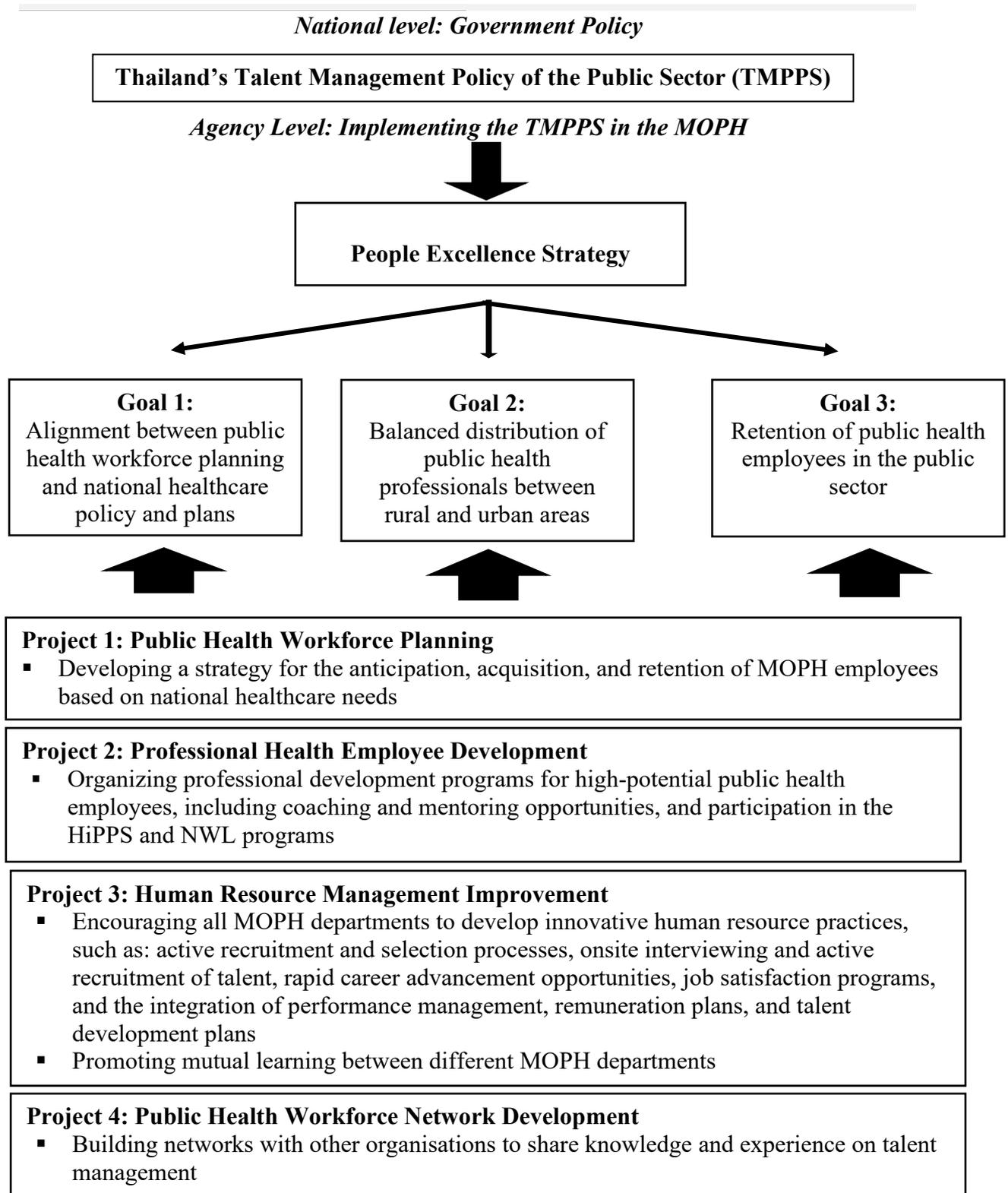


Figure 1: The talent management system of the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) under the talent management policy of the public sector (TMPPS).

Source: MOPH (2017)



Although this talent management system has been in place at the MOPH since 2014, little research has been undertaken on its actual implementation. This leaves unanswered the question around which factors might contribute to the success of the MOPH talent management system. Hence, this study first charts the implementation of such a talent management system at the MOPH and, second, it examines which factors might contribute to its success.

Research Framework Research design, data, and methodology

This study employs the policy implementation framework devised by Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), in order to describe the implementation of a talent management system at the MOPH. This framework lays out 3 main factors associated with policy implementation: (a) the characteristics of implementing agencies, (b) the disposition of policy implementors implementation, and (c) interorganisational communication and enforcement activities (Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). The first factor captures the impact of organisational structure and culture on an organisation's readiness to implement a new policy. The dispositional factor describes stakeholders' attitudes and perceptions towards the policy under implementation. Finally, interorganisational communication tracks the communication strategies used to disseminate, across an organisation, the necessary information on policy implementation (Kang, Mulaphong, Hwang & Chang, 2019).

In addition to those above, this study considers one more factor potentially associated with the effectiveness of implementation of a talent management system at the MOPH, namely the leadership style of MOPH executives. This addition is motivated by previous studies indicating that leaders in an organisation play a critical role in directing and motivating the organisation's members to take action towards a goal (Chatman & Cha, 2003; Goffee & Jones, 2000). Some studies, such as that by Kim et al. (2005), also find that a particular leadership style, which the authors call "transformational leadership," is positively related to effective talent management. In Thailand, however, research on the relationship between leadership styles and the effectiveness of talent management is still scarce. Thus, it is worth investigating whether the leadership styles of MOPH executives might also have an impact on the successful implementation of a talent management system. Figure 2 illustrates an integrative framework for the implementation of a talent.

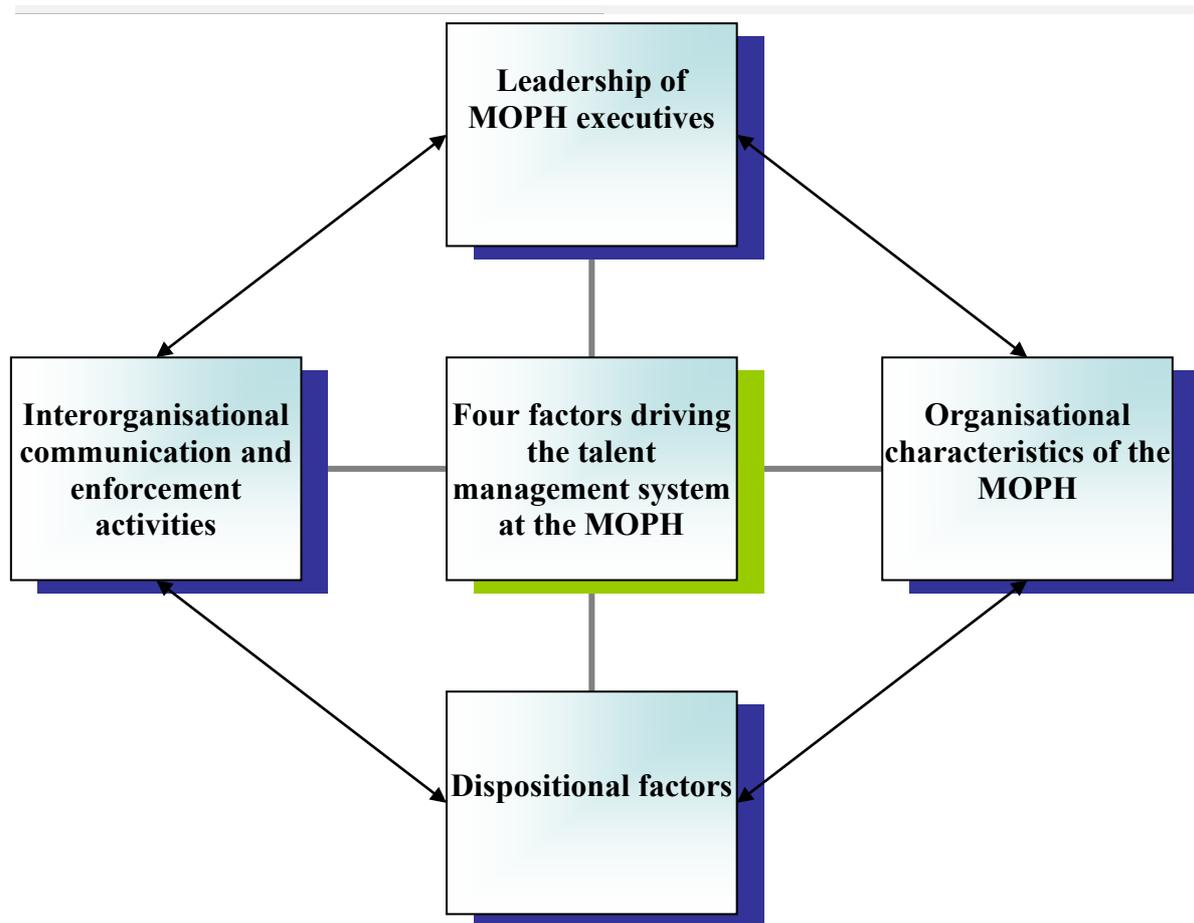


Figure 2: An integrative framework for the implementation of a talent management system at the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH).

Data and Methodology

The methodology for data collection in this study involved two stages. The first stage consisted of a review of the literature related to talent management, human resource management, and policy implementation. Simultaneously, Thai government documents were examined to obtain information regarding national human resource development policies and plans. In the second stage, in-depth interviews were conducted between 2015 to 2016, as a strategy for the collection of primary data. Interviews were undertaken with 50 key informants who had taken part in the MOPH talent management system for at least 1 year. These key informants can be divided into 3 groups: (a) senior executives (9 people), (b) primary-level executives (22 people), and (c) policy implementors such as human resource (HR) officers and supervisors and talented employees (19 people).

Interviews were conducted following a semi-structured format with open-ended questions. These interview questions were reviewed by an expert panel to attest their validity and



reliability. This format is recommended by subject experts, attesting to its validity and reliability. For each key informant, the interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. In order to ensure the interviewees' anonymity and confidentiality, their names and organisational positions were replaced with codes. To confirm the reliability of findings, triangulation was undertaken by asking key informants to comment on, confirm, and help the authors draw conclusions from the interview results. Finally, words and transcripts derived from the interviews were examined using a content analysis technique to draw out any underlying themes, meanings, and relationships in the interview topics.

Findings

Organisational characteristics

There are two main factors justifying the implementation of a talent management system at the MOPH. The first consists of the internal needs of the MOPH, which include addressing the "brain drain" of public health workers and the increased challenges confronting the healthcare system in Thailand. The MOPH implemented the new talent management system in the hope it would allow it more effectively to acquire, manage, and retain a group of high-performing employees. The second factor consists of external influence, suggesting the MOPH was under pressure to adopt talent management practices that were becoming popular among other public and private organisations. Some of the interviews revealed that the MOPH might have adopted a talent management system in order to avoid lagging behind other public agencies that already had one in place.

With respect to the MOPH's organisational structure and management, the ministry ranks third among 19 ministries in employment of government personnel, with a total of 169,789 employees (13.35%), organised into 16 departments (MOPH, 2017).¹ As a result, the MOPH's organisational structure is hierarchical; it spans a large domain of operation, and features a centralised decision-making process. Moreover, the human resource management division of the Office of the Permanent Secretary is primarily responsible for the implementation of talent management processes across ministerial departments. On the one hand, this centralised structure can help MOPH executives exercise complete control over talent management initiatives, and it ensures continuity at the level of talent management policy and even standards across departments.

¹ Office of the Minister, Office of the Permanent Secretary, Department of Mental Health, Department of Disease Control, Department of Health, Department of Medical Services, Department of Medical Sciences, Department of Health Service Support, Department of Thai Tradition and Alternative Medicine, Government Pharmaceutical Organisation, Ban Phaeo Hospital, Healthcare Accreditation Institute, National Vaccine Institute, Health Systems Research Institute, National Health Security Office, and National Institute for Emergency Medicine



On the other hand, centralising talent management decisions can also lead to some disadvantages. First, this study found that due to the scarcity of public budgets and resources, the MOPH is not in a position to provide competitive compensation and benefits in order to retain talent in the public sector. Moreover, budget proposals concerning talent management initiatives usually face delays because they have to face scrutiny at various levels of the organisation's hierarchy. Second, whereas talent management would theoretically require high-performing employees to be on a fast track towards career advancement, in practice bureaucratic rules and regulations and organisational politics act as barriers.

Dispositional factors

Stakeholders' attitudes and perceptions are important factors in the successful implementation of talent management policy. Interviews revealed that the decision to implement a talent management system was made by top executives at the MOPH. This means it demands a good deal of commitment from MOPH employees to implement it. In this respect, this study found that although the MOPH intended to integrate talent management practices in employees' daily work routines, some key informants like supervisors and HR officers reported that such practices actually resulted in an added layer of work. Moreover, centralising decision-making in connection with talent management processes produced frustration in supervisors and HR officers because they have not been put in a position to make decisions and respond to problems in timely fashion.

With respect to the attitudes and perceptions of talented employees, some reported that they were satisfied with the policy because it provided an opportunity to take on some challenging tasks, and benefit from a salary increase and from rapid career advancement. However, some reported dissatisfaction with a criterion for talent selection demanding higher-level proficiency in English, which discouraged some high-potential employees from applying for the program.

Interorganisational communication and enforcement activities

There are 2 internal communication channels that the MOPH has adopted to communicate with its employees: formal and informal. The first includes the use of official channels such as formal letters and memoranda, official e-mail, and structured meetings to share information regarding the ministry's talent management policy and practices. In contrast, informal communication methods include an instant messaging application called "LINE," which has been used for information sharing and exchange of ideas among MOPH employees.

Some key informants reported that the use of formal communication channels resulted in delays in information sharing between MOPH employees. In turn, delays on the part of the



MOPH to respond to enquiries via formal channels resulted in potential applicants giving up on applying for the talent management program. Moreover, some key informants suggested that they would prefer using the LINE application as a main channel of communication, since all employees have access to it through their cellphones and personal computers and can receive, respond, and share information with other members instantly.

Leadership

The final factor affecting the success of the MOPH's talent management system is the quality of leadership by MOPH executives and supervisors. From the interviews, it became clear the critical role performed by executives in the position of Director General—the head of a department at the MOPH—in driving progress on talent management initiatives. Specifically, some key informants reported that their Director Generals ascribed importance to the talent management program and led and oversaw its functioning themselves. Other Director Generals worked closely with their talent management teams and provided them with guidance and direction, while also supplying the resources necessary for the implementation of talent management initiatives including opportunities for on-the-job training, job rotation, and funding for talented professionals wanting to develop their skills through off-the-job training. Interestingly, some key informants who were interviewed in their capacity as members of the target public of the MOPH talent management program, also reported that some Director Generals had taken up a mentoring role towards talented employees in their respective departments.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has sought to enhance understanding of how a talent management system has been implemented at the MOPH in Thailand, as a strategy to address “brain drain” from the public health sector and to attract and retain talent in the Thai public sector. In particular, this study has tried to identify some factors that might positively contribute to the implementation of talent management initiatives at the MOPH. The framework for the study was adapted from the policy implementation framework proposed by Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), which contemplates 3 critical success factors for policy implementation: (a) organisational characteristics, (b) dispositional factors, and (c) interorganisational communication and enforcement activities. In addition, our study also examined a fourth factor: the leadership style of MOPH executives.

Overall, this study suggests that these four factors help understand the areas of success and failure in the implementation of a talent management system at the MOPH. Top MOPH executives, especially the Director Generals at some departments, have been playing a leading role in promoting talent management initiatives in their respective departments. Moreover, they have been mentoring talented employees themselves and have been providing



necessary resources and assistance to sustain their departments' talent management processes. This leadership style is aligned with what Bass and Riggio (2006) have called a "transformational leader," who shows concern for his/her subordinates' needs and motivates them to undertake generative work for the organisation. This finding is also consistent with previous studies specific to the public health sector (Aarons, Farahnak, Ehrhart & Sklar, 2004; Moullin, Ehrhart & Aarons, 2018; Kim et al., 2005; Steinmann, Klug & Maier, 2018), which found that transformational leaders were associated with organisational success. A recommendation emerging from this study is that the MOPH encourage the work of these transformational leaders in cultivating leadership skills among MOPH employees.

However, there are some drawbacks that have been found to hinder implementation of the MOPH's talent management system. First, although no one at the MOPH doubts the usefulness of the talent management system, some stakeholders like supervisors and HR officers viewed the implementation of the talent management system as an added administrative burden. This finding is consistent with the suggestion by Fink and Sturman (2017) that implementing more sophisticated HR and talent management practices can become a burdensome assignment for line managers and HR officers. This drives a second recommendation of our study, namely that the MOPH assemble a talent management task force to be primarily responsible for integrating and synchronising efforts at the MOPH to acquire, develop, and retain talent (Yamhill & McLean, 2005). This task force should take the form of a cross-functional team that reports directly to the Director General of each department and works closely with HR officers and supervisors.

The centralized organisational structure of the MOPH is another obstacle to the success of its talent management system. This is because decisions related to talent management are undertaken by only a few persons occupying the highest organisational ranks. While some scholars (Ashkenas, 2016) have supported the idea of centralising talent management decisions because top leaders might be better able to integrate talent management practices with an organisation's strategic objectives, this does not seem to be the case at the MOPH. Since the latter is a public organisation beset by bureaucratic red tape, an excessive number of rules, and a budget deficit, these factors slow down executive decisions to allocate resources and to communicate promptly in connection with talent management activities. The findings of this study are also consistent with an earlier study by Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017), which reports that too many formal rules meant to secure an organisation's accountability and transparency, hamper efforts by public organisations to attract and retain talent. Therefore, this study suggests that the MOPH transform its structure to become a more agile organisation valuing adaptive and innovative work practices and shedding unnecessary administrative burdens that delay the success of talent management initiatives (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Rigby, Sutherland & Takeuchi, 2016).



Finally, in today's digital era, informal communication methods, like the LINE instant messaging application, were reported to be effective in facilitating communication among MOPH employees. This is because employees can freely download and install the application on their cellphones and personal computers and are therefore able instantly to send, receive, or reply to messages and notifications regarding MOPH talent management initiatives. This informal communication channel can promote acceptance of talent management processes among employees and enhance their engagement with, and commitment to, the talent management system in place at the MOPH.

However, besides taking fuller advantage of digital technology to promote the successful implementation of its talent management system, the MOPH should also pay special attention to issues of cybersecurity and data privacy (Wirtz & Weyerer, 2017). Specifically, the MOPH currently has no written guidelines and policies to govern use of the popular LINE application among its employees. Still, using this instant messaging application might sometimes lead to breaches of confidentiality and privacy and make the organisation more vulnerable to digital threats. Hence, a recommendation flowing from our study is that the MOPH establish rules and policies concerning the use of instant messaging services. MOPH employees should also be educated about the sensitive nature of government data and the risks related to improper use of instant messaging services on the workplace. Finally, the MOPH should put in place a team responsible for monitoring and managing content transmitted via instant messages.

In conclusion, the problems of public health "brain drain" and of a severe shortage of public health workers have driven the MOPH to put in place a talent management system to attract, employ, and retain talented professionals in the Thai public health sector. However, over the span of more than half a decade since its adoption, no empirical study had yet investigated the implementation of the talent management system at the MOPH. More importantly, the question around whether this system had been functioning effectively remained unaddressed. The results of this study not only help gain a better understanding of how organisational characteristics, dispositional factors, communication methods, and leadership roles shape the implementation of the talent management system at the MOPH. They also provide important information around the factors that facilitate or hinder implementation of a talent management system, and suggest ways to improve the one adopted at the MOPH, so that it might function more effectively.



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