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# Talent identification: line managers' perceptions of their own requirements as talent spotters

Golik, Mariela\*  
Blanco, María Rita\*\*

## Abstract

Identification is a key step in the organizational talent management process. Even though evaluating potential through an objective approach, integrating multiple methods, is recommended, many organizations rely upon line manager nominations as their main sources of identification. Given their central role, this study analyses the line managers' attributes required to carry out an effective talent identification process. This qualitative study was drawn upon social cognition (social psychology framework) and talent identification literature with a sample of 20 managers, belonging to a multinational of Argentine origin, who described their experiences and requirements as talent spotters through semi-structured interviews. Results suggest that observation skills, listening and communication skills, cognitive skills, intuition, empathy, identification as part of the managerial role, low aversion to risk, vocation, predisposition to learn, resilience, and commitment are important attributes in the identification process. The present study provides a map of the talent spotter's attributes that are necessary to assess employees' potential.

**Keywords:** talent identification; line managers; talent spotters; potential.

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\* PhD en Ciencias de Gestion, orientación Recursos Humanos, Université Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne, Francia. Profesora en Universidad de San Martín, Argentina. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4344-0068>; Email: [mgolik@unsam.edu.ar](mailto:mgolik@unsam.edu.ar)

\*\* Doctorado en Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, España. Profesora en Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, España. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2899-7634>; Email: [maria.blanco@urjc.es](mailto:maria.blanco@urjc.es). (Corresponding autor)

# Identificación de talentos: percepción de los gerentes de línea de sus propias necesidades como observadores de talentos

## Resumen

La identificación constituye un paso clave en el proceso de gestión del talento organizacional. Aunque se recomienda evaluar el potencial a través de un enfoque objetivo, integrando múltiples métodos, gran parte de las organizaciones confían en las nominaciones de los gerentes de línea y en las evaluaciones del desempeño como principales fuentes de identificación. Dado su rol central, este estudio analiza, de forma cualitativa, los atributos que deben poseer los gerentes de línea para llevar a cabo un proceso de identificación de talento efectivo. Para llevar a cabo este análisis se indagan las experiencias y requerimientos sugeridos por los identificadores en una muestra de 20 gerentes de una multinacional argentina a quienes se les aplica una entrevista de tipo semi-directiva, diseñada con base en la teoría de cognición social (psicología social) y la literatura de identificación de talentos. Los resultados revelan que las capacidades de observación, escucha y comunicación, habilidades cognitivas, intuición, empatía, identificación como parte del rol, aversión al riesgo, vocación, predisposición al aprendizaje, resiliencia y el compromiso son importantes en el proceso de identificación. El presente estudio brinda un panorama de los atributos necesarios para evaluar potencial de los gerentes de línea.

**Palabras clave:** identificación del talento; gerentes de línea; identificadores de talento; potencial.

## 1. Introduction

The identification of talent constitutes a crucial step for building a large talent pool and developing an effective talent management (TM) system that would enable organizations to effectively respond to environmental challenges (Lai & Ishizaka, 2020). Talent identification (TI) involves choosing the best candidates (top performers and high potentials) to be included in the talent pool and/or in the succession plan, and

consequently, to be considered for the future strategic roles of the organization (Evans et al, 2011). Since the TI process is primarily a hierarchical initiative (Silzer & Church 2010), it starts at the top of the organization, with senior managers settling high potential definitions and processes, and asking for nominations by line managers, later.

Even though extant literature recommends assessing potential through an objective approach integrating multiple methods and tools (Finkelstein

et al, 2018), many organizations still trust in supervisors' nominations and performance appraisals as their main sources of identification (Golik et al, 2018; Kabalina & Osipova, 2022). Indeed, the majority rely on an overall designation of potential based on the judgments of managers participating in the talent-review process (Kehoe et al, 2023).

In this vein, line managers are responsible for appraising the performance of talented employees as well as for their contribution to the achievement of business objectives (Ulrich & Allen, 2014). The TI process in hands of line managers is interactive and subjective by nature (Wiblen et al, 2012). Certainly, according to the interactionist perspective, potential exists not just because of what an individual does or does not do, but often because of someone else's capacity to perceive those actions as indicative of potential (Dominick & Gabriel, 2009). Therefore, the manager exerts an influence not only on who is identified as a high potential, but also on how this potential will be developed later.

Despite the central role of line managers in the talent management (TM) process, not all of them are able to carry out this process in an effective way. Indeed, it is estimated that 40% of high potential designations fail (Cappelli & Keller, 2014). Moreover, the potential identification is usually hindered by line managers themselves, since they do not perceive the subordinates' potential, do not offer them opportunities to demonstrate their talent (Silzer & Church, 2009) or exhibit a lack of engagement with the TI process (Kabalina & Osipova, 2022). In sum, the behaviours, traits, and values of talent spotters exert a strong influence on the TI process (Lai & Ishizaka, 2020).

In spite of its relevance and the poor performance of line managers in the process, talent spotters' attributes have been scarcely explored in empirical studies (Blanco & Golik, 2021). To our knowledge, García-Carbonell et al, (2015) analysed how the ability to identify talent in senior teams is conditioned by their cognitive abilities and values, and Golik and Blanco (2022) examined line managers' tendency to be homophilic in the TI process. Even when these studies add to the knowledge about line managers as talent spotters, they do not address the individual requirements to execute this process effectively, considering the talent spotters' point of view.

The line managers' view is relevant since the TI process is subjective by nature (Wiblen et al, 2012). Line managers are key actors of the TI process, representing a main influence upon its outcomes (Golik et al, 2018). Their narratives will let us to understand their experiences, and the assigned meanings to the requirements as talent spotters. In this way, this study draws upon a worker-oriented approach since, according to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) the line managers' personal beliefs regarding their self-capacities represent an insightful source of self-regulatory behaviour.

Thus, this study aims to address the required attributes in talent spotters, from their own words, to carry out an effective TI process and, to answer the call for more empirical studies on this field, taking into account the role of line managers (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Blanco & Golik, 2021). In practical terms, the importance granted by participants to the different attributes will allow us to propose some guidelines for the selection and training

of talent spotters.

The article is structured as follows: first, the analytical framework underlying the investigation is outlined. Second, the methodology is described, followed by findings and their discussion. Finally, conclusions are presented together with practical implications and future research guidelines.

## 2. Identification of organizational talent

The TI process involves the identification of the performance and the potential of employees to deploy their skills and talents in a way that contributes to the improvement of corporate outcomes and the company's competitive position (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Determining how the organization defines and assesses employees' potential constitutes a strategic decision that has a substantial impact on other talent management processes, and on corporate results (Blanco & Golik, 2021). Although a wide range of tools are used to identify potential, empirical studies reveal the pre-eminence of direct supervisors' recommendations and performance appraisals as main sources of identification. High potentials' nominations are generally made by direct supervisors, who are best positioned to observe and evaluate the individuals' work (King, 2015).

### 2.1. The role of line managers in the assessment of talent

Line managers are key actors in the TI process since they know the abilities, performance, motivations, and career aspirations of the candidates. The TI process can be understood as a social

interactive activity, where the power dynamics, characteristics, and values of decision-makers (line managers) and employees should be considered (Lai & Ishizaka, 2020) and as an interactionist activity where potential exists often due to someone's ability to identify the talented individual (Dominick & Gabriel, 2009). Furthermore, since social cognition operationalizes talent as the perception of it, this framework enables the analysis of the dynamic ways in which expectations and judgments shape what is recognized as talent (Dries, 2013).

Social psychology aims to understand how people's feelings, behaviours, and thoughts are influenced based on the real or assumed presence of others and the way in which such psychological factors, in turn, influence interactions with others (Allport, 1987). Social cognition, as part of the social psychology framework (Chadee, 2011), concerns the way in which individuals process, remember and use information in social contexts to explain and predict how people behave (Fiske & Taylor, 2013).

Thus, the way people think about others plays an important role in how they feel and interact with the environment. As human beings, we do not deal with different situations as neutral observers, we are led by our own desires and expectations which, in turn, influence on what we see and remember (González & Ruiz, 2015). Even being unaware of this process, we constantly process the storing of new information, and continually retrieve existing information as a necessary input for new interactions.

We have already mentioned that TI process is subjective by nature (Wiblen *et al*, 2012) and perceptual, since managers, through their senses, select the type of stimuli they are going

to react to. A person's awareness and acceptance of stimuli play an important role in the perception process. In fact, seeing was recognized as a key activity to determine whether someone is considered talented or not (Wiblen et al, 2012). Individuals differ greatly in what they appreciate and where they focus their attention. The reception of different stimuli is extremely selective and beliefs, expectations, past experiences, and other personal characteristics may influence it (Assael, 2004). The action of filtering stimuli through different senses is a goal directed activity. Therefore, when an individual is carrying out a goal-directed action, they will overlook the information considered irrelevant for the achievement of the goal. In our case, since the objective is TI, when analysing the potential of the employees, talent spotters try to match what they observe with the strategic needs of the organization.

### **3. Methodology**

Considering the scarcity of empirical studies about talent spotters and our intention to gain an insight about the behaviours and attributes of line managers, we relied upon an exploratory and qualitative approach (Patton, 2002). This approach was adopted since it allows the study of people and processes in their natural settings revealing, in descriptive terms, the meanings that people attach to their experiences (Yilmaz, 2013). Moreover, this research is based on a constructivist grounded theory, whose purpose is the identification of new knowledge (Charmaz, 2014). It explores what it is assumed to be a socially constructed dynamic reality through a flexible framework that relies on an in-depth description of the phenomenon

from the perspectives of those involved.

#### **3.1. Sample**

Since purposeful sampling in qualitative research aims at studying a small number of people or unique cases whose analysis produces a wealth of detailed information and an in-depth understanding of the people, and situations studied (Yilmaz, 2013), the sample is made up of 20 senior managers who work in different business units of an Argentine multinational media group. Considering that the average sample size in grounded theory studies is 20 (Mason, 2010), our sample was deemed sufficient for the analysis. As to the multinational criterion, it was chosen, firstly, because it has been working with a formal TM approach for ten years, and several TI cycles have been run. Secondly, its company size allowed us to have a group of talent spotters large enough to explore the research topic in depth.

- **Line managers selection criteria**

Managers were expected to have proven experience in relation with their talent identification skills to be eligible. Hence, middle and senior managers must have previously identified at least two candidates with potential, and that potential had to be confirmed later through their successful performance in more complex roles. Nominations were made by the Corporate Development Director and the Human Resource Business Partner of the key business units. Then, after a list of 25 participants was provided, managers were invited to participate. Finally, 18 talent spotters agreed to take part. The sample

composition is shown in Table 1.

Standard practices regarding the anonymity of the participants and

confidentiality of the information were used. Ethical considerations were in line with those presented by Yin (2003).

**Table 1**  
**Sample**

	Job function	Organizational level	Time leading teams (years)	Gender	Age	Highest educational degree
1	Corporate HR Development Manager	senior manager	28	M	56	MA Education
2	HR Business Partner	middle manager	12	F	44	BA Public Relations
3	IT Architecture Head	middle manager	2	M	35	IT Engineering
4	CEO SBU internet	senior manager	13	M	41	MBA & MA Software Engineering
5	SBU Scheduling coordinator	middle manager	3	M	36	BA Communications
6	IT Technical Department Head	middle manager	20	F	46	IT Engineering
7	Services Head	middle manager	11	M	40	Electronic Engineering
8	PIM head	middle manager	13	M	39	Telecommunications Engineering
9	CEO SBU	senior manager	27	M	58	BA Accounting
10	CFO SBU	middle manager	13	M	41	MBA
11	CIO SBU	middle manager	20	M	49	BA Systems
12	Controller Director	senior manager	15	M	46	MBA
13	Continuous Improvement Head	middle manager	14	M	48	BA Systems
14	CEO SBU	senior manager	5	M	60	Bachelor in Arts
15	SBU and Musical Contents Mgr	senior manager	14	M	46	High School
16	SBU Scheduling Head	middle manager	13	M	37	BA Journalism
17	HRBP	middle manager	34	M	60	BA in Human Resources
18	CEO SBU	senior manager	44	M	62	BA International Relations
19	HRO SBU	middle manager	12	M	41	IT engineering
20	HR Partner	middle manager	10	F	40	BA Psychology

### 3.2 Data collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with talent spotters who had first-hand

experiences in the topic under analysis and who were willing to share them (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) were employed. These interviews lasted between 50 and

80 minutes and were carried out face to face, during November 2015 and May 2016.

*Interview protocol.* It was designed based on an in-depth review of the TI literature (Dominick & Gabriel, 2009; Dries & Pepermans, 2012; García-Carbonell et al, 2015). 15 open-ended questions were proposed to facilitate the description of the TI processes and its competencies to obtain a more nuanced understanding of how talent was identified in practice. We offer some examples of these questions below:

- Describe two processes where you consider you did a good job as a talent spotter.
- What did you do in those processes?
- What are the most difficult aspects to be carried out in an identification process?
- How did you realize that a person had potential?
- Which are the traits and skills of an effective talent spotter?
- If you had to train an inexperienced manager to identify talent, what would you teach him/her?
- Based on your experience, which are the most difficult aspects to learn or develop as a talent spotter?

Interviews were open-ended and highly flexible, encouraging participants to speak freely and follow-up questions were offered for clarification and deeper elaboration (Berg & Lune, 2017) to gain more insights about the TI process.

*Validation of the interview protocol.* The 4-step Interview Protocol Refinement (Yeong et al, 2018) was employed to improve the interview protocol reliability and validity. Thus, we followed these steps: we ensured alignment between interview and research questions; then, we built an inquiry-based conversation;

we asked and received feedback of the protocol by two researchers and two HRM experts; finally, we pilot-tested the interview guide with two-line managers. This process allowed us to refine some questions to ensure their understanding by the respondents, and, in that way, the search of information was facilitated to be able to achieve our study goals.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed (130 pages), after having obtained the informants' permission. Interviews were analyzed using NVivo 11 software. Data analysis, based upon grounded constructivist theory, where there is no a priori definition of the codes (King, 2004), included the following steps. Step 1 comprised the familiarization with the data by listening, transcribing and reading the interviews. Step 2 involved the creation of initial open codes. Later, two researchers, independently, coded the verbatim transcripts, results were compared, and coding similarities and differences were considered to maximize the inter-coder reliability (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). This stage involved the use of a variety of codes and several sub-codes were grouped within a single code. This first set of codes allowed us to organize extracts. The coding framework was refined during the process of reading and rereading the interviews. All codes met the required criteria: in line with the research questions, covering all relevant data, mutually exclusive, and at the same conceptual level (Merriam, 2009). Finally, reliability was calculated (Total agreements) / (Total # observations) x 100. In our study, the result was 80 per cent, higher than the minimum defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2000).

### 3.4. Findings

After the analysis of the interviews, 171 codes were identified which refer to the different attributes considered important by line managers to carry out the TI process effectively. Among them, observation abilities, listening and communication skills, cognitive skills, intuition, low aversion to risk, vocation,

predisposition to learn, identification as part of the managerial role, empathy, commitment, and resilience can be pointed out. It is worth mentioning that some of these attributes can be associated with the use of different senses during the perception process, such as seeing or hearing. We will show the findings regarding the most mentioned attributes below, see Tables 2 and 3.

**Table 2**  
**Talent spotters' narratives about the perceived attributes as talent spotters – Skills and abilities**

Skills and abilities			
Code	Interviewees who mentioned it	Number of quotes (n= 171)	Narratives
Observation skills	20	38	<p>"I am very observant (...). I notice down to the smallest detail. To some extent, I see the world as if I were a Human Resource person. I perceive situations, styles, shapes, tones, looks, fears. I observe how people react to problems and complex situations. I see how some of them deal with these situations differently. Always there is a person who does not "get drowned" when facing complex situations, someone who is able to "stop the ball" [image from soccer] and then thinks, speaks calmly, and makes everyone follow their suggestions." (Interviewee 12)</p> <p>"I see if they suggest alternatives or not and how they propose them. If they have explored those issues in depth, if they offer you an alternative solution, anticipating themselves to the potential problem. I see how they interact with their peers; I spend time observing them" (Interviewee 7)</p>
Listening and communication skills	14	25	<p>If you can communicate effectively, you can identify the needs of others and their expectations. You can build trust. From there, you will be able to identify whether the candidate can take risks or not, if can suggest alternatives when facing a problem." (Interviewee 8).</p> <p>"My team was already organized when I joined the firm, so the first thing I did was to have one-on-one meetings with each team member, so they could tell me where they came from, where they wanted to go, what motivated them and what their expectations concerning my role were." (Interviewee 3).</p>
Cognitive skills	12	13	<p>"All talent spotters have at least the same or a higher level of cognitive skills than those they are identifying; in general, they are intellectually brilliant, and they understand all the variables of the business." (Interviewee 1).</p> <p>"In order to decide whether I would nominate him to the talent pool or not, I considered which career path he could have, considering the strategy change to be implemented in a short time. The business was changing rapidly." (Interviewee 19).</p> <p>"At the beginning I didn't look at the medium or long term, then I did. I forced myself to think about what type of potential my team members had or what the impact of a new person joining the team could be. During the interviewing process, I always tried to see or imagine how the candidate would get along with the existing team members with whom they would interact daily." (Interviewee 6).</p>

**Cont... Table 2**

<b>Intuition</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>31</b>	"You can realize, very quickly, if the person has something special; later you can identify that they may have some characteristics that are not so easy to perceive at first. For example, their self-confidence may be lower than you initially considered, or they may have perseverance or resilience problems (...). However, when you see that person, you say to yourself, there is something (potential) here." (Interviewee 15)
<b>Empathy</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	"You have to think about the others, to put yourself in their heads, to have the ability to understand them. You must be very empathic and genuinely interested in the welfare of the others. There are brilliant leaders who are totally unempathetic, so it doesn't work. An effective talent spotter must have the ability to understand others." (Interviewee 12).

**Table 3**

**Talent spotters' narratives about the perceived attributes as talent spotters – Values, work style, and personality**

Values, Work style and personality			
Code	Interviewees who mentioned it	Number of quotes (n= 171)	Narratives
<b>Vocation to spot talent</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>	"For me, the first requirement is to be willing to do it; this is a key issue. Then, train and learn and get advice. And once those ingredients are present, wanting to assess talent, train and be close to people, and then start to observe (...). I believe that every day is a good opportunity to observe people, their actions, their behaviours." (Interviewee 7).
<b>Identification as part of the managerial work</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	"I don't wake up every morning thinking about the potential of people or who has it or not, it is part of my daily work. I observe and I also take care because just saying 'this person is a talent' is not enough, you also have to take care of him/her." (Interviewee 11).
<b>Low risk aversion</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>18</b>	"To start with, you do not have to be concerned about risk. Selecting, identifying people, and betting on their development imply the acceptance of risk. The first thing you must understand is that it will not hurt you if you later discover that your assessment was not the correct one; you do not have to stop believing in the importance and the need of carrying out the talent identification process. If it goes wrong for any reason, and you say 'well, I spent a lot of time helping him grow, advising him and suddenly he threw everything away, I will not do it anymore', then we have a problem." (Interviewee 9) "The talent spotter looks for the sparkling in the eyes. There is a brain-heart-arms connection, and they aim to find people with those connections. I do not find it difficult to say quickly if someone is talented or not. I bet on it; I am not risk averse." (Interviewee 1).
<b>Predisposition to learn</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	"It seems to me that you have to be close to people, to work with them. Being around them, every day, offers you a good opportunity to learn. I've learned a lot from the people I have mentioned ... being by their side, discussing with them and understanding that a lot of them were not as I thought they were." (Interviewee 7). "Working with these people trains you all the time, you learn from them continuously. They are in constant change, in permanent evolution, and at a certain moment you begin to understand them, to perceive, to feel what is happening to them." (Interviewee 15).
<b>Resilience</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	"Sometimes you have to tolerate frustration, understand that it may not work and persevere anyway ... you need to be resilient" (Interviewee 1)
<b>Commitment</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	"You have to be committed with the identification process and your employee" (Interviewee 8)

#### 4. Required attributes of an effective talent spotter: Discussion

Participants described the behaviours carried out as part of the TI process as well as the requirements of the role. In this sense, the information obtained -attributes- may be considered as part of the talent spotter job specification, which is derived from the performance of the job analysis (Ellington et al, 2015). The analysis of the 11 attributes obtained, which can be associated with the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) allowed us to group them as skills and abilities -Table 2-, and other characteristics (values, work style, and personality) -Table 3-. The most mentioned ones will be examined in the following section.

- **Observation skills**

Seeing or observing was very frequently mentioned in the narratives (38 codes). Not only was it the most mentioned attribute, but it was also present throughout the whole sample. The analysis of narratives showed the key difference between observing and seeing. Seeing is natural, immediate, unintentional whereas observing is cultural, determined, and intentional (Vásquez-Rodríguez, 1992). Seeing is a biological process, typical of every human being; while observing is conceived as an intentional and reflective process, which acquires meaning through our brain, in line with the reasoning and interests of the person who carries out that action. Looking is a mental process; we must learn to observe (Sánchez, 2009).

Talent spotters observe multiple aspects of their employees' behaviours and they do it daily and constantly (Golik

et al, 2018; Blanco & Golik, 2021). In so doing, they retain all kinds of information about candidates in different work situations. Later, they match that information with their own talent models as well as the organizational ones and the result of that analysis constitutes a basic input to find the match between the candidates' potential and future roles (Golik et al, 2018). Indeed, great managers see talent before others, and they find the best role for each employee (Chamorro-Premuzic & Kirschner, 2020).

- **Listening and interpersonal communication skills**

The second most mentioned characteristic was the ability to listen and to generate effective interpersonal communication. The narratives highlight the need to build a trusting environment to know the capabilities, personality, and interests of the team members. Indeed, scholars have identified a positive link between supervisor listening and perceived leader-follower relationship quality (Lloyd et al, 2017).

The potential variables already mentioned (interests, motivations, among others) can be identified through the interpersonal communication and listening skills of talent spotters, confirming the importance of the interactionist perspective (Dominick & Gabriel, 2009). These skills strengthen the role of leaders as communication agents. In fact, interviewees 8 and 3 pointed out that talent spotters need communication skills to identify the needs of their team members.

- **Cognitive skills**

The TI process implies that talent spotters behave in a specific way

to achieve a goal. An effective talent spotter must understand the business where they operate in depth as well as the critical roles (Golik et al, 2018). Also, they should be able to determine who a talent for the organization is, a talent for what, and how this type of talent can be matched to future organizational roles (Arnold & Constanza, 2022).

As shown in Table 2, understanding the business and the requirements of the different roles entail certain cognitive abilities. Indeed, interviewee 6 shared the lessons learned in the TI process, and explained the cognitive complexity involved in the visualization of different scenarios and time horizons. Moreover, these skills are put into play in the TI process when the talent spotter foresees the potential roles where a candidate may be assigned to, the learning challenges to keep on growing, and the translation of that potential into effective performance in the future.

To match the candidate's competencies, potential, interests, and style to the requirements of the role, the use of cognitive abilities is fundamental, as evidenced by participant 19 -Table 2-. As shown, an effective talent spotter aligns the use of their senses with the TI criteria and the organizational needs. Not only does he/she recognize potential, but also identify potential for what (Finkelstein et al, 2018).

- **Intuition**

Intuition was also mentioned by participants, and it was described in multiple ways, sometimes vaguely, as in the case of interviewee 15 -Table 2-. According to Kahneman and Klein (2009), people have two different cognitive systems to be able to process information and make decisions: intuition

and analysis. Managers' decisions follow these two systems: System 1, subjective, affective, and intuitive, and System 2, objective, rational, and analytical. Sometimes they complement one another, and frequently, compete one against the other. Within this dual processing system, intuition is conceived as a rapid cognitive process in which involuntary, automatic, emotionally charged judgments arise through quick, unconscious, and holistic associations (Epstein, 2010). This intuitive process "implies a sensation of knowing without knowing how one knows" (Epstein, 2010: 296).

In many narratives it was identified that talent spotters relied first upon their intuition (System 1) and, later, they tried to rationalize and justify that initial intuitive decision (System 2), combining both systems. In this regard, respondent 12 described the interaction between intuition and experience: "I think that intuition is your first call, it tells you 'He or she is the one' and then, experience contributes to validate faster whether you were right or not." High-quality decisions can be based on intuition when the decision-maker is a true expert (Kahneman, 2013). This answer is in line with Miles and Sadler-Smith (2014) who identified that intuition comes from experience and, consequently, the confidence of intuitive people about their decisions was increased through experience, we consider that prior talent spotters' TI experiences influence upon their perception of the employee's potential, and on the accuracy of this identification.

- **Empathy**

Some interviewees also mentioned the importance of empathy as shared

by participant 2 - Table 2-. This narrative reveals the cognitive empathy conceptualised as a mental ability which facilitates the understanding and identification of the emotions of another person (Jolliffe & Murray, 2012).

- **Identification as part of the managerial role and vocation**

From the narratives, it seems clear that line managers understand the TI process as part of their daily managerial tasks, as shared by participant 11 -Table 3-. As to vocation, results showed that line managers must commit to their identification role, and they should be motivated to perform it. Initially, they must have a vocation, as shared by participant 7 -Table 3-, and afterwards, they must learn to do it properly. In this vein, the lack of engagement with the TI process was already mentioned as one of the obstacles to an effective TI process (Kabalina & Osipova, 2022).

- **Low risk aversion**

Findings demonstrate that a low degree of risk aversion is also required: the possibility of making mistakes, in other words, an inaccurate assessment of potential should not hinder the actions of the talent spotter as shared by participant 9 -Table 3-. This narrative reveals the importance of a growth mindset for talent spotters, as mentioned by Heslin et al, (2005). In the same line, participant 1 explained how his low level of risk aversion contributed to taking quick decisions about talented candidates. We consider, in line with Klein (2003), that when line managers face uncertainty, expert intuition may help them to make quick decisions confidently.

- **Predisposition to learn**

An attribute mentioned by several interviewees was the willingness to learn. This requirement involves not only learning how to identify talent, as shared in previous narratives, but also having a predisposition and openness to learn from others. Indeed, the learning goal orientation is a general learning-related motive that impacts individual engagement in informal learning (Rigolizzo, 2019). As described by interviewees 7 and 15, the effective talent spotter learns from their team members, thus enriching their own TI and leadership experiences. These narratives resonate with the idea that leaders need to be flexible when recognizing differences in the values of diverse groups, and be continuous lifelong learners (Chin & Trimble, 2015).

In sum, our findings confirm the interactionist perspective since there is a constant interaction between the talent spotter and the candidate in the TI process which demands an important investment of time and the development of KSAOs from line managers. In fact, the centrality of the role of line managers in the TI process demands a profile with multiple requirements. Our study identified a range of attributes for talent spotters: observation and listening and communication skills, cognitive skills, intuition, identification as part of the managerial role, low risk aversion, vocation, empathy, resilience, commitment, and predisposition to learn.

A combination of these different attributes conformed the real profile of the interviewed talent spotters, and each of those attributes imprinted their own mark on the TI process. Line managers built their identity as talent spotters from their strengths; some of them relied more

on their intuition or senses (observation skills) while others depended on their leadership skills, building trustful environments for their team members. Of note, no attributes seemed to be connected with age or seniority in the management role.

## 5. Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of line managers about the required attributes in talent spotters to be able to carry out an effective TI process, because they are key actors as well as decision makers (Ulrich & Allen, 2014). Findings revealed a range of talent spotter attributes, grouped as skills and abilities, and values, work style, and personality. Thus, this study contributes to the TM literature by determining the perceived skill requirements of talent spotters who must deal with the TI process and the assessment of potential.

In practical terms, considering that some of these attributes are innate and others acquired, our findings could constitute a guide for Talent Managers to determine those to be considered in the selection process of line-managers as talent spotters, and those to be developed over time. As to the acquired TI skills, managers could design customized development plans for line managers, taking into account their personal characteristics, and considering both formal and on-the-job learning programs. In turn, from the individual career management point of view, these findings could also contribute to the career development of young professionals who may be interested in future executive careers, considering them as input of their own personal development plan to achieve a managerial role earlier or in better conditions.

Some limitations have been identified in this study that provide opportunities for further research. First, our conclusions are not generalizable as they are based on an interpretation of the perceptions of a very specific group of employees but rather hypotheses that may be useful for future quantitative studies. Second, our sample is unbalanced regarding gender, due to the type of industry. Since some attributes, as in the case of empathy, have been shown to be different by gender, females have consistently been found to have higher empathy than males (Villadangos *et al*, 2016), it would be interesting to explore its relevance in a more balanced gender sample. Third, since an emerging stream of research suggests that contextual factors interact with workers attributes, and our study has just focused on individual attributes (Sanchez & Levine, 2010), research could explore the influence of contextual conditions such as the organizational or national culture.

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