Diversity brings new talent into the organisation

By Lotte Holck, PhD, postdoc at Copenhagen Business School, and Karina K. Andreasen, Head of Talent and Development at ISS Denmark

New study from ISS Denmark and Copenhagen Business School shows, how diversity brings new talent into the organisation. To attract and retain these qualified employees it is essential to take a more inclusive approach to talent management, which again helps to professionalize service and strengthen pipeline of successors to the benefit of profit and business.
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Executive summary

The labour market in Denmark, as in most other European countries, is challenged by a combination of growth and increasing labour shortages, and hence faces a tough fight to attract talented employees. New research from ISS Denmark and Copenhagen Business School demonstrates how instead of only adopting an elitist approach that targets a few ‘high-achievers’ in the pursuit of talent, companies can benefit from a more inclusive approach to talent management. This is especially true of diverse companies that employ a substantial number of skilled migrants, who bring valuable and supplementary qualifications into the organisation. To cultivate and utilise their qualifications, organisations need to employ inclusive talent initiatives that cover employees at every level of the organisation. The benefits of these steps will be supplementary qualifications, a strengthened pipeline of successors that includes a wider pool of internal talent and expanded leadership capabilities.
Introduction

Denmark has witnessed increasing internationalisation for the past two decades: from being a fairly homogeneous country, foreign nationals today make up 12% of the total workforce. In 2016, 336,840 foreign citizens were employed in Danish jobs, which was a surge of almost 45% from 2008 (Christensen, 2017). Concurrent with this development, Danish companies are facing the challenge of growing labour shortages combined with steady growth rates (Copenhagen Capacity, 2016). With an unemployment rate below 5%, the big ‘68 generation facing retirement and the relatively modest size of the new generations taking over, it has become increasingly hard for companies to recruit enough qualified labour. Paradoxically, despite the lack of qualified labour, one third of high-skilled migrants are employed in positions below their qualifications and the unemployment rate among migrants is twice as high as among native Danes (Risberg et al., 2018).

The service industry is a good example of an industry that is challenged by a combination of internationalisation, growth and labour shortages. Almost 30% of train and bus drivers and employees in Denmark’s restaurants and slaughterhouses, and 45% of staff in cleaning companies, are migrants; 20 years ago, the figure was barely 10%. Diversity is thus on the rise in the service sector, where the labour shortage is especially pronounced: 26% of cleaning companies face difficulties in attracting employees. This figure was only 15% in 2014 (Statistics Denmark, 2018; Holck, 2018b).

The increasing tendency to employ migrants has occurred simultaneously with escalating technological and efficiency requirements in the service industry. It is thus not only high-tech industries, but also labour-intensive, low-tech industries like service work that are witnessing automation and professionalisation of jobs: e.g. modern cleaning demands knowledge of technical equipment, materials, chemistry and dosage, techniques for cleaning different surfaces, as well as the social and cultural ability to navigate the host organisation. During the last decade, cleaning has changed from being perceived as unskilled work to a “profession” that is associated with the need for constant upgrading through on-the-job training, education and certification.

To cater for the ‘skills gap’ and attract qualified labour, most companies spend resources on exclusive talent acquisition and retention (Christensen, 2017; Minbaeva & Collings, 2013). This white paper highlights the pressing need to also focus on the talent already in the organisation. This study of ISS Denmark (ISS DK) demonstrates how a highly diverse composition of employees has turned out to be a competitive advantage, drawing on multifaceted business arguments that arise from skilled migrants’ paradoxical positioning: despite predominantly entering the organisation at first-line level, skilled migrants bring supplementary and additional qualifications into the organisation, which has helped to professionalise the service industry. Drawing on the example of ISS DK, this paper discusses the prospects of embracing first-line employees in order to make the ambitions and capabilities of these migrants and other talented employees more prominent through strategic use of inclusive talent management (ITM). ITM will help strengthen the internal pipeline of qualified successors, opening up for a wider pool of internal talent, especially for middle-management positions, which have one of the biggest enrollment needs.
Diversity and inclusive talent management

**HRM strategies of talent management**

While representing one of the fastest-growing areas within the academic discipline of HRM since a ‘war for talent’ was declared in the late 1990s, talent management (TM) remains firmly positioned in the literature as a normative and exclusive practice that targets the development of a small proportion of high-performing and high-potential employees in the upper echelons of the organisation (Minbaeva & Collings, 2013; Sheenan and Anderson, 2015). A definition of talent management forms part of the broader field of HRM and embraces an organisation’s ability to attract, select, develop and retain key employees (Sheenan & Anderson, 2015). Highly talented individuals are identified by organisations based on a variety of characteristics, such as competencies, skills, abilities, experience, knowledge, intelligence, character and drive, or the ability to learn and grow within an organisation (Minbaeva & Collings, 2013). Compared to other organisational human resources, they are supposed to be key strategic resources because they are assumed to have the most important impact on organisational performance and to create competitive advantages for a firm (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Swailes et al., 2014).

However, critical scholars have slated TM for its tendency to show exclusionary interest in ‘superstar’ talent while being unaware of other key organisational stakeholders such as first-line employees and middle managers (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Thus, talent management strategies remain exclusionary and elitist, employing practices that deliberately exclude and separate staff into categorical groups of high and low value (Sheenan & Anderson, 2015). A corollary HRM lingo of ‘super keepers’, ‘A-listers’ and ‘stars’ has emerged, which discards the second-tier experiences of most organisational members: the ‘non-talented’ (Swailes, 2013). This has raised an ethical critique of the creation of an ‘elite’ group among employees with dehumanising effects due to the lack of care for the allegedly ‘non-talented’ members within the organisation (Sheenan and Anderson, 2015). Critical research problematises how talent management excludes individuals who are in the lower ranks of the organisation, segregating the organisation into an A and B team, often with gendered, aged and racial overtones (Holck, 2017, 2018c; Swailes et al., 2014).

In practice, an elitist, performance-driven approach to TM excludes individuals who are in the lower ranks of the organisation, such as technical or operational workers and middle managers, whose ability to advance receives little attention in the organisation. Consequently, the organisation might lose out on opportunities to develop people who could have played key roles in areas such as process and product innovation, technical expertise, and management (Aten et al., 2016). Another line of criticism is the inclination of performance-driven TM to look externally for talent instead of paying greater attention to internal talent: Disregarding, how leadership or specialist talent is just as likely to be present in those employees working their way through the organisation as managers hired from outside the organisation (Al Ariss et al., 2014). A third line of criticism is a debate on organisational justice and the ethical implications of TM, as well as linking TM to employee engagement and organisational justice (Sheehan & Anderson, 2015).
Towards inclusive talent management

Critical HRM researchers distinguish between exclusive-elitist and inclusive all-embracing talent management. Exclusive-elitist TM refers to talent initiatives that only target high-potential and high-performing employees, who are often recruited externally. The inclusive talent management (ITM) approach, on the other hand, targets all potential employees, based on a strength-based approach to talent management (Al Ariss et al., 2014). ITM is thus linked to opportunity via participation – rather than meeting a preset threshold that reflects an organisational vision of talent – which also marks a shift from performance-driven to learning-oriented talent management (Holck et al., forthcoming; Swailes et al., 2014).

ITM perceives talent as including everyone in the organisation, seeing every employee as having his or her own strengths (and weaknesses), and has the potential to create added value for the organisation: ITM captures the value of the entire workforce, not just a few ‘superstars’ (Swailes et al., 2014). ITM is believed to benefit the organisation by bringing about a more pleasant, collegial and motivating working climate by treating everyone as equals, striving for more equal distribution of resources and possibilities across all employees rather than a subset of elite performers (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). While several structurally and culturally mediated factors, such as gender and national background, are seen to be implicated in the seemingly subjective criteria involved in an exclusive-elitist TM, ITM might have the potential to sidestep these factors, as talent is seen to potentially reside in every employee: talent is not something you possess per se (a trait), but something that can be nurtured and developed through participation and motivation (Offermann & Basford, 2014; Swailes et al., 2014). ITM has been criticised for creating unnecessarily high costs in terms of HR investments and problems of definitory challenges in identifying talent (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). By looking at the example of ISS DK, this white paper illustrates how this criticism linked to ITM might be outweighed by the benefits that ITM brings to the organisation.
We studied a highly diverse organisation, ISS DK, which is a service organisation whose core business is facility management. ISS DK is a superdiverse organisation characterised by a high numerical representation of diversity in terms of gender, age, cultural background, citizenship and immigrant history in Denmark, educational background, work experience inside and outside Denmark, language skills, tenure in the company, etc. – characteristics that we also refer to as features of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007). This study draws on ethnographic fieldwork carried out over a period of two years, during which the researcher worked together with (was trained as a new employee) and visited 30 teams all over Denmark, and shadowed their first-line managers (from April 2016 to June 2018). The identities of all the participants have been anonymised.

Employee composition in ISS DK has changed radically over the past 30 years, especially in terms of gender, cultural, and educational background: the percentage of employees with a migrant background has increased from 2% in 1991 to 50% in 2018. ISS DK employ people from 118 countries and in 2016 16% of the leaders had migrant background. Males, especially with a migrant background, have changed the traditional image of the service industry as female dominated and males now make up 50% of employees. When it comes to educational background, migrants have different qualifications and skills compared to their Danish colleagues: 22.4% of employees with a migrant background have either a middle-level or higher education, compared to only 9.1% of employees with a Danish background. However, 45% of employees with a Danish background have vocational training, while this is only 17% of migrants. Hence, together, they represent supplementary and different skills and qualifications.

TM initiatives have long been on the agenda in ISS DK. E.g., ISS DK has co-founded the ISS Global Management Training Programme, which was launched in 2012. This is an example of a more exclusive-elitist talent programme, which annually enrols approximately 40 newly graduated and externally recruited individuals across 20 countries (three in Denmark). The exclusive 18-month programme aims at training talented leaders “to develop a pipeline of managers capable of leading the transformation of ISS”, as the trainees will eventually perform the role of a key account manager (level three).

Most recently, ISS DK also introduced customised development packages for white-collar employees, who in the given year have been reviewed as ‘high potential’ in a People Review matrix. ITM initiatives will thus supplement and enlarge the current talent approach in ISS DK by targeting employees in blue-collar positions.
One of the big advantages that a diverse company like ISS DK reaps is the many qualifications, abilities, professional experiences and educational backgrounds that a superdiverse group of employees brings to the organisation. There are many stories of high-skilled migrants working in ISS DK, who have backgrounds in professions like engineering, law, HRM, business or hotel management, public administration, tourism, pharmacology, construction, research, teaching, etc. Most start in first-line positions, as one canteen manager explains: “I have had a lot of employees with a refugee background and most of them were highly educated, for instance a university teacher from Nepal.” Another service manager recounts: “I have had some doctors who couldn’t use their profession in Denmark because of the language.”

However, some of them do manage to make a career in ISS DK. One is Piotr, an IT manager from Hungary, who has been working with ISS DK for 10 years and currently works as a service manager (cleaning):

I am responsible for approximately 250 locations in two municipalities. I have 140 full- and part-time employees in my department, two assisting service managers referring directly to me, and 20 supervisors. ISS was not my ‘dream job’, but it was the job I could get, as I did not speak Danish when I first arrived in Denmark. But I grew increasingly fond of ISS, my colleagues and customers, and I have not looked for another job for the past 10 years. The first few years I studied Danish in the evening, because I know that Danish is key to a career in ISS. This is what I tell my employees with migrant background. I started as a janitor, but very quickly I was promoted, first to assistant and then to supervisor. After completing the ISS service manager training, I was promoted to service manager. My goal is to make my department grow even bigger and become a key account manager.

Many of the high-skilled first-line managers tell us how their educational backgrounds and professional skills have improved their daily work. Omar, for instance, has a BA in engineering from India: “There is a lot of registration on the computer, different systems to navigate and smarter ways to structure work technologically. I often help my own key account manager with this kind of work.” Another manager, Arwa, used to be a tourist guide in Tunesia, and she finds that she can use her knowledge of service and people in general in her current job in terms of both meeting customers’ demands and working with her employees. Third, Roy, worked as a lawyer and was studying HRM before he came to Denmark from Syria, and this combination is highly useful when working with contracts as well as daily management.

It is not only managers who have a migrant background but also their leaders, like site manager Karen, who praises the new skills among her first-line managers with a migrant background:

One of my managers has an engineering background from Belarus. He is so well structured, so much in control of everything, keeping everything in Excel spreadsheets. Another manager has worked in tax administration in Romania. She knows exactly how to follow all procedures and is quick to learn new administrative routines.
Migrants often possess specialised and relevant professional knowledge; many have prior managerial experience; and they can be multilingual, mastering up to seven languages. These are great leadership qualifications, as leadership in ISS DK requires the ability to navigate modern management systems, technological knowledge, and the capacity for intercultural communication with superdiverse groups of customers and employees. Migrants therefore offer new, valuable qualifications, supplementing the qualifications of their Danish colleagues at first-line level (who predominantly have a vocational background). Then many new qualifications and employee profiles open up the organisation for new talents, like Lise, who stopped her training as a police officer to pursue a leadership career in ISS DK. This mix of professional knowledge and working experiences that all the employees in ISS DK offers, is highly fertile for the organisation, when striving to meet the pressing demands of increasing professionalisation, technologisation and efficiency that characterise the service industry.
Diversity expands leadership capabilities and strengthens the pipeline

Apart from their professional knowledge, a superdiverse group of employees bring new leadership capabilities into the organisation. Several colleagues highlight the benefit of migrants’ knowledge of working conditions and the relevant tasks at first-line level, as this is the most common entry point for migrants in ISS DK:

These leaders [with a migrant background] care about their employees and they are driven by the fact that they want to do their work well, and they want to keep their employees, which is also part of doing the work well. They tend to spend a lot of time reaching out to their employees to accommodate their needs and wishes. They show empathy and can take the position of their employees. Because they have been there, in the exact same position and in the same situation: as new in Denmark.

Abdu, a site manager, illustrates how his career in ISS DK – starting as a first-line employee – has developed his leadership skills:

We need leaders who think ‘employee first’. Leaders who think, “Okay, if I’m going to make sure Aisha is doing well, what do I do? I know she has two children and she has high rent. I know she cannot afford a, b, c. What can I do for her? Oh, I can give all my employees breakfast. Then she saves seven kroner each day. How can I boost her motivation? By giving her responsibility.” That’s how I want my leaders to think. I am not in favour of micromanagement and control, of leaders who think they could do the job better than their employees.

Migrants – like their colleagues with a Danish background – can demonstrate more or less excellent leadership behaviour. However, their sheer number and the valuable qualifications that especially high-skilled migrants bring to ISS DK, make them a promising group to develop in order to strengthen the pipeline of competent successors according to many of their colleagues: “Good management? Yes, I think [leaders with migrant background] are good leaders. They are some of the leaders of tomorrow.” Another site manager, Jens, expands on this point:

Some of the new types of leaders are very knowledgeable and diligent, and they know how to navigate interculturally. They have something to fight for because they all want climb the career ladder. And some of them do indeed have the qualifications to do so. Of course, they can be challenged in terms of command of Danish and not knowing the culture that well. But what counts is their enthusiasm and intellect.

Apart from supplementary qualifications and knowledge of first-line work expanding the leadership capability base in ISS DK, high-skilled migrants are also ambitious about a career in ISS. But it is not always easy to navigate the promotion system in a large organisation like ISS DK. Many employees and middle-managers ask for more transparency in relation to and guidance on what it takes to be developed for and move to new positions vertically as well as horizontally in the organisation. Apart from transparency, another problem is the identification of talent, which seems to happen arbitrarily. Anna, a service manager, recounts:
By coincidence I found out that one of my employees, well, she used to have her own telemarketing agency in Pakistan and was manager of 30 employees. We need to be much better at spotting and developing this kind of talent to strengthen our pipeline of successors.

The new and supplementary qualifications that skilled migrants at first-line level bring to ISS DK have expanded the leadership qualifications available in ISS DK. A more inclusive identification of what the necessary competences are for leadership positions, has been established: The traditional focus on education and professional experiences must extended to include multilingualism, intercultural intelligence and experience from non-Danish workplaces. This has carved the way for a new and unprecedented focus on career opportunities and talent development for first-line staff in ISS DK. These are initiatives that are furthermore meant to create the much-needed transparency in terms of career possibilities in ISS DK to help all employees navigate the development and promotion processes.

Summing up, the superdiverse group of employees in ISS not only offers supplementary and relevant qualifications in terms of educational and professional backgrounds. They also have diverse working experiences, career trajectories and lifestories. Together these factors make up a synergy of skills that enlarge the leadership capability pool in ISS and strengthens successor pipelines with a wider pool of talents to draw on.
Implementing inclusive talent management

With the mindset that every employee possesses a potential, and to cater for the need to identify, motivate and develop diverse and talented employees at all levels of the organisation, ISS DK has established a holistic talent agenda called ‘Great Potential’. ‘Great Potential’ unifies existing TM initiatives and the new ITM initiatives to ensure that ISS DK will always have a pipeline of qualified candidates. Under the heading ‘Great Potential’, ISS DK will initiate three new ITM initiatives in 2018/19: Grow Your Potential, a mentorship programme and initiatives to create more transparent career paths.

Grow Your Potential
Grow Your Potential offers training through participation, building on the philosophy that talent is not a trait of a few privileged ‘superstars’, but something that can be nurtured and developed in every employee. Grow Your Potential is an initiative that runs alongside the existing management trainee programme and the ‘high-potential’ programme, which are both for white-collar employees in ISS DK. Grow Your Potential is relevant for all employees at all levels of ISS DK; however, the need to create a pipeline of successors is most pressing at the first-line managerial level. Grow Your Potential thus primarily targets the 86% of employees working at first-line level in blue-collar positions as employees or middle-managers. Combining Grow Your Potential, the management trainee programme and the ‘high-potential’ initiatives will ensure a more holistic talent approach in ISS DK.

Figure three: Impact of ITM and Grow Your Potential

Employee satisfaction, attraction and retention of first-line employees; transparent careers and more advancement from bottom to top; efficient use of internal competence and leadership development.
Middle-managers on behalf of a potential candidate or the employees themselves can apply to participate in Grow Your Potential. Grow Your Potential will entail courses and on-the-job training of potential participants. This will be supplemented by leadership courses that already exist in ISS DK.

In addition, existing leaders must be motivated not only to lead employees, but to lead future leaders and their successor: leaders must be made aware of their responsibility to nurture, develop and motivate talented employees to pursue a career in ISS DK (see Holck and Andersen, 2017a, 2017b). Grow Your Potential then creates a wider pool of talented employees, who expand the internal pipeline of successors, who are ready to seize vacant leadership positions. An ITM programme like Grow Your Potential sends a strong signal about the organisational value of employees, to the benefit of employee engagement and retention. Grow Your Potential differentiates ISS DK from its competitors and will help ISS DK win the ‘war for talent’ by attracting qualified and ambitious candidates.

Mentorship programme
Employees, who get promoted and face new challenges can benefit from advice and guidance from experienced leaders. Grow Your Potential is supplemented by the offer to get a mentor, who can provide guidance about career changes and new opportunities. The mentors are leaders (preferably KAMs and site managers, see figure one) and in a different business unit than the employee, to broaden the potential's/mentee's network. The mentor–mentee relationship strengthens leadership development among mentors and mentees: while mentee’s can draw on the mentor’s experience and guidance, then mentors acquire detailed information about the kind of capabilities employees at first-line level possess and how they can be utilised. Mentors furthermore act as role models and ambassadors for diversity and inclusion in ISS DK.

Transparent career paths
The last initiative within ITM is to make career paths more transparent in ISS DK. This involves making the skills and experiences necessary to achieve a particular position clear, accessible and visible. Making career paths transparent and visible is especially important in ISS DK, as more than 95% of employees in ISS DK work on a customer location. This means that access and daily exposure to corporate information is limited due to geographical distance to ISS DK office in Søborg. Hence, visibility of career paths is a matter of mapping out all possible career paths in ISS DK as well as effectively distributing information about this (see figure four). The formulation of performance demands and making career paths visible is supplemented by the circulation of internal career stories, to motivate and inspire employees to make cross-organisational and even unconventional careers.

Information to ensure transparent career paths will be made available on a careers website that is accessible to both internal and external candidates. Launching transparent career path initiatives serves to retain and develop current employees, strengthening the internal pipeline of successors. The ambition is to motivate current
employees not only to aim for the traditional vertical career paths, but to go beyond and consider horizontal career paths in other segments of the company, specialist positions, etc. Finally, transparent career paths are meant to attract external qualified candidates to seek opportunities in ISS DK.

Figure four: Example of possible career path in ISS DK for a service employee in cleaning. Notice the light bubbles indicate a role requiring formal training (vocational training or in Danish Erhvervsuddannelse).
Conclusion - Towards inclusive management

This study of ISS Denmark demonstrates how a highly diverse group of employees has turned out to be a competitive advantage for the company. The synergy created by combining the supplementary qualifications and working experiences of a diverse workforce has helped ISS DK to meet the demands of increasing professionalisation and efficiency that characterise the service industry. Through launching new ITM initiatives under the heading of ‘Great Potential’, ISS DK strives to develop and nurture this pool of internal talent at all levels of the organisation. In addition, the ambitions is to increase the number of leaders with diverse backgrounds. ITM initiatives primarily targets the 86% of employees working at first-line level in blue-collar positions as employees or middle-managers: This group of employees are not covered by the exiting talent initiatives in ISS DK and the need to create a pipeline of successors is most pressing at the first-line managerial level.

ITM in ISS DK has several organisational benefits:

Firstly, the ITM initiative Grow Your Potential embraces all employees in ISS DK as possible participants – as they all have the potential to develop, if they have the motivation to do so. This creates added value for the organisation by capturing and upgrading the value of the entire workforce.

Secondly, ITM creates awareness of talent at all levels of the organisation and expands leadership priorities, especially at first-line level. Consequently, ISS DK focuses on management’s responsibility to identify, develop and promote diverse talents among first-line employees (Holck and Andersen, 2017a, 2017b). ITM initiatives will thus expand leadership capacities to nurture and motivate talented employees.

Thirdly, ITM initiatives support the chance for ambitious, talented employees to build
a career in ISS DK. Not only does this generate loyalty and retention by sending out a strong corporate signal to all employees about their value to the organisation. This also helps ISS DK save resources on employee turnover and recruitment. ITM furthermore strengthens successor pipelines by enrolling a wider pool of internal qualified candidates, who are ready to seize new opportunities in ISS DK. Finally, it is predicted that ITM will help ISS DK win the fight for talented individuals and attract an ambitious group of qualified external candidates to fill vacancies.

All in all, this study documents how making the ambitions and the capabilities of all the employees – including high-skilled migrants – more prominent through strategic use of ITM that targets first-line employees will benefit the development of employees, leadership and ISS DK as a business.

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**Figure six: Goals for the future of ITM**

- **Inclusive talent management program supplemented by ISS management education**
- **Evaluation and promotion criteria should be closely examined for any sign of bias**
- **Leadership teams at all levels should represent differences in ethnicity, gender, age, educational background and personal profile**
- **Promote internal communication channels to increase transparency and awareness of career opportunities across ISS**
- **Awareness of talents in the pipeline and the progress of the ITM program among top-management, including mentorship and promotion**
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Company profiles

Copenhagen Business School

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