External mentoring as a talent attraction tool in the talent shortage context

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Abstract

The paper explores the role of external mentoring as a strategic talent attraction tool in the context of talent shortages and describes the ways in which it can help firms to find new candidates, especially among young graduates, at the same time developing its own employees. The authors conducted 21 in-depth interviews with experienced mentors from multinational companies in Russia and one expert interview. Content analysis was used to identify the key themes related to the effectiveness of external mentoring. External mentoring significantly enhances employer branding, knowledge exchange, learning and professional development. The critical components of success are voluntary participation, non-monetary recognition and long-term trust-based relationships between mentors and mentees. The paper also identifies the challenges that external mentoring may encounter and essential criteria for selecting mentors and mentees. The authors conceptualize external mentoring as a novel approach to talent attraction extending beyond internal employee development. The study provides fresh insights into resolving talent shortages and creating external talent pools, thus contributing to talent management and mentoring literature.

Introduction

Globalization, demographic changes and talent mobility have intensified competition for highly skilled labor, particularly in emerging economies, the BRICS countries included (Burzynski et al., 2020; Ewers et al., 2022; Suk Kim & Kotchegura, 2017; Van den Broek et al., 2018). Russia, as one of the BRICS countries, faces significant challenges in talent management (TM) and attraction (TA) because of the brain drain and general talent supply shortage (Foong & Lim, 2010; Latukha et al., 2022). According to Latukha et al. (2022), the outflow of highly skilled talents from Russia is on the rise as they seek better educational sources, careers, and opportunities for professional development. Bargujara et al. (2025)s points out that the current intensification of brain drain from Russia has affected its ranking in the global market. Talent shortages limit organizational resilience to turbulent business environments (Ugboego et al., 2022).

Talent workers are those who can make a difference in organizational performance through their contribution or high level of potential they have demonstrated over the long term (Tansley et al., 2007). They are an immensely valuable resource that drives organizations to achieve sustainable advantage and organizational success (Latukha et al., 2022). From an inclusive perspective, all individuals have the potential to become talented (Iles et al., 2010; Mousa et al., 2023). TM aims to develop them and enhance their performance through a set of practices, including talent identifying, attracting, developing, and retaining (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). TA is the starting point of TM, referring to the strategies and approaches that firms use to attract, invite, and recruit new talent to enhance their value proposition (Nicholas, 2021). It is one of organizational core capabilities that has become a top priority for organization leaders (Magbool et al., 2016). Effective TA tools enable companies to attract enough talent, be resilient, and therefore improve the dynamic capability of organizations to tackle challenges (Ugboego et al., 2022).

Today, firms are facing significant TA-related challenges. First, TA initiatives are easily benchmarked and copied, which requires firms to consistently explore more innovative and effective TA instruments to increase their competitiveness in the employer market (Chenkovich & Cates, 2016). Given the aging workforce (Turek & Henkens, 2020) and unequal distribution of talent supply worldwide (Burzynski et al., 2020), the risk of a "massive loss of collective skills and experience" is very high, and it further intensifies the fierce competition in the war for talent (Mupepi, 2017, p. 35).

It is therefore necessary to reconsider the approaches to working with the dynamic employee priorities and abilities (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Mupepi, 2017). We argue that the mentoring technique used beyond its traditional function of internal employee development can become a new TA instrument and an effective long-term investment (McIntyre & Hobson, 2016; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). To explore the role of external mentoring, we discuss the relationship between university students as mentees and successfully working alumni as their mentors. Such external mentoring

activities tend to enhance the appeal of mentors' companies and attract talented candidates (Cadorin et al., 2021).

Mentoring as an external talent attraction tool

TA's crucial element is communicating precisely to acquire a target group of talents. Firms need to send out signals to build a positive image among potential employees; in other words, create the employer brand (Ewerlin, 2013; Manoharan et al., 2023; Rajkumar et al., 2015; Tsai, 2017) to boost their attractiveness (Amelia & Nasution, 2016; Manoharan et al., 2023; Reis & Braga, 2016; Sokro, 2012). Connecting with students through alumni significantly increases the visibility and attractiveness of a firm among students and helps organizations create their own external talent pool (Minocha et al., 2017; Panagiotidou & Mihail, 2024; Rajkumar et al., 2015). Such connections can be forged through mentoring activities.

Mentoring is a technique for developing in-house talent (Abbott-Anderson et al., 2016; Egan & Song, 2008; Hu et al., 2016; Martini & Cavenago, 2017; McIntyre & Hobson, 2016). Inzer and Crawford (2005) describe mentoring as a relationship between mentor and mentee or protégé. The crucial factors of success here are the involvement and enthusiasm of the two people, one of whom may shape opinions and ideas of the other. Recent studies emphasize that workplace mentoring contributes to the employees' professional development and enhances talents' personal well-being (Falzon, 2023). However, the role of external mentoring in TM remains underexplored.

External mentoring (Langdon, 2014; Langdon & Ward, 2015; McIntyre & Hobson, 2016; Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005) as a TA tool can bring significant benefits to organizations if appropriately implemented because it responds to the current trends and demands of the business environment, takes into account expectations of new generations, promotes employer brand, differentiates a firm from its competitors in the labor market and provides a mutually beneficial experience for both potential employee and organization (Martini & Cavenago, 2017; Panagiotidou & Mihail, 2024; Schuster et al., 2017). For instance, Allen and O'Brien (2006) examine the effects of formal mentoring programs on potential applicants' attraction to organizations and conclude that the presence of a mentoring program increases organizational attraction. Some researchers explore how external mentoring programs affect the pre-hire processes and point out the implications of successful mentoring programs (Horvath et al., 2008). Mentees, seen as potential new employees, are more attracted to the companies that offer mentoring programs with individual mentors (Horvath et al., 2008). Maras et al. (2024) maintain that external mentoring programs can be a response to the high attrition rates among early-career teachers. External mentors, acting as a bridge between universities and schools, can help break down the barriers between these two environments and provide early-career teachers with emotional support, career planning advice, teaching resources, and classroom management skills. The

potential for transferring application scenarios of external mentoring to the realms of businesses and universities remains a subject that warrants further exploration. This type of mentoring can help a firm acquire necessary competencies as it goes beyond organizational borders and is oriented towards external talents who are not yet employed by the organization.

The present study regards TA as a tool of talent management. Mentoring, which has traditionally been considered a way of talent development within organization, is posited to be a tool of talent attraction. The first research question is formulated as follows:

RQ 1: What makes mentoring a TA tool for organizations?

Mentoring process components influencing talent attraction

While the benefits gained by a mentee appear to be obvious, their mentor's perspective is unclear and as such receives researchers' attention (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Ragins et al., 2024). Mentors are defined as more senior individuals who provide various kinds of psycho-social and career support to a younger or less experienced person in the role of a mentee (Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Smith-Jentsch et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2023). Employees choose to become mentors driven by different motives, which determine different outcomes. According to social exchange principles, individuals engage in relationships that they think are rewarding (Janssen et al., 2014; Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2017). Following this logic, mentors are more willing to mentor others if they expect mentoring to bring benefits rather than negative emotions, drawbacks or obstacles. However, obligations in the mentoring process may lead to a formal communication between the mentor and mentee without sufficient emotional connectedness. Moreover, in different kinds of mentoring relationships, mentors and mentees may differ in their level of commitment to the process (Scandura & Williams, 2001). Inzer and Crawford (2005) explain the idea of mentoring by specifying mentoring components, i.e. mentor and mentee, their unique relationship, and the atmosphere in which they operate. It requires a sufficient amount of mentors' effort and time. If a mentor does not allocate enough time and enthusiasm, the talent of the protégé will not be developed to its full potential (Ortiz-Walters & Fullick, 2015).

Mentoring is a natural process that comes from willingness to participate in such a relationship and usually has a long-term orientation. Mentors are likely to offer several types of career development to a mentee, or protégé, engage in positive social interactions (Allen et al., 2006; Egan & Song, 2008; Inzer & Crawford, 2005) and create more intensive knowledge transfer, partly based on emotional and informal communication (Egan & Song, 2008), thus ensuring a closer connection between protégé and the firm in terms of branding and onboarding. In this study, we are concerned with the components of mentoring as a TA tool and ask the second question:

RQ 2: What are the components of external mentoring as a TA tool?

Methodology

Data collection

The data collection process was explorative and proceeded through five phases: (1) analysis of the available secondary data about mentoring practices in multinational companies in Russia; (2) a pilot face-to-face interview with an expert who works as a human resource and TM manager for a multinational company at a local office in Russia; the aim of this interview was to verify the questionnaire's structure and content and formulate sharper and more precise research questions; (3) selection of respondents through coordinators of mentoring programs for Saint Petersburg State University and Moscow State University; (4) semi-structured in-depth interviews with respondents; and (5) one additional interview with an expert and professional coach who specializes in internal corporate mentoring in order to get an informed view of the research results and clarify possible inconsistencies in the analysis.

The 21 interviews (one interview with one mentor) conducted during the data collection phase provided a solid basis for analysis (Bekele & Ago, 2022). The respondents were recommended by coordinators of mentoring programs at Saint Petersburg State University or Moscow State University; the main selection criterion was their participation in the programs. The selected mentors were to be working for a multinational company in Russia, mentoring at least two students and have mentorship experience of at least three years. During this stage, we sought to achieve an in-depth understanding of the mentoring phenomenon. The interview guide comprised the following sections: (1) background information; (2) mentoring experience; (3) internal corporate mentoring; (4) talent management processes and practices; (5) peculiarities of the mentoring communication between students and successfully employed alums; (6) external mentoring as a talent attraction tool. Respondents could leave appropriate comments and recommendations to improve their ideas and share any additional thoughts on the issue. The open-ended questions were complemented with multiple-choice and ranking-type questions.

This five-phase research process allowed us to gather and evaluate various kinds of empirical evidence from several sources, which enabled data triangulation to guarantee the reliability of conclusions (Elo et al., 2014). The triangulation was possible thanks to sufficient numbers of informants at different phases of data collection, identical interview questions and crosschecked information throughout the research process. For research purposes, the respondents were numbered from 1 to 21 to assure anonymity and confidentiality. Data saturation was reached after interviewing respondent #18; the inferred themes comprised value, content, process, voluntary basis, recognition, challenges, emotions, selection of mentee and selection of mentor.

Data analysis

Data analysis began with content analysis aiming to categorize and structure the data under the theme headings that represented the focal points of this research and correlated with research questions. Each category of data was coded to enable comparisons between responses (Petty et al., 2012; Won & Choi, 2017). First, we formulated two themes, value (1) and components (2), and then components were cascaded and identified as content (2.1), process (2.2), voluntary basis (2.3), recognition (2.4), challenges (2.5), emotions (2.6), selection of mentee (2.7) and selection of mentor (2.8.) as the second level sub-themes.

The verification strategy used in this study is in agreement with Elo et al., and Morse et al., who maintain that validity and reliability of results could be ensured by appropriate sample and methodological coherence (Elo et al., 2014; Morse et al., 2002). Sampling sufficiency can be evidenced by saturation and replication. By definition, replication in categories is ensured by saturating data; replication verifies and guarantees comprehension and completeness of the research (Morse et al., 2002). We analyzed participants' responses using content analysis and distinguished the most pronounced themes related to talent mentoring. In other words, we used an analytical replication technique to determine what constituted talent mentoring according to the obtained case evidence. This technique enabled generalized conclusions (Tsang, 2014). The analysis is based on the assumption that when a finding is detected in more than one case, its generalizability is strengthened (Petty et al., 2012). After completing this stage, the data from the final expert interview and secondary sources were integrated to verify the accuracy of the analysis and validity of the conclusions. Talent mentoring outcomes (value) and components emerged from the data in the course of interview and literature analysis. A selected sample of the respondents' answers is presented with verbatim quotations to ensure the trustworthiness of the results (Elo et al., 2014). Some of the themes intersect or fully coincide with the sub-themes, showing that even when different aspects of a topic were discussed, the same important issues arose. This proves that triangulation was achieved in the study.

Findings

Mentoring as talent attraction

Today, multinational organizations focus on attracting and developing high-potential young graduates. Respondents #7, 11, 15, 18, and 20 said that there could be exceptions to this approach in cases when a company needs to fill senior positions or positions that require particular knowledge of the industry it works in. The most popular tools for attracting high-potential graduates are various development programs such as

leadership development or rotational management trainee programs. As respondent #4 emphasized:

"The quality of skills and knowledge a young graduate possesses is essential in the era of talent scarcity. Case competitions and business games help us quickly detect students with the required skills and attract them."

According to most respondents, many companies face a talent shortage problem. Mentors explain that they see it as a gap in expectations of graduates and companies. The employer expects a young graduate to already possess the required skills and offers an average salary and rather monotonous work. Organizations realize that they need to adjust their packages and offerings to the labor market expectations to remain attractive to talented candidates (Jeske & Olson, 2021). Thus, respondent# 8 said:

"Today's labor market requires organizations to be more flexible in terms of compensation, the benefits they offer, working conditions and remote work communication. They also need to look for new ways of attracting talents."

Respondent #21 described potential outcomes of mentoring:

"I suppose that talent mentoring can be a fantastic TA tool. It can increase the loyalty of young graduates because they see that the company recognizes their potential and is ready to invest in their development. Moreover, talent mentoring reduces the workload for recruiters."

Corporations realize the importance of human capital and are therefore willing to invest in TM practices. Respondent #5 pointed out:

"Companies are ready to assign the task of student mentoring to an employee if they see a clear fit and high potential in a candidate."

Mentoring as a TA practice can also be seen as the employer branding tool, which increases its value for the company. Mentor #15 said:

"In a competitive business environment, organizations put efforts into building a really good and well-recognized employer brand; mentoring definitely contributes to that as it is based on direct collaboration with universities."

An external mentoring practice attracts young, high-potential graduates to an organization and is also good for the staff members. Respondents #1,11 and 15 emphasized that the sheer understanding that their organization provided such opportunity for growth and development was valuable. Respondent #19 said:

"Mentoring can increase the loyalty of employees dramatically. When I shared my experience with the student, I reevaluated my daily work, tasks, and responsibilities and understood how much I enjoy what I do and how grateful I am to my employer."

When a mentee asks for professional advice or evaluation of a project work, this pushes the mentor to expand his knowledge. Respondent #13 said:

"I do not always have ready-made answers for my mentee. Sometimes, I need time to consult with my colleagues. Since I want to help my mentee, I feel motivated to do some research on the topic even if it goes beyond my professional expertise."

Respondent #11 added to that:

"It is hard to acknowledge, but a couple of times I learned new and unexpected facts about the business environment that the student shared with me based on the

results of his project. I just fell in love with the process of mentoring. I not only share my experience, but I also get a lot in return."

Moreover, mentoring is an excellent tool for employees to improve their leadership and communication skills. As respondent #8 explained:

"I find mentoring an advanced tool for developing senior managers. They get to the position when they think that they know pretty much everything, but in our time that's become impossible. Mentoring fosters learning in an engaging way."

Consequently, organizations benefit from a mentoring program in at least two ways: they attract new talent and develop their employees who do the mentoring work. All respondents said they discussed their corporate culture and organizational values and shared what they liked most because mentees were interested in this and asked detailed questions. Respondent #8 said:

"I was surprised that my mentee was so enthusiastic to learn about our corporate culture in the first place but not about the business model or industry. The reasonable explanation for this is that he could read about almost everything on the official website, but culture cannot be described. It should be experienced."

Respondent #6 spoke about even more benefits of mentoring that can be important for organizations:

"I believe that mentoring favors networking, sharing ideas among employees and building trusting relationships between people, knowledge sharing, developing tailor-made career tracks for mentees."

Components of external mentoring as a talent attraction tool

(1) Content

Respondent #19 gives the following definition of mentoring:

"Mentoring refers to the academic and practical project work that [a] mentee does with the help of a mentor, and both of them benefit from this activity."

Respondents #2, 4, 6, 13, and 16 emphasized that mentoring is a unique tool for understanding oneself, both for the mentor and mentee. Respondent #4 stressed:

"When you answer your mentee's questions it may seem at first that you repeat the basics, but if you reflect later on, you start analyzing your professional and personal activities and get a fresh view of things based on the mentee's comments and remarks."

Respondent #11 gave the following definition:

"Mentoring is not counseling. And the most challenging task for a mentor is to understand the difference. The mentor can provide influential ideas, but the last call makes a mentee by himself."

Respondent #20 stated:

"Mentoring is about deep and open relationships between a mentor and mentee. Both are involved in a knowledge-sharing process; they train and educate each other on a constant basis."

Respondent #6 highlighted:

"Mentoring can't be effective without career development prospects and strong willingness to develop. The mentor and the mentee should understand its value first."

The findings illustrate that mentoring cannot be standardized because the content of the practice highly depends on the participants' view and understanding of the work.

(2) Process

Mentoring requires mutual trust and commitment. It is a long-term relationship that evolves and matures over time. Interviewee #7 said:

"It is not about one meeting over coffee to have fun and a nice chat. It goes beyond that. It is a separate pair-work long-term project with particular phases. The process can flow and can have some difficulties while moving from one stage to another."

As respondents ##1, 10, 12, and 17 pointed out, firstly, a mentor needs to understand what the mentee wants and explain what can be achieved and what cannot. The interaction starts with personal introductions, followed by the talk about professional stuff. According to respondents ##5, 6 and 11, the most important thing for the mentor is to express opinion but not impose it on the mentee. It's ok for both to hold or change their positions.

(3) Voluntary basis

The most crucial feature of the proper mentoring is its voluntary nature. Both participants should feel that they really need it and be willing to work together. Our findings are in line with those obtained by Parise and Forret (2008). From the mentors' perspective, as respondents #6, 11, 17, and 20 observed, after working for several years in the industry an employee may acquire sufficient experience and knowledge of this industry and feel like sharing it with the younger generation. This means mentors have an internal impulse to help and assist a student's growth. They may also have the need to be respected and valued by juniors. In academic literature (e.g., Janssen et al., 2014), such motives were identified as self-focused. Mentees should be motivated by their desire to learn, to improve specific skills, and to get professional opinions about certain issues. Only with this motivation will they get the most out of their communication with a mentor. Respondent #1 added:

"Forcing participants to be involved in [a] mentoring process can ruin the whole program and negatively affect their attitudes to such initiatives. It should be built on engagement and personal desire to generate positive emotions and other benefits."

(4) Recognition

All respondents agreed that acknowledgment should be non-monetary. Respondent #3 explained what most probably will occur when a company introduces monetary motivation for being a mentor:

"As soon as the company offers financial bonuses for mentoring activity, some employees agree to be mentors pursuing financial benefit but not their own urge to help others and develop professionally."

Respondent #14 emphasized:

"Mentoring comes from your heart. For the mentor, it is about what you want to do. People who pursue financial rewards or promotions should not get involved in mentoring. They should do it based on their internal wish to do so."

Respondent #18 observes that mentors generally are senior staff members with a high, sufficient salary and, consequently, value non-monetary rewards. Respondent #10 gave examples of non-financial rewards:

"Non-monetary rewards which have high emotional appeal are the most suitable way to recognize the mentoring activity of an employee. They can vary from a public thank you at an annual meeting to a certificate of merit for developing and raising young talents to a holiday package tour."

According to the literature on external mentoring, mentees as new employees are more committed to the organizations that offer voluntary mentoring programs than to those with compulsory ones (Horvath et al., 2008). Non-financial rewards can satisfy employees because they make them feel appreciated and valued members of their organizations. The voluntary character of mentoring is its core value; acknowledgment from the company is an effective motivational instrument.

(5) Challenges

External mentoring as a TA tool involves a number of challenges. The interviewed mentors identified those they faced and suggested ways to overcome them. Many respondents emphasized the importance of relationships and trust between mentor and mentee as it enables them to talk frankly about the difficulties they are having. This is indeed necessary for the success of the program. The most discussed challenge is evaluating results because it is important for further program development (Abbott-Anderson et al., 2016). Respondents #4, 7, 9, and 19 stressed that not only participants of the mentoring program should know about the process, but other employees as well, in case they wish to get involved. Participants require organizational support and coordination to stay motivated and remain on the right track. Respondents #1, 10, 15, and 17 emphasized that in some organizations implementing external mentoring programs requires preparation. It may take some time for TM managers to communicate the value and mission of mentoring to employees. Companies that already have internal mentoring programs are more likely to quickly integrate external practice into their culture (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2005). Respondent #21 said:

"Employees who work in organizations that foster internal corporate mentoring are already aware of the initial value of mentoring, understand benefits for themselves, and are used to such activities."

External mentoring programs may also be less successful because of low level of employer brand, insufficient TM development, formalized training for participants, imposed guidelines on the frequency of meetings and choice of learning materials, formalistic recognition of achievements, and unreasonable amounts of time spent on mentoring.

(6) Emotions

Respondent #7 described his feelings:

"Every time I talk to my mentee, I feel a rush of vivacity."

Respondent #4 explained less succinctly:

"When I see that my mentee every time comes with new questions, motivated to learn more, I feel that my professionalism is recognized and valued. I feel that I achieved something in my life."

Employees who are involved in mentoring have the opportunity to improve their leadership and counseling skills. They find mentoring a rewarding experience in terms of self-development (Zhang et al., 2023). Therefore, they feel more valuable and satisfied with their work, which certainly benefits the organization (Gentry et al., 2008; Ghosh & Reio, 2013). The theme of emotions illustrates that mentoring induces positive emotions both in the mentor and mentee.

(7) Selection of mentee

We have found that clear goals of the program and mentees' motivation to work in the mentor's company are the most significant factors affecting mentee selection, so they are recognized as sub-themes.

Selecting a right candidate for the mentee role is extremely important as it lowers the risk that the mentee will not apply for a position after completing the mentoring program. When a student knows exactly why he or she is interested in a particular company and what he or she expects from the future employer, it is easier for human resource (HR) managers to evaluate their fit for the program. Goal and result-orientated students deliver better results. When a student is determined, it is easier for the mentor to set further directions. Respondent #7 said:

"I strongly believe that for a mentee the mentoring process is more beneficial when this mentee knows and understands why he or she participates in the program. Such a mentee is more result-orientated and for me as a mentor, it is easier to work with this person. Our interaction becomes more productive."

HR managers should also consider prospective mentees' personality, willingness to develop, ability to learn, and the rank of their university. For example, respondents #13, 15, 17, 20, and 21 mentioned personality tests as good and helpful instruments for finding the best match for a mentor-mentee pair. Many of the respondents said that the enthusiasm and motivation of a mentee are the key drivers of the mentoring relationship.

(8) Selection of mentor

When an organization chooses an employee to be a mentor, the most important factors mentioned by respondents are willingness to participate voluntarily and job satisfaction. Voluntary participation was discussed above and arose again as a sub-theme. Mentor #11 said:

"In our company at the moment, we apply mentoring only internally. Application was open and there were actually more employees who volunteered to be mentors for newcomers than there were new staff members."

It demonstrates that mentors see other benefits for themselves than monetary recognition and are willing to participate. Job satisfaction is highly important, as Respondent #12 stated:

"I am satisfied with my job and with my employer. Consciously or unconsciously, I share my satisfaction with others, and they get a very positive image of what my company is about."

The overall findings can be found in Table.

Table. External mentoring for TA: Findings

Mentoring conditions (theme 2 and sub-themes)	
Recognition	Non-monetary basis
Voluntary basis	Internal impulse from a mentor A mentee's desire to learn
Emotions	Mentee's and mentor's inclusion
Challenges	Lack of contribution from a mentee Mentee does not prepare for meetings Mentor's workload Evaluation of results Communication process Employer brand and TM development Training for participants Frequency of meetings Formal recognition
Mentoring process (theme 2 and sub-themes)	
Content	The unique nature of mentorship Mentorship through ideas and knowledge sharing
Mentor and mentee selection	Mentee's motivation Voluntary participation of a mentor
Interactions	Long-term relationship Communication
Outcomes (theme 1)	
External mentoring outcomes	Employer branding Knowledge exchange and transfer Enhancing learning and development

Discussion and conclusion

Mentoring as a development tool significantly contributes to firms' results (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021) but the existing challenges may necessitate a search for new TA techniques (Allen et al., 2006; Horvath et al., 2008). Our study introduces the concept of external mentoring as a fresh approach to TA and identifies the key components of its success. Unlike traditional internal mentoring programs, external mentoring involves partnerships between companies and external entities, primarily universities. We conducted content analysis of the data from in-depth interviews with experienced mentors working for multinational companies in Russia. The results show that employing external mentoring as a TA tool not only helps improve the employer brand to attract new talents (Panagiotidou & Mihail, 2024) but also enhances employee loyalty, professional knowledge, leadership and communication skills, and understanding of corporate culture (Zhang et al., 2023). At the organizational level, it promotes knowledge-sharing within companies and contributes to trusting relationships among employees.

External mentorship emphasizes sharing ideas and knowledge between mentors and mentees when both parties benefit from the relationship. Our findings show that they tend to grow professionally and have positive emotions in this long-term and adjustable process. Non-monetary incentives and voluntary basis are important conditions of effective mentoring. We have also identified the challenges associated with employing external mentoring as a TA tool. These may include lack of contribution from a mentee, insufficient preparation for meetings, mentors' excessive workload, improper evaluation of results, difficulties in communication, unpopular employer brand, low levels of TM development and training programs, and unsatisfactory attitude to mentoring relationships.

We assert that the right choice of both participants is a crucial element of talent mentoring as it determines the success of the whole program. The mentee's motivation and the mentor's voluntary participation are important selection criteria.

Theoretical contributions

Our findings contribute to both mentoring and TM literature. By presenting the external mentoring framework, we conceptualize the different applications for external mentoring (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Our conclusions follow Allen and O'Brien (2006) in broadening the scope of mentoring research beyond internal organizational borders. Mentoring creates a talent pool, and recruiters can start looking for the right candidates among the students involved in mentoring. The paper also explains how organizations can benefit from implementing external mentoring programs.

Second, our results develop the concept of TA and TM by broadening the scope of mechanisms to acquire talents (Schuler et al., 2011; Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Thunnissen et al., 2013). The study identifies the factors that determine success of external mentoring as a TA tool and thus expands the understanding of organizational

attractiveness for talented potential employees in today's business environment. Since TM and TM practices are generally considered important for organizational resilience (Ugboego et al., 2022), external mentoring as a TA and TM tool deserves special attention because it may enhance the resilience of mentors and mentees and therefore the strength of the whole organization. The present paper looks into the nature of this management practice thus enlarging the literature on factors of resilience.

Third, our study has found that one of the key reasons for talent shortages is the gap in the expectations of graduates and companies. Employers need to explore new TA tools that will help them attract and manage the so-called millennials who differ from the previous generations of workers (e.g., Chenkovich & Cates, 2016; Durocher et al., 2016; Tsai, 2017). We explain the benefits of external mentoring, expanding the previous research into the issue (Eby et al., 2008; Ghosh, 2014; Kao et al., 2014; Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2015; Parise & Forret, 2008; Zhang et al., 2023).

Fourth, the paper proves that mentor and mentee selection are important elements of the talent mentoring process. This is in agreement with Jyoti and Sharma (2017), who emphasized the importance of making the right decisions in selection process. Organizations should carefully choose the best applicants who are willing and have the capabilities to deliver value. Mentoring is more beneficial for the mentee; therefore, they are expected to be responsible for the success of the interaction and its intensity. These align with Jyoti and Sharma's (2017) idea of self-efficacy. Moreover, the selection of mentees can be fitted into Meyers and Van Woerkom's (2014) framework as a tool for exclusive or inclusive approach. Mentoring with exclusive approach refers to choosing a talented, high-performing student as a mentee and then developing this student with a view to subsequent retention (Kamoche & Leigh, 2022). In contrast, according the inclusive approach to mentoring, any individual can take up the mentee role because the inclusive theory states that everyone is talented (Kaliannan et al., 2023). The mentor's main task is to identify mentee's talent, develop it, and find its appropriate application.

Managerial implications

Although all respondents agree that mentoring is a powerful TA tool, organizations do not widely use it for talent development, even internally; the respondents see it as a missed opportunity. By investigating mentoring as a TA tool, we show how to drive TA and employee development through business mentoring programs and highlight the critical points on which HRM and TM professionals should focus when starting an external mentoring program. The paper provides new perspectives for managers in their understanding of TA practices by showing them additional mechanisms of TA related to mentoring. As a result, firms may reconsider the role of mentoring as a development tool for employees within a company, giving it a new value in achieving attraction goals.

However, certain risks have to be considered before starting an external mentoring program, as well as peculiarities related to the company profile and the industry in

which it operates. Respondents agreed that such a program cannot be a universal solution to the problems related to attracting talented graduates. As respondent#9 said:

"Such practices will be widely popular among, for instance, IT, audit, engineering, and healthcare firms. Generally speaking, this tool will be the most beneficial for companies that hire from particular universities and require specific skills that are not taught during lectures."

Finally, the implications of our findings may extend beyond Russia. The other BRICS countries and emerging economies are also facing talent shortages and have to grapple with the need to attract and retain high-potential individuals to support their rapid economic growth. China, for instance, is at a critical stage of economic transformation and upgrading, with an increasing demand for high-quality and innovative talents. Some Chinese companies have realized the importance of cooperation with universities in jointly cultivating talent. An example is Huawei, a famous Chinese company, that promotes cooperation with universities through the platform of the Information Communication Technology (ICT) Academy. By introducing Huawei's advanced ICT technologies and integrating them with the talent development goals and industry job competency requirements, Huawei aims to cultivate composite talents with cross-disciplinary capabilities. The findings of this study should assist in designing suitable external mentoring programs in line with the industry characteristics and talent needs.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Limitations of this research are determined by a relatively small sample size (n=21). Future studies could include a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings. We also suggest that the framework be tested in a longitudinal study to find out the long-term effect of mentoring.

Our studies rely on self-reported data from interviews, which may be subject to biases. Future research could benefit from multiple data sources, including observational data or surveys, to mitigate the potential biases.

We argue that external mentoring as a new TA tool may foster mentors' and mentees' resilience and ultimately organizational resilience. The future studies should empirically test such relationships; the results may assist companies in tackling talent shortages in an increasingly turbulent environment.

The study is based on empirical evidence obtained from companies operating in Russia. This evidence naturally has certain cultural, economic, and educational peculiarities and our findings may not be directly applicable to other countries. Future research may explore the application of external mentoring in other BRICS countries to further validate its effectiveness and adaptability. It would be useful to explore the possibilities of tailoring the external mentoring to the unique cultural, economic, and educational contexts of India, China, Brazil, and South Africa.

Researchers could also explore the potential role of the collaboration between multinational corporations and universities in different countries in preventing the

outflow of domestic talent and attracting international talent to the BRICS countries. International cooperation should take into account, among other things, differences in educational systems, labor markets, and cultural norms. An in-depth analysis of these complex factors may promote the two-way flow of talent, not only to prevent the outflow of domestic talent but also to attract international talent, thereby enhancing the global competitiveness of companies and countries.

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