Talent Management and Public Service Competitiveness in Malaysia
(Pengurusan Bakat dan Daya Saing Perkhidmatan Awam di Malaysia)

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ABSTRACT

Public service organizations in Malaysia must improve their performance and competitiveness to safeguard themselves against the potential negative consequences of their modest decline in these areas. Previous studies have recognized that talent management can significantly influence an organization's performance, but theoretical and empirical research on this relationship remains limited within public service organizations. Therefore, this research aimed to explore and understand the interplay among talent, talent management, and competitiveness within the context of the Malaysian public service sector. Following a qualitative approach, interviews were conducted with 10 Malaysian public servants from the Public Sector Key Position (JUSA) level. The interview transcripts were subsequently analyzed using ATLAS.ti 9 software. The study's findings revealed that talent management and talent constitute a core strategy for competitiveness in the Malaysian public service. Clear definitions of these concepts are vital in facilitating a more profound understanding of this strategy among public service organizations and their stakeholders. Consequently, the refinement and elaboration of definitions are essential to ensure clarity and consensus among all stakeholders, thus preventing confusion and misunderstandings in the future. Lastly, the definition process enables public service organizations to develop more precise definitions based on their specific context and scope.

Keywords: Public service; performance; competitiveness; talent management; talent

ABSTRAK

Organisasi perkhidmatan awam di Malaysia perlu meningkatkan prestasi dan daya saing mereka untuk melindungi diri dari kemungkinan akibat negatif daripada penurunan sederhana mereka dalam hal ini. Kajian terdahulu telah mengiktiraf bahawa pengurusan bakat boleh mempengaruhi prestasi organisasi dengan signifikan, tetapi kajian teori dan empirikal mengenai hubungan ini masih terhad dalam organisasi perkhidmatan awam. Oleh itu, penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk meneroka dan memahami interaksi antara bakat, pengurusan bakat, dan daya saing dalam konteks sektor perkhidmatan awam Malaysia. Mengikut pendekatan kualitatif, temu bual telah dijalankan dengan 10 penjawat awam Malaysia dari peringkat Jawatan Utama Sektor Awam (JUSA). Transkrip temu bual seterusnya dianalisis menggunakan perisian ATLAS.ti 9. Dapatan kajian mendedahkan bahawa pengurusan bakat dan bakat merupakan strategi teras untuk daya saing dalam perkhidmatan awam Malaysia. Definisi yang jelas tentang konsep-konsep ini adalah penting dalam membolehkan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang strategi ini di kalangan organisasi perkhidmatan awam dan pihak berkepentingan mereka. Oleh itu, penghalusan dan penghuraian definisi adalah penting untuk memastikan kejelasan dan konsensus di kalangan semua pihak berkepentingan, lalu mengelakkan kekeliruan dan salah faham pada masa hadapan. Akhir sekali, proses definisi membolehkan organisasi perkhidmatan awam membangunkan definisi yang lebih tepat berdasarkan konteks dan skop khusus mereka.

Kata kunci: Perkhidmatan awam, prestasi, daya saing, pengurusan bakat, bakat

INTRODUCTION

The public service encompasses institutions that play an important role in improving a country's economic growth as well as the well-being of its people. As a representative of the government, the public service is responsible for

making top-level decisions on the implementation of policy and strategic actions to protect the interests of the people and the country (Naidoo 2015; Pam 2012). Each of these decisions significantly impacts a nation's population, credibility, sustainable growth, living standards, trust in the economy, political stability, and more (Ananthan et al. 2019a; Rusu & Toderascu 2016). According to Mori (2010), the absence of public service can cause disarray and chaos that ultimately disrupts national stability and peace. Therefore, a competitive public service is essential to protect the sustainability, welfare, and harmony of the people and the country. In this context, competitiveness refers to public service organizations' ability to continuously improve performance and quickly adapt to the current environment (Fagerberg & Srholec 2015; Grupe & Rose 2010; Spring et al. 2017).

However, the competitive performance of the public service sector in Malaysia is an issue that is often debated by various parties, including economists and the general public, following the sector's modest drop in performance. A 2019 World Bank study on public service performance revealed that the competitiveness of the Malaysian public service declined in 2014 and has remained stagnant ever since (World Bank Group 2019). Additionally, a significant disparity exists between the competitive performance of public service in Malaysia and in other developed countries, particularly OECD nations (Kwakwa 2019). The 12th Malaysia Plan (RMK-12) Study Report by the EPU in 2022 also found that the Malaysian public service failed to achieve its targeted competitive performance level for governance and efficiency in the RMK-11, resulting in a drop in its ranking from 10th to 25th place. This subpar performance has generated numerous complaints and criticisms about the efficiency of the public service (Majid et al. 2019), evinced by the increase in the number of complaints from 13.5% in 2018 to 21.4% in 2019 (Bureau of Public Complaints 2019).

The Malaysian public service is also plagued by integrity problems among its civil servants. The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) reported that 63.3% of the complaints it received between 2013 and 2018 involved the public service, while MACC statistics show that the number of individuals arrested for receiving bribes increased to 2019 in 525, compared to 418 in 2018 and 409 in 2017. Moreover, the Edelman Barometer report noted a downward trend in public trust in the Malaysian public service from 2015 to 2017, falling from just 45% in 2015 to 39% in 2016, and further to 37% in 2017. However, in 2018, there was a 9% improvement in public trust, reaching 46%. Despite this increase, the below-average figure indicates that Malaysian citizens' confidence in the public service remains at a relatively fragile and alarming level.

The public service's poor competitiveness performance indicates its reduced productivity, which ultimately weakens its role as a progressive policy maker, an engine for growth, and a provider of social amenities to the people (Pam 2012). Low competitiveness also hinders the public service from effectively implementing policy transformations (Moon & Lee 2017), addressing complex contemporary challenges, and fulfilling strategic government objectives for the betterment of the people and the nation (Kravariti & Johnston 2019). Consequently, uncompetitive public service can neither meet service efficiency and quality benchmarks nor comply with accreditation standards set by international bodies (Arbab 2017). Ultimately, the entire governance cycle weakens, failing to achieve expected outcomes and meet the demands and needs of the people (Jidwin & Mail 2015; Said et al. 2015; Siddiquee 2014). Accordingly, Patrizii and Resce (2015) concluded that non-competitive public services impede economic growth and national development. Therefore, it is imperative to continuously enhance the competitiveness of the Malaysian public service to avoid greater negative impacts on the country in the future (Fourie & Poggenpoel 2017).

A 2019 study by the World Bank found that to build sustainable and competitive capabilities, the Malaysian public service needs to focus on its human resource activities (World Bank Group 2019). Indeed, Majid et al. (2017) noted gaps and deficiencies in the human resource management practices of public service organizations in Malaysia, calling for a reform of the practice to produce high-quality talent that can strengthen public service capabilities (Xavier 2017). In this regard, talent management has been identified as a critical variable that can drive all government programs, including the Government Transformation Program (GTP), the Economic Transformation Program (ETP), and the RMK-11, towards positioning Malaysia as a competitive high-income country (Ramli et al. 2018). Talent management is considered vital because of its strategic approach to producing talent who can perform tasks and responsibilities that fulfill the standards and expectations of the organization (Nilsson & Ellström 2012; Thunnissen et al. 2013).

Thus, the scope of this qualitative study encompassed the importance of talent management practices in public service organizations in Malaysia. Specifically, the study's objective was to examine the definitions, understanding, and application of the concepts of talent management, competitiveness, and human capital in the sector, particularly from the perspective of top management. The public service sector was chosen because of its function as the administrative machinery and executive power of the nation that implements all government policies and decisions (Public Service Department 2017). Furthermore, its role is to generate long-term economic growth and development so that the country's competitiveness remains stable for the foreseeable future (Asri 2010; Bank Negara Malaysia

2018). To gain top management's insights, officials from the Public Sector Key Position (JUSA) level were selected as the research respondents, as they normally have at least 20 years of service experience and lead their organizations either at the agency, department, or ministry level. This study's findings will help policymakers develop robust talent management and performance measurement policies for Malaysia's public service, ultimately ensuring that Malaysia has a world-class public service that can effectively contribute to the development and growth of the nation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To uncover the influence of talent management on competitiveness in public service organizations, this section sets the stage by defining the core research concepts, namely talent management, competitiveness, and talent.

TALENT MANAGEMENT

Talent management gained attention when the demand for talent gradually increased relative to other resources (Beechler & Woodward 2009a; Schuler et al. 2011; Vaiman & Collings 2014). Based on the resource-based view (RBV), talent constitutes human capital (Gallardo-Gallardo et al. 2015; Nijs et al. 2014) and is now considered the most valuable resource for any organization. Therefore, effective talent management can increase an organization's competitiveness. The model of Groves (2007) and Silzer and Church (2010) is the most appropriate talent management approach for the public service, containing a set of strategic practices under a standard human resource management function. This new approach differs from previous ones by being more practical, systematic, and focused, allowing organizations to gain talent in a more organized way with specific implementation steps (Aarnio & Kimber 2016; Ashton & Lynne 2005; Iles 2008). Moreover, the model integrates talent management into resource management strategies, thereby enhancing organizational performance by ensuring the right talent is in the right place at the right time (Ansar & Baloch 2018; Muntean 2014; Golik & Blanco 2014). Systematic talent management can increase organizational competitiveness as it can create a competitive position in the market (Ibidunni et al. 2016), maximize profit (Bayyut 2015), meet customers' expectations (Kehinde 2012; Meutia & Ismail 2012), and overcome challenges in a hyper-competitive environment (Abdul-Kareem 2016; Kurgat 2016). For example, a study by McKinsey (2018) found that 99% of the participants surveyed admitted that talent management makes companies more competitive by getting ahead of their rivals more quickly.

However, public sector organizations in Malaysia still struggle to understand talent management and determine its strategic elements (Akinremi et al. 2019). This is because the definition of the term is still considered vague, unclear, and without precise direction (Gallardo-Gallardo et al. 2015; Thunnissen et al. 2013). Existing definitions are not based on data and evidence, but rather on a selective choice of management reports, unpublished narratives, rhetoric, anecdotes, or exhortations (Lewis & Heckman 2006; Cooke et al. 2014). Moreover, the academic community has not filled gaps in talent management concepts, theories, and practices (Tansley 2011). There are also relatively limited high-quality empirical studies in the area (Hoeglund 2012), with most academic publications failing to explain relevant talent management practices (Dries 2013). These studies' various definitions of talent management differ in language and tone (Thunnissen et al. 2013), and are often merely assumptions made by researchers in the field (Lewis & Heckman 2006).

COMPETITIVENESS

A competitive strategy has become mandatory in the current era of uncertain economic development (Akben-Selcuk 2016). It is a widely discussed and debated topic in the modern world, particularly in the fields of economics, management, and public policy, due to its close correlation with organizational success (Dereli 2015; Pérez-Moreno et al. 2016). In the public sector, efficiency and effectiveness are vital criteria for evaluating performance (Siddiquee et al. 2017; Vladescu 2012), providing a competitive edge and profitability in the market (Gitonga et al. 2016; Mahsud et al. 2011). Furthermore, competitiveness is an essential criterion for the management of large, structured organizations like the public service (Gurtoo 2009). Thus, for this sector, the operational strategy model is employed. This model is suitable because public service actors aspire to have functional values and techniques similar to those of the private sector, which is consistently competitive in meeting the demands of its customers and stakeholders (Adejuwon 2018; Miao et al. 2011; Nazri et al. 2011). In fact, Nazri et al. (2011) discovered that the operational model acts as a catalyst for addressing weaknesses in public service organizations and highlights the importance of organizational capabilities in attaining a competitive advantage (David et al. 2013).

However, the definition of competitiveness is vague and difficult to understand (Bhawsar & Chattopadhyay 2015; Krugman 1994, 1996), with a single, unified definition remaining elusive (Akben-Selcuk 2016; Lotfi & Karim 2016; Vargas 2017). This is due to the failure of stakeholders to reach a consensus and define the term clearly and precisely (Flanagan et al. 2007; Ketels 2016). Not only is competitiveness associated with numerous criteria, interpretations, and disciplines (Deniz et al. 2013; Momaya 2019; Tan et al. 2016), but it is also perceived in various ways and applied at multiple levels (Nazmfar et al. 2018; Sachitra 2017). As a result, researchers have defined competitiveness based on their respective study scopes, objectives, and dimensions (Aranga Mose 2016; Nazmfar et al. 2018; Siudek & Zawojska 2014b).

The definition of competitiveness is also dynamic due to the wide range of contextual and temporal factors that influence it (Claude 2018; Zelga 2017), making it a broad and multifaceted concept with varying meanings, perspectives, and antecedents (Buckley et al. 1988; Chaudhuri & Ray 1997; Olczyk 2016). The broad scope, multidimensional nature, and diverse interpretations of competitiveness have added to its complexity (Grbic & Mihajlovic 2012; Sachitra & Chong 2016; Zmuda & Czarny 2018), creating confusion among practitioners and academics (Sachitra & Chong 2018; Sigalas 2015; Snowdon & Stonehouse 2006). The resulting uncertainty presents challenges for researchers in developing comprehensive and relevant models (Czarny 2018), which impacts decision-making for all stakeholders (Porter et al. 2013). Ultimately, this situation characterizes competitiveness as a contested concept, particularly in the Malaysian public sector.

TALENT

Previous studies in the field of competitiveness have begun to acknowledge that the internal resources of an organization play a pivotal role in its competitive performance (Boxall et al. 2009). According to Madhani (2010), internal resources are considered inputs that enable an organization to perform its activities. They also lay a strong foundation for formulating and implementing organizational strategies (Grant 1996; Porter 1985). In this regard, talent is an internal resource that is at the heart of every organization in the 21st century (Balcerzyk & Materac 2019; Cappelli 2008a; Iles 2013). In the RBV theoretical framework, talent is a high-value, rare, unique, inimitable, and difficult-to-replace resource (Mensah 2015; Yildiz & Esmer 2021), often referred to as the human capital of an organization (Gallardo-Gallardo et al. 2015a; Nijs et al. 2014). The RBV's ability to identify the characteristics and potential of a resource (Barney & Wright 1997; Wright et al. 1994) explains why human capital contributes to sustainable organizational competitiveness (Barney et al. 2011).

However, the definition of talent remains vague and unclear (Sart 2014; Yildiz & Esmer 2021), with no single, standardized definition accepted by all parties to date (Al Ariss et al. 2014; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen 2016; Golubovskaya et al. 2019). According to Acar and Yener (2016), talent is often defined in different ways and terms by different stakeholders. The debate on the definition of talent thus continues to this day, and achieving universal consensus is a persistent challenge (Denise 2015; Gagné 2009; McDonnell et al. 2017; Mäkelä et al. 2010; Mcdonnell & Collings 2011). A recent study by Dries (2013) identified several important contradictions and tensions that often arise between academics and practitioners in the talent field, particularly related to theoretical perspectives, assumptions, and practices. It was noted that different theoretical perspectives are often used to define talent, but there is no clear basis for explaining its meaning accurately and in detail. Moreover, the definition and concepts of talent still vary when different theories are applied (McDonnell et al. 2017).

At the organizational level, each entity has its own concept, meaning, practices, and dynamics when defining talent (Chuai et al. 2010; Yildiz & Esmer 2021), which is often highly contingent on its strategy, competitive environment, and nature (Chuai et al. 2010; Sleiderink 2012). For example, some organizations prefer to adopt a subjective interpretation and meaning of talent (Langenegger et al. 2011). Additionally, cultural diversity influences the definition of talent, as diversity significantly changes the social dynamics of an organization with Western practices and characteristics (Zhang & Bright 2012). This leads to a lack of uniformity in determining the meaning of talent, as the definition is shaped by workplace needs and practices (Schiemann 2014; Tetik 2016).

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to gain in-depth knowledge about the definition and concept of talent management and competitiveness in public service organizations in Malaysia; therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted. Specifically, the semi-structured interview was selected as the qualitative method for several reasons. First, this technique suited the study's objective to obtain clearer information on the situation, phenomenon, and factors under investigation (Al Ariss et al. 2014). Second, interviews allow researchers to build relationships and observe visual cues and gestures more closely (Patricia 2017). Third, this method is more meaningful as it provides an opportunity

to deeply and directly explore, describe, and explain the complex phenomena related to the participants and their organizations, including their problems, structures, operations, and policies (Mohammed 2018; Saunders et al. 2019). To prepare for the interviews, a set of questions was developed based on themes agreed upon through a brainstorming session with a small group of human resource managers from various government ministries and agencies. This session took place from December 22 to 24, 2020 at the offices of the involved officers. Furthermore, the researcher sought the consultation, approval, and validation of top management in the ministries, departments, and agencies to ensure that the questions prepared would gather factual information. Additionally, insights from prior research, such as Mohammed (2018), contributed to determining the interview questions.

The research participants were JUSA-level senior officials in the Malaysian public service. Officers at this level usually have at least 20 years of service experience and lead their organizations at the agency, department, or ministry level (Public Service Department 2017). Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met this criterion and were well-prepared with accurate information about the study topic. Ultimately, a total of 10 participants, representing five ministries and five agencies, were interviewed. The sample size of 10 participants was considered adequate based on the consensus among talent management researchers that an effective number of respondents for qualitative interviews is five to 11. For instance, Mohammed (2018), in his research on talent management in Australia, found that a total of six to eight respondents is ideal for interview research. Similarly, Yeonsoo et al. (2014) interviewed a total of five respondents in their qualitative study on the strategic model of technical talent management. Other researchers, like Creswell (2009), have also suggested that up to 10 respondents can be interviewed to study related phenomena.

Prior to the interview sessions, an official appointment was requested through their respective secretaries to obtain permission and set a suitable date and time for the interviews. The interviews were conducted at each participant's office in Putrajaya on various dates, with each interview lasting approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes. During the interviews, raw audio data was collected and transcribed. Subsequently, the transcripts were analyzed using Atlas.ti 9, a software that simplifies the data classification process and organizes research findings more neatly and systematically. Atlas.ti 9 has a Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis System (CAQDAS) program capable of handling a variety of data formats, including audios, videos, images, written content, articles, books, questionnaires, and conversation transcripts.

RESULTS

In this study, a total of 10 participants were interviewed. The profile of the participants, who were all JUSA-level officials from the Malaysian public service, is presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, the participants included three officers at JUSA Grade A with 32 to 35 years of service experience, two at JUSA Grade B with 29 to 30 years of service experience, and five at JUSA Grade C with 25 to 26 years of service experience. Of the participants, six were male and four were female.

TABLE 1. The profile of the participants

No	Participant	Grade	Experience	Gender	Location
1.	R 1	JUSA A	34 year	Male	Putrajaya
2.	R 2	JUSA A	35 year	Male	Putrajaya
3.	R 3	JUSA A	32 year	Female	Putrajaya
4.	R 4	JUSA B	30 year	Male	Putrajaya
5.	R 5	JUSA B	29 year	Male	Putrajaya
6.	R 6	JUSA C	25 year	Female	Putrajaya
7.	R 7	JUSA C	26 year	Female	Putrajaya
8.	R 8	JUSA C	25 year	Male	Putrajaya
9.	R 9	JUSA C	25 year	Male	Putrajaya
10.	R 10	JUSA C	26 year	Female	Putrajaya

Interview Analysis:

Objective 1: To identify the definition of talent management in the Malaysian public service

The interviews with the 10 participants revealed their perspectives and views on talent management in the public service. The results of the ATLAS.ti transcript analysis for this objective are shown in Figure 1.
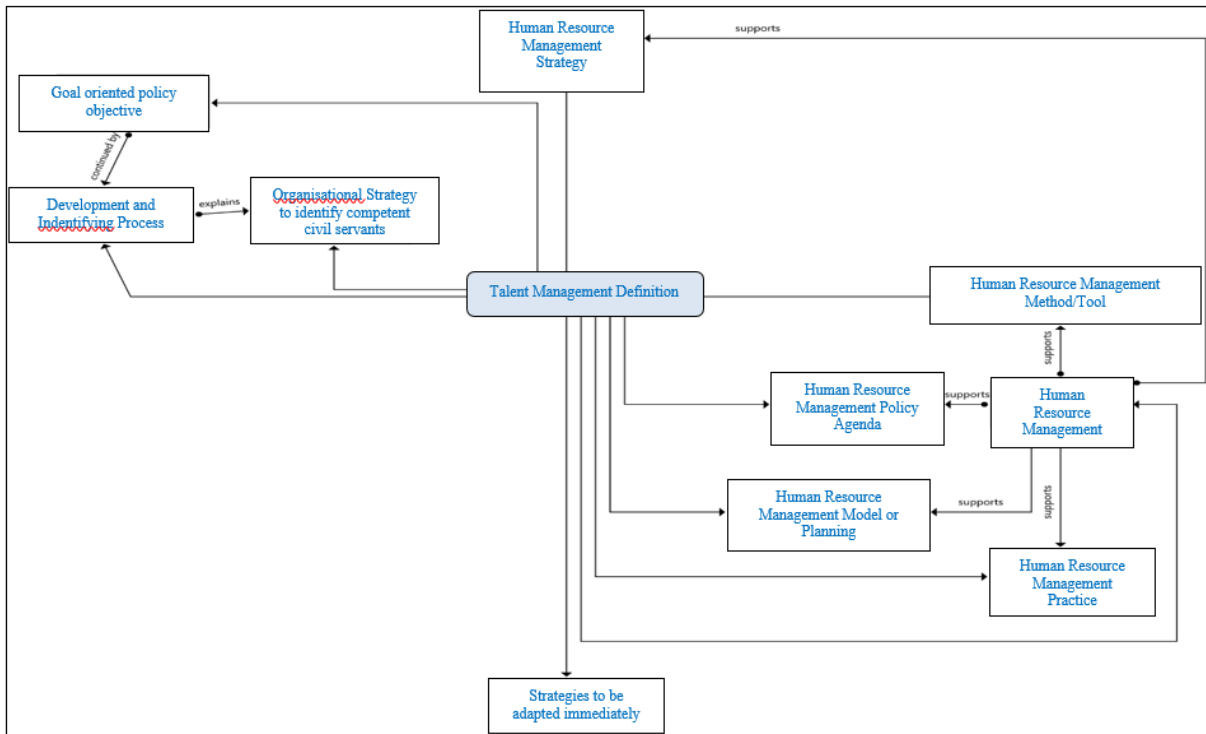
FIGURE 1. Findings on talent management definition generated from ATLAS.ti version 9

Based on the analysis findings, a total of six participants defined talent management as an aspect of human resource management. For example, R1 described talent management as a human resource management process that is practiced by all organizations, including in the public service. This perspective was supported by R6, who stated:

"Human resource management and talent management are the same thing just with different names. The elements that exist in human resource management are the same for talent management." (R6).

Likewise, R2 views talent management as a tool or method for managing human resources in the public service. R3 also sees it as a human resource management policy agenda that should be adopted by all agencies, departments, and ministries in the public service through circulars issued by central agencies. According to R4, talent management is a model framework or plan for public service organizations to manage their human resources, and R5 considers talent management to be a human resource management strategy.

Conversely, for R7, talent management is a strategy for identifying competent and high-quality civil servants. This viewpoint was echoed by R8, who elaborated that:

"Talent management is used to identify and develop civil servants who have knowledge, skills, and experience as well as good behavior…it is a strategy to identify and develop civil servants who are qualified to move the strategy drawn up and the action plans to be implemented." (R8).

R9, on the other hand, defined talent management as a purposeful and objective human capital management strategy that can be implemented through an effective talent management strategy. They claimed as follows:

"The framework and plan can identify, develop, and place suitable talent according to the principle of 'the right person at the right place and at the right time." (R9)

R10 also agreed that talent management is a strategy that needs to be adapted immediately, explaining that:

"Considering that the public service in Malaysia has a total of 1.7 million civil servants who have various types, thoughts, education levels, knowledge, backgrounds, and behavior in the public service, this resource needs to be

optimized because each of them must have advantages that can be used for the benefit of the service and the country."
(R10).

In conclusion, there are two groups of views on talent management in the Malaysian public service. The first group sees talent management as a human resource management practice that is implemented in public service organizations. While this view still sees it as a human resource management strategy, the second view of talent management is more objective; it considers talent management as resource management aiming to ensure that the public service has competent and high-quality civil servants.

Objective 2: To identify the definition of competitiveness in the Malaysian public service

The next analysis involved the definition of public service competitiveness in Malaysia from the perspective of the top management. Figure 2 illustrates the ATLAS.ti results on defining competitiveness.

R5 defined competitiveness as the ability of public service organizations to carry out their roles and functions more efficiently. This view was supported by R3 and R6, who described the competitiveness of public services in Malaysia as the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. Likewise, R1 defined public service competitiveness as efficiency, effectiveness, and quality in delivering services, whereas R8 referred to competitiveness as a public service requirement to provide the best service to the people and the country.

However, R10 explained that because the Malaysian public service is the policymaker and regulator for every aspect of national development, its competitiveness should be the ability to compete and succeed by gaining the same capabilities as competitors. This definition refers to the competition faced by the public service when its efficiency and effectiveness are measured and compared with other countries' public services through global benchmarks issued by international bodies such as the World Economic Forum (WEF), World Bank (World Bank), Institute for Management Development (IMD) and the World Monetary Fund (IMF).

R7, R4, and R2 all defined competitiveness as the ability and capability of public service organizations to be efficient and effective, with R4 adding the notion of competing in a challenging environment. Notably, R2 highlighted competition against private sector competitors, as follows:

"Public services need to have the ability and capability to compete to remain relevant, otherwise our duties and responsibilities will be taken by others in the private sector" (R2).

Only R9 expressed a slightly different view of public service competitiveness as productivity, i.e., input and output, saying that:

"Competitiveness is a productivity factor provided by public services for the benefit of the country and the people."
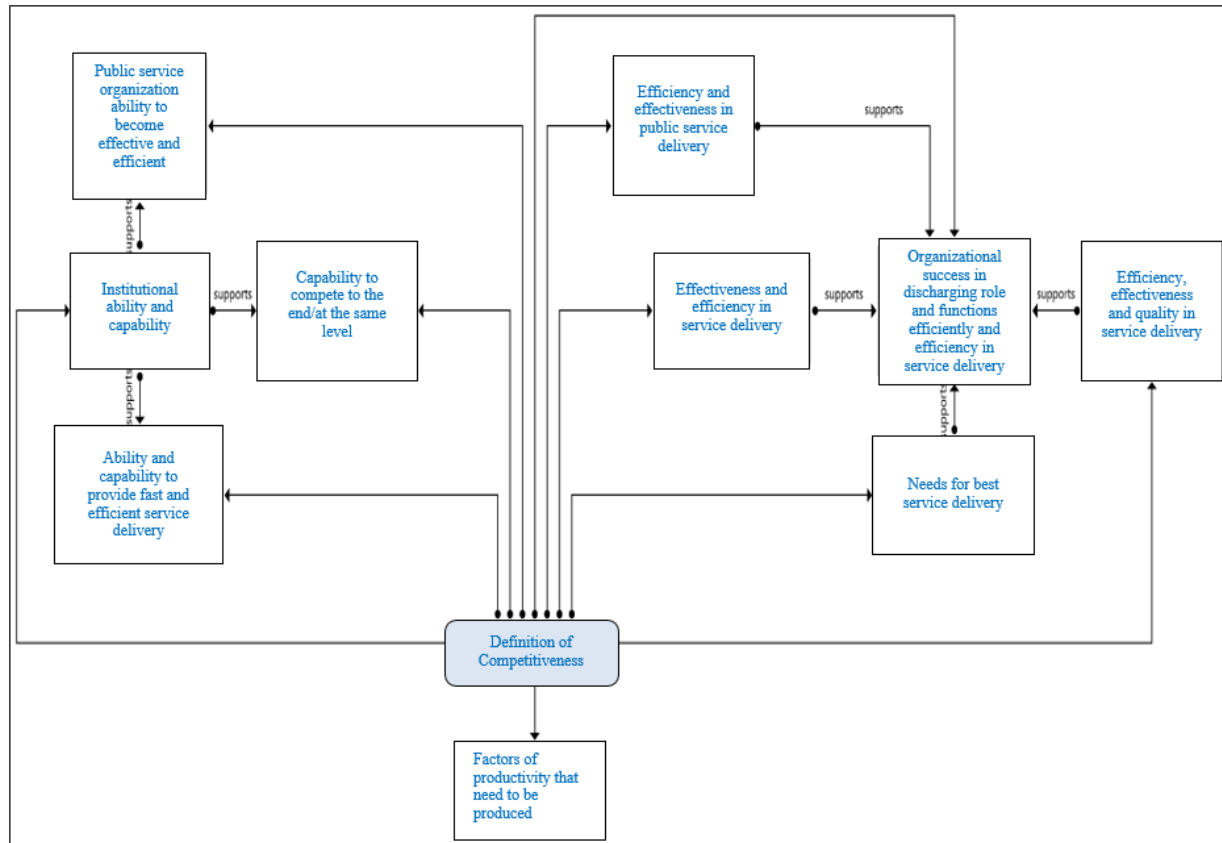(R9).

FIGURE 2. Findings on competitiveness definition generated from ATLAS.ti. version 9

In conclusion, the public service's top management hold two differing opinions regarding the definition of public service competitiveness. On one hand, the competitiveness of public services in Malaysia is defined as service delivery, which seeks to provide the best service efficiently and effectively to the people and the country. On the other hand, competitiveness is seen as the ability and capability of public service organizations to respond efficiently and effectively to competition in a challenging environment.

Objective 3: To identify the definition of talent in the Malaysian public service

The final ATLAS.ti analysis was related to top management's definition of talent in the public service sector, the results of which are depicted in Figure 3. Based on the findings, R1 defined talent as civil servants who can confront various challenges in the current environment, because they are not only frontliners but also the backbone of the national administration. R2's interview delineates talent as a civil servant with dynamic thinking, capable of bringing about a paradigm shift to make public service organizations more creative and innovative. In addition, R5 interpreted talent as a civil servant who has high accountability and responsibility to perform public service duties for the people and the country. Meanwhile, R8 and R10 defined talent as civil servants who have high quality and high competence, respectively. More elaborately, R4 explained talent as civil servants capable of efficiently and effectively performing service duties and responsibilities by constantly striving to acquire new knowledge and skills compared to their peers.

It can be observed that the definitions of talent provided by R1, R2, R4, R5, R8, and R10, while genuinely their perspectives, are somewhat general. They do not identify specific criteria for talent in detail. Rather, talent is broadly characterized as a competent, high quality, capable, accountable, or responsible civil servant, who is able to carry out public service duties efficiently and effectively in the face of contemporary challenges. In contrast, an alternative perspective offered by R3, R6, and R7 provides a more detailed definition of talent, focusing on the specific characteristics and criteria that must be present in public servants in Malaysia. R3 defined talent as a subset of human capital, wherein individuals with knowledge, skills, and experience are selected and developed through the talent management processes within public service organizations. Similarly, R6 classified talent as civil servants who

possess the comprehensive knowledge, skills, and characteristics necessary for their duties and responsibilities, apart from good values and behavior to complement them. Furthermore, R7 designated talent as a valuable asset equipped to fulfill tasks and responsibilities by possessing skills, knowledge, experience, creative thinking, innovation, ability, and the capacity to execute tasks that facilitate smooth-running public service operations. From R9's perspective, talent is more aligned with a public servant characterized by high integrity, competence, and the ability to attain the productivity levels desired within public service organizations.
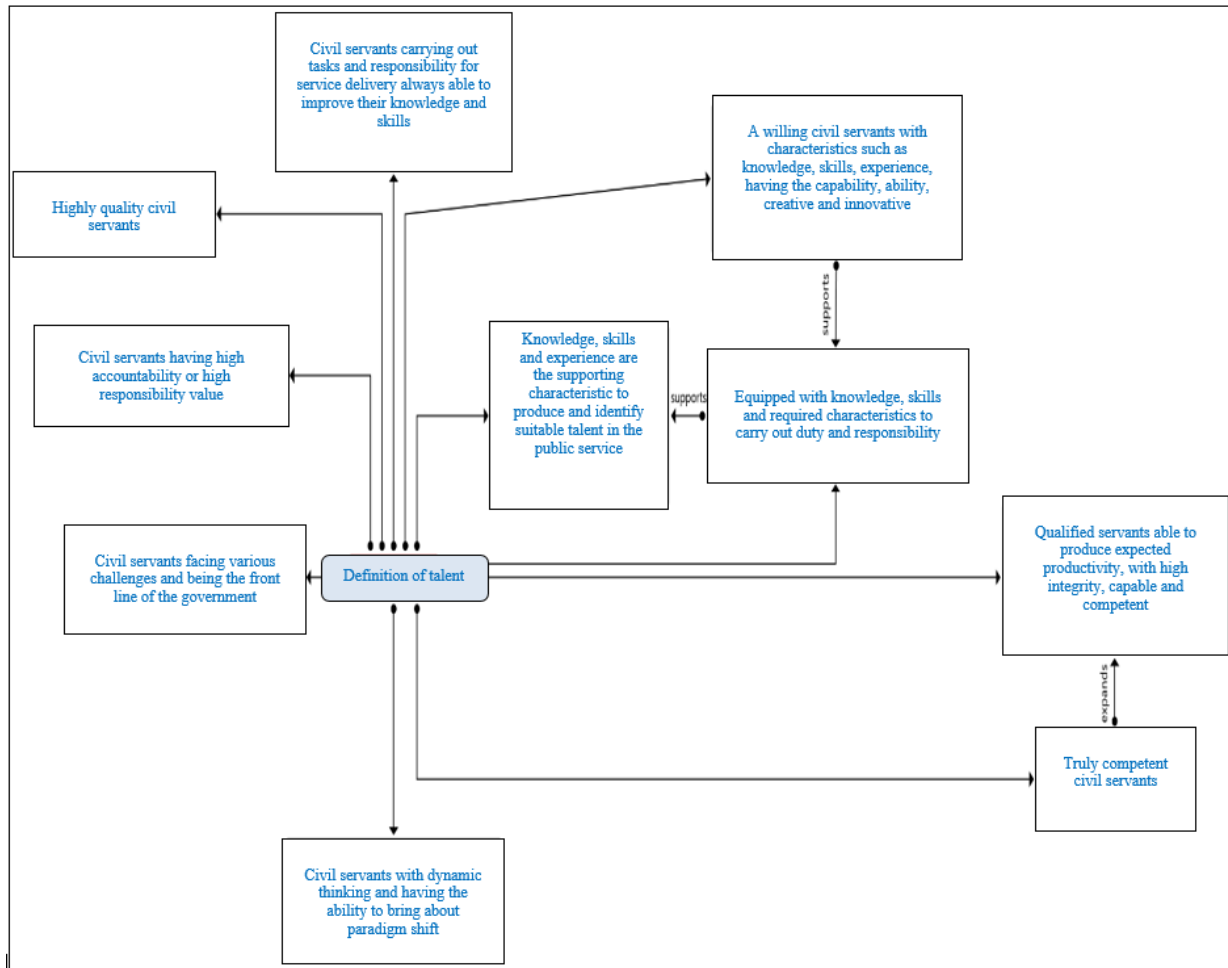

FIGURE 3. Findings on talent definition generated from ATLAS.ti version 9

In short, talent is the most significant resource for public service organizations today. It is embodied by civil servants who exhibit diverse characteristics and criteria, including accountability, quality, competence, knowledge, skills, experience, values, integrity, ability, and good behavior. These attributes collectively ensure that public service organizations maintain the ability and capability to fulfill their responsibilities and functions, thus remaining relevant in the long term.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to define and explain the concepts of talent management, competitiveness, and talent as key factors in the Malaysian public service. The findings of interviews with 10 JUSA-level officials indicate that talent management in public service organizations is defined as a human resource management strategy aiming to ensure that the public service can identify, develop, and appropriately place highly competent and high-quality civil servants at the right time and in the right positions. This approach represents a modern shift in human resource management, in response to the need to change and adapt its understanding following current developments.

Talent management has become a contemporary term and an influential tool that can effectively be leveraged to gain a competitive advantage. A literature review identifies this variable as a paradigm shift from traditional to modern human resource management to ensure sustainable competitiveness, mainly by cultivating talent suited for the demands of today's organizational environment (Collings & Mellahi 2009c). According to et al. advantage over time. A regression analysis by Al-qarioti (2016b) on organizations in Kuwait revealed that talent management strategies are positively and significantly associated with competitiveness. Likewise, a study by Arbab (2017) on the impact of talent management strategy demonstrated that it significantly increases the competitiveness of the Bahrain Post organization.

In conclusion, talent management is a mandatory approach that must be implemented by the Malaysian public service in its organizations to gain human capital advantages. It represents a strategic resource management system that efficiently and effectively manages talent, equipping the organization to deal with the challenges of competition and uncertainties in the current environment.

In addition, this study's participants view competitiveness as the organization's ability and capacity to respond efficiently and effectively to current changes. It has been established that public services capable of enhancing efficiency and effectiveness more robustly have a more prominent impact on competitiveness. This definition is important because it is used by the public service to constantly improve accountability and relevance. The public service differs significantly from other profit-driven organizations in its objectives, whereby strong competitive performance reflects the public service's commitment to good governance and administration across all levels of the government structure. In this context, the legitimacy of public service organizations' performance is evaluated based on efficiency, effectiveness, and the economic value they offer. According to Lufunyo (2013), public services that deliver services and policies efficiently and effectively are seen as upholding the highest standards of transparency and providing high-quality services. Measuring efficiency and effectiveness within public services is thus of paramount importance, as it directly influences the quality of services provided to the people and the country. It also gauges the level of productivity achieved by public services in serving the government and the nation (Hookana 2011). Competitive public service has the potential to help overcome challenges and obstacles, and can continue reinforcing the economic growth rate of a country (Patrizii & Recce 2015). In summary, the definition of competitiveness, as derived from this study, is a responsibility that public service cannot afford to overlook, as it symbolizes the public service's performance. Malaysian public services must possess the ability and capacity to compete in order to remain relevant; otherwise, their duties and responsibilities may be assumed by others in the private sector

This study has also revealed that talent is defined as a civil servant possessing assets that can be developed, refined, and improved to enhance the Malaysian public service's efficiency and effectiveness in delivering services. This asset constitutes a resource with knowledge, skills, experience, good conduct, and virtuous values inherent in every Malaysian civil servant. These attributes are considered highly valuable, rare, unique, and difficult to replicate, aligning with the principles of the RBV that regard talent as a form of human capital. As per the RBV, human capital is a key organizational resource that grants competitive advantages through its value, rarity, and inimitability (VRIO). This definition of talent is crucial in today's context, where talent is increasingly perceived as a comprehensive and imperative resource that equips organizations to navigate ongoing changes and contribute positively to competitive advantages, economic growth, innovation, creativity, and adaptability in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

According to the Public Service Department (2017), talent is acknowledged as an indispensable resource for organizations, given its significant contributions to economic growth and the modern economy compared to other resources. Furthermore, a seminal study by Kravariti and Johnston (2019) on public service organizations has characterized talent in the public sector as individuals possessing competence, knowledge, and values aligned with the core principle of public service, which is to deliver quality services to the people and the nation. In this context, recognizing the potential of talent in the public service is essential, as modern organizations no longer see human capital as a burden but rather as a producer of knowledge in the era of globalization and technology. A precise definition of talent is an indispensable matter in the public service due to the considerable size of civil servant populations in most countries around the world. This large pool of civil servants encompasses diverse talent characteristics and competencies that must be properly identified based on established definitions and criteria. Only then can public service organizations nurture and position the right talent in the right place and at the right time.

CONCLUSION

Public services are under pressure to demonstrate their competitiveness, both to compete effectively and to avert potential negative repercussions. This is because a decline in public service performance can have profound implications for a country's stability and well-being. It may also hinder the government's ability to remain competitive on a global scale. Therefore, public service organizations in Malaysia must enhance their performance and competitiveness to avoid future adverse consequences. Previous studies have acknowledged talent management

as a factor with the potential to significantly impact an organization's performance. However, empirical and theoretical research on this aspect within public service organizations is still relatively scarce. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to examine the definitions, understanding, and application of talent management, competitiveness, and talent in the Malaysian public service. Not only are clearly defined terms essential for understanding these concepts, but refining and elaborating upon them is imperative to ensure consensus and clarity among all stakeholders and thus, prevent potential misunderstandings and confusion. It also enables the public service to develop a precise definition tailored to its unique context and scope. Additionally, a clear definition allows for a more focused and systematic approach, enhancing the potential benefits derived from its implementation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study's findings contribute to the understanding and debate of the role of talent management in the public sector, a topic that was previously limited to selected organizations or specific regions. Furthermore, competitiveness is an aspect that needs more attention and priority from the public service, since it serves as a primary indicator for evaluating and comparing the performance levels of public service organizations. It deepens the comprehension of the impact of talent management strategies on enhancing competitiveness within the public service. Typically associated with the manufacturing and business sectors, the advantages gained through improved competitiveness enable the public service to maintain long-term relevance by responding to changes in the environment. Apart from that, an increase in competitiveness improves organizational quality, creativity, efficiency, effectiveness, and service delivery. Apart from talent management, talent itself possesses substantial potential to evolve into a strategic organizational resource for public service organizations in Malaysia. This potential stems from its characteristics, including skills, education, and experience, that can not only be improved and developed but can also be augmented by incorporating moral values and good behavior. This definition of talent can serve as a metric for evaluating internal resources, especially within public service organizations, if they seek to transform them into strategic resources.

The practical implications of this study extend to human resource managers in government departments, future researchers, and central agencies overseeing human resource practices within the Malaysian public sector. As a key institution, the civil service plays a pivotal role in enhancing the well-being and economic progress of the country. It is a government agent that holds responsibility for high-level policy decisions to safeguard the interests of the nation and its people. Therefore, a competitive civil service is imperative to ensure national sustainability, welfare, and stability. Such competitiveness is characterized by the sector's ability to continually enhance performance and swiftly adapt to changing circumstances. Thus, this study's findings aid policymakers in establishing robust talent management and performance measurement policies for the Malaysian civil service, ultimately fostering a world-class civil service that drives the nation's development and growth. Moreover, the study reveals that talent management, when integrated with human resource management, enhances the quality of civil servants in the public sector, surpassing traditional paradigms. Through talent management, competitiveness can be achieved, ensuring long-term relevance in a changing environment. This newfound understanding underscores the importance of competitiveness as a key performance indicator for public sector organizations. Furthermore, by enhancing skills, education, values, and behavior, human capital can transform into a strategic resource for Malaysian public service organizations. This integration of talent management with human resource elements is essential for producing competent civil servants and improving overall public sector performance.

The use of theories, models, and empirical evidence in this study enriches the understanding of talent management, competitiveness, and human capital in public services, providing valuable insights for future research. However, the study has limitations. It primarily focused on participants in the JUSA grade, leaving various levels and schemes within public services to be explored. Additionally, despite inviting many officials to brainstorming and focus group sessions, only a few responded due to their heavy workload and duties. Some interviewees were also reluctant to provide in-depth information, citing the sensitivity of the subject matter. Past research indicates that the study of talent management in public service organizations is underexplored, receiving limited attention (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo 2019). This field has a narrow scope, with research often dominated by private and multinational companies. Therefore, further comprehensive studies, using quantitative or mixed methods, are needed to examine the relationships between the study variables and fill the gaps in this context. Finally, it would be useful for future research to investigate other aspects of talent management, competitiveness, and talent that were not covered in this study.

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