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**Mutations de l'environnement, mutations  
des organisations, mutations de la GRH ?**

## **COUNCIL FIRES, ROPE TEAMS AND MOSAICS: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF CO-DEVELOPMENT GROUPS AS AN EXPERT TALENT DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Talent management is key for multinational companies in a turbulent environment. However, the use of reflective practices for developing talents is under-researched. In this paper, we fill this research gap by exploring the consequences of a reflective practice, namely professional co-development groups, in expert talent management. Through the analysis of a single case-study, our research shows that co-development appears as an organizational parallel space, a resourcing and safe place in which employees can take the time to slow-down, reflect and explore, while developing their collective intelligence and reinforcing their well-being among others. It also helps organizations break silos, infuse agility, find new internal solutions and strengthen employee engagement, while supporting the evolution of organizational culture. We also explore the conditions of success and the limits of this approach and we propose a theoretical model summarizing these results.

**Keywords:** talent management, experts, reflective practice, co-development

## INTRODUCTION

It has been more than 20 years now that the term of talent management was coined for the first time by McKinsey consultants (Chambers et al., 1998; Michaels et al., 2001). Talent Management is strategic because it can lead to a source of competitive advantage (Ashton & Morton, 2005). The capability and ability for multinational companies – defined as “*business organizations whose activities are located in more than two countries*” (Smelser & Baltes, 2001, p. 10 197) – to detect and exploit talents in the different countries where they operate is crucial (Mellahi & Collings, 2010). Despite a turbulent environment in many Western countries, talents remain scarce and the fight for acquisition and retention of those talents is fierce. This “war” might even be harder because the traditional sources of competitive advantages in firms are declining in the knowledge economy (Dries, 2013). This has been exacerbated in the Covid crisis that we are experiencing, experts and high potential have proved to be crucial for organizations (Deloitte, 2021). Talent management is particularly important for multinational companies, as they must find international high-potential and high-performing talents to reflect the global scope of the organization (Minbaeva & Collings, 2013).

In particular, the current turbulent context has as consequence the need for companies to invest in more sophisticated talent, new skills and expertise (Stahl et al., 2007). There is consequently a need to attract, develop and retain expert talent, especially since expertise is not innate but acquired through arduous practice (Meyers et al., 2013). In this paper, we focus on exclusive talent management, as opposed to inclusive talent management, which posits that all employees of a firm are talents and can be consequently considered as a mere synonym for HRM (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). The rationale of exclusive talent management is that talented employees are supposed to bring more value and to enhance the firms’ competitive advantage (Collings & Mellahi, 2009), as compared to the other employees. It consequently relies on the segmentation of the workforce (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005), where pivotal talents are separated from the rest of employees (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). High potential and managerial talents have traditionally been more considered in research, but expert talent is also a talent segment worth studying (Dries et al., 2012).

Although reflective practices can contribute to practitioners’ effectiveness (Schön, 1983), such practices have not often been studied to support talent management or more specifically talent development in organizations. As part of the reflective practice tradition, co-development groups (Payette & Champagne, 1997) aim to improve practitioners’ professional practice through structured individual and collective reflectivity and experience sharing among peers.

The present study aims to explore the use of reflective practices for expert talents in multinational companies. Research about talent development seems to focus about programs (see e.g. Muratbekova-Touron et al., 2018), as there is a need for combined individualized practices (Thévenet & Vercoustre, 2009). To our knowledge, the impact of a single talent development practice on both the individual and the organization has been under-explored. Very recent research investigates the possible dark side of being identified as a talent (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018), but no study has focused on possible solutions

to attenuate those negative side effects. In particular, there is no research looking into how reflective practices could be beneficial to talents.

This is why we propose to follow an explorative research design to answer the following research question: how do reflective practices benefit expert talents and their organization? Through a single case-study approach and the analysis of 13 interviews from expert talents

and co-development facilitators in a French multinational bank, we shed light on the mechanisms enabling expert talents and their organization to benefit from a reflective practice: co-development professional groups. We therefore contribute both to the talent management and the learning and development literature streams, by proposing a model explaining the mechanisms of co-development.

The remainder of this paper will be structured as follow: first we will propose a literature review about expert talent management and reflective practices, with a focus on co-development professional groups (hereafter: “co-development”). Then, we will present our methodology, before presenting and discussing our results. Finally, we will conclude the paper.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **1. Expert Talent Development**

Exclusive talent management relies on the postulate that a minority of employees contribute disproportionately to company performance (O’Boyle Jr. & Aguinis, 2012). Talent Management supposes consequently the segmentation of employees (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). It can be defined as “all organizational activities for the purpose of attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining the best employees in the most strategic roles (those roles necessary to achieve organizational strategic priorities) on a global scale” (Scullion & Collings, 2011, p. 56). Whereas most of the attention has been focused on managerial talent in multinational companies (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020), probably because companies traditionally value more leadership than expertise (Dries et al., 2012), scholars and companies acknowledge the strategic role of experts and the need to recognize them as talent and to include them in companies’ high potential policies (Dries & Pepermans, 2008). Hence the sub-segmentation in several companies between “leaders” and “experts”. “*Key experts possess organization-specific knowledge and skills that are very difficult to replace*” (Dries & Pepermans, 2008, p. 103). Including experts in a talent management policy is consequently relevant, as talents may reciprocate with positive attitudes such as commitment and intention to stay in the company (Björkman et al., 2013; Gelens et al., 2015; Marescaux et al., 2013).

Along with attraction and retention, talent development is crucial in talent management policies (Stahl et al., 2007), especially for companies which aim at filling strategic positions with employees from the inside (Al Ariss et al., 2014) and if their philosophy is that talent is rare and can be developed (Meyers et al., 2020). Talent development typically includes several practices: formal trainings, such as MBAs, in-class trainings, soft skills trainings, etc (Stahl et al., 2007), ‘on-the-job’ learning, such as global assignments (Cerdin & Brewster, 2014; Collings, 2014), job rotations, cross-functional project assignments, promotions (Stahl et al., 2007) and multifunctionality (Muratbekova-Touron et al., 2018). Mentoring, coaching or job shadowing are also cited as they provide talents new perspectives on their jobs (Stahl et al., 2007). Talent development practices are part of a set of HR practices (Al Ariss et al., 2014) and very often organized in the form of a program where practices are happening according to a specific timeline and where they are seen as complementary (Muratbekova-Touron et al., 2018). In particular, experts may have heightened expectations regarding their development, such as software developers demonstrating a high and constant learning-orientation as a corollary to innovation (Muratbekova-Touron & Galindo, 2018).

## 2. The dark side of being talent

Most research highlight that talent management often has very positive outcomes. Talent employees experience more successful careers (Bonneton et al., 2019; Dries & Pepermans, 2008), they are more committed (Björkman et al., 2013; Gelens et al., 2015), they are more satisfied with their jobs (Festing & Schäfer, 2014) and feel more belonging to a group (Bonneton et al., 2020). On the contrary, employees who do not belong to talent pools are excluded from development opportunities (Lacey & Groves, 2014). Being identified as a talent can consequently appear as a blessing (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018).

At the organizational level, talent management has been described as crucial for organizational performance (Ashton & Morton, 2005; Cheese et al., 2008; Collings & Mellahi, 2009) and this has been confirmed by empirical research; a study by Bethke-Langenegger et al. (2011) showed that talent management practices with a strong focus on corporate strategy have an impact on corporate profit.

And yet, a very recent stream in the talent management literature underlines the possible negative aspects of talent management. The lack of continuity of HR practices has been shown to be problematic in the perception of employees (Piening et al., 2014), and this is especially the case for talent management. Participants often cite this non-continuity in talent management practices as a major source of disappointment which may even lead to a greater intention to leave the company (Bonneton et al., 2019).

Recent research highlights the possible negative effects for talents themselves, as they will have “*to accept high levels of discursive pressure to identify with the espoused organisational values and identity*” (Painter- Morland et al., 2019, p. 137), consequently leading to an altered identity supposed to be adequate for the organization (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Talent management consequently proposes a utilitarian view of employees, where their outputs is the only thing that matters (Painter- Morland et al., 2019). Moreover, identified talents are put in the “firing line” or “spot light” (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018, p. 82) and are consequently exposed to all kinds of organizational politics maneuvers, and they are expected to abide by the logic of the company’s economic performance while being highly dependent from the manager’s favor (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018), as the annual appraisal is a common tool to assess talent (Mäkelä et al., 2010).

## 3. Learning and reflective practices

Schön (1983) highlights the importance of reflection practice or ‘reflection-in-action’, which he opposes to technical expertise. According to him, whereas technical expertise is key in some contexts, it is also “*limited by situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and conflict*”, in which “*the professional cannot legitimately claim to be expert, but only to be especially well prepared to reflect-in-action*” (p. 345). Although reflective practice has been primarily conceptualized as an individual process (Collin & Karsenti, 2011), we will study in this research a specific form of individual and collective reflective practice called co-development, created by Payette & Champagne (1997).

Inspired by Schön’s works, Payette & Champagne (1997) highlight that practice is a unique source of knowledge and that only the combination with reflection allows the transmission of this knowledge. The authors define co-development as a learning approach or method aiming to improve one’s own professional practice, by listening and helping peers to progress in improving their own practice. Co-development has the objective of broadening the capacities

of reflection and action of each member of the group by emphasizing experience sharing and structured interactions between experienced practitioners of a “learning community”.

There are three roles in co-development: the “client”, who proposes the subject that will be the basis of the discussion and collective development, the “consultants”, who help the “client” to better define, understand, analyze and learn from experience and finally, a group facilitator. The authors refer to the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) to present the structured process of co-development: *“the consultation begins with the presentation of a problematic situation emerging from the experience of the “client”, followed by questions of clarification and understanding with the “consultants”, then by freer exchanges, which lead to the formulation of hypotheses for action by the “client” himself”* (Payette & Champagne, 1997, p. 8-9). Co-development groups have a size between four and ten participants, and sessions tend to last between three and four hours every two to five weeks for a period going from six months to one year, including a final debrief.

In their book, the authors identify several benefits, limits and success factors of co-development. The main benefits highlighted are economic (increase of productivity and quality of the service while cost remains low), practical (simple, light and adaptative approach) and human (staff learning and development, positive self-vision increase). Some benefits such as emotional and psychological support and connections are also mentioned but only as secondary. Although the authors refer to co-development as being revitalizing, surprisingly well-being is not mentioned as a possible benefit of this approach.

Success factors mentioned by the authors concern both the mindset of participants (motivation, openness, commitment, professional maturity, listening skills, ability to question oneself, respect, trust in oneself and others) and organizational (participant choice, quality of the facilitation, compatibility with the organizational context). The main limits mentioned may come from a non-respect of these conditions or linked to the confidentiality and time frames that co-development impose.

Co-development can take place in a diversity of contexts such as business (Giraud et al., 2016; Payette & Champagne, 1997), business and employment cooperatives (Ballon & Veyer, 2020), education (Payette & Champagne, 1997; Roy et al., 2014), healthcare (Langlois et al., 2014) and social work (Hughes et al., 2020).

Although reflective practice has proved to be very effective (Schön, 1983), research on that kind of practices dedicated to talent management is very scarce. Daubner-Siva et al. (2018) highlight that practices such as reflective writing might prove efficient to counter the potential downsides and tensions of being identified as talent: *“keeping a diary helped the first author to digest, understand, and come to terms with events”* (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018, p. 83). Apart from this example, there is, to our knowledge, no mention in research about the importance of reflective practices in the case of talent management.

In talent management, the consideration of performance in strategic roles is crucial (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). As the goal of professional co-development groups being an increase in individual performance in one’s occupation (Payette & Champagne, 1997), it appears that co-development groups could be adequate for talent employees. Furthermore, even if it is not the primary goal of this development practice, co-development has been found to emotional and psychological support and connections. In the case of talent employees described as suffering from isolation and loneliness as well as increased stress (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018), co-development could prove to be highly efficient. We consequently decide to focus on this specific development practice: co-development, and study its consequences, as part of a talent management program devoted specifically to experts. Hence our research question: *how does*

*a reflective practice (in the form of professional co-development groups) benefit expert talents and their organization?*

## METHODOLOGY

To answer our research question, we follow a qualitative methodology. More precisely, we chose an exploratory single case-study research design (Yin, 2013), as our main concern is to decipher the mechanisms of a specific talent management practice, and consequently to answer a “how” question and understand a complex phenomenon (Pratt, 2009). For this study, we decided to take a magnifying glass and investigate one specific practice part of a talent management program, namely professional co-development groups, as an example of a reflective practice.

### 1. Description of the case

Our research is based on a French financial institution of more than 100,000 employees present in more than 50 countries in all continents. Its diversified business model is based on a wide range of independent business units supported by central support functions.

This company has been offering co-development to its employees for several years following the influence of some practitioners having been trained by Payette and Champagne. Co-development is well-rooted in the company as dozens of co-development schemes have already taken place and most facilitators are internal employees to the company who have been specifically trained for this.

More specifically, we are going to study co-development taking place within a development program that the company proposes to its senior experts, as one of the corporate talent management programs. This program aims to strengthen the visibility, the impact and the leadership of these senior experts while also aiming to contribute to the retention of this critical population. The program starts with a 5-day learning & development “bootcamp” after which co-development is used for 9 months as a way to “*maintain the momentum of the program*”<sup>1</sup>.

### 2. Data Collection

Our research is based on 20 semi-structured interviews with senior experts and facilitators having participated to co-development groups. The results of the present article are based on the preliminary analysis of the first 13 interviews of the sample. Interviews were done in French, they lasted between one hour and one hour and a half and were systematically recorded. Both authors attended all the interviews, in order to get an in-depth knowledge of the data, which is helpful in the coding phase (Saldana, 2015).

The choice of the interviewees was done based on a balanced representation of the different businesses, fields of expertise and profiles attending the described development program. The choice of the interviewees was done based on a balanced representation of the different businesses, fields of expertise and profiles attending the described development program. A balance between experts and facilitators was also sought in this sample. Experts allowed us to access a first-hand user experience of co-development. Facilitators were chosen for their experience in running such groups and their capacity to compare experts to other

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<sup>1</sup> Verbatim of the program director and internal facilitator

practitioners. The idea was to analyze the emergence of common shared patterns (Patton, 1990). Data collection coming from interviews was enriched with the non-participant observation of two closing and final debrief sessions as well as secondary data, for the sake of triangulation (Yin, 2013). A summary of the interviewees is presented the below charts (Table 1 and 2).

**Table 1: Description of the experts sample**

| Interviewee     | Activity                     | Age | Interview Year | Gender |
|-----------------|------------------------------|-----|----------------|--------|
| Senior Expert 1 | Cloud computing              | 50  | 2020           | M      |
| Senior Expert 2 | Data Science                 | 48  | 2020           | M      |
| Senior Expert 3 | Legal Advisor                | 41  | 2020           | F      |
| Senior Expert 4 | Banking regulation           | 43  | 2021           | F      |
| Senior Expert 5 | Risk Management              | 42  | 2021           | M      |
| Senior Expert 6 | Financial markets operations | 44  | 2021           | F      |
| Senior Expert 7 | IT development               | 43  | 2021           | F      |

**Table 2: Description of the facilitators sample**

| Interviewee                                   | Activity  | Age | Interview Year | Gender |
|---|---|-----|----------------|--------|
| Facilitator 1 (internal and program director) | Talent development practitioner and executive coach | 40  | 2020           | M      |
| Facilitator 2 (external)                      | Executive coach                                     | 51  | 2020           | F      |
| Facilitator 3 (internal)                      | Executive coach                                     | 52  | 2020           | M      |
| Facilitator 4 (external)                      | Executive coach                                     | 55  | 2020           | F      |
| Facilitator 5 (internal)                      | Transformation project manager and executive coach  | 51  | 2021           | F      |
| Facilitator 6 (internal)                      | Transformation project manager and executive coach  | 54  | 2021           | F      |

### 3. Data analysis

The data was coded with the help of the NVivo 11 software. We coded the interviews transcribed in French, and then translated the citations used for this paper. We followed the 3-step coding phases as depicted by Gioia et al. (2013). The emergence of the concepts, themes and dimensions occurred in an iterative process (Point & Fourboul, 2006), as we started to reflect on the coding tree while we were collecting data, as advised by Gioia et al. (2013). Both authors developed the coding tree and confronted their coding. The data collection as well as data analysis is still on-going. We expect to continue the interviews until we reach data saturation and have explored each category in-depth (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

## RESULTS

In this section, we will present the results of our exploratory research. First of all, we will develop the idea of co-development as a parallel resourcing space in organizations, we will



then expose other benefits of this approach and finally, we will share its limits and conditions of success.

## 1. Co-development: a parallel resourcing space

### 1.1. *A place to take the time*

First of all, co-development allows participants to **take the time to slow-down** their professional pace and concentrate on their own development: *“in a world that goes faster and faster, it is about taking the time to ask, the time to think, the time to listen to others, the time to listen to yourself (...) it is a time for themselves, while usually it is a time for others”* (facilitator 4).

### 1.2. *A safe exploration place*

Another aspect that emerges from our research is the fact that co-development is a **place of exploration and emergence**: *“we let ourselves be carried away by a reflection that is evolving, we do not hold on to anything (...) we do not know where we are going”* (facilitator 3). This experiential philosophy behind co-development stands out particularly when compared to the usual work of these experts: *“we don't find that in our day-to-day”* (expert 3).

Something that emerged in all of our interviews is the fact that co-development is also a **safe place** composed by a balanced blend of trust and benevolence that allows participants to share the subjects that they cannot share elsewhere in the organization: *“a secure place of expression, where confidence reigns, in order to be able to evoke difficult subjects that participants can not necessarily treat either with their hierarchy or with their subordinates”* (facilitator 4).

This **lack of judgement** is also critical for participants to make their fear of judgement disappear and allow themselves to accept their vulnerability and show their weaknesses, something that they do not see as a possibility in their usual work: *“often that is the difference between their daily work and what they find in co-development: security”* (facilitator 6).

### 1.3. *A place of collective intelligence*

Co-development can indeed not be understood without its **collective dimension**. Participants find in it a sense of belonging to a new group with whom they have shared a special experience: *“a co-development group creates a small community a (...) they all shared quite intense moments, very engaging, and at the same time in a pleasant, benevolent climate (...), a history, a common framework, a state of mind, a philosophy”* (facilitator 4). Based on this common experience, co-development also helps participants feel less lonely in their professional difficulties and to develop a valuable network across the organization. Participants experiment the joy of helping and being helped and even facilitators find it a very rewarding activity.

Thanks to this strong connection, each co-development group becomes a place allowing participants to learn from each other's experiences and views. It is a **collective learning space**: *“This questioning (on their professional practices), they cannot do it in real time and they cannot do it alone, they are obliged to have a space of reflection, in the sense of a mirror”* (facilitator 3). This is why the diversity of participants' backgrounds and profiles is absolutely critical: *“the more diverse it is, the more open it is and the more the client will be able to take what he wants in order to be able to move forward”* (facilitator 4).

#### 1.4. *A place of pleasure and well-being*

Co-development is not only seen as an opportunity of learning with peers, but also as a place of **pleasure**: it is *“a resourcing place, the people who participate in this kind of groups generally have a lot of fun being there (...), it is in this place of trust and pleasure in being together that conditions will be met to really progress and learn together”* (facilitator 4).

Moreover, co-development can have direct benefits on participants' **well-being** both in their personal and in their professional lives. For example, one facilitator shared with us the fact that a participant had a burial just before a session and that he preferred to join the session rather than going to his desk. Furthermore, co-development can allow organizations to prevent psychosocial risks and other work-related illnesses.

Some interviewees used **metaphors** to speak about co-development. One facilitator mentioned a **council fire**: *“I like the notion of council fire, like in tribal traditions (...). To hold council does not mean giving advice, precisely, this is what I find strong in this method, it is about supporting the clients in their reflection and not in their decisions”* (facilitator 2). Another facilitator referred to a **rope team**: *“it is like a rope team on a mountain (...). You know that it is steep and challenging and that you need to trust each other because, if someone in the middle falls out, everyone falls. I really have this feeling, and I include myself in, I am also in this rope”* (facilitator 5). An expert chose a **mosaic**: *“in the mosaic you have lots of small pieces and it is those small pieces that will constitute the final image, each one brings one's own tessera to the mosaic and when we do not have all the tesserae and that one is missing, something is missing”* (expert 4). Other metaphors used were a keystone, a cocoon, a boat, a band-aid and a pit stop.

## 2. Other benefits

### 2.1. *Benefits for the organization*

**Silo breaking** emerges as a strong value-added of co-development based on the diversity of participants: *“create networks outside of traditional channels. You can call on people from your co-development group with confidence (...) and bypass a certain organization, so it allows you to cause short circuits in a good sense”* (expert 1). This **agility** can be beneficial not only to the organization, but also to employees: *“the fact of getting out of these silos, of this organization, it simply feels good (...) and it allows to co-create solutions that will work and to create cohesion outside the classic hierarchical structure”* (expert 1). Co-development also contributes to organizational efficiency by unlocking situations: *“these are solutions that we find internally. Top leaders tend to think that we will have more answers asking an external consultant. Now we put value back on the individuals and the organization”* (expert 7).

From a Human Resource perspective, co-development has also an impact on **employee engagement and retention**. It is seen by participants as a useful development opportunity and an investment and recognition from the company towards them. One data science expert even shared with us that he was planning to leave the company before joining this program, that co-development was his preferred component, and that after this experience, he decided to stay in the organization.

Co-development can also contribute to the evolution of **organizational culture**, taking into account its multiplying effect: *“it can have a very strong impact in terms of cultural change in the company. We have about a hundred facilitators, if each one facilitates groups of nine or ten people, very quickly, we can reach one thousand (...) in one single session”* (facilitator 1).

Furthermore, when the Board of an organization is directly involved, this can have a strong impact too: *“the CEO told me that the way of working of that committee had radically changed, namely the quality of dialogue and reciprocal listening”* (facilitator 4).

Although they find it difficult to calculate it, interviewees agree on the high **return on investment** (ROI) of co-development: *“it is a gain in time and in efficiency. You save time because your approach subjects differently and because, through the network you have created, you can knock on the right doors much faster. When I speak of increased efficiency, it is because, as your brain is trained to think in different ways, it will go faster ”* (expert 5).

## **2.2. Benefits for participants**

A certain **number of competences appear at the very core of co-development** such as active listening, questioning, receiving feedback and sharing complex subjects with non-technical audiences. Paying a close attention to all aspects of verbal and non-verbal communication both as a speaker and a listener also appear a key competence. Finally, empathy is seen as critical too.

Co-development also gives participants the opportunity to **challenge their usual way of thinking**, and **reinforce the trust in themselves** thanks to the watchful and supportive dynamics of the group: *“codev also allowed me to gain confidence, to tell to myself that I have resources that others can use and there are sessions where I go out and it feels good, we are even happy, but we are also tired because it sometimes turns things upside down”* (expert 1).

Another benefit mentioned by participants is that co-development is a very natural **discovery of reflective practices**: *“It concerns both business and introspection, but in a very natural way. It is not very easy to succeed in getting people to work on these more introspective dimensions out of nowhere, whereas here, through this “excuse”, a concrete business problematic, they go very smoothly in this direction, on this level”* (facilitator 1). As sessions progress, participants get more familiar with co-development and often refer to it as “codev”. Practitioners also agree on the fact that co-development contributes to reinforcing their **self-knowledge and self-awareness**.

While some interviewees find co-development useful for any employee, other consider it particularly suited for experts: *“yes, codev is very useful for experts, I think it is necessary! Experts, by default, are not necessarily people who have a lot of empathy, people who know how to structure well a message or make it accessible to all audiences”* (expert 1).

We present in the below table (Table 3) some key differences between co-development and other aspects of the organizational life emerging from our research.

**Table 3: The opposition between co-development and its outside corporate context**

| <b>Co-development as a parallel resourcing space</b>                                      | <b>The outside corporate context</b>   |
|---|--|
| A place to take the time and slow-down and reflect  | Lack of time and usual urgency management  |
| A safe place, free of judgement, welcoming vulnerability and allowing experimentation     | Fear of judgement, impression of needing to “be strong” and results orientation      |
| Orientation towards listening and reflecting  | Orientation towards speaking and solving problems                                    |
| A place of collective intelligence, learning, diversity and openness                      | Individual performance orientation, restricted vision                                |
| A place of pleasure and well-being  | Pressure on performance and stress   |
| A place of silo breaking, organizational agility and new solutions coming from the inside | Organizational silos, heaviness and part of the solutions sought outside the company |
| Employee engagement, reinforced trust in themselves and new ways of thinking              | Employees sometimes tired and or discouraged and reproducing usual thinking patterns |
| Long term organizational culture evolution  | Short-term pattern reproduction  |
| High return on investment and effectiveness   | Costly and less effective development initiatives                                    |

### 3. Conditions and limits

#### 3.1. Success factors and conditions

First and foremost, the most critical factor linked to the success of co-development is the respect of its **specific methodology, framework and principles**: *"It is formidable. I have facilitated dozens of sessions and not once, it did not work, not once, either it works very well, or it works really really well, but not once did it not work, it shows that there is something very well thought out in this methodology"* (facilitator 1).

Another key factor for this methodology to succeed is to have the **support of executives as well as managers** in the organization. It is important that managers explicitly back this initiative, promote and value it so that employees can realistically have the time to benefit from it in the right conditions.

Third, the skills and style of the **facilitator** is also a success factor. This person is in charge of making sure that co-development framework and principles are respected, while also ensuring that key values such trust, benevolence or respect are present along the sessions.

Finally, for co-development to succeed it has to be **voluntary** for participants. Co-development is about introspection and reflective practice at work and each collaborator needs to be able to decide whether they want to experience this approach or not.

### 3.2. *Limits*

One important limit identified is that co-development is **not relevant for all subjects**. For example, there are highly complex or technical organizational subjects that may not benefit from the added-value of co-development. Furthermore, some issues may be connected to more profound underlying factors that the time and the format of co-development may not be able to cover. For this reason, participants are sometimes encouraged to work with a coach when co-development ends.

Another limit is that co-development is **not suitable for all employees**. Co-development requires participants to have a certain openness towards personal development subjects, as well as being comfortable with principles such as feeling exposed, trusting each other or respecting a specific framework, what may not be the priority for some employees.

Furthermore, co-development is **not relevant for all contexts or organizations** either. A facilitator tells us that *“it is not the universal panacea, it is a means at the service of an objective” (facilitator 4)* and that it is not adapted for companies “not believing” in collective learning or organizations encouraging competition among participants.

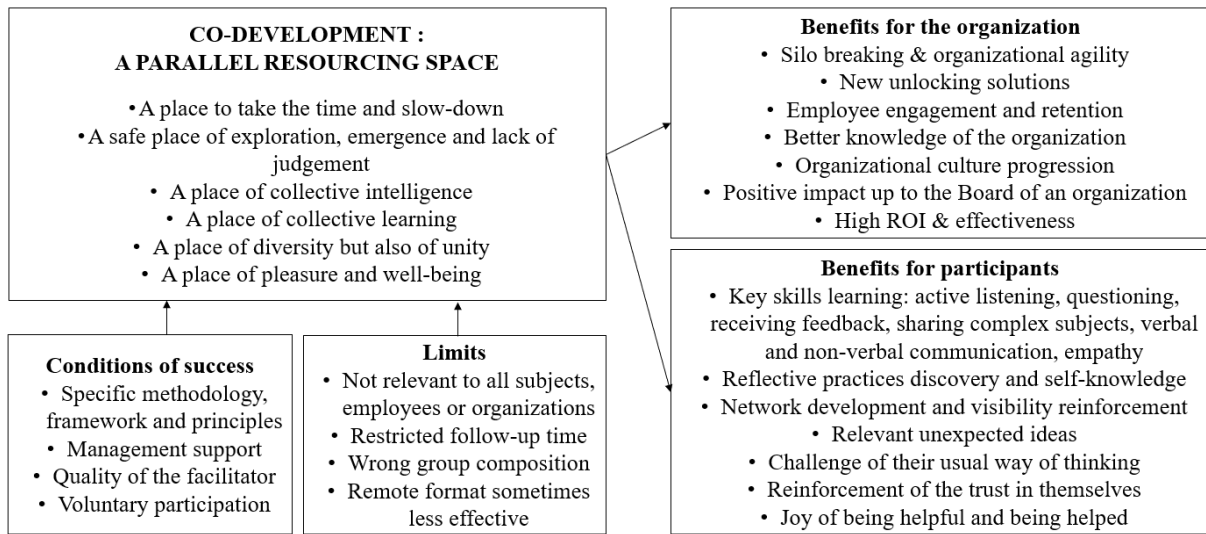
Another limit of co-development is that the sharing of how subjects progress is **restricted in time**. The “client” usually shares with the group in the session after how the “client” subject is progressing, but for time reasons, this cannot be done later than that, which impedes the sharing of more long-term benefits.

Another limit identified is that a **wrong composition of a group** will make co-development fail. For example, if groups are composed by sales professionals who are in competition, their business stakes will pollute the dynamics of the group. Also, participants should be peers with no hierarchical link.

A final limit is that, according to interviewees’ perception, **remote sessions** are less effective than face-to-face ones, unless trust has been created in the first face-to-face two or three sessions, as was the case during the Covid-19 crisis. In such cases, participants acknowledged that remote sessions allowed participants to get more intimate as they felt *“protected behind their screen”* (expert 7).

The analysis of the data of the single-case study enabled us to investigate how a reflective practice can benefit both the individuals – expert talents in our case – and the organization, as well as the success conditions and limits. We propose a figure to summarize these results (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Summary of key results**



## DISCUSSION

The results of the single-case study bring interesting elements for talent management, and in particular the management of expert talent. The talent management literature streams point out the fact that being identified as a talent has positive consequences (see e.g. Dries, Van Acker, et al., 2012). But more recent papers have highlighted that being a talent also comes with increased stress and pressure (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018; Painter- Morland et al., 2019). The present study shows that including reflective practices such as co-development may counter those negative “side effects” associated with the talent status. Providing employees a safe place can therefore bring freedom of speech and the possibility of honest dialog and interactions which may enhance the well-being of talent. In our case, it appeared that such benefits may be particularly needed for experts, who may feel lonely and receive less consideration than managerial talents (Dries et al., 2012), although their competencies are key for the company’s competitive advantage (Boxall & Steeneveld, 1999). Moreover, reflective practices such as co-development are not costly and can continue even after a talent management program, therefore countering the common low continuity of talent management practices causing disappointment and disengagement of talents over the long run (Bonneton et al., 2019).

Another salient point in our results is the importance of the collective and the sense of belonging to a group. Participants highlighted that they are quite isolated in their daily working life, and having co-development sessions in a group strengthened their sense of belonging to a community. Harvey & Maclean (2010) described a corporate community as: “*a defined set of individuals with shared values, assumptions and beliefs, whose interests, whether material, aesthetic or ideological, are bound together*” (p. 107). Belonging to a community can also reduce the aforementioned feeling of loneliness described both in the case of talents and experts. Belonging to the community may reduce the natural reluctance of individuals to share information, as ways of doing are at the heart of the individual performance (Detchessahar, 2003).

Having discussion spaces within organizations can clearly contribute to employee well-being (Detchessahar, 2013), exactly as our interviewees depicted it. We highlighted in the results section of the present paper the importance of metaphors in the content of the interviews, as participants spontaneously depicted the co-development process with the help of such figures of speech. This may be a sign of the expression of a “*vivid and memorable*” experience (Ortony, 1975). Moreover, metaphors can be effective in the management practice and in problem-solving, especially when used in a spontaneous way (Morgan, 2011). Indeed, metaphors may appear as necessary for participants (and not just a nice way of telling their experience of co-development), because “*they allow the transfer of coherent chunks of characteristics – perceptual, cognitive, emotional and experiential – from a vehicle which is known to a topic which is less so*” (Ortony, 1975, p. 53). It may consequently be evidence of the strength of the co-development practice, as it offers a way to access emotional realities (Tietze et al., 2003).

Furthermore, taking an organizational perspective, we found in our study that co-development has strong benefits for the organizations, and not just the individuals. First, we found that co-development groups can contribute to the creation of knowledge. As Nonaka (1994) underlined, creating a team where mutual trust reigns can facilitate dialog, consequently enabling knowledge creation. Therefore, implementing talent development processes such as co-development as we described it can facilitate the creation of group knowledge, highly beneficial for the organization. Moreover, in the case of big and highly decentralized organizations such as banks organized around different business units, collective reflective practices can provide agility and consequently overcome the organizational silos preventing information to circulate smoothly within the organization. Indeed, silos are known to hinder internal collaboration and organizational learning, and thereupon, burden organizations’ performance and sustainability (de Waal et al., 2019). Co-development groups or other collective talent development practices gathering participants from different parts of the organization can consequently have a positive impact on organizational performance in overcoming silos.

Finally, while agreeing with the economic, practical and human benefits of co-development identified by Payette & Champagne (1997), this research contributes to a better understanding of this parallel resourcing space through an in-depth analysis of the perception of 13 participants highly involved in these groups. This also allows us to identify new organizational benefits such as silo breaking and agility as well as deeper benefits for participants, such as the reinforcement of their well-being. Moreover, this research contributes to enrich the understanding of the success conditions of co-development, such as the key importance of management and top management support, as well as some of its limits such as the impact of remote sessions, for example in a pandemic context.

Despite its contributions, our research has several limitations. First, as a single case-study research lead in a multinational company, our results may not be generalizable to other contexts (Eisenhardt, 1991). We propose here a contextualized empirical research, which is highly needed in the field (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020) especially since talent management is a response to the macro-environment of organizations (Dejoux & Thévenet, 2010). There are several specificities: first, the banking environment may be specific and present a particularly turbulent environment (Bikker & Haaf, 2002) , which may accentuate the opposition with co-development that we describe in our results (see Table 3). Consequently, future research could be extended to other industries and study if the dichotomy between those two “worlds” is as salient as in our case. Moreover, we followed a qualitative research design, and we consequently studied the perception of individuals, and we didn’t measure objectively the link between the exposure to the exposure to co-development and dependent

variables such as employee engagement, turnover intention, well-being... Further quantitative research could objectively measure those relationships.

Second, our study explored co-development practices in the frame of an expert talent management program. Even if we focused our questions in the interview on the very practice of co-development, some of the benefits are closely linked to the fact that it happened within a program. Although taking a magnifying glass and looking precisely on one single talent development practice, it may be hard to isolate it from the set of talent management practices entailed in the whole program. Future research could investigate if our results still apply in the case of co-development for any other segment of employees.

Despite these limitations, our research helps gain an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms and dynamics taking place in co-development groups. Our study can consequently be considered as an extreme case worth studying (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Our research has two main theoretical contributions, adding insights to both the talent management and the reflective practice research streams. First, we explore the field of reflective practices in the case of talent management, which is, to our knowledge, a still under-researched stream. We showed that reflective practices have many positive outcomes for the individuals, which benefit to well-being. We propose insights on how to counter the possible negative effects of being identified as talent on the individual level (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018), thanks to the implementation of specific reflective talent development practices, such as co-development.

Second, we propose a theoretical model describing the mechanisms explaining how a reflective practice, co-development, can bring positive outcomes both at the individual and at the organizational level. This happens via the establishment of a safe place out of the daily turbulent environment and conveying totally opposed characteristics, where individuals can truly be themselves and express their concerns without any judgment, consequently increasing both the well-being and the individual performance but also providing the organization agility as well as increased effectiveness.

Finally, our research has strong managerial implications. Our results provide insights to talent learning and development teams on how they can design talent management practices that can provide benefits to both the individuals and their organizations. Moreover, the investment both in terms of time and budget appears very limited, while ensuring the continuity of talent development over time. Our study also shows that co-development is a powerful practice once the key success factors and limits of the method have been considered for implementation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research contributes to explore the under-researched use of reflective practices in talent management. More specifically, this paper studies in-depth the benefits, the limits and the success conditions of co-development groups in expert talent management. To do so, we first thoroughly reviewed the talent management and reflective practices literature fields. Second, we rigorously analysed empirical data, namely interviews with co-development participants. Finally, we proposed a detailed description of the individual, collective and organizational dynamics of co-development based on our empirical research, which we summarized in a theoretical model. Despite some limitations, this work also contributes to a recent research



stream in talent management studying how possible negative effects of talent management can be counterbalanced.

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