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Brain Drain, Talent Mobility And Academic Networking

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ABSTRACT

Talent is the key to economic development and the network built among talents is the resource crucial for national competitiveness. Talent is highly mobile and a more talented individual tends to show higher tendency to move on and respond to better economic opportunities. Therefore, managing talent is a challenging job. This paper examines the evolution of brain drain to talent mobility and also analyses talent networking for a special group of talent, that is, academics. The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature and patterns of academic networking, and the challenges in forming and maintaining this network.

Introduction

In this era, probably the most hotly debated topic in any contemporary business economic forum, besides the debt crisis, is the talent crisis. In the World Economic Forum, Schwab stated: "... the world is moving from capitalism to talentism" (World Economic Forum, 2012). Talent crisis is widely recognized as today's problem rather than a problem of the future. It

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has resulted not only from talent shortage in the labor market, but most importantly, from skills gap or mismatch. On one hand, people are complaining about the difficulty in finding a job while on the other hand, companies are lamenting about the difficulties that they face in finding the right people to fill vacancies. This talent constraint is one of the key reasons preventing companies from innovating and exploring market opportunities (PwC, 2012). No one can make an argument about the importance of talent in economic development. But the question arises, what is talent? Generally, human talent refers to a highly educated and skilled person, who has distinct capacity to acquire new knowledge and learn quickly, to create new ideas as well as produce high economic value products (Kuznetsov and Sabel, 2006; Salimano, 2008). Many terms are associated with talent, such as human capital, knowledge workers, experts and professionals. In addition to this, there are many types of talent such as technical talent, scientists, academics, entrepreneurs and cultural talents (Solimano, 2008). In this paper, talent is used as a general term to refer to skilled knowledge workers. We will focus on one specific type of talent; namely academics, while discussing the nature of networking among talents. Talent is a source of innovation, creativity, and a key to success and competitive advantage in today's knowledge-based economy. Quoted from McKinsey & Company, Inc. (2001) "We have found repeatedly that having strong talent in key positions creates huge improvements in performance". The competition for talented people is becoming more intense than ever before. At the same time, talent is highly mobile. The intensity and patterns of mobility have changed significantly in the wake of advancement in information communication technology, cheaper transportation cost, expanding globalization activities and more integrated labor markets worldwide.

In the quest for talent, governments are developing various attractive schemes and policies. As far as companies are concerned, they are engaging in proactive talent management practices. On the other side, individuals are seeking opportunities to upgrade their own value. The relentless competition for talent is changing the way it is being managed; from the protectionist approach to reduce brain drain, to more open approach in managing talent mobility and nurturing talent networking, many new issues have risen. For instance: What are the obstacles in talent mobility? How to create a win-win strategy in dealing with talent mobility? How to promote networking and improve connection among talents? This paper examines three interconnected issues, namely brain drain, talent mobility and networking. The main objective of this paper is to provide an insight into the nature, patterns and problems associated with talent mobility and networking. A special group of talent has been studied in this paper for the development of networking framework. The focus is on academics because academics are highly mobile and it is common for academics to form various

types of collaborative relationships. But it is to be noted that there are many questions linked with these collaborations among academics that need to be answered, such as, to what extent such collaborations are formed? How such networks are formed? How effective are government programs and institutional efforts in facilitating knowledge networking?

After effective deliberations with several academics, we are able to provide a preliminary understanding on the patterns of academic networking and challenges in forming and maintaining this network as well as some suggestions to harness fruitful connection between academics. This paper is organized into different sections. The next section discusses brain drain and its evolution to talent mobility. It is followed by discussion on academic networking. The last section of this paper concludes the study.

From Brain Drain to Talent Mobility

For decades and for various reasons, people have been moving across national borders. Both push and pull factors associated with personal considerations, socioeconomic, cultural and political issues have contributed to such movements. According to the World Bank statistics, more than 215 million people in the world are international migrants (World Bank, 2011). Empirical evidences have often demonstrated that migration involves permanent movement of intellectual workers in one direction from developing to developed countries, particularly OECD countries and at a scale that would endanger the development in the home country in the long term (Carrington and Detragiache, 1999; OECD, 2002; Jalowiecki and Gorzelak, 2004; Leipziger, 2008; Solimano, 2008). Hence, international migration is often associated with the reduction of the stock of human capital in sending countries, which is termed as "brain drain". Based on the estimate provided by Lowell, Findlay, and Stewart (2004), about 10% of the tertiary educated elites living in advanced countries, particularly North America, Western Europe and Australia in 2001, were born in developing countries. About 40% of India's emigrants had education above high school level (Economist, 2011). The scale of talent migration is pretty staggering. Since the term "brain drain" was first introduced by the British Royal Society to indicate the massive outflow of scientists and highly educated persons from Europe to North America, the conventional view has often regarded brain drain as harmful to the migrant's home country. There are sufficient but not substantial amount of studies and literature to showcase the asymmetric effects of brain drain on sending and receiving countries. Generally, sending countries bear decline in potential contributions made by highly educated people in social, economic, political, cultural, scientific and educational development in the home country. On the other hand, receiving countries benefit from the knowledge and skills of these highly skilled migrants, without investing too much on

them. Brain drain causes greater divergence and greater inequality in income distribution between developed and developing countries. In order to reduce the damage caused by brain drain, some governments have taken protectionist approaches to restrict, limit or discourage emigration of skilled workers to other countries. For example, in the old days, the authorities could threaten potential emigrants with the death penalty (Jalowiecki and Gorzelak, 2004).

However, there are also counter arguments on the relative advantages and disadvantages of brain drain on sending countries and receiving countries. One argument is that sending countries greatly benefit from the remittances received from emigrants for domestic development. In addition to this, other positive externalities in sending countries include greater incentive to invest in higher education due to positive migration prospects and this may result in the accumulation of human capital in the home country. On the other hand, receiving countries may suffer from overcrowding effects which cause higher unemployment in the labor market. Based on this argument, the idea of migration seems to be a zero-sum game. In fact, there is no conclusive finding on the negative and positive effects of talent migration, especially when we open up the discussion to more than one-way flow of knowledge workers. Lowell, Findlay, and Stewart (2004) called it "brain strain" rather than brain drain to reflect both the positive and negative consequences of two-way flow of talents.

Basically, the phenomena of brain drain was built on the premise that it engages only a one way linear directional flow of talented people, from peripheral to core countries, which resulted in net permanent loss to sending countries. In today's global context, what is more relevant is multiple-way talent mobility or "brain circulation" (The Royal Society, 2011). Due to increasing accessibility to travel, communication and open door policies of many countries, movement of people is not limited to one way flow only. People are constantly on the move, especially skilled knowledge workers. Theoretically, multiple direction movements of talented individuals in response to better economic opportunities create optimal resource allocation, encourage skills transfer, exchange of ideas and reduce skills mismatch. As mentioned earlier, talent crisis is partly due to skills mismatch at company and national levels. The existence of critical gaps between skills acquired by employees and required by businesses creates massive challenges for individuals, businesses and governments. From brain drain, the focus has now shifted to managing talent mobility. The need for talent movement is more critical than ever before as the world is becoming increasingly integrated and interconnected. It is generally accepted that well managed talent mobility strategy will provide win-win strategy for all parties involved in the game.

Talent Mobility and Networking

Moving talents are valuable economic, political and social agents. They are not only bridging skills gap but also connecting the world. Solimano (2008) wrote, "economic development is about mobilizing valuable resources...".

Talent mobility is a powerful term; it covers different types of movement, such as (i) physical movement (people moving physically within and across organization, countries and industries, both nationally and globally), (ii) professional movement (people moving across occupations and skill sets), (iii) job movement (people moving from unemployment to employment, moving jobs to people) and (iv) virtual movement (knowledge and skills moving without physical movement of people), (World Economic Forum, 2012). Essentially, all variables are brought back to the same equation, which is to solve the imbalances in the human capital markets (World Economic Forum, 2012). Solimano (2008) provides an encompassing analysis on the determinants of talent mobility. Generally, individuals consider the following factors in making a decision related to movement: (i) earning and development gaps (whether income difference justifies the cost of movement and whether living standard and productive potential differences are substantial), (ii) personal factors (whether family responsibility, personal experiences, expectations and goals support the move), (iii) career prospects (the potential to produce better output and move up the career ladder), (iv) concentration effects (whether there is enough critical mass of professional peers and opportunity to interact with quality peers in order to upgrade one's own skills), (v) signaling effect (whether mobility offers greater reputation and recognition), (vi) socio-cultural affinity (whether there is obstacle in language or cultural differences), (vii) network of contacts (whether there is possibility to associate with international elite of talent), and (viii) policy regimes (whether policies in home and host countries are friendly to talent mobility).

As highlighted above, the mobility decision is determined by a mixture of social, economic, political, cultural and individual concerns. It is a complex decision making process. However, understanding the motivations and considerations behind talent mobility would greatly assist businesses and countries in designing appropriate strategies, measures and instruments to attract, retain and engage talent in the process of development. In the current context, we observed the co-existence of huge unemployment and/or underemployment on one hand and talent shortages in many industries on the other hand. The mismatch resulted in misuse of talent or untapped human resources for productive activities. Most probably, the clue to solve this labor market puzzle relies on finding effective mechanisms to optimize talent flow. However, the World Economic Forum (2012) has pointed out that at least two fundamental

issues have led to limit talent mobility. The first one is the existence of public and private interventions that constrain the mobility. Apparent examples are special visa requirements imposed by some countries or special qualification certification made mandatory by some industries. The other is the existence of information gap in the labor market. Employees face lack of information about current and future skills and needs, while employers do not have enough information about the capabilities of employees. To overcome talent mobility challenges, World Economic Forum has recommended establishment of platforms to connect various stakeholders in order to solve the problem through collaborative efforts. Indeed, connection and collaboration are essential in today's economy. As mentioned earlier, talent mobility provides a possible solution to talent crisis and would contribute to more optimal resource allocation. However, to benefit from them, network must be built to connect the moving nodes. Talent connections through formal or information links, physical or virtual networks, diaspora communities or professional groups, are useful in transferring information, generating new ideas, sharing technology, stimulating innovation and resolving global problems (The Royal Society, 2011). However, the puzzles is; how to create and maintain such connections? The Royal Society (2011) comments that despite the fact that the connectivity and collaboration among scientists is becoming increasingly important, still little is known about the nature and dynamics of these networks. This paper attempts to take up the challenge to explore these issues. There are different types of talent. Each type of talent has different characteristics and needs different mechanisms for network formation. As such, we have decided to focus on one special group of talent, i.e., academics, for our study on networking issues.

A Study on Academic Networking

As defined by Solimano (2008), "academic talent" widely includes students, professors, researchers and scientists, whose workstation is located in universities, laboratories or research institutes. In this paper, our target group consists of scholars who are teaching and doing research in Malaysian universities. A total of 28 academics from various disciplines, holding different positions in the universities (from lecturers to Vice Chancellors) and having different years of working experiences, were selected randomly from five different universities in Malaysia. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to reveal the motivations, challenges and patterns of networking among academics. From feedback received during the interviews, we observed the following trends:

i. Motivation

Generally, collaboration and networking is a norm in academia. Since most of the issues that we are facing now are much more complex, the scope as well as scale of the research ques-

tions often required multidisciplinary analysis in a broader perspective. Although not totally impossible, it is relatively more difficult to produce quality research without collaborative effort. In addition to this, there are also other reasons that motivate academics to work in a team instead of doing solo work. This is done with a view to increase productivity and impact of the research, share research equipment, and gain greater recognition and visibility. Most of the respondents gave positive reasons for collaboration. However, a small number of respondents informed us that they are forced to work in a team in order to fulfill the KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) set by the university in which they are providing their services.

ii. Network Structure

The network can be either random or non-random. Normally, young (junior) academics and those from social sciences background are less specific about their research partners and requirements for collaboration. They are more willing to work with whoever shows interest in collaborating with them and they are less certain about the outcome. Such academics are following the random walk model in networking. On the other hand, senior academics, especially those from medical or science background, are more determined to work with certain partners or topics and may not accept requests for collaboration easily without knowing the researchers in person. They follow a systematic or more predictable network pattern.

iii. Network Formation

Networks can be formed either through bottom-up approach or top-down approach. The bottom-up approach is widely adopted where academics initiate and organize informal linkage first and bring it to the university level for official endorsement when the network is matured, stabilized and working well. On the other hand, there is also top-down approach where the universities organize academics into purposeful research groups. This approach is typically used when the universities have specific research goals to achieve.

iv. Platform

There are various platforms for academics to form network with colleagues. The most popular places for academics to find potential collaborators are conferences, seminars or workshops. Conferences play an important role in connecting academics as it is specially designed to bring researchers working in the same or related areas together, hence the matching probability is higher. Personal contact is another effective platform where colleagues, friends and even students play a role to connect academics. Another increasingly important platform is social media. Many respondents said they are connected via LinkedIn,

Google Scholar or Facebook. Some respondents identified their partners by going through journals. After reading an article, an author seeks possibility for joint research with article writer or other forms of collaborations. But many respondents have complained about the high failure rate of this method as most of the authors chose not to respond to the invitation. Government initiatives such as fellowship and research funding are important platforms as well, but they are more useful for senior academics who have accumulated enough credential records to compete for limited opportunities. Other less visible platforms are R&D collaboration offices in universities, professional associations and alumni networks.

v. Network Strength

There are both strong and weak ties in a network relationship. Strong ties entice highly committed members to nurture a lasting relationship. The strong ties are built based on trust, sharing of common interests, respect for each other and other positive attitudes such as willingness to share, take risk, invest in the relationship and act as open minded individuals. Most of the strong ties originate from informal networks based on bottom-up approach and these ties are more successful in achieving network objectives. On the other hand, some respondents shared their experiences of dealing with weak network where there is loose interaction, lack of sharing of responsibility and lack of team commitment. The weak ties emerge from formal arrangement or the random network model where team members do not know each other very well. The weak ties normally die out after a while and it is a waste of effort for those who put too much effort in them.

vi. Network Maintenance

Many respondents recognize that the success of a relationship depends heavily on personal effort. And they are willing to invest time and effort to maintain the relationship. Geographical distance is no longer an issue as many respondents cited that they are using email, Facebook and/or Skype to communicate with their partners. However, despite the increasing popularity of virtual networking, the importance of physical meetings and interactions is emphasized at the same time by the respondents. Therefore, respondents will arrange regular meetings, conferences, social gathering, study group or short term visiting to keep the network active.

vii. Challenges

There are many challenges in managing academic networking, right from identifying to forming and maintaining the network. Basically, lack of information impedes the effort to identify the right partner, and a lot of time and energy has been wasted in searching for

collaborators. There are insufficient databases about professionals, either at institutional level or government agencies level. There are also not enough platforms or opportunities for academics (especially young academics) to explore and form the network. Funding and other supporting services for networking are also limited. Both ecosystem and performance evaluation criteria are not favorable for academics networking, as the outcomes from networking are often not immediate, direct, concrete and visible.

Conclusion

At a time when the global economy is getting more integrated and industries are moving from production to knowledge-based industries, the most important currency for wealth creation is talent. However, attracting and retaining talent is a challenging job as talent is highly mobile. The old practice of limiting talent mobility to prevent brain drain is dying out. Strategies have been suggested to optimize talent flow and to build networks for linking up the talents. Network among talents is increasingly seen as a resource crucial for the competitiveness of modern nations. This paper examines a special type of talent, and explores the nature and patterns of academic networking. Generally, it is common for academics to form networks with colleagues from the same institution. Local or international researchers help them to improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of their research work and their teaching performances as well. Personal effort is fundamental in developing and maintaining the network. There are many ways for academics to form their networks, but the most effective way is through personal contacts and/or recommendations by colleagues, mentors or even students. Building up a strong network takes time and it works well when there is trust element embedded in the relationship. Social media plays an important role in academic networking but physical interaction remains vital. Even though the primary driver for successful networking is academics itself, universities should play more active role to promote and nurture academics networking. It is found that universities are not providing enough support to facilitate academic networking, especially to young academics, despite stating enhancement of scientific collaboration and networking as their mission. Bureaucratic and rigid systems often drive away potential collaborators and the desire to involve in networking activities. Although the findings presented in this paper are limited to a small number of sources, but as the respondents represent academics from different backgrounds, progressing at their career path, the results shed some light on the nature, patterns as well as challenges of academic networking, which may be useful for future research.

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