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Best Practices in the ICT Consultancy Sector to Engage Star Talents

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One of Finland's business strengths is the know-how on IT business, but lately, the industry has suffered from rapid talent turnover. The labor market is highly competitive, and it creates more challenges for the organizations to keep their talents in the organization. ICT consultancy is a branch of IT businesses, with knowledge-intensive competences, where the capabilities of a single employee may be creating a competitive advantage in business. Organizations want to keep these star talents, but operating in a challenging business environment gives extra concerns.

The objective of the Thesis was to find out what the organizations from the ICT consultancy sector do to engage their talents. The outcome of the study was to provide best practices for engaging star talents.

The thesis was carried out using Action research methodology, with an aim to provide important knowledge for business practitioners. To better understand the business problem, existing knowledge was studied to build up the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework focused on exploring the theories behind star talent management, why the companies should be interested in their stars, and the theories to increase employee engagement.

Then, the current state analysis of the business context was examined by conducting interviews with the professionals in the ICT consultancy business. At the Thesis proposals stage, these two patterns compared, what is theoretically found as an effective method, and what the business practitioners view as working in the real life.

As a result, best practices for ICT consultancy companies to engage their star talents were developed. It was found that the organizations have a similar perspective of what kind of talents make the stars in the industry, and also what constitutes the needs of the organization. The thesis findings highlighted the importance of management and leadership, and the organization's ability to give a feeling of meaningful work. Other factors that were seen as important were the rewarding either in a form of recognition or financially, and the offering of competitive benefits.

| Keywords | Star talent, employee engagement, talent turnover |

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1   Introduction

In the Finnish business context, the lack of a competent workforce in the IT business has been a hot potato during the past few years. One of Finland's business strengths is know-how in IT technologies, and due to the digital revolution in every industry, the need for a talented workforce is growing rapidly in IT companies. The issue has been noticed in the Finnish Government, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment targeted a program in 2018 to find methods to solve issues on the unsatisfying talent markets. (City of Helsinki 2018; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2018)

As the digital revolution goes on, the ICT consultancy companies are providing know-how and solutions for several industries in the country. This causes constant growing demand for skilled labor, and consequently, the employees are competed and eagerly sourced from the competitors. As a result, the ICT consultancy companies suffer from a high employee turnover rate, annually 15-20%, even as high as 30% (Hagberg 2020). These two issues together, the lack of workforce and high employee turnover rate, has tilted the recruiting markets so that employers are bending over backward to make talents interested in them (Hagberg 2020), and has driven the companies to the war of talent (Aho 2021).

The companies need new talents, they freshen up the culture and bring new perspectives to the doing, a newcomer brings much-needed outsiders views to the organization. To avoid the organization to become hermetic, a healthy amount of employee turnover is needed. But when the employee flow is too often from the company, the costs of hiring new talents become high; hiring and training a newcomer takes money and time before the new employee is yielding profit for the organization. If the leaver is one of the key talents from the organization, the value of the know-how they take with them is not easily replaceable, and the consequences can be severe. Losing a key talent from the organization can cause a snowball effect, and cause first low-quality products or services, and then rapidly lead to the loss of customers (Aho 2021).

In the relatively short period of time, the way we work has changed from monotonous tasks in manufacturing industries to operations that require a very high level of knowledge, and in parallel, the employment markets have become employee-driven; today's employees are aware of their value and are moving fast if they do not feel engaged to their employer. In the new millennium and globalized business environment, people

might be the only source for competitive advantage for businesses (Whittington & Galpin 2010). This has raised the interest in employee engagement on organizations studied globally, employee engagement is named as their 2nd most important business challenge (Schwartz, Bersin & Pelster 2014). This is a challenge also noticed in the ICT consultancy sector, and engaging and motivating employees is seen as an effective method for reducing employee turnover (Hagberg 2020).

Some talents of an organization are worth letting go of, but there are some key talents in the organization, star performers, whose departure would have a meaningful negative impact on the organization. Truly talented employees are rare, difficult and expensive to replace, and can easily encourage other colleagues to depart once leaving the organization (Wigert 2018). These highly talented employees have skills the competing organizations are also interested in, and this increases the speed of key talent to leave if feeling disengaged. Wigert (2018, p.1) summarizes the importance '*when your best employees are not engaged, they are as likely to leave your organization as your employees who tend to have performance issues and are unhappy*'.

Why organizations are, and should be, interested in their key talents? Business practice suggests that key talents improve a company´s profitability through their expertise, experience, and innovativeness (Tzabbar & Baburaj 2020), and their impact can make or break the organizational success, have an impact on long-term sustainability and the survival of the organization (Aguinis & Bradley 2015). The star performers are not necessarily the most talented or have the most potential, but they can translate their talent to outcomes favorable to business success (Elliott & Folsom 2013).

Therefore, this thesis focuses on helping businesses to understand how to effectively engage their talents and sharing best practices for engaging star talents.

1.1   Business Challenge

ICT Consultancy as a business was chosen for this study because it is one branch of the IT industries, which is publicly discussed to have talent issues, and they are also publicly known to suffer from the high-turnover rate. It is also a knowledge-based business, where an individual employee can bring remarkable results for the hiring company, a type of business where these key talents are intensely competed for. The chosen industry operates in a very challenging environment, and studying the chosen industry gives

valuable information on what organizations can do to keep their valuable stars, even when operating in a demanding business-environment.

1.2 Objective and Outcome of the Study

The objective of the study is *to investigate what companies operating in the ICT consultancy sector in Finland are doing to engage their star performers*. The study is based on literature review and exploring the existing best practices of the ICT sector to clarify how businesses can engage their talents.

The outcome of the study is a set of best practices in the ICT consultancy sector how to engage star talents.

1.3 Thesis Outline

This Thesis is written in six sections. Section 1 is the introduction. Section 2 presents the research design of the Thesis. This section explains the methods used in the study, what kind of information is needed from existing theories, how the data is gathered, and how the reliability and validity of the study are taken into account. Section 3 builds the Conceptual Framework of the Thesis, based on a review of existing knowledge around the Thesis topic. It discusses what is considered as a Star talent, why companies are and should be interested in them, the leading theories for increasing employee engagement, and efficient methods to increase employee engagement in an organization. Section 4 presents the results of the Current State Analysis, based on the analysis of the data gathered from the real-life business context, how the chosen ICT Consultancy industry companies are doing these things in practice, and how interviewed professionals view these topics in real life: what is a Star in ICT Consultancy business, and how the organizations engage them. Section 5, Building the Proposal, contain a report on the process where the existing knowledge is measured against the practice to reveal how the companies are efficiently working with the topics. At the end of this section, the Thesis proposals are presented. Section 6 contains the results of validation and the final proposal. The last section summarizes the study, gives practical implications, and presents the thesis evaluation.

1.4   Key Terms

Star talent   Elite of the employees, individuals who contribute with a dis-proportionate amount to the outcome and whose perfor-mance is exceptional.

Talent turnover   Measurement rate of employees, who leave the organization during a year.

Employee engagement   Extent of how passionate employee feels about their work, how committed they are to the organization, and how much effort they put to their work.

2 Research Design

This section describes the research design, the methods used for data collection and analysis, and discusses the validity and reliability of the study.

2.1 Research Approach

This study is an applied empirical research which follows the Gate model which is in use at Metropolia University of Applied Sciences. The Gate model is built of seven gates, which the research process follows.
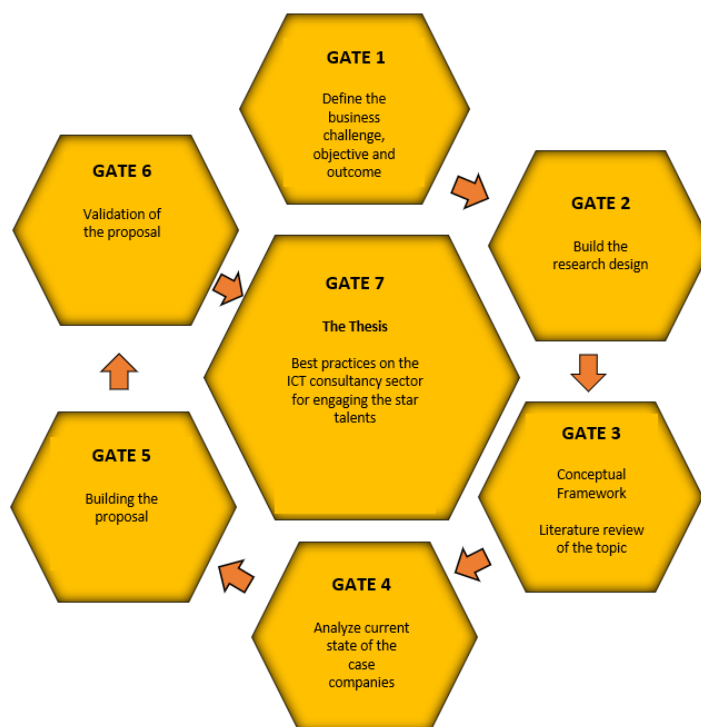
Figure 1. Gate model used in Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, Master's Degree program in Business Informatics (2021).

At the first and the second gates, the business challenge is defined, the objective and the outcome of the study are set out, and the research design is developed. At gate three, existing knowledge, literature, and previous studies on the topic are studied to synthesize a Conceptual framework that will guide the study in further stages. The next gate, number four, is the current state analysis of the selected companies. Over the next two gates, the proposal for businesses is build up and validated. The final gate is the

final text, where the best practices on the ICT consultancy industry in Finland for engaging the star performers are presented. Each gate and the progress on it are presented at gate seminars, in order to obtain feedback and shape the further direction for the study.

The research strategy selected for this study is Action research. Action research is commonly used in social sciences and the business field, especially when conducing qualitative research. Coghlan & Brannick (2014) explain *"the central idea is that action research uses a scientific approach to study the resolution of important social or organizational issues together with those who experience these issues directly"* (p.6). Action research follows up a four-step cyclical process of 1. Planning, 2. Taking action, 3. Evaluating the action, and 4. Leading to further planning, and that is the structure also this study is following up. The outcomes of action research are not only solutions for practical issues, but as well important knowledge from the outcomes and providing knowledge that is valuable for practitioners. (Coghlan & Brannick 2014).

In qualitative research data, verifies modes of reasoning can be used. Saldanã (2011) summarizes them as deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning.

> 'Deduction is what we generally draw and conclude from established facts and evidence. Induction is what we explore and infer transferable from the particular to general, based on an examination and of the evidence and an accumulation of knowledge. Abduction is surmising from the evidence that which is most likely, those explanatory hunches based on clues.' (Saldanã 2011, p.93).

In this study, adductive reasoning seems to be the closest approach, shifting from literature to the field data and back to comparing with literature.

In this study, multiple qualitative data sources are used. Saldanã (2011) encourages researchers using qualitative methods to use multiple data sources, because first; the researcher gets a range of diverse perspectives for analysis and representation purposes, and further gains a deeper understanding of the topic, and for the second; multiple sources increase credibility and trustworthiness, known as triangulation. (Saldanã 2011)

In the organization and management studies, qualitative research is a common research type, and interviews are common methods for data gathering. According to Puusa (2020) the benefit of using the interview as data-gathering material is to be able to choose interviewees who are already known to have knowledge and professional skills on the

research topic, which can be categorized as approved and discretionary sample. During the interview, the interviewer aims to get as much as possible information about the research topic, and in some cases, it is beneficial to share the topics of the interview in advance. (Puusa 2020) All these suggestions were utilized in this thesis.

2.2   Research Design

Figure 2 shows the research design for this study.
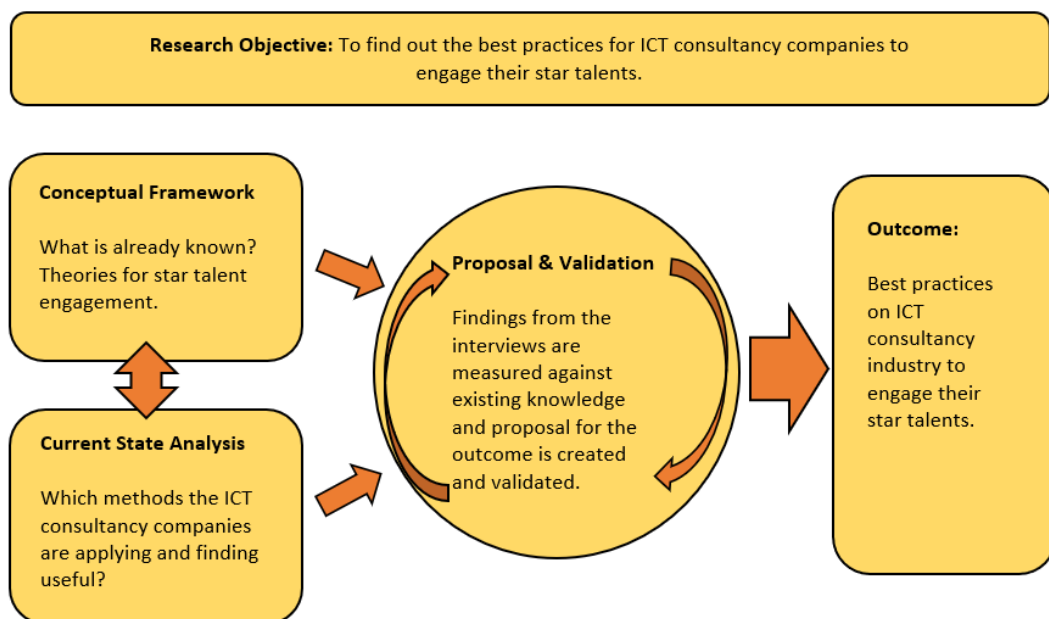
Figure 2. Research design of this study.

The need for this study originated from the current business challenges experienced by the ICT consultancy companies, and from the researcher's personal interest in employee engagement as a topic in this business context. The objective of the study was to find out the best practices for ICT Consultancy companies to engage their star talents.

The research design starts with setting the objective. The next step is building the conceptual Framework of the study based on discussing the topics of what is considered as star talent, their purpose for the organizations, the leading theories behind employee engagement, and the methods which literature and previous research found effective in engaging high talents into the organization. Once the conceptual framework based on

selected existing knowledge is built, it is used as guidance for carrying out this study in relevant business context.

In the next step, the Current state analysis gathers data how the ICT consultancy companies are currently performing when engaging their star talents, which methods and actions they have found useful with their employees. The Current state analysis was conducted using qualitative research methods, such as one-on-one interviews with one representative of each selected company. The interviews were of a semi-structured type, with the questions formulated in advance as a basis for the discussion, while leaving room for open discussion and sharing the interviewees´ thoughts on the topic. This method was chosen because finding out the best existing practices in the industry are based on multilayered themes on employee management, and each interviewee's valuable knowledge is best found in open discussions. The purpose of this study was to identify real-world situations, and which aspects the interviewed professionals have found important, and interviews were found to be the most applicable method for the purpose.

Based on the selected elements of the available knowledge which were merged into the conceptual framework and the findings from the current state analysis, the proposal for the Thesis proposal was created. During this process, the findings from the interviews were compared against the existing knowledge, how effective certain topics have been found in previously done studies, and how valid these were seen in the studied business context. Based on this evaluation, the Thesis Proposals were created. In the Validation section, the process of getting to the end results is presented.

The Outcome of the Thesis is a set of best practices in the ICT Consultancy sector how to engage Star talents.

2.3   Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis methods are chosen based on which can best address the objective of the study, and best answer the research questions. In this study, the purpose of the data collection was to find out, what the ICT consultancy industry experts are currently doing to keep their star talents engaged. The topic is broad, and several underlying topics are included, so the best form of data collection was to conduct an interview.

To get a spectrum of perspectives, different size of companies (measured by turnover and employee volume) were selected for this study. Companies were selected based on first studying their webpage, their offering of IT consultancy services, and the size of a company. Once a list of suitable organizations was established, an e-mail or a contact form via the company´s website was sent to the selected companies, where the purpose of the study was introduced and a suitable candidate from the company was asked for an interview. Once the interview candidates were invited, a suitable one-hour slot was agreed upon for a Teams meeting, and the topics and interview questions to be discussed were shared with the interviewee. In the interview, the interviewees were familiarized with the purpose of the study and the researcher's position in the industry. The discussions were recorded, with the interviewee's approval, although some interviewees preferred to stay anonymous. Also, field notes were taken during the interview, which were finalized immediately after the interview was finished.

Because the majority of the interviewees chose to be anonymous, all of the respondents are given the codes 'Interviewee A, B, C, D, and E'. All the interviewees were working in HR managerial and leadership positions, the exact title of the persons is also left out to secure the confidentiality of the respondents. For the transparency reasons, the details are only kept in the researcher's archive. Details of the interview can be seen in the Table below.

Table 1.   Interview details in this study.

Interviewee	Date of the interview	How data was collected	Duration	Recording
A	26.2.2021	Interview via Teams meeting	58 min	field notes & recording
B	9.3.2021	Interview via Teams meeting	46min	field notes & recording
C	19.3.2021	Interview via Teams meeting	54min	field notes & recording
D	29.3.2021	Interview via Teams meeting	32min	field notes & recording
E	30.3.2021	Interview via Teams meeting	43min	field notes & recording

The interviews were conducted between 26.2. – 30.3.2021. Five persons from five different companies were interviewed. Time spent on interviews made 233 minutes in total. Field notes were taken on 12 pages A5 size pages and handwritten.

For the interviews, a set of interview themes and questions was prepared, so the interviewer could follow them along the discussion. The interview themes and questions can be found at the end of the study, as Appendix 1, Interview topics.

For data analysis in this study, the data gathered in the interviews was analyzed using Thematic/Content analysis. Based on the results, the proposals were developed.

2.4   Validity and Reliability

The validity of the study measures if the indicator used by the researcher is measuring what it is supposed to measure, and *the reliability of the study* measures whether the same results can be achieved by the same or different researchers, using the same methods at a different time, assuming the phenomenon under study has not changed (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p.93).

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are best measured in terms of credibility and trustworthiness (Saldaña 2011). *Credibility* can be evaluated by the methods used to get into the results, i.e., evidencing where the data was sourced, the time spent on the field, the number of the interviewees, the analytics used, and the thinking process used to get to the conclusion. *Trustworthiness* occurs when the researcher informs the reader of the research process details, i.e., the duration of the study, numerical details of the data sources. Saldaña emphasizes the importance of transparency in working and writing to obtain credibility and trustworthiness from the readers. (Saldaña 2011)

Each step of the study has moments for evaluating credibility and trustworthiness. Table 2 below shows the actions taken to improve credibility and trustworthiness in this study.

Table 2.   Actions taken in the study to ensure credibility and trustworthiness.

Criteria	Phase of the study	Requirements	Actions taken in this study
Trustworthiness	Research Design	Use valid Theories in Case studies	Grounding for the used theories explained.
Credibility	Research Design	Structure of the research is clear	The cycle of Metropolia Thesis design is explained, the cycle of an action research is explained.
Trustworthiness	Current State Analysis	Develop data collection database	Interviews recorded & field notes taken, refer to chapter data collection
Trustworthiness	Current State Analysis	Interviewees are informed of the purpose of the interview	Details of the study given to interviewees in prior, refer to chapter data collection
Credibility	Current State Analysis	Use multiple sources of evidence for data collection	Five persons each from different companies were interviewed for data collection.
Trustworthiness	Current State Analysis	Steps taken in the study are documented and explained	Details of the data collection phases and cycle provided, reference to chapter data collection
Trustworthiness	Current State Analysis	Non biased source for information	Interviewees given possibility to stay completely anonymous on the Thesis, no conncetion in prior between the interviewer and interviewees.
Credibility	Conceptual Framework	Theories referred to are documented and traceable	Materials are sourced from trustworthy and traceable sources, referencing style approved in scientific writing used, and list of used referenes provided on References section.
Credibility	Conceptual Framework	Multiple sources for existing knowledge	Comprehensive resource list, several scientists and theories used and presented.
Trustworthiness	Conceptual Framework	Establish Chain of Evidence	Findings from literature explained and discsussed in a consistent way.
Trustworthiness	Building the Framework	Transparency of the thinking process used to lead to the Thesis Proposal	Thinking process leading to the Proposal clearly documented and explained.
Trustworthiness	Building the Framework	Do pattern matching	Findings from the Current State Analysis are matched and evaluated to the findings from the Conceptual Framework.

3 Existing Knowledge on Star Talent Management and Employee Engagement

This section discusses existing knowledge on the topics of star talent management and employee engagement. This section goes through what is a Star, why Stars are important for businesses, continuing why employee engagement is important for the businesses, and further following leading theories of employee engagement, and factors presented in scientific literature proven to add employee engagement. This section ends with Conceptual Framework of the Thesis. The relevant theories selected and merged into the conceptual framework are later used as a backbone for building up the Thesis proposal in this study.

3.1 Importance of Employee Engagement for Businesses

A company that wants to stay competitive in today´s business world, where the rate of change is accelerating, needs engaged employees. These are employees who have high levels of energy, can to absorb new things quickly, and show dedication to their work (Bakker 2017). People in today's employment market are very conscious of the importance to maximize their employability, and one big reason why they accept the job and how motivated they are in it concerns how they value their experience on their own CV (Woodruffe 2006). Considering this, talented employees want to develop on their work, and if they do not have that possibility on their work, they will quickly depart somewhere else. The employee contracts have changed, employees are operating more as free agents than in the past. This means the power has shifted from employer to employee, and the business leaders are forced to learn how to build an organization that engages employees as sensitive, passionate and creative contributors. (Bersin 2015; Woodruffe 2006.)

Engaging employees is an important issue considering the whole workforce. Nevertheless, losing an employee who has constant performance issues is not to cry after, but when a company loses a highly talented and productive employee makes a difference. Notably, companies' most talented employees are just the same as likely to leave as the ones struggling with performance issues, if they are not engaged (Wiggert 2018). If an organization is not interested to develop its employees, to give them development opportunities, responsibility and independence, it can end up with a workforce who are not

wanted by any other company, which can be the worst what can happen to any organization. (Teikari 2009.)

Thus, employee engagement becomes increasingly important for businesses. In 2014 Deloitte organization studied 2 532 businesses from 94 countries from the major industries, and the research showed employee engagement is vital for the companies: it was ranked as number 2 on their priorities, first being the challenge of building global leadership (Schwartz, Bersin & Pelster 2014). Employee engagement has been linked to several employee attitudes and behaviors, low levels of employee engagement having a direct impact on organizational outcomes (Whittington et al. 2017): disengaged employees withdraw themselves from the organization, are more absent, have a higher level of intention to leave the organization, and engage in detrimental behaviors which impact customer service and supplier relationships.

The business leaders have caught their eyes on the topic because research has linked employee engagement to have positive organizational outcomes, increase employee loyalty and production, and also positively impact customer satisfaction and profit (Harter, Schmidt & Keyes 2002). Keeping the talented employees engaged in the organization boosts businesses' performance, with remarkable results on research carried out on 192 organizations and 34 countries (Sorenson 2013): a highly engaged workforce performed 21% better in productivity, and by 22% in profitability. However, the businesses need to be interested in employee engagement not only for the financial benefits it brings but more importantly to keep and attract the talents on a highly competitive field of skilled employees. Whittington and Galpin (2010) emphasize the fact that economic activities have globalized during the past 20 years, and have exacerbated the businesses' need to attract and keep highly talented employees. The new reality of globalized businesses means, people might be the only source for competitive advantage and this should encourage businesses to create working environments to provide employees challenge and meaningfulness. (Whittington & Galpin 2010.)

3.2   War for Talent and the History of Engaging the Employees

During the past decades, organizations have focused on their employees by different views. In the 1930´s and -40´s focus has been on job satisfaction, and evolved through the viewpoint of understanding happy employees are also more productive employees to the 1970´s and -80´s hot topic of organizational commitment and winning the 'war of

talent'. In the new millennium, the focus has shifted to employee engagement. One of the key drivers has been the changes in the nature of work, the new millennium work required a higher level of knowledge, education, and skills, and employees fit to do these tasks were in return demanding better-quality jobs and expected the jobs to offer growth and development opportunities. Different from previous decades, the employees were shifting to take charge of their own career management and employability and were not committed to the organizations for decades, and this changed also the organizations' way to handle their human resources. In an era of continuous change, it was more important to have engaged employees than establishing a long-term commitment with them. Having employees who are engaged in their work was found to be more important than to establish a long-term commitment. (Meyer 2017.)

Is employee engagement the hot topic of the millennium human resources, or just a faddish concept that will fade away when the best before date arrives? Perhaps both ends have their point, but nevertheless, it has elements that will carry on for a longer period of time. As history shows, the business world has changed, and along with the focus on how companies view their employees. The transition from a focus on job satisfaction to organizational commitment, and further to employee engagement has evolved with business world changes, and those concepts are still there, as a foundation to build up a new concept. Job satisfaction is still relevant, similarly organizational commitment, they both are the groundwork of today´s topic employee engagement. How employees value the work will change, as already we have seen the attitude changes from big fat paycheck being the secondary to today´s millennials, the millennials in today´s workplaces value interesting and challenging work with growth and development opportunities, the future generations might want work to have a higher meaning and make a lasting contribution to the society. The war of talent remains, as Meyer (2017, p.2) states, *'organizations continue to compete for talent, and once attracted, want to retain the best and brightest'.*

3.3   Talents and Stars

The sections of this chapter discuss different viewpoints of looking at talent, and what is actually considered being talent. This study focuses on engaging star talents, and therefore star talent as a concept is explained deeper and examined why star talent is important in the talent pool.

3.3.1 What or Who is Talent?

Competitive advantage is accessed through talent, and is expected to be driven by individual employees who are identified as talents, who possess talent and who have the potential to contribute high performance today, and also in the future to serve the organizations' purpose (King 2018). Sparrow and Makram (2015) describe talented employees as those who are expected to be able to create extra value for their organization. This extra value is drawn from the talent's knowledge, capabilities, contributions, commitment, skills, competencies, and abilities. An employee identified as a talent in their organization is an employee who organization recognizes to have a high potential for future advancement and who may contribute to the organization's success, regardless of the employee's hierarchical position in the organization (Huselid, Beatty & Becker 2005). High talent is seen as a scarce resource, usually a high-potential employee is in the top 5% of the organization's employees, and is considered to be the most capable and motivated, as well as most likely climb to positions of responsibility and power. (Zenger and Folkman 2017.)

What or who is then talent? In the literature review, scholars presented two approaches to viewing the meaning of talent. First, the subject approach, which considers talent as a person. Second, which considers talent as an object, the object approach, means talent is something that an employee possesses, like competence or skill. (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Gonzáles-Cruz 2013.) Figure 3 shows the talent within the world of work.
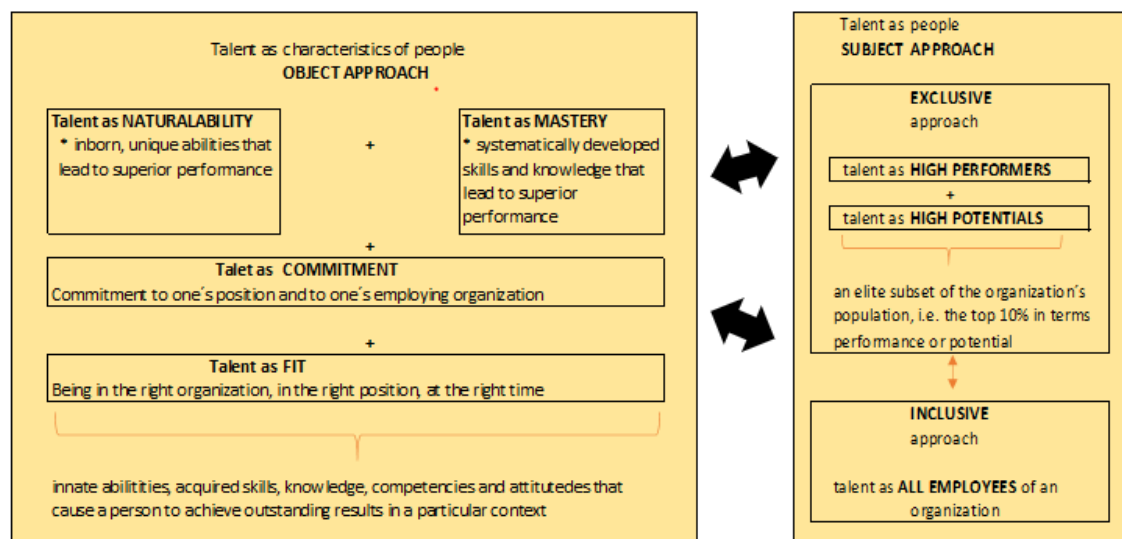

Figure 3. Talent within the world of work (based on Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & González-Gruz, 2013, p.8).

As Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Gonzáles-Cruz (2013) conceptualize, defining what or who is talent can be approached talent as a subject, or talent as an object. In the subject approach, talented employees are talent as people, and talent can be inclusive, counting all the employees of an organization as talent. Or talent can be exclusive, an elite of the organization's population, and it considers high performers and high potentials as talent. Second, the object approach considers talent as an object, being something, the employee possesses. Talent can be a natural ability, which are inborn abilities, or mastery, which are systematically developed skills and knowledge. Talent can be a commitment, which shows as employees' commitment to own position and to the organization. Talent can be a fit, fit for the organization, fit to the position. (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Gonzáles-Cruz 2013.)

Talent can be seen as both subject and object. Often, they are seen as "stars", who hold differentiated status in the organization and whose performance in the organization is expected to be disproportionated compared to the entire workforce (Kehoe, Lepak & Bentley 2016).

3.3.2 Star Performers and Their Input for Business

The organizational landscape of the 21st-century companies is no more grounded in the same values of the manufacturing sector and corporate hierarchy, where the human capital of the necessary many was the essence. Today´s workplace is operating globally, and in terms of human resources, is increasingly driven by the few vital contributors, star performers. Without a doubt, star performer has existed throughout the history, but on today's workplace, their presence is particularly noticeable because their production is so clearly superior. Star performers can be identified by viewing their productivity in relation to the others, and they can also be identified by exceptional output over time, not just a single exceptionally good result.

Star performers are defined in literature as *'a few individuals who contribute a disproportionate amount of output'* (Aguinis & O´Boyle 2014, p.313), and as *'repositories of technical, industry and firm knowledge, with disproportionately high levels of performance and significant visibility in the external market'* (Tzabbar & Baburaj 2020, p.1), also as '*those teams and individuals who consistently produce the greatest results in support of the organization´s strategy and goals'* (Elliott & Folsom 2013, p.4).

Star performers are not necessarily the most talented or do not have the most potential, but they translate the talent they have into outcomes that drive better business success (Elliott & Folsom 2013). Star performers can be seen as game changers for the organizations, whose impact can make or break organizational success and who can impact long-term sustainability and the survival of the organization (Aguinis & Bradley 2015). However, the existence of a star is scarce, only 10-20% of employees are believed to have a significant impact on the company´s performance – and survival in the markets (Tzabbar & Baburaj 2020).

Star employees contribute directly by improving the productivity of their organizations, by innovativeness and expertise, and experience, which are hard to replace. In addition to the direct effect, star employees have indirect effects also within the organization, they often improve other employees' productivity through knowledge spillover, and by providing offshoots of their innovations. They are also highly respected colleagues, who often work as role models for younger colleagues. (Tzabbar & Baburaj 2020.)

The impact of star performers has been found significant on different types of organizations. Based on research Elliott & Folsom (2013) conducted in different organizations, the high performers and high performing teams are performing even 50% better, than compared to the average performing teams. In R&D development organizations, a star performing team was found to bring 50% more products to markets or doing it 50% faster – or even both – than the compared average teams. In sales organizations, top 10% of the performers generated 30 – 50% of the revenues. In software engineering organizations the best programmers write ten times the amount of bug-free code compared to their average colleagues. (Elliott & Folsom 2013.)

In the knowledge-intensive business sector, managing star performers can be seen as a source for organizational success (Aguinis & Bradley 2015), and they bring the needed competitive advantage to the organization (Tzabbar & Baburaj 2020). In academia, researchers encourage organizations to put emphasis on the accomplishment of star performers. Elliott & Folsom (2013) highlight it improves business results while being rather cost-effective and quick to implement. Aguinis & Bradley (2015) name star performers management as key to success in today´s global and hypercompetitive market.

3.4   Employee Engagement

Engagement is described as 'emotional involvement or commitment' or 'the state of be-ing in gear' on the Merriam-Webster dictionary. In academia there is no consensus on the conceptualization of engagement, however, the topic has been researched a lot dur-ing the 2000. In the business context almost all the consultancy firms offering human resources guidance are offering their clients how to improve your employees' levels of work engagement, all of them underlining to the organizations it really is worth the effort and it pays off to engage your employees.

Based on the literature review, there currently are three leading approaches in the stud-ies of employee engagement; self-expression approach by Kahn, engagement as opti-mal growth by Schaufeli et al., and satisfaction approach by Gallup organization. These three approaches are presented in the following sections of the study.

3.4.1   Kahn´s Self-Expression Approach

The concept of engagement to the workplace context is considered to be first coined by William Kahn in the 1990s. Kahn (1990) defined engagement as *'the harnessing of or-ganization members´ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and ex-press themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances'* (p. 694), and continues disengagement as an opposite character showing as distancing the employees' selves from the work roles, and by withdrawal or by defending themselves during work role performances either physically, cognitively or emotionally.

Kahn´s theory is deeply rooted in the self-actualization concept and hierarchy of needs introduced by Abraham Maslow in 1943: *What a man can be, he must be*! Maslow´s self-actualization *'refers to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially'* (cited in: Wiedemann 2019, p.22). Kahn´s statement was that people have dimensions, 'preferred self', which they prefer to use and express, when given appropriate conditions. He sharpens his definition of engage-ment as *'simultaneous employment and expression of a person´s ´preferred self´ in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional) and active, full performances'*. (Kahn 1990, p.700.)

The focus of Kahn´s study was on psychological conditions influencing people to engage in their work role, on the momentary circumstances of people´s experiences that shape

behaviors. The research was conducted on a sample of summer camp counselors and professionals in an architecture firm, and Kahn observed that when people experience certain elements, they are more likely to fully engage their personal selves to work. Based on his observations, Kahn outlined three psychological elements, which have an impact on how a person engages: psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability. *Meaningfulness* is experienced when the person feels worthwhile, useful, and valuable, they feel they have made a difference and not taken for granted. *Safety* is experienced when the employee feels safe to show one´s self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career. Third, *availability* is experienced when the employee has the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to engage. (Kahn 1990.)

3.4.2   Schaufeli´s Theory of Engagement as Optimal Growth

One of the most cited theories on employee engagement is presented by Schaufeli et al. in 2002. The authors broke in with the theory engagement is the opposite of burnout, stating that on the contrary of burnout engagement is characterized by high levels of energy, and of being highly identified with one´s work. The authors defined employee engagement as a persistent and affective-motivational state of fulfillment in employees, characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al. 2002). These characteristics can be also described as *behavioral-energetic, emotional, and cognitive* components of engagement. A person who is *vigor*, is willing to invest the effort to work, is having high levels of energy and mental resilience, and when facing difficulties has persistence. *Dedication* refers to being highly involved in his/her work, and also to a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. The third dimension of engagement, *absorption*, shows on by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one´s work, almost like a 'flow' like state. (Schaufeli et al. 2002.)

In academia, a lot is discussed whether employee engagement is merely putting new wine into old bottles, and previously studied concepts such as extra-role behavior, organizational commitment, positive affectivity, job satisfaction, job involvement, workaholism, or flow have already described the same issue. Schaufeli & Bakker (2010) summarize that there is partial overlap with e.g., job involvement and flow and positive affectivity of these concepts, however, the whole concept of employee engagement cannot be reduced to any of these. Further, workaholism, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment are conceptually distinct from work engagement. The authors conclude, work

engagement has added value over and above these mentioned concepts. (Schaufeli & Bakker 2010.)

3.4.3 Gallup´s Satisfaction Approach

Gallup organization has been the groundbreaker on bringing employee engagement known to the business context and to the organizations. Harter, Schmidt & Keyes (2002) studied a huge database from a study held at Gallup organization and found that engagement was positively correlated with business outcomes. Engaged employees were found to be more loyal to business-unit, have higher profitability and productivity, and also have lower rates of turnover. Their study findings indicate that workplaces with engaged employees have better chances of keeping their employees, and satisfying customers while being also financially more productive and profitable. The authors point out that well-being at the workplace and performance are not independent, but rather components of a psychologically and financially healthy workplace.

According to Harter, Schmidt & Hayes (2002), '*employee engagement refers to the individual´s involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work*' (2002, p.269). They criticize the previously done studies of job satisfaction and organizational commitment to be too general to be easily applied in practice and to be too distant from everyday employee experiences within the working environment. Positive employee experience, which adds engagement, occurs when employees are proud of their company, satisfied with their work partly because their basic needs are met fairly consistently.

With similarities to Kahn´s conceptualization, Gallup organization sees engagement occurring when employees are emotionally connected to others and cognitively vigilant. Based on their research, Harter, Schmidt & Hayes (2002) find employees to feel engaged both emotionally and cognitively when they know what is expected of them, have what is need to do their work, have chances to feel an impact and fulfillment, feel they are part of something meaningful, coworkers whom they can trust, and have development and improvement chances.

Drawing further from self-actualization theory, Gallup describes their satisfaction approach as four levels of employee performance development needs, an employee must have the foundational levels of needs fulfilled before an environment of trust and support is created. Once these foundations are robust, a level of personal growth can be reached. The levels are not, however, phases to finish and move to the next one, but

they should be considered as a constant and ongoing process. For example, an employee feels connected to one´s team members, but does not know what is expected from him/her (a basic need), nor has appropriate materials or tools to do the work (a basic need), and is not able to do what he/she does the best (an individual need), as a consequence the bond between team members does not have positive impact on his/her performance. Instead, the coffee break with the colleagues likely turns to a gripe session, not productive teamwork. (Gallup 2020.) Figure 4 shows four levels of employee´s performance development needs.
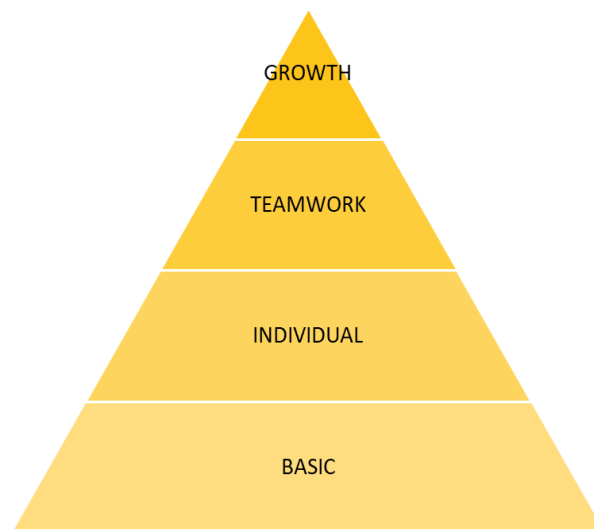
Figure 4. Four levels of employee´s performance development needs (Gallup 2020).

Gallup (2020) divides employees into three groups, based on their level of engagement; engaged, not engaged, and actively disengaged, as shown in Figure 5 below.

Engaged	Engaged employees are highly involved in and enthusiastic about their work and workplace. They are psychological "owners," drive performance and innovation, and move the organization forward.
Not engaged	Not engaged employees are psychologically unattached to their work and company. Because their engagement needs are not being fully met, they're putting time - but not energy or passion - into their work.
Actively disengaged	Actively disengaged employees aren't just unhappy at work - they are resentful that their needs aren't being met and are acting out their unhappiness. Every

day, these workers potentially undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish.

Figure 5. Levels of engagement by Gallup (Gallup 2021).

Although many of the reasons why employees stay or leave the companies may be related to aspects manager cannot directly influence, such as pay, benefits, or such out of manager´s direct control, Gallup researchers highlight the importance of managerial work on engaging their employees, and the significance of what influence managers have over their employees' satisfaction with their company (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes 2002). The most significant variance on job satisfaction and employee opinion surveys was found on aspects the supervisor or manager can directly influence, the researchers put on an as high number as 70% of the variance in team engagement is determined solely by the manager. (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes 2002.)

3.5 Factors Increasing Employee Engagement

This section of the study presents the main four individual factors, which the literature points out to be increasing employee engagement.

3.5.1 Management and Leadership Style

On previously presented theories, Kahn (1990) emphasized the impact of the management style to impact the psychological conditions impacting employee's engagement to their work. Kahn highlighted, a management style that is supportive, resilient, and clarifying is found to increase psychological safety, and a supportive managerial environment allows employees to try and also fail without the fear of the consequences. In a more recent study of Millar, Chen & Waller (2017), which focused on knowledge-intensive organizations, topics of coaching leadership style, high manager-employee relationship quality, and good team climate, were found to foster engagement, and on the contrary, knowledge-intensive sector employees were found to react negatively and feel disengaged because of bureaucracy, budget limitations, and status-quo habits. Gallup organization's satisfaction approach (Gallup 2020) also emphasizes the importance of the managerial work on the engagement process, they emphasize that even 70% of the variance in team engagement is determined solely by the manager. Leadership style impacting positively to engagement is presented as 'transformational leadership', where

the leaders transform organizations by motivating employees to high levels of performance when they help the employees to reach their potential through the dedication to the vision and higher purpose (Wiedemann 2019). Wiedemann (2019) found transformational leadership to have a strong correlation with employee's psychological need satisfaction, and as a consequence to engagement. The research findings from Wiedemann (2019), and Kovjanic, Schuh & Jonas (2013) strongly suggested the researched organizations improve the leadership quality of their supervisors, more specifically the leadership qualities supporting transformational leadership which supports the psychological needs of the subordinates because effective leadership style has been found to be rewarded with increased employee engagement. The impact of the leadership quality on employee engagement was found to be significant in all these researches.

3.5.2 Organization Fit

Organizations are putting lots of effort into their recruitment processes, to find the best job demands fit from the employee candidates, and they have rather specific attributes they find important for their employees. Good organization fit is indeed found to be a significant factor for strong employee engagement and therefore is paid lots of attention to during the recruitment process. However, since this study does not concentrate on the recruitment process, but on the already existing workforce of the organizations, and on what keeps them engaged, the concept is approached by focusing on what increases the organization fit for the existing employees. Thompson, Lemmon & Walter (2015) categorized the 4 types of capital that organizations and individual employees have, and when supported and fostered they increase organization fit and as a consequence, increase engagement. These 4 dimensions are *human capital*, *social capital*, *family capital*, and all these can be impacted by the fourth-dimension *positive psychological capital*.

Human capital is either generic human capital or unit-specific human capital. The first relates to knowledge, skills, and the employee's abilities he/she brings to the workplace. Unit-specific human capital is more related to the specific needs of an organization, these skills can be improved through training, mentoring, providing development opportunities, or work design, which altogether increase employee's knowledge, skills, and ability.

Social capital is a concept considering the employee's relationships with others, the in-group relations and relationships to other groups, and broader relationship to the organization one belongs. The social capital concept includes the employee – manager relationship, and the fit for the organization.

Family capital refers to the work-family balance, or to a lack of it. An employee who has a good work-life balance has good cognitive resources to be more engaged at work, home demands do not disturb his/her work performance. Issues with family members, health, or financial problems can all result in focus issues during working hours. Employees who can detach from their home-life, or work-life, when appropriate, are more likely to be the more engaged employees. Companies can support this balance by flexible work arrangements, using output-based performance criteria rather than criteria based on hours worked, and by fostering a culture promoting good work-life balance.

Positive psychological capital reflects to employee's internal psychological resources that he/she can draw from in order to succeed. Positive psychological capital is built of hope, efficacy, resiliency and optimism. Positive psychological capital can enhance the three other forms of capital, f.eg. having a highly educated employee who works on low-skilled job, does have lots of human capital, but rarely is engaged. If this employee feels hope on the job, that this job can be a stepping stone to his/her dream job, the existence of hope will improve his/her engagement. Positive psychological capital is an area where the direct manager can play a significant role, by for example fostering hope in their leadership styles. (Thompson, Lemmon & Walter 2015.)

3.5.3 Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility refers to how organizations operate their businesses, considering it is ethical, society friendly, and beneficial to the community. Corporate Social Responsibility not only focuses on the financial gains of the company but also how it impacts different stakeholders; employees, suppliers, stakeholders, customers, communities, etc. (Ismail 2009). Corporate Social Responsibility can be viewed as external, initiatives by an organization promoting its social and environmental impacts, and internal, which are actions to improve employees' conditions and as a consequence to improve their productivity (Soni & Mehta 2020).

As discussed in the introduction section, today's employees are not working only for their paycheck, but as the awareness of the global welfare and environment are becoming more and more important in the societies, they have become also important terms on how employees value their organizations. The employees do consider, are their organizations performing in a way that reflects their values. How an employee perceives its employer to succeed at their Corporate Social Responsibility has a significant impact on the employee's need satisfaction and on their sense of purpose at work – and as a result, how engaged employees are (Wiedemann 2019). Chaudhary (2019) found in her research, the psychological conditions Kahn (1990) stated as conditions for work engagement, meaningfulness, safety and availability, mediated the relationship with Corporate Social Responsibility and employee engagement. Chaudhary suggested Corporate Social Responsibility is a significant tool for talent management to foster an engaged workforce.

The organization's internal Corporate Social Responsibility practices have a positive, significant impact on employee engagement. The indicators studied were actions aiming to improve the employees' lives: employees' needs and wants fulfillment, fairness in managerial decisions, training & development opportunities, work-life balance, safety and health, and providing equal opportunities. (Soni & Mehta 2020.)

Humans have an inbuilt need to do meaningful work, something that everyone needs to fulfill the interest in freedom, autonomy and dignity (Yeoman 2013). Activities in Corporate Social Responsibility have been found to affect employee´s meaningfulness at work and providing meaningfulness has a positive impact on employee engagement, even the job role itself is not attached to any humane purpose, but employees notice their organization is working for acknowledged social purpose. (Nazir & Islam 2020.)

3.5.4 Organizational commitment

Organizational commitment is a psychological state between an organization and its employees, which makes employees less likely to leave the organization (Meyer & Allen 1991). Meyer & Allen (1991) narrow commitment to three components; affective, continuance, and normative commitment. *Affective commitment* refers to the psychological connection between the organization and employee, an affectively connected employee wants to be part of the organization and accepts the organization's goals as one's own. *Continuance commitment* is a psychological state where the employee weighs in

whether to leave or stay and decides to stay because it is more beneficial. *Normative commitment* is the employee´s psychological state, in which he/she feels it is an obligation to stay in the organization. (Meyer & Allen 1991.)

Organizational commitment has been found to increase employee engagement, and vice versa – the more engaged employees are, the more committed they are to their organization. A high level of organizational commitment enhances employees engagement in proactive extra-role behavior. (Uddin, Mahmood & Fan 2019.)

Such Human Resources practices as career advancement, performance feedback, job security, training and development, rewards and recognition, and employee participation have been found to impact employees feeling of being committed to the organization, and make employees feel more engaged to their organization. (Aktar & Pangil, 2018.)

3.6   Conceptual Framework for This Study

The Conceptual Framework discusses the input of *Star talent in the organization*. In today's workplace, the existence of a Star is noticeable because their production is so clearly superior. They can be identified by viewing their productivity in relation to the others, and they can also be identified by exceptional output over time, not just a single exceptionally good result. In the knowledge-intensive business sector, managing star performers can be seen as a source for organizational success (Aguinis & Bradley 2015), and they bring the needed competitive advantage to the organization (Tzabbar & Baburaj 2020). Nevertheless, these rare pearls of the employees are also as quick to leave as the ones with performance issues, if they are not engaged (Wigert 2018). This leads to the second part of the Conceptual Framework, employee engagement.

Employee engagement has been found to bring benefits for the organizations; increased employee loyalty and production, more satisfied customers, and bigger profits (Harter, Schmidt & Keys 2003), and therefore it has caught the interest of the business leaders. Increasing employee engagement is not a single solution theory, there are more than one leading theories behind the topic, all of them emphasizing the multilayered themes and individual needs of an employee.

Summing up, the existing knowledge part of the study presents three leading theories; Kahn's self-expression approach, Schaufeli's theory of engagement as optimal growth,

and Gallup's satisfaction approach. Existing knowledge also suggests that efficient management and leadership style, good organization fit, external and internal Corporate Social Responsibility practices, and solid organizational commitment are each increasing employee engagement. Figure 6 below presents visually from which viewpoints star talent engagement is examined in this study.
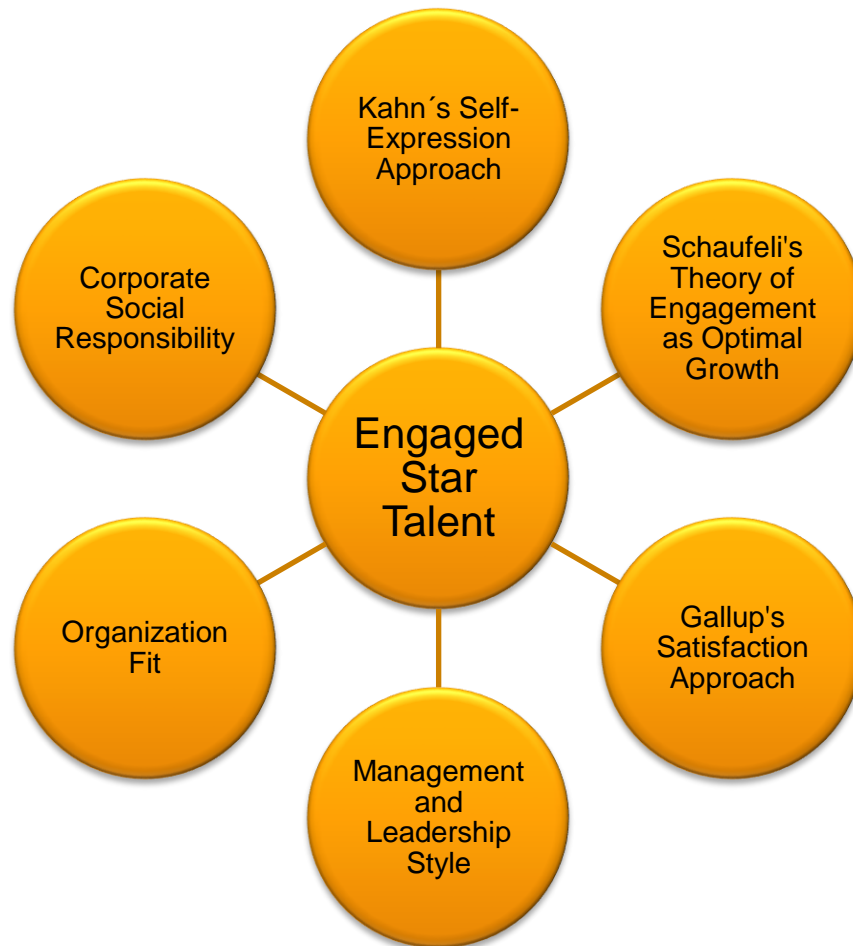

Figure 6. Conceptual framework for this study.

4   Current State Analysis

This section reports on the results of the current state analysis of the Thesis.

4.1   Overview of the Current State Analysis

The purpose of the current state analysis was to find out, what the ICT Consultancy companies in Finland are doing to engage their employees. For this purpose, experts from real-life business contexts were interviewed. The interviewees were selected from different sizes of ICT consultancy enterprises. The data were collected by interviewing five representatives of the ITC consultancies, from five different organizations. The themes and questions for the interview were built up based on the conceptual framework to gather the most relevant insights on the topic. The data collection process was explained previously in Section 2.3 Data Collection and Analysis in more detail.

The themes for the interviews were structured, and the interviewer guided the interview situations so the following topics were covered:

-    Talent turnover in the industry

-    Characteristics of a star

-    What is done to keep the stars

-    Role of theoretical knowledge in practice

-    Star talent management in practice

Second, the interviews were analyzed. It started with going through the recordings and field notes. The structure of the interview slightly varied with each interviewee, the topics were discussed in a different order, and some topics were revisited in later stages of the interview. While the recording was dismantled, the interview results were grouped to the same structure, to follow a clear structure in the findings. While analyzing the interviews, methods of mind mapping and transcription were used.

Third, the structure of the current state analysis was built up. The structure of the interviews and the popularity of some topics on the interviewee's comments were the basis

for how the current state analysis is presented. Last, the current state analysis was written to follow a systematic and clear structure. The thesis writers thinking logic behind analysis for the similarity of the findings, exceptional viewpoints, and popularity of the topic is presented.

4.1.1 Findings of the Current State Analysis

Based on the results of analyzing the context and conducting the interviews with the selected ITC consultancy companies, the following findings about the correct practices of star talent management and employee engagement in the ITC industry and selected companies were identified:

4.1.2 Challenges of High Talent Turnover

The ICT talent market is perceived to be highly competitive, especially certain types of know-how that is difficult to find. This has caused there are lots of opportunities for the employees, and there is demand on the markets for talents, which has caused shortening of the employment years. High turnover was also mentioned to rise their recruiting and new employee introduction costs.

Based on the results of the analysis, these views were confirmed by all the participants. In addition, when asked if the interviewees, if they have noticed the issue of high talent turnover in the sector also on their organization, all agreed to experiencing such a challenge. Some mentioned they cannot say it is a hot topic at their organization, they do not suffer from high talent turnover currently, but they were aware of the employee shortage of the talents.

An important finding related to the practices that the companies employ to deal with this challenge. This challenge made companies evaluate their own attractiveness in the talent market. Interviewees knew, their talents are occasionally headhunted, and said to do so themselves too. One of the respondents summarized the employment market:

> *'I have noticed that during recruiting process, there's no more hundreds of applicants and we could just pick the best out of them, but it is more like how we get the good ones to us. Good applicants are competed, who gets the best.'* (Interviewee D)

There was also a finding related to the specific situation caused by Covid-2019. One of the interviewees mentioned the current Covid-19 pandemic has escalated the turnover rate, and added that this pandemic season has put management skills to challenge and frame.

4.1.3   Definition of a Star Talent

Employees in the ICT Consultancy field are working in very close interaction with the end customers, and customer projects are large concepts that require people and teamwork skills from the employees. The working environment for an employee in this business sector gave a basis for the requirements of a Star; multifaceted teamwork skills and personality traits which support doing together, and customer service skills were very well presented in the interviews. Based on the results of the analysis, the participants highlighted the following characteristics of a start talent.

The first big group of characteristics related to the team behavior. All the interviewees highlighted the employees they determine as their key personnel, their *star* employees, are effective **team players**. The interviewees pointed out the type of their business is very *project-oriented*, and customer projects are mostly run in teams, where every team members' contribution is needed, and working together for the common goal is a must. Therefore, teamwork skills are appreciated and valued, their stars were described to be skilled in *sharing, mentoring, and educating fellow colleagues*. Their stars are able to ask for advice, and voluntarily provide their own expertise when seeing a colleague struggling. A star has solid *interaction skills.* Star is not necessarily the most talented in technical terms but is able *to utilize the competencies of the team*, and able *to see the big picture*, and *work for the common goal*.

> *'being a star is not directly related to the role in the company, more to the fact what kind of team player one is'* (Interviewee E)

> *'…they like to share their knowledge to others, train others'* (Interviewee A)

> *'in case they see need for help or someone struggling, they hurry to help others to get our customer happy'* (Interviewee A)

All the interviewees also mentioned their *company culture* stands for doing together, doing things as a team, and teamwork skills are seen as an important characteristic of a good employee. One of the respondents also mentioned the newcomers are encouraged

for the culture of solving problems together, as a team, although being able to take initiative is a must.

The second big group of characteristics related to the customer behavior. A star employee is able to see the most important on the consulting work, the customer. **Customer-centric way of thinking** came up as a characteristic of star behavior. Stars are seen as a group of employees, who are the secret for *long-lasting customer relationships*, they are making sure customer gets what customer wants and pays for.

> *'customer gets what customer wants, there is no impact if one* [star] *has bad day or she/he lacks competence at some point, if so she/he takes it further in the team…'* (Interviewee A)

It came up during the interviews with most respondents, that the companies are taking their customer service seriously, and they also appreciate *the customer service skills* in their employees highly. One respondent mentioned it is so rare to find a technically excellent employee with excellent customer service skills and the ability to put the customer first, that this kind of combination is definitely counted as 'star' in their organization.

The third biggest group of characteristics related to the individual behavior. The stars were described to have the **attitude** as their diacritical and common factor. The star employees were described to have *a to-do attitude*, they are taking an *active role* in problem solving, and the personality is aiming for *learning*. This attitude was described to be visible in everything they do.

> *'…attitude is the most important, good attitude to work and working, whereas work substance can be learned'* (Interviewee E)

Star employees were described to be *self-driven, taking initiative, taking responsibility* for their own work, show actively own will and desire to develop their skills. Activity is usually seen on several occasions.

> *'…that activity, those active types are eagerly participating, usually the familiar active ones are seen volunteering e.g. going to speak at the schools, and those active ones are usually good at their work, too'* (Interviewee E)

Stars were seen to take an active role also in other challenging situations, one interviewee described that e.g., if something is seen as unsatisfactory or unfair in the office, the star employee's activism comes up also in these situations, and the troubling issue is brought up.

During discussions came up as empirical experience from part of the interviewees, that high talents seem to be very *goal-oriented*, and *self-conscious.* Very often they were recognized to be *career-oriented*, and who know what they want, and also are aware of their own strengths and skills. These high talents are easily taking responsibility, but also want *freedom* in return. They might be faster to make decisions to leave the organization, are also more eagerly raising a hot topic for discussion, and when able and/or allowed to show their skills in full potential, are also able to bring remarkable results. Being a good problem solver, high customer focus and people skills were common individual attributes given for organizations stars.

4.1.4   Talent Management Practices in ICT Companies

The respondents were very coherent on the importance of talent management practices in engaging their employees. Their opinions were very aligned on the importance of a normal office day, how important it is to have the pieces together so the employee feels good to come to the office and the co-operation with the colleagues is working well. Lots of attention was given to the managerial work and leadership, and how it is included in the organization's strategy.

The basis for work engagement is done on an ordinary workday, how an employee feels to come to work in the morning, how she/he gets on with the day. Another important aspect is the work community, how the people function together. The interviewees mentioned they are putting effort into listening to their employees and taking action on their hopes and development initiatives. For example, one of the interviewees mentioned they have internal development projects, which involve how the company operates, or how the customer projects are run, and some employees are participating in the decision-making unit. Employees have reported back to like to work with professional colleagues, to have a community where they can spar, and develop their own knowledge by deepening their knowledge. Also working in a helpful environment had been reported to boost the feeling of engagement, being part of a community where it is a norm to lend a helping hand.

All of the respondents mentioned as one of their success for star management, the way how they handle leadership, and direct managerial work. Two of the respondents mentioned they have intentionally put extra focus on leadership and management because it has been seen as very important. Direct managerial work makes meaning for giving feedback, gives goals, is doing regular follow-up with employees on scheduled one-to-

one discussions. The employees need someone to lead their performance, and someone to give them clear goals and a direction where to head to. In a knowledge-intensive field, the importance of feedback was mentioned to be important for employees, as much as rewards when achieving their goals.

> '…empathic, humane leadership is even more important in the future. I believe that work wellbeing is made of physical and emotional wellbeing and employee-oriented approach.' (Interviewee B)

All the interviewees pointed out, the industry has good employee benefits, and they wanted to keep up with the competitors, to keep their employees engaged. For example, comprehensive health care, family leave opportunities, training, and certification opportunities were mentioned as a reason to engage.

Giving employees the opportunity to do meaningful work was also mentioned. Interviewees mentioned, the employees have shown to like to participate in projects which are giving the feeling of doing something important and to have sometimes even statewide impact.

All the interviewees mentioned the importance of having an interest in engaging their employees, it should start from the top of the organization, and be embedded in the strategy – and also have the budget and time reserved to accomplish things. Some interviewees brought this up as it being part of their culture.

Having clear structure, and efficient processes were mentioned as one engaging factor, and it was mentioned as a thing the organization puts the effort on:

> 'We aim to have processes well setup, and we have put effort in developing our processes for decades. People know, that things function and go forward.' (Interviewee C)

Organizations expect from their employees capability to take initiative and offer the possibility to have an influence on things. Freedom and responsibility were both mentioned important.

> '…important, that you can influence on thing, and this leads to the skills of taking initiative. Our flat bureaucracy is good on this.' (Interviewee D)

'In Finland we have lots of responsibilities, and as a part of that also lots of freedom. They can put things into practice, that freedom, and people are very responsible.' (Interviewee C)

4.1.5   Role of Theoretical Knowledge in Company Practices

During the interviews, it was discussed what thoughts the interviewees have over the presented theories found to increase engagement. The theories were presented earlier on the conceptual framework portion of this study, and they are organizational fit, management and leadership, corporate social responsibility, and organizational commitment. Without an exception, management and leadership practices were reported to be very efficient methods, and the interviewees highlighted they are placing extra effort on the topic. The organizations had found a certain type of leadership to be efficient on talent management and to be an engaging factor. The organizational fit was seen more as an action during recruitment, but lots of actions were placed on the existing employees to increase the feeling of being fit for the organization. Organizational commitment was seen as a valued engaging factor in the smallest of interviewed organizations, and the bigger organizations reported they like to put effort into adding the feeling of commitment to the organization's values. Corporate social responsibility was reported to be important for the employees and also brought up to be a factor in which a Star talent might be more sensitive than an average colleague. The following columns provide a more thorough discussion of the analysis findings.

Each one of the interviewees pointed out they find **management and leadership** to play a crucial role in employee engagement. It was also given effort on the corporate level, organizations have consciously developed their managerial work, and they want to support and train their employees in managerial positions.

'Managerial work and leadership, it is very important at our organization. And our employees have close relationship with their managers.' (Interviewee A)

'Manager work, especially on the practical level, it is very important.' (Interviewee B)

'Manager role is important to a high degree, very critical role. There might be corporate level policies, but it is manager who brings them visible and to every-day life.' (Interviewee E)

Interviewees had a common alignment of the expectations of a manager role, and they all highlighted they like to see coaching style of leadership, humane leadership, and their leadership culture was presented as soft style, modern leadership. One of the challenges on the topic was the need for time on the managerial work, and some of the respondents pointed out that it is a role, which needs to have dedicated time to work on the role. The manager needs to have time to implement humane leadership and to treat their employees as individuals, with each of their own strengths. Manager gives the direction and frames to their employees and is bringing the company-wide alignments to the practical level. They are on a crucial role in creating the fruitful ground for high-talents to flourish, and managers were reported to be the best source to spot the potential talents for the organization's benefit.

Organizational commitment was seen to be an important factor for engaging their employees on the smallest of the company, in terms of employee amount. Their employees had reported to like the way how and what the company does, and showed to like the way how things were done at their organization. Again, measured in the number of employees, the biggest organizations represented on the interviews, mentioned during the interview their employees have reported to like to be part of the projects the organization is doing, and feeling committed and getting feeling of meaningfulness throughout important work.

The interviewees found **organization fit** to play an important role especially in the recruiting process, and it was mentioned to put lots of weight on the evaluation process of a suitable candidate. Two of the respondents brought up, they would like to see more diversity and diversity inclusion in the recruitment process and deciding culture fit more in terms of 'culture add'.

> *'It does not develop anyone´s thinking processes, if there is no challenge, certain type of confrontation, or different viewpoints to the issues. Good things of a diverse team are that issues are evaluated from several viewpoints.'* (Interviewee E)

When considering star talents, the topic of organization fit came up during the interviews with most of the interviewees. It was clearly pointed out, their organizational culture does not support individual behavior of being better than the others, nor that kind of management that brings up favorites was supported. Interviewees pointed out, they do not foresee arrogant or high-handed behavior to make a lasting career in their organization – it

was not seen as a fit for their organization. More it was seen that a star in their organization is a person, who spreads an efficient way of working and good spirit and takes others into consideration.

> *'I think that the star talent in our organizational culture should have a skills and talent to lift up and support others, and spread around good spirit, good way of doing.'* (Interviewee E)

> *'If these stars are very individualistic, kind of demanding lots of attention, these individualistic are not very long lasting in our organization. They do not enjoy themselves, and organization can neither support them so.'* (Interviewee C)

Corporate Social Responsibility has been part of the organizations' agendas for a long, but the interviewees mentioned the interest in it has risen during recent years. It was seen as a possible factor for adding commitment because it adds the meaningfulness of the work. The organizations mentioned they are doing co-operation with goodwill organizations, open up discussions from certain topics on their company intranet and invite employees to a discussion, openly share information on the corporate CSR agenda on the intranet. The employees are interested in the topic, some reported there is slight age variation on the topic of interests. However, some of the respondents mentioned, the same individuals, which are often considered as high-talents in their organization, are also a bit more eagerly participating e.g. in goodwill co-operations. in terms of internal CSR, high-talents were spotted to be more active in bringing up to discussion if something was seen as unfair treatment and were brave in their behavior. One respondent summarizes the being considered as high-talent, is how they carry out their actions, and how they react to things:

> *'One criteria, why they are considered as stars, is that they already implement these* [CSR philosophies] *…their actions are sustainable, and they react if the things are not working, e.g. if some person is not respected like they should be, so they can bring it up and defend them… they are models on implementing these things, and feel somehow responsible and bring things up.'* (Interviewee C)

4.1.6 Know-How and Best Practices in Managing Star Talents in the Selected Organizations

Managing star talents was not a task with easy solutions, but rather raised a discussion of multilayered challenges in the topic. Finnish working culture was brought up, and the willingness to treat people fairly and equally, and that also is a standard in our labor law. Unanimous, the organizations value each of their employees, and it was highlighted that

each position in the organization is needed for being successful. Nevertheless, the perceived Star talents wanted to be praised or respect for good work to be shown otherwise, and this had caused also some troubling thoughts among the interviewees – how to do it and not look like favoring someone over the others. Interestingly, there was some variation on specific talent programs, some of the organizations had different programs for their perceived stars, where the others had none. Also, the concept of star talent management caught some criticism and was not seen as a desirable management practice by all of the interviewees. Based on the results of the analysis, the following topics were the most highlighted.

All the interviewees brought up the importance of all the employees, and the desire to treat people equally. Also, the employee law came up, Finnish law requires people are equally rewarded and otherwise given the same opportunities. There was consensus among the respondents, each one said all employees and all kind of expertise is needed and highly valued. And management efforts should be targeted on the whole employee, not to be chosen individuals only.

Finding who is a high talent in the organization was said not to be an easy task. One respondent summarized:

> *'That talent, it is so dependable of one's life situation, and has one been recognized as talent. It is a challenge to recognize talents, and it requires humane approach, discretion and emotional intelligence… Treating people equally is so important.'*
> (Interviewee B)

The interviewees had recognized, it takes time to manage high talents, and required more dedicated time for it, starting from high-level alignments and processes embedded into the organization's strategy.

Further, some of the respondents admitted, it is a dance on thin ice to balance equality and knowledge and fear, knowing that a certain employee's departure would be a big risk for the company. These employees might have faster career development, or get leadership's interest and desire to solve issues they have brought up – to keep them happy and engaged to the organization. If an employee considered important for the company shows unhappiness, some extra effort would be done to please the star. On the other hand, it came up in another interview, the companies try to avoid the risk of having too much information on one employee, and they try to embed the knowledge rather on processes, not on individuals.

Most of the interviewees explained they have an employee ranking and rewarding system which is very open and known by the employees, and the requirements what it takes to be considered on their top talents requires both professional and interpersonal people skills. The bonus system they had in place, was linked to the ranking and rewarding system – the better you perform, the better you are rewarded. With one exception, where additional bonuses were deliberately divided with equal portions.

Two of the interviewees mentioned they have certain talent programs, which are in place only for top talents, either for leadership or knowledge-intensive positions. Another representative of these two organizations said the talent program has been recently developed to meet this high-talent management challenge, and found it currently working well. The second mentioned they have had it in place in some form for a long time, but it has been adjusted to meet more also knowledge-intensive professionals as talents, and wondered if that program should be bigger, take more employees part.

Considering some employees as stars, the concept of star talent, caught also some criticism from some respondents. It was mentioned they would find it more fruitful to target organizations resources to managing the employees as a whole to work together in a certain, desired way, and that would be more beneficial for the organization than putting the effort on singular people, employees perceived as stars. The interviewee appraised, it would be more important to create possibilities, and target actions so that each employee feels good at work and flourish, and each potential would be recognized and noticed. Another respondent was touching same dilemma, the interviewee highlighted the importance of the circumstances created for the employees and continued each employee can be a star on the right place and moment.

4.1.7   Summary of the Key Findings from the Current State Analysis

The organizations participated in this study, were very aware of the high-talent turnover in the industry, and how competed the skilled labor force is. The findings of the current state analysis emphasize how multilayered and chained the concepts of star talent and employee engagement are. There was cohesion among the interviewees about what kind of is a Star in the industry, and the descriptions were very alike between the respondents. The interviewees were very aware, what kind of employees they need in their organizations, and what kind of employees they considered as high talent. Certain requirements of technical skills were taken for granted, but to separate the wheat from the chaff, Stars have personal skills that differentiate them from the average employee. Star

in ICT Consultancy business has good teamwork skills, is able to work with a customer-centric focus, does have individual skills like a to-do attitude to work and people management skills, does have characteristics as a person which support the organization goals, like self-orientation to work. These were reported the most commonly recognized traits for the Stars, but it was also highlighted each person is different, and recognizing star and managing stars requires ability to handle them individually, to know each one's strengths and capabilities.

In the real-life environment, which the current state analysis reflects, the practices presented in theoretical knowledge were found usable. The most practical method among the interviewees was management and leadership, especially direct managerial role was mentioned to be important because that is a key position to work with employees and potential stars, and serving as a link between organization and employee. Second, organization fit, organization commitment, and Corporate Social Responsibility were each given agreeable comments, the methods originated from the theories were seen as beneficial. However, these practices are very intertwined, practicalities like providing a feeling of meaningful work are linked to managerial work, organization fit, organization commitment, and CSR.

As a consequence, for multilayered themes on what kind of is a Star and which methods are beneficial, the best practices used in star talent management are also very multifaceted. Organizations put lots of effort into fostering a working environment that supports beneficial teamwork, and where the customer focus is clear on every stage. Employees' well-being is taken care of by providing extensive benefits and supporting employees' well-being at every stage of life. Organizations are taking their management and leadership seriously, and are putting effort into supporting their managers on the role, and offer them training to succeed in the role. There were reported to be actions to increase employees feeling of being fit for the organization, and the topic was paid lots of attention during recruitment. Corporate social responsibility was reported to raise lots of interest among the employees, and the activities within internal CSR were commonly reported. Rewarding from the good work was seen as important by each of the interviewees, and that topic also raised thoughts about fairness in the workplace, employees were definitely wanted to be treated fairly, although sometimes it brought challenges. The interviewees saw, the most important action is to make an ordinary office Tuesday enough good, so the employee feels good to come to work and is able to do one's work well.

Table 3 below shows the main topics found in the current state analysis.

Table 3.   Overview of the Current State Analysis findings.

Star in ICT Consultancy business	Company practices & theoretical knowledge	Know-how and best practices
Team behaviour	Management & Leadership	
• shares, mentors and educates fellow colleagues	• direct managerial role in high importance	• company culture which fosters doing together, and customer focused mindset
• solid interaction skills	• has to be embedded in strategy	
• is able to utilize team competencies	• successful manager role needs support	• managerial work is supported, and training provided
• sees big picture	• most important link between organization and employee	
• works for the common goal		• fairness in every level & decision
		• including and taking employees part to the decision making
Customer-centric way of thinking	Organizational Fit	
• skilled in customer service	• important especially in recruitment stage	• attractive organization to work
• ability to put the customer first	• existing employees' feeling of being fit for the organization increased by internal actions	• meaningful work
	• build strong organizational culture, know what is fit for the organization	• professional colleagues
Individual skills		• making workplace as good as possible to come in and work the day through
• a to-do attitude to work		
• easily takes an active role	Organizational Commitment	
• willingness to learn	• increases engagement especially in smaller enterprises	• ordinary workdays are important
• self-driven, takes initiative, takes responsibility	• employees who feel they are part of somehting meaningful are more committed to the organization	• supported employee well-being
• people managments skills		• extensive benefits
		• open & equal rewarding
Individual characteristics	Corporate Social Responsiblity	• targeted actions to increase the feeling of being fit for the organization
• goal oriented	• increasingly important	
• self oriented	• practices in CSR are valued by employees	• CSR on everyday level
• usually career oriented	• internal CSR pracitces important	• individual treatment
• needs freedom		
• problem solver		

Based on the findings of the current state analysis, it can be said the ICT consultancy organizations are very aware of what kind of employees they need, and how the work should be done to meet the organization's goals. The employees identified as Stars have very similar attributes through the industry, and Stars are valued because they bring competitive advantage through their superior skills. Organizations place lots of effort into engaging their employees and are using versatile practices to succeed.

In the next stage of the study, the Thesis proposals are built up. The findings from the Current State Analysis are measured against the patterns found on the existing knowledge and are used as a foundation for the best-practices proposals.

5 Building the Proposals and Recommendations for ICT Consultancy Companies for Star Talent Management and Employee Engagement

This section merges the results of the current state analysis and the conceptual framework towards the building of the proposals.

5.1 Overview of the Proposal Building Stage

This section presents the steps in the proposal building for this study. It describes the process of creating the Thesis proposals, leading to the final outcome of the study, best practices in the ICT consultancy sector to engage their star talents.

The findings from the Current State Analysis point out, the industry experts are taking multiple actions to keep their star talents engaged. The organizations are very aware of the industry situation, where high talent turnover is a challenge, and the labor markets for high talents are very competitive. The studied organizations were coherent on the definitions of a Star talent in the industry, and they knew what kind of employees are fit for theirs. The organizations placed measures in order their talents consider the organization a good place to work, and recognized well what makes their employees flourish and to support organization's goals.

The conceptual framework of the study presented three different theories for employee engagement, each of them showing from a different viewpoint what makes an employee engage. In addition, three different commonly used single methods, which each of the theories also supports, and which have been found to increase the level of engagement, were presented deeper.

The focus of this study is to find what is found efficient to engage employees on the conceptual framework, and what the existing organizations have found efficient as per the current state analysis, and based on them both, to make proposals for the organizations of the best practices to engage their star talents.

In this stage of the study, the patterns found in the conceptual framework, are measured against the findings from the conceptual framework. Each subchapter goes through a selected topic, presents what were the supporting findings from the conceptual framework, and compares what were the findings from the current state analysis, or vice versa.

First, the structure for the proposals was built up. The structure is based on the writer's analysis from both sections of the study. For example, management and leadership were seen as an important topic in both sections, theoretically and practically. The findings from the theories were measured against the findings from the interview analysis. Second, both findings of the topic are evaluated, and third, the proposal based on the evaluation is placed. Each proposal is a topic that was discussed with the interviewees, and they presented it as an important and efficient method for engaging employees.

5.2 Characteristics of a Star

What is considered Star, is dependent on the organization's goals and requirements for an employee. It is important an organization recognizes, what kind of employee behavior is 'star-like and what kind of employee is supporting the organization to achieve its goals. These are the basis for the first proposal, which encourages organizations to be fully aware of what they need in the organization and recognize their stars from the employees.

In the literature, star performers were characterized as employees who have high levels of technical, industry, and firm knowledge (Tzabbar & Baburaj 2020), and who can use that knowledge consistently to support organizations goals (Elliott & Folsom 2013). The Finnish IT consultancy companies value this similar kind of expertise on the employees they categorize as their stars, the interviewees mentioned their stars are aware of the company´s goals and can utilize their own knowledge, or retrieve it from the colleagues, to accomplish the company's targets. Usually, this target was mentioned to be the satisfied customer, and the star talents were described to be either technically skilled or to have team working skills to work for the common goal.

Based on the results of *the current state analysis,* the interviewees stressed that, the **team players** are needed and valued in the ICT consultancy business. An employee, who has solid interaction skills, is able to utilize team competencies with one's people management skills, and who shares, mentors and educates colleagues, is respected both by colleagues and by employer.

Next, based on the results of *the current state analysis*, the interviewees stressed that, the employees' **skills to work with the customer** were highly appreciated and were given as an important attribute for a star in every company. In the IT consultancy sector,

the work is done as projects for the end customer, and close interaction and co-operation with the client is needed. An employee who was able to carry out the technical solutions and also able to work successfully with the customer was having characteristics the employers seemed to like, and would like to keep on their workforce. In literature, Tzabbar & Baburaj (2020) highlighted, star talents do bring a much-needed competitive advantage to the organization. In the IT sector, one of the advantages to separate from your competitors might be the way how you handle your customers. Good is not enough on a highly competed field.

In addition, based on the results of *the current state analysis*, certain kinds of attributes were *not desired* for the stars, and commonly, it was the **arrogant, individualistic behavior** of an employee. This apparently is due to the fact, the work is done very much on teams, and teamwork skills were very needed. The interviewees mentioned the substance skills can be learned, but it is more important what kind of an attitude the person has, and what are one's teamwork skills. *In literature,* Elliott & Folsom (2013) had found in their study similar reflections, it was seen more important for the star to be able to translate the talent to organization beneficial outcomes, rather than being just technically most talented or to have the most potential. This study findings support the same conclusions.

Based on the results of *the current state analysis*, the employees were said to expect lots of freedom on their work, and their organizational culture to foster employees who master **self-directed type of working**, who have high problem-solving skills, and can see the big picture fast. The respondents agreed, in return for freedom the employees are expected to take responsibility for their work, and this was also one characteristic given for their star – their high talents could be trusted to deliver what expected. Similar attributes to describe the organization's stars were given by each interviewee.

Based on the results of *the current state analysis*, the studied organizations found it important that the employee is fit for the organizations' needs and **fit** for their culture. A lot of attention was said to be paid to this during the recruitment process as well. The respondents commented their employees have reported liking to work along with professional, capable colleagues, and like the way how the organization does things.

In *the conceptual framework,* organization fit was discussed from the viewpoint of how organizations can increase the feeling of organizational **fit** for the existing workforce, and

4-dimensional theory from Thompson, Lemmon & Walter (2015) was presented. According to the authors, employees or organizations have different types of capital, and through support and training these capitals employee feels more fit to the organization.

Based on the results of *the current state analysis*, it can be drawn that the studied companies are very aware of the impact of organizational fit on increased engagement. The companies were putting effort especially on to add *human capital,* by providing training to improve employees' professional expertise, training to succeed in managerial work, and provide career development opportunities. *Social capital* includes how an employee fits into the team, how the team collaboration works, and how is the relationship between manager and employee. These attributes were seen as very important for an employee by the interviewees, and companies had paid attention to have a good balance on the topics. Comments referring to *family capital* for an employee came less, but it was mentioned the companies like to offer family leave opportunities and to take into consideration the individual needs of an employee. The fourth dimension, *positive psychological capital*, came up in the interviews as a reference for investing into humane, empathic leadership, which according to the theory were an important part of adding the psychological capital of an employee.

Finally, *in the literature,* Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Gonzáles-Cruz (2013), defines how talent can be viewed. The approach of this study is to view talent as exclusive, as an elite portion of the population, consisting of high performers and high potentials of the employee population, Star talents. The other approach, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & Gonzáles-Cruz (2013) presented, and which the viewpoints of some of the interviewee's support, is to look at talent as an inclusive, talent as all employees of the organization. The divergent views on the topic of engagement were fresh, and highly valued.

Based on the results of *the current state analysis*, the concept of star talent, particularly defining part of the employees as Stars, caught some criticism among some of the respondents. The interviewees wondered if the concept is really usable in the Finnish labor context due to our requirement of a high level of equality. Also, some thoughts about whether it is more beneficial to target the organization's development power to the workforce as one, rather than picking up individuals, Stars, to target actions in order to increase engagement. The dilemma was also pointed out from the viewpoint of the Finnish labor law.

Summing up, the thesis findings demonstrate that the researched organizations are very aware of what is fit for their organization, and what kind of employees they need in their organization. Organizations pay lots of attention to employ people who are fit for their organization, either in term of adding diversity by cultural add, or by strengthening the skill portfolio of the organization. Organizations seemed to put effort on to boost the feeling of cultural fit for their existing employees. As the organizations were very aware of what their organization needs, the respondents were also very coherent on the attributes how they describe their Star talents, what qualifications are appreciated in the industry. Accordingly, the first proposal for the ICT organizations can be formulated as follows:

Thesis proposal 1: Know what is fit for your organization & know what is a Star in your organization.

5.3 Management and Leadership

The second proposal concerns management and leadership, and its quality. The direct managerial work was given high importance on engaging factors by the industry experts and on the conceptual framework. A managerial position is important in spotting and working with the talents, and also being a link between the organization and the employees. Therefore, it was seen important the quality in management and leadership is high.

Based on the Current State Analysis, the direct managers were said to be the best to notice high talent in the organization and to be located in a position that links the employees to the organization's strategy. Management was not only seen important on the direct line manager level, but also on the leadership level, how the organization values certain attributes, and how the strategy level decisions are implemented to practice. In the Conceptual Framework, management and leadership quality was brought up on all the presented theories, Kahn´s (1990) theory emphasized how the management style impacts the psychological conditions which employees feel, and which conditions make them engaged in their work. According to Kahn, supportive, resilient, and clarifying management styles are positively impacting the feelings of meaningfulness, psychological safety, and availability, which were the backbone for his theory of adding employee engagement. The satisfaction approach by Gallup (2020) rates that 70% of the variance on team engagement is influenced exclusively by the manager.

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Further, in the literature often used term 'transformational leadership' was used for leadership style where the leaders transform organizations by highly motivated and engaged employees, employees who the leaders have helped to reach their full potential (Wiedemann 2019). Schaufeli highlights the importance of leadership to accomplish high levels of engagement:

> 'Particularly transformational leadership that provides a clear vision, inspires and motivates, offers intellectual challenges, and shows interest in the needs of the employees, is successful in accomplishing this. In addition, management should focus on employee strengths instead of weaknesses.' (Schaufeli 2012, p.4)

In line with the theoretical findings were the results from the Current State Analysis. The professionals interviewed for this study all valued coaching style of leadership, encouraged line manager role being the source who gives direction and vision, and valued characteristics such as empathetic and easily reachable personalities on their managers. The interviewees also mentioned low hierarchy and minimizing bureaucracy to be their organization's aims, and they found it important to give employees a lot of freedom and decision power. These actions are in line with the presented theories, the kind of leadership the interviewees found important, is seen to foster engagement, and also to foster talents to flourish on their full potential. In Current State Analysis, it was found beneficial to train the managers, to give enough time for them to do their work, and to support them in their role. Some of the interviewees mentioned they have recently started transition projects to make a conscious transfer to a more modern kind of leadership. The interviewees were very coherent on the importance of management and leadership.

However, the researched organizations were not very active in carrying specific talent management programs for their Stars. Only one of the interviewees mentioned they have recently started a program, which is targeted at employees identified as Stars and aiming for their more efficient management. The rest of the interviewees mentioned they have some talent programs in place, but either the quantity of the people taken into the program was very small to be adequate, or the program was aimed only for the leadership positions and not for a Star from any position, or there was no type of a talent program in place. It caused some pondering among the respondents, whether the existing talent programs could be improved, and also whether it was necessary to have specific talent programs for Stars. From point of view of the presented theories, several authors (Aguinis & Bradley 2015; Elliott & Folsom 2013; Tzabbar & Baburaj 2020) suggest, it

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pays off to manage your Stars and to have specific Star talent programs in the organization. Accordingly, the second proposal for the ICT organizations can be formulated as follows:

Thesis proposal 2: Manage your Stars and invest in your management and leadership quality.

5.4   Meaningful Work

The third proposal of the Thesis concerns the feeling of meaningfulness in work. The researches presented on the Conceptual Framework support its importance for fostering engaged employees, and the findings from the Current State Analysis supported the theoretical findings.

In literature, meaningful work is a common attribute, which has been found to add employee engagement in the millennium workplaces. People have a desire to do something meaningful, leave their mark on society and work for a greater purpose. Employees look at their employers from a critical perspective, whether the organizations they work for are able to stand for the values they find important, and whether they get the feeling of being part of or doing something meaningful. Kahn (1990) viewed meaningfulness as a psychological state and states in his theory of self-expression approach that *meaningfulness* is experienced when the person feels worthwhile, useful, and valuable, they feel they have made a difference and not taken for granted. Humans have an inbuilt need to do meaningful work, where they can fulfil the interest in freedom, autonomy and dignity (Yeoman 2013). Meaningfulness can be perceived also through how the company operates in society, through aspects of Corporate Social Responsibility. Even the job role itself is not related to any human purpose, but employees notice their organization is working for a social purpose, it has an impact on employees feeling of meaningfulness at work, and as a consequence to how engaged the employee is (Nazir & Islam 2020). Organizations' internal Corporate Social Responsibility is also important on the impact on employee engagement. Soni & Mehta (2020) mentioned tools to improve employees' lives and as a consequence their engagement: employees' needs and wants fulfilment, fairness in managerial decisions, training & development opportunities, work-life balance, safety and health, and providing equal opportunities.

Based on the results of *the current state analysis*, the interviewees mentioned their employees have reported back they like to be part of doing something meaningful like building up solutions that are meaningful for society. The respondents also commented, not all employees like the same, one size does not fit all but have to listen with care what are the individual's own needs. Some of the respondents had found aspects related to external Corporate Social Responsibility to be an important part of building employee engagement, for example, the organization's environmental or diversity inclusion programs had been found meaningful for the employees. The interviewees were all very sensitive on the aspect of fairness in the team, the employees were definitely wanted to be treated all the same, and to offer to see through decisions. Training and certification opportunities were found important to engage employees. Managerial decisions wanted to be kept transparent, and definitely equal to all. Work-life balance was also mentioned to be important, and companies wanted to support their people in different life situations. The extensive health care provided by occupational health care was mentioned as one of the attractive and engaging elements.

ICT business can be a place, where you can do meaningful work and leave a mark on society. Employees have reported back, they feel they are part of something meaningful when building up solutions that can even make an impact nationwide. Theoretical background also supports the importance of meaningfulness on engaging employees, and on a field that has competition over talented employees, this can be a tool to differentiate. Organizations are very aware of the internal and external CSR factors, which provide the feeling of being part of something meaningful and as a consequence, increase the level of engagement, and organizations target actions on them.

Based on the above findings, third proposal can be formulated as follows:

Thesis proposal 3: Meaningful work increases engagement.

5.5   Ordinary Workday

Based on the discussions with the stakeholders of this study, the fourth proposal concerning an ordinary workday was formulated. The principle of this proposal is, an average workday should be good enough the employee feels good to come to work, and has a working environment that supports performing well for the organization's goals. This is a very important backbone for creating employee engagement; once the ordinary workday

is good, the other bricks can be added to it. This proposal examines several viewpoints from the Conceptual Framework.

In the Current State Analysis, the interviewees found it important the employee feel good to come to work. This was seen by interviewees as the signs of a good working place, and also a solid base for an engaged workforce. It was found important, if there were troubling issues noticed to block everyday good work, the issues were tried to be tackled fast. In literature, Gallup organization's theory of satisfaction approach (Harter, Schmidt & Keyes 2002) is very deeply rooted in the principle that well-being at the workplace and employee performance are components of a psychologically and financially healthy workplace. Employees who are proud of their company, and satisfied with their work have a positive employee experience, and as a result, are more engaged. Both emotional end cognitive employee engagement can be increased when employees know what is expected of them, have what they need to do their work, have chances to feel an impact and fulfillment, they feel they are part of something meaningful, coworkers they can trust and have development and improvement chances. (Gallup 2021; Harter, Schmidt & Hayes 2002)

In literature, the satisfaction Approach Theory (Gallup 2021) is presented as a pyramid of needs, needs that should be satisfied fairly consistently to give a positive employee experience, and increase engagement. The needs for employee's performance development are basic, individual, teamwork, and growth. These needs are not isolated steps to reach in order to move to the next, but they are more a constant and ongoing process. The findings from the Conceptual Framework are in line with this theory; the employee must have the foundational levels of needs fulfilled in order for the environment of trust is created. These needs are different for each employee, and the challenge of individual treatment came up during the interviews. In Current State Analysis, it was mentioned to be one of the challenges in managerial work because knowing each one's needs and strengths takes time to know each individual.

Above theories list the importance of trustworthy colleagues and employees varying needs for teamwork as elements to increase engagement. Not only are the teamwork skills important from the employers' point of view, but also from the employees' point of view colleagues and teams were reported to be important. The interviewees mentioned their employees have appreciated the skilled and professional colleagues to work with and to have a good community to which belong to.

Interestingly, the current ongoing pandemic had created some turbulence on the employees, and it has increased the speed talents are departing. This is an issue future behavioral scientists probably are eager to study, how much environmental instability influences the employee's perceptions of the workplace, and has it done rapid changes on the pyramid of needs.

Further, some of the interviewees mentioned they like to include their employees on the organizations' decision-making process, as a representative of a team. Employee participation has been found an effective method on literature (Aktar & Pangil, 2018) to make employees feel more committed to the organization, as the other methods of providing training and development opportunities and providing a secure workplace, which both were mentioned as methods the studied organizations also liked to use. These mentioned methods to add organizational commitment has been found important to increase the feeling of affective commitment (Meyer & Allen 1991), and they encourage the employee to be part of the organization and accept the organization's goals as one's own, which are in turn signs of an engaged employee.

Interestingly, considering star talents, the respondents seemed to have a mutual understanding that Stars are not the most sensitive on the ups and downs of daily happenings in the office, but they might be departing faster if some issues become constant. They believe, their Stars know their value on the job markets, and if some things are left open or unsolved for too long, they might make quick decisions to depart fast.

Summing up, it can be drawn that it is important to pay extra effort to make the ordinary workdays good. An employee who feels respected, valued, has good working environment, is more likely to become more engaged to the organization. This leads to the fourth proposal of the study:

Thesis proposal 4: Ordinary workdays matter.

5.6   Rewarding and Benefits

The fifth proposal concerns the importance of rewarding, in different means, and employee benefits given. This topic was often referred to in Current State Analysis, and was

found important on the Current State Analysis, too. The topic is also causing some deliberation, because organizations want to treat their employees with equality and fairness.

Based on the Current State Analysis, the studied organizations were rewarding their employees from good work. Some of the organizations had a criteria-based grading and rewarding, which was transparent for all the employees. The organizations' incentives were divided then according to the grading. Some had monthly salaries based on performance bonuses, how you succeed on certain projects. This was not opened more detail and no results can be drawn of the information available. The criteria-based bonus rewarding was in line with the talent grading; if you were considered as a high talent in your organization, you fulfilled certain attributes on the criteria scale and ended up in the top performers' section and finally were also financially benefitting from the good work. In the literature, the importance of rewarding is distinctive, employees, and star employees, want to get feedback on their work and be rewarded for their accomplishments. In literature, performance feedback, rewards, and recognition have been found to increase organizational commitment (Aktar & Pangil 2018), and to as a consequence increase employee's level of engagement.

In the Current State Analysis, some of the researched organizations had also a colleague-rooted rewarding system in place, where anyone from the organization can name a valued contribution and name a colleague for a reward. The employee benefits given were in the interest of the respondents, it was mentioned the competitors in the same field are also providing good employee benefits, and the case companies wanted to keep up. Especially occupational health service benefits were mentioned, and that is a field in Finnish labor markets where is variance between industries and organizations.

Rewarding was also discussed on the point of equal treatment, to which Finnish labor law is giving very strict and – equal – guidelines, and the guideline was seen as a good framework. Rewarding can be also in form of praising, to which the respondents said the one-to-one discussions to be the best place, publicly praising was seen as a bit of dilemmatic.

The researched organizations paid attention to the rewarding and benefits. Rewarding on terms of salary and mostly with bonuses is related to how well you do your work, most organizations have certain kinds of grading for their employees. Employee benefits were

probably giving more space to differentiate. Either the topic was not wanted to be opened, or it was not enough clearly asked in the interview, but it seems organizations do not have in place one-off (monetary) rewards.

To conclude, rewarding can happen in many forms. Rewarding can take place in monetary rewarding, where employees are rewarded by the accomplishments in their work and certain grading they have achieved. Rewards can be also bonuses, which are given as one-off, or annually based on the organizations profit. Rewards can also be in form of performance rewarding, and can be originated also by colleagues. Rewarding can also be in form of praising. Although organizations want to treat employees equally, they want to be also fair in rewarding, and different forms of rewarding give some space on recognizing good work. Employee benefits are a form of rewarding, and can be used as a tool to differentiate from competitors. As a result, this leads to the fifth proposal of the Thesis:

Thesis proposal 5: Reward from good work.

5.7   Summary of the Proposals

Thesis proposal 1: Know what is fit for your organization & know what is a Star in your organization.

> One size does not fit all. Organizations differ, and the needs they have do vary. What is fit for your organization should be clear, and it helps to define what makes a Star in your organization. Star might not be a Star at your competitors, but the characteristics one has might be Star material at yours. Know what is your Star, and you can help the Star to flourish.

Thesis proposal 2: Manage your Stars & invest in your management and leadership quality.

> The direct line manager is in an important position to keep the employees engaged. They can influence greatly on does the employee feel the psychological conditions fulfilled in order to feel engaged, does the employee have their needs fulfilled which makes them engaged. The manager role

needs time and resources. Leadership roles as giving direction and vision are significant in engaging employees.

Thesis proposal 3: Meaningful work increases engagement.

> People have a need to be part of something meaningful, and work is as important as any other part of life. Being part of a project what is meaningful, or being part of an organization that does meaningful things in society, are factors increasing engagement. What is meaningful to each employee, varies.

Thesis proposal 4: Ordinary workdays matter.

> An ordinary day at the office should be a good day at work. Employees feel more engaged if their needs are recognized and fulfilled on daily basis, and their wellbeing is taken care of. One important aspect is the work community, the colleagues you work with and with whom you solve the projects. Employees have basic, individual, teamwork, and growth needs, which should be fulfilled in order for the environment of trust is created and engagement can occur.

Thesis proposal 5: Reward from good work.

> Rewarding the employee from a work well done is an important factor to increase engagement. The rewarding can be in form of money, or in a form of praise or bonus. Employee benefits are also a form of a reward, and a tool to differentiate.

Summing up, these Thesis proposals are based on the analysis of the existing methods currently in use in the researched organizations, and they are reflected against the leading theories on the topic. The presented proposals are already in use and found applicable by the researched organizations. Thus, in this way, the thesis identified, refined and provided the set of best practices for the industry.

6   Discussion and Conclusions

In this section of the study, the Thesis is summarized. An overview of the study, its results, and Thesis Proposal creation are presented. Evaluation of the Thesis and personal reflection make the last parts of this section.

6.1   Executive Summary

One of Finland's business strengths has been the know-how on IT technologies. Recently, there has been lots of public discussion on news media about the high talent turnover and lack of competent workforce on the sector organizations, even the Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment has launched programs to support businesses with the lack of workforce. The industry is employing knowledge-intensive workers, part of them are highly educated and their competencies are difficult to replace, a departure of a valued high talent can cause severe impacts on such industries. ICT consultancy sector was chosen for this study because it is a branch of IT industries, which has been on the media the most.

The purpose of this study was to identify the proven methods in the ICT sector organizations to engage their Star talents. The topic is approached from the viewpoint of the impact of a Star talent on the organization and the importance of engaging the star talents in the organizations. The theoretical framework focuses on the leading theories for engaging employees, and the methods increasing employee engagement.

For studying the topic in real-life business context, five HR professionals from five different ICT consultancy companies were selected and interviewed. The purpose of the interviews was to find out what aspects the professionals working in the field find efficient for managing their Star talents, what kind of traits the Star makes in their organization, and how the best practice form the Finnish ICT consultancies relate to the theoretical suggestions for increasing employee engagement.

Theoretical insights and business context findings made the basis for the Thesis proposal creation. The existing knowledge was compared to the patterns identified from the real-life. As a result, five proposals for best practices on engaging Star talent in the ICT consultancy sector were found, which was the objective of the study. The Thesis proposal are in a nutshell:

1. Know what is fit for your organization & know what is a Star in your organization.

2. Manage your Stars & invest in your management and leadership quality.

3. Meaningful work increases engagement.

4. Ordinary workdays matter.

5. Reward from good work.

6.2 Practical Implications

The presented theories are all very known for the experienced HR professionals, who are on a daily basis working with the topics of employee engagement and engaging their high talents. However, it was noticed during the interviews, that the topic is not that straightforward in the practical business context, and does not have an easy solution available. The topic is very multilayered, and the usable methods are also different for different Star talents, which highlights the challenge the company's HR and managers do face on a daily basis. However, the study discusses the dilemma from various viewpoints, and based on the existing knowledge and findings, offers five different proposals, which the Finnish ICT consultancy companies have found useful on their Star talent engagement. These can be used as tools to consider in an organization, but nevertheless, they do not offer a simple solution to the matter. The Thesis makes an introduction to the topic, which organizations can utilize for carrying out deeper research on their own organization later on.

6.3 Evaluation of the Thesis

The objective of the study was to investigate what ICT consultancy sector organizations in Finland are doing to engage their star performers. The need for the study arose due to a high talent turnover in the ICT sector is an often referred topic in media, which together with the lack of a competent workforce is a constant challenge for the ICT organizations. The recruiting markets are challenging for the employer, and labor market pull for talents has caused that employees are moving fast.

The outcome of the research was to set out best practices for engaging the star performers in ICT consultancy companies in Finland. The study was based on literature reviews, which was the basis for setting out the conceptual framework of the Thesis. Existing knowledge on Star talent management and employee engagement was the basis for the theoretical framework, and an extensive literature review was conducted to find out the leading theories of the topic. Second, the current state analysis was built up. The qualitative research method was chosen for this study, and Current State Analysis started by conducting interviews with the stakeholders, five persons were interviewed. After the interviews were conducted, the analysis part was started. Once the conceptual framework and current state analysis were in place, they were both used as foundations to which Thesis proposals were built up. The outcome of the Thesis was met, the Thesis provides a set of best practices for ICT consultancy organizations to engage their star talents.

Evaluating the process of building up the conceptual framework, the multilayered topic caused a dilemma, how to choose the only right theories and methods for this study. The concept does not have one right solution, but different points of view. This phase of the study could have been done differently, too, to choose fewer viewpoints and to choose one or two views only. Due to the writers newness to the topic, a more comprehensive viewpoint was chosen to support the building up the conceptual framework.

Second, evaluating the process of the current state analysis, carrying out the research as a qualitative study, and conducting interviews proved to be a good choice for the purpose. Interviews were a good form to gather as much information on the topic as possible and to rise different viewpoints based on the interviewee's own viewpoints and interests. Each one of the interviewees was enthusiastic about the topic, and had several years of professionalism of the topic, and was very open and supportive of the research. Their input and time given for the interviews are highly valued. The interviewees were given anonymity to protect their organizations and to get as open and trustworthy comments as possible. Anonymity helped to discuss some sensitive topics in the interview, also knowledge of the researcher is not employed by any ICT organization helped to keep the discussion open. However, to gain a deeper understanding of the topic, more confidential issues should be studied, e.g., salary competition topics, extra benefits possibly given, and also, it would be worthwhile to conduct the research from the Star talents personal point of view – what makes them engage. These are suggestions for a further study if some of the research organization gets interested in to rummage the topic further.

For getting a more grounded validation for the Thesis proposals, the second round of a discussion should have been arranged with the interviewees, preferably to have them all in the same meeting to have a vivid discussion on the proposals. However, for holding on to the promised anonymity, this was not doable.

In this study, validation was not done, but the researcher checked validity and reliability of the conducted study following the practice from social sciences. In social sciences, triangulation is a commonly used validation strategy in qualitative research. Whereas in quantitative research, research is validated, when it is measurable, quantifiable, and generalizable and the validation advocates that the research is valid if another researcher replicates it and uses the same methods, and achieves the same results. In this study, validation is perceived from another perspective, validation is showing that research is thoroughly and reliably planned, and implemented, and where the procedures used and the results of the study are compatible and consistent with the presented objectives. (Farquhar, Michels & Robson 2020; Santos et al. 2020)

Data triangulation	Multiple sources for Data gathering were used. Interviewees were from different organizations, whose all profession is in the HR field, management and leadership positions. A semi-structured interview was chosen as a method, to handle the topics of interest and also to give space for asking clarifying positions.
Theoretical triangulation	Employee engagement is presented on different viewpoints and aspects from different scientists discussed. Star talent as a concept is discussed using several sources. Both are evaluated from the global and domestic viewpoints and areas of importance.
Meta-triangulation	More than one theoretical perspective is used in the interpretation of findings. Current state analysis findings are measured against several theories, using different viewpoints to the topic.

Regarding the next steps, this study makes only an introduction to the topic. Employee engagement and managing star talents is a large and complicated matter to be covered

in a single Master´s study. The focus of the study was to offer best practices on the topic, and the Thesis proposals can be used as practical recommendations. Most of the time of the study was spent on patterning the existing knowledge and the current state analysis findings, on creating the Thesis proposals.

6.4   Final Words

This is the final section of the study and it contains the Thesis author´s personal reflection.

I have always been a believer that the employees / people in general are able to deliver extremely good results if the conditions are good and also noticed while working in the other knowledge-intensive sector, there really are Stars among the employees, whose input to the organization success is high. My professional background is not in the HR field, so the topics of this Thesis offered me definitely a learning path, a very interesting and educating one. The deeper I got into the theories, the more multilayered the concept of employee engagement and whole star talent concept came.

It is thanks to Metropolia MBA program, I got into the topic. As said, employee engagement and managing talents have been unfamiliar topics to me, but thanks to the encouraging atmosphere in the University, also the unknown paths were worth exploring. It is amazing to learn.

My warmest thanks to the anonymous interviewees, thank you for dedicating your valuable time and sharing your professionalism!

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Appendix 1.

Interview topics and questions

- What kind of is your Star?

- The industry challenge in general &

  what do you do to keep your Stars?

- Theories for increasing employee engagement,

  what kind of thoughts or opinions these arise?

- Managing Star talents, how is it done &
  thoughts around the topic.