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THE ESSENCE OF AGILE TALENT THROUGH BUSINESS AND ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

The current article is composed to explore the essence and emerging shades in the meaning of the modern construct of agile talent. **Methodology** – Systematic Literature review, critical analysis, and content analysis of selected publications, including scientific articles, conference papers, reports, and corporate websites, are applied as research methods in concern with achieving the aforementioned research purpose. Identified the important nuances and basic characteristics of agile talent are summarized and categorized through the mind-map method. **Findings** – An existing set of related nuances in the meaning of agile talent is described that served as a prerequisite to deliberate proposal of a useful definition for the aforementioned construct. Directions for future research in the sphere of agile talent are also outlined. **Research limitations** – The research on agile talent is conducted in Google search engine, embedding the business perspective pursuit, and the scientific aggregator of Google Scholar, incarnating the following scientific perspective.

KEYWORDS: agile talent, talent, agile, agile organizations, talent agility.

JEL: M12, J24, M50

INTRODUCTION

Post Covid-19 world, geopolitical tensions, local war conflicts, terrorism, technological and other disruptions, climate change, and green transition embody the sources of great challenges to the survival and potentially successful development of contemporary companies. Observed numerous “trials and errors” in interpreting the business environment signals prove to be a difficult or sometimes even unsurmountable individual or collective endeavor for managers, employees and other constituencies of business organizations whose beliefs about realizing the organizational issues of external adaptation, internal integration, the nature of the truth, time, space, human nature, appropriate human activity, and nature of human relationship (Schein & Schein, 2017) seem to be extremely diverse. Furthermore, a wide array of adopted attitudes and behaviors by managers and other stakeholders to continuous coping with these revolving organizational issues is also noticed, reflecting their assumptions about forming priorities in business (i.e. formulating and appraising the pursuits of unique purpose and related objectives), ways of addressing change, attracting and using of specific resources, approaches in identifying and taking advantage of business opportunities due to the achievement of inconsistent (unpredictable) business outcomes, and resulting hesitation, perceived anxiety and uncertainty in relation with the undertaken interventions (table 1).

Table 1. Differentiated approaches in “reading” the business environment factors

| Differentiated approaches in identifying, understanding, and interpreting of important factors in the contemporary business environment | Adopted attitudes and behaviors by managers and other stakeholders to corporate management & development |
|--|---|
| Mack, K., Krämer & Burgartz (2015); Bennett & Lemoine (2014) – “volatility, uncertainties, complexity, and ambiguity.” | Stănescu & Romaşcanu (2022); Sreenivasan (2019) – “vision, understanding, courage and adaptability.” |
| Nataliia & Olena (2023); Cascio (2020) – “brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible.” | Stănescu & Romaşcanu (2022); Sreenivasan (2019) – “equitability, inclusiveness & diversity of the business world, vibrancy, unparalleled work output, challenging work, agility.” |
| Leading Effectively Staff (2019) – “rapid, unpredictable, paradoxical, and tangled.” | Stănescu & Romaşcanu (2022); Balita (2020) – “positive outlook amid the Covid-19 crisis, virtuous values, utilitarian unity, circumspective clarity and agile action.” |
| Kohler (2021) – “turbulent, uncertain, novel, and ambiguous.” | Falkenberg (2019) – “reality, understanding, possibilities, and transparency.” |

Source: Own research and analysis.

The already described complicated situation brings to the forefront the issues with navigating effectively and efficiently through management and leadership challenges of purposeful attracting and/or creating of high value-adding people in contemporary business organizations as their main source of sustainable competitive advantage, even in the era of wide penetrating artificial intelligence, robotics, virtual and augmented reality, automation, digital technologies, wearables and blockchain (Priya & Jayalakshmi, 2025; Parry & Battista, 2023; Jassy, 2025; Gowrishankar et al., 2025), driving continuous organizational renewal (Raofian, Ghatari, Manesh & Palumbo, 2025; Flinn, 2024; Lowry, 2024) and under the conditions of dominating unhealthy pluralism in the practical use of diverse, incongruent and in some aspects even colliding people related theories and practices as (green) human resource management, human-centered management, human capital management, personnel management, people management, exponential human resource management and talent management (Hamid, 2019; Dimitrov, K. R., 2021; Lepeley, 2023; Hanine & Dinar, 2022; Popova & Shynkarenko, 2016; Zhang-Zhang, Rohlfers & Varma, 2022; Diamandis & Kotler, 2015; Ismail, Malone, van Geest & Diamandis, 2014; Younger & Smallwood, 2016a; Dimitrov, 2023, 2019; Venkatesh, 2016).

That is why surveying the essence and significant characteristics of an emerging construct of “agile talent” is chosen as the subject of this article. Secondary sources are selected as an object of survey, i.e., scientific articles, conference papers, reports, and corporate websites, not only discoverable through search by the aforementioned keyword in Google search engine (***, 2025a), but also in the scientific aggregator of Google Scholar (***, 2025b). The necessary discipline in thinking and acting for this research endeavor is provided by the semantical support of two useful definitions, implying the necessity of a new people-oriented approach to be designed and implemented in agile business organizations, as follows:

- *Talent* - that “refers to systematically developed innate abilities of individuals that are deployed in activities they like, find important, and in which they want to invest energy. It enables individuals to perform excellently in one or more domains of human functioning, operationalized as performing better than other individuals of the same age or experience, or as performing consistently at their personal best” (Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014), without even implying the idea to question the organizational need of its management (i.e. talent management) (Dimitrov, 2015).

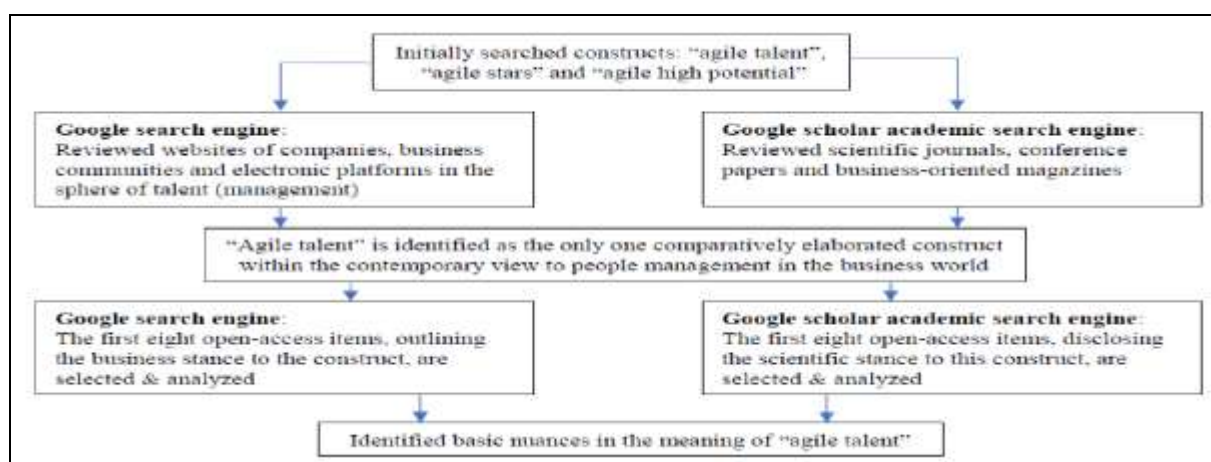
- *An agile organization* – “a network of teams operating in rapid learning and decision-making cycles”, substantially supported by technology and “guided by a common purpose that co-creates value for all stakeholders by utilizing new data and empowering the teams closest to the information”. Fast and efficient reconfigurations of “strategy, structure, processes, people, and technology toward value-creating and value-protecting opportunities” permit the agile entity adding “velocity and adaptability to stability, creating a critical source of competitive advantage in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous conditions” (Brosseau, Ebrahim, Handscomb & Thaker, 2019; The McKinsey Agile Tribe, 2017).

1. METHODOLOGY

The arising construct of “agile talent” is explored here by outlining an accumulating array of nuances in its meaning. This is accomplished by the use of systematic literature review, content analysis and critical analysis (see Snyder, 2023; Paul, Khatri & Kaur Duggal, 2023; van Wee & Banister, 2023; Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman & The PRISMA Group, 2009) for a group of publications, found in Google search engine (***, 2025a), Google scholar academic search engine (***, 2025b) where the existence of some iterations to “agile talent” are also observed, as close constructs as “agile stars” and “agile high potentials”. This research task is based simultaneously on open-access publications, written in the English language, outlining both the business stance (e.g., websites of companies, business communities, and electronic platforms in the sphere of talent management) and the scientific stance (e.g., scientific journals, conference papers, and business-oriented magazines). The first eight appropriate, full-text items from each category are chosen for content and critical analysis. This is how: (a) key nuances in the bundle of the forming meaning for “agile talent” are identified; (b) five reasons, explaining the instability of its meaning, are indicated, and (c) a useful definition for the aforementioned construct is deliberately proposed, extending the potential and diverse categories of people and creatively reframed constituencies that may contribute to the success of a target company.

Finally, important shades of meaning of agile talent are reviewed and summarized by generating a useful mind-map (Buzan, 2018). The consecutive steps in selecting the group of items from the aforementioned search engines and academic databases are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The selection steps in exploring the construct of agile talent



Source: Own research and analysis.

This paper also abides by two research limitations. *First*, the research for the construct of agile talent is held only in the Google search engine, pursuing the business perspective, and the scientific aggregator of Google Scholar, following the scientific perspective.

Second, the use of already mentioned constructs as “agile stars” and “agile high potentials, and even the new ones, identified during the conducted research process, is avoided, i.e. “workforce agility”, “agile workforce”, “employee agility”, “human resource agility”, “HR agility”, “people agility” and “talent agility” (Gouda & Tiwari, 2022), due their possible attribution to diverse people management theories (schools of thought), unclear and ambiguous relationships with agile talent and rare applications that may provoke some underlying analytical contradictions and confusion among unbiased researchers.

2. THE CONSTRUCT OF “AGILE TALENT” IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING

It is an indisputable truth that management as a science possesses two main sources of accumulating new knowledge – the experience of decision-makers in performing business organizations and the proposed new scientific instruments, resulting from academic research. This is the reason why the shades of meaning, embedded in the emerging construct of “agile talent”, are identified and analysed here through the lens of both the first eight companies, providing a useful definition or succinct description for it on their websites in Google search engine (***, 2025a) and the first eight open-access articles from Google scholar academic aggregator (***, 2025b), providing similar contribution. Three milestones initially directed and further concentrated the conducted research process to the exploration of the construct of agile talent, as follows:

- The grounded position of Vardi and Collings (2023) who perform a research review of scientific literature on management of talent in modern business organizations that undoubtedly shows the existing unity and complementarity of three traditionally close constructs as (1) “talent”, (2) “stars” and (3) “high potential”, respectively corresponding to the three approaches of the wider defined “people management”, implemented in contemporary companies – i.e. (1) as the object of talent management, originating from the broader stream of strategic (important, long-term) human resource management, (2) through the lens of human capital, and (3) from the perspective of organizational behavior and psychology. An initial research is conducted on the potentially existing two variations of the target construct of “agile talent” – “agile stars” and “agile high potential” through Google search engine (***, 2025a) and in Google Scholar aggregator (***, 2025b), revealing that “agile talent” is the only comparatively elaborated construct within the contemporary view to managing people in the business world in comparison to the already mentioned two close constructs that justifies its choice as a research subject.
- The in-depth search in Google Scholar for “agile talent” that discloses widespread joint and arbitrary applications, many times even without providing of necessary, respective definitions for used and a bit impulsively adopted as potentially close terms, i.e. “workforce agility”, “agile workforce”, “employee agility”, “human resource agility”, “HR agility” and “people agility” (Gouda & Tiwari, 2022).
- The in-depth search in Google Scholar for the exact construct of “agile talent” that also revealed a rare use of another closer construct, labelled as “talent agility”, appearing in headings, abstracts, and full-text of reviewed items (Gouda & Tiwari, 2024a; 2024b; 2022). The last construct still seems bewildering because of not only observed interchangeable use without any scientific explanations, but also lack of

scientific agreement around prescribed meanings to it, regarding its relationship with the core construct of “agile talent” – for example viewing it as an organizational capability, a workforce ability or characteristic, internal/ external orientation of undertaken activities, and positioning it as a main organizational development aim versus a means of achieving it (Gouda & Tiwari, 2024a; 2024b; 2022; IMocha, 2025; Younger & Smallwood, 2016a). Furthermore, the first book in the field of agile talent (Younger & Smallwood, 2016a) discloses a predominant utilization of agile talent and rare application of talent agility in its text body, unlike in the papers by Gouda & Tiwari (2024a; 2024b; 2022), where the opposite situation is noticed. In both provided opposing cases, the use of the aforementioned two constructs seems arbitrary and undisciplined, without outlining any similarities or differences between them.

Thus, the performed research for agile talent in Google search engine (***, 2025a) and Google scholar academic aggregator (***, 2025b) discloses: (a) a grounded business stance to outlining key nuances in the meaning of “agile talent” (table 2), based on relevant content of corporate websites, business communities and electronic platforms, and (b) an emerging scientific approach to identifying important shades in the meaning of “agile talent”, based on publications in scientific books, journals and business-oriented magazines (table 3).

Table 2: The business stance in outlining important nuances in the meaning of “agile talent”

| Company/ Community | Provided a definition or description of agile talent |
|---|---|
| Agile Talent Community - Grant Thornton (***, 2025c) | (1) Agile, open, and collaborative (2) Contract professionals, contributing project-based work to the company and/or to its clients (3) Contract professionals, inculcated with unique organizational culture attributes. (4) Contract professionals in a long-term relationship with a target company. (5) Talent, brought together “from across our industry and beyond.” |
| Agile Talent – a functional practice group in Cornerstone (***, 2025d) | “A highly adaptable workforce capable of enabling companies to achieve the objectives of tomorrow.” |
| Hemsley Fraser (***, 2025e) | (1) Strong believers in “continuous learning, improvement, innovation.” (2) Actively challenging “the status quo by pursuing more value.” (3) Openness to “new and different ways of doing things, skills and capabilities.” (4) Desire to collaborate and stretch across boundaries. |
| Bain & Company (Johnson, Jacobs, Thompson, Gunn & Woods, 2023) | (1) Performing “work with a clear sense of purpose.” (2) Expecting from managers and peers “encouragement and freedom to innovate.” (3) Belonging to a community of professionals, understanding and embracing “Agile” as a sphere of knowledge, and doing things in teams and companies (4) Characterized by multisourcing – simultaneously being grown as top talent from inside and being attracted from outside the business organization (5) Trusting performance reviews that emphasize more team-based work and collaborative success in comparison to individual skills (6) Preferring compensation and rewards, based on team incentives, with widened salary bands to close the gap between agile talent and managerial jobs. (7) Being provided with the opportunity to transfer their Agile skills laterally to other projects or functions in the company. |
| Osborne Interim Management (Kendall, 2023) | (1) Contract executives, astutely used by target companies (2) Agile (temporary, contract, interim) talent (3) “Gigster” workforce (4) Well-qualified, experienced, senior contract managers |
| Ioffice by Eptura (McDonald, 2019) | (1) A group of full-time employees, freelancers, contractors, and consultants, i.e., the company personnel (2) A talent pool of a company, used to source candidates not only in its immediate area, but also regionally, nationally, and/or globally |
| Prowareness (Gieles & | (1) Emphasizing teamwork |

| Company/ Community | Provided a definition or description of agile talent |
|------------------------------------|--|
| van der Meer, 2017) | (2) Implementing predominantly Kanban or Scrumban methods of work (3) Relative ease in (un-)learning and responding to changes (4) High motivation and specific personal characteristics, enhancing transparency, cooperation, and collaboration |
| Toptal platform (Younger, n.d.) | (1) An enabler of accession to the global talent “cloud” by the company (2) An indispensable part of the “blended workforce.” |

Source: Own research and analysis

Table 3: The scientific approach in identifying key shades in the meaning of “agile talent”

| Scientific/ Business publication | Provided a definition or description of agile talent |
|---|--|
| Jriyasetapong, Kiattisin & Ayuthaya (2023) | Narrower apprehension: (a) its strategic perspective; (b) the learners in the business organization; (c) a significant and multicomponent factor in a model, enhancing organizational digital transformation |
| Forbes (Wingard, 2019) | (1) Freelancers (2) Outside experts (3) A new generation of workers (4) Associated with strategic work |
| Cappelli, et al. (2018) | Employees collaborate in small, cross-functional units (teams). |
| WorkingCapitalReview (2018) | (1) Mobile staff (2) Contractors, consultants, freelancers, and other categories of people, performing necessary work for a target company, but not under the traditional “employer-employee” relationship (3) Talents, performing not only administrative, operational-focused, or temporary work tasks, but also delivering strategic and sophisticated ones |
| Horney (2016) | (1) External, project-based, and flexible, contingent workers, gigsters, free agents, temporary help, agency workers, on-call workers, contract workers, independent contractors, or freelancers (2) A component of the “gig” economy (3) Full-time employees |
| Younger (2016) | (1) Freelancers (2) An enabler of cost efficiency, necessary specific technical or functional expertise, higher speed, greater flexibility, and innovation for the business organization |
| Younger & Smallwood (2016a) | (1) An enabler of non-traditional employment relationships (2) It contains not only full-time employees, but also external, project-based, and flexible workforce (i.e., outside experts, external staff, contingent workers, free agents, contractors, and “gigsters”) |
| Younger & Smallwood (2016b) | external, project-based, flexible, global |

Source: Own research and analysis.

Based on the summarized information in the presented two tables, it may be concluded that the “agile talent” construct emerges as:

- An efficient and effective organizational response in the sphere of contemporary people management to the influences of the faster changing, volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous and even bewildering business environment – a grounded perspective, supported by other influential researchers not only concentrating their interests within the narrower sphere of agile talent (Barman, Riederer & Salo, 2021), but also looking to the broader and holistic issues of agile talent management, the realizations of important relationships as dynamic talent management capabilities and organizational agility (Harsch & Festing, 2020) or organization agility and talent

management (Lawler III & Worley, 2015) and the specificity of leading under the conditions of the VUCA environment (Lawrence, 2013).

- A logical consequence of the intensive “war for talent” among competing companies in many fast-growing industries all over the world, that brings to even greater and creative widening of the aggregate of personnel categories, identified and deliberately attracted to contribute to the target company, even undertaking deliberate management interventions of transforming the stakeholders into talent categories. Such perspective is also adopted by other leading researchers, opinion leaders and business consultants as Younger & Smallwood (2016a), Sánchez-Bayón & Lominchar (2020), Dimitrov (2019), Ismail, Malone, van Geest & Diamandis (2014), World Employment Confederation (n.d.) and Gigged.AI (2025) whose expressed grounded opinions and research results imply the formation of a consensus, regarding: (a) the inevitable enrichment and restructuring of the monitored stakeholder groups (i.e. arranging and managing the actors in company’s workforce or generally human ecosystem), even elaborating new ones (users, fans, partners, general public, etc.) by design and implementation of information-enabled products and services, and by even co-creating and utilizing the great potential of (agentic) artificial intelligence; (b) widespread, simultaneous implementations of new and diverse types of “employer-employee” relationships, characterized by deliberate choices of employment locations (in or outside the organizational boundaries), preferred types and durations of binding contracts, the utilization of services by intermediaries (e.g. employee leasing companies or practicing even employee sharing within a particular context, freelance platforms, etc.) in the employment process and during the employment periods even in the “grey area” still not well arranged by the enacted labour laws in the majority of national jurisdictions.
- A complex business-related cultural phenomenon, manifesting due to the occurrence of generational change in the workplace, increasing and creative adoption of (management) innovations, information technologies, and project-based work organization of daily activities under the frameworks of designed and implemented new business models. Thus, to the forefront comes the need to adequately elaborate the training and development component of the talent management function, especially with an emphasis on the (un-)learning patterns of humans and groups, and the teamwork as a whole, in or outside the organizational boundaries, in relation to the occurring constant change and its accelerating pace. A strong support to this stance may be inferred through the work results of other researchers in this field who explore the urgent need of broader talent management reinvention, i.e. the embeddedness of agility in separate talent management system elements (Ranasinghe & Sangaradeniya, 2021) and even beyond agility to encompass its manifestations in different cultural levels (Claus, 2019; Dimitrov, 2012).

Nevertheless, the construct of agile talent still seems a bit confusing and unstable, as evidenced by the search on Google (***, 2025a) and Google Scholar (***, 2025b) for at least five reasons. *First*, it does not represent a newness in the sphere of human resource management entirely, because a recommendation to shift the focus in the work of human resource units from inside full-time employees to outside the organizational boundaries was made years earlier (Armstrong, 2012; Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank & Ulrich, 2012; Scullion & Collings, 2010).

Second, there exist articles containing the exact term – sometimes in their headings, but without defining, deeply analyzing, or surveying it in the following sections of theirs (see

Sánchez-Bayón & Lominchar, 2020; Lawrence, 2013; Ranasinghe & Sangaradeniya, 2021; Barman, Riederer & Salo, 2021).

Third, there may be found scientific articles that do not use the exact construct of “agile talent”, although their topic is oriented to outlining the intersection between the elements of talent management and the agile management practices, sometimes labeling it as necessary management innovation (i.e. HR disruption or talent management reinvention) for the purpose of realizing development, growth and sustainability in business organizations (Claus, 2019; De SmetRep, 2018; Mahadevan, Paquette, Rashid & Ustinov, 2019; Martin, 2015).

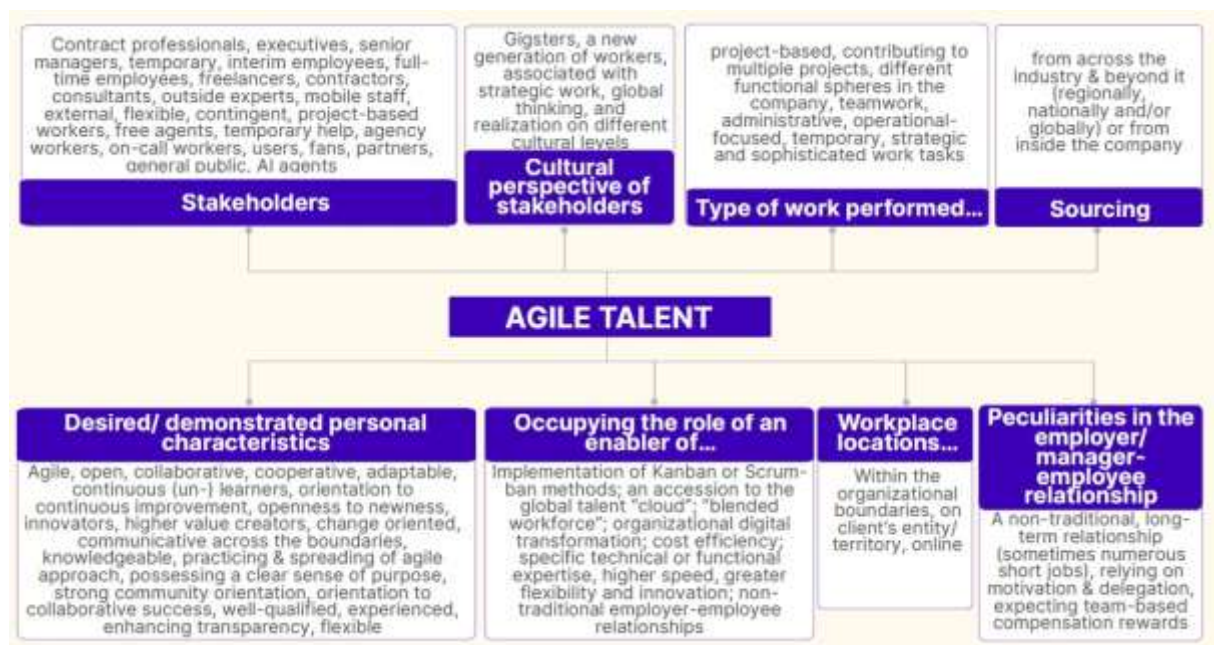
Fourth, Younger and Smallwood (2016a) use in their influential book predominantly the constituency of “outside experts” to denote “agile talent” with the exception that in its introduction, their colleague Marshall Goldsmith deliberately provides further details of diverse personnel groups, covered under the semantic umbrella of agile talent.

Fifth, it seems implied that simply the embracement of talent management in modern business organizations as a prerequisite of increasing personnel preparedness, readiness, and agility brings to demonstrations of restraint from the application of the term “agile talent” (Martin, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The logic summary of the already identified important shades in the meaning of the construct “agile talent” is depicted on a specific mind map (Figure 2), where the contributions of both the identified groups of the first eight open-access scientific or business-oriented publications, containing in their text bodies the exact aforementioned construct, represent the backbone.

Figure 2. The mind map for the agile talent



Source: Own analysis.

In this way, agile talent seems to emerge as a construct which elaborating bundle of shades of meaning driven by participating stakeholders (talent categories), incl. their cultural

perspectives, cherished personal characteristics, type of performed work, sourcing, enabled desired organizational states of being, workplace locations, and observed peculiarities in “employer/ manager – employee” relationship. Thus, the performed holistic analysis contributes to proposing a comprehensive definition of the underlying term – “agile talent” that is adopted *as the efficient and effective use and creative segmentation of company stakeholder (talent) groups (i.e. workforce or generally human ecosystem actors, and even in the virtual environment or the emerging artificial intelligence agents) as full-time managers/employees, external staff/ experts/ managers, contingent workers, free agents, contractors, community, fans, etc. in order to negotiate and execute a continuous pursuit of unique organizational purpose by implementation of agile people management practices not only within, but also beyond the organizational boundaries, and extending to include human-robot collaboration.*

The conducted research allows outlining several directions for future exploration in the field of agile talent. *First*, new surveys are necessary to explore the adoption of agile talent in business organizations across more countries, not only in developed ones or the Asian Tigers, but also in all member states of the European Union, etc. *Second*, the majority of publications study business organizations as research objects, and minority target units from the state administration (e.g., the military, universities) or the NGO sector. *Third*, the implementation of agile talent in organizations from more industries should be examined in order to construct a richer map of its manifestation and appraise the potential achievement of cherished organizational results through it, identify appropriate methods of its management, make valid comparisons among them, detect and measure the strength of some important relationships. *Fourth*, a strong orientation by researchers to the use of representative samples of (business) organizations in their undertaken scientific projects is necessary in order to be able to make conclusions and recommendations that matter not only to small groups of surveyed entities, but also to all the players in diverse industries, spreading wider good practices and accelerating higher corporate growth. *Fifth*, further exploration of the transformation processes from the organizational status quo in the field of people management to the establishment and dominance of agile talent in companies or their units is needed in order to outline important (dis-)advantages, causes and effects in preferred reliance on specific stakeholders and cultural contexts, and thus performing deeper comparative and critical analysis, and formulating more precise managerial recommendations. *Sixth*, the position of agile talent among an array of other emergent and innovative methods of people management should be unequivocally determined.

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