

# Beyond competing for talent: an integrative framework for coopetition in talent management in SMEs

Beyond  
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talent

Stefan Jooss

*Cork University Business School, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland*

Julia Lenz

*School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, Technological University Dublin, Dublin, Ireland and Department of Business Administration, Munich University of Applied Sciences, Munich, Germany, and*

Ralf Burbach

*School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, Technological University Dublin, Dublin, Ireland*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to unpack how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can operationalise coopetition in talent management, addressing ongoing talent shortages in the hospitality industry which were intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This conceptual paper draws from literature on coopetition and talent management in SMEs. Specifically, the authors take an interorganisational talent pool lens and develop a framework following the principles of open-systems theory.

**Findings** – The authors find that the traditional use of talent pools is often impractical for SMEs because of a lack of resources and capabilities. Instead, interorganisational talent pools, through coopetition in talent management, can aid these firms to address talent shortages. The authors identify potential for SME coopetition at various stages, including attraction, development and retention of talent.

**Practical implications** – Coopetition in talent management can aid industries in establishing market-thickening pipelines. Through co-attracting, co-developing and co-retaining talent, SMEs can create interorganisational talent pools. To develop talent management coopetition, a set of prerequisites, catalysts and potential inhibitors must be analysed and managed.

**Originality/value** – This paper moves the talent management debate beyond competition for talent, introducing coopetition as a viable alternative. Taking an open-systems perspective, the authors develop an integrative framework for coopetition in talent management in SMEs encompassing input, process and output components. The authors reveal the dynamic and complex

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In memoriam – Claudia Eckstaller, Professor at the Department of Business Administration at the Munich University of Applied Sciences. She passed away on 15 February 2022. The authors are thankful for her ideas and the constant support of this research.



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nature of this coepetition process, highlighting the essential role of coepetition context and illustrating open-system principles.

**Keywords** Talent management, Coepetition, SMEs, Hospitality industry, Talent pipelines, Interorganisational talent pools, Open-systems theory

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

Many hospitality organisations have long faced and continue to face challenges in attracting, developing and retaining talent (Brannon and Burbach, 2021; Jooss *et al.*, 2021a; Kravariti *et al.*, 2022), likely because existing approaches to talent management are insufficient or ineffectively applied in this industry (Baum, 2019). The Covid-19 crisis has served to spotlight the limitations of current talent management approaches, while also unveiling the precarious nature of employment in the industry (Baum *et al.*, 2020). The hospitality industry, perhaps more than other service industries, suffers from the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis (He *et al.*, 2021). The post-pandemic employment market displays signs of increasing talent shortages, largely because of an exodus of many employees to other industries (Baum *et al.*, 2020). To reverse this trend and to strengthen talent pipelines, hospitality organisations need to reimagine their talent management strategies and practices.

In spite of the apparent ubiquitousness of large hotel chains, the hospitality industry is characterised by a substantial amount of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). According to Smith Travel Research (2015), there exist more than 100,000 individually operated hotel properties with more than seven million rooms globally. For the purpose of this paper, we define SMEs as businesses that have fewer than 250 employees and a maximum turnover of €50m (European Commission, 2022). We contend that especially SMEs, which likely lack resources, capabilities and time for dedicated talent management deliberations (Harney, 2021), need to adopt innovative solutions and combine their efforts through coepetition to overcome their talent challenges (Chang and Eberhard, 2021). However, many hospitality organisations tend to drain their common labour pools, instead of establishing talent pipelines for all organisations (Brannon and Burbach, 2021). Thus, it appears that, to date, SMEs have approached talent management from a competition perspective rather than a coepetition perspective.

Coepetition is a neologism of “competition” and “cooperation” (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996; Le Roy *et al.*, 2018). It involves the collaboration of independent companies, even when they compete around broader business activities to combine resources and capabilities (Bengtsson and Kock, 2014; Raza-Ullah *et al.*, 2014). SMEs are more likely to coepete with other SMEs if they can reduce their costs, learn from each other and are located in the same geographical area (Chiambaretto *et al.*, 2020; Kallmuenzer *et al.*, 2021; Madhavan *et al.*, 2004). However, research on coepetition in talent management is scarce (Van den Broek *et al.*, 2018), and the extant literature offers limited insights into the applicability of common talent strategies and practices to SMEs, particularly in the hospitality industry. Addressing these shortcomings, our conceptual paper unpacks how SMEs can operationalise coepetition in talent management. To do so, we draw on coepetition literature (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016; Fernandez *et al.*, 2018) and talent management in SMEs literature (Krishnan and Scullion, 2017; Festing *et al.*, 2013). Specifically, we take a talent pool lens to examine how coepetition may enable the development of interorganisational talent pools. Unlike traditionally adopted talent pools (Jooss *et al.*, 2021b; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2010), which are inward focused, exclusive and unique to a single organisation, interorganisational talent pools are external, inclusive and shared among a defined number of coepeting firms (Brannon and Burbach, 2021). In this paper, we inquire:

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Q1. How can co-competition in talent management be operationalised by SMEs in the hospitality industry?

Our study presents three primary contributions: First, we add to the debate on shifting boundaries in talent management (Vaiman *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, we move the talent management discourse beyond competition for talent, introducing co-competition as a viable alternative for organisations. We contend that interorganisational talent pools, through co-competition in talent management, can aid hospitality businesses to address talent shortages and develop talent strategically. Second, we build on the extant co-competition literature (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016) with an integrative framework for co-competition in talent management in SMEs encompassing input, process and output components. Taking a systems perspective, our paper reveals the dynamic nature of this co-competition process, highlighting the essential role of the co-competition context (i.e. prerequisites, catalysts and potential inhibitors) and illustrating open-system principles. Third, we answer the call for greater contextualisation of talent management research (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2019), providing insights on co-competition in an SME setting within the hospitality industry. In doing so, we identify potential for SME co-competition as part of a talent management system, which encompasses co-attracting, co-developing and co-retaining talent.

### Conceptualising talent management in small and medium-sized enterprises

The meaning of talent varies in both the talent management and hospitality literatures (Kravariti *et al.*, 2022; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017). While specific definitions depend on organisational contexts, a strong focus is placed on high performers and/or high potentials (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Jooss *et al.*, 2019). Hospitality organisations may take an inclusive (i.e. entire workforce) or exclusive (i.e. a subset of people in the workforce) perspective when conceptualising talent (Sheehan *et al.*, 2018). Baum (2008) highlights that talent in hospitality organisations encompasses a set of hard and soft skills required to deliver high levels of customer service, which differs among service providers, and which must be adopted to meet the needs of diverse customers. Similarly, other research in the hospitality industry has emphasised the central role of creating customer experiences and fostering service cultures when developing definitions of talent (Bharwani and Talib, 2017; Chung and D'Annunzio-Green, 2018).

In this paper, we define talent management as “the process through which organizations meet their needs for talent” (amended from Cappelli and Keller, 2017, p. 28). This definition captures the inherent “need” for talent given the significant talent shortages in the industry and also highlights talent management as a “process” – a view that we also adopt in this paper. As part of this strategic discourse, the talent management literature has presented a set of three talent routines, including pivotal positions, talent pools and workforce differentiation (Collings and Mellahi, 2009). With the exception of some recent work (Brannon and Burbach, 2021; Jooss *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b), most research in the hospitality industry has traditionally adopted a broader view on managing talent beyond these three routines. As such, most studies in a hospitality context relate talent management to the attraction, development and retention of talent (D'Annunzio-Green, 2018; Kravariti *et al.*, 2022; Sheehan *et al.*, 2018). For example, Chen *et al.* (2020) examine the perceptions and preferences of hiring managers, Johnson *et al.* (2019) unpack talent development and Deery and Jago (2015) reveal how work–life balance and wider working conditions are critical factors impacting retention.

In spite of making up 99% of firms in OECD and G20 countries (OECD, 2015), SMEs remain an often neglected research area in talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016;

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Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021). While the importance of people management practices for the success of SMEs has long been recognised (Dundon and Wilkinson, 2009; Krishnan and Scullion, 2017), there has been limited focus on talent management strategies and practices in SMEs (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021), and even less so in the hospitality industry (Chang and Eberhard, 2021). Valverde *et al.* (2013) outline three characteristics found in people management practices in SMEs: First, they found high similarity across SMEs and suggest homogeneity in people management depending on external (e.g. industry) and internal (e.g. organisational structure) factors. While a common approach to managing people may exist across some firms and industries, Krishnan and Scullion (2017) flag the importance of age, size and growth of SMEs, influencing their approach to managing their workforce. Second, a high degree of informality and reactivity is common in people management practices in SMEs, which is also commonly observed in the hospitality industry (Chung and D'Annunzio-Green, 2018). Thus, many talent strategies are emergent and *ad hoc* rather than rational and formulaic (Harney, 2021). Third, the presence of powerful owners influences how practices are developed and implemented (Valverde *et al.*, 2013). The power of key decision makers, including CEOs, owners or human resource (HR) managers was also noted in the hospitality industry (Kravariti *et al.*, 2021).

Given these characteristics, SMEs face unique challenges when attracting, developing and retaining talent (Festing *et al.*, 2017; Krishnan and Scullion, 2017), particularly if they operate without an HR function or dedicated HR professionals (Chang and Eberhard, 2021; Loufrani-Fedida and Aldebert, 2021). For example, when attracting talent, SMEs often lack proactive recruitment strategies and have scarce resources to invest in talent practices (Festing *et al.*, 2013). As a result, SMEs have a legitimacy disadvantage in that their employer brand is less known in comparison to larger firms, and that limited information is available to job seekers (Krishnan and Scullion, 2017). A particular challenge for SMEs in the hospitality industry relates to the location of the firm. As many hospitality businesses are located in rural areas, these are potentially less attractive for individuals seeking employment. In addition, the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the precarious nature of the industry, with SMEs facing significant talent shortages (Baum *et al.*, 2020). When developing talent, SMEs often apply an *ad hoc* approach to learning and struggle to integrate formal, high-quality training into their day-to-day operations (Chung and D'Annunzio-Green, 2018). Finally, when retaining talent, SMEs can only offer few career progression opportunities given the limited number of positions available within the firm (Chung and D'Annunzio-Green, 2018) and often fail to provide competitive working conditions that will reduce employee attrition (Baum, 2019; Deery and Jago, 2015). In the following section, we examine the applicability of talent pools in SMEs to address the ongoing attraction, development and retention challenges in the hospitality industry.

### **An interorganisational talent pool lens**

A central effort in talent management is the establishment of talent pipelines which can be defined as “the sequenced flow and development of individuals, repeated over time, disproportionately from specific labor sources into particular positions within firms, occupations, and geographies” (Brymer *et al.*, 2019, p. 209). In essence, a pipeline is an “intentional supply strategy” (Brymer *et al.*, 2014, p. 486) and can take three principal forms: internal (i.e. promote from within), external (i.e. facilitate external hiring) and market thickening (i.e. influence educational and occupational choices) (Brymer *et al.*, 2019). In contrast to internal and external pipelines, market-thickening pipelines are not specific to any one firm, can be quite broad in their scope and involve cooperating firms which might compete around other business aspects. Market-thickening pipelines can provide benefits to participating organisations via disproportionate access to talent (Brymer *et al.*, 2019).

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For example, organisations that participate in building market-thickening pipelines engage individuals early in their career development and provide career paths in the industry. In doing so, firms influence individuals' choice to join and remain in an industry. Ultimately, these pipelines aid organisations in feeding talent into talent pools, which can be defined as a group of high-performing and high-potential incumbents (Collings *et al.*, 2019). Thus, talent pools generally relate to a subset of people in the workforce (exclusive approach) but are in some cases treated as synonyms when describing the entire workforce (inclusive approach) (Brannon and Burbach, 2021). Adopting a talent pool routine, which emphasises the “flow” and “process” notions of talent rather than traditional “static” and “stock” associations (Collings *et al.*, 2019), can lead to greater breadth and depth of talent in an organisation (Jooss *et al.*, 2021b). The talent management and, more recently, hospitality literatures have identified multiple talent pools in organisations, including, for example, for emerging leaders, executives, technical talent, high potentials, local talent, rising stars or top talent (Björkman *et al.*, 2013; Jooss *et al.*, 2021b; Kichuk *et al.*, 2019; McDonnell *et al.*, 2011). These talent pools can be established at various levels in an organisation, refer to functional or leadership aspects and can be managed centrally or replicated across various geographies (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2010; Jooss *et al.*, 2021b).

In an SME context, the traditional use of talent pools is often impractical given their size, and thus number of employees, and given the flat structures of SMEs (Krishnan and Scullion, 2017). Thus, talent pools at various hierarchical levels are unrealistic and a revised approach to managing talent pools is needed. Brannon and Burbach (2021) propose “interorganisational talent pools” as an alternative to traditional talent pools. Unlike traditionally adopted talent pools (Jooss *et al.*, 2021b; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2010), which are inward-focused and unique to a single organisation, interorganisational talent pools are externally focused and shared among a defined number of cooperating firms (Brannon and Burbach, 2021). Such an approach requires a large degree of self-regulation and coordination of resources given the multiple and often conflicting interests among participating stakeholders (Chang and Eberhard, 2021). Interorganisational talent pools are designed to serve several organisations; however, talent remains a scarce resource and its overuse can lead to depletion. For example, if managers seek to recruit talent exclusively into their firms, they deprive their competitors of that scarce resource. Thus, a responsible and coordinated use is required to make interorganisational talent pools a successful practice (Brannon and Burbach, 2021; Van den Broek *et al.*, 2018). To establish interorganisational talent pools more firmly in the literature, empirical research as well as conceptual grounding is required. In this paper, we conceptualise the development of interorganisational talent pools through co-competition in talent management. We now move to a discussion of co-competition in SMEs.

### **Conceptualising competition in small and medium-sized enterprises**

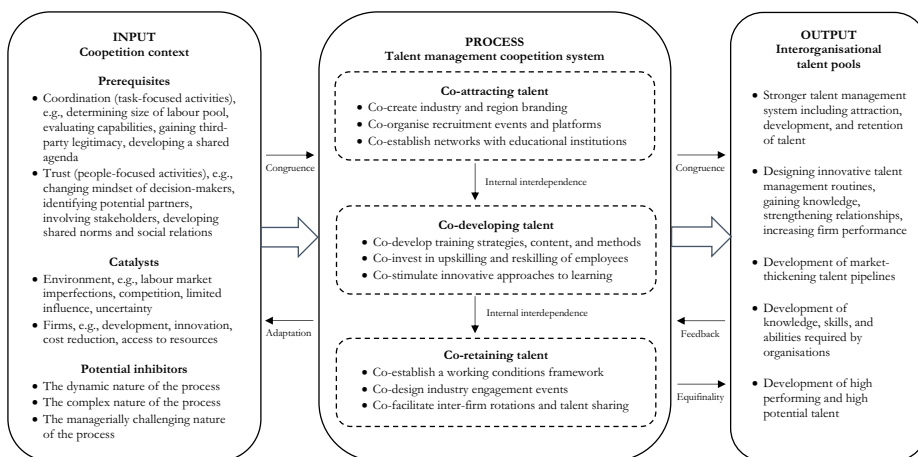
Co-competition, a term that was coined in the 1980s, refers to the “simultaneous pursuit of cooperation and competition by firms” (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016, p. 23). Driven by hyper-competition, firms can use interorganisational co-competition to overcome resource shortages, drive innovation, gain knowledge, strengthen relationships and ultimately improve firm performance (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016; Gnyawali *et al.*, 2006; Van den Broek *et al.*, 2018). To conceptualise co-competition, the extant literature has focused traditionally on the actors involved in co-competition (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996; Pathak *et al.*, 2014) and the activities associated with co-competition (Ho and Ganesan, 2013; Raza-Ullah *et al.*, 2014). Considering the range of actors in co-competition, five levels of co-competition can be differentiated: intra-firm, dyadic, triadic, network and inter-network (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016). Intra-firm co-competition refers to co-competition within the

firm, for example, among cross-functional subunits (Ghobadi and D'Ambra, 2012). Dyadic co-competition relates to a one-to-one relationship between firms, and can include horizontal and vertical relationships (e.g. Fernandez *et al.*, 2014). Triadic co-competition considers co-competition between three interconnected firms (Thomason *et al.*, 2013). Network co-competition refers to co-competition among multiple firms and can take various forms, such as alliance portfolios, value-chain clusters or industry eco-systems (Bengtsson and Johansson, 2014). Finally, inter-network co-competition considers co-competition across distinct networks (Peng and Bourne, 2009). For the purpose of our study, we focus on network co-competition, encompassing multiple SMEs in the hospitality industry and commonly within a geographical boundary (i.e. region). Co-competition encompasses a broad range of activities. A number of studies focus on the interactions between co-competing stakeholders, arguing that these stakeholders will compete around some business activities (e.g. supply chain), while co-competing around other activities (e.g. R&D) (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016; Gnyawali and Park, 2009). In our paper, SMEs in the hospitality industry compete around business activities, including the provision of accommodation and food and beverage offerings, but seek co-competition in the area of talent management.

In the context of SMEs, the ability to co-ope is a critical factor for the competitive positioning of firms, allowing economies of scale, reduction of operational costs and expansion of markets (BarNir and Smith, 2002; Bengtsson and Johansson, 2014; Gnyawali and Park, 2009). Yet, the co-competition literature has predominately focused on large firms, with only a few studies explicitly studying SMEs (Levy *et al.*, 2003; Morris *et al.*, 2007; Robert *et al.*, 2009; Thomason *et al.*, 2013). For example, Morris *et al.* (2007) emphasised the role of co-competition as a deliberate risk management strategy, reducing uncertainty and costs. Similarly, Robert *et al.* (2009) note that governing bodies involved in co-competition can optimise resources more effectively than individual SMEs. Kraus *et al.* (2019) found that SMEs in the brewing industry benefited from co-competition through innovation, market reach, marketing and firm growth. Particularly for those SMEs that are located in rural areas, such as many hospitality businesses, regional network co-competition is more cost-effective and can also strengthen the region's performance as a whole (Chang and Eberhard, 2021). Similar findings were presented by Kallmuenzer *et al.* (2021), who found that Austrian SMEs in the hospitality industry benefited from co-competition, particularly if economic benefits were demonstrable and destination networks were strengthened. Notably, to achieve value in co-competition, SMEs need to manage socially complex, relational and resource-based aspects, including trust, commitment and mutual benefit (Thomason *et al.*, 2013). In spite of the conceptual development and practical application of co-competition in businesses for almost four decades (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996), there is a dearth of research on the extent of its utilisation in talent management and in the context of the hospitality industry.

### **An open-systems-based framework for co-competition in talent management**

Having conceptualised co-competition and talent management in SMEs in the hospitality industry, we use open-systems theory (Katz and Kahn, 1978) to integrate current findings and build a framework for co-competition in talent management in SMEs (see Figure 1). In general terms, open-systems theory allows to describe structures and operations of a system (Barabási, 2016). It provides a framework that maps core components and subcomponents of a system and highlights their interrelatedness (Harney, 2018; Nadler and Tushman, 1980). Specifically, open-systems theory encompasses a set of internal and external input factors, processes and outputs (Katz and Kahn, 1978). Building on this, our framework encompasses three components: input factors (i.e. co-competition context), the process of co-competition in a talent management system and output factors related to talent management. Subsequently,



**Figure 1.** Integrative framework for competition in talent management

we discuss the interrelatedness of these components by illustrating five open-systems principles.

### Inputs

The first aspect in our framework considers the *coopetition context*. Specifically, we distinguish between prerequisites, catalysts and potential inhibitors. First, *prerequisites* are conditions that likely influence the effectiveness of setting up coopetition in talent management in SMEs. Drawing on work from [Devetag \(2009\)](#), we present trust (people-focused activities) and coordination (task-focused activities) as two central prerequisites. *Coordination* relates to, for example, determining the size of the existing labour pool, evaluating firms' capabilities, gaining third-party legitimacy and developing a shared agenda ([Bouncken et al., 2020](#); [Gnyawali and Park, 2009](#)). Given that many hospitality businesses are located in rural areas and underserved geographies, a critical assessment of the size of the existing labour pool is required. While dyadic coopetition (one-to-one relationship between two firms) can take place, greater economies of scale are achieved through network coopetition, involving multiple firms. Closely evaluating firms' capabilities is particularly important in an SME context, and even more so in the hospitality industry, as many firms lack resources, capabilities and time for dedicated talent management interventions ([Harney, 2021](#)). In addition, SMEs should seek governance and regulation from third parties such as steering groups, hospitality and tourism associations, public institutions or government agencies to strengthen and regulate the talent management coopetition process and, in doing so, gain legitimacy ([Czakon and Czernek, 2016](#); [Hoffmann and Schlosser, 2001](#)). For example, since 2020, several UK hospitality organisations have joined the Hoteliers' Charter, a third party whose intent is to raise the profile of the hospitality industry and to develop an advanced framework for employment in the industry ([Hoteliers' Charter, 2022](#)).

Developing a shared agenda is a foundational prerequisite and relates to the establishment of mutual goals, duties and rights ([Gnyawali and Park, 2009](#)) and the design of a talent management coopetition structure ([Hoffmann and Schlosser, 2001](#)). Establishing these mutual goals, duties and rights is driven by the "overriding motivation" for organisations to engage in coopetition in the first place – the intent to create value ([Gnyawali and Ryan-Charleton, 2018](#), p. 2513). This value creation intent helps to understand why firms seek mutual pursuits. For example, coopeting partners might face the same opportunities or challenges which they can jointly tackle ([Gnyawali and Park, 2011](#)),

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including ongoing talent attraction and retention challenges. Specifically, we assert that the aim of SMEs in the hospitality industry to cooperate in talent management extends beyond the establishment of traditional internal and external pipelines. Instead, establishing market-thickening pipelines (Brymer *et al.*, 2019) allows SMEs to influence actively educational and occupational choices. Ultimately, the purpose of these market-thickening pipelines is to address the industry-wide talent shortages. Given that these talent shortages are experienced across many hospitality firms, market-thickening pipelines are an effort between multiple competing organisations to engage in cooperation, leveraging resources and capabilities to build deeper talent supply across the industry. Specifically, Brymer *et al.* (2019) suggest that such pipelines aid in reaching three objectives: building labour pools with sufficient skills, credentials and experience; forming labour pools within an underserved geography; and developing labour pools from an underrepresented group to enhance diversity. This can be achieved through, for example, intentionally cultivating a range of pipelines with distinct characteristics. SMEs might target underrepresented groups when co-attracting talent or offer a set of diverse programmes when co-developing talent.

In terms of the second central prerequisite, *trust*, we refer to the importance of changing the mindset of decision makers, identifying potential partners, involving stakeholders and developing shared norms and social relations among partners (Devetag, 2009; Gnyawali and Ryan-Charleton, 2018; Kraus *et al.*, 2019). Changing the mindsets of SME owners and managers, who traditionally applied a competition perspective when running their business, is crucial (Czakon and Czernek-Marszałek, 2021). Cooperating partners can change their mindset and develop trust because of a reciprocal cooperative intent to create value (Gnyawali and Ryan-Charleton, 2018). However, such a mutual pursuit requires time and resource investments by potential partners and trade-offs between joint and firm value creation (Chiambaretto *et al.*, 2020). Finally, by involving a range of stakeholders to develop shared norms can create a common understanding and commitment and can promote appropriate behaviour among competitors, which acts as self-enforcing safeguards to deter firms pursuing self-interest at the expense of mutual pursuits (Gnyawali and Ryan-Charleton, 2018).

Second, *catalysts* comprise firm-level and environmental-level factors that drive competition in talent management in SMEs (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016). *Firm-level catalysts* refer to an organisation's goals, capabilities, experiences, prospective strategies and perceived vulnerability to leverage, for example, development, innovation, cost reduction and access to resources (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016; Gnyawali and Park, 2009). SMEs in the hospitality industry are facing severe pressures to innovate, given increasing customer expectations and their lack of resources. These SMEs can also gain more influence in existing markets and expand to new markets (BarNir and Smith, 2002; Levy *et al.*, 2003), and, in a talent management setting, widen their labour pool. Setting goals to enhance talent management through cooperation, for example, in relation to employer branding or learning and development opportunities can also improve the often negative perceptions of the hospitality industry. *Environmental-level catalysts* refer to industry characteristics and influential stakeholders (e.g. owners or managers), and might also consider the characteristics of the cooperating partner and the relationship with that partner (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016; Ho and Ganesan, 2013). This includes, for example, labour market imperfections, intense competition, limited influence and uncertain environments. The ongoing talent shortages in the hospitality industry require SMEs to fight the "war for talent", intensified through increasing competition (Kallmuenzer *et al.*, 2021). SMEs can use the power of cooperating partners to widen their influence, for example, by benefiting from the reputation of the cooperating firm (Czakon and Czernek, 2016). Particularly in uncertain environments, SMEs seek cooperation to minimise risk (Levy *et al.*, 2003); for example, the



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Covid-19 pandemic has brought co-competition considerations to the forefront in many hospitality firms (Hughes and Christensen, 2021).

Third, *potential inhibitors* are those factors that might act as barriers during talent management co-competition, including the dynamic (Bengtsson and Johansson, 2014), complex (Ho and Ganesan, 2013) and managerially challenging (Fernandez *et al.*, 2014) nature of the process. The *dynamic nature* of the process relates to varying interdependencies and interactions within co-competition networks and the interplay between cooperation and competition (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016). As SMEs configure and reconfigure their networks and businesses, some partners will join while others will exit the network. This is particularly relevant in the hospitality industry given the precarious nature of employment and the challenges faced by business owners as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Baum *et al.*, 2020). The *complex nature* of the process relates to multifaceted relationships, ambiguity, role conflicts and potential tensions, for example, because of contradicting demands or mistrust in partnering firms (Hoffmann and Schlosser, 2001; Tidstrom, 2014). Considering the often lacking expertise of SMEs around talent management strategies and practices, the need for education in this context is particularly relevant. Finally, the *managerially challenging nature* of co-competition relates to governance structures, contracts, legal processes and the management of all stakeholders across the network, ensuring their commitment to co-competition (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016). In a talent management context, employment contracts and responsibilities, in particular, are legal aspects that cannot be ignored when developing co-competition (Gnyawali and Park, 2009).

#### *Processes*

Following Kravariti *et al.*'s (2022) conceptualisation of the core talent management practices in the hospitality industry, we argue that the talent management co-competition system in SMEs encompasses three central components: co-attracting, co-developing and co-retaining talent. First, co-competition in *talent attraction* includes co-creating industry and region branding; co-organising recruitment events and platforms; and co-establishing networks with educational institutions. Through these co-competition practices, SMEs can not only reduce their operational costs, but also reach a wider audience of potential talent, build a stronger employment brand and establish talent pipelines (Bengtsson and Johansson, 2014). This is potentially of great benefit for individual hospitality firms given the traditionally poor industry image (Jooss *et al.*, 2021a). For example, since 2021, several firms have joined Hospitality Rising, a collaborative movement which aims to create a large-scale hospitality recruitment advertising campaign (Hospitality Rising, 2022). Second, co-competition in *talent development* encompasses co-developing training strategies, content and methods; co-investing in upskilling and reskilling of employees; and co-stimulating innovative approaches to learning. For example, where similar training needs have been identified across firms, SMEs can organise a training session for all employees with these needs, which can then also translate into knowledge sharing across SMEs. Firms could also share the costs for course development or e-learning licenses. These cost-sharing initiatives are crucial for hospitality organisations who often have limited financial resources dedicated to talent management (Harney, 2021; Jooss *et al.*, 2021a). Equally, SMEs might jointly design apprenticeship or trainee management programmes, which are commonly adopted approaches to learning and development in the hospitality industry (Johnson *et al.*, 2019). Ultimately, we argue that these co-investment efforts to develop talent will reduce turnover intentions and individuals are more likely to remain in an occupation where they see opportunities to learn, develop and grow and where they have established a matching skillset (Allen *et al.*, 2010).

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Third, competition in *talent retention* relates to co-establishing a framework for working conditions; co-designing industry engagement events; and co-facilitating inter-firm rotations and talent sharing. Building a common framework around compensation, benefits and conditions of work aids to ensure employees are treated and rewarded in an appropriate and attractive way. While government or national associations might design some of these policies in terms of minimum standards, competing firms can choose to go beyond these standards in an effort to improve talent management in the industry. For example, competing firms might introduce principles around rotations and working hours to improve work–life balance, champion a transparent and fair gratuities system and offer employee well-being support (Hoteliers' Charter, 2022). This, in turn, reduces attrition rates not least because there is a reduced need for employees to change their employer to improve their working conditions or promotional opportunities, provided they remain employed among the partnering organisations. Thus, staff will also benefit from greater career opportunities through rotation, while SMEs can use talent sharing to manage talent shortages or varying staffing levels in response to changing occupancy rates more effectively. In the face of the often-cited poor working conditions in the hospitality industry, for example, around work–life balance (Deery and Jago, 2015) and the precarious nature of the work (Baum *et al.*, 2020), a common framework could provide some security to employees, while also allowing competing firms to learn from each other with regard to talent management. Talent sharing has emerged as a talent practice that firms have adopted in the context of rapid change and faced with unprecedented challenges such as Covid-19, and which has received some traction, mainly by consulting firms (Mercer, 2021). While large firms use internal talent marketplaces to share talent internally, SMEs can share talent through competition practices. We argue that temporary talent sharing is not only an effective way to avoid furloughing or laying off talent, but also an important aspect of competition in talent management, leading to increased retention of talent.

### *Outputs*

Organisations implement talent management practices to meet their needs for talent more effectively (Cappelli and Keller, 2017). We argue that competition in talent management can be a strategy for SMEs to satisfy their talent needs and to establish interorganisational talent pools (Brannon and Burbach, 2021). More specifically, we assert that, through competition, SMEs can create stronger talent management systems, including co-attraction, co-development and co-retention practices. Further outputs of competition (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016) that are relevant to talent management in SMEs include the design of innovative talent management routines, the gaining of knowledge, the strengthening of relationships and an increase in firm performance among participating firms. Arguably, well-managed interorganisational talent pools will ameliorate the attractiveness of the particular region in which the competition takes place, not only for participating SMEs but for the entire region and industry. This, in turn, may aid in the development of market-thickening talent pipelines (Brymer *et al.*, 2019). Finally, we assert that interorganisational talent pools allow SMEs to manage their talent more effectively through the development of relevant knowledge, skills and abilities and through the development of high-performing and high-potential talent (Collings and Mellahi, 2009). We conclude that SMEs can use competition as a strategy to leverage resources and capabilities to establish interorganisational talent pools in parallel to their ongoing firm-specific talent management strategies.

### *Open-systems theory principles*

In addition to input, process and output factors, open-systems theory (Katz and Kahn, 1978) presents several system principles. In our competition in talent management framework (Figure 1), we illustrate five principles: congruence, internal interdependence, equifinality,

feedback and adaptation. First, congruence relates to the fit between the system components, i.e. inputs, processes and outputs (Nadler and Tushman, 1980). A central argument of this principle is that greater strategic fit will result in more effective talent management cooperation (Garavan *et al.*, 2021). For example, this principle helps us to understand whether the cooperation context has been considered appropriately before entering into a cooperation arrangement and when developing talent management cooperation practices around attraction, development and retention. Second, internal interdependence considers the interconnectedness between the various process components and subcomponents (Kast and Rozenzweig, 1972). In our framework, this relates to the various cooperative practices around talent co-attraction, co-development and co-retention. Third, equifinality emphasises that the same outputs can be achieved through different means and from different inputs, which implies that future discussions of cooperation in talent management should not adopt a universal perspective but encourage configurational thinking (Harney, 2018). Fourth, feedback allows for consideration and adjustments to the talent management cooperation processes based on the reflection of outputs achieved (Garavan *et al.*, 2021). Frequently seeking feedback, especially in a cooperation context which may encompass a large number of stakeholders with potentially different priorities and interests, can provide valuable insights to competing SMEs. Fifth, adaptation relates to amendments and quality improvements made to the cooperation process as a result of a changing cooperation context (Schleicher *et al.*, 2018). These principles are reflective of the highly dynamic nature of the cooperation relationships and processes (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016).

## Conclusions

### *Theoretical implications*

The purpose of this paper was to unpack how SMEs can operationalise cooperation in talent management. From a theoretical perspective, we add to the debate on shifting boundaries in talent management (Vaiman *et al.*, 2021) and initiated a move of the discourse beyond competition for talent. The talent management literature has traditionally focused on the “war for talent”, and by using this metaphor emphasised competition between firms. We assert that the future of talent management should encompass a wider perspective that takes cognisance of how firms can cooperate, rather than compete, to manage and counteract perennial talent shortages, the increasingly complex demands of talent and the changing nature of employment in the industry (Brannon and Burbach, 2021). This perspective also aligns with Boudreau *et al.*'s (2015, p. 83) view that we are moving “beyond employment” in a single firm to considering how best to complete work. In addition, we also built on the cooperation literature (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016) to develop an integrative framework for cooperation in talent management in SMEs comprising input, process and output components. Using our framework, we conceptualise market-thickening pipelines and interorganisational talent pools as fundamental components of talent management cooperation efforts in SMEs. Our open-systems perspective allowed us to highlight the interrelatedness of core framework components and the central role of the cooperation context, including prerequisites, catalysts and potential inhibitors of cooperation in talent management. Thus, we reiterate the need for contextualising talent management practices in SMEs and in the hospitality industry (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2019; Kravariti *et al.*, 2022). We conclude that only considering the process components of talent management cooperation (i.e. attracting, developing and retaining talent) and neglecting the input factors (i.e. cooperation context) will provide limited and potentially misleading insights into cooperation as a strategy in talent management in SMEs. Furthermore, we suggest that interorganisational talent pools and true cooperation for mutual gain can be realised only if

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SMEs give due consideration to the co-competition context, the talent management co-competition system and open-systems theory principles discussed in this paper.

#### *Practical implications*

Our paper has several practical implications. First, we assert that SMEs can benefit from talent management co-competition, addressing ongoing talent shortages midst or post Covid-19 and promoting economic growth and employment (United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8; [United Nations, 2022](#)). While SMEs have applied co-competition across many business areas for decades, they have largely neglected its value for talent management. We contend that, in the first instance, SMEs should consider whether their co-competition context is conducive to developing a talent management co-competition system. While co-competition can result in joint value creation and firm value creation, it can also lead to value destruction if the competition–cooperation simultaneity is not balanced and if trade-offs in value creation are not managed ([Gnyawali and Ryan-Charleton, 2018](#)). Second, we identify potential co-competition practices for SMEs as part of a talent management system, including co-attracting, co-developing and co-retaining talent. However, SMEs interested in co-competition are faced with a critical choice; do they only seek short-term wins through individual competitive talent management practices or are they pursuing a longer term mutually beneficial arrangement by way of setting up talent management co-competition systems? Third, we identified five system principles which organisations should be conscious of given their central role in impacting the dynamics and potential attainment of the inherent benefits of the co-competition process. Moreover, these principles also assist SMEs in their efforts to achieve greater alignment between talent process components and to improve co-competition processes continuously over time through feedback and adaptation.

#### *Limitations and future research*

As with any research, our conceptual paper has some limitations which we see as opportunities for future research. While we grounded our argumentation in the co-competition and talent management literatures, we did not present any empirical findings. Therefore, we call for empirical research, using our integrative framework as a starting point, to gain further insights on co-competition in talent management, including the specific responsibilities and practices as part of the co-competition process. We contend that such empirical research should distinguish further between micro (less than 10 employees), small businesses (10–49 employees) and medium-sized enterprises (50–249 employees), given the likelihood of identifying significant differences in terms of resources, capabilities and talent management strategies and practices in SMEs ([Harney, 2021](#)). Research might also consider the prevalence of co-competition in larger organisations and the variance in co-competition contexts and processes. Longitudinal studies that examine co-competition efforts of SMEs in the hospitality industry would be beneficial to better understand output factors and potential inhibitors along the way. Moreover, we are conscious that the focus of our paper were SMEs in the hospitality industry. Future research should examine other stakeholders' experiences and roles in talent management co-competition. For example, examining employees' experiences and the potential advantages and drawbacks of forming part of a talent management co-competition framework versus a single employer deserve attention. Equally, investigating the role of third-party mediation strategies in the hospitality industry is required to better understand the regulations and policies needed to achieve mutual value and avoid situations where self-interest threatens common interest ([Gnyawali and Ryan-Charleton, 2018](#)). Finally, comparative studies with varying regional foci will offer

additional insights into the coopepetition context. We hope that our paper will stimulate future research on coopepetition in talent management, moving beyond competing for talent.

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### Corresponding author

Stefan Jooss can be contacted at: [stefan.jooss@ucc.ie](mailto:stefan.jooss@ucc.ie)

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