

War for Talent in Human Resource Management: Organizational Strategies for Attracting and Retaining Top Talent

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ABSTRACT

The intensifying global competition for skilled human capital, widely termed the "War for Talent", represents one of the most consequential strategic challenges in contemporary human resource management (HRM). This systematic literature review examines organizational strategies for attracting and retaining top talent in the digital era, synthesizing evidence from twenty peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2024. The findings demonstrate that effective talent war strategies operate across three interlocking phases: attraction, development, and retention. Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped all three phases: AI-powered recruitment and talent identification systems expand access to global talent pools; continuous digital learning platforms build inimitable competencies that strengthen retention; and HR analytics enable proactive identification of flight-risk employees before attrition materializes. Employer branding emerges as a decisive differentiator in competitive talent markets, while employee empowerment and work-life balance serve as foundational retention anchors. Sector-specific analyses across healthcare, hospitality, telecommunications, and technology reveal that while the universal logic of talent attraction and retention holds, the dominant strategies and acute pressure points differ significantly by industry. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital HRM innovation and elevated employee well-being as a strategic priority. A conceptual three-phase framework integrating digital tools, human-centered policies, and predictive analytics is proposed to guide organizations in developing resilient, responsive talent management systems capable of winning the war for talent sustainably.

Keywords: Talent Management; Employer Branding; Employee Retention.

INTRODUCTION

The phrase "War for Talent," first coined by McKinsey & Company researchers in 1997, has only grown in relevance over the subsequent three decades. Rather than diminishing as organizations developed more sophisticated HR practices, the battle for skilled human capital has intensified, driven by accelerating technological disruption, demographic shifts in the global workforce, and the post-pandemic reconfiguration of work itself (Daraojimba et al., 2024; Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). In a knowledge-driven economy where competitive advantage increasingly resides in intangible human assets rather than physical capital, the capacity to attract, develop, and retain exceptional talent has become a defining determinant of organizational success.



The digital transformation of the business environment has added qualitatively new dimensions to this talent competition. On one hand, digital tools, from AI-powered recruitment systems to predictive HR analytics, offer organizations unprecedented capabilities for identifying and engaging top talent with speed and precision previously unimaginable (França et al., 2023; Rožman et al., 2022). On the other hand, digitalization has democratized access to information about employers, making organizational cultures, compensation benchmarks, and leadership reputations transparently visible to candidates through platforms such as LinkedIn, Glassdoor, and Indeed. This information asymmetry reversal shifts bargaining power toward talented individuals, raising the strategic stakes for organizations competing in talent markets (Guerra et al., 2023).

Simultaneously, the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed the most dramatic workplace transformation in living memory. Remote and hybrid work became normative almost overnight, geographical barriers to talent sourcing dissolved, and employee expectations regarding work-life balance, psychological safety, and organizational purpose underwent a fundamental recalibration (Azizi et al., 2021; Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). Organizations that adapted their HR strategies swiftly, embracing flexible arrangements, digital empowerment tools, and transparent communication, emerged from the pandemic with stronger talent pipelines than those that rigidly maintained pre-pandemic norms.

Despite a substantial body of literature on talent management practices, a comprehensive synthesis specifically examining the strategic organizational responses to the War for Talent in the digital-and-post-pandemic era remains limited. Existing studies tend to focus on specific practices in isolation, employer branding, AI recruitment, or retention packages, without integrating them into a coherent strategic framework that addresses the full talent lifecycle from attraction through development to long-term retention. This study addresses that gap through a systematic literature review of twenty recent empirical and conceptual studies, proposing an integrated three-phase framework for winning the talent war sustainably.

The study pursues four objectives: (1) to characterize the nature of contemporary talent competition and its digital drivers; (2) to identify the most effective evidence-based strategies for talent attraction in competitive markets; (3) to examine proven approaches for talent development and retention; and (4) to analyze sector-specific talent war dynamics and propose a conceptual integration framework for HRM practice.

METHOD

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure methodological transparency and reproducibility. The SLR approach was selected as most appropriate for the research objectives given its capacity to provide a comprehensive, unbiased synthesis of evidence across multiple studies and contexts (Mitosis et al., 2021; Ghani et al., 2022).

Literature searches were conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, EBSCO, and IEEE Xplore. The search employed the following primary keyword combinations: "war for talent" AND "human resource management"; "talent attraction strategies" AND "digital"; "employee retention" AND "HRM strategy"; "employer branding" AND "talent competition"; "HR analytics" AND "retention"; "AI recruitment" AND "talent management". Searches were bounded to publications between 2019 and 2024 to ensure capture of post-pandemic and digitally-focused insights.

Inclusion criteria required articles to: (1) be published in peer-reviewed journals indexed in recognized academic databases; (2) focus on organizational strategies for talent attraction, development, or retention within an HRM framework; (3) address digital transformation dimensions of talent management or talent competition; and (4) employ rigorous empirical, review, or conceptual methodologies. Articles excluded included: practitioner reports without academic peer review, dissertations, editorials, and studies with purely theoretical focus unconnected to empirical evidence. From 134 initially identified records, 20 articles satisfied all inclusion criteria.

Thematic synthesis was employed, organizing findings around the study's four research objectives. Each article was coded for: sector context, research design, talent war challenge addressed, primary strategies studied, and key outcomes. A three-phase analytical lens, Attraction, Development, Retention, was applied as the organizing framework, enabling cross-study comparison and identification of coherent strategic patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reviewed literature consistently confirms that talent competition has intensified in the digital era, acquiring characteristics qualitatively distinct from the original McKinsey formulation. Guerra et al. (2023) document the impact of digital transformation on talent management specifically, identifying four mechanisms through which digitalization reshapes talent competition: (1) global talent market integration, digital connectivity enables organizations to compete for talent across geographic boundaries, both expanding opportunity and heightening competition; (2) accelerated skill obsolescence, the half-life of technical skills has shortened dramatically, creating continuous pressure on organizations to invest in talent development or face capability gaps; (3) platform-mediated transparency, employer reputation and culture are now immediately accessible to candidates, creating reputational vulnerability for organizations with poor employee experiences; and (4) AI-enabled talent intelligence, leading organizations deploy sophisticated analytics to identify, track, and engage top talent proactively, creating an information advantage.

Daraojimba et al. (2024) review strategic HRM trends in the 21st century and identify the War for Talent as a meta-trend driving most other HRM innovations. Their analysis shows that organizations progressing from traditional reactive talent management to proactive strategic HRM, characterized by data-driven decision-making, digital infrastructure investment, and talent-centric culture building, demonstrate measurably superior talent outcomes. Agustian et al. (2023) corroborate this, demonstrating from business administration contexts that HRM strategies explicitly aligned with competitive advantage objectives generate stronger talent retention and attraction performance than those treating HRM as an administrative function.

Talent attraction in the digital era requires simultaneously managing the science of data-driven candidate matching and the art of compelling organizational storytelling. França et al. (2023) provide compelling evidence that AI applied to potential assessment and talent identification significantly improves the accuracy of candidate-job fit predictions compared to traditional methods. By analyzing behavioral patterns, cognitive assessments, and career trajectory data, AI systems identify high-potential candidates who might be overlooked by conventional recruiters relying on CV screening alone. This capability is particularly valuable in tight talent markets where top candidates are typically employed rather than actively job-seeking.

Chen (2022) examines the collaboration between human recruiters and AI systems, finding that well-designed human-AI recruitment partnerships substantially reduce demographic bias in hiring while maintaining, and often improving, quality outcomes. This finding addresses a critical strategic risk: organizations that fail to manage unconscious bias in recruitment systematically exclude segments of the talent pool, weakening their competitive position. The combination of AI's consistency and human judgment's contextual sensitivity creates a recruitment capability neither can achieve alone.

Employer branding emerges from multiple reviewed studies as perhaps the single most leverageable attraction strategy. Reis et al. (2021) conduct a systematic literature review specifically on employer branding as a talent management tool, establishing through evidence synthesis that a strong, authentic Employee Value Proposition (EVP), clearly articulating why talented people should join and stay, increases candidate conversion rates, reduces talent acquisition costs, and generates self-selection effects that improve average hire quality. Critically, their review demonstrates that the authenticity of employer brand claims matters decisively: discrepancies between promoted culture and lived employee experience activate reputational damage through digital channels faster than traditional brand-building investment can repair.

The literature strongly supports reconceptualizing talent development not merely as a training function but as a primary retention mechanism. Elsafty and Oraby (2022) provide direct empirical evidence that investment in employee training is a significant predictor of retention intentions, with the effect operating through both intrinsic mechanisms (increased competence, confidence, and career satisfaction) and organizational commitment (employees reciprocate developmental investment with loyalty). Their study underscores that the perception of developmental opportunity, not simply the provision of training programs, is what drives retention effects; employees must believe their organization is genuinely invested in their professional growth.

Rožman et al. (2022) advance this argument by examining the integration of AI into talent management models with specific focus on work engagement and performance outcomes. Their framework demonstrates that AI-enabled personalization of development pathways, where learning recommendations, stretch assignment suggestions, and career path visualizations are tailored to individual competency profiles and aspirations, generates substantially higher engagement than one-size-fits-all development programs. In the talent war context, this personalization creates a competitive moat: organizations delivering genuinely personalized development experiences are significantly harder for competitors to displace through compensation offers alone.

Aguinis and Burgi-Tian (2021) examine talent management challenges in the COVID-19 and post-COVID context, arguing that performance management, when reimagined as a continuous developmental dialogue rather than an annual evaluation, becomes a powerful retention mechanism. Their framework positions regular manager-employee conversations about goals, obstacles, strengths, and growth opportunities as creating the relational depth that prevents disengagement. They find that organizations maintaining robust performance management through the pandemic's disruptions retained talent more effectively than those suspending or reducing feedback practices.

Kumar (2021) provides a comprehensive empirical examination of talent management practices and their relationship with employee turnover and retention intentions, finding that structured talent management systems, encompassing talent identification, targeted development, and performance-linked rewards, significantly reduce turnover intentions compared to organizations without formal talent

management frameworks. The mediating pathway runs through employee perception of organizational justice and care: when employees believe they have been identified as valued talent and invested in accordingly, their psychological contract with the organization deepens.

Murray and Holmes (2021) examine employee empowerment and organizational commitment as drivers of workforce sustainability, presenting evidence that genuine empowerment, defined as meaningful autonomy in role execution, real voice in decision-making, and trust-based management, is among the most powerful predictors of voluntary retention. Their study is particularly significant in the War for Talent context because empowerment costs organizations relatively little financially while delivering outsized retention returns. In talent wars where financially outbidding competitors is not always feasible, particularly for mid-sized organizations, empowerment-driven retention strategies offer a strategically accessible differentiation lever.

Cachón-Rodríguez et al. (2022) introduce social capital as a mediating variable in sustainable HRM and loyalty relationships, demonstrating that employees embedded in strong interpersonal networks within their organization exhibit significantly higher retention even when receiving competitive external offers. This social capital effect has direct strategic implications: organizations should design talent practices that deliberately build intra-organizational relationships through cross-functional project assignments, communities of practice, mentoring networks, and social events, as these relationships create exit costs that compensation alone cannot easily overcome.

Yahia et al. (2021) address the analytical dimension of retention, presenting a deep learning framework for predicting employee attrition from big data sources. Their study demonstrates prediction accuracy significantly exceeding traditional statistical models, enabling organizations to identify at-risk employees months before attrition typically occurs. This predictive capability transforms retention management from reactive crisis response to proactive talent stewardship. Okatta et al. (2024) expand this perspective through a comprehensive review of HR analytics opportunities and challenges, finding that organizations successfully deploying people analytics for strategic decision-making achieve measurably lower regrettable attrition rates, defined as the loss of high-performing, high-potential employees.

The war for talent does not manifest uniformly across sectors; its intensity, nature, and most effective strategic responses vary considerably by industry context. Table 3 synthesizes key sector-specific findings from the reviewed literature.

Table 3. Sector-Specific Talent War Challenges and Dominant Organizational Strategies

Sector	Primary Talent War Challenge	Dominant Strategy	Key Reference
Healthcare	Critical shortage of specialized clinical staff	Talent pipeline development and structured succession	Mitosis et al. (2021) — systematic qualitative review across healthcare systems
Hospitality	High turnover; pandemic exodus	seasonal post-talent retention packages with work-life balance focus	Ghani et al. (2022) — review of retention strategies in hotel and restaurant sector
Telecommunications	Rapid digital obsolescence; e-HRM adoption	Digital integration for organizational health	HRM for AlHamad et al. (2022) — Jordan telecom sector study on e-HRM impact

Technology / IT	Intense global competition for AI and data science talent	AI-augmented identification and development	talent and	Rožman et al. (2022); França et al. (2023) — AI in talent management
Cross-sector (COVID-19 Context)	Unprecedented workforce disruption and talent flight	Innovative remote psychological agile teams	HRM: work, safety,	Azizi et al. (2021); Aguinis & Burgi-Tian (2021) — pandemic HRM adaptations

Source: Synthesized from reviewed literature (2021–2024)

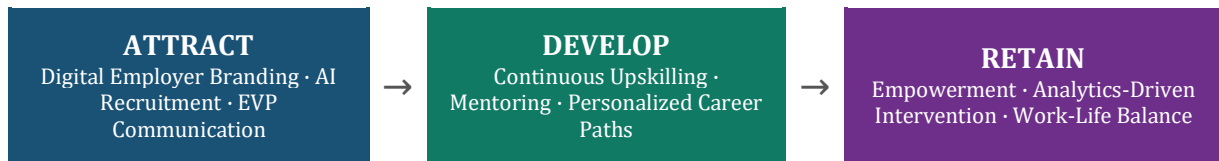
Mitosis et al. (2021) provide a thorough systematic qualitative review of talent management in healthcare, a sector where the talent war carries direct consequences for patient outcomes and public health system viability. Their review identifies that healthcare organizations face a distinctive combination of acute specialist shortages, high occupational stress driving burnout-related attrition, and regulatory constraints on compensation flexibility. Effective strategies in this context emphasize talent pipeline development through educational partnerships, structured succession planning for specialist roles, and psychological safety investments that address occupational burnout drivers.

Ghani et al. (2022) examine retention challenges in the hospitality industry, which experienced severe talent disruption during the pandemic, with widespread workforce exits that created persistent shortages even as demand recovered. Their review finds that hospitality organizations achieving superior retention in the post-pandemic period combined three elements: competitive total reward packages aligned with employee lifestyle priorities (including flexible scheduling and work-life balance provisions), authentic organizational culture that provided workers with a sense of belonging and purpose, and visible career development pathways that countered the sector's reputation for limited advancement opportunities.

AlHamad et al. (2022) examine the effect of e-HRM on organizational health in the telecommunications sector, where rapid digital skill transformation creates persistent tension between the pace of required capability change and employees' capacity to adapt. Their findings suggest that e-HRM platforms, by streamlining administrative HR processes, liberate HR professional time for higher-value talent development and engagement activities, indirectly supporting retention through improved employee experience. Digital HRM systems also provide real-time visibility into workforce health indicators, enabling earlier intervention when disengagement patterns emerge.

The synthesis of the reviewed literature supports an integrated, three-phase framework for an organizational talent war strategy that unites digital capabilities with human-centered practices. Figure 1 visually represents this framework by linking the three core phases, attraction, development, and retention, and showing how each phase combines targeted digital tools (for example, analytics-driven sourcing, adaptive learning platforms, and AI-enabled engagement systems) with people-focused interventions (such as employer branding, coaching and stretch assignments, and recognition and career-pathing). The framework emphasizes the interdependence of phases: effective attraction feeds a development pipeline that, when coupled with meaningful retention practices, produces a self-reinforcing talent ecosystem. It also highlights feedback loops enabled by real-time data, so insights from retention and performance outcomes continuously refine attraction criteria and development curricula, creating a dynamic cycle that sustains competitive advantage in talent-intensive environments.

Figure 1. Three-Phase War for Talent Strategic Framework: Attract-Develop-Retain



Source: Developed by authors based on systematic literature review (2021–2024)

The framework emphasizes that the three phases are not sequential but cyclical and mutually reinforcing. Strong retention outcomes, demonstrated through visible career success stories of existing employees, directly feed attraction by authenticating employer brand claims. Robust development programs support attraction by differentiating the EVP and support retention by deepening the psychological contract. HR analytics span all three phases, providing the intelligence layer that enables continuous optimization of the talent ecosystem.

Table 1. Evidence-Based War for Talent Strategies: Digital Tools, Impacts, and Outcomes

Strategy Domain	Key Practices	Talent War Impact	Retention Outcome	References
Digital Recruitment	AI-assisted screening, data-driven candidate matching, digital employer branding	Expands talent pool access, reduces hiring bias	Higher quality hires, lower early attrition	França et al. (2023); Chen (2022)
Employer Branding	EVP communication, social media presence, culture storytelling	Attracts passive candidates, builds reputational capital	Higher offer acceptance rates, reduced time-to-fill	Reis et al. (2021); Kumar (2021)
Learning & Development	Continuous upskilling, personalized learning paths, mentoring programs	Builds rare, inimitable competencies internally	Increased commitment and career satisfaction	Elsafty & Oraby (2022); Daraojimba et al. (2024)
Performance Management	Real-time OKR, AI-feedback loops, continuous appraisal	Aligns talent effort with strategic priorities	Reduces disengagement and quiet quitting	Aguinis & Burgi-Tian (2021); Rožman et al. (2022)
Employee Empowerment	Autonomy in roles, flexible work, participative decision-making	Increases organizational commitment levels	Substantially lowers voluntary turnover	Murray & Holmes (2021); Cachón-Rodríguez et al. (2022)
HR Analytics	Attrition prediction models, people analytics dashboards, sentiment analysis	Enables proactive retention intervention	Targeted retention programs reduce high-performer loss	Yahia et al. (2021); Okatta et al. (2024)

Digital Systems	HRM	e-HRM cloud-based automated workflows	platforms, HRIS, and health	Improves HR agility and organizational health	Better employee experience driving loyalty	AlHamad et al. (2022); Gadzali et al. (2023)
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Source: Synthesized from reviewed literature (2021–2024)

Table 2 extends the conceptual framework by contrasting each phase across critical dimensions, including primary drivers, digital tools, key challenges, success metrics, and the specific shifts introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2. Three-Phase Talent War Framework: Dimensional Analysis

Dimension	Attraction Phase	Development Phase	Retention Phase
Primary Driver	Employer brand strength and EVP clarity	Personalized career growth and upskilling	Psychological safety and empowerment
Digital Tool	AI recruitment, social sourcing platforms	Adaptive LMS, digital mentoring, OKR tools	HR analytics, e-HRM, sentiment monitoring
Key Challenge	Standing out in hyper-competitive talent markets	Keeping pace with rapid skill obsolescence	Competing against constant poaching attempts
Success Metric	Offer acceptance rate, candidate quality score	Promotion rate, training ROI, skill growth index	Turnover rate, engagement score, tenure
COVID-19 Shift	Remote hiring normalized; global talent access widened	Accelerated move to digital, self-directed learning	Work-life balance and flexibility became non-negotiable

Source: Developed by authors based on reviewed literature (2021–2024)

Across all reviewed studies, digital transformation emerges as the foundational enabler of contemporary talent war strategy rather than merely a tactical tool. Vrontis et al. (2021) conduct a systematic review of AI, robotics, and advanced technologies in HRM, finding that organizations integrating these technologies into talent practices achieve not only operational efficiency but qualitative improvements in talent outcomes from higher candidate quality to more personalized development experiences to more accurate retention risk detection.

AlHamad et al. (2022) and Gadzali et al. (2023) together demonstrate that digital HRM systems, when properly implemented with employee experience at the design center rather than administrative efficiency alone, improve organizational health metrics that correlate with talent retention. The critical implementation insight from both studies is that technology adoption without accompanying culture and capability change delivers minimal talent benefit; the full value of digital HRM tools is unlocked only when leaders develop the analytical literacy and human-centric mindset to translate data insights into meaningful talent decisions.

Azizi et al. (2021) provide important evidence from the COVID-19 crisis context that organizations with pre-existing digital HRM infrastructure adapted their talent practices far more successfully to pandemic conditions than those relying on legacy systems. This crisis resilience finding suggests that digital HRM investment is not merely an operational efficiency play but a strategic risk management decision that determines organizational capacity to maintain talent cohesion during external disruptions.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review confirms that the War for Talent is not a passing management trend but a structural feature of the contemporary knowledge economy, intensified and transformed by digital disruption and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations cannot opt out of talent competition; they can only choose whether to engage it strategically or reactively with dramatically different outcomes.

The evidence synthesized across twenty peer-reviewed studies converges on several key conclusions. First, talent attraction in competitive markets requires the simultaneous cultivation of strong employer brand authenticity and the deployment of AI-enabled recruitment precision; organizations relying on compensation alone consistently lose talent battles to those offering compelling purpose, culture, and growth narratives. Second, talent development is simultaneously a capability investment and a retention instrument; the perception of genuine organizational investment in individual growth creates loyalty bonds that external offers struggle to sever. Third, retention management has been transformed by HR analytics from a reactive damage-control function into a proactive talent stewardship capability, enabling organizations to intervene before flight-risk employees disengage irreversibly.

The three-phase Attract–Develop–Retain framework proposed in this study offers practitioners a coherent strategic architecture for designing and evaluating their talent war responses. The framework's emphasis on phase integration, recognizing that retention feeds attraction, development supports both, and analytics spans all three, reflects the systemic complexity of talent competition that single-practice approaches cannot adequately address.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal empirical studies that quantify the long-term ROI of integrated talent war strategies across different organizational sizes and cultural contexts. The moderating roles of national labor market conditions, organizational culture maturity, and digital readiness levels warrant dedicated investigation. Additionally, the ethical dimensions of AI-driven talent management, including algorithmic bias, employee privacy, and the risk of creating digital talent surveillance environments, represent important emerging research frontiers with direct implications for the sustainability of digital talent strategies.

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