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## Beyond Competing for Talent: An Integrative Framework for Coopetition in Talent Management in SMEs

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**REVIEWER 1**

Suggestions/comments from the Reviewer	Response from the Author(s)
NA	NA

**REVIEWER 2**

Suggestions/comments from the Reviewer	Response from the Author(s)
<p>I understand your point that intent to create value might incentivise organisational leaders to develop some shared goals although I am not sure that it is an 'overriding motivation for organisations to engage in coopetition'. Thank you for adding the explanation of who third parties are in relation to regulation and governance and also for including some examples of common frameworks and responsibilities, although I remain dubious about individual contractual issues. I applaud your call for future research to evaluate your proposed integrative framework and suggest this should be empirically grounded</p> <p>Your explanation of how developing a shared talent pool might address issues of diversity remains a little vague in my view.</p> <p>I also question what would prompt SMEs to seek third party governance in relation to talent poaching from the shared pool. However, that is a question to explore further in an empirical study.</p>	<p>We have adopted this argumentation from leading coopetition authors who argue that firms coopete because they would like to create value in a particular area - thus, a shared goal in that area can be defined. As part of this revision, we have placed 'overriding motivation' in single quotes and added the page number from the Journal of Management editorial piece where this reference was taken from to demonstrate that this was an argument borrowed directly from the extant literature rather than self-developed.</p> <p>We have added an additional sentence to give two examples of how enhancing diversity could be achieved. We now state on page 11: SMEs might target underrepresented groups when co-attracting talent or offer a set of diverse programmes when co-developing talent.</p> <p>Third party governance helps to gain legitimacy. We now state on page 10: 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 (Czakoń and Czernek, 2016; Hoffmann and Schlosser, 2001).</p>

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<p>The theoretical contribution of this paper has been better clarified however I think you are rather over-stating the case by claiming that you have moved 'the discourse beyond competition for talent'. You have raised an interesting question but have not yet evidenced support for your framework.</p>	<p>We have revised the wording to avoid over-stating our case. We now state in our conclusion section on page 17: 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.</p>
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**REVIEWER 3**

Suggestions/comments from the Reviewer	Response from the Author(s)
NA	NA

**REVIEWER 4**

Suggestions/comments from the Reviewer	Response from the Author(s)
<p>The revised manuscript is thoughtfully revised and all my concerns were addressed. Some more thought on the use of the term 'sustainable' might be required. For example, you refer to sustainable co-opetition, career paths, and talent pools. Given the specific use of the term 'sustainable' in contemporary HRM literature (e.g. Cooke et al, 2022), for example, pertaining to the needs of multiple stakeholders, is this the intended meaning that you want to offer? Is co-opetition sustainable in the sense that it addresses the needs of both employers, employees, and the environment? This is a minor comment, I believe you could clarify the use of the term in your manuscript.</p>	<p>We have removed the term 'sustainable' as sustainable HRM practices as discussed in the sustainability literature is beyond the scope of this paper.</p>
<p>This paper carries important implications for research and practice. It would be useful to consider implications in relation to some of the 17 UN sustainable development goals. How might co-opetition in talent management contribute to the accomplishment of a more democratic, equitable, transparent ecosystem in this context?</p>	<p>Given the central issue relates to talent management, the paper particularly relates to the UN SDG goal 8. While an in-depth engagement of this would move too far away from the focal point of the paper, we now state in our practical implications section on page 18: We assert that SMEs can benefit from talent management co-opetition, addressing ongoing talent shortages midst or post Covid-19 and promoting economic growth and employment (UN Sustainable Development Goal 8; United Nations, 2022).</p>

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

### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper unpacks how 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** – Our conceptual paper draws from literature on coopetition and talent management in SMEs. Specifically, we take an interorganisational talent pool lens and develop a framework following the principles of open systems theory.

**Findings** – We find that the traditional use of talent pools is often impractical for SMEs due to a lack of resources and capabilities. Instead, interorganisational talent pools, through coopetition in talent management, can aid these firms to address talent shortages. We 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, we develop an integrative framework for coopetition in talent management in SMEs encompassing input, process, and output components. We reveal the dynamic and complex nature of this coopetition process, highlighting the essential role of coopetition context and illustrating open system principles.

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

## Introduction

Many hospitality organisations have long faced and continue to face challenges in attracting, developing, and retaining talent (Burbach and Brannon, 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 due to 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.

Despite 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 50 million Euros (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 cooperation 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 (Burbach and Brannon, 2021). Thus, it appears that, to date, SMEs have approached talent management from a competition perspective rather than a cooperation perspective.

Cooperation 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 cooperate with other SMEs if they can

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3 reduce their costs, learn from each other, and are located in the same geographical area (Chiambaretto  
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5 *et al.*, 2020; Kallmuenzer *et al.*, 2021; Madhavan *et al.*, 2004). However, research on coopetition in talent  
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7 management is scarce (Van den Broek *et al.*, 2018), and the extant literature offers limited insights into  
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9 the applicability of common talent strategies and practices to SMEs, particularly in the hospitality  
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11 industry. Addressing these shortcomings, our conceptual paper unpacks how SMEs can operationalise  
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13 coopetition in talent management. To do so, we draw on coopetition literature (e.g., Bengtsson and  
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15 Raza-Ullah, 2016; Fernandez *et al.*, 2018) and talent management in SMEs literature (e.g., Krishnan and  
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17 Scullion, 2017; Festing *et al.*, 2013). Specifically, we take a talent pool lens to examine how coopetition  
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19 may enable the development of interorganisational talent pools. Unlike traditionally adopted talent  
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21 pools (e.g., Jooss *et al.*, 2021b; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2010), which are inward focused, exclusive, and unique to  
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23 a single organisation, interorganisational talent pools are external, inclusive, and shared among a  
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25 defined number of competing firms (Burbach and Brannon, 2021). In this paper, we inquire: *How can*  
26  
27 *coopetition in talent management be operationalised by SMEs in the hospitality industry?*  
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31 Our study presents three primary contributions: First, we add to the debate on shifting  
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33 boundaries in talent management (Vaiman *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, we move the talent management  
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35 discourse beyond competition for talent, introducing coopetition as a viable alternative for  
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37 organisations. We contend that interorganisational talent pools, through coopetition in talent  
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39 management, can aid hospitality businesses to address talent shortages and develop talent strategically.  
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41 Second, we build on the extant coopetition literature (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016) with an  
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43 integrative framework for coopetition in talent management in SMEs encompassing input, process,  
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45 and output components. Taking a systems perspective, our paper reveals the dynamic nature of this  
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47 coopetition process, highlighting the essential role of the coopetition context (i.e., prerequisites,  
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49 catalysts, and potential inhibitors) and illustrating open system principles. Third, we answer the call for  
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51 greater contextualisation of talent management research (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2019), providing  
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53 insights on coopetition in an SME setting within the hospitality industry. In doing so, we identify  
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55 potential for SME coopetition as part of a talent management system which encompasses co-attracting,  
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57 co-developing, and co-retaining talent.  
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## Conceptualising talent management in SMEs

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 (e.g., Burbach and Brannon, 2021; Jooss *et al.*, 2021), 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.

Despite making up 99 per cent of firms in OECD and G20 countries (OECD, 2015), SMEs remain an often neglected research area in talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen,



2016; 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). 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) (Burbach and Brannon, 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

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3 recently, hospitality literatures have identified multiple talent pools in organisations including, for  
4 example, for emerging leaders, executives, technical talent, high potentials, local talent, rising stars, or  
5 top talent (e.g., Björkman *et al.*, 2013; Jooss *et al.*, 2021b; Kichuk *et al.*, 2019; McDonnell *et al.*, 2011).  
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7 These talent pools can be established at various levels in an organisation, refer to functional or  
8 leadership aspects, and can be managed centrally or replicated across various geographies (Mäkelä *et*  
9 *al.*, 2010; Jooss *et al.*, 2021b).  
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16 In an SME context, the traditional use of talent pools is often impractical given their size, and  
17 thus number of employees, and given the flat structures of SMEs (Krishnan and Scullion, 2017). Thus,  
18 talent pools at various hierarchical levels are unrealistic and a revised approach to managing talent  
19 pools is needed. Burbach and Brannon (2021) propose ‘interorganisational talent pools’ as an  
20 alternative to traditional talent pools. Unlike traditionally adopted talent pools (Jooss *et al.*, 2021b;  
21 Mäkelä *et al.*, 2010), which are inward focused and unique to a single organisation, interorganisational  
22 talent pools are externally focused and shared among a defined number of competing firms (Burbach  
23 and Brannon, 2021). Such an approach requires a large degree of self-regulation and coordination of  
24 resources given the multiple and often conflicting interests among participating stakeholders (Chang  
25 and Eberhart, 2021). Interorganisational talent pools are designed to serve several organisations;  
26 however, talent remains a scarce resource and its overuse can lead to depletion. For example, if  
27 managers seek to recruit talent exclusively into their firms, they deprive their competitors of that scarce  
28 resource. Thus, a responsible and coordinated use is required to make interorganisational talent pools  
29 a successful practice (Burbach and Brannon, 2021; Van den Broek *et al.*, 2018). To establish  
30 interorganisational talent pools more firmly in the literature, empirical research as well as conceptual  
31 grounding is required. In this paper, we conceptualise the development of interorganisational talent  
32 pools through competition in talent management. We now move to a discussion of competition in  
33 SMEs.  
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### 54 55 56 57 **Conceptualising competition in SMEs** 58 59 60

Coopetition, 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 utilise interorganisational coopetition 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 coopetition, the extant literature has focused traditionally on the actors involved in coopetition (e.g., Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996; Pathak *et al.*, 2014) and the activities associated with coopetition (e.g., Ho and Ganesan, 2013; Raza-Ullah *et al.*, 2014). Considering the range of actors in coopetition, five levels of coopetition can be differentiated: intra-firm, dyadic, triadic, network, and inter-network (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016). Intra-firm coopetition refers to coopetition within the firm, for example, among cross-functional subunits (e.g., Ghobadi and D’Ambra, 2013). Dyadic coopetition relates to a one-to-one relationship between firms, and can include horizontal and vertical relationships (e.g., Fernandez *et al.*, 2014). Triadic coopetition considers coopetition between three interconnected firms (e.g., Thomason *et al.*, 2013). Network coopetition refers to coopetition among multiple firms and can take various forms, such as alliance portfolios, value-chain clusters, or industry eco-systems (e.g., Bengtsson and Johansson, 2014). Finally, inter-network coopetition considers coopetition across distinct networks (e.g., Peng and Bourne, 2009). For the purpose of our study, we focus on network coopetition, encompassing multiple SMEs in the hospitality industry and commonly within a geographical boundary (i.e., region). Coopetition encompasses a broad range of activities. A number of studies focus on the interactions between competing stakeholders, arguing that these stakeholders will compete around some business activities (e.g., supply chain), while 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 coopetition in the area of talent management.

In the context of SMEs, the ability to cooperate 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 coopetition

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3 literature has predominately focused on large firms, with only a few studies explicitly studying SMEs  
4 (e.g., Levy *et al.*, 2003; Morris *et al.*, 2007; Robert *et al.*, 2009; Thomason *et al.*, 2013). For example,  
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6 Morris *et al.* (2007) emphasised the role of cooptation as a deliberate risk management strategy,  
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8 reducing uncertainty and costs. Similarly, Robert *et al.* (2009) note that governing bodies involved in  
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10 cooptation can optimise resources more effectively than individual SMEs. Kraus *et al.* (2019) found  
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12 that SMEs in the brewing industry benefited from cooptation through innovation, market reach,  
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14 marketing, and firm growth. Particularly for those SMEs that are located in rural areas, like many  
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16 hospitality businesses, regional network cooptation is more cost-effective and can also strengthen the  
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18 region's performance as a whole (Chang and Eberhard, 2021). Similar findings were presented by  
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20 Kallmuenzer *et al.* (2021) who found that Austrian SMEs in the hospitality industry benefited from  
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22 cooptation, particularly if economic benefits were demonstrable and destination networks were  
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24 strengthened. Notably, to achieve value in cooptation, SMEs need to manage socially complex,  
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26 relational, and resource-based aspects, including trust, commitment, and mutual benefit (Thomason *et*  
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28 *al.*, 2013). Despite the conceptual development and practical application of cooptation in businesses  
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30 for almost four decades (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996), there is a dearth of research on the extent  
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32 of its utilisation in talent management and in the context of the hospitality industry.  
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### 40 **An open systems based framework for cooptation in talent management**

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43 Having conceptualised cooptation and talent management in SMEs in the hospitality industry, we  
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45 utilise open systems theory (Katz and Kahn, 1978) to integrate current findings and build a framework  
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47 for cooptation in talent management in SMEs (see Figure 1). In general terms, open systems theory  
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49 allows to describe structures and operations of a system (Barabási, 2016). It provides a framework that  
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51 maps core components and subcomponents of a system and highlights their interrelatedness (Harney,  
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53 2018; Nadler and Tushman, 1980). Specifically, open systems theory encompasses a set of internal and  
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55 external input factors, processes, and outputs (Katz and Kahn, 1978). Building on this, our framework  
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57 encompasses three components: input factors (i.e., cooptation context), the process of cooptation in  
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3 a talent management system, and output factors related to talent management. Subsequently, we  
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5 discuss the interrelatedness of these components by illustrating five open systems principles.  
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### 15 16 17 *Inputs*

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19 The first aspect in our framework considers the *coopetition context*. Specifically, we distinguish between  
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21 prerequisites, catalysts, and potential inhibitors. First, *prerequisites* are conditions that likely influence  
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23 the effectiveness of setting up coopetition in talent management in SMEs. Drawing on work from  
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25 Devetag (2009), we present trust (people-focused activities) and coordination (task-focused activities)  
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27 as two central prerequisites. *Coordination* relates to, for example, determining the size of the existing  
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29 labour pool, evaluating firms' capabilities, gaining third-party legitimacy, and developing a shared  
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31 agenda (Bouncken *et al.*, 2020; Gnyawali and Park, 2009). Given that many hospitality businesses are  
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33 located in rural areas and underserved geographies, a critical assessment of the size of the existing  
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35 labour pool is required. While dyadic coopetition (one-to-one relationship between two firms) can take  
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37 place, greater economies of scale are achieved through network coopetition, involving multiple firms.  
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39 Closely evaluating firms' capabilities is particularly important in an SME context, and even more so in  
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41 the hospitality industry, as many firms lack resources, capabilities, and time for dedicated talent  
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43 management interventions (Harney, 2021). In addition, SMEs should seek governance and regulation  
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45 from third parties such as steering groups, hospitality and tourism associations, public institutions, or  
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47 government agencies to strengthen and regulate the talent management coopetition process and, in  
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49 doing so, gain legitimacy (Czakoń and Czernek, 2016; Hoffmann and Schlosser, 2001). For example,  
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51 since 2020, several UK hospitality organisations have joined the Hoteliers' Charter, a third party whose  
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53 intent is to raise the profile of the hospitality industry and to develop an advanced framework for  
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55 employment in the industry (Hoteliers' Charter, 2022).  
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3 Developing a shared agenda is a foundational prerequisite and relates to the establishment of  
4 mutual goals, duties, and rights (Gnyawali and Park, 2009) and the design of a talent management  
5 cooperation structure (Hoffmann and Schlosser, 2001). Establishing these mutual goals, duties, and  
6 rights is driven by the 'overriding motivation' for organisations to engage in cooperation in the first  
7 place - the intent to create value (Gnyawali and Ryan-Charleton, 2018, p. 2513). This value creation  
8 intent helps to understand why firms seek mutual pursuits. For example, cooperating partners might face  
9 the same opportunities or challenges which they can jointly tackle (Gnyawali and Park, 2011), including  
10 ongoing talent attraction and retention challenges. Specifically, we assert that the aim of SMEs in the  
11 hospitality industry to cooperate in talent management extends beyond the establishment of traditional  
12 internal and external pipelines. Instead, establishing market-thickening pipelines (Brymer *et al.*, 2019)  
13 allows SMEs to influence actively educational and occupational choices. Ultimately, the purpose of  
14 these market-thickening pipelines is to address the industry-wide talent shortages. Given that these  
15 talent shortages are experienced across many hospitality firms, market-thickening pipelines are an  
16 effort between multiple competing organisations to engage in cooperation, leveraging resources and  
17 capabilities to build deeper talent supply across the industry. Specifically, Brymer *et al.* (2019) suggest  
18 that such pipelines aid in reaching three objectives: building labour pools with sufficient skills,  
19 credentials, and experience; forming labour pools within an underserved geography; and developing  
20 labour pools from an underrepresented group to enhance diversity. This can be achieved through, for  
21 example, intentionally cultivating a range of pipelines with distinct characteristics. SMEs might target  
22 underrepresented groups when co-attracting talent or offer a set of diverse programmes when co-  
23 developing talent.

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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-Marszalek, 2021). Cooperating partners can change their mindset and develop trust because of a



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3 reciprocal cooperative intent to create value (Gnywali and Charleton, 2018). However, such a mutual  
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5 pursuit requires time and resource investments by potential partners and trade-offs between joint and  
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7 firm value creation (Chiambaretto et al., 2020). Finally, by involving a range of stakeholders to develop  
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9 shared norms can create a common understanding and commitment and can promote appropriate  
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11 behaviour among coopetitors, which acts as self-enforcing safeguards to deter firms pursuing self-  
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13 interest at the expense of mutual pursuits (Gnywali and Charleton, 2018).  
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16 Second, *catalysts* comprise firm-level and environmental-level factors that drive coepetition in  
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18 talent management in SMEs (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016). *Firm-level catalysts* refer to an  
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20 organisation's goals, capabilities, experiences, prospective strategies, and perceived vulnerability to  
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22 leverage, for example, development, innovation, cost reduction, and access to resources (Bengtsson  
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24 and Raza-Ullah, 2016; Gnyawali and Park, 2009). SMEs in the hospitality industry are facing severe  
25  
26 pressures to innovate given increasing customer expectations and their lack of resources. These SMEs  
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28 can also gain more influence in existing markets and expand to new markets (BarNir and Smith, 2002;  
29  
30 Levy et al., 2003), and, in a talent management setting, widen their labour pool. Setting goals to enhance  
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32 talent management through coepetition, for example, in relation to employer branding or learning and  
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34 development opportunities can also improve the often negative perceptions of the hospitality industry.  
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36 *Environmental-level catalysts* refer to industry characteristics and influential stakeholders (e.g., owners or  
37  
38 managers), and might also consider the characteristics of the coepeting partner and the relationship  
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40 with that partner (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016; Ho and Ganesam, 2013). This includes, for  
41  
42 example, labour market imperfections, intense competition, limited influence, and uncertain  
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44 environments. The ongoing talent shortages in the hospitality industry require SMEs to fight the 'war  
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46 for talent', intensified through increasing competition (Kallmuenzer et al., 2021). SMEs can utilise the  
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48 power of coepeting partners to widen their influence, for example, by benefiting from the reputation  
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50 of the coepeting firm (Czakon and Czernek, 2016). Particularly in uncertain environments, SMEs seek  
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52 coepetition to minimise risk (Levy et al., 2003), for example, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought  
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54 coepetition considerations to the forefront in many hospitality firms (Hughes and Christensen, 2021).  
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3 Third, *potential inhibitors* are those factors that might act as barriers during talent management  
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5 cooperation, including the dynamic (e.g., Bengtsson and Johnsson, 2014), complex (e.g., Ho and  
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7 Gamesan, 2013), and managerially challenging (e.g., Fernandez et al., 2014) nature of the process. The  
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9 *dynamic nature* of the process relates to varying interdependencies and interactions within cooperation  
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11 networks and the interplay between cooperation and competition (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016).  
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13 As SMEs configure and reconfigure their networks and businesses, some partners will join while others  
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15 will exit the network. This is particularly relevant in the hospitality industry given the precarious nature  
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17 of employment and the challenges faced by business owners as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic  
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19 (Baum *et al.*, 2020). The *complex nature* of the process relates to multifaceted relationships, ambiguity,  
20  
21 role conflicts, and potential tensions, for example, because of contradicting demands or mistrust in  
22  
23 partnering firms (Hoffmann and Schlosser, 2001; Tidstrom, 2014). Considering the often lacking  
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25 expertise of SMEs around talent management strategies and practices, the need for education in this  
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27 context is particularly relevant. Finally, the *managerially challenging nature* of cooperation relates to  
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29 governance structures, contracts, legal processes, and the management of all stakeholders across the  
30  
31 network, ensuring their commitment to cooperation (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016). In a talent  
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33 management context, employment contracts and responsibilities, in particular, are legal aspects that  
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35 cannot be ignored when developing cooperation (Gnyawali and Park, 2009).  
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#### 42 *Processes*

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44 Following Kravariti *et al.*'s (2022) conceptualisation of the core talent management practices in the  
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46 hospitality industry, we argue that the talent management cooperation system in SMEs encompasses  
47  
48 three central components: co-attracting, co-developing, and co-retaining talent. First, cooperation in  
49  
50 *talent attraction* includes co-creating industry and region branding; co-organising recruitment events and  
51  
52 platforms; and co-establishing networks with educational institutions. Through these cooperation  
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54 practices, SMEs can not only reduce their operational costs, but also reach a wider audience of potential  
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56 talent, build a stronger employment brand, and establish talent pipelines (Bengtsson and Johansson,  
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58 2014). This is potentially of great benefit for individual hospitality firms given the traditionally poor  
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3 industry image (Jooss *et al.*, 2021a). For example, since 2021, several firms have joined Hospitality  
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5 Rising, a collaborative movement which aims to create a large-scale hospitality recruitment advertising  
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7 campaign (Hospitality Rising, 2022). Second, co-competition in *talent development* encompasses co-  
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9 developing training strategies, content, and methods; co-investing in upskilling and reskilling of  
10  
11 employees; and co-stimulating innovative approaches to learning. For example, where similar training  
12  
13 needs have been identified across firms, SMEs can organise a training session for all employees with  
14  
15 these needs, which can then also translate into knowledge sharing across SMEs. Firms could also share  
16  
17 the costs for course development or e-learning licenses. These cost-sharing initiatives are crucial for  
18  
19 hospitality organisations who often have limited financial resources dedicated to talent management  
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21 (Harney, 2021; Jooss *et al.*, 2021a). Equally, SMEs might jointly design apprenticeship or trainee  
22  
23 management programmes, which are commonly adopted approaches to learning and development in  
24  
25 the hospitality industry (Johnson *et al.*, 2019). Ultimately, we argue that these co-investment efforts to  
26  
27 develop talent will reduce turnover intentions and individuals are more likely to remain in an  
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29 occupation where they see opportunities to learn, develop, and grow and where they have established  
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31 a matching skillset (Allen *et al.*, 2010).  
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36 Third, co-competition in *talent retention* relates to co-establishing a framework for working  
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38 conditions; co-designing industry engagement events; and co-facilitating inter-firm rotations and talent  
39  
40 sharing. Building a common framework around compensation, benefits, and conditions of work aids  
41  
42 to ensure employees are treated and rewarded in an appropriate and attractive way. While government  
43  
44 or national associations might design some of these policies in terms of minimum standards, competing  
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46 firms can choose to go beyond these standards in an effort to improve talent management in the  
47  
48 industry. For example, competing firms might introduce principles around rotas and working hours to  
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50 improve work-life balance, champion a transparent and fair gratuities system, and offer employee well-  
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52 being support (Hoteliers' Charter, 2022). This, in turn, reduces attrition rates not least because there is  
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54 a reduced need for employees to change their employer to improve their working conditions or  
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56 promotional opportunities, provided they remain employed among the partnering organisations. Thus,  
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58 staff will also benefit from greater career opportunities through rotation, while SMEs can utilise talent  
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3 sharing to manage talent shortages or varying staffing levels in response to changing occupancy rates  
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5 more effectively. In the face of the often-cited poor working conditions in the hospitality industry, for  
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7 example, around work-life balance (Deery and Jago, 2015) and the precarious nature of the work (Baum  
8  
9 *et al.*, 2020), a common framework could provide some security to employees, while also allowing  
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11 cooperating firms to learn from each other with regard to talent management. Talent sharing has emerged  
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13 as a talent practice that firms have adopted in the context of rapid change and faced with  
14  
15 unprecedented challenges such as Covid-19, and which has received some traction, mainly by  
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17 consulting firms (e.g., Mercer, 2021). While large firms utilise internal talent marketplaces to share  
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19 talent internally, SMEs can share talent through cooperation practices. We argue that temporary talent  
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21 sharing is not only an effective way to avoid furloughing or laying off talent, but also an important  
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23 aspect of cooperation in talent management, leading to increased retention of talent.  
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### 29 *Outputs*

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31 Organisations implement talent management practices to meet their needs for talent more effectively  
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33 (Cappelli and Keller, 2017). We argue that cooperation in talent management can be a strategy for SMEs  
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35 to satisfy their talent needs and to establish interorganisational talent pools (Burbach and Brannon,  
36  
37 2021). More specifically, we assert that, through cooperation, SMEs can create stronger talent  
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39 management systems including co-attraction, co-development, and co-retention practices. Further  
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41 outputs of cooperation (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016) that are relevant to talent management in  
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43 SMEs include the design of innovative talent management routines, the gaining of knowledge, the  
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45 strengthening of relationships, and an increase in firm performance among participating firms.  
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47 Arguably, well-managed interorganisational talent pools will ameliorate the attractiveness of the  
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49 particular region in which the cooperation takes place, not only for participating SMEs but for the  
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51 entire region and industry. This, in turn, may aid in the development of market-thickening talent  
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53 pipelines (Brymer *et al.*, 2019). Finally, we assert that interorganisational talent pools allow SMEs to  
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55 manage their talent more effectively through the development of relevant knowledge, skills, and  
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57 abilities and through the development of high performing and high potential talent (Collings and  
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3 Mellahi, 2009). We conclude that SMEs can utilise co-competition as a strategy to leverage resources and  
4 capabilities to establish interorganisational talent pools in parallel to their ongoing firm-specific talent  
5 management strategies.  
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### 10 11 *Open systems theory principles*

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14 In addition to input, process, and output factors, open systems theory (Katz and Kahn, 1978) presents  
15 several system principles. In our co-competition in talent management framework (Figure 1), we illustrate  
16 five principles: congruence, internal interdependence, equifinality, feedback, and adaptation. First,  
17 congruence relates to the fit between the system components, i.e., inputs, processes, and outputs  
18 (Nadler and Tushman, 1980). A central argument of this principle is that greater strategic fit will result  
19 in more effective talent management co-competition (Garavan *et al.*, 2021). For example, this principle  
20 helps us to understand whether the co-competition context has been considered appropriately before  
21 entering into a co-competition arrangement and when developing talent management co-competition practices  
22 around attraction, development, and retention. Second, internal interdependence considers the  
23 interconnectedness between the various process components and subcomponents (Kast and  
24 Rozenzweig, 1972). In our framework, this relates to the various co-competitive practices around talent  
25 co-attraction, co-development, and co-retention. Third, equifinality emphasises that the same outputs  
26 can be achieved through different means and from different inputs which implies that future  
27 discussions of co-competition in talent management should not adopt a universal perspective but  
28 encourage configurational thinking (Harney, 2018). Fourth, feedback allows for consideration and  
29 adjustments to the talent management co-competition processes based on the reflection of outputs  
30 achieved (Garavan *et al.*, 2021). Frequently seeking feedback can, especially in a co-competition context  
31 which may encompass a large number of stakeholders with potentially different priorities and interests,  
32 provide valuable insights to co-competiting SMEs. Fifth, adaptation relates to amendments and quality  
33 improvements made to the co-competition process as a result of a changing co-competition context  
34 (Schleicher *et al.*, 2018). These principles are reflective of the highly dynamic nature of the co-competition  
35 relationships and processes (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016).  
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## Conclusions

### *Theoretical implications*

The purpose of this paper was to unpack how SMEs can operationalise cooptation 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 cooptate 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 cooptation literature (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016) to develop an integrative framework for cooptation 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 cooptation efforts in SMEs. Our open systems perspective allowed us to highlight the interrelatedness of core framework components and the central role of the cooptation context, including prerequisites, catalysts, and potential inhibitors of cooptation 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 cooptation (i.e., attracting, developing, and retaining talent) and neglecting the input factors (i.e., cooptation context), will provide limited and potentially misleading insights into cooptation as a strategy in talent management in SMEs. Furthermore, we suggest that interorganisational talent pools and true cooptation for mutual gain can be realised only if SMEs give due consideration to the cooptation



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3 context, the talent management cooperation system, and open systems theory principles discussed in  
4 this paper.  
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### 9 *Practical implications*

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11 Our paper has several practical implications. First, we assert that SMEs can benefit from talent  
12 management cooperation, addressing ongoing talent shortages amidst or post Covid-19 and promoting  
13 economic growth and employment (United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8; United Nations,  
14 2022). While SMEs have applied cooperation across many business areas for decades, they have largely  
15 neglected its value for talent management. We contend that, in the first instance, SMEs should consider  
16 whether their cooperation context is conducive to developing a talent management cooperation system.  
17 While cooperation can result in joint value creation and firm value creation, it can also lead to value  
18 destruction if the competition-cooperation simultaneity is not balanced and if trade-offs in value  
19 creation are not managed (Gnyawali and Charleton, 2018). Second, we identify potential cooperation  
20 practices for SMEs as part of a talent management system including co-attracting, co-developing, and  
21 co-retaining talent. However, SMEs interested in cooperation are faced with a critical choice; do they  
22 only seek short-term wins through individual competitive talent management practices or are they  
23 pursuing a longer-term mutually beneficial arrangement by way of setting up talent management  
24 cooperation systems? Third, we identified five system principles which organisations should be  
25 conscious of given their central role in impacting the dynamics and potential attainment of the inherent  
26 benefits of the cooperation process. Moreover, these principles also assist SMEs in their efforts to  
27 achieve greater alignment between talent process components and to improve cooperation processes  
28 continuously over time through feedback and adaptation.  
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### 52 *Limitations and future research*

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54 As with any research, our conceptual paper has some limitations which we see as opportunities for  
55 future research. While we grounded our argumentation in the cooperation and talent management  
56 literatures, we did not present any empirical findings. Therefore, we call for empirical research, utilising  
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our integrative framework as a starting point, to gain further insights on coopetition in talent management, including the specific responsibilities and practices as part of the coopetition 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 coopetition in larger organisations and the variance in coopetition contexts and processes. Longitudinal studies that examine coopetition 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 coopetition. For example, examining employees' experiences and the potential advantages and drawbacks of forming part of a talent management coopetition 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 Charleton, 2018). Finally, comparative studies with varying regional foci will offer additional insights into the coopetition context. We hope that our paper will stimulate future research on coopetition in talent management, moving beyond competing for talent.

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Figure 1. Integrative framework for coopetition in talent management

