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Simply the best? Star performers and high-potential employees: Critical reflections and a path forward for research and practice

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Abstract

In recent decades, scholars' and practitioners' interest in star performers and high-potential employees (HiPos) has increased dramatically. To date, however, researchers have considered these two classifications of exceptional talent in relative isolation of one another, despite the fact that they are widely considered to comprise organizations' most valuable employees. The current article identifies and explores key intersections in the heretofore-siloed streams of research on star employees and HiPos. In so doing, we identify core assumptions, highlight questions that emerge at focal intersections, and offer a foundation for the cross-fertilization of insights to strengthen the scholarly and practical impact of inquiry related to both groups. We then consider the implications of four significant recent trends in the world of work – increased employee mobility; greater focus on issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace; cross-cultural issues; and the broader set of technological changes that are shaping the workplace – for research and practice related to stars and HiPos. Along the way, we highlight the integral and path-breaking contributions of publications in *Personnel Psychology* to our knowledge about organizations' best talent.

KEYWORDS

cumulative advantage, high potentials, HiPos, human capital, star employees, strategic human resource management, talent management, workforce differentiation, high-potential employees

1 | INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, scholars and practitioners have increasingly recognized employees as organizations' most important resource (Fulmer & Ployhart, 2014). It is no surprise, then, that interest in star performers and high-potential employees – two groups widely considered to comprise organizations' most valuable employees – has increased over this time. Articles published in *Personnel Psychology* have been path-breaking and integral to the significant progress in our understanding of these two groups. Between 2010 and 2022 in particular – the period in which most of *Personnel Psychology's* articles on stars and high potentials have thus far been published – the journal's contributions capture key trends in these vibrant areas of research. For instance, whereas early research on stars focused heavily on stars' impacts on organizations and industries (e.g., Zucker et al., 1998), more recent studies in *Personnel Psychology* have increasingly focused on the implications of stars for their colleagues and teams (Aguinis & O'Boyle, 2014; Aguinis et al., 2016; Call et al., 2021; Kehoe & Bentley, 2021; Long et al., 2015). As for high-potential employees, publications in this journal have highlighted a growing interest in models and indicators of leadership potential, as well as in the influence of bias in leader evaluation, development, and success (Dragoni et al., 2011; Dreher et al., 2019; Finkelstein et al., 2018; Hirschfeld & Thomas, 2011; Inesi & Cable, 2015; Munyon et al., 2015).

While the increased interest in star employees and high potentials (hereafter, HiPos) is logical, what is perhaps less obvious is the basis for the siloed progression that research on these two groups of employees has taken. Beyond differences in the conceptualizations of these constructs, research streams on these groups have adopted distinct perspectives on the role of cumulative advantage in the success and career progression of stars and HiPos. They have made often-competing assumptions related to the role of context in shaping the effectiveness of stars and HiPos and have focused on research questions examining quite different outcomes. We acknowledge foundational differences in the classification of these two groups, with stars most often identified as individual contributors who have demonstrated extraordinary performance, and HiPos identified as individuals deemed to have potential to progress into pivotal and/or leadership roles in the future. However, such significant divergence in the treatment of stars and HiPos – in both research and practice – obscures the important fact that together, these two groups represent the likely present and future source of organizations' greatest value creation. As such, there is value in more effectively leveraging the insights that have been generated within each of these literatures, both to identify opportunities for cross-fertilization and to revisit and critically evaluate assumptions related to each of these groups of exceptional employees.

With this as our point of departure, the purpose of this paper is to identify and explore key intersections in the heretofore-siloed streams of research on stars and HiPos. Our intent is not to offer a comprehensive review of either literature. For reviews and conceptual development in the stars literature, see Asgari et al. (2021), Kehoe et al. (2018), and Call et al. (2015). In the HiPo literature, see Arnold and Costanza (2022), Finkelstein et al. (2018), Dries and Pepermans (2012), and Silzer and Borman (2017). Rather, our objective is to apply a critical lens to clarify and revisit key assumptions, highlight questions that emerge at focal intersections, and offer a foundation for both continued progress and cross-fertilization of insights to strengthen the scholarly and practical impact of inquiry in both areas. Following this exercise, and to inform research and practice related to stars and HiPos, we consider the implications of four significant recent trends in the world of work – increased employee mobility; greater recognition of issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion; cross-cultural issues; and the emergence of new technologies in the workplace. Along the way, we highlight the contributions of publications in *Personnel Psychology* to our knowledge about organizations' best talent.

2 | DEFINING STARS AND HiPos

Stars and HiPos are defined based on the level of value they create – or are expected to create – relative to other employees. Both star employees and HiPos are viewed as the "best of the best" talent in their organizations. As such,

they are prized and guarded by their organizations, and they enjoy high status within them. Digging deeper into the conceptualizations employed in the distinct literatures on these two classifications, however, we observe differences in the bases used to identify stars and HiPos. We also observe differences in the assumptions, expectations, and assessments that underpin our understanding of their exceptional value.

2.1 | Key elements in the definitions of stars and HiPos

2.1.1 | Stars

While definitions of stars vary across studies, as noted in a recent review by Asgari et al. (2021: 226), "the primary focus of the literature on stars involves their outsized productivity." Indeed, in one commonly adopted definition, Groysberg et al. (2008) identify stars as individuals who demonstrate exceptional performance (within a particular type of job) and who tend to enjoy broad visibility, relative to peers in their industries. Supporting their focus on an industry's most exceptional performers, the authors note, "Studies of research-and-development scientists and academic researchers have found that a few individuals are many times more productive than their colleagues. In knowledge work, the ability and experience of top performers are assets that cannot be compensated for by a larger number of poorer performers, or by nonhuman assets" (Groysberg et al., 2008, p. 1214). Importantly, O'Boyle and Aguinis' (2012) seminal *Personnel Psychology* article demonstrated the generalizability of this insight across jobs and industries using performance data from 633,263 individuals across 198 samples, and in the process, stimulated the interest of the *Personnel Psychology* community in the topic of stars.

Operationalizing their definition among securities analysts, Groysberg et al. (2008) identified stars based on client ratings of analysts' effectiveness, classifying those analysts ranking highest in their sectors as stars. Likewise, scholars have identified stars using other metrics of performance suited to their research contexts, including patenting and publication performance in R&D (Rothaermel & Hess, 2007; Zucker & Darby, 1997) and academic (e.g., Azoulay et al., 2010; Oettl, 2012) settings; composite measures of individual contributions in professional sports (Chen & Garg, 2018; Lucifora & Simmons, 2003); and – less often – managerial ratings of job performance in more "traditional" organizational contexts (e.g., Campbell et al., 2017).

Notably, in this definition, current performance is combined with cumulative performance to identify those individuals whose track record of extraordinary productivity sets them apart from their peers with respect to contributions to value creation up to the present time. Further, some scholars have focused on the broad visibility (e.g., Groysberg et al., 2008), status (e.g., Kehoe & Bentley, 2021), and/or social capital (Call et al., 2015) that tend to result from and to support the perpetuation of ongoing star-level performance. Yet the most consistent *defining* feature of stars themselves is exceptional individual performance.

2.1.2 | HiPos

Scholars' classification of HiPos is most often based on individuals' selection into their employing organizations' "high-potential" programs (Silzer & Dowell, 2009). These programs are workforce-differentiation initiatives that allocate resources disproportionately to the development and retention of employees who are deemed to have the greatest potential to succeed in pivotal strategic[1] and/or leadership roles in their organizations in the future (Church et al., 2021). On this basis, Thornton et al. (2017) defined HiPos as those individuals "deemed capable, with the right development, to occupy a senior-executive position at some time in the future" (p. 834). Importantly, as this definition highlights, it is difficult to define HiPos precisely, independent of the specific corporate talent-management processes or programs within which they have received the HiPo designation. This is because the exact criteria used in HiPo-designations, along with the roles that particular HiPo programs are preparing individuals to enter eventually,

TABLE 1 Comparison of key elements of definitions of stars and HiPos

Element of definition	Stars	HiPos
Temporal orientation of assessment	Backward-looking	Forward-looking
Nature and scope of assessment	Objective and narrow	Subjective and multifaceted
Contextual specificity of evaluation criteria	Position/role-specific	Broader, organization-specific
Source of designation	Researcher	Practitioner

vary across organizations. From this standpoint, the commonalities in HiPo-designations reside more in the forward-looking orientation used in the evaluation of individuals' personal characteristics than in the precise set of individual characteristics that they evaluate.

Following this logic, Finkelstein et al. (2018), writing in this journal, define potential more broadly as "the probable upper-bound trajectory of what an individual may achieve during their career" (p. 4). The underlying premise of this definition is that "those thought to have high potential might not yet possess what is needed in future career roles, which may not even be clearly defined, but there are indicators that they may successfully develop into what will likely be needed by the organization" (p. 4). They also highlight the important distinction between one's designation as a HiPo and having potential. Generally, possession of potential and designation as a HiPo will overlap, but there are situations that can lead people with high potential to be overlooked in HiPo-designation processes and people who lack high-potential to be so designated. We return to these challenges in our discussions of HiPo-designation processes and DEI below.

Key to Finkelstein and colleagues' definition is its emphasis on the trajectory that individuals can achieve over the course of their careers (within an organization). Indeed, how evaluators weigh and value displayed performance relative to untapped potential in assessments of potential is a key question (Alessandri et al., 2021; Kupor et al., 2014), with research suggesting that those with a trajectory of performance *improvement* over time are often perceived as having higher potential than others with records of sustained high performance (Soliman & Buehler, 2018; Tsay, 2016).

From a practical perspective, a minority of firms assess potential using some combination of measures of cognitive abilities, personality dimensions, growth and learning competencies, biographical data, learning agility, and developmental readiness (Church & Rotolo, 2013; Church et al., 2015; Thornton et al., 2017; Finkelstein et al., 2018). The majority, however, rely on an overall designation of potential (e.g., "high potential" vs. "steady performer") based on the aligned judgments of managers engaged in a talent-review process (DDI, the Conference Board, & EY, 2018). This approach combines current performance with other qualities deemed indicative of an individual's ability to advance and succeed in higher-level roles in a given organization in a holistic assessment of future potential.

2.2 | Summary insights

Table 1 provides a summary of the distinguishing characteristics in extant conceptualizations of stars and HiPos. First, in considering temporality, we note that the definition of stars is *backward-looking*, emphasizing an individual's exceptional cumulative performance up to the point of identification. In contrast, the definition of HiPos is *forward-looking*, emphasizing an individual's perceived capabilities for future success. Second, in considering the nature and scope of the assessments used to evaluate and classify stars and HiPos, we emphasize that stars are most often identified by scholars based on *objective, somewhat narrow assessments of productivity* alone. In contrast, organizations typically use *subjective and multifaceted assessments of potential* to identify HiPos, often including a combination of productivity and other attributes deemed important for broader pivotal or leadership roles. Third, definitions of stars and HiPos differ in the contextual specificity of the evaluation criteria applied. For instance, classifications of stars apply *performance criteria that are specific to the job or role* (but largely consistent across the industry) presently occupied by a

focal individual and that in some cases focus on performance on a subset of tasks required by that role (e.g., publications by faculty members (Oettl, 2012)). In contrast, HiPo classifications rely on *broader, yet organization-specific criteria* to identify high-potential employees who may occupy higher-level roles sometime in the future. Finally, although organizations regularly recognize high performers, it is scholars who have conceptualized and identified the "star" performers who are the subject of academic research in the literature on stars. In contrast, HiPo-designations are entirely practitioner-determined.

To a large extent, these definitions have evolved over time as the result of path-dependent developments in research and practice. However, some of the elements of these conceptualizations and operationalizations (see Table 1) remain problematic, as we will show by examining three key intersections in these literatures below.

3 | KEY INTERSECTIONS

In the sections that follow, we consider three intersections in the literatures on stars and HiPos that are central to the distinctions that characterize our understanding of these two groups and that separate them from their less extraordinary peers. These are: (a) the role of cumulative advantage in the perpetuation of performance and potential; (b) the role of context in stars' and HiPos' ongoing (or interrupted) success; and (c) key employee- and organization-relevant outcomes associated with stars and HiPos (and HiPo programs). In considering these intersections, we reflect on the commonalities and points of divergence in our understanding of stars and HiPos, call out and evaluate the assumptions inherent in these literatures, and offer calls for future inquiry into areas of interest and concern that emerge from this exercise.

3.1 | The role of cumulative advantage in the perpetuation of performance and potential

Research applying the notion of cumulative advantage to organizational and work settings highlights a self-perpetuating cycle: individuals who achieve early success benefit not only from a knowledge-based foundation for continued performance but also from increased recognition and status, which affords them preferential access to key resources and opportunities. Such access positions them for continued performance excellence, as well as disproportionate recognition and rewards for their subsequent contributions (Merton, 1988; Rosen, 1981). The very concepts of stars and high potentials rest to some degree on the "virtuous cycle" of cumulative advantage, which provides a partial explanation for why stars' productivity so significantly and repeatedly outpaces that of their non-star peers. It also explains the rationale for employers' disproportionate investments in the competencies, social networks, and visibility of the employees they identify as having the highest potential (Collings et al., 2019).

Research confirms that cumulative advantage facilitates the career success of both stars and HiPos. For example, research on stars is replete with examples of cumulative advantage supporting their emergence and continued success (which tend to be examined in terms of their ongoing performance, status, and rewards in a particular role). Indeed, in a 2016 *Personnel Psychology* article, Aguinis and colleagues documented a greater prevalence of stars – specifically, heavier tails in the distribution of individual productivity – in occupational contexts that support the operation of cumulative advantage. The authors found that such contexts include those characterized by a multiplicity of productivity (i.e., where individuals can more easily draw on their prior successes to advance their subsequent performance), monopolistic productivity (i.e., where a disproportionate allocation of resources and opportunities to top performers limits the performance opportunities of others), and job autonomy.

While research on stars suggests the sometimes-*implicit* operation of cumulative advantage that benefits stars, HiPo programs tend overtly to trigger and/or accelerate the virtuous cycle for designated individuals (Church et al., 2015; Gelens et al., 2014). As Church et al. (2021: 9) note: "being designated as a high potential is effectively saying

that the organization is interested in accelerating that person's development and moving the person through the ranks." This quote indicates that HiPo programs aim to direct investments in cumulative advantage to support the progression of HiPos into and across roles higher in the organizational hierarchy.

3.1.1 | Early and overt investments in HiPos' cumulative advantage

Employers' overt investment in HiPos' progression aims to benefit organizations in multiple ways. First, it helps them in targeting investments when limited promotional opportunities and resource constraints mean that investing equally in development opportunities for all employees is not viable. Second, and more generally, it offers a mechanism for creating and sustaining a pipeline of talent to meet future organizational needs (Church et al., 2021; Collings et al., 2019).

For employees selected into HiPo programs, there are potential benefits in terms of personal development and accelerated career progression (Church et al., 2021). Indeed, HiPos often receive greater social support, such as mentorship or career coaching, which directly contributes to their career advancement within an organization (Dries & Pepermans, 2008). These "growth opportunities" for HiPos include formal instruction, stretch assignments, and access to networks of successful peers and/or leaders that may not be offered to other employees (Finkelstein et al., 2018). HiPos also benefit from sponsored mobility, whereby they receive preferential attention from decision-makers, who provide them with opportunities that lead to advancement (Alessandri et al., 2021; Maurer & Chapman, 2013). Finally, HiPo programs provide increased visibility to designated employees, who are generally allocated higher-profile work projects and enjoy greater access to senior executives, which, in turn, may increase their status (Church et al., 2015; Finkelstein et al., 2018). In short, the recognition of individuals' promise in the context of HiPo programs, paired with targeted investments that HiPo programs facilitate, often sets HiPos on a path that supports their success and upward career trajectories.

The impact of path dependence even in the designation stage of HiPo programs is clear, with prior performance evaluations often playing a considerable role in individuals' selection into HiPo programs (Church & Rotolo, 2013; Dries & Pepermans, 2008). Indeed, Church et al. (2015) reported that in their examination of 80 companies, the most-cited criterion for identifying HiPos was performance (with 75% using current performance and 73% using prior performance). This tendency appears to be prevalent even in the context of more mature HiPo programs. For instance, in their assessment of a HiPo program of a large global organization, Church et al. (2021) reported that the effect of a one-unit increase in average performance rating was 2.5 times stronger than the effect of a one-unit increase in assessed potential in predicting individuals' subsequent promotions or identification as a HiPo.

It is important to note that, in practice, organizations' heavy reliance on individuals' past performance in identifying HiPos, combined with a lack of precision in the identification of the specific leadership positions and/or pivotal roles that HiPos are intended to fill, makes the validity of organizations' HiPo-designation processes difficult to assess. Consequently, it is often unclear whether HiPo programs result in investments in the "right" employees – that is, those employees who are in fact best equipped to benefit and to thrive in future positions – as a function of organizations' disproportionate investments in their development.

First, success in one's *current* role may not translate to strong performance in a *future* role (Finkelstein et al., 2018; Silzer & Church, 2009) – a challenge exacerbated when organizations fail to precisely define the target roles into which HiPos are most likely to progress. That is, given the ambiguity that often surrounds the intended paths and destinations of HiPos' progression in an organization, organizations often have limited ability to determine the individual attributes that are required for success in HiPos' future roles and to align HiPo selection criteria with these requirements – whether based on past performance or other metrics.

Second, the subjectivity of performance assessment is widely recognized, meaning that even when HiPos are likely to progress into roles with similar requirements to their current jobs (i.e., where past performance is likely to have more predictive validity), the valid ranking of individual employees based on these scores is still challenging (Pfeffer,

2001). To the extent that HiPo selection is largely reliant on subjective measures of performance, predictive validity may be undermined by the biases and shortcomings inherent in individual managers' competencies in evaluating performance. More generally, it may perpetuate biases that systematically disadvantage the evaluation of and opportunities provided to marginalized groups in organizations (Cascio & Aguinis, 2019), causing many individuals who deserve to be considered for HiPo programs to be overlooked. As a result of these limitations, the overt investments that organizations make to accelerate the development and advancement of their most promising employees in HiPo programs may not be directed consistently to those employees whose progression is likely to yield the greatest return. To the extent that employees perceive that HiPo selection is not based on merit, a key factor in shaping colleagues' reactions to being excluded from such programs (Björkman et al., 2013), there are two major costs to organizations. One, they fail to allocate investments and resources to those who are most deserving. Two, morale – and possibly productivity – may suffer as other employees display negative responses.

3.1.2 | The implicit and ongoing operation of cumulative advantage among stars

We have noted that a key purpose of HiPo programs is to trigger and accelerate the operation of cumulative advantage among individuals designated as HiPos. There has been less attention in star research, however, to organizations' overt investments in star employees' cumulative advantage (though we see indirect evidence that organizations divert resources to support stars' work disproportionately). Rather, this research has emphasized the implications of the implicit operation of cumulative advantage for stars. For instance, in their study of securities analysts, Groysberg and Lee (2008) attribute their findings that stars' past performance predicts their future performance to four factors – namely, that stars benefit from (1) exceptional individual competence, (2) disproportionate access to resources, (3) positive attention from colleagues, and (4) evaluation biases that lead to inflated evaluations of their subsequent performance.

The detrimental effect of star employees' status-based advantages on the performance of non-star employees has also been highlighted. For instance, in another study of securities analysts, Prato and Ferraro (2018) showed that the performance of non-star analysts decreases following the hiring of a star into the organization, presumably because resources and opportunities are redirected away from incumbent employees to support the newly hired star's work. Interestingly, Long and colleagues highlighted in their 2015 *Personnel Psychology* publication that stars' colleagues may even perceive an incentive to offer their support to stars, further perpetuating stars' opportunities to thrive. They demonstrated that the development of supportive relationships with stars predicted higher ratings of promotability by individuals' supervisors.

The idea that evaluation biases may benefit stars to the detriment of non-stars has also been demonstrated in other research, with implications ranging from differences in immediate performance assessments to longer-range impacts on employment outcomes. For instance, Kim and King (2014) documented umpires' biases in evaluating the quality of pitches of star pitchers in professional baseball. Kehoe and Bentley (2021) demonstrated in a recent *Personnel Psychology* publication that, when co-managing a hedge fund alongside a star, non-star hedge fund managers received less credit and experienced smaller gains in professional status following successful fund performance. These authors also found that stars – relative to their non-star co-managers – also received greater blame for fund failures.

We note that much of the focus on cumulative advantage within the star literature is oriented toward the perpetuation of cumulative advantage *after* stars have achieved their star status. While some prior research has examined the roles of early recognition, ongoing performance, social capital, and sponsorship on individuals' career success (e.g., Judge et al., 2004), we know little about how these elements combine to affect individuals' emergence as stars. These considerations also raise questions about the referents that organizations use in their identification of stars. Specifically, much of the star literature has applied an industry-level lens in identifying stars based on individuals' exceptional performance relative to industry peers. This ignores how organizations actually think about and manage stars in practice – which may focus more on their performance internally as top contributors, irrespective of how they compare

externally. From this standpoint, there is a need to consider potential discontinuities in the operation of cumulative advantage among stars and would-be stars that arise based on changes in individuals' relative standing in performance as they move between organizations and/or as the composition of talent within an organization changes.

3.2 | The role of context

Implicit in existing conceptualizations of stars and HiPos is a distinction in how context is incorporated in their respective assessments of individuals' performance and potential. Context refers to the boundaries (or, importantly, boundary conditions) surrounding individuals' performance and/or potential. Two types of contexts are particularly relevant to a consideration of stars and HiPos: the organizational context in which individuals are employed and the narrower job/task/occupational context in which their work is embedded.

We have noted that definitions differ in the contextual specificity of the evaluation criteria applied to individuals. For instance, classifications of stars apply *performance criteria that are specific to the job or role* presently occupied by a focal individual and that in some cases focus only on a subset of tasks required by that role. Importantly, in much of the star literature, there is an implicit assumption that these performance criteria – while specific to a job or role – are generalizable across organizations in an industry. In contrast, HiPo classifications rely on *broader, yet organization-specific criteria* to identify high-potential employees who may occupy higher-level roles in the future. In aggregate, these distinctions result in limited insight into the generalizability of stars' narrowly defined excellence to other jobs or tasks and limited precision in the connections between HiPos' observed qualities and the requirements of future, often yet-undetermined roles that they may enter.

The assumptions and oversights inherent in these criteria often result in incomplete specifications of the contexts in which both groups operate. For instance, this approach to identifying stars overlooks the organization-specific elements of individual performance (Huckman & Pisano, 2006) and relies on performance metrics that likely represent only a portion of an individual's contributions. In the case of HiPos, the insufficient attention given to the identification of target roles into which HiPos are intended to progress translates to poor predictive validity in HiPo-designation processes and a weak connection between developmental activities and skill requirements for HiPos' subsequent success. As a result, research shows that common assumptions related to the portability of stars' and HiPos' performance and potential across contexts are often flawed, with findings indicating that stars' performance declines when they switch employers and that HiPos frequently fail to meet performance expectations when moving into new roles – particularly leadership roles – within their organizations.

To illustrate, there is a sizable body of research that focuses on the implications of star employees' mobility out of (Tzabbar & Kehoe, 2014), between (Groysberg et al., 2008; Kang et al., 2017) and into (Groysberg & Lee, 2009; Prato & Ferraro, 2018) organizations. On one hand, this work reflects an assumption that star status is not constrained by an individual's employment in any one organization. On the other hand, this research demonstrates that stars' exceptional performance indeed reflects an organization-specific component, with stars experiencing a significant, if temporary, decrease in performance when they change organizations (Groysberg et al., 2008; Groysberg & Lee, 2009). This organization-specific component of stars' success appears to be rooted in part in the support engendered in stars' relationships with their colleagues and in the broader organizational capabilities and status that bolster a star's output over time in an employing firm (Groysberg & Lee, 2009). These tendencies also appear to be reflected in the reduced propensities of stars to leave firms that have greater status or where the star has greater tenure (Kang et al., 2017). Such organization-specific factors are consistent with those found to be critical in supporting typical employees' performance (and in limiting the portability of performance across organizations) in the broader management literature (e.g., Campbell et al., 2014; Huckman & Pisano, 2006; Raffiee & Byun, 2020).

In contrast to the basis for identifying stars, designations within HiPo programs are based on organization-specific assessments of individuals' potential "to be effective in other future roles, usually with much broader responsibilities, and at higher levels in the hierarchy" (Silzer & Church, 2009, p. 378) *within a focal organization*. The intended career

trajectory for employees in HiPo programs often involves a progression from individual-contributor roles to leadership (Finkelstein et al., 2018) or other pivotal positions, reflecting transitions across job and task contexts that may vary markedly (and that, as noted, are often not mapped out clearly in advance). Importantly, evidence of the limited success of HiPo programs and of HiPos' internal career moves within organizations (e.g., by one estimate, 40% of such moves end in failure, Martin & Schmidt, 2010) raises questions about the predictive validity of organizations' efforts to evaluate individuals' current performance and success in predicting often-distal and poorly specified job and task contexts.

Notably, current performance remains the most common criterion used in organizations' approaches to identify HiPos (Church et al., 2015), despite the tenuous link between past performance and future success in vastly different situations and contexts (Benson et al., 2019; Cascio & Aguinis, 2008; Silzer & Church, 2009). It also appears that where potential is measured, the reliance on insights from external vendors is significant, which may reflect an insufficient focus within assessments on the organizational context (including the specific roles within an organization into which HiPos are likely to advance). By one estimate, 58% of HiPo definitions adopted by organizations include a combination of outside vendor definitions and internal, organization-specific ones (Arnold & Costanza, 2022). Thus, the role of normative isomorphism in the diffusion of such definitions – and the extent to which they obscure important distinctions in the requirements for HiPo success across organizations and target roles – represents an important question.

Importantly, these literatures also shed light on when stars' and HiPos' performance and potential are in fact more portable – namely, when the "distance" (or difference) between current and future contexts is smaller. For instance, when stars' new employment contexts more closely resemble their previous ones (e.g., when they bring familiar colleagues to their new organizations, when ample resources are readily available to support their work), their performance decline is less severe in both magnitude and duration (Groysberg et al., 2008). Additionally, when HiPo assessments include multiple criteria beyond individuals' current performance, HiPo-designations tend to be a stronger indicator of performance in future leadership roles (presumably because the additional criteria included in these assessments reflect the requirements for leader success beyond the requirements of individuals' current jobs) (Church et al., 2021). In combination, these findings offer a meaningful, albeit simple, takeaway: stars' and HiPos' performance and potential are most portable to future contexts (whether job, task, or organizational) that are most similar to their prior contexts.

3.3 | Focal outcomes associated with stars and HiPos (or HiPo Programs)

Organizations' significant investments in attracting, engaging, and retaining stars and HiPos is predicated on the assumption that these individuals will create extraordinary value. Importantly, the consequences of employing and investing in stars and HiPos extend beyond value creation, and potentially manifest across a range of levels from the individual to the organization. Consequences can be favorable or unfavorable. While both literatures recognize the significance of the employment relationships of stars and HiPos, there is a clear divergence in the outcomes that each body of research has considered.

3.3.1 | Favorable outcomes of interest

Research on stars has largely focused on the consequences of stars' presence and behaviors for learning and performance of their peers and employing organizations. Indeed, an extensive body of research focuses on the varied ways in which stars create or diminish value. We credit the 2014 *Personnel Psychology* article by Aguinis and O'Boyle for highlighting the significance of stars' disproportionate influence in organizations for the journal's readers. Stars' most direct contributions come in the form of exceptional individual productivity. More broadly, however, research suggests that star employees may also wield their unique expertise and influence to benefit the performance and development

of their peers by sharing knowledge (Grigoriou & Rothaermel, 2014; Oettl, 2012; Oldroyd & Morris, 2012; Zucker et al., 2002); providing intellectual guidance (Kehoe & Tzabbar, 2015; Li et al., 2020); and promoting effective work processes in the context of collaborative relationships (Burke et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2018). At the organizational level, stars' expertise positions them to provide meaningful intellectual guidance and direction in shaping the scope and trajectory of a firm's strategic focus (Rothaermel & Hess, 2007; Zucker et al., 1998). Their broad status conveys favorable spillovers that increase the perceived value of the organization and its offerings in the eyes of external stakeholders, including investors (Fuller & Rothaermel, 2012; Higgins et al., 2011) and prospective employees (Coff & Kryscynski, 2011).

In contrast to research focusing on stars' value creation, scholarly research on HiPos has focused largely on the favorable and unfavorable effects of HiPo programs on focal individuals' attitudes toward the organization and employment relationship (Gelens et al., 2014). On the favorable side (from the perspective of HiPos), this research indicates that HiPos tend to perceive higher distributive justice than do non-HiPos. Further, consistent with insights from social exchange theory, much of this work suggests that HiPos are likely to reciprocate the investments that their employers make in their career development (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). For instance, De Boeck et al. (2018) concluded from a review of prior research that individuals identified as HiPos tend to exert greater work effort and stronger intentions to stay in their organizations than those not so identified. Similarly, individuals who perceived they had been identified as talent (i.e., HiPos) displayed a stronger commitment to meeting increasing performance demands, building competencies that were valuable for their employers, and actively supporting their organizations' strategic priorities (Björkman et al., 2013). This literature has been almost silent, however, on the implications of these individual-level consequences for unit- or organization-level outcomes. Understanding how investments in HiPo programs affect such outcomes would be valuable (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011).

3.3.2 | Less favorable outcomes of interest

The literature also describes the less favorable influences of stars and HiPos. In the case of stars, their less favorable influences tend to be rooted in – or in some cases enabled by – their exceptional productivity, disproportionate influence, and positions of status. Stars' desire to maintain these can reinforce workflows that revolve around their expertise, often with the star assuming a central role in collaborative processes (Kehoe & Tzabbar, 2015). While sometimes functional, such patterns can limit the creativity and learning opportunities of non-star peers (Li et al., 2020) and can stunt an organization's investments in routines, capabilities, and initiatives that are not directly tied to the star (Chen & Garg, 2018; Tzabbar & Kehoe, 2014). When left unchecked, these tendencies can result in a team's or organization's over-dependence on the star and his or her expertise. They also represent a significant vulnerability if the star leaves, resulting in a disruption of team routines (Chen & Garg, 2018) and organizational capabilities (Tzabbar & Kehoe, 2014). Finally, scholars have demonstrated a curvilinear relationship between the number, or proportion, of stars on a team and team performance. This may reflect the detrimental effect of status conflicts that can emerge in the presence of multiple stars, as well as the diminishing returns associated with the expertise-, visibility-, and network-based benefits associated with adding an additional star to a team beyond some threshold. This threshold may vary across contexts (Call et al., 2021; Groysberg et al., 2011). Importantly, the emergence of favorable and unfavorable effects of stars in multi-star settings are likely to depend, in part, on the characteristics of the stars themselves (Groysberg et al., 2011) and – as Call and colleagues demonstrated in a 2021 *Personnel Psychology* article – on the characteristics of their colleagues.

In the case of HiPos, research again tends to focus on the less favorable effects of HiPo programs rather than on the effects of HiPos on their colleagues or organizations. This research suggests that the demands and expectations placed on HiPos can be a source of insecurity and frustration. Indeed, HiPos can be prone to high levels of daily stress. For instance, Dries and De Gieter (2014) found that being monitored and pressured to demonstrate continuous improvement and flexibility places HiPos at a heightened risk for burnout. HiPos in that study also reported anxiety about the

expectations placed upon them, with a lack of transparent communication about their HiPo status identified as a major source of frustration and dissatisfaction. Indeed, these frustrations are consistent with De Boeck et al.'s (2018) findings that the risk of a perceived breach in the psychological contract was higher in HiPos than in non-HiPos. From the perspective of social-exchange theory, this suggests that HiPo programs that lack transparency may create a perceived imbalance in HiPos' exchange relationships with their employers.

4 | SUMMARY CRITIQUE AND A PATH FORWARD IN DEFINING AND STUDYING STARS AND HiPos

4.1 | Refining the conceptualization of stars and HiPos

Our consideration of the three intersections discussed above (i.e., the role of cumulative advantage, the role of context, and focal outcomes) raises questions about the assumptions inherent in these research streams and points to the need to revisit some of the conceptual foundations that underlie our understanding of stars and HiPos. We have highlighted concerns related to the practical relevance of scholars' approaches to classifying stars. These include the emphasis on objective, narrowly defined productivity measures and the application of industry – rather than organizational – standards in evaluating individuals' relative productivity. In the case of HiPos, we have noted the challenges that arise when organizations do not clearly identify target roles for HiPos' progression or when organizations fail to align the designation processes and developmental investments in their HiPo programs with the requirements of these roles. Here we offer recommendations to refine our conceptualization of stars and HiPos to overcome the limitations inherent in existing approaches outlined earlier. We believe that following these recommendations will result in a stronger alignment between the conceptualization and operationalization of these constructs and will support the development of a foundation for a more generalizable set of findings on which future research can build. Further, our recommendations lay the groundwork to address several critical research questions that these research streams have heretofore been poorly positioned to examine. Table 2 summarizes the changes that we recommend scholars and practitioners make to their current conceptualizations and operationalizations of stars and HiPos.

4.1.1 | Classifying stars

The dominant approaches used by scholars to classify stars are rooted in the economics and strategy literatures, where reliance on longitudinal, archival data is the norm and where early interest in stars centered on stars' influences at the industry level. This offers a reasonably accurate basis for identifying exceptional performers in industries where defined roles generalize across organizations and are held by individuals over significant periods; where objective measures of individual performance (e.g., patents, publications, client ratings, investment returns) are available; and where performance measures align closely with the basis on which employees in these roles are expected to create value.

When these conditions are not met, this approach becomes problematic. For instance, in many industries, it is common for individuals to change jobs or roles – either through lateral or upward mobility within or across organizations – over the course of their careers (Bidwell, 2017; Dokko & Jiang, 2017). This reduces the likelihood that individuals demonstrating exceptional performance in these contexts would be identified as stars due to a lack of an established track record of productivity within a single role.

Likewise, many organizations use idiosyncratic (Grant et al., 2014) – or at least non-standard (Leary et al., 2017) – job titles, or they may vary in the scope or nature of responsibilities that they include within a standard job title based on organization-specific factors (e.g., size, structure, strategy). In these cases, identifying stars by comparing the performance of individuals in different organizations with the same job title may neither be possible nor appropriate. Finally, our own experiences conducting field research suggest that many individuals work in jobs where objective

TABLE 2 Recommended revisions in the treatment of key elements of definitions of stars and HiPos

	Stars		HiPos	
Element of definition	**Current approach**	**Recommendations**	**Current approach**	**Recommendations**
Temporal orientation of assessment	Backward-looking	Backward-looking	Forward-looking	Forward-looking
Nature and scope of assessment	Objective and narrow	Assessment aligned with contributions to value creation in a specific context	Subjective and multifaceted	Standardized (whether objective or subjective) within an organization, with scope determined by range or requirements for success in designated roles/career paths
Contextual specificity of evaluation criteria	Position/role-specific	May be position/role-specific or organization-, industry-, or profession-specific	Broader, organization-specific	Position-/role-/career path-specific; may be partly or entirely organization-specific
Source of designation	Researcher	Researcher or practitioner	Practitioner	Practitioner (perhaps with research support for validation)

measures of individual performance are unavailable – or where available objective measures reflect only a portion of their contributions within their roles. Such criterion deficiency renders the application of typical classification approaches either impossible or inaccurate. Unfortunately, these restrictions have resulted in a lack of research on stars across "more traditional" organizational contexts (Kehoe et al., 2022).[2]

Addressing these issues requires a more pragmatic approach for classifying star employees that can be tailored to fit a broader range of jobs and contexts. First, we urge scholars to explicitly seek out performance metric(s) – whether objective or subjective – that are most closely aligned with how individuals contribute value within the particular roles and organizations in which they work. Scholars should classify stars based on exceptional performance assessed as exceeding a defined, extraordinary (i.e., not merely "high") threshold on these performance measures. Specific measures may be based on comparisons either to organizational or industry standards, depending on the generalizability of the focal job and performance measure. This approach facilitates the study of stars across a broader range of industries, organizations, and jobs, and offers a standard for understanding star performance based on the contributions that are truly valued in a particular context rather than those that are most easily captured by available metrics.

The tradeoff, we acknowledge, is increased variability in how stars are classified across contexts, raising questions about the generalizability of some findings. For instance, some prior research (in industries where objective performance data were publicly available) implicitly or explicitly included visibility or status as additional criteria in the classification of stars. However, the extent to which performance coincides with visibility or status is likely to vary across contexts and may be lower if performance data are not broadly – or externally – available. Thus, future research will need to examine the boundary conditions associated with stars' influences as documented in contexts where performance and status go hand in hand (e.g., Groysberg et al.'s (2008) findings related to the consequences of hiring stars to enhance firms' stock market performance).[3] We suspect that many of stars' influences may be amplified in such contexts, as greater status is likely to increase stars' bargaining power, social capital, and access to resources and opportunities on one hand, and to increase both positive and negative attention targeting stars and their employers on the other hand. Moreover, the recognition of stars in contexts where performance is assessed subjectively introduces the possibility that bias will influence not only the resources and opportunities that indirectly shape individuals' performance trajectories over time but also the more immediate performance evaluations that are used in the classification of stars. Thus, an examination of how the use of subjective versus objective performance metrics influences who is (or is not) identified as a star will also require attention.

4.1.2 | Classifying HiPos

Our (and others') primary critique of scholars' existing approaches to classifying HiPos is rooted in the limitations inherent in organizations' HiPo programs – particularly in their designation, development, and career-pathing practices (Arnold & Costanza, 2022). Scholars must take as given the pool of individuals who have been designated as HiPos within the context of these practices. Most notably, as we have highlighted, the intended future positions for individuals in HiPo programs – even within a single organization – tend to be variable and/or poorly defined. Thus, it is difficult to identify valid criteria on which to assess individuals (reflected in the common question, "potential for what?") to succeed in these future roles. This is problematic, as it results in many organizations' HiPo-identification processes relying on an unexplained combination of individuals' current performance with subjective and idiosyncratic forecasts by their current leaders. This approach likely produces a mix of star performers and politically savvy employees in organizations' HiPo pools. It offers little basis on which scholars can meaningfully evaluate the workings of the designation process.

Our recommendation for addressing these concerns requires organizations to impose greater precision in the identification of target roles – or at least categories of roles – and designation criteria within HiPo programs. That is, organizations should identify the set of leadership positions and pivotal roles for which they intend their HiPo

programs to build succession capacity. Ideally those are vital to an organization's intended strategic positioning and growth. They should then determine the requirements for success within those roles. Only then should they identify metrics and assessments that will be used to identify HiPos and to determine developmental activities and career paths that will position them for success in these positions. Our intent is not to impose stringent constraints on the career paths of HiPos within an organization, but rather to urge organizations to consider more carefully the leadership and pivotal roles – and on these bases, the competencies – that are most critical to their pursuit of competitive advantage. Doing so will align the design of HiPo programs and the assessments used in them. We believe it will improve the effectiveness of HiPo programs, in part by rectifying the common conflation of exceptional performance by individual contributors (e.g., in some cases, stars) with the competencies that will be needed by leaders and holders of key roles (i.e., HiPos) to support the organization's future success. Some stars will indeed merit inclusion in their organizations' HiPo programs, but that should be based on their possession of the competencies identified as essential within the HiPo-designation process rather than on their exceptional performance. Whether there are competencies or other qualities that generalize across individuals who meet the criteria for classification as both stars and HiPos is an intriguing and important question for future research.

There are often large gaps in the skills and role requirements between individuals' roles at the time of HiPo designation and the roles that have been identified for their eventual succession. One strategy to address this issue is to design HiPo-designation processes to focus on predicting success in roles more proximal to (e.g., two levels above) an individual's present role (Church et al., 2021). Doing so offers a progression through roles (and/or experiences) that reduces the leap into future positions – and that may lead to a stronger relationship between past and future performance among HiPos that is akin to observations among stars occupying the same role over time (Groysberg & Lee, 2008). Once HiPos progress two levels higher, they can be reassessed for qualities needed to progress to more senior positions. This approach may also offer a useful set of checks and balances to curb organizations' propensities to continue promoting individuals based on prior successes until they land in a role where they are no longer successful, a phenomenon known as the Peter Principle (Benson et al., 2019)

Two broad implications of these recommendations are important to note. First, this approach likely requires a substantial front-end investment by organizations. The emphasis on greater precision in the alignment of HiPo designation and development with targeted roles likely renders available, off-the-shelf, or proprietary assessments inadequate. While some target roles (particularly leadership roles) may share commonalities in their requirements for success – even across organizations – the effective alignment of the key elements of HiPo programs with specific roles necessarily entails some level of role- and organization-specific investment. Making these initial investments is likely to yield important benefits for organizations as well as HiPos. Both will benefit from a more systematic and less biased HiPo-designation process, clearer career and development pathways within HiPo programs, and better capacity to fill critical roles with HiPos who have the specific knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes (KSAOs) required to succeed within them.

Second, more systematic processes should reduce bias in HiPo designation (Arnold & Costanza, 2022), but the elimination of bias is unlikely. However, this approach allows scholars to observe any bias that influences HiPo-designation decisions. In addition, the introduction of more specific evaluation criteria and the systematic use of validated assessment tools will make it possible to identify individuals who meet the HiPo-designation criteria, yet are not designated for inclusion in an organization's HiPo program (Finkelstein et al., 2018). This will overcome a limitation of prior research, namely, reliance on employees' self-perceptions of having unrecognized potential (e.g., De Boeck et al., 2019). It will also allow scholars to study the conditions under which bias is most likely to affect organizations' leadership and talent pipelines, as well as the implications of such bias. Minimizing exclusionary processes will benefit organizations' leadership and talent pipelines as well as the career outcomes of those most likely to be excluded as a result of biased processes.

4.2 | Future research directions

Having offered refined conceptualizations of stars and HiPos, we now turn to the implications of our critique for future research in these areas, extending our focus beyond the definitional and methodological discussions above.

4.2.1 | New considerations related to cumulative advantage

Our review highlighted the importance of cumulative advantage to the performance and outcomes for stars and HiPos. This discussion underscores the need for more research to examine the effectiveness of overt investments in individuals' cumulative advantage in HiPo programs, at multiple levels and through multiple lenses. For instance, at the individual level, we know that HiPos benefit from enhanced career progression in internal labor markets (Dries & Pepermans, 2008). It would be useful to develop a deeper understanding of the discrete effects of these programs on HiPos' skills, visibility, and social capital (i.e., measured independently of the focal organizational context). These factors also benefit star performers (Call et al., 2015) and impact their colleagues (Kehoe & Bentley, 2021) and organizations (Groysberg et al., 2008). Examining their role in the management and experiences of HiPos may provide further insights into how HiPo programs translate into individual- and organizational-level outcomes. Specifically, more research is needed to understand how outcomes for HiPos differ relative to colleagues who are not included in HiPo programs – particularly those who are excluded due to bias or bases other than merit – and also relative to individuals in organizations that do not have HiPo programs.

At the organizational level, there is a need to evaluate the extent to which organizations that invest in HiPo programs enjoy more effective internal labor markets (i.e., in terms of higher internal promotion rates for leadership roles and/or in the success of promoted leaders). Relatedly, clearer identification of which investments in HiPo programs (e.g., social capital, coaching, mentoring) contribute most to these differences would be useful. Such inquiry would shed light on how organizations can best direct their investments in HiPo programs, thereby freeing up resources to enrich HiPos' employment relationships or to support non-HiPo development. Finally, at the industry level, an unanswered question is whether industries in which HiPo programs are more prevalent have more effective leaders, which may suggest that aggregate effects of individual-level cumulative advantage can benefit entire industries.

4.2.2 | New considerations related to the role of context

We turn next to the portability of stars' and HiPos' performance across contexts and note that research to date has tended to focus on how features of the (job/task/organizational) context influence the portability of individuals' performance and potential. We know much less about how individual characteristics interact with these contextual features, particularly among stars. For example, which, if any, KSAOs enable stars to carry their exceptional performance more effectively to other organizational, job, or occupational contexts? Given increased levels of external hiring, answers to these questions may be helpful for organizations in overcoming the performance declines that are often seen following the hiring of stars from other organizations (Groysberg et al., 2008).

With respect to HiPos, we need to better understand the personal characteristics (e.g., cognitive skills, personality factors, biodata experiences, and situational judgment (Church & Rotolo, 2016)) – both innate and learned – that make some HiPos more versatile and enable them to thrive across a wide variety of future roles. This understanding could inform organizations in making selection and development investments in HiPo programs – particularly in the near term until efforts to identify target HiPo roles and role requirements more precisely have taken hold. It may also boost organizations' use of HiPo programs to develop promising individuals for roles other than formal leadership positions (Church & Rotolo, 2016; Katz et al., 1995). This is important, as the failure rates in HiPo programs (Martin & Schmidt, 2010) suggest that they may only be marginally better than external hiring when it comes to identifying high performers who can thrive across contexts (Groysberg et al., 2008; Groysberg & Lee, 2009).

4.2.3 | New considerations for the examination of focal outcomes

Divergence in the focal outcomes examined in research on stars and HiPos highlights important opportunities for cross-fertilization. For instance, considering how star employees respond effectively to different circumstances in the employment relationship (e.g., team assignments, work and resource allocations, pay) may improve our understanding of the boundary conditions of stars' individual performance and other contributions. This may also shed new light on how organizations can magnify stars' positive influences on their colleagues without alienating them.

Relatedly, given what we know about the multiplicative effect of ability and motivation on performance (Van Iddekinge et al., 2018), research on stars would benefit from a more direct examination of the motivational drivers of stars' behavior, which are often assumed in this literature (e.g., turf protection, status preservation (see Groysberg et al., 2011; Kehoe & Tzabbar, 2015)). Finally, whereas the very basis for the HiPo literature rests on organizations' differential investments in HiPos, there is little research on how organizations manage stars (Morris et al., 2021), or on the affective impact of the HR practices used. Particularly in the wake of recent increases in employee mobility, research on the HR practices used to manage stars and their work environments, focusing on their content as well as outcomes would be valuable.

Research on HiPos would benefit from a deeper examination of the effect of various investments on HiPos' learning and career outcomes, given that these are key objectives of such programs and can influence both HiPos and their peers. Although HiPo programs generally have significant organization-specific components, a more systematic examination of the means (e.g., by strengthening talent pipelines, improving leadership quality, increasing internal promotion rates) and conditions under which such programs are likely to add value in organizations would be useful. Two conditions that we already know affect outcomes are the degree of transparency about HiPo status and the types of predictors used to assess potential (Church et al., 2015). In addition, this work would benefit from examining how HiPos themselves affect the colleagues around them, both during development, and subsequently, when they assume leadership or pivotal roles, particularly as HiPos are often explicitly targeted for progression into such positions in which they will directly influence others – a point of distinction relative to stars.

Both literatures would benefit from an extension of their temporal lenses. For instance, star research would benefit from a consideration of how stars' effects on their peers and organizations evolve over their careers and/or as their performance and/or status change over time (Kehoe et al., 2018). As noted above, HiPo research would benefit from systematic tracking of how HiPo programs affect individuals' careers in the long term, both with respect to their retention, promotion, and eventual leadership performance in a focal organization, as well as their career outcomes in other organizations should they leave their current employers.[4]

Finally, these literatures would benefit from an understanding of what happens when individuals exit HiPo programs, or no longer continue to meet the criteria for designation as stars. In the former case, it may be that individuals reach their targeted level in the organizational hierarchy. In that case, it would be useful to understand the benefit of HiPo programs for HiPos' ultimate success, satisfaction, etc., relative to colleagues who reached that level through other routes. Alternatively, if individuals are no longer designated as HiPos owing to some failure or a decline in performance or assessed potential, how does that impact subsequent performance, career outcomes, and affective indicators, relative to other employees who never had a HiPo designation? These same questions could also be relevant for stars who lose their status as star employees. In both cases, the loss of status – and the investment and benefits that tend to accompany it – may have devastating personal and career consequences (Marr & Thau, 2014).

5 | CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND THE ROAD FORWARD

We have examined key intersections in scholarship on stars and HiPos – two classifications of elite employees who comprise organizations' most valuable talent. In calling attention to the need to revisit key assumptions, we have set the stage for cross-fertilization and suggested new questions in these literatures moving forward.

Yet, the world of work is ever-changing. To ensure the continued relevance and value of research in these areas, we must consider how changes in the workplace intersect with our understanding of stars and HiPos. To that end, we address four emerging trends that are shaping the workplace and consider their implications for ongoing scholarship on stars and HiPos. We summarize practical concerns and directions for future research on these topics in Table 3.

5.1 | Employee mobility

Over recent decades we have seen a shift away from the tradition of lifelong employment in a single organization. Rather, today's workers more often build their careers across multiple employers (Bidwell & Briscoe, 2010; Dokko & Jiang, 2017), with this increased employee mobility resulting both from necessity (e.g., reduced job security, Cappelli, 1999) and from shifting motivations in the employment relationship (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001).

Although the increased prevalence of employee mobility is not new, even more recently, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations in several industries experienced unprecedented levels of employee turnover in a period termed "The Great Resignation." These spikes in employee attrition – which were most pronounced in North America and the United Kingdom (The Economist, 2021) – marked a continuation and amplification of prior trends of increased employee mobility (Fuller & Kerr, 2022). As a result, this period left many organizations with workforce shortages, prompting increased attention to both recruitment and retention strategies.

The organizational consequences of increased employee turnover are particularly stark for employers of stars and HiPos. Indeed, we have already highlighted that organizations are prone to vulnerabilities associated with their overdependence on stars (Tzabbar & Kehoe, 2014), which often come to light only in the face of stars' absence (Chen & Garg, 2018). The costs of HiPos' exits may be even more direct, as organizations stand to lose their full investment in a HiPo's development upon separation. Moreover, the threat of resignation may be higher for stars and HiPos relative to other employees, as their exceptional performance and visibility make them susceptible to burnout in their current roles (Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Oldroyd & Morris, 2012), as well as attractive as targets for recruiters (Groysberg et al., 2008; Kehoe & Bentley, 2021).

Accordingly, there is a growing need to consider whether and how organizations might proactively manage – and mitigate – the fallout from any increased turnover among stars and HiPos. For instance, in the context of stars, there are opportunities for organizations to rethink typical collaborative structures, work assignments, and resource-allocation processes to encourage opportunities for developmental spillovers between stars and their colleagues. Research would benefit from exploring whether (and which among) such changes offer promise in striking a more effective balance in supporting stars' exceptional contributions while ensuring the sustained development of the skills, capabilities, and professional relationships of colleagues. When effective, such efforts may offer the dual benefit of building greater organizational resilience in the case of star turnover and more effectively leveraging stars' expertise in the development of other employees' knowledge and skills during stars' tenure (Kehoe et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, in the case of HiPos, one strategy for reducing the loss associated with HiPo turnover would be for organizations to rethink their investments in HiPos' development. Specifically, while the HiPo literature has largely focused on the identification and development of HiPos within the boundaries of a single organization, expanding the focus of HiPos' potential (and investments in that potential) beyond the boundaries of their employers may offer a promising avenue in buffering organizations from losses tied to HiPo turnover.

This view is not without precedent. Consider, for example, industrial clusters, where interconnected firms, suppliers, and associated institutions are geographically concentrated (Porter, 2000). Clusters represent a fascinating context that showcases collective approaches to attracting and developing both HiPo and star employees (Chabault et al., 2012; O'Sullivan & Collings, 2019). Drawing on evidence from the French context, for instance, Chabault et al. (2012) outline examples of innovations in clusters aimed at contributing to HiPo development and retention. Examples include temporary assignments of employees to other organizations in the cluster (a practice known as "secondments") as a means of employee development. Employees work collaboratively across organizations on time-bound

TABLE 3 Contemporary issues relevant to stars and HiPos: Practical implications and future research questions

Practical concerns and implications	Future research directions and questions
Employee mobility	
Increased employee mobility poses especially stark threats to employers of stars and HiPos due to: • Higher costs of exit (based on organizations' frequent overdependence on stars and substantial investments in HiPos) • A greater likelihood of turnover by stars and HiPos relative to other employees due to the availability of more attractive external opportunities and the higher risk of overwork and burnout among them.	• What are the individual and cumulative costs associated with turnover of stars and HiPos? • How can organizations proactively manage and mitigate the increased turnover of stars and HiPos? • How can emerging collaborative structures, work assignments, and resource-allocation processes aid in balancing stars' exceptional individual contributions, while ensuring the sustained development of KSAOs and professional relationships with other employees? • How can collaborations beyond the firm, such as temporary secondments, collaboration on time-bound R&D projects, and global talent-sharing initiatives aid HiPo and star development and retention? ○ How do such initiatives translate into individual- and organizational-level outcomes? ○ Does the level of turnover in the labor market influence the impacts? ○ How does employment in a cluster contribute to the cumulative advantage of stars?

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Practical concerns and implications	Future research directions and questions
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	
Increased attention to DEI issues in organizations have not eliminated inequities experienced by top female and minority employees. • The perpetuation of gender- and race-based stereotypes is reflected in continued underrepresentation of women and minorities in higher-level leadership roles and in performance ranges that classify them as stars. • Pay premiums for high-potential women (and likely, minorities) are unlikely to be sufficient to overcome damage caused by broader inequities these groups continue to face at work. • Eliminating these inequities will require organizations to address both visible and invisible biases that influence resource allocations, networking opportunities and outcomes, and evaluations of performance and potential.	• What is the role of individuals' professional networks in HiPo identification? • How can targeted investments in network development reduce biases in assessments of performance, recognition, rewards, and the identification of diverse candidates as HiPos? ○ What differences in resources or opportunities emerge at different stages of the careers of diverse employees? How do these translate into disadvantages for marginalized groups with respect to identification as HiPos or emergence as stars? ○ What interventions might mitigate these differences? • How do factors such as age, gender, race, sexual orientation, and other factors interact to affect HiPo and star emergence and identification? ○ Are there cultural factors that amplify or mitigate the impact of these influences? ○ What interventions are effective in reducing such inequities?

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Practical concerns and implications	Future research directions and questions
Cross-Cultural Issues	
The continued globalization of organizations points to a need for organizations to expand and/or modify definitions and expectations related to exceptional performance and potential. • Cross-cultural competencies and global leadership competencies are expected to increase in importance for organizations' top talent • Increases in the prevalence of remote work may expand organizations' access to stars, while increasing the frequency with which stars are separated (e.g., in different countries) from peers • Interruptions to global expansion and mobility associated with the pandemic raise questions about the patterns and paths that organizations' post-pandemic growth will take – and what this means for the growth and developmental requirements of stars and HiPos	• How do MNEs conceptualize differences in individual attributes that are – or are perceived to be – essential to exceptional performance and/or strong indicators of leadership potential – in different cultures and under different multinational enterprise strategies? What implications do these have for HiPo identification? • How do the demands required by a more volatile global environment alter the competencies required of a HiPo global leader? ○ What are the emerging cultural and global leadership competencies that are most important in the performance of stars and HiPos, and how can these be assessed? • For stars, how does working alone, particularly in a different national context affect their performance, status, relationships with co-workers and their capacity to tap into the broader organizational capabilities that are integral to their performance? • How can organizations create the growth and development opportunities to build cross-cultural competencies core to many HiPo programs in the context of reduced opportunities for global mobility? • How do cultural and spatial distances affect the identification of HiPos and stars in global contexts? ○ Are HiPos and stars in culturally or spatially distant locations held to higher standards in evaluations of their performance and potential owing to proximity biases or other factors?

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Practical concerns and implications	Future research directions and questions
Technological trends in the workplace	
Emerging trends related to the future of work raise important questions for organizations related to: • How best to leverage AI to augment the contributions of firms' best talent • How the increased incorporation of technology in organizational processes changes the most valuable contributions of employees – and thus the competencies that define stars and HiPos • Whether and how to use AI to identify and predict future performance of prospective stars and HiPos	• How can organizations transition people, structures, and processes from traditional ways of working to a workplace enabled by humans and technology to maximize star and HiPo performance? • How does the increasing digitization of business and increasing use of AI affect star emergence and performance? ○ How are measures of performance and potential best modified and validated to account for changes in the contextual features of work? ○ What KSAOs do stars require to leverage AI to maintain and improve their relative levels of high performance and impact? ○ How can HiPo selection, assessment, and development account for the requirements that HiPo employees and leaders engage with and leverage digital technologies and AI in future roles? • To what extent will uneven technology adoption across organizations within an industry represent a new barrier to the portability of stars' performance across employers? • Will AI and digitization change the insulators and conductors of cumulative advantage that have been identified as predictive of heavy-tailed productivity distributions (i.e., higher prevalence of star performers)? • How can organizations design and monitor the use of AI in HiPo selection to minimize the potential for bias in these systems? • How can organizations ensure that employees perceive AI-based systems to be fair and transparent when used in HiPo selection?

R&D projects, and even in global talent-sharing initiatives across clusters in different countries. Research on the secondment of academics to the National Science Foundation points to tangible benefits to their colleagues when the secondees return, in terms of raising more research funds than comparable scientists without seconded peers (Kolympiris et al., 2019). An examination of whether and how such initiatives translate into individual and organizational outcomes – particularly in high-turnover contexts – represents an interesting avenue for further study. Additionally, it would be helpful to examine the tradeoffs inherent in potentially substituting some of HiPos' organization- and role-specific development with experiences in other organizations and developmental contexts that are not tailored to support the requirements of the roles into which they will eventually progress. Finally, it would be interesting to determine whether working in a cluster contributes to the cumulative advantage of stars, owing to greater access to and exchange of knowledge both within and across organizational boundaries in the cluster (Bathelt et al., 2004).

5.2 | Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Despite increasing attention to and investment in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, female and minority talent continue to be underrepresented at upper-management and executive levels of organizations (Bono et al., 2017; Hirschfeld & Thomas, 2011). This reflects a partial failure of HiPo programs and points to a need for additional efforts to close gaps in the development and advancement of these traditionally marginalized groups.

In one reflection of organizations' increased demand for female leaders, Leslie et al. (2017) demonstrated a reversal of the gender pay gap among HiPos – such that female HiPos were paid more than their male counterparts. The authors suggested that this reversal may be due to the potential of female leaders to meet diversity goals in senior-leadership positions, in the context of the limited supply of female HiPo candidates. In a replication of Leslie et al.'s research, a study published in *Personnel Psychology* Dreher et al. (2019) found support for the reversal of the gender pay gap among HiPos. They also demonstrated, however, that HiPo women in their sample did not report higher levels of pay satisfaction. This suggests, in part, that HiPo women may perceive and experience broader forms of inequity in their organizations and that pay premiums may ultimately have a limited impact on their satisfaction and retention unless other inequities are also addressed.

Inequities experienced by would-be HiPos from marginalized groups begin before HiPo identification. Stereotypes of leaders as male and White (Petsko & Rosette, 2002; Rosette et al., 2008) have a significant impact on HiPo identification processes. Indeed, role-congruence theory highlights the qualities often displayed by females as incongruous with the stereotypical qualities of (male) leaders, such as competitiveness, ambition, and execution (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Such stereotypes may carry greater weight in shaping HiPo-designation processes in organizational environments that lack explicit values supporting diversity and inclusion (Roberson et al., 2017). Those environments may also increase the general propensity in organizations for women to be held to higher standards in evaluations of potential (Roth et al., 2012), and to place greater value on potential for male candidates (Player et al., 2019).

Even after women are recognized as potential leaders, they experience bias in evaluations. For example, in a 2015 study published in *Personnel Psychology*, Inesi and Cable found that the very accomplishments that are core to being identified as HiPos can lead to a drop in future performance evaluations for women. They theorized that male supervisors viewed these competence signals as a threat to the traditional gender hierarchy, which translated into a negative bias in evaluating female subordinates' subsequent performance. Female HiPos also suffer more severe consequences for missteps on their career journeys. For example, Bono et al.'s (2017) *Personnel Psychology* article demonstrated that ineffective interpersonal behaviors had a stronger effect on leadership derailment among female – relative to male – managers, even though such behaviors were less common among females compared to their male counterparts. We also know that there are stages in women's lives and careers where ratings of potential – and access to career support – are most at risk. For example, managers often discount past performance and downplay the future potential of HiPo women upon their return to the workplace after maternity leaves (Freeney et al., 2021; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019).

Research also points to disadvantages experienced by female and minority star employees (c.f. Aguinis et al., 2018; Groysberg, 2008). First, because stars more often occupy individual-contributor roles, female and minority stars may offer less "diversity value" for organizations hoping to showcase progress in the advancement of employees from marginalized groups. That may be easier to do by highlighting representation in leadership positions (Leslie et al., 2017). From this perspective, we may expect female and minority stars to experience similar pay inequities to other non-HiPo female and minority employees.[5] As one quite visible example, female and minority movie and sports stars continue to receive less exposure and lower pay than their male counterparts (De Pater et al., 2014; Manno, 2021).

Female and minority stars also face greater challenges in translating their KSAOs to productive output. For instance, among star scientists, women must accumulate more scientific knowledge, resources, and social capital to achieve output equivalent to their male counterparts (Aguinis et al., 2018). In some cases, disparities in productivity result from overt differences in opportunities to perform. Research on salespeople, for example, suggests that White males are assigned higher-potential sales accounts relative to women and minorities (Comer et al., 1998).

An important implication of our earlier discussion of cumulative advantage as more (less) deliberate and visible for HiPos (stars) is that the role of bias in these processes may be similarly more visible for HiPos relative to stars. Thus, it may be easier to overcome bias in HiPo programs by making changes to assessment and development processes. In contrast, overcoming bias related to the allocation of opportunities, resources, and sponsorship to enable individuals to emerge as stars may require interventions targeted at informal organizational structures.

From this standpoint, increased attention to the role of social capital in shaping the disparities experienced by female and minority stars and HiPos may offer a fruitful avenue to address inequities. Indeed, social capital has been identified as a core element of stardom (Call et al., 2015) and is central to the sponsorship and support that propel HiPos in their organizations. Differences in women's and minorities' professional networks may be core to the inferior career outcomes that these stars and HiPos (or would-be HiPos) experience, relative to White males. Indeed, Ibarra (1995) found that for minority groups, differences in advancement potential were associated with different network configurations. To advance practice and scholarship, we suggest that managers explore ways to build more inclusive networks among employees, particularly women and minorities, early in their careers. Further, researchers might identify contexts where targeted investments can overcome biases observed in assessments of performance, recognition, and merit-based rewards assigned to women and minorities relative to White men (Castilla, 2008; Castilla & Benard, 2010).

We also note that DEI questions should be considered through an intersectional lens. How do factors such as age, gender, and race interact to affect HiPos and stars? For example, the backlash against counter-stereotypical leadership behaviors may affect women's progression to leadership positions when specific racial and gender stereotypes are combined (Rosette et al., 2016). Similarly, the combination of gender and age negatively impact remuneration for star female actors (De Pater et al., 2014). These complexities underscore the need to look beyond simple, binary conceptualizations of diversity, such as gender, age, or race in isolation.

Finally, it would be useful to examine how greater representation from marginalized groups in an organization's pools of stars and HiPos influences DEI efforts. For instance, having a larger number of female and/or minority stars and HiPos may be the impetus needed to propel an organization's efforts to increase representation of marginalized groups in key positions; to address bias in selection, performance evaluation, and promotion processes; and to foster an inclusive culture where a variety of perspectives are valued.

5.3 | Cross-cultural issues

Because the market for top talent is global, organizations must attend to cross-cultural issues in their considerations of talent designation and development. First, global leadership competencies are becoming a core requirement for leader success. According to a Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) (2020) survey, 40% of HR professionals struggle to staff their global teams, with 85% of respondents requiring global talent to meet business needs,

and 75% pointing to foreign-born workers as key in driving growth and innovation in their organizations. From this standpoint, organizations have little choice but to adopt a global orientation as they consider the future of the leadership landscape. Indeed, in many MNEs, HiPo designation comes with the expectation that one is willing to relocate internationally. This reflects the perceived value of developing one's cross-cultural competence through international assignments to be able to assume future roles (Collings, 2014). As future leaders, HiPos' success will almost necessarily depend on their abilities to navigate relationships that span national and cultural boundaries. As individual contributors, however, stars may experience varied impacts of the increasingly global workplace depending on their particular roles.

To be sure, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted many elements of the global work environment. On the positive side, accessing stars located in geographically distant areas has become easier as organizations have embraced work-from-anywhere models. This offers an expanded talent pool for MNEs, as well as for firms that previously focused recruitment in their home countries. On the other hand, during the pandemic, national borders were closed for extended periods, and global mobility contracted as many international assignees returned to their home countries. Additionally, individuals' attitudes toward where they work evolved with the progression of the pandemic, which could have lasting effects on HiPos' and stars' willingness to relocate internationally. Further, MNEs are increasingly reconsidering their carbon footprints and what this means for employee mobility on a global scale (Lazarova et al., 2023).

These intersecting trends pose new challenges and amplify existing hurdles that organizations face in considering the cross-cultural issues surrounding HiPos and stars. First, research on stars and HiPos has largely been conducted within a singular (often Western) cultural context. There is a need to consider differences in individual attributes that are key to exceptional performance or leadership potential – in different cultures and under different multinational enterprise strategies (Collings et al., 2019). Such investigations have implications both for how organizations evaluate performance and identify potential and for the specific investments they make in their top talent (McCall, 1994). Moreover, as individuals' careers become increasingly global, research on cultural competence and on global leadership competencies may prove useful in informing additional individual attributes that predict the performance of stars and HiPos (Ang et al., 2007; Caligiuri et al., 2020). For instance, how do the demands required by a more volatile global environment alter the competencies required of a HiPo global leader? One interpretation is that cultural agility, with its focus on tolerance for ambiguity, resilience, and curiosity, could become an even more significant indicator of potential (Caligiuri et al., 2020).

To the extent that shifts toward remote work encourage organizations to cast wider nets in their search for top talent, we may find that stars increasingly take on remote work assignments putting them in different locations – and even in different national contexts – from their colleagues. To date, research has devoted scant attention to the role of stars' geographic locations in shaping their performance. One exception is Tzabbar and Vestal (2015), who found that status asymmetries among team members may increase the challenges of geographic dispersion for collaborative innovation. Considering recent increases in remote work, research should consider how stars' separation from their peers influences their individual productivity (which is often enhanced by the presence of quality colleagues (Groysberg & Lee, 2008)) and status. That status may be undermined if stars' exceptional global status does not translate to local team contexts where they are not physically present to defend it (Groysberg et al., 2011). Relatedly, it will be important to examine how such separation affects stars' employment relationships, their interactions with colleagues, and their abilities to tap into the broader organizational capabilities core to star performance (Groysberg & Lee, 2009).

As for HiPo programs, the visibility of employees who are culturally and spatially distant from key decision-makers is also a concern, as is understanding how organizations can mitigate the disadvantages that these employees face in HiPo selection. For example, one survey of 10,000 employees found that more than 4 out of 10 executives ranked the potential inequities between remote and in-office employees as their top concern in the transition from the pandemic (Hirsch, 2022). Given organizations' frequent reliance on subjective indicators of potential in identifying HiPos, proximity bias may be particularly likely to hinder HiPos' (or would-be HiPos') career progression. We know little about the existence or extent of proximity bias in hybrid work arrangements, even in the domestic context (where such bias

may be less severe), or about what safeguards may be effective in eliminating this bias from managers' assessments of potential. These remain key questions for research (Mäkelä et al., 2010).

5.4 | Technological trends in the workplace

Despite an increase in management scholars' attention to the role of technology in accomplishing work (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016; Montealegre & Cascio, 2020), this topic has received limited attention in research on stars and HiPos. However, the pandemic has accelerated many of the changes that were already emerging, and it upended the world of work for many (Cascio & Collings, 2023; Collings et al., 2021), bringing into sharper focus the role that technological shifts will increasingly play in shaping the workplace. For example, during the pandemic, we witnessed a significant acceleration in the digitization of business. By one estimate, US e-commerce penetration achieved 10 years of growth in just 90 days in the first quarter of 2020 (McKinsey, 2020). We have also witnessed an increased impact of artificial intelligence (AI) in workplaces (Harbert, 2022). Its role in augmenting human work has expanded through the introduction and improvement of technologies such as natural language processing, machine learning, and machine vision (Jarrahi, 2018). These trends are significant for our consideration of research on stars and HiPos for at least two reasons. First, the evolving role of technology in the workplace changes how work is done and raises important questions around the boundary conditions of the exceptional performance of stars as well as the KSAOs of HiPos that are likely to be most predictive of future performance. Second, technology is increasingly utilized in decision-making around talent and this has important implications for ethics, fairness, and the operation of HiPo programs more broadly.

We agree with Montealegre and Cascio's (2020) assertion that the biggest management challenge associated with automation is transitioning people, structures, and processes from traditional ways of working to a workplace enabled by humans and technology. Writing from this perspective, chess Grand-Master Gary Kasparov asserts "like with human teams, the power of working with AI comes from how the person and computer complement each other; the best players and most powerful AIs partnering up don't necessarily produce the best results" (De Cremer & Kasparov, 2021). Considering these changes, it will be important to examine how disruptive trends in automation and technology will change the KSAOs that differentiate stars in different occupations and HiPos in different roles in a single organization. Additionally, it will be critical to determine what KSAOs stars will require to effectively leverage AI to maintain and improve their outsized performance and impact. Will AI and digitization change the insulators and conductors of cumulative advantage that have been identified in this journal (Aguinis et al., 2016) as predictive of heavy-tailed productivity distributions and star performance? Further, to what extent will uneven technology adoption across organizations within an industry represent a new barrier to the portability of stars' performance across employers?

AI also has potential impacts on HiPo selection, given its capacity to identify patterns in candidate or employee information that may predict future job performance. However, it also raises questions about ethical and consistent use to ensure unbiased outcomes (Kim-Schmid & Raveendhran, 2022). It seems there is much to learn in this regard. Illustratively, in a recent study, 92% of executives said they are increasing investments in AI and data systems, yet fewer than half said their organizations have policies on ethics and data responsibility (Harbert, 2022). A key question, therefore, concerns how organizations can minimize the risk of bias in the use of AI for HiPo selection. The fear is that AI could reinforce biases already evident in HiPo selection, limiting progress on DEI. Further, how can organizations ensure that employees perceive AI-based systems to be fair and transparent when they are used to select HiPos?

6 | CONCLUSION

Organizations invest heavily in stars and HiPos, who are widely viewed as those employees capable of creating the greatest value. In this paper, we revisited the definitions underlying these two classifications of top talent and examined key intersections in the siloed research streams in which they have been studied. We identified opportunities

for cross-fertilization, while highlighting assumptions that merit reconsideration and points of distinction that should be preserved and reinforced. Throughout, we underscored significant contributions of papers published in *Personnel Psychology*.

Following this examination, we considered four contemporary issues in the world of work that we believe will have important implications for considerations of stars and HiPos in organizations today as well as tomorrow. In our discussion of these issues, and in an effort specifically to honor the aims of this journal, we identified practical issues relevant to organizations, as well as research questions and directions through which we believe scholars might contribute to a deeper, richer understanding of the impact of these concerns.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Following Boudreau and Ramstad (2007), Collings et al. (2019), and Huselid and Becker (2011), we define these pivotal strategic roles based on two factors: (1) their centrality to an organization's strategy and (2) the potential for significant differential performance when the quality or quantity of individuals in these roles increases.

[2] We note that a few scholars have attempted to overcome this barrier by identifying stars as individuals who have both received a high-potential designation and achieved high performance ratings. While we appreciate the resourcefulness, this approach conflates performance and potential, introducing a unique set of validity concerns.

[3] This recommendation is not qualitatively different from Kehoe et al.'s (2018) call for scholars to account for the differences between "performance stars" (i.e., those creating exceptional value through their individual performance contributions), universal stars (i.e., those stars whose exceptional individual performance is matched with broad status) and status stars (who enjoy broad status despite unexceptional performance).

[4] See Dries and Pepermans (2008) for an interesting qualitative assessment of these questions.

[5] As Badura et al. (2018) documented in a meta-analysis published in *Personnel Psychology* in 2018, the broader gender pay gap (i.e., across all employees) has narrowed over time, but a contemporary gap remains.

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