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# Getting the measure of talent management: A discourse analysis approach to e-talent

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Despite the assertion that talent management can benefit from e - HRM , studies that explore the intersection of these two social phenomena are nominal. This is perplexing given the inherent assumption that organisations will need to appropriate and exploit the functionality of e - HRM, or their 'talent management system' to generate analytics and data in order to make evidence - based decisions about talent. Drawing on a qualitative case study of talent management, we examine the discursive processes through which certain employees come to be identified as " talent " and the role of e - HRM in this specific talent management practice . By providing evidence of two approaches to talent identification, offered through either a "measurement" or an " observing" discourse , the study indicates that executives prefer to identify valuable employees through intuition and executive experience, rather than analytics and data generated through e - HRM.

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# Getting the Measure of Talent Management: A Discourse Analysis Approach to e-Talent

Sharna Wible and Kristine Dery

## Abstract

Despite the assertion that talent management can benefit from e-HRM, studies that explore the intersection of these two social phenomena are nominal. This is perplexing given the inherent assumption that organisations will need to appropriate and exploit the functionality of e-HRM, or their ‘talent management system’ to generate analytics and data in order to make evidence-based decisions about talent. Drawing on a qualitative case study of talent management, we examine the discursive processes through which certain employees come to be identified as “talent” and the role of e-HRM in this specific talent management practice. By providing evidence of two approaches to talent identification, offered through either a “measurement” or an “observing” discourse, the study indicates that executives prefer to identify valuable employees through intuition and executive experience, rather than analytics and data generated through e-HRM.

## Keywords

Talent management, electronic Human Resource Management (e-HRM), discourse analysis, case study

## Introduction

Advocates of e-talent posit that technology will increase capabilities to select, retain and manage human capital and talent based assets more effectively through the provision of dynamic, real-time data, metrics and analytics (Lawler, Levenson, & Boudreau, 2004; Williams, 2009). As organisations increasingly recognize the value of effective talent management practices that are informed by data and analytics rather than intuition, the need to understand the role of technology becomes more pertinent (Davenport, Harris, & Shapiro, 2010). Despite the assertion that talent management can benefit from electronic human resource management (e-HRM), the configurations of computer hardware, software, electronic networking resources that enable intended or actual HRM activities, through individual and group level interactions within and across organizational

boundaries (Marler & Fisher, 2013), there are very few studies that explore the intersection of these two social phenomena (notable exceptions are Burbach & Royle, 2010; Wiblen, Dery, & Grant, 2012; Wiblen, Grant, & Dery, 2010). This is perplexing given the centrality of e-HRM to generate analytics and data in order to make evidence-based decisions about talent.

Seeking to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between talent management and e-HRM, the study examines the discursive practices through which certain individuals come to be classified as “talent” and the role that e-HRM plays in such processes. Specifically, we draw upon an in-depth qualitative case study of a professional services firm operating in Australia – referred to as PSF- and examine its talent identification practices whilst reflecting upon the role and contribution of e-HRM, data and metrics in these processes. Our findings illustrate that there were two distinct approaches to talent identification represented through two competing discourses: referred to as “measuring” and “observing” talent. Firstly, the “measuring” discourse called for a talent identification process whereby employees were formally and systematically evaluated according to pre-determined performance and potential measures deemed to be of value and importance to PSF. Such an approach relied heavily on the use of e-HRM to generate metrics in a systemic and objective manner. The second “observing” approach emphasised a process of observation or ‘seeing’. This approach called for a flexible and tailored process and was premised on the belief that the value of an employee was evaluated through more subjective processes that relied on the implicit skills of senior executives, with the assumption that executives possessed the skills and capabilities required to effectively identify and “see” talent. By doing so, our study enhances our understanding of e-HRM, for which there is a call for empirical research (Marler & Fisher, 2013).

We present our study in five sections. First, we review the literature pertinent to this study and illustrate the potential for e-HRM to enhance the practice of talent management, and more specifically talent identification. Second, we detail our discourse analytic approach and explain how

this theoretical framework, by assuming that the concept of talent is socially constructed, enables us to appreciate, rather than simplify the complexity associated with appropriating e-talent. In doing so, we are able to challenge the assumption that technology is determinate (Marler & Fisher, 2013; Strohmeier, 2007, 2009). Next, we account for the selection of our research site and outline the methodology we employed. The following section presents our findings. It is here that we illustrate that there were two distinct approaches to talent identification within PSF, which each approach presented via either a “measuring” or “observing” talent discourse. The final section draws together the main points of our arguments and shows how our study enhances our understanding of the processes through which “talent” subjects are identified and the role of e-HRM in this process.

### **The concept of e-Talent: Establishing connections between Talent Management and e-HRM**

Discourses pertaining to the importance of talent management have been couched in several arguments based on the premise that the calibre of people employed by an organisation, as well as the practice of managing those people, will lead to significant beneficial outcomes which can be organisational, HR, or more importantly financial. These discussions position talent management as one of the most important issues for senior executives worldwide and although economic conditions lead to fluctuations in the labour market, discourses proclaiming the importance of talent management to organisations has prevailed. Industry and practitioner surveys continue to present results which position talent management as an imperative component of organisations operations and vital for their competitive position (for example see PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012; Towers Watson, 2010; Wilson, 2010). This leads to the normative assumption that the effective management of people based assets is of importance to organisations, whether large and small, public or private, because “talent” is a potential source of competitive advantage and can be used as a weapon to fight in the corporate landscape (Chambers, Foulton, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels III, 1998; Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Wellins & Schweyer, 2007). In order to do so,

organisations need to implement and enact talent management practices, which despite being the subject of ongoing definitional debate, typically involves the identification, development, appraisal, deployment, and retaining of high-performing and high-potential employees (Blass, 2007; McDonnell, 2011; Snell, 2008) or the identification of key positions and pivotal roles (Boudreau, 2003; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Mellahi & Collings, 2010). Organisations, therefore, are required to identify talent (Hartmann, Feisel, & Schober, 2010) because talent is of little strategic value if it is not identified (Mellahi & Collings, 2010).

Operating in parallel to the above discourses is the assertion that technology, whether in the form of enterprise systems, human resource information systems, social media, software-for-a-service or cloud based technology, is beneficial for talent management. Furthermore, given that e-HRM pervades personal and professional domains, it is of little surprise that countless industry, professional and vendor providers advocate for the use of e-HRM in talent management. There is also evidence of a rise in e-talent in organisation. For example, a recent Towers Watson survey of more than 1,000 organisations across 45 countries, found that 33% were spending significantly more on technology. Notable to the discourses of e-talent was the finding that organisations were allocating investments to core HR systems as well as ‘the next generation’ of technology that focuses on integrated talent management systems, HR data and analytics (Towers Watson, 2014).

E-talent, the use of e-HRM in talent management, features in talent management and e-HRM discourses in various ways. Pertinent to the study of talent identification are those that call for the introduction of a “talent management system” and evidence-based decision making. The first emerges from the concept of strategic talent management whereby processes of talent identification are systematic, integrated and proactive (Berger & Berger, 2003; Collings, McDonnell, & Scullion, 2009; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Mellahi & Collings, 2010). From this perspective, all individuals should be subjected to the same talent identification processes (Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010; Stainton, 2005). It encourages organisations to shift their emphasis from micro and individual-level

talent practices to ones that focus on systems-level and macro issues (Jones, Whitaker, Seet, & Parkin, 2012) such that talent management practices are integrated with the rest of the organisation (van Dijk, 2008; Whelen & Carcary, 2011; Williamson, 2011). Implicit in these discourses is the implementation and appropriation of a “talent management system”, facilitated through e-HRM, founded upon the belief that ‘great systems are often more important than great people’ (Beechler & Woodward, 2009:277).

The second, is premised on the assertion that e-HRM will increase capabilities to select, retain and manage human capital and talent based assets more effectively through the provision of dynamic, real-time data, metrics and analytics (Lawler et al., 2004; Williams, 2009). Explicit in these conversations is the assertion that organisations should implement and appropriate the practice of talent management through technologies, as these will not only enhance an organisations ability to efficiently and effectively manage their human resources (Farndale, Paauwe, & Hoeksema, 2009; Ruël, Bondarouk, & Looise, 2004; Schalk, Timmerman, & den Heuvel, 2013; Stone & Dulebohn, 2013) but they will improve the organisations orientation by standardising and harmonizing the HR function to facilitate faster and more accurate decision making (Parry & Tyson, 2011; Ruël et al., 2004; Schalk et al., 2013). Such functionality is of import to the conduct of transformational activities such as talent management (Parry & Tyson, 2011; Thite & Kavanagh, 2009), as e-HRM can enhance an organisations ability to make more informed decisions about their “talent” by providing stakeholders, other than just HR professionals, with access to data (Hendrickson, 2003; Pilbeam & Corbridge, 2006; Schalk et al., 2013; Stone & Dulebohn, 2013; Williams, 2009). Data are representative of the “facts” of transactions that occur in organisations on a daily basis. The data, when interpreted, becomes information, which given meaning, becomes knowledge. Knowledge, therefore, consists of the procedures one follows to use data and information to make decisions and conduct business (Marler & Floyd, 2015:36). This, enables what Rousseau and

Barends (2011:233) refer to as evidence-based decisions which helps ‘...HR practitioners develop greater objectivity and balance in their decisions’.

Both talent management and human capital scholars agree that organisations should use the best available scientific evidence upon which to base decisions about human resources, human capital or talent. It is here that discourses pertaining to the importance of talent management ‘metrics’, ‘data’ and ‘analytics’ become prominent. Influential advocates of this approach are Boudreau and Ramstad, whom together, continually reiterate the imperative need for organisations, and their HR functions, to make decisions based on facts or science. The adoption of a “decision science” will provide a logical, reliable and consistent – but flexible- framework that enhances decisions about a key resource (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2002). Furthermore, the generation of metrics and data, via e-HRM, will enable organisations to establish connections between the actions of talent subjects and by consequence, ensure that investments in talent resources are directed towards those where significant strategic difference can be achieved (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007). Bassi and McMurrer also advocate for e-talent. They believe that it is of benefit because it affords the capabilities to generate data, information and knowledge about talent, which is vital for achieving competitive advantage, but the alternative, whereby talent is managed through ‘...instinct and institution [is] not only inadequate but reckless’ (2007:9).

Implicit in references to metrics, data and analytics is the normative assumption that the “value” of employees is calculable and quantifiable. That is, at the core of these, and other strategic talent management discourses, is the assertion that the value of an employee can be “measured”, and that the generation of such measures, facilitate the ranking of employees according to their performance (Brady, Bolchover, & Sturgess, 2008) and potential. Such measures are pre-determined and applied consistently across an organisation. The ability to measure talent, therefore become a necessary condition for effective and strategic talent management. For some organisations, the identification

of talent based on ‘hard’ performance measures is considered less politically charged (Dries, 2013) because all employees are evaluated the same way.

Despite substantial agreement that e-talent provides the capability to generate sophisticated and standardized metrics and measurement systems to identify high performers, there are concerns about whether the adoption of a systematic approach will result in the identification of “talent clones” (McDonnell, 2011) by prioritizing homophily at the expense of the ability to recognize idiosyncratic characteristics and attribute value to difference and diversity (Highhouse, 2008; Mäkelä, Björkman, & Ehrnrooth, 2010). Reservations about a measures based approach are notably acknowledged by strategic talent management scholars including Mellahi and Collings, who despite positioning themselves as advocates of e-talent ‘... contend that this line of thinking can be misleading when applied to managing talented people. Talent is often tacit, inherently complex and difficult to measure because it often deals with potential rather than performance’ (2010:147).

Whilst statements eluding to the concept of e-talent have been operational for some time there is some evidence that developments in vendor platforms, coupled with the advent of social media and cloud based technologies, have reinvigorated and provided additional discursive legitimacy for ‘metrics’ and ‘data’ with the term ‘big data’ featuring prominently in corporate discourses. Empirical studies, however, continue to produce results and present findings that find a disconnect between the rhetoric and reality with the capabilities of e-HRM largely unrealized (for example see Grant, Dery, Hall, Wailes, & Wiblen, 2009; Parry & Tyson, 2011). Similarly, talent management studies regularly reveal that talent management tends to be ad hoc, rather than integrated, systematic, consistent and strategic (Burbach & Royle, 2010; Hartmann et al., 2010; McDonnell, Lamare, Gunnigle, & Lavelle, 2010). What's more, while corporate discourses continue to profess the importance of measuring and identifying talent, research examining how organisations conduct this process continues to be under represented in with even less seeking to reflect on the role of e-HRM (Wiblen et al., 2012 is a notable exception). Seeking to contribute to the knowledge of e-

talent as a social phenomenon, the study examines the processes of talent identification in single-site case organisation, and pays particular attention to the role of e-HRM, metrics and data in these processes. We pursue this via the research question: *How is talent identified in PSF and what role do e-HRM, metrics and data play in these processes?*

### **Examining e-Talent through Discourse**

We employed discourse analysis as the theoretical framework to address our research question and in doing so presume that the concepts of talent and the object of talent identification are social constructions communicated through discourses. Within this approach discourses are not only associated with the production, transmission and consumption of texts, but ‘also constitutes power relations by holding in place meanings associated with concepts, objects and subject positions, which distribute power and privileges among actors’ (Hardy & Phillips, 2004:300). This approach can contribute to our understanding of complex and seemingly contradictory practices such as talent management in three significant ways.

First, rather than assuming that the meanings attributed to these are common place, self explanatory, obvious or that they exist ‘out there’, this study assumes that both “talent” and ‘talent management’ are socially constructed phenomena. In other words, talent and talent management are not concepts which can be discovered, but rather it need to be defined within organisational settings (Maguire & Hardy, 2013). It is here that a discourse-analytic approach has the potential to facilitate a greater understanding of ‘the intersubjective meanings embedded in social life... (and helps us) to explain why people act the way they do’ (Gibbons, 1987:3). This is a ‘unique contribution of discourse analysis in that it views discursive activity as constitutive of the social world and focuses on understanding the processes through which the social world is produced and through which it changes’ (Phillips & Oswick, 2012:10). From this perspective, the study of talent management

becomes the study and exploration of ‘how’ actors construct their meanings of concepts and how they disseminate these to others to influence the thoughts and actions of others.

Second, a discursive perspective highlights the role that language plays in constructing the meanings attributed to the terms “talent” and ‘talent management’ as it focuses on uncovering the ways in which the meanings of these terms are produced, enacted and maintained. Hence one is able to facilitate a deeper understanding of the constructive effects of discourse in social organisations (Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 2001; Heracleous, 2006; Maguire & Hardy, 2013; Vaara, Kleymann, & Seristö, 2004; van Dijk, 1997). A discursive approach is of further value in this way, because it has the potential to demonstrate that there can be meanings which are dominant, accepted or contested, but it can also reveal there to be multiple interpretations operating within the context of one organisation.

Third, a discourse analytic approach has the ability to demonstrate that the meanings attributed to talent and talent management are the outcome of a process of negotiation, whereby the meanings can be created and supported by processes, with meanings negotiated by different stakeholders with different views and interests (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005). In applying this approach we are therefore able to consider how certain ways of talking or constructing knowledge are ‘ruled in’ whilst others are ‘ruled out’ (Hall, 2001; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004).

### **Research Site and Methods**

The study, which focuses on the talk of e-talent, forms part of a larger research project examining talent management in Australian organisations. The study of talent management in professional services firms, including those of PSF examined here, are considered appropriate research sites, because they operate within knowledge intensive environments where the capabilities of employees are critical to success, and that by consequence, would be committed to the effective identification

and management of talent. In this way, our case organisation comprises of knowledge-based employees 'who use their heads more than their hands to produce value' (Horibe, 1999:xi) and it is these employees 'which lie at the heart of talent management' (McDonnell et al., 2010:151).

The findings presented derive from data collected over a three-year period commencing in March 2009. After initiating contact with the case organisation and establishing their commitment to the study, we collected publically available data in order to collect contextual information about the organisation, especially those we considered relevant to the study of talent management. This included in primary and secondary texts including internal reports, internal and external presentations, company websites, and media commentary. We continued to do so throughout the duration of the study in order to ensure that the situated dynamics of the organisation were considered over time.

Subsequent to the collection of publically available data and becoming familiar with the case, we conducted semi-structured interviews over a period of 30 months between March 2009 and August 2011. Several phases of interviews were conducted with individuals from different business units, corporate HR executives, as well as members of PSF's senior executive team in order to obtain multiple perspectives about talent management over a period of time. Questions focused on obtaining data pertaining to the context of the organisation, including its current and future strategic ambitions, client offerings, as well as the practice of talent management and talent identification, pertaining to the business unit and organisation-wide. The same researcher conducted interviews. Overall a total 79 interviews with 44 actors were conducted which resulted in 70 hours of interview data, all of which was transcribed, reviewed and then subsequently analysed (Lawler, 1998; Roulston, deMarrais, & Lewis, 2003).

Interview data were further complemented by data obtained through qualitative observations (Creswell, 2009), with one of the authors afforded the opportunity act as a non-participant observer

of the organisation's "talent development program". The inclusion of data derived from this activity enabled the researcher to liaise with and observe the practice of talent management via firsthand experience. Furthermore it facilitated the observation of a vast array of formal and informal conversations and interactions which focused on people engaged in conversations (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). By combining data generated via an array of texts as encouraged by a discursive perspective, we could acknowledge that an actor may talk and act in ways in which are inconsistent with the account presented during an interview (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000) such that reflections upon the extent to which the 'ideas' and 'talk' provided in interviews were reflected in their 'practices' and 'actions'.

Data analysis was conducted in line with the work of Maguire and Phillips (2008) and Maguire and Hardy (2013) whose empirical research similarly applies discourse analysis as the methodology by which to examine the social construction of meaning and comprised of five main stages. In the first stage, an event history database was constructed (Van de Ven & Poole, 1990). This involved chronologically ordering the data obtained from the three data collection activities according to its source and genre (e.g. interview transcripts, interview notes, audio recording of interview, website, company documentation, informal meeting, internal or external presentation, non-participant observation). This data was further organized into a discursive event history database (Maguire, 2004) which sought to capture "who said what, and when" (Maguire & Hardy, 2009).

Second, using content analysis, the data was subjected to a detailed and systematic examination and interpretation in order to identify key discursive themes (Berg, 2009; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). All data was coded for references to talent and talent management as the focus turned to the talent management discourse and analysis of what was used to bring the concepts of "talent", 'talent management' and 'talent identification' into existence as objects (Maguire, 2004). This involved initially separating the data according to: the concepts used to position the drivers and

importance of talent management; the language used to construct meaning to the concept of “talent”; and the language used to construct the meaning of the practice of talent management. It was within this activity that specific references to the process of talent identification were made and here that the focus of subsequent coding was directed. Discussions pertaining to talent identification were initially grouped into numerous categories of responses, also referred to in discursive studies as ‘first order’ codes (Maguire, 2004; Maguire & Phillips, 2008). The terms used to represent these categories of responses, were wherever possible, reflective of the terms and the language used by actors and within the primary texts. Many of these were most appropriately expressed via a simple descriptive phrase (Corley & Gioia, 2004) rather than keywords. The content of the data were further coded at two levels in order to generate key themes that revealed two approaches to the identification of talent, represented in this study via two discourses.

### **Findings: Identifying Talent at PSF**

PSF operates within the professional services industry within Australia. Although structured as a member firm of a larger private listed company located in the United Kingdom, PSF brands itself as the ‘largest independent management consultancy firm in Australia’ (PSF’s website: About us) and operates wholly within the legislative requirements of Australia whilst sustaining a partnership structure of ownership. Upon commencement of the study in 2009, PSF had over 5000 employees located in offices around Australia. During the course of the study, PSF had experienced significant growth and by January 2013, PSF had grown to employ more than 520 partners with close to 6000 people located in 16 offices across the country (PSF 2013). Employees are separated into six business units according to the skills possessed and the services provided to clients, with further differences in relation to employee and partner numbers, office locations, and the required and

valued skills and capabilities of their workforces. Consequently PSF employees were categorised as either fulfilling organisation-wide (referred to as “corporate”) or “business unit” roles.

The e-HRM and IS strategy at PSF was underpinned by a best-in-breed approach whereby technology platforms were intentionally selected, implemented and appropriated based on specific needs and functionality.

So I suppose it can go a number of ways in big corporates and large organisations and that's you go for an ERP, you go for a full solutions - an SAP or the Oracle Fusion whatever. But what [PSF] has done locally in the context of Australia has been essentially to do a bit of a best of breed. So we'll select applications purpose fit for the functional need it's trying to achieve. Now that comes with a significant number of pitfalls because firstly you need to be able to manage - and in this case 80 applications in the firm and growing (Senior Corporate HR executive).

This created a situation whereby the array of e-HRM was diverse with at least five different systems, including PeopleSoft, SuccessFactors, Saba, Cognos and Taleo, appropriated in relation to the management of people based resources with, as noted above, 80 systems operational throughout the organisation.

First phase interviews signaled that talent management practices at PSF were not underpinned by a pre-determined definition of “talent”. The absence of a “consistent” definition appeared to have implications for the practice of talent management with evidence of variation in the object of talent management. This gave rise to an organisational context whereby business units, via their senior executives, were able to determine the focus, structure and desired outcome of talent management within the context of their operations. There was further evidence of potential variation in the object of talent identification with corporate executives not advising their business unit counterparts about the criteria, nor the processes through which valuable employees were to be identified and subsequently categorized as “talent”. The vast majority of the discussions pertaining to talent identification, therefore, tended to be positioned in relation to the most appropriate process, with executives seeking to debate whether an employee’s value were best identified via processes

founded upon measurement or observation. These two contrasting approaches are further examined in the sections below.

### *Measuring the Value of Talent*

The “measuring” approach called for a talent identification process whereby employees were evaluated according to pre-determined performance and potential measures deemed to be of value and importance to PSF. Such an approach relied heavily on the use of e-HRM platforms to generate metrics, obtained and maintained within a talent management system, and applied in ways that were objective. There was evidence that key actors subscribed to this approach with some executives not only sharing positive sentiments about a talent management system, but sort to position such discussions in relation to the theme of consistency. In this way, a measurement based approach facilitated consistency in the policies and processes enacted to identify talent, with advocates of this approach asserting that talent identification should be consistent organisation-wide.

The importance attributed to talent management system and the subsequent systematic talent identification processes appeared to emerge in response to perceived limitations of the organisations existing approach. As stated above, talent management practices were not underwritten by a pre-determined understanding of the concept of talent with business units and executives able to attribute value to a vast array of skills and capabilities solely within the context of their business units operations. Rather than positioning agency as a positive aspect, the absence of what many referred to as a “consistent” talent management system was professed as a weakness and potentially limiting the effectiveness of the organisation-wide approach to talent management. Inconsistency, executives indicated, lead to context whereby the definition of talent and an understanding of the valuable skills and capabilities could differ. Furthermore, there was the potential for there to be variation in the structure, focus and desired outcomes of talent management, including talent identification. As such, the ‘doing’ of talent management differed, “...if you think about six

different businesses doing very different things in very different ways...”. Variation, or by another term, inconsistency in the existing processes appeared to lay the foundation for a measurement based approach, with executives proposing that this change was essential to achieving consistency in talent identification organisation-wide.

Calls for a talent management system acted as the foundation for a standardized talent identification process whereby all employees were subjected to a systematic process of evaluation, founded upon the want to measure the value of an employee. This process of measuring would involve gathering information about all employees according to an array of criteria which senior executives had determined to be of importance to the organisation. Although a coherent understanding pertaining to the specific composition of these criteria was lacking, there was agreement that some criteria, particularly those concerning revenue generation, should be applied to all employees regardless of that employee’s geographic or business unit location. Systematic evaluation would result in the generation of an array of talent-based metrics that would then form the basis to identify performing employees, with the ultimate aim of measuring the performance and potential of all employees was the ability to identify PSF’s ‘top talent’.

The concept of e-talent featured prominently with the measures and metrics to be generated and maintained through technology, or what was commonly referred to as a “talent identification tool”. Executives talked at length about the benefits of using e-HRM to collect data about employees’ performance and potential according to predefined criteria, which was then analyzed by technology to produce talent-based metrics. These pieces of information would then form the basis upon which employees were evaluated, with all employees subsequently ranked. It was from this ranking process that high performing and high potential employees became known to senior executives, with a certain number or proportion of these employees identified and categorized as talent.

E-HRM, therefore, played a role in the identification of talent not only because it ‘...enables the consistent evaluation of performance and potential of all employees across the organisation’ (Corporate HR executive) but because it potentially facilitated a process for the ranking of employees in relation to their status as “talent”. By maintaining performance based metrics and data longitudinally, employees could be allocated a performance based score (out of 25), from which higher performing employees or ‘top talent’ subjects were identified. There appeared to be a substantial amount of debate within PSF about what percentage of their workforce should be categorized as “talent” within this approach with some executives mentioning 5%, whilst others suggesting the proportion could be up to 30% of their workforce.

Executives talked about the e-HRM platforms available and the ability to adopt e-talent practices. Oracle’s PeopleSoft was appropriated for payroll and administrative purposes and SAP’s SuccessFactors as the performance management system. Although there was the systematic use of this technology for annual performance reviews, its appropriation and enactment in the talent identification processes by business unit’s differed, ‘the organisation does provide a technology tool, system and process about how we should identify talent, but the use of this system and process differs across the organisation’ (Business Unit HR executive).

Business unit’s differed in the extent that they positioned themselves as advocates of the measuring discourse. Notably, those located within PSF’s Knowledge Services division appeared to be the most prominent advocates of this discourse. Executives spoke with conviction that the value and importance of an agreed definition of the concept of talent and pre-determined process for identifying talented employees. Adopting a systemic and consistent approach to the practice of talent management was important and positioned as enabling a number of positive outcomes including adopting processes informed by, and connected to, current and future needs, with talent identified based on criteria that were directed by business strategy and broader organisational goals of expansion and revenue generation. In this way, enacting a talent management system and

measures based approach could help to ensure the process of identifying talent was ‘robust’ and ‘objective’.

Despite these differences there appeared to be general support for a measurement approach with statements pertaining to its potential benefits featuring in texts from all six business units, with an array of beneficial outcomes proposed including the ability to be ‘fair’ and ‘transparent’ out the criteria used to identify talent subjects. A more salient outcome was, however, the adoption and enactment of a talent management system that could be applied consistently across PSF. As such, there would be some level of assurance, for all PSF employees, that ‘everybody was doing the same thing’.

Despite these, many executives acknowledged that any integrated and measurement based approach would need to allow for some flexibility in practice due to the differing requirements and strategic goals of PSF’s six business units. The pursuit of different strategic aims and strategies coupled with the diversity of PSF’s workforce ensured that some “tweaking” would be required in due course: “It’s interesting what you say about consistency, and a consistent tool ... when the firm looks about anything being a consistent tool, probably we are about 80% consistent. There’s always, anything that’s firm wide, there’s always room for tweaking’ (Business Unit HR executive). Hence the ability to realize the proclaimed benefits of talent management system and a measures based approach were questionable.

There were also concerns raised about the potential limitations and undesired consequences of a measures based approach, with some executives proposing that it was synonymous with a ‘one-size-fits-all’ process. Despite positioning himself as e-talent advocate, PSF’s CEO held these concerns and asserted that systematic processes, founded upon talent-based measures could minimize the organisations ability to attribute value to difference and diversity. The CEO made several remarks to this effect whilst addressing a cohort of employees recently identified as “talent” (October 2010), and encouraged the need to be flexible in defining the concept of talent otherwise

“we might end up with an organisation full of talent clones”. Notably several executives referred to the CEO when discussing the potential limitations, for example:

...from a talent perspective and I know that it is something that our capability team has had a challenge that [the CEO] thinks and has a view that you cannot just say that talent fit into this box or that box. They are all different and it is all different. (Business Unit Senior HR executive)

Such apprehensions provided a framework for the alternative approach to talent identification.

### *Identifying Talent through Observation*

The second approach sought not to identify talent by measuring an employee’s performance and potential via e-HRM, but rather emphasized an evaluation process founded upon observations. In stark contrast to the want to identify talent in a systematic manner, this approach called for a flexible and tailored process and was premised on the belief that the value of an employee should be discussed and evaluated via a process of consensus.

There was evidence of the observational approach being the preferred methodology at PSF, with this discourse featuring in the vast majority of texts, with many executives electing to position their discussions in direct relation to the perceived limitations of the alternative measures based approach. A subjective and observational, rather than a more objective measures approach would help to ensure that talent subjects were identified based on information other than that generated via the annual performance review. The following quotation demonstrates such binary positioning:

For example, there are some groups in the firm...who have a much more structured approach, who have a tool, that you know you could put millions of things in and spit out results... [but there are others] because of the nature of their work that style doesn’t really work for them. There are like well I will just tell you who my top talent is. And I say, you know what, I don’t believe that we need to over engineer it and spend 8 hours to come up with a result of who our talent is. (Business Unit Senior HR executive)

A prominent theme within this discourse was the assumption that the concept of “talent” is identifiable and observable through a process of “seeing”. The overwhelming majority of

executives, when talking about PSF's prevailing process of talent identification indicated that "talent" was embedded in individual's and that such employees 'acted' in a certain way. Therefore, talent was an attribute that individual employees performed. In other words, executives professed that they were able to evaluate the value of an employee through observation, underpinned by the assumption that "talent" was a concept that they could "see". There were numerous discussions which were attributed to this category of response, for example, 'People within the business should be open to seeing talented people' (Business Unit Senior Executive) and '...you will be able to see the top 10% and the stella talent' (Business Unit Senior Executive).

As mentioned previously, PSF's CEO expressed reservations about the alternative measures based approach and sought to advocate for talent identification processes underpinned by subjective evaluations derived from observations. Rather than enforcing a structured process upon the different business units, he professed that executives throughout PSF 'know' who the talented employees are within the context of their operations and expressed support for such on numerous occasions observed by one of the authors firsthand. Certain business units, via their executives, positioned themselves as advocates of this approach on the basis that it was the preferred approach of the CEO. For example, '[the CEO] has a view that any partner should be able to identify talent like that [and she clinks her fingers]. As they can just see it. They just know it. (Business Unit HR executive) and '...he is very conscious his [executives] should know who the talented people are... (Business Unit HR executive).

An important benefit was the ability to evaluate an employee's value via process of consensus that included a "multiplicity of views". This created a situation whereby an employee's inclusion, and alternatively their exclusion, from the talent pool was based on the opinion and evaluation of that employee by more than one executive, 'The value for me is to get them to be discussing these people and debating it because obviously someone thinks someone is talent, someone doesn't (Business Unit HR executive). Another senior executive also reaffirmed this

perceived outcome: ‘...but the value is actually in the discussion and the debating. Because sometimes it’s just one persons opinion. You know a name on a paper’. This would assist in ensuring that the most appropriate employees were identified as “talent”. Collegiate activities facilitated discussions whereby an array of questions could be asked including, ‘Are they the right people? Just because you put them on list are they really our talent? Have we captured the right people?’ Such a process enabled others attending the discussions to veto or confirm the decision of others as to whether that specific employee was indicative of what they understood to be talent.

Despite the stated benefits, the observation discourse does concede that there are some potential weaknesses of this approach. The absence of a pre-determined or structured methodology could result in processes that focused on the needs of the respective business units, rather than those of the organisation as a whole. There was also the potential for talent identification to be regarded as “ad hoc” with a key senior corporate HR executive declaring, ‘So it is fair to say that at the moment is happening in our business but it is quite ad hoc in that identification space’.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Despite the concepts of e-talent and “big data” featuring in corporate discourses pertaining to e-HRM and talent management, there is a dearth of research that empirically examines the talent identification process of organisations, with even less considering the role of e-HRM in these processes. This, we assert, is perplexing given the relationship between technology, as well as metrics and data, in talent management. In this study, we have integrated pertinent publications from e-HRM and talent management, informed by discourse analysis, in order to present empirical and theoretical insights into e-talent.

By examining the discursive practices through which certain employees come to be identified and categorized as “talent” in PSF, our findings show that there were two distinct approaches to talent identification represented through two competing discourses: “measuring”

talent and “observing” talent. Firstly, the “measuring” discourse called for talent identification processes whereby employees were systematically evaluated according to pre-determined performance and potential measures deemed to be of value and importance to PSF. Such an approach relied heavily on the use of e-HRM to generate metrics in a systemic and objective manner. Talent was defined and understood in relation to the outputs and measurable value attributed to past and current activities.

The second “observing” or “seeing” approach sought to identify talent through a process of observation. This approach called for a flexible and tailored process and was premised on the belief that the value of an employee was determined through more subjective processes that relied on the implicit skills of senior executives. This discourse tended to be more forward focussed drawing on perceptions of both current and future performance. Discourses around organisational fit, partner compatibility and team dynamics were more prevalent. Management capabilities to be able to identify and “see” talent were used to judge both the skills and value-generating capabilities of the leadership and were entangled in this talent identification process.

Despite the obvious alignment of the “measuring” discourse with the organisational objectives and the capabilities of the e-HRM, the dominant discourse was typically that of “observing”. Discussions about talent identification framed around “measuring” were frequently overturned by more subjective “observing” approaches with executives engaged with e-HRM frequently diminishing the role of e-talent depending on the interplay of the dominant discourse. Critically, for the study of talent management, the analysis of the texts presented a situation whereby the merits and the limitations of the two approaches were positioned in relation to each other. There was also evidence of the assertion that the measures and observational approaches were mutually exclusive with business units wholly advocated for one approach at the exclusion of the other.

Our study also shows that the “observation” approaches, underpinned by intuition and senior executive experience, were not incautiously adopted, but rather done so deliberately and knowingly, with executives, including the CEO, cautious about the implications of a measures based approach potentially emphasizing talent clones (McDonnell, 2011) and homophily, rather than diversity. These empirical insights provide additional evidence for what Dries (2013:280-281) calls ‘conjectural assumptions’. In this way, there is the potential that talent subjects, will continue to identified based on surmise or guesswork, rather than “hard” performance and potential data, information and knowledge and hence the role e-HRM, metrics, data and analytics not paramount.

The study, through the theoretical lens of discourse analysis, is able to enhance our understanding of e-talent, e-HRM and talent management in a number of significant ways. Firstly, it examines the intersection of two social phenomena, e-HRM and talent management, where empirical and theoretical are considered to be nominal and lacking (Marler & Fisher, 2013; McDonnell, 2011; Stone & Dulebohn, 2013), despite continue rhetoric about the importance of both technology and talent management to organisations. Secondly, by exploring these phenomena as social constructionists, we are able to reflect on meanings and how these come to be constructed, as well as how particular discourses become legitimated and institutionalized (Vaara et al., 2004), with certain ways of identifying talent, be it either through measurement or observation, ruled in and talked about within the context of PSF’s operations. Our study goes further, by providing empirical evidence that indicates that talent management, and more specifically talent identification, can be the subject of contestation and power relations even within the one organisation. Although, this line of enquiry was outside of the scope of this study, the role of power and politics in talent management warrants further investigation.

Thirdly, we show that despite e-talent advocates professing that e-HRM possesses the capabilities and functionality that afforded organisations with the ability to make decisions pertaining to human resources, human capital and talent based on metrics, data and analytics

(Lawler et al., 2004; Williams, 2009), executives asserted that its greatest contribution to PSF was its ability to ensure that there was consistency and the harmonising of policies and processes across the organisation. This, however, prioritised a role for e-talent and e-HRM because it required the enactment of a talent management system, referred to in the context of this study as a talent identification tool. Despite previous suggestions that organisations, such as PSF, may not be adopting e-talent, because of the limited mathematical abilities and knowledge of HR professionals (Wiblen et al., 2012), or as Strohmeier states ‘...HR people are not trained as data scientists, who easily handle a broader range of complex analytical methods and software’ (2013:14), there was no evidence of these sentiments in our case organisations, with executives not referring to the presence, nor absence of such skills, in either of the measuring or observing discourses. However we do encourage organisations, and in particular HR professionals, to proactively recruit or develop such skills, otherwise the capabilities, functionality and potential benefits of e-talent will, by consequence, remain underutilised.

Despite these contributions, our study has a number of limitations. First, in adopting a single site exploratory case study to examine talent management, we suggest using caution if attempting to draw wider generalizations from the findings. This limitation derives from the context specific nature of the findings that seek to illuminate and provide thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) pertaining to the experiences and practices of one organisation, that of PSF. As such, we do not profess that the findings represent talent identification practices of organisations operating in Australia, nor that they are indicative and replicable in other organisations located within the professional services industry. Although we offer empirical insights into the ‘how’ of talent identification and e-talent, the findings must be considered as representative of those in a specific time and place as the definition of talent is dynamic and can and is likely to change over time as the priorities of an organisation change (McDonnell et al., 2010). Despite the importance attributed to context by this study, further exploration of the role of e-HRM, and more specifically e-talent, in

other organisations, industries and represent fruitful contexts for future research. Such studies may enhance our knowledge and appreciation of contextual influences on e-talent. Furthermore, one encourages others to ask specific questions about the influence and the affect of other factors such as those prevalent here including industry and ownership structure, including those found by Mäkelä et al. (2010). A key point that we wish to conclude with is that although the proclaimed benefits of e-talent are vast and auspicious, it is important to acknowledge that e-HRM is only a tool, and whilst it can enable and improve evidence-based decision-making, it needs to be appropriated by actors, managed, and supported by organizational policies and processes to do so.

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