2012

Linking leadership and talent: a discursive analysis of e-learning in a professional services firm

Sharna L. Wiblen
University of Sydney, swiblen@uow.edu.au

David Grant
University of Sydney, david.grant2@unsw.edu.au

Kristine Dery
University of Sydney

Publication Details

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Linking leadership and talent: a discursive analysis of e-learning in a professional services firm

Abstract
This paper draws on discursive analytic techniques to explore the perceived material outcomes of e-learning. Specifically it examines an e-learning portal provided to a particular set of talented individuals within professional services firm based in Australia. To explore the perceived contributions of this example of e-HRM for talent management we consider two different sets of actors; the human resource function and the organisation. Our findings illustrate that the perceived material outcomes of this technology are contested and influenced by the different actors who are involved in the receipt, delivery and management of this e-learning portal. Despite the presence of an agreed dominant discourse, Leadership Online was seen to have material outcomes which centered upon the themes of flexible learning; skills development; demonstrating investment and employer branding.

Publication Details

This conference paper is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/buspapers/951
LINKING LEADERSHIP AND TALENT: A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF E-LEARNING IN A PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRM

Sharna Wiblen
Work and Organisational Studies, School of Business, University of Sydney
Room 203, Institute Building H03, NSW 2006
Sharna.wiblen@sydney.edu.au

David Grant
Work and Organisational Studies, School of Business, University of Sydney
Room 224, Institute Building H03, NSW 2006
David.grant@sydney.edu.au

Kristine Dery
Work and Organisational Studies, School of Business, University of Sydney
Room 406, Institute Building H03, NSW 2006
Kristine.dery@sydney.edu.au

Keywords:
Talent, talent management, discourse, e-HRM, e-learning, professional services, material outcomes

Word count: 7059 (including in-text referencing)

1 Corresponding author
Abstract:  
This paper draws on discursive analytic techniques to explore the perceived material outcomes of e-learning. Specifically it examines an e-learning portal provided to a particular set of talented individuals within a professional services firm based in Australia. To explore the perceived contributions of this example of e-HRM for talent management we consider two different sets of actors; the human resource function and the organisation. Our findings illustrate that the perceived material outcomes of this technology are contested and influenced by the different actors who are involved in the receipt, delivery and management of this e-learning portal. Despite the presence of an agreed dominant discourse, Leadership Online was seen to have material outcomes which centered upon the themes of flexible learning; skills development; demonstrating investment and employer branding.

Keywords:  
Talent, talent management, discourse, e-HRM, e-learning, professional services, material outcomes

Word count: 7059 (including in-text referencing)
Introduction

It is argued that the use of technology for learning and development purposes will increase (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2010; Welsh, Wanberg, Brown, & Simmering, 2003). A recent report by Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Callan & Bowman, 2010) strongly advocates for the adoption and use of e-learning by drawing connections between such adoption with an organisation’s ability to adopt, diffuse, and implement innovation into core business processes. They continue this discourse between e-learning and innovation throughout the report and articulate that: ‘Australian organisations need to improve at using and embedding e-learning innovations. There is an increased pressure to further increase the current rate of e-learning in workplaces’ (2010:1) with only about one third of Australian businesses currently using e-learning for the structured training and development of employees.

There has been much discussion about the increased adoption of e-learning by organisations as a method to deliver the training and development needs of all of their employees however few scholars have examined the role and contributions of e-learning in corporate settings (Fisher, Wasserman, & Orvis, 2010). Given such opportunity this paper explores the perceived material outcomes of an e-learning portal (referred to as Leadership Online) in the corporate setting of an Australian based Professional Services Firm (referred to as PSF). Seeking to enhance the e-learning extant literature, we share the stated contributions and hence material outcomes of this technology which are presented through four discourses thus contributing to two areas of research, electronic Human Resource Management (e-HRM) and talent management.

Our paper is structured as follows. In the first section we contextualise our study by reviewing extant debates about the war for talent and the call for organisations to define talent and consequently identify and develop talented employees. In the second section we establish connections between the examinations of talent management with that of e-HRM. By focusing on e-learning, we are able to explore the potential for e-learning portals to play a role in the development of talent. This involves us examining the extant e-learning literature while specifically focusing on the stated and perceived benefits, advantages and material outcomes associated with the adoption and appropriation of this technology. The third section outlines our research design. In the fourth section we impart our findings presented via discussion of four material outcomes discourses: facilitate flexible learning; skills development; demonstrate investment and make talent feel special and employer branding. The final section presents our discussions and conclusions and touches on some implications for academics and HR practitioners.

The Importance of Winning the War for Talent

The use of the term ‘talent management’ gained momentum and popularity in the late 1990’s as the term ‘war for talent’ was coined to describe the more competitive market for people with requisite skills. A McKinsey & Company’s 1998 study (Chambers, Foulton, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels III, 1998) drew widespread attention to rising demand for talent-intensive skills that would outpace supply in many industries and markets. Stahl et al (2007) further elaborated by stating that in the late 1990’s ‘talent management’ was synonymous with human capital management and its influence on an organisations strategy. In contrast to other parts of the world which sought to downsize their investments in human resources in response to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the salience of the war for talent in Australia has shown no signs of abating with a recent Australian Human Resource Institute (AHRI) report finding that the projection of continued skills shortages through to
2020 was of great concern and hence the war for talent was the number one priority for Australian organisations (Wilson, 2010).

Despite the lack of clarity and agreement as to the definition of talent, we believe that organisations can define and then identify talent in three main ways. The first recognises individuals as talent and involves the identification of individuals who are believed to be high performers (see Blass, 2007; CIPD, 2008; Snell, 2008). The second category views talent in terms of particular skills and capabilities and centre’s upon the organisation’s evaluation of particular skills and knowledge as critical to their operations and strategic direction. This category can include individuals and cohorts of employees such as knowledge workers, professional services staff and/or technical experts (April & Jappie, 2008; Blass, 2007; CIPD, 2006a, b; Lah, 2009). Individuals that are included in this category are seen to possess attributes and skills that are considered to be hard to replace (CIPD, 2006a). The third category considers talent in the form of particular functions, or as Boudreau refers to them ‘pivotal roles’ (2003:21). This category involves the identification of resources and roles that are deemed critical to the strategic success of the organisation. Regardless of the definition of talent adopted, to retain identified talented employees, organisations must undertake a number of talent management activities of which development is one (Wiblen, Grant, & Dery, 2010). A component of talent development is the provision of additional learning opportunities and the enhancement of skills (Bassi & McMurrer, 2007; McDonnell, Lamare, Gunnigle, & Lavelle, 2010). This is where e-HRM and e-learning has a potential role to play.

E-HRM and Talent Management

The array of technology that is available to organisations and their HR functions continues to expand and advance in sophistication with some arguing that the future of talent management must involve technology (Davenport, Harris, & Shapiro, 2010; Snell, 2008). Frank and Taylor (2004) argue that: ‘As technology infiltrates nearly every facet of the workplace, implications for talent management may be profound’. Bassi and McMurrer share similar views and argue that through the use of human capital tools, organisations and HR can ‘…start gauging how well people are managed and developed throughout an organisation’ (2007:2). They believe that a relationship between the use of technology and competitive advantage exists. In sum a number of the compelling reasons as to why organisations should use technology in talent management have been expressed. Although many others also advocate for the use of technology in talent management practices (Burbach & Royle, 2010; Wiblen et al., 2010; Williams, 2009), we still know very little about the way in which technology, whether categorised as e-HRM, human resources information systems, enterprise resource planning systems, social media, or specifically for this study e-learning, can contribute to talent management.

Similar to talent, many definitions of e-learning are proposed however we agree with the definition as advocated by Zhang and Nunamaker (2003), Welsh et al (2003) and Bondarouk & Ruël (2010) by defining e-learning as any type of learning situation in which instructional content is delivered through the use of computer networked technology, primarily over an intranet, or through the Internet, where and when required. The delivery and structure of e-learning Welsh et al (2003) believe can take two forms: asynchronous and synchronous. The first, asynchronous, seeks to provide its employees with access to training modules anytime, anywhere. That is, employees can access their prescribed learning and development activities at a time and
place which is to their convenience and can be referred to as ‘learning and development on demand.’ The ability to access learning in this manner is believed to enable the empowerment of employees. To facilitate the delivery of this type of e-learning, organisations will adopt more flexible applications such as simulation games, videos, pre-recorded lectures, and podcasts. The second, synchronous, is less flexible regarding the delivery of learning as it requires employees to utilize the training module at a specified time. Although delivered through technology, this approach more closely represents more traditional classroom based methods of learning.

Although Bedwell and Salas argue that ‘the purpose of any training is to ultimately increase effective performance by influencing employee behaviours, knowledge and attitudes’ (2010:243) many other academics and practitioners proclaim additional anticipated material outcomes associated with the adoption of e-learning. These can be separated into four main categories and are presented in the following table.

**Table 1: Extant literature outcomes of e-learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Outcomes by theme</th>
<th>Material Outcomes by Subtheme</th>
<th>Supporting Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Cost Efficiencies</td>
<td>Reduce training costs</td>
<td>(Alexander, 2001; Bedwell &amp; Salas, 2010; Bondarouk &amp; Ruël, 2010; Callan &amp; Bowman, 2010; Granger &amp; Levine, 2010; Welsh et al., 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Learning Flexibility</td>
<td>Access training modules</td>
<td>(Bedwell &amp; Salas, 2010; Bondarouk &amp; Ruël, 2010; Callan &amp; Bowman, 2010; Granger &amp; Levine, 2010; Mueller &amp; Strohmeier, 2010; Welsh et al., 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>anywhere, anytime</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individuality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timeliness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Skills Development</td>
<td>Enhance job-specific</td>
<td>(Bedwell &amp; Salas, 2010; Bondarouk &amp; Ruël, 2010; Mayer, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>competencies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge gain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information acquisition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Improve quality of learning</td>
<td>Support communities of practice where learners interact and learn together</td>
<td>(Bondarouk &amp; Ruël, 2010; Callan &amp; Bowman, 2010; Granger &amp; Levine, 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enable employees to determine and plan their own training objectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the prevalence and power of positive discourses presented by e-learning advocates, it is important to acknowledge the potential limitations and weaknesses regarding the ability for individuals and organisations to realise such benefits. These include: the potential for information overload; high upfront implementation costs (Bedwell & Salas, 2010; Bondarouk & Ruël, 2010); minimal achievement of learning outcomes (Fisher et al., 2010); which could potentially result in e-learning ‘…being no more than an
information provider’ (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2010:151). Overall for some organisations, similar to other e-HRM based projects, e-learning has not always lived up to its expectations (Fisher et al., 2010).

The extant literature relating to e-learning has explored a number of areas in addition to the above. These include: an individual’s ability to learn (see Baudoin, 2010); measuring learning outcomes (see Baudoin, 2010; Brown, 2001; Brown & Ford, 2002); it’s effectiveness and factors affecting its effectiveness (Fisher et al., 2010); system-related design characteristics (Mueller & Strohmeier, 2010) and the importance of learner control (Granger & Levine, 2010). Furthermore the overwhelming majority of these apply quantitative methods (Baudoin, 2010) and examine e-learning from a general perspective by assuming that an organisation implements e-learning for everyone. Given the existing emphasis and focus, this paper seeks to expand upon the extant literature and enhance our understanding of the contributions of e-learning by exploring the perceived material outcomes of e-learning for a targeted set of employees identified as ‘top talent’ which leads us to our primary research question:

a. How does e-learning contribute to the learning and development of top talent in PSF?

Research Design

We have adopted a discourse analytic approach to explore the perceived material outcomes of e-learning for a targeted set of employees identified as ‘top talent’. For the purposes of this paper we use the term material outcomes to refer to the articulated and perceived contributions associated with providing such employees with access to Leadership Online. We define discourse as a set of inter-related texts that, along with the related practices of text production, dissemination and consumption, bring an object or idea into being (Parker, 1992). Discourses are important as they play a role in constituting material reality where they produce rules, identity, context, values and procedures (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996) and these in turn influence social practices by shaping what can be said, who says it, when and where (Deetz, 1992; Fairclough, 1992; Hall, 2001). By examining a corporate setting, that is the operations of PSF, it is important that we consider the manner in which the creation and distribution of texts influences the actions of individuals. Institutions, therefore, we believe can only be understood as products of the discursive activity that influences actions (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004:635). By combining discourse and material outcomes we seek to provide insights into the practices and processes associated with creation of meanings and understandings of the phenomena of e-learning in practice.

By adopting a discourse analytic approach, seek to make two contributions. Our first contribution is to explore the potential role that e-learning, an example of e-HRM, can play in the delivery of an organisations talent management programs. In this respect our paper provides empirical evidence that demonstrates e-learning is being used by some organisations, in our case PSF, to provide talent with advancements in learning and development. As such we provide embryonic insights into the appropriation of e-HRM for talent management in one specific area, that being e-learning. Secondly we show that the perceived material outcomes of Leadership Online, as expressed via discourses, were contested. We found that the different actors within PSF had differing opinions and beliefs regarding the role and potential contributions of the technology.

To further examine our phenomena we embraced an interpretative epistemology. This was considered the most appropriate for this study as we sought to focus on the perceived role and value of the e-learning portal
and the subjective meanings attributed to the technology by our interviewees. Furthermore, the adoption of this approach was valuable as it advocates two essential assumptions. Firstly, that individual’s create their own meanings and secondly that context can influence the creation of such meanings. As the authors assume that the world is not a given, but rather an emergent social process (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) the study sought to analyse and explore the subjective meanings that individuals and organisations attributed to the technology. More specifically we were seeking ‘to understand the intersubjective meanings embedded in social life… (and) to explain why people act the way they do’ (Gibbons, 1987:3). Additionally the adoption of interpretative assumptions gave salience to organisational context and is in line with the perspective adopted by Orlikowski and Baroudi who believe that the context of the use of technology is important. Furthermore, we agree that ‘the design and use of technology in organisations, in particular, is intrinsically embedded in social contexts, marked by time, locale, politics, and culture. Neglecting these influences may reveal an incomplete picture of information systems phenomena’ (1991:12).

Our study adopted an exploratory qualitative single case study methodology (Berg, 2009) and the rigorous empirical data and findings presented in this paper draw upon the examination of an e-learning portal) appropriated by one organisation, PSF (an assumed name) which is currently participating in a larger longitudinal project which is examining role of technology in talent management. A case study for the purposes of this study enabled the systematic collection of information about social settings, events and/or individuals which facilitated an understanding of how the organisation and the individuals within operated and functioned (Berg, 2009). More specifically a qualitative case study was applied such that the authors could ‘…study the experiences of real cases operating in real situations’ (Van de Ven & Poole, 1990:3). A professional services firm was selected for three salient reasons. First, the knowledge economy is predicted to increase in importance (Wilson, 2010) and thus there is an ongoing commitment to talent management in the professional services industry. Second, knowledge-based professional service firms are more inclined to be intensive internet and technology users (McDonnell et al., 2010). Third we agree with the reflections of Bondarouk and Ruel that the increased demand for knowledge workers, which can be located in professional services firms, requires organisations to ‘…educate and train anyone, at anytime, and from anyplace’ (2010:149) and as such PSF was likely to have adopted e-learning. Furthermore, our study, through the examination of a corporate setting, responds to Fisher et al’s call for more research of this type (2010:207).

To address and answer our research question we adopted qualitative methods which focused on the collection of primary and secondary data over a four year time period (2008-2011). Our primary data comprised of 43 interviews with members of the HR function, of the senior executive and other employees that held leadership roles in the organisation. These interviewees were selected because they were involved with the creation and delivery of PSF’s talent management policies and programs including Leadership Online. The empirical data collected from our interviews were recorded, transcribed and reviewed by the authors (Roulston, deMarrais, & Lewis, 2003). During this period, one of the authors was able to view and access Leadership Online. This provided a wonderful opportunity to personally experience the technology and explore firsthand its structure and content. Pursuing such a research design enabled the authors to gain a deep understanding of the technology from the perspectives of two key actors- employees from the HR function and other organisational members. The interview data was supplemented and triangulated through consideration and analysis of additional primary and secondary sources deemed informative and relevant (Neuman, 2000). These
documents detailed the operations and structure of PSF, their overall business strategy, organisational websites and external commentary about the organisation and Leadership Online.

Analysis of our data comprised three main stages. In the first stage we read and catalogued our data according to their genre (e.g interviews, website, newspaper articles, commentary, internal and external presentations, observation of technology in use) and by actor (HR function, Leadership Online Consultants, senior managers, CEO) (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002). In the second stage the data and other sources of text was subjected to a detailed and systematic examination and interpretation using content analysis (Berg, 2009). This process involved coding at two levels. At the first level, we applied a lexicon of terms that emanated from the data itself and which related the e-learning and the perceived material outcomes. It was during this process that the constructs of ‘teaching leadership’, ‘investment’ and ‘feel special’ were revealed. At the second level we applied a priori constructs (Eisenhardt, 1989) which were grounded in the existing literature. For example, we identified statements that related to cost efficiencies, flexibility and skills development. The key themes that emerged from this stage of analysis were explored, discarded and further refined (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The role of the researcher’s during this study were substantial as the meanings that individuals attribute to the technology required subjective interpretation and the construction of the findings will be rooted in the person, character, experience and context of the participants and the authors (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2002; Neuman, 2000). In the third stage, we undertook a process of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This involved the systematic and iterative analysis of our coded and ordered data seeking to identify relationships and patterns (Eisenhardt, 1989) and compare the discourses expressed from the two different perspectives.

Findings: Leadership Online and its Material Outcomes

PSF is an organisation with over 500 employees located in offices around Australia and in a number of different business units that provide an array of different client offerings. Seeking to expand and grow, PSF undertakes an array of talent management activities and externally promotes itself as being an organisation where ‘by investing in talent identification, development and recruitment’ competitive advantages can be realised. As part of senior management’s commitment to this area, the organisation, through its HR function and other employees in leadership positions offers an array of talent management policies and programs. One of these specifically targets ‘top talent’. For a two year period this top talent undertakes a number of development programs which includes workshops, skills development, mentoring and opportunities to learn about PSF’s wider operations and business strategies. A further component of this talent management program is to be provided with access to an e-learning portal- Leadership Online. Recognising the role of e-learning for talent, the portal was described internally as: ‘…an online learning portal and e-learning system which… holds information from e-learning courses, pod casts, you can host communities…’ (Leadership Online Consultant), while externally they proclaim that ‘our program combines a range of learning methods including online and face-to-face that delivers the leadership insights you need to get ahead in your career.’ Leadership Online has been recognised as an innovative portal for learning both internally and externally. Internally, the portal is promoted as an ‘Innovation Success Story’ while externally it has been recognized in the 2011 Australia...
Learning Impact Awards. These awards honour innovation and learning impact facilitated through the use of technology and as such Leadership Online could be considered as an innovative example of e-HRM.

We found that employees that are identified as ‘talent’ are provided with access to an e-learning portal, which is perceived to have a number of material outcomes for the individuals, HR and the organisation. In this section we bring together our findings to demonstrate the dynamic and evolutionary nature of the talent discourse and the perceived material outcomes associated with the appropriation of Leadership Online. We do this through the examination of the material outcome discourses expressed by two key categories of actors- the HR function and the organisation. Overall we found that the perceived material outcomes are somewhat contested and influenced by the different actors who are involved in the receipt, delivery and management of this e-learning tool. Despite the absence of an agreed dominant discourse, Leadership Online was seen to have four material outcomes: facilitate flexible learning; skills development; demonstrate investment and make talent feel special and employer branding. Each of our interviewees presented multiple positions about the role of the technology and hence these four material outcomes are not considered to be mutually exclusive. Each of these is now examined.

**Teaching Leadership to Talent**

Guided by the extant literature and the thoughts of Bedwell and Salas that ‘the purpose of any training is to ultimately increase effective performance by influencing employee behaviours, knowledge and attitudes’ (2010:243), we found that the dominant discourse about the material outcomes of Leadership Online centered upon the enhancement and development of an employee’s skills and capabilities. All of our interviewees agreed that the most salient material outcome of this technology was in fact, as the term e-learning implies the facilitation of ‘learning’. In our case, ‘learning’ was believed to be synonymous with development: “It is all about development” (State Managing Partner).

All interviewees advocated for the facilitation and delivery of learning through a number of mechanisms which included the provision of experience, formal and informal learning opportunities. Adopting a 70/20/10 model to learning, where 70% of learning occurs through experience, 20% through informal learning and 10% through formal learning, Leadership Online was seen to be a major component of formal learning: “[Leadership Online] is the e-learning component of your 10% formal learning” (State Managing Partner). This finding was not surprising as the conceptualisation of e-learning was invariably associated with the primary and assumed extant literature discourse.

While the particular importance allocated to this ‘learning’ discourse was consistent within the organisation, both the HR function and the organisation advocated for and emphasized the development of a particular set of skills; leadership skills. Although our interviewees believed that through the appropriation of Leadership Online, the targeted employees would be able to develop an array of behavioral and technical skills in general, they overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of developing leadership skills in particular. As such a significant material outcome centered upon the teaching of leadership skills to talent. The salience of this discourse was expressed in a number of ways by an array of interviewees:

“We need to develop leadership skills for these talented employees…” (National HR Manager).
“It is about developing your leadership, people and communication skills” (State Managing Partner).

“It helps them to develop their leadership competencies” (Leadership Online Consultant).

“Through the program this year you will have the opportunity to do a number of things. Firstly to develop your leadership skills and capabilities” (National HR Partner).

When asked to elaborate upon this strident commitment many interviewees provided further insights into what specific aspects of leadership development were pursued. These additional insights enabled us to enhance our understanding of the different components within Leadership Online and as such we learnt that there were 6 leadership competency areas which they are seeking to develop in their talent through this e-learning portal. They dealt with; the individuals character, client advocacy, focusing on results, interpersonal skills, leading change and personal capability. Within these six areas were 19 additional subset areas. By conducting a 360 degree review of performance, talented employees were able to identify which of these specific leadership skills they were considered strong and those which required further development. Such development could then be facilitated through the appropriation of Leadership Online. This process was described in the following manner: “It is used to establish learning priorities for the individuals and then the technology will push relevant content to the individual. These learning priorities focus on leadership.” It was the development of these leadership capabilities, which HR emphasised within their interviews.

The salience attributed to leadership development was believed to be a direct consequence of the organisations larger talent discourse. Seeking to define talent across the organisation and the different business units, had encouraged the HR function to agree upon leadership potential and performance to be the most sought after skill and capability of an employee identified as ‘talent’. One of the most prominent connections made between leadership as ‘talent’ and Leadership Online was based on the association between the concepts of talent and leadership with talented employees believed to also be future leaders of the organisation: “They [the talent] are being perceived as being an inspiring leader” (National HR Manager).

Although it was agreed that an important material outcome of Leadership Online was the acquisition and development of leadership skills, the ability to ensure that such outcomes were realized was hindered by the absence of assessment. Employees with access to the portal were able to undertake and complete an array of courses however there were no mandatory components or rewards attached. The absence of formal assessment was an intended outcome of the manner in which the portal was structured and a specific desire of the CEO. When asked about the lack of formal assessment one of the business unit HR managers commented that:

“And what we try to stress in this is that it is their journey and the more that they put into it the more they will get out of it and they can do a couple of things, they can just skim through this, because none of this is an assessment centre.”

Recognising that this technology was provided to a targeted set of talented employees rather than all employees had encouraged the HR function and the organisation to advocate for skills development however
the prominent theme in this discourse centered upon the development of a particular set of skills, those were leadership skills. Furthermore the development of such skills was to be facilitated through access to the technology rather than mandatory engagement.

*Learning Anywhere, Anytime*

All of our interviewees, whether from the HR or other organisational functions, agreed that Leadership Online was an e-learning portal which facilitated access to learning anytime, anywhere. Due to its asynchronous nature, as well as the diverse array of technological mechanisms through which it could be accessed and delivered, sought to ensure that talent could exercise control and power over when and where their learning was undertaken. Such flexible access was seen to contribute to learning and development in two ways. The first centered upon the nature of the professional services industry which meant that the day to day business demands of Leadership Online users could restrict the time and energy allocated to their skills development. Rather than attempting to control learning, Leadership Online was structured so that it could be accessed anywhere where there was access to the internet. The learning anytime, anywhere material outcome discourse was prominent throughout all texts, with video reflections within the module stating that Leadership Online is “a holistic leadership development program delivered when and where you want it”. The CEO agreed with this material outcome: “They can access the [Leadership Online] through their laptops and ipads. It is designed for time poor executives and we try to encourage them to engage with learning in their free time.”

Although it was generally considered that talent could and would seek to undertake learning during their ‘down time’ the extent to which this could be realised, presented a challenge. The client facing nature of the work hindered the extent to which talented employees could access the technology and undertake their leadership development: “the challenge that we have, is that we spend quite a bit of money on giving them access to this, which at the end of the day they did not have the time to leverage most of the time…” (National HR Manager). While the effects of workload presented challenges for system access the majority of our interviewees agreed that Leadership Online was about flexibility and gaining access to formal leadership development on demand, which we refer to as learning anywhere, anytime.

*Demonstrate investment and Make Talent Feel Special*

In dramatic contrast to the cost efficiencies discourse which prevails in the extant literature (see Alexander, 2001; Bedwell & Salas, 2010; Bondarouk & Ruël, 2010; Callan & Bowman, 2010; Granger & Levine, 2010; Welsh et al., 2003), we found that for PSF a material outcome of Leadership Online was to demonstrate investment rather than reduce the costs associated with the delivery and provision of learning through e-learning and this was the third articulated discourse. Although this discourse emerged later during interviews, both the HR function and other members of the organisation agreed that the minimization of costs associated with the provision of Leadership Online was not an expected material outcome. Several members of the HR function reflected upon the costs associated with providing talented employees with access to the technology with two of
these stating that these costs were significant: “We spend quite a bit of money on giving them access to this” and “we are throwing so much money behind this.”

Given that Leadership Online was structured to provide learning for some, rather than learning for all, the CEO advocated for this discourse of investment and stated both internally and externally that Leadership Online was “our chance to invest in you.” He further described the costs associated with providing access to the technology as “significant”. Such significant costs were not considered as inhibiting but rather demonstrated the importance that the organisation placed on developing those identified as talent.

There was support for this discourse across the organisation. In particular several Leadership Online Consultant interviewees further reflected upon how this technology was allocated to targeted employees. Several stated that being granted access to Leadership Online enabled senior management to demonstrate exclusive benefits were a consequence of being identified as talent. Again these material outcomes centered upon the demonstration of investment. One Leadership Consultant however did not share such positive interpretations of the technology. Rather than advocating that Leadership Online was about investment, she believed that “the organisation uses it to be able to tick the box to say that they have provided leadership development.”

The salience of the demonstration of investment discourse was further reinforced through the expressed desire to make those employees identified as talent to “feel special”. This was emphasised by the HR function. Seeking to provide additional opportunities and rewards above those experienced by the wider workforce, talented individuals would be provided with access to Leadership Online. This access represented a major investment and also demonstrated the importance of those employees to PSF. On the whole they commented that part of the organisation’s wider talent management programs was to make those identified feel special: “we want to make sure that they are getting at least a little bit of special treatment at the moment, but our longer term plans is to make them feel very special” (National HR Manager). Another fellow member of the national HR function expressed similar sentiments:

It [Leadership Online] is for the individual’s that are identified and actually get to participate in the program. It is about making them feel acknowledged that they are top talent and have been selected to be part of this program. It is about investing in their development and also hoping that in turn with that it is acting as a bit of a retention piece with those individuals.

Wanting to make talent “feel special” featured prominently in the investment discourse. When elaborating on this discourse and the perceived symbolism associated with providing employees with access to Leadership Online, members of the HR function were united. Furthermore they concurred that this material outcome was not only valued by the HR function but also the talented employees themselves: “they all think it is a great idea. They all think that it is wonderful…So yeah it is great to have, and they feel very special to have it… so there is a prestige element of it…” Overall interviewees agreed that the recognition of employees through the process of being identified as talent and thus provided access to Leadership Online resulted in those selected feeling very special and thus more engaged and committed to PSF. This was a significant desired material outcome. While the technology itself clearly did not produce this material outcome, access and appropriation of Leadership Online generated a discourse of privilege.
**Employer Branding**

The ability for PSF to gain external brand promotion was further facilitated through the promotion of Leadership Online as an innovative form of e-learning. Such promotion had been validated through the winning of national awards recognising innovation and education. Such external recognition helped PSF to establish itself as a market leader in the provision of e-learning. The ability to sell the technology to external clients also generated additional revenue for PSF. The importance of selling the technology and the encompassed branding was described by one of the Leadership Online Consultants who proclaimed that this was not only an important material outcome for the technology, but rather the most salient: “The organisation’s focus on [Leadership Online] is more for outside clients, that is they want to sell the technology…” The salience attributed to this discourse however was only advocated by this one interviewee.

This employer branding material outcome was the most contested of the four discourses. Although two interviewees located within the HR function referred to employer branding as a material outcome, we found that this discourse was far more salient among interviewees located outside of the HR function. Playing a greater interactive role with PSF’s clients we believed, encouraged these interviewees to view and evaluate Leadership Online within the wider organisational context. Rather than being viewed primarily as a leadership development tool for talented individuals who are located internally within the organisation, the appropriation of Leadership Online by external clients provided an avenue through which PSF’s service offerings could be promoted.

**Table 2: Material Outcomes of Leadership Online**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Outcome Discourses by Theme</th>
<th>Material Outcomes of Leadership Online expressed by Human Resource employees</th>
<th>Material Outcomes expressed by non-human resource employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Leadership to Talent</td>
<td>• Part of formal learning</td>
<td>• Part of formal learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Facilitates the development of leadership skills and capabilities</td>
<td>• Facilitated the development of leadership skills and capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Seeking to develop 6 specific leadership skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Part of PSF’s larger talent discourse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Anytime, Anywhere</td>
<td>• Facilitates flexible learning</td>
<td>• Facilitates flexible learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can be accessed through an array of mechanisms</td>
<td>• Can be accessed through an array of mechanisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Would like talent to engage with learning in their down time</td>
<td>• Would like talent to engage with learning in their down time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate Investment and Make</td>
<td>• Want to demonstrate</td>
<td>• Want to demonstrate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Talent Feel Special

- Investment in the development of talented employees
  - Part of PSF’s talent management program for top talent
  - Costs associated with providing access to Leadership Online are significant
  - Want to make talented employees feel special

Employer Branding

- Positioning PSF and “employer of choice” among those seeking career development
  - Talent management leader
- Opportunity to promote PSF as market leader in e-learning
  - Leadership Online can be sold to external clients
  - Opportunity for additional revenue

Discussion and conclusions

The main purpose of this paper was to explore the perceived material outcomes of an e-learning portal provided to a targeted set of employees, which were identified as ‘top talent’ in PSF. To achieve this we undertook an analysis of Leadership Online and identified four material outcomes expressed through four discourses which we referred to as: teaching leadership to talent; learning anytime, anywhere; demonstrate investment and make talent feel special; and employer branding. The four discourses shared by our interviewees provide some support for the extant arguments about the material outcomes and benefits of e-learning. First, we found that for PSF, Leadership Online was a technology tool used to deliver materials seeking to provide skills development. Interviewees from both within and outside the human resource function agreed that Leadership Online was part of their formal learning and development. This empirical finding corroborates the work of many who believe that e-learning has the potential to enhance an individual’s knowledge (see Bedwell & Salas, 2010; Bondarouk & Ruël, 2010b; Mayer, 2005). Our case study further support suggestions that e-learning can enhance job-specific competencies. It was believed that for PSF, Leadership Online sought to enhance six specific competencies, all of which focused on leadership. We found that developing leadership competencies was not only deemed important, but the most the salient of material outcomes. The emphasis placed on leadership we believe is further illustrated through PSF’s ‘leadership’ focused branding of the e-learning tool which we have sought to adequately represent by referring to the technology as ‘Leadership Online’. Second, we found that Leadership Online sought to provide talent with the ability to exercise control over where and when learning
was conducted. The ability to undertake flexible, convenient and timeliness of learning was expressed by our interviewees via a learning anytime, anywhere discourse. Although this finding supports many existing studies (see Bedwell & Salas, 2010; Bondarouk & Ruël, 2010; Callan & Bowman, 2010; Granger & Levine, 2010; Mueller & Strohmeier, 2010; Welsh et al., 2003), given the client facing nature of the professional services industry we would like to explore the extent to which the potential for such flexibility is actually realised. The third material outcome, referred to as employer branding was the most contested of the four discourses. Although two interviewees located within the HR function referred to employer branding as a material outcome, we found that this discourse was far more salient among interviewees located outside of the HR function. The importance of employee branding further extends our understanding of the potential benefits of e-learning and further demonstrates the contested nature of e-learning in PSF.

In stark contrast to the cost efficiencies discourses that prevail in the extant literature (see Alexander, 2001; Bedwell & Salas, 2010; Bondarouk & Ruël, 2010; Callan & Bowman, 2010; Granger & Levine, 2010; Welsh et al., 2003), we found that a material outcome of this e-learning portal was not to decrease training costs and achieve cost efficiencies but rather demonstrate their willingness and desire to invest in the development of talent. Furthermore the costs associated with the provision of Leadership Online were believed to be substantial and representative of their larger commitment to the identification and development of talent. We believe that the extent to which this finding diverges from the findings of existing empirical studies, demonstrates that further examination of the motivations and material outcomes of e-learning for a targeted set of employees, rather than e-learning for all employees may provide additional and valued insights into the role of e-HRM and e-learning for talent management and organisations more generally.

By adopting a discourse analytic approach we were able to identify and present a number of perspectives about the potential material outcomes associated with the provision of Leadership Online. By examining the thoughts and beliefs of employees both within and outside the HR function we have demonstrated that the perceived material outcomes of this technology are somewhat contested. Given the contested nature of this phenomenon we found that different actors within PSF have differing opinions and beliefs regarding the material outcomes of Leadership Online. By focusing on one example of the application of e-HRM for talent management, that being e-learning we demonstrated that e-learning can be appropriated to deliver an organisation's talent management program.

For the purposes of this study we have used the term ‘material outcomes’ to refer to the perceived benefits and contributions of e-learning, as expressed through discourse and as such we have privileged the talk and text of our interviewees. While this approach is in keeping with existing discourse studies, we invite others to further enhance our understanding of e-learning through empirical examination of connections between the social and the material aspects of this technology. By adopting such socio-materiality perspectives (see Orlikowski, 2007), we believe, would question the manner in which the formation, structure and appropriation of this technology influences the perceived and realised benefits, and hence material outcomes of e-learning. More specifically we encourage others to question how managers and senior executives use similar e-learning tools to shape the way that employees create strategic processes and make decisions.

Our findings encourage further future areas of research. Given that the insights shared within this paper are based on the opinions and experiences of employees from two key actors groups- the HR function and the wider organisation from a senior leadership perspective, it would be beneficial to examine whether those
talented employees that are provided access to e-learning agree with, contest or present alternative discourses from those presented here. Examination of whether such outcomes are realised would also be fruitful. Such studies could provide further insights into the appropriation of e-learning in corporate settings as our study focused on one organisation based in Australia.

We believe that the study’s findings have implications for HR practitioners as they demonstrate that there are both opportunities and challenges associated with the use of e-HRM and e-learning for talent management and more specifically talent development. Examining the perceived benefits and contributions of e-learning at PSF has led us to appreciate the different ways that an example of e-HRM can be viewed. As such HR practitioners and members of the wider organisation need to acknowledge and plan for the diverse ways those employees will use such technology. As such the HR function should expect the material outcomes of such technology to remain diverse and contested. Although e-learning is being utilized by more and more organisations, our understandings of the way that this technology is being appropriated and whether learning and knowledge is actually advanced is limited. As such we would encourage both HR practitioners and organisations to reflect upon and articulate the material outcomes that they seek to gain from implementing such technology for learning, and question whether more traditional forms of learning may be more effective.

References


