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Authors	Wiblen, Sharna;McDonnell, Anthony
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Connecting 'Talent' Meanings and Multi-level Context: A Discursive Approach

Sharna Wiblen

Sydney Business School, Faculty of Business, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

Faculty of Business
Room 40A.286
The University of Wollongong
Wollongong, NSW, 2522, Australia
+61 2 4221 4541
swiblen@uow.edu.au

Anthony McDonnell

Cork University Business School, University College Cork, Ireland

Department of Management & Marketing
Room #:2.08
Cork University Business School
O'Rahilly Building
University College Cork
College Road, Cork
+353 (0)21 490 3735
anthony.mcdonnell@ucc.ie

Connecting 'Talent' Meanings and Multi-level Context: A Discursive Approach

Through an in-depth, multilevel case study of a professional services firm, this paper illuminates what stakeholders mean when they use the term "talent". The paper underlines how various contextual factors including, workforce composition, ownership structures and individual perceptions influence talent meanings within an organisation. Our analysis of talent phenomena at a multiplicity of levels illustrates that it is not only about the words, phrases, and terms employed when talking about talent that requires examination. There is a need to deliberate on the meanings that underpin the talk because while stakeholders may *talk* the same way they may *mean* different things and that context influences these meanings in differing ways. The paper makes a key theoretical through specific recognition of the importance of thoughtful reflection of how stakeholders discursively construct meanings because "talent" is a concept which requires translation via talk to become meaningful within the material world and these meanings are influenced by context. Thus, we can not infer, that talent meanings radiate within organisations, nor across organisational boundaries, industries or countries because discourses arise and materialise within specific contexts and we must acknowledge that talent discourses can not be removed from the context in which they operate.

Keywords: talent; talent management; social constructionist; discourse analysis; professional services; case study, context.

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Introduction

Since the turn of the century there has been remarkable interest in the "talent" concept as judged by the rise of consultancies offering talent management services and solutions, new talent related positions created and the concomitant rapid rise of academic publications (McDonnell, Collings, Mellahi, & Schuler, 2017; Thunnissen, 2016). Despite scholarship asserting that talent-based assets are linked to financial outcomes and essential for operational and strategic success (Collings, 2014), a degree of convergence within academic debates about how talent can be defined (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016), and significant advances in knowledge about how organisations can operationalise talent measurements (Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014; Thunnissen & Van Arensbergen, 2015), there is much to learn about how "talent" is attributed meaning in practice. In particular, there is a limited understanding of the extent to which internal and external stakeholders have a shared perspective or definition of talent (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013), and what influence context has in informing and shaping how talent is given meaning and operationalised in practice.

Talent definitions and conceptualisations serve as the foundation for talent management practices (Wiblen, 2016) through which organisations seek to capitalise on talent to execute operational requirements and realise strategic ambitions. Dominant meanings (ideas about the concept of talent) inform talent management (objects and practices). Yet talent meanings are often taken for granted and subsumed by the apparent inherent understanding that the reference is to a specific group of individuals included in the organisation's talent pool (McDonnell, Collings, Mellahi and Schuler, 2017). Much scholarship appears to make significant assumptions that everyone knows (and agrees) what we are talking about when we talk about talent. However, in an IJHRM review paper, Thunnissen et al. (2013) noted that only half of

all papers set out a definition of talent. This, in turn, raises several questions; what are the defining characteristics of talented people? To what extent is talent embedded within an individual or can it be a specific role or position that's valuable? Is it possible for all individual employees to be talent or does it have to elitist? Understanding what we mean when we talk about talent is vital because some ideas or characteristics may have greater meaning (and importance) within organisations.

Talent is a culturally and historically situated concept (Maguire, 2004) whereby meanings can, and do change. As societies and social groups negotiate what talent is or is not at that period of time (see Tansley, 2011 for an overview of how talent meanings have changed over time) we assert the imperative need to reflect on talent meaning attribution within the context of actual practice. Cooke (2017) usefully argued that consideration of context is essential in making sense of what is happening in the rich world of reality. As such we consider context – the situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organisational behaviour as well as functional relationships between variables (Johns, 2006:386) – to act as a salient factor in shaping the meaning of talent. Talent is also contextually-specific. Therefore, we need to consider how local (micro) situations may combine with more meso and macro levels of context interpretation and influence (Phillips & Oswick, 2012), for instance how organisational contexts shape the talent definitions (Nijs et al., 2014) adopted by organisations.

Consideration of discursive construction, language use and processes of meaning attribution can considerably aid knowledge generation because talent meanings are not objective, discoverable or commonplace. Instead, "talent" exists only in one's mind as concepts reside only in the realm of the idea (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). Interest in properties of 'naturally occurring' language use by real language users, instead of a study of abstract language systems and invented examples is essential (Wodak & Meyer, 2015) to provide a more complete

understanding of talent which leads us to examine two interconnected research questions, 1) How is 'talent' attributed meaning? 2) What contextual factors influence talent meanings?

This leads us to make the following contributions. Our findings differentiate between multiple forms of conceptualising talent – potential partners (individuals), valued skilled based roles, top talent (individuals) and everyone is talent – relevant to the professional services case organisation, and illustrates how several contextual factors (e.g. industry, ownership structure, personal perceptions, client needs) shape these meanings. Through detailed empirical insights which thus far have been lacking, the paper builds much-needed conceptual clarity about what talent means in practice. People may talk the same way, but our findings illustrate that talk can mean many different things to people which highlights the importance of adopting multiple-level perspectives and exploring what influences these meanings. This contribution is particularly timely given that the impact (or in this paper's case - the influence) of contextual factors on talent conceptualisations has, as noted in this Special Issue's call for papers (Gallardo-Gallardo, Thunnissen, & Scullion, 2017), been largely neglected.

The paper also illustrates the value of an underutilised theoretical and methodological framework (i.e. discourse analysis) to enhance knowledge by illustrating how the study of language, talk and the discursive construction of talent informs all subsequent perspectives of talent management (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005:60) and the ability for organisations to mobilise talent-based assets for financial performance, organisational outcomes and strategy execution. This approach has frequently been applied to studies of organisational change (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Grant & Nyberg, 2014), climate change (Grant & Nyberg, 2014; Wright, Nyberg, & Grant, 2012), leadership (Fairhurst, 2009; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010) and risk (Maguire & Hardy, 2013), but has been negligible in the talent management literature (Wiblen, 2016 being the only paper we are aware that does so). Discourse analysis recognises that language plays a critical role in the process of creating meanings (Hardy, 2004; Phillips &

Hardy, 2002) about what talent 'is'. It also provides a theoretical perspective with the ability to recognise that there can be variation of meaning within a particular discourse (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Sillince, 2007) such that an array of meanings are attributed to the term "talent" creating a situation whereby organisational stakeholders do not necessarily conceptualise talent in the same way. Organisational discourse studies do not replace more traditional approaches that seek to establish cause and effect, rather they are complementary to them. The paper advances theory by nuancing out how context, talent and discourse are interrelated because 'context is part of a text or statement that surrounds a particular word…and influences its meaning…' (Sillince, 2007:365). Our extensive empirical study illustrates that talent can only be examined within a specific context, at a specific point of time, from specific individual perspectives. We cannot infer, furthermore, that talent meanings radiate within organisations, nor across organisational boundaries, industries or countries because discourses arise and materialise within specific contexts and we must acknowledge that talent discourses cannot be removed from the context in which they operate.

The article unfolds as follows. The next section reviews the talent literature outlining the various ways publications talk about and refer to talent. We then provide details of our research design, explaining the value of examining intersubjective meanings about what talent is (or is not) within professional services firms. We also explain our specific multi-level methodology, data collection and stages of data analysis. The findings sections depict how stakeholders talk about talent to establish talent meanings and note how contextual factors influence and shape these. In our concluding sections we nuance out the interrelationship between talent, discourse and context, and reflect on the implications for future research and practice.

Prevailing Talent Discourses

A tranche of literature prescribes how the talent concept has been defined and attributed meaning although we note that much appears as non-empirically derived (Table 1, highlights how academics and practitioners alike discursively construct 'talent'). Considerations of how others talk and write about talent and the explicit recognition of existing talent definitions are important as they lay the foundation for the examination of talent meanings within organisational boundaries. Talent management practices, while outside the scope of this paper, are performed within the context of *discourses* (original emphasis) - structured collections of texts and discursive practices (Maguire & Hardy, 2013; Nelson Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004). Prevailing discourses also influence which discursive constructions are "ruled in" and viewed as normal, standard and acceptable (Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas, & Davies, 2004). For each definition proposed, authors seek to shape talent conversations by offering their individual or team-based perspective of what the term talent means to them or to prescribe how we can or should think about talent. In so doing, the authors are seeking to have their ideas about talent "ruled in" and adopted by others within academia and practice. On the other hand, prevailing discourses also provide some insights into which talent meanings are "ruled out", or framed as less legitimate (Hall, 2001; Heracleous, 2006; Phillips et al., 2004) within broader talent conversations. Rather than seeking to reconcile definitional debates, the objective of this section is to outline the dominant talent themes in the extant literature - individuals; skills and capabilities; pivotal roles and positions; and inclusive perspectives whereby everyone is talent (Wiblen, 2016; Wiblen, Dery, & Grant, 2012; Wiblen, Grant, & Dery, 2010). There are numerous ways that organisations, and the stakeholders within, can talk about talent. Discourses are, however, privy to ongoing processes of negotiation and are never able to determine social reality fully (Maguire & Hardy, 2013). Therefore, organisations and the stakeholders within can call upon parallel discourses when attributing meaning to talent and these are likely to evolve. What now follows is an overview of the most common perspectives.

Insert Table 1 about here

The pervasiveness of exclusive approaches (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell et al., 2017) has led to the dominance of a discourse that privileges certain "individuals" over others and as such can be termed the *individuals perspective*. This approach assumes that talent attributes are embedded within, and inherent to individuals where some employees are of greater value than others. Firmly rooted in Western countries, this invariably leads to the dominance of individualistic definitions whereby talent is framed in terms of an above-average individual who can perform their ability in a given performance domain (Gagné, 2004; Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013; Nijs et al., 2014; Tansley, 2011). The disproportionate allocation of resources towards these individuals is considered legitimate (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Lepak & Snell, 2002) and arises after the processes of workforce differentiation. Whether referred to as "high potentials", "rising stars", "high performers" (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001; Stahl et al., 2007) talent discourses assume (either explicitly or implicitly) that these individuals contribute disproportionately to operational and strategic outcomes.

A second, but less prominent discourse, frames talent as a *set of particular skills and capabilities* deemed critical to operational processes, strategic direction and organisational performance (Wiblen et al., 2012; Wiblen et al., 2010). This is similar to the previous perspective in that some individuals are more prized than others, but here they are deemed valuable because of the skills and capabilities they possess. In other words, talent subjects (the individuals) possess unique attributes, with specific "skills/capabilities" framed as a valuable defining characteristic. This meaning may be more prevalent in specific organisational contexts. For example, given the inherent value of differentiated technical skills in attaining

clients and generating revenue this perspective may be especially prevalent in knowledge-based industries (Lepak & Snell, 1999) or client-facing organisations. Data scientists appear to be viewed as increasingly important across many businesses. These are viewed as valuable because of the skills and capabilities (e.g. coding, analytics and interpretation skills) they possess, not because of them, the individual. However, the context within which these skills and capabilities are deemed valuable are subject to change as ten years ago there was less prominent discourse about such skillsets and in ten years they may also be less critical – the world and commercial competition may move on (or have been automated and replaced by technology).

The *pivotal role and positions* conceptualisation asserts that particular functions and roles, rather than individual or specific skills and capabilities, are what are critical to strategic success (e.g. Boudreau, 2003). Conducting a systematic analysis of operational and strategic processes permits informed identification of the positions which warrant the most investment. Stakeholders may utilise Huselid, Beatty, and Becker (2005) "A positions" language as a means to encourage organisations to transition beyond the current individualistic perspectives towards identifying strategically critical jobs that are disproportionately crucial to the strategy. In other words, while all roles are operational, not all roles are strategic, and organisational context will impact on what is and is not. Individualistic and position-based discourses are interrelated where only valuable individuals in specific positions are classifiable as talent (Becker and Huselid, 2006). Valuable and strategic positions are frequently inferred as those where small incremental improvements in quality and quantity result in above-average returns (for example see Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Mellahi & Collings, 2010).

Finally, a less prevalent framing of talent is the "*everybody is talent*" perspective which actively refutes the foundational workforce differentiation and exclusive assumptions. Advocates argue that talent is inherent within every individual. Gallardo-Gallardo and

Thunnissen (2016) review found that researchers have devoted limited attention to this perspective. Although these talent meanings exist, such discourses and talent concepts tend to be largely "ruled out", and marginalised (Hall, 2001; Heracleous, 2006; Phillips et al., 2004) given that workforce differentiation is the foundation of talent management "practice" (Wiblen, 2018).

Other conceptualisations of talent exist, but they tend to bear many similarities to the approaches above. Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) talk about talent in terms of "philosophies" (i.e. exclusive and stable; exclusive and developable; inclusive and stable; inclusive and developable) – the fundamental assumptions and beliefs about the nature, value, and instrumentality of talent that are held by a firm's decision-makers (2014:192) – and how these influence talent meanings. This approach implicitly recognises that different perspectives will exist and may vary by organisational stakeholder. Similarly, Thunnissen, Boselie, and Fruytier (2013a) note that "talent is not absolute; it is relative and subjective". The importance of context in talent conceptualisations are implicitly emphasised in that multiple meanings and definitions may exist in practice both across and within organisations.

The impact of contextual factors including the role of actors within specific organisational contexts, however, remains largely neglected with Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen (2016:40) claiming that the "…relevance of the organisational configuration for [talent management] is hardly a subject in empirical [talent management] research". Despite recent recognition of that specific national factors influence talent management practices (Vaiman, Collings, & Scullion, 2017; Vaiman, Sparrow, Schuler, & Collings, 2018a, 2018b), we can also reflect on a broader array of contextual factors. This can involve micro (individual context), meso (localised/Unit context) and macro (organisational context) and meta (societal, institutional and phenomenological context) levels (Grant & Marshak, 2011). For example, country-level factors, industry, ownership structure and strategies, organisational politics are

all few potential influencers. A more comprehensive understanding of talent as a context-specific concept and consideration of how context is interpreted from different disciplinary perspectives (Cooke, 2017) is essential to transitioning towards an enhanced and empirically informed understanding. The many definitions and typologies currently offered as suggestions of what individuals and organisations could mean when they talk about talent complicate, rather than clarifies our understanding of what talent "is". As such, we are to some degree in a state of "conceptual obscurity" (Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013:305) although there are inferences by many that "talent as an underlying construct is taken for granted and thus not defined explicitly" (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013:290). We propose that conversations about talent need to transition from the hypothetical to consideration of what happens in the world of practice, as well as an examination of "who is considered talent and why" (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013:290) because empirically informed insights about the meanings appropriated and adopted within and by organisations remain mostly elusive.

Research Design

Theorising about the talent concepts requires an understanding of the discursive processes related to how certain individuals, skills and capabilities, pivotal roles and positions and/or everyone, come to be categorised and framed as "talent" within organisational contexts. Given that talent is a socially constructed concept we assert that talent meanings are subjective and thus there is significant value in examining intersubjective meanings embedded in social life (Gibbons, 1987).

Research Context

Our multi-level qualitative case study occurs within the context of one organisation 'PSF' (a pseudonym) – the Australian subsidiary of a multinational professional services firm.

PSF was purposefully selected because professional services firms are information-rich cases (Patton, 1990) which afford many insights into the complexity of talent management; macro talent management discourses assert an inherent relationship between 'talent' and operational and competitive advantage for professional services firms and other organisations operating in the context of knowledge-based industries. Without talent, knowledge-based organisations are unable to achieve or sustain a competitive advantage (Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Wellins & Schweyer, 2007) and because PSF sells the knowledge of it's internal 'talent', rather than a material/tangible product, to its clients; we agree with academic colleagues before us that knowledge-based organisations need to manage the internal talent pool proactively (see McDonnell, Lamare, Gunnigle, & Lavelle, 2010; Tymon Jr, Stumpf, & Doh, 2010). Knowledge-intensive organisations such as PSF have also been seen as more likely to manage their internal talent pools and wider workforce via formalised talent management practices (McDonnell et al., 2010) because individual professionals are the carriers, interpreters and appliers of knowledge in professional services firms (Groysberg & Lee, 2009; Malhotra, Smets, & Morris, 2016).

At the time the study commenced PSF employed over 5000 and branded itself as the largest independent management consultancy firm in Australia. It sustains a partnership ownership structure incorporating two levels of seniority; equity and non-equity partner. Revenue and equity generated by the organisation are allocated amongst equity partners as these senior executives are simultaneous 'employees' and 'owners'. Non-equity partners are considered senior leaders and future owners. Non-equity performance is recognised and rewarded via salaries and bonuses rather than equity. Professional services firms, while privy to various external legal factors, operate with hierarchical levels of employee seniority with employees categorised as Graduates, Associates, Senior Associates, or Partner. Employees generally compete to move up the ranks towards Partner, whereby they transition towards a

financial stake in the business and share in the profits (Malhotra et al., 2016), or they leave and join another organisation. There is controlled entry into the Partnership which directly influences firm size as Associates are organised into teams where they work for a specific Partner. PSF's workforce is also separated into "corporate" or "business unit" (herein referred to as Units) based roles. PSF's six Units are organised into different specialities and offer clients a distinct set of value propositions. Each Unit differs in relation to the: employee numbers, Partner numbers, office locations and specific skills and capabilities valued internally. PSF's external communications and competitive marketing promoted the organisation as a leader in HRM, talent management and human capital practices indicating that PSF proactively invested in talent. Internally the widely promoted five-year strategic plan (2010-2015), operational at the time of this study, sought to increase the size and operating revenue significantly and formalise talent management as a strategically critical factor.

We explored multiple discourses, from several operational contexts from multi-level perspectives within PSF. Specifically, we present four embedded subunits of PSF[1] – Corporate, FinCo, KnowCo and TaxCo. We purposefully include the atypical case (Stake, 2006) of TaxCo because of the alternative talent discourses operational within this context.

Insert Table 2 about here

Data Collection and Analysis

79 semi-structured were conducted with individuals who were either HR executives, members of the senior executive team, or executives tasked explicitly with recruiting, identifying or developing talent. Although guided by an interview schedule there was flexibility and

[1] While Table 2 and 3 provide readers with an overview of our embedded units of analysis additional specifics about our case study organisation, the six Units, and our interview sample are omitted to ensure anonymity.

opportunities for reflective thoughts. This was paramount because the study sought to generate informed and deliberate personal perspectives about what "talent" meant personally, professionally, within the context of the role, their particular operational context (i.e. corporate headquarters or a business unit) and the organisation overall. If executives sought clarification of what talent meant, they were directed to share their opinions and reflect on their perspectives. In other words, they were free to interpret the term as they saw fit. Specific interview questions included: Could you please describe what the word 'talent' means to you? Could you please describe what you think 'talent' means for the organisation? Do you think people play an important role in the organisation? What is your understanding of the organisation, in particular, its current and future business strategies? Both theoretical (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and snowball sampling (Minichiello, 1990) were utilised to recruit interviews. These ranged from 23 to 94 minutes in duration and were recorded, transcribed, reviewed and then analysed (Roulston, deMarrais, & Lewis, 2003). These were supplemented with internal and publicly available texts (including annual reports, videos, corporate website, industry presentations, news reports) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the situated dynamics of the organisation and the broader operational and industry-specific context within which executives talked about talent. This is important because talent discourses are shaped and constrained by the context in which they operate.

The data analysis process was guided by previous discourse analytic studies (e.g. Maguire, 2004; Maguire and Phillips, 2008; Maguire and Hardy, 2013). The first stage involved the development of a discursive event history database (Maguire, 2004) that captured who said what, when and data genre, i.e. transcripts, notes, documents (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). The second stage involved systematic examination and interpretation using content analysis (Berg, 2009) which involved identifying key discursive themes. For example, we identified statements relating to the definitions of talent with interest in the language used to

construct meaning and its associated reasoning. Emerging concepts were grouped into first-order codes (Maguire, 2004; Maguire & Phillips, 2008). The language employed by interviewees was maintained, with most appropriately expressed via a simple descriptive phrase (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Key themes were then explored, discarded and further refined (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, first order codes not pertaining explicitly to the discursive strategies used to legitimatise the importance of talent management; the language used to construct the meaning of talent; or the talent subject privy to talent identification and development practices were discarded owing to their lack of relevance to talent conceptualisations. Data codes were then refined into discursive themes (Berg, 2009; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) in line with our research questions. Discursive themes included *a priori* constructs (Eisenhardt, 1989) identifiable in the extant literature (individuals, skills and capabilities, pivotal roles and positions and everyone is talent), as well as a lexicon of terms (including "potential partner") emanating from the data.

The third stage involved devising narratives by collating the reflective opinions of interviewees according to the operational context (corporate or the business unit of FinCo, KnowCo and TaxCo) of the embedded units of analysis. Each "meaning" presented highlights the potential influence of individual perspectives, organisational and local contexts and past experiences (Anonymised, 2012) on talent. The final stage involved axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first order data were analysed further with the focus on identifying relationships and emerging patterns (Eisenhardt, 1989) regarding the talk about "talent". This involved a systematic, abductive (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Vaara & Monin, 2008) and iterative analytical process incorporating continuous movement between the coding of the data, emerging themes, existing theory and the research question until identifying aggregate discourses. This was triangulated within and across sources and business units to establish discrete aggregate discourses which, when combined, highlighted the opinions and experiences

of stakeholders at a multiplicity of levels and perspectives. Seeking to ascertain the context in which individual phrases and themes were situated (Hardy & Thomas, 2013), all texts were analysed systematically again. From this, it was inferred that the lexicon phrase of 'potential to be partner' dominated internal stakeholder talk about talent with references to 'valued skills and capabilities' situated within discussions about the defining attributes of a 'potential partner'. The data were examined further to consider whether defined and agreed upon talent concepts were operational within the case context. This stage identified differing perspectives of the defining attributes required within the dominant talent concept. Considering the differences, we examined the talent concept narratives again to seek an understanding of the various factors which influence talent meanings. We analysed the data to garner insights into the reason's called upon to explain and account for individual (micro-level discourses), Unit (meso-level discourses) and Organisation-wide (Macro-level discourses) talent meanings. Certain contextually-based factors (such as partnership ownership model, the inherent relationship between partners and operating revenue and profit) were frequently framed to explain why the 'potential partner' talent meaning was important within PSF. Other contextual factors (such as the outcome of the performance management process and client demand) were used to justify the 'top talent' and 'valued skills-based role' talent meanings.

Findings

Contextualising the Importance of Talent to PSF

PSF believed that the effective management of talent was essential because the organisation wanted to "win" the war for talent. References to this winning sentiment, as indicated by the phrase 'We want to win our unfair share of talent' were frequently called upon by executives including the CEO to legitimatise the proactive management of key individuals.

Many executives asserted that the defining characteristics of the professional services

industry compounded and reinforced the need to effectively manage the talent supply chain. The inherent relationship between PSF's workforce, client-facing structure and financial and operational performance ensured that talent management was a "priority". The knowledge and experience of its employees - and by direct consequence - its talent, underpinned the organisational value proposition, client services and ability to generate revenue.

The need to effectively manage talent to pursue and realise the organisation's strategy was the final discursive strategy employed to justify talent management. The launch of the '2010 - 2015 Strategic Plan' urged executives to manage talented individuals in each business unit proactively. The strategic ambitions focused on "revenue generation" and "growth", and it was the explicit desire of the CEO to 'grow' PSF regarding revenue and size. Such positive talent management attitudes were not, however, unilaterally accepted across the organisation (see Table 3), with evidence of the differing internal contexts influencing how key stakeholders defined talent concepts.

Insert Table 3 about here

Despite considerable talk about talent, PSF did not have an organisation-wide approach or a pre-established and mandated definition. Executives conceded that the meanings attributed to talent, and more specifically the lexicon phrase of a "potential partner" were subjected to ongoing processes of negotiation with numerous interpretations, rather than a single understanding of what a "potential partner" looked like in the idealised sense. The variation pertained not so much to differences between individuals, but rather business units that had sought to adapt their conceptualisation of talent to the Unit's specific context.

Multiple Discourses about the Meaning of Talent

Talent Meanings: The Corporate Headquarters' (CHQ) Perspective

"Talent" within the context of CHQ was synonymous with "potential partner", taken as high performing individuals who illustrate the capacity for successful promotion to non-equity partner within a certain period (generally two years). "Talent", therefore, was framed as a concept embedded within specific individuals. Underpinning this discourse were descriptions of valuable individuals possessing an ability to make significant contributions to the organisation and its operational performance. Framed either within the context of current or future strategic ambitions, talent subjects needed to be evaluated as 'high potentials', whereby the individual could effectively illustrate their potential to contribute to PSF's competitive positioning. A partnership model where equity partners are employees and owners ensured that individuals deemed to be indicative of talent and promotable to partner were viewed as both 'talent' and 'future owners' of PSF.

This talent concept appeared as an inherent by-product of PSF's partnership ownership structure.

> One is that the organisation [PSF] and the way that it is structured…it almost seems that the higher you climb up the ladder the closer you get to partnership they sort of automatically become talent…it is a pyramid structure... (Corporate HR executive)

There was, however, ambiguity about the core attributes, skills and capabilities required to be identified as a talent subject. This ambiguity arose from PSF's organisational context whereby there was no pre-determined definition. Rather, senior executives within each of PSF's Units could enact their perceptions of talent. Furthermore, Unit's rather than CHQ's HR function or Senior Executive team could establish the defining characteristics of a talented individual as per their specific requirements.

This cohort of stakeholders advocated unanimously for the prioritisation of "financial" skills and capabilities. Executives emphasised the need for individuals to advise equity-partners of the service offerings which would form the basis for a profitable client-building revenue

stream. Appropriation of the term talent and more specifically a potential partner was synonymous with individuals that could articulate the ability to "sell" knowledge-based services to clients, and by consequence generate revenue. As a Corporate HR executive explained: '[Talent] have to sell themselves… they've got to put together a [business case] document which is all about justifying how they are going to bring revenue into the firm'. The salience of financial skills and capabilities were attributed to PSF's ownership model and the direct relationship between revenue generation, partnership and ownership, whereby "potential partners" seek to attain not only promotion to (non-equity) partner but also a future financial stake in the business.

"Leadership" skills were also framed as valuable within the dominant potential partner talent concept because executives equated these individuals as future leaders. While the default relationship between leadership and the corporate talent concept were expressed via statements like, 'When we are talking about talent we are really talking about our top talent... who will be future leaders of the firm' (Corporate Partner) others, referred to an internal contextual factor in the form of *senior management intent* and believed that the emphasis on leadership was in the interest of the CEO and Senior Executive team: 'That is a reflection of our leadership and our CEO in that he is very clear...his focus in this firm is around leaders, defining leadership and building' (Corporate Senior Recruiting executive).

Despite framing both financial and leadership skills as attributes with the corporate talent concept, Executives admitted that these were not, in practice, allocated equal weight during talent identification. Executives subjectively decided the emphasis placed on each skill/ However, determination of talent status was not possible without illustration of revenue generation, while there was a perception that leadership skills could be developed post promotion.

Talent Meanings: The FinCo Perspective

FinCo Executives similarly asserted the importance of talent, noting that talent management was 'core' to both the Unit's and PSF's operations, value proposition and 'part of what we [PSF] do'. There was widespread agreement with CHQ colleagues that investing in individuals who illustrated the potential to be promoted to the role of partner was a strategic imperative. The disproportionate allocation of resources to "potential partners" was legitimate due to the inherent relationship between these talent subjects and the operational and financial outcomes of both FinCo and PSF. FinCo executives noted that their Unit's understanding of talent was influenced by the ownership structure of PSF and the assumption that *these* talent subjects were and will continue to be the focus of the organisation because 'future partners represented future owners'.

Despite public talk about potential partners, this term clearly meant different things to different stakeholders. The absence of a pre-established and well-defined FinCo talent concept presented a context whereby senior executive could enact agency over the skills and capabilities required of individuals to be identified and included into the talent pool. When asked to share personal perspectives, many senior executives, including those responsible for identifying potential partners, paused to deliberate.

Talk about the defining attributes of a potential partner in FinCo appeared as strongly focusing on financial attributes. The ability to evidence, via a written "business case" was the core component of this dominant talent concept. The ability to contribute to the Unit financially via the creation of a new service offering which was forecasted to generate additional revenue was key. Financial skills, therefore, were the core component of FinCo's meaning of talent. The salience of financial capabilities was justified using the mainstream language associated with being in the professional services industry and the requirement for FinCo to operate in a competitive environment where 'everything is driven by utilisation and dollars' (FinCo Senior

HR executive). Thus, industry context was pivotal.

Interestingly, FinCo's HR executives inferred that the emphasis attributed to financial skills arose not only from broader operational factors (professional services industry, partnership ownership model, and client-facing) but also from specific internal influences. HR executives frequently professed the presence of a natural predisposition or gift for "numbers", "financials" and "data" within the Unit's workforce and that the personal interest in "numbers" influenced talent definitions within this context:

> There is quite a bit of focus on metrics in the firm because they are accountants and they tend to like the numbers. Some partners only consider financial metrics…They are not interested in so called people metrics. (FinCo Senior HR executive)

Further talent criteria were, however, less clear. Senior HR Executives noted that evaluation criteria beyond the "financial" dimension were privy to senior executives agency. This led to remarkable differences in the perceived value of people and behavioural-based skills and capabilities. While some deemed interpersonal skills essential to succeed in the role of partner, post-admission into the partnership, other senior executives disagreed. Personal perspectives, therefore, influenced how senior executives framed "what" was core to both individual and Unit talent conceptualisations.

The inability to attribute meaning to talent in terms other than "financial performance" was viewed as overly challenging because of the "diverse" array of services offered to clients. Consequently, the requisite skills and capabilities and previous work history required of employees varied significantly despite their focus on the provision of 'accounting and financial' based services. Notably, there were no intentional efforts to address this, with FinCo executives asserting its appropriateness and effectiveness.

Talent Meanings: The KnowCo Perspective

All KnowCo executives declared that "talent" was vital and a "massive focus". KnowCo's policies and practices were described as more sophisticated and 'structured' than other Units with several executives framing a standardised definition of talent as core to effective talent management practice. Although agreeing with CHQ and FinCo counterparts that talent referred to "potential partners" KnowCo executives felt that the presence of a well-defined talent concept ensured 'we have a one-size-fits-all approach to partnership…' and therefore enabled consistency of "what" was valued. The meaning of talent was not privy to iterative processes of negotiation because KnowCo's senior executives had devised a commonality consisting of three main attributes of evaluation: financial performance, the ability to develop external business and leadership skills. Furthermore, the meaning of talent was informed by and aligned to KnowCo's specific operational needs, and strategic requirements while again being related to the mainstream partnership model language.

Individuals were required to illustrate their ability to contribute to KnowCo and PSF via the generation of revenue. Potential partners, however, were further evaluated on the ability to generate revenue through 'the creation of additional business'. This involved documenting tactics for client engagement within the current and future operational context. The emphasis attributed to "financial" skills and capabilities was again framed as legitimate and an integral aspect of professional services where operational revenue is generated via the engagement and retention of clients. This category of skills and capabilities were further legitimated through references to PSF's '2015 Strategic Plan' which articulated the organisations' ambitions for revenue expansion.

"Leadership" was the third component. Its importance arose from discussions about the need for "talent" to take on leadership positions upon promotion to partner. Once promoted and admitted to PSF's partnership, "potential partners" were tasked with leading a team. The intention, therefore, was to evaluate individuals formally by deliberating upon the likelihood

of them 'being an inspiring leader?' (KnowCo HR executive), and '… an amazing people leader' (KnowCo Senior partner).

While KnowCo confirmed the dominance of the potential partner concept at PSF we found evidence of two distinct talent concepts operating. Discursive practices about the importance of talent retention allowed executives to talk about the ability for certain individuals to be classified as "talent" because they possessed specific or technical skills and capabilities deemed valuable within the context of KnowCo's operations:

> …because there are skills that you know that you need to retain to ensure that you have a sustainable business. So once you have actually defined those you…would basically want to ensure that we retain them (Senior KnowCo HR executive).

This talent concept was founded on valued skill based roles that contained specialised skills that were highly valuable to clients and the Unit's competitive positioning. Defining talent in this way, allowed KnowCo executives to negotiate a more fluid understanding of the skills and capabilities deemed valuable that compliment, and could, in practice, circumvent the potentially limited practical application of the Unit's well-defined potential partner talent concept. A secondary talent concept provided the framework to encourage and permit deliberate conversations about "what" was talent within the context of wider operational boundaries. The valued skills based roles conversations occurred in parallel to the accepted and normalised "potential partner" discussions allowing both junior and senior individual's (not just pre-partners) to be formally allocated "talent" status.

This secondary concept was heavily influenced by the external, rather than internal, context because perceptions about the skills and capabilities deemed valuable within specific "roles" and "positions" was determined by clients and the marketplace. Clients may only access these specific skills by engaging a specific team within the Unit. This meaning of talent, interestingly, was subjected to client-based and senior executive agency with clients acting as stakeholders in the processes of negotiating who and what is talent. Despite the operation of

this client-demanded “skills-based” concept in parallel to the dominant potential partner, all KnowCo executives agreed that the two, in practice, were not considered equally important. While potential partner talent subjects would remain core to talent meanings and a strategic imperative, an individual deemed “talent” based on the opinions of external clients was less so and therefore more malleable with client-based stakeholder’s perceptions influencing the value of these individuals. That is, changes in client’s perspectives bore a direct relationship on the individual’s talent status and thus brings an interesting macro contextual factor into play in how talent is given meaning.

Talent Meanings: The TaxCo Perspective

TaxCo executives actively and deliberately refuted assertions about the importance of talent indicating that talent management was neither a priority nor strategic imperative. The notable absence of senior executives’ commitment resulted in a context where despite ‘some progress h[aving] been made’ by the Unit’s HR team, their non-HR counterparts were not invested in, nor committed to, talent management. TaxCo executives declared that “talent” did not pervade their everyday language, nor was the term used to refer to any policies or practices. This appeared as intentional, deliberate and legitimate and a direct consequence of TaxCo’s employees deriving from legal backgrounds. These educational experiences, when considered in the context of the Unit’s value proposition was founded upon the ability to interpret and adhere to legislative and government requirements. It provided a context for an antagonistic relationship with talent management which, by design, emphasised workforce differentiation. In direct opposition to their CHQ, FinCo and KnowCo counterparts, TaxCo executives prioritised the notions of outcome equity, procedural fairness and compliance and adherence to formalised operational and legislative rules and frameworks.

The situational imperatives of TaxCo became political with executives resisting the

dominant perspective whereby talent was strongly equated to the potential to make partner, instead advocating the inclusive approach whereby "everybody is talent". In seeking to reaffirm the Unit's position when explicitly asked about the meaning, a senior HR executive declared: 'We do consider that all of our people are talent. We really do. We do hire people that are best in class and who are high flying, high achieving individuals'. Another noted '[the term talent] can be used for all of your people and all of the people practices that you have'.

Notwithstanding the convincing and consistent rhetoric that TaxCo's entire workforce was "talent" a few executives hesitantly conceded that some employees, in practice, were of greater value than others. This in part owed to TaxCo being required to nominate individuals to participate in PSF's organisation-wide talent development programme which meant discussions took place around "top talent" and "rising stars". In contrast to CHQ, FinCo and KnowCo counterparts which invested significant resources to deliberately identify high performing and high potential individual's (referred to as top talent) to participate in PSF's potential partner development program, TaxCo viewed the process as an operational requirement, rather than a strategic imperative. The defining attributes of such individuals beyond the traditionally accepted "high performer" post-PSF's annual organisation-wide performance management practice was privy to processes of negotiation with evidence of limited engagement, or intentional deliberation, with the core components of this exclusive talent concept.

TaxCo executives remained incessant throughout the study that, within their Unit context, the term "talent" did not feature. The term invoked strong negative connotations as it directly contradicted TaxCo's ideals of outcome equity and procedural fairness. TaxCo senior and HR executives were cognisant that discussions about talent and the requirement for workforce differentiation would directly contradict their value proposition and the requirement

for the Unit to advise clients on how to interpret and consistently abide by legislative and compliance frameworks.

Discussion and conclusions

By illustrating that consideration of discourse and language is vital to the study of "how" organisations attribute meaning to "talent", our paper contributes to an understanding of the intersection between context and talent meanings. At the onset of our paper, we posed two interrelated research questions about how talent is attributed meaning? and purposeful reflection of how contextual factors influence the talent meanings identified? Examining a professional services firm for whom "talent" is an essential priority because of the direct relationship between talent, client-services and revenue, illustrates that understanding what talent means is complex and subject to debate not only within the Academy but also within the organisational boundaries of a single case. More specifically, this research illuminates that talent discourses are embedded within specific micro, meso, macro and meta contexts because talent is a socially constructed concept which cannot be de-contextualised.

The talent meanings operating within PSF were diverse and subject to ongoing negotiation. Our analysis identified multiple talent discourses operating within the four meso-level contexts. Consequently, convergence of thought amongst individuals and Units was not unanimously agreed. Figure 1 illustrates how the multi-level examination of the discursive construction of meanings within meso contexts give rise to multiple talent discourses with both exclusive and inclusive perspectives (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell et al., 2017; Silzer & Dowell, 2010); an emphasis on subject frameworks (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013); as well as components of the individuals, skills and capabilities, pivotal roles and positions and everybody is talent (Wiblen, 2016; Wiblen et al., 2012; Wiblen et al., 2010) conceptualisations found within this organisation.

Rather than Unit discourses being governed by prevailing discourses heralding the automatic prioritisation of talent by professional service firms and knowledge-based industries, and the macro relationship between 'partners' and 'revenue' because of the organisation's partnership structure, our analysis suggested some agency in talent meanings. Within meso contexts, we found that while CHQ, FinCo and KnowCo enacted the dominant 'potential to be partner' discourse, there were small, but meaningful differences in the defining characteristics. While stakeholders within these Unit's talked about talent in similar ways, different images of what a 'potential partner' looked like in the idealised sense were evident. Moreover, in parallel to the dominant potential partner was the 'valued skills-based roles' that operated in KnowCo whereby specific roles were valuable because of external client and commercial demands.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The differences within our case organisation was especially evident in the atypical Unit - TaxCo. Here, we witnessed a fascinating illustration of actively resisting the historically and contextually-specific exclusive 'potential partner' discourse. Rather than accepting meta 'importance of talent management' and value of 'workforce differentiation' TaxCo advocated for outcomes equity, procedural fairness and compliance which manifested in the 'everyone is talent' discourse dominating talent meanings. Talk about talent did not pervade internal conversations, with senior stakeholders actively resisting the mandated requirement to differentiate 'top talent' during PSF's organisation-wide performance management process. The discursive practices encasing talent within four embedded units shows how "talent" is a social construct. The findings also illustrate the pivotal role language (Hardy, 2004; Phillips & Hardy, 2002) plays in garnering an empirically-informed understanding of talent within real-world contexts because meanings are established through processes of negotiation that are influenced by multiple stakeholders each with potentially differing views and interests (Grant

& Marshak, 2011; Hardy et al., 2005). Caution is therefore required in assuming that shared understandings of "talent" exist.

In addressing the second research question, the findings point to talent meanings being contextually-specific with meta, macro, meso and micro factors influencing how particular meanings come to be 'ruled in', with others marginalised. Seeking to understand both the 'how' of talent meanings and the 'why' of these meanings, we were interested in the properties of naturally occurring language use by real language users (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Consideration of the role of meta, macro, meso and micro contexts on language use permits illustration of how numerous context-based reasons were called upon to justify both dominant and parallel talent discourses. Figure 2 illustrates some degree of convergence of perspectives on the role of the partnership ownership model, the relationship between partners and revenue and organisational size, and that talent underpins client-services. CHQ, KnowCo and FinCo, offered additional and alternative reasons why potential partners were talent. Notably, CEO perceptions about the importance of leadership development featured prominently in CHQ justifications, affording evidence that certain micro-based factors (stakeholder voices) are influential in some contexts more than others. Despite clarity on the dominant exclusive potential partner discourse being a direct and automatic consequence of the partnership model in CHQ and FinCo, this talent concept was notably absent in TaxCo. There was no acknowledgment of the role of this contextual factor, nor did our data analysis illustrate any recognition of the importance of identifying potential partners. Rather TaxCo continually professed that notions of equity and fairness underpinned commercial activities and internal operations. Recognising that the word "talent" is not value-free because it implies inequity, frameworks for deliberate differentiation and process of discrimination to differentiate and identify individuals of greater value in line with an exclusive talent concept (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Stahl et al., 2012; Thunnissen et al., 2013a), was viewed by TaxCo as contradicting

its value proposition. TaxCo's organisational context and business needs, its workforce, clients and strategy were viewed distinctly to PSF, and thus these influenced the talent meaning which was all-encompassing. This can be linked to ethical concerns surrounding exclusive approaches (Swailes, 2013). If individuals not deemed to be talent (i.e. the special few) feel that their opportunities to advance and grow are inhibited by this lack of "status" then there is arguably an ethical issue due to some employees being harmed (Haslam, 2006).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Context influences talent meanings (Cooke, 2017; Johns, 2006) regardless of how they are conceived (e.g. "top talent", "everybody is talent"). We propose that adoption and proliferation of context-based reasoning are neither inherent nor stable and that talent discourses can not be de-contextualised from the multi-level context in which they operate. Following on, it is challenging to comprehend talent management without a more nuanced appreciation of how talent is attributed meaning at a multiplicity of levels as stakeholders operate as discrete discursive agents rather than unified actors (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013b).

By recognising the complexity, this paper makes three primary contributions. First, our study adds to talent management scholarship and particularly to the literature on talent by exploring the role of contextual factors in shaping how actors discursively construct talent meanings. This in-depth case illustrates that talent meanings are not objective, and therefore, examining language processes become vital in understanding how particular meanings emerge, are ruled-in and are materialised in organising practices. An empirical examination of talent meanings within multi-levels of real-life context – a professional services firm - illustrates how dominant talent discourses, often prioritise exclusive and subject perspectives which assert that

'talent' resides within specific individuals. At the same time, we have shown that talent discourses are not mutually exclusive, with stakeholders able to draw on inclusive ideals, whereby everybody is talent, in constructing alternative and parallel talent discourses. Hence, debates about talent being exclusive *or* inclusive are overly simplistic. This study established talent as a social discursive construction with TaxCo's inclusive everybody is talent perspective not articulated in other PSF meso-level contexts. Similarly, PSF's dominant 'potential partner' appeared unable to permeate TaxCo's operational boundaries with talk about 'talent' and 'potential partners' notably, and deliberately, absent from internal conversations. Consequently, calls for consistency in definitions are unlikely to assist the advancement of knowledge but may exacerbate confusion on the parameters of the field through the adoption of overly-simplistic normative perspectives. We argue that researchers need to adopt a more pluralistic consideration of what talent means. Discourse analytic studies can play a stronger role in this by transitioning beyond framing organisations as '…objects to be measured and counted, but also social constructions to be interpreted and deconstructed' (Phillips & Oswick, 2012:7).

Second, in addition to the provision of empirical insights about 'how' talent is ascribed meaning, we also explain 'why' certain talent concepts arise. We argue the study of both talent and talent management are best understood within spatial and temporal contexts (Grant & Shields, 2006) whereby discourse, context and talent are mutually constitutive (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). The paper addresses a current dilemma whereby talent management scholars do not consider the extent to which talent meanings and talent management practices are situated within bounded cultural and historical contexts whereby factors outside of language in the form of events, actions, or structures, influence how stakeholders talk (Sillince, 2007). Our four embedded Unit's provided numerous examples of how various meta, macro, meso and micro-level factors influenced talent meanings. The role of context was most evident in TaxCo

where the talent meanings appeared antagonistic to those operating throughout PSF. Talent meaning diversity occurred despite all Unit's operating within the same: country (Australia), industry (professional services), ownership structure (partnership), senior executive team (senior stakeholders), formalised strategic plan and talent development program. Our paper makes a theoretical contribution through explicitly acknowledging the importance of considering language and how stakeholders discursively construct talent meanings because "talent" is a concept which requires translation via talk to become meaningful within the material world and these meanings are influenced by context. In so doing, the study addresses the failure of research to examine how contextual factors and different actors influence talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). Thus, we cannot infer, that talent meanings radiate within organisations, nor across organisational boundaries, industries or countries because discourses arise and materialise within specific contexts and we must acknowledge that talent discourses can not be removed from the context in which they operate.

Finally, by examining corporate headquarters and three business units within an overall corporate entity, we nuance out how talent meanings are situated in multiple discourses. Our research design provided a methodological mechanism which appreciates that contextual factors influence local talent practices (Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale, & Sumelius, 2013; Hartmann, Feisel, & Schober, 2010) while also adequately illustrating instances of agreement and resistance. The embedded case study approach illuminated the complexity associated with talent and highlighted the need to examine not only what definitions of talent prevail within organisations, but also the meanings that underpin these. A multi-level approach illustrates that while stakeholders may apply the same terms and hence talk the same way (i.e. "potential partner"), differing meaning perspectives can and are likely to exist. Collecting extensive multi-level interview and textual data about "talent" and analysing via discourse analysis, generated insights that would have been more difficult to garner from positivist,

survey-based approaches. Statistical analysis may have concluded that stakeholders within PSF adopted and enacted a unified "potential partner" meaning of talent, whereby TaxCo's alternative and antagonist "everyone is talent" deemed insignificant. Our intention is not to adjudicate among different perspectives nor infer that either perspective permits greater access to the truth about talent as quantitative work offers many benefits, but rather note that we need a diversity of perspectives and contexts to illustrate, illuminate and acknowledge the complexity of talent before being able to theorise about a salient and competitively imperative concept – talent. These findings raise concerns on the majority of published papers that fail to inform the reader how talent was viewed or treated in their research (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). The complexity identified in this study raises the question, what interpretations can be taken where no guidance has been provided on how the underlying talent concept has been treated? If this situation were to continue, we argue there is significant potential to severely damage the legitimacy of this field of research through providing a very questionable evidence base on which practitioners can draw on for improved decision-making around managing talent.

Notwithstanding these contributions, we are conscious of the limitations associated with a single qualitative case study of a professional services firm. Futhermore, our sample focused on presenting the perspectives of senior executives involved in talent management. Further examination and explicit consideration of a larger cohort of stakeholders, including talent subjects themselves, as well as how stakeholders attribute meaning to "talent" in other contexts are highly relevant and can lay the foundation for more empirically informed theoretical advancement. One possibility for future research concerns contexts in which "talent" is equally paramount to operational and strategic outcomes, for example in other professional services and knowledge-based firms. Such contexts permit theoretically informed data samples where the importance of talent is inherent thereby offering useful insights into the

social processes through which talent meanings are negotiated and legitimatised within organisations. Specific future research questions may include: Do all partnership-based professional services firms talk about talent concepts in similar exclusive ways? If potential partner discourses dominate in these contexts, do stakeholders share similar meanings? If so, what individual, local, organisational, cultural and broader factors inform and influence meanings? If shared meanings are not operating within an organisation, then conversely, we encourage research that asks why not?

The study was also unable to consider the relationship between talent concepts and organisational outcomes. While our study supports Daubner-Siva, Vinkenburg, and Jansen (2017) statements about the ubiquitous nature of paradoxes within organisations, we are unable to comment on the relationship between discourse, context, talent and organisational success. Abstaining from the conversations about the contribution of talent management to organisational success (Collings, 2014) restricts our ability to make any informed inferences about which foundational meanings positively influence operational outcomes. Our study, by highlighting varying talent meanings, however, points to the possibility of multiple implications for operational, financial and strategic outcomes. This should, hopefully, encourage studies that explicitly focus on the potential intersection between talent concepts and outcomes. This gives rise to future discourse analytic studies that reflect on talent meanings, contextual factors that influence meaning, and whether stakeholders talk about and infer positive or negative relationships with business and commercially related outcomes. This may encourage a research trajectory that seeks to empirically confirm or refute the widely disseminated adage that ‘people are a source of competitive advantage’. Which people? And more specifically, which talent concepts aggrandise success and competitive advantage?

Moreover, the focus on establishing a relationship between conceptualisations of talent and narrow measures of organisational performance (e.g. shareholder value) or competitive

advantage could be usefully extended to other domains. For example, our study illustrates that multiple meanings raise questions about variability of performance at team, unit, organisational levels, and how talent subjects themselves react to talent meanings (e.g. job satisfaction, motivation, commitment, stress)? Given the operation of different talent meanings, we should consider whose talent meanings (specific individuals, HR, line managers) prevail and come to dominate internal talent conversations. Our study shows that certain stakeholders (e.g. CEO and non-HR TaxCo executives) have the potential to influence talent management practices more significantly than others. Explicit consideration of various voices can generate further insights into how talent meanings materialise in organisations. Voice-based studies are particularly relevant given that not all (talent) meanings are acted upon equally and there is a potential relationship between inclusive perspectives and existing collectivism ideals.

Our findings go beyond academia in having important implications for practice. We firstly suggest that all organisations, regardless of size, industry or location should "rule in" talent management. Although the extent to which talent management is perceived as important can, and should, differ between organisations since it should be related to strategy (Collings et al., 2009; Wiblen et al., 2010; McDonnell, 2011), we argue the urgent need for organisations, their HR functions and senior executives to frequently talk about the relationship between talent and operational, strategic and financial success. It is not enough, and indeed may be dangerous (in the context of the lack of evidence on the impact on talent subjects), to assume that senior stakeholders accept and confer with widely heralded rhetoric on what talent is. As our study shows, stakeholders must actively and consciously legitimatise talent management, even within organisational contexts where the quality of talent underpins competitive advantage. For HR executives, a discursive orientation to talent management means going beyond the meta-level discourses framing talent as an 'organisations greatest asset' and the need to 'win the war for talent' and apply more critical perspectives to internal

talk about talent, at multiple levels, and from multiple perspectives. If HR or Corporate executives seek to change talent meanings, then they must first garner an informed appreciation of talent discourses operating in micro and meso contexts. It may be discourses, within one specific context, maybe that of TaxCo, which executives seek to change to facilitate a more unified approach.

Despite this recommendation, our intention is not to infer that establishing consistent talent definitions are a salient, nor foundation goal. Consistent practices can lead to several negative implications. For example, where an organisation has talent development programmes in existence, there may be insufficient clarity and consistency around the decisions on who should be included or not. There is the potential for stakeholders to talk the same way about talent, but the individual and subjective meanings which underpin the language and terms may differ. This, in turn, may impact the make-up of talent pools and lead to personal frustration around status recognition or lack thereof due to employees perceiving unfairness and injustice in decisions as to who gets categorised as talent (or not). Practitioners, therefore, need to reflect on the language employed in their operations critically and how that, in turn, impacts decision-making. Instances of divergence in meaning, while potentially appropriate, may bring to the fore political and power struggles as stakeholders compete to have particular meanings, perceptions and voices, permeate talent discussions or not (as in the atypical case of TaxCo). Rather than propose practitioners should invest in the convergence of meaning we call for more significant reflexive consideration be given to identifying what stakeholders mean when referring to talent subjects. Along this vein, we encourage practitioners to be critical of 'best-practice' discourses because talent meanings should be informed by and aligned to, operational and strategic goals (Tansley, 2011; Wiblen, 2016). Operational needs and strategies, along with talent meanings, are highly context-specific. More notably, talent meanings need to align with the contextual factors which matter most. Which part of the context matters for organisational

performance because the underlying foundation of talent management is to mobilise people-based resources for positive organisational performance. We are not saying that one contextual factor is more important than another, but rather that critical reflection of the contextual factors framed as dominant, such as operating in a specific industry need to manage talent in a professional services firm effectively, may not completely account for talent meanings. Practitioners need to understand and decide which aspects of context matter most and why such contextual factors should influence talent meanings more than others. It is essential that we do not automatically assume that organisations that 'sell' talent have formalised definitions of what talent 'is' (McDonnell, 2011) or that workforce differentiation is an essential foundation for knowledge-based organisations. Inclusion of TaxCo as our atypical case illustrates not only how teams and functions may amend talent meanings to match their specific aims and ambitions, but there is the potential for talent meanings within functional contexts to overshadow dominant exclusive perspectives. While some may argue that PSF's senior executive team should proactively seek to manage TaxCo and 'encourage' the Unit to adopt the dominant talent meaning (potential partner), we question whether meaning convergence is a salient and useful aim. Stakeholders and academics alike must deconstruct talent meanings within their specific context to transition towards an informed understanding of the complexity of talent. Contextualised talent meanings, where there are multiple rather than a single meaning, may be indicative of best-practice for that specific organisation. Contextualised informed ambiguity about talent is far better than contested, accidental or decontextualised ambiguity.

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Table 1: Example Talent Meanings

Talent Definition or Meaning Source		Explicit or implied talent meanings	Explicit or implied Exclusive or Inclusive meaning	Talent meaning discourse
From a human capital perspective, talent refers to the human capital in an organisational that is both valuable and unique, with an *employee's* contribution to the organisation the main criterion of interest.	Dries (2013:276)	Individual	Inclusive & Exclusive	Individuals Everyone is talent
Talent refers to systematically developed innate abilities of *individuals* that are deployed in activities they like, find important, and in which they want to invest energy. It enables individuals to perform excellently in one or more domains of human functioning, operationalised as performing better than individuals other individuals of the same age of experience, or as performing consistently at their personal best.	Nijs et al (2014:182)	Individuals	Exclusive	Individuals
Subject perspectives on talent imply a focus on the identification and development of *talented people*. Object perspectives on talent, on the other hand, imply a focus in the identification and development of *characteristics of* talented people.	Dries (2013:278)	Individuals Characteristics of individuals	Exclusive	Individuals
Talent can be an innate construct, most acquired or results from the interaction between (specific levels of) nature and nurture components. (1) Talent is innate (nature): whereby *talented employees* are endowed with certain qualities while others are not. (2) Talent is acquired (nurture): whereby the value of employees can be enhanced.	Meyers, van Woerkom, and Dries (2013)	Individuals Individuals with certain attributes	Exclusive	Individuals
Talent has been used broadly to describe an *individual's* skill, aptitude and achievement…The four elements of individual talent are potency (person's power, influence and capability to achieve results), truest interest (passion), skill intelligences (mental and physical learning and performance abilities to compete, conquer and survive), and virtue intelligence (moral excellence and integrity). Talent is the resource that includes the potential and realised capacities of *individuals.*	van Dijk (2008:387) van Dijk (2009)	Individuals Individuals with certain attributes Individuals	Inclusive Inclusive	Everybody is talent Everybody is talent
We define talent as the resource that includes the potential and realised capacities of *individuals* and groups and how they are organised, including those within the organisation and those who might join the organisation.	Boudreau and Ramstad (2007:2)	Individuals Groups of individuals	Inclusive (individuals) & Exclusive (certain groups)	Individuals Everyone is talent
Talent consists of those *individuals* who can make a difference to organisational performance, either through their immediate contribution or in the longer term by demonstrating the highest levels of potential.	CIPD (2007:3)	Individuals	Exclusive	Individuals
[Talent] refers to a select group of *employees*, those that rank at the top in terms of capability and performance- rather than the entire workforce.	Stahl et al. (2007:4)	Individuals	Exclusive	Individuals
There is a commonly held perception of a global war for talent, in which organisations must fiercely compete with other employers for a finite supply of desperately needed *workers*, especially those with hard-to-find or highly valued skills- including leadership skills.	Wellins and Schweyer (2007:2)	Individuals Individuals with certain skills	Exclusive	Everyone is talent Skills and capabilities
'… 'talent' as an inherent *individual* quality to be sought out and recruited…'	MacBeath (2006:183)	Individual	Inclusive	Everyone is talent

Talent is 'the sum of a *person's* abilities…his or her intrinsic gifts, *skills*, knowledge, experience, intelligence, judgment, attitude, character and drive. It also includes his or her ability to grow'.	Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod (2001:xii)	Individuals Individuals with ceratin attributes Individuals with certain skills	Inclusive	Individuals Everyone is talent Skills and capabilities
'Talent' should refer to a *person's* recurring patterns of thought, feeling or behaviour that can be productively applied. By this definition, impatience is a talent, as are charm, strategic thinking, competitiveness, empathy, focus, and tact. According to the most common sense and the most arcane neuroscience, talents such as these are enduring and unique. They are almost impossible to teach.	Buckingham and Vosburgh (2001)	Individuals Individuals with certain attributes	Inclusive	Individuals
Some key *technical employees* may legitimately be classified as talent in some organisations.	McDonnell et al. (2010:158)	Individuals Individuals with certain (technical) skills	Exclusive	Individuals Skills and capabilities
Talent is concerned with identifying *key positions* which have the potential to differentially impact the firm's competitive advantage and filling these with 'A performers'.	Whelen and Carcary (2011:676)	Pivotal positions	Exclusive	Pivotal roles and positions
There may be functional and technical type *roles* which have a sizeable strategic impact on the organisation.	McDonnell (2011)	Pivotal roles	Exclusive	Pivotal roles and positions
It has never been more important to have talented employees staff the organisation's key strategic *positions*.	McDonnell et al. (2010:150)	Strategic positions	Exclusive	Individuals Pivotal roles and positions
"Pivotal talent pools" are the vital targets for HR investment and leader attention.	Boudreau and Ramstad (2005:129)	Pivotal talent pools	Exclusive	Pivotal roles and positions

Table 2: Contextualising PSF and the Embedded Business Units

	Corporate	FinCo	KnowCo	TaxCo
Value Proposition (Basis of client services)	Operates in professional services industry providing knowledge-based services to clients via six business units.	Offers financially-based knowledge and services to external clients.	Offers various knowledge-based services to clients (e.g. human capital, strategy and operations, technology).	Offers taxation and legislative-based services to domestic and international clients.
Workforce composition	Executives are responsible for creating and enacting organisational-wide policies and practices. Employee groups include Corporate HR function, and Senior Executive team. 5000 employees in offices across Australia (at time of data collection).	The clear majority of employees possess accounting and finance qualifications and experiences. Workforce described as "diverse".	A diverse workforce with various skills and capabilities, backgrounds and experiences. Diverse client base due to KnowCo's consultancy structure. Described as "One of the largest and fastest growing" Business Unit in PSF.	Workforce assists clients with interpreting and translating requirements of domestic and international tax legislation or preparation of tenders and submissions for government incentives and/funding. External texts describe TaxCo as one of the larger business units in PSF.

Table 3: Multi-level Discourses Contextualising the Talk about Talent within PSF[2]

Discourse-level	Corporate	FinCo	KnowCo	*TaxCo (atypical meso case)*
Meta (societal, institutional and phenomenological context)	Talent connected to winning the war for talent. Talent is required to compete in and win the war for talent. Talent inherently valuable because the organisation operates in the professional services industry.	Talent core to operations because FinCo (and PSF) operates in the professional services industry	Talent underpins PSF's value proposition and client offerings.	*Broader discourses about the importance of talent refuted within TaxCo.*
Macro (organisational context)	Talent inherently valuable because the organisation operates in the professional services industry. Talent strategy informed by, and aligned to, strategic ambitions for growth (size and revenue).	Talent core to operations because FinCo operates in the professional services industry. Talent underpins FinCo's value proposition to clients.	Talent is required to pursue and realise PSF's formal strategic plan and ambitions for expansion Talent underpins KnowCo's value proposition and client offerings	*Broader discourses about the importance of talent refuted within TaxCo.*
Meso (localised context)	Talk about "talent" pervades stakeholders conversations.	Talk about "talent" pervades internal conversations.	Talk about "talent" pervades internal conversations. Talent "are our number one priority."	*Talent management not considered important or a priority for TaxCo.* *The absence of senior stakeholder support for, and investment in, talent.* *The term "talent" did not pervade internal conversations.*
Micro (individual context)	Talk about "talent" pervades stakeholders conversations.	Talk about "talent" pervades stakeholders conversations.	Talk about "talent" pervades stakeholders conversations.	*Internal stakeholders don't use the term "talent".*

[2] We do not assert that discourses are heirachical and acknowledge that a discourse can simultaneously exist at several levels (Grant & Marshak, 2011).

Figure 1: Dominant and Parallel Talent Concepts Operating in Business Unit (Meso) Contexts

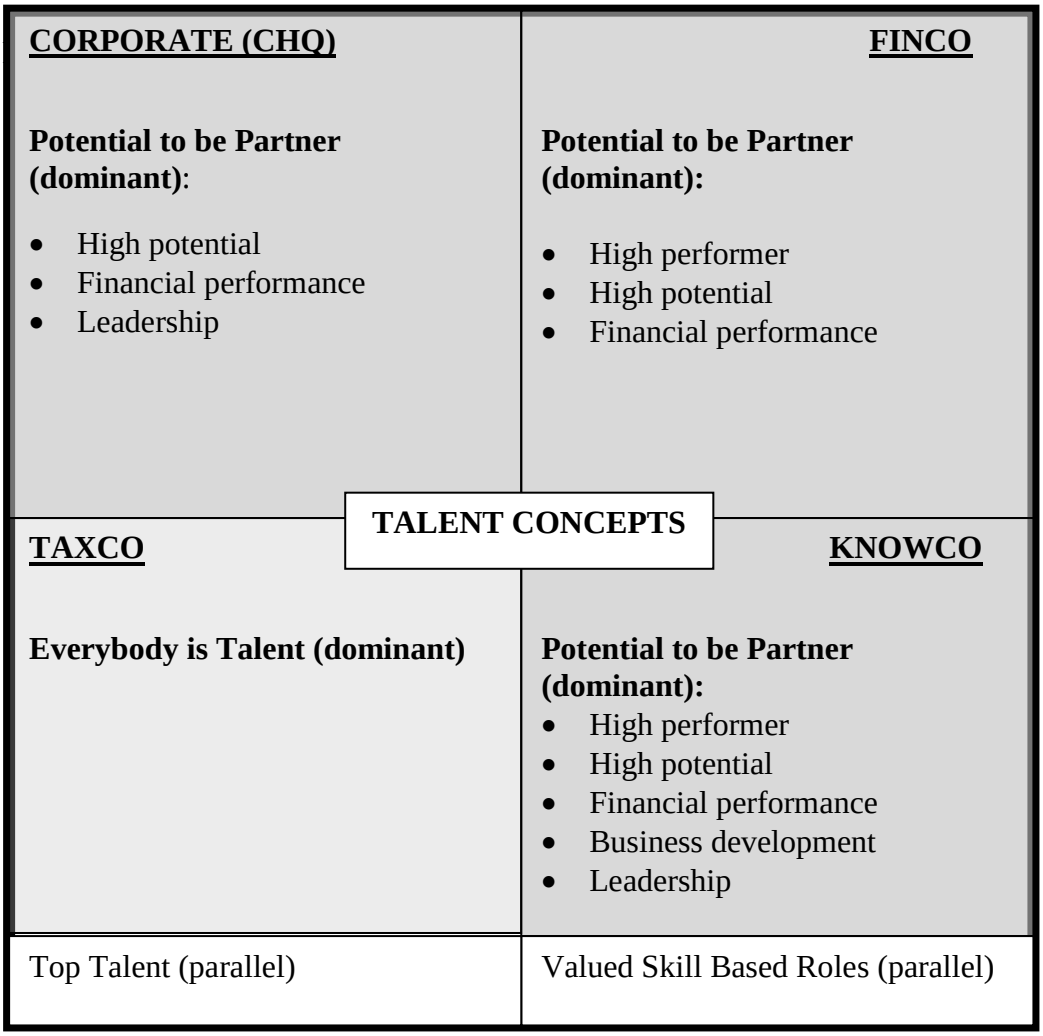


Figure 2: Contextual Factors Influencing Dominant and Parallel Talent Concepts

