Exploring the Social and Political Aspects of Talent Management in Organisations

by

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Declaration

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Abstract

Talent management has been an area of significant organisational focus since 1997 when McKinsey and Company first introduced the concept of the ‘war for talent’. What appears to have been neglected in many subsequent talent management publications, however, is the tension between the rhetoric and reality of talent management. The objective of the research is to explore this tension in the context of the social and political aspects of managing talent in organisations and to gain a deeper understanding of how talent management really works in organisations.

The empirical, qualitative study, which is based on a social constructivist perspective, involved a cross-sectional study of 14 semi-structured interviews with a key informant sample comprising 14 Human Resources and Talent Management professionals from 11 industry sectors. Participating organisations ranged in employee number from 85 to 114,000 globally. Interviews were personally transcribed and, following an extended period of inductive thematic analysis, three aggregate dimensions emerged from 27 first order codes and eight second order themes.

The findings, summarised in the three aggregate dimensions of 1) The challenge of maintaining objectivity in talent management; 2) The desire for more structure and follow-through in talent management; and 3) Disappointment and unfulfilled promises, highlight the discrepancy which exists between the literature on talent management and the everyday experience of practitioners in the field. The data provide evidence that talent decisions are heavily influenced by the degree to which senior executives know and hence support an individual discussed in talent review sessions. The study also illuminates the significant frustration felt by HR and talent professionals about the ‘real’ talent management process in their respective firms. Another key finding concerns the anxiety line managers experience in the talent management process out of fear of raising (false) expectations and not being able to manage these appropriately.

Key words: talent management, rhetoric and reality, organisational politics, rhetoric and reality
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Much has been written about the topic of talent management in past decades (Burkus and Osula, 2011; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Collings and Mellahi, 2009, Uren and Samuel, 2007; Mandhanya and Shah, 2010; Silzer and Dowell, 2010, Mellahi and Collings, 2010; Harvey, 2014). Most of these authors – in one guise or another – highlight the importance of managing talent and the impact talent management initiatives can have on the effectiveness of an organisation. The intention behind the majority of talent management initiatives in organisations is arguably positive and well-meaning with examples such as face-to-face development conversations between company top executives and their top talent in order to progress careers cited (Ready and Conger, 2007).

Described as a key focus area of strategic human resources management, the literature acknowledges that 'high potential' individuals in today's workforce are more aware of the need for leadership at all levels of an enterprise, the changing workforce demographics, and the resulting talent shortages, making them more willing to change jobs and chose employers which offer career progression and development opportunities as opposed to expecting a job-for-life (Ashton, 2005; Powell and Lubitsh, 2007; Cunningham, 2007). Further building on this, Higgs (2003) suggests that shifting competitive landscapes and more volatile business environments in general are forcing firms to rethink their approach to strategies in general; perhaps people strategies specifically.

The practice of Talent Management itself has evolved over the years, moving from focusing on ‘high potential’ employees only to a more holistic and inclusive view which includes aligning talent strategies to business strategies and building employee engagement in an effort to retain ‘talent’ at all levels with the firm, allowing for execution of organisational goals in the short-, medium-, and long-term (Cheese, 2008; Cunningham, 2007).
My personal experience suggests that although a majority of firms have talent managers and learning and development teams in place, few organisations appear to have truly ‘cracked’ how to manage talent; a topic referred to as a “curiously vague subject” by Morgan and Jardin (2010, p. 25). According to Lamoureux (2009), succession and talent management is still a new concept in many firms with less than a quarter offering integrated solutions which ensure the most appropriate person is appointed to a specific role.

This seems a suitable place to introduce myself and the motivation to conduct this research. I currently work as Chief Human Resources Officer for a global mobility company; a position held for the past 14 months. Previous roles included Group Head of Organisation Development in an international soft drinks organisation; Head of Talent and Learning & Development Europe in a global financial services firm; HR Director Europe in a mobile phone company as well as positions including divisional Senior Talent Manager in two global IT organisations and, at the very beginning of my 15-year career in HR, a position as Country HR Manager Germany. The firms above ranged in size from 280 to 108,000 employees and all had either international or global operations. Before moving into HR, I worked for nine years in Executive Assistant roles in global organisations which gave me significant exposure to senior leaders and the challenges they are confronted with on a daily basis very early on in my career. Born in Germany, I lived in the United States of America during my teenage years through my father’s work, then finished my career education in Germany before starting full-time employment. 14 months into my HR career, I relocated to the United Kingdom through work and also successfully completed a number of short-term assignments whilst employed for a global IT company, including the setting up of a new call centre for an IT firm in Slovakia and roles as interim HR business partner during periods of transition in Ireland and The Netherlands. All of these projects and roles opened my eyes to organisational complexities and the potential pitfalls of well-intentioned talent management processes which set-out to plan succession for senior roles but often fail to deliver because other individuals – not included on the plans – are appointed to roles or strategic external hires are the preferred choice to fill vacancies. This dynamic tension will be explored in significantly more detail in Chapter 4, Data Analysis.
I have a deep passion for personal development and, in 2002, embarked on a suite of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) courses which ultimately led to a Master Practitioner and Trainer qualification in 2005. I quickly realised I wanted to pursue further education and also came to terms with the insight that whilst NLP knowledge is useful in business from a perspective of more effective communications, it is not a recognised academic achievement in its own right. In September 2005, I started a two year, part-time MSc in People and Organisation Development at Roffey Park Management Institute (accredited by the University of Sussex) and graduated in the summer of 2008. My thirst for knowledge, however, was not quenched, which led to enrolment in the University of Surrey’s DBA programme in September 2009. I will provide more insight into the subsequent learning journey in Chapter 7 – Reflective Diary.

This study, then, comes out of my 15 years of professional experience in the field of Human Resources Management with a particular focus on people and organisational development as well as talent management, succession planning, organisational design and executive coaching and mentoring and will present the findings and recommendations of a qualitative, interview-based study, the data of which was assimilated through a process of inductive thematic analysis. I will provide further detail on the decision which led to this course of action later in this chapter as well as in chapter 3, Methodology.

Having witnessed dozens upon dozens of talent management processes and conversations, the question as to how the talent process described by the firms in manuals and guidelines differ from what happens in reality, in the everyday life of the organisation, was triggered. Over the years as a practitioner in the field, I also became increasingly aware of a certain level of frustration expressed by HR colleagues who were concerned about being asked to execute the promotion of individuals outside of the talent review cycle and, perhaps more importantly in the context of this research, of individuals who were not necessarily deemed to be ‘key talent’ with high potential during the talent review process. With this study, I would like to gain a deeper understanding of the issues practitioners in HR and talent management are working to address in their firms and how the rhetoric of talent management contrasts with the reality of the practice.
What is it that prevents organisations from excelling at talent management; from promoting and developing their high performing staff through succession planning and subsequent management; from having comparative and objective talent conversations as opposed to applying mostly subjective criteria; from avoiding pitfalls such as forming first impressions too quickly and drawing on the same talent pool over and over again (Robinson et al, 2009), instead of observing a greater number of individuals over a longer period of time and thus building a larger talent group for the organisation?

This thesis will investigate the proposition that the reality and rhetoric of talent management are far removed in many organisations and that the political and social aspects of organisational life influence how talent management initiatives are implemented and – ultimately – how successful they are. To a large extent, such decisions rest on the shoulders of senior managers and executives; a group of individuals for whom Dotlich and Cairo (2003) find the following words: “Although many corporations do not acknowledge it, their entire leadership ranks are made up of flawed human beings. What needs to be more openly acknowledged is that flawed human beings can still be great leaders” (p. 150).

Writing as an HR professional, I posit that supporting these flawed human beings through talent management initiatives can be a challenge at the very best of times. Add to this the potential complexities resulting from the social and political dimensions of organisational life, it is imaginable that turf wars may erupt in talent management, leading to a far from straight-forward process. It is this dynamic force between the rhetoric and reality of talent management in the context of the social and political aspects of the practice that I have been curious about for many years.

Many observations during my 15 years in talent and HR management in a number of international organisations - as previously outlined – made me consider the degree to which flawed talent decisions and judgements are common. Below are three examples witnessed in order to offer a perspective on such decisions and set the scene for the data analysis chapter (chapter 4):
1. A senior vice president listed as ‘ready now’ successors for a role on the European Executive Team for five consecutive years on succession plans without actually being appointed or promoted as the incumbent continued to be seen as the right person for the role. The latter also had no other career options due to the specialised nature of the role;

2. A senior director listed as potential successor in the ‘ready now’ and ‘ready in 2-3 years’ for a number of executive roles on succession plans for six years and then being offered a compromise agreement to leave the organisation as the individual was no longer seen as a ‘right fit’ for the company in spite of significant (financial) investment into coaching and mentoring;

3. A director joining an organisation as an external hire and, within three weeks of joining, being seen as the most suitable successor to a role on the European Executive Team and, having been identified as a key talent, was listed on the succession plans for executive roles. The director left the firm 15 months later as he was not seen as a cultural fit, failed to deliver against expectations and mismanaged his team, resulting in 6 resignations of senior staff within 5 months.

Cappelli (2008) summarises points two and three above succinctly: “When an important vacancy occurs, it’s not unusual for companies to conclude that the candidates identified by the succession plan no longer meet the needs of the job” (p. 77). This view is echoed by Garrow and Hirsh (2008), who encourage a firm to consider where in the succession pipeline potential need for action arises and how to address such issues promptly. The areas of competence, connection and culture are highlighted as key indicators regarding an individuals’ ‘fit’ for a role by Hills (2009) who further suggests that succession plans and strategies are “inevitably a mix of buying and building talent” (p. 3). Harro and Miller (2009) support this view by asking their clients how the unwritten rules of expected behaviour, the “systems and culture” of the organisation “create a consistent, positive flow of talent to support future growth” (p. 63).

However positive the intentions of internal promotions, Lamoureux (2009) argues that all too often, unsuitable individuals continue to be promoted for four main reasons:
1) An underdeveloped or non-existent leadership strategy;

2) Lack of a leadership model;

3) Inability to be honest, authentic, and transparent with high performers;

4) No common definition of high potential and high performer.

Jacobs (2005) not only discusses the fact that at times, low performers are left in their roles for too long, out of “loyalty or a sense of compassion” (p. 3), but also offers a number of steps for building a strong leadership pipeline in global businesses, advocating the validation of nominees to more senior roles through the “use of consistent, objective criteria to identify and source high-performance and high-potential candidates for the talent pool.” (p. 2). Particularly the ‘validation’ aspect is a good step in the right direction as it involves managers across borders and businesses to take responsibility for the development of future talent. Objective criteria, on the other hand, are rather more challenging to determine and implement.

In this context, Robinson et al (2009) discuss the use of a nine-box grid (see Appendix 1) as a decision aid tool in talent decision, suggesting that ‘performance’ and ‘potential’ be used as the criteria on the matrix. The authors furthermore advocate the implementation of a ‘potential pyramid’ containing “decision steps or checkpoints” in question format to guide talent conversations among leaders. Whether, however, the very first question on this pyramid, e.g. does this person consistently exhibit our company values, support our mission, and enhance our culture, can be answered objectively by those present in the talent discussion remains to be seen. With Robinson et al (2009) offering “create plan to coach; consider termination” (p. 414) as potential solutions should the answer to the question above be ‘no’, some managers might find talent-related decisions rather easy!

During my years as a practitioner in the field of HR and talent management, I have been privileged to attend and witness numerous talent discussions in various organisations and at different levels; from the executive to the front-line manager conversations. It has never ceased to amaze me how the rhetoric of talent reviews – objectives and outcomes are clear and the process is well-documented and
presumably understood – differs from the reality of how the meetings are conducted. One such conversation, which ultimately influenced my decision to explore the social and political aspects of talent management, took place in 2009 in a leading financial services firm in the context of a succession and talent review for a major European business unit. The senior executive of the business unit was known to be a talent management advocate and keen supporter of personal development. He had just presented an overall compelling story about how he sees and assesses his team and the depth of talent within his organisation.

Several individuals were listed as so-called rising talent on the talent matrix (9-box grid), suggesting that they are people who can progress up to two grade levels in the organisation over the coming three to five years as defined by this organisations’ talent review manual and interpretation guidelines. At the level being discussed, it would suggest that these individuals have the potential to join the European Executive Team and should be listed as ‘ready now’ or ‘ready short-term’ successors for senior roles on the succession plan. There was, however, a noticeable mismatch between the well-populated 9-box grid and the near empty succession plan. When probed, the executive manager confirmed that the main reason he placed so many of his direct reports into the top three boxes on the 9-box was motivational: he considered these individuals to be excellent contributors and smart and wanted to ensure they stay motivated and engaged during a period of transition.

Furthermore, the succession plan for the executive manager himself was empty in all four categories (‘ready now’, ‘ready short-term’, ‘ready medium-term’, ‘ready long-term’) even though in 2009, the overall organisation would have employed circa 500 individuals at ‘head of’ level and another 250 at ‘director’ level. When queried about this, the executive manager smiled and suggested that, on second thought, a few individuals could move into his role with some training and mentoring to support the career move and progression to top management.

This example raises a number of questions in relation to the social and political aspects of talent management, e.g. to what degree do managers use sound and objective criteria to evaluate their own
direct reports?; how many managers believe they are irreplaceable?; to what extend does the rhetoric (interpretation guidelines and templates with examples) diverge from the reality? It is perhaps indicative that the organisation mentioned above decided to issue ‘interpretation guidelines’ for the in-house designed 67-page talent review handbook as it was deemed overly complex to support the talent management efforts of line managers? However, it is important to note that the organisation cited is not being singled out as during my years of working with colleagues from other organisations and within my own employers, the issuing of supporting documentation in an effort to simplify talent management processes was not uncommon.

As previously mentioned, it is witnessing conversations similar in nature to the one outlined above that triggered my curiosity about the role politics and social aspects play in talent management. My experience as a practitioner in the field suggests that talent management interventions and programmes are not the rational, technical process human resources managers like to think they are. Rather, it is complex, sometimes messy, far from straight-forward and often driven by those who are best at playing the ‘talent game’; e.g. those who are politically savvy and understand how to manipulate a situation to suit their personal needs and outcomes.

Kesler (2002) states that “The politics of talent management needs to be understood more than it is, and it needs to be confronted more openly in companies” (p. 5); suggesting a gap in this field of research. It is on the basis of this statement and my professional experience, combined with my curiosity to explore the rhetoric and reality (Legge, 2005) of talent management in more detail that I seek to undertake my study. The main developmental intentions of my proposed study are to:

1) Support HR practitioners to become more attuned to organisational politics;
2) Help fellow practitioners in the field of talent management recognise that organisational politics are an integral part of the talent management process and to learn to accept and embrace this;
3) Provide insights which allow HR and talent professionals to grow in confidence to call-out people decisions based on personal bias and, at the same time, be able to offer managers enhanced or more neutral talent assessment processes to support in-house perspectives on talent;

4) Provide a process map depicting the reality of talent management in many organisations, on the basis of which talent and HR professionals can become more astute managers of talent with a new or increased sense of awareness of influencing factors, recognising and acknowledging that there is a marked difference between the rhetoric and reality of managing talent.

Bearing the above stated outcomes and objectives in mind, I gave due consideration to the most appropriate way of gathering data that would allow me to explore and understand organisational politics more than may have been the case previously (see Kesler, 2002) or, perhaps, illuminate the complexities of organisational politics and the bearing this has on the talent management process. Given the sensitivity around talent management, such as exposure to confidential people information, it was important to me as a researcher to find a way of speaking to and engaging with research participants which would allow them to feel comfortable and safe rather than feeling as though they were being interrogated with their firm’s approach to talent management scrutinised and criticised. This led me to exclude data gathering in the form of surveys or questionnaires as I doubted these would lead to satisfactory detail whereas a qualitative approach in the form of one-on-one, personally conducted interviews appeared more appropriate. Much of the data gathered during my research – as outlined in Chapter 4 – included paralinguistic features in the form of sighs, laughs or facial expressions by participants which I ascertain would have been very difficult to capture or uncover using quantitative research approaches such as questionnaires. Such features, however, created possibilities for further gentle inquiry into the talent management process of a firm; a subtlety which will have been missed had the data been gathered through surveys or questionnaires.

My desire was to get under the veneer of how talent management works in organisations without being directive or descriptive in my research questions; something that would have been the case using a questionnaire, for example. Upon due consideration, I decided that an exploratory, inductive and
qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews would provide the data I was hoping to gather in order to better understand organisational politics and the dynamics between the rhetoric and reality of the practice. The research thus set out to ‘Explore the social and political aspects of talent management in organisations’.

The following Chapter 2 will review the literature on talent management, informing the proposed study by reviewing talent management’s origins, the tensions between HR management and talent management as well as looking into organisational politics; before moving on to the third chapter which will explain the methodology. Chapter four will present the data analysis; Chapter five enters into a discussion about the data and the literature reviewed in Chapter two. Chapter six presents the conclusions and recommendations and, finally, chapter seven provides an insight into my DBA journey in the context of a reflective diary.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Few topics in the HR literature appear to attract as much attention and interest as Talent Management. Many articles on talent management comprise of insights on the elements of attraction, identification, development, deployment and engagement of employees (Uren and Samuel, 2007; Mandhanya and Shah, 2010; Silzer and Dowell, 2010).

In this thesis, I wish to explore the social and political aspects of talent management, in particular in relation to the difference and dynamic tension between the rhetoric and reality of talent management, presenting perhaps a new perspective which assesses talent management in a more critical way as opposed to getting pulled into further exploration of the “war for talent” which represents the starting point of so many other academic articles (Iles, 2010; Gallardo-Gallardo et al, 2013; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Vaiman et al, 2012; Dries, 2013).

The origins of the practice of talent management are debated in literature with some arguing that it is a process which emerged in the 1990s as organisational awareness of the perceived benefits of managing talent to drive business success increased (Mandhanya and Shah, 2010). This suggests a link to McKinsey’s article on the ‘war for talent’ which was published in 1997 (Michaels et al., 2001, cited in Mellahi and Collings, 2010; Harvey, 2014, McKinsey, 1997) and which is often seen as the starting point for the talent management practices in place today. This perspective, however, is countered by Cappelli (2008) who believes that “every talent management process in use today was developed half a century ago” and that it is necessary for companies to change their approach to this processes in order to take account of the “great uncertainty businesses face today” (p. 76). Harvey (2014) argues that: “The prolonged war for talent is neither an academic fad nor a media buzzword, but a realistic competition among nations for scarce human talents.” (p. 68), further emphasising the importance of talent
management to drive organisational success and face the realities of managing talent and moving away from the common rhetoric associated with the practice; which usually suggests that talent management is a streamlined organisational process.

Scullion, Collings and Gunnigle (2007) speak of the vibrancy and diversity of the field of talent management and the Boston Consulting Group identifies it as one of the critical challenges for the HR function in the European context (Boston Consulting Group, 2007). Furthermore, talent management occupies a significant amount of organisational resources, including involvement by Chief Executive Officers and investment in talent managers and advisors in firms, to a level not previously seen (Whelan et al, 2010). Lewis and Heckman (2006) comment that “given the number of consulting firms engaging in talent management and the growing number of articles and books on the topic, one might also believe talent management to be a well-defined area of practice supported by extensive research and a core set of principles.” (p. 139); however, they argue, that this is not the case. The need for effective talent management, suggesting that this will lead to better organisational results as key employees will be retained, is discussed (Oladapo, 2014; Ashton and Morton, 2005) along with the impact organisational change can have on the effectiveness of talent management as a firm may no longer have the right individuals performing critical roles (Ashton and Morton, 2005). This will be discussed further in section 2.2 – Definitions and Boundaries of Talent Management.

This literature review focuses on the publications most closely aligned to the research questions stated in the previous chapter, e.g. ‘How does talent management work in organisations?’ as well as examining the definitions of talent management, its link to Human Resources management, and exploring the difference between the rhetoric and reality of talent management.

The literature review has highlighted four areas in relation to the state of the field of talent management, which will be addressed throughout this chapter; namely:

1) The lack of empirical research;
2) The lack of theory;
3) The dominance of managerialist literature;

4) The boundaries of the field of HR and talent management are indistinct.

In support of the main topic of this thesis, the exploration of the social and political aspects of talent management, section 2.3 will review the literature focusing on this particular perspective. In addition, I will seek to illuminate the tension that appears to exist between the rhetoric and the reality of talent management, both in the literature and in practice as will be demonstrated in the Data Analysis Chapter (Chapter 4) of this thesis.

Although the field of talent management has evolved over the past decade, Thunnissen et al (2013) suggest that there is limited empirical research to draw upon and that “the current academic literature is conceptual, exploring the topic in all its elements” (p. 1757). The authors continue “New perspectives are essential for a theoretical framework for talent management in different contexts, for example in different branches of industry or in public or private organisations” (p. 1758). The limited empirical research in the field of talent management is also discussed by Collings and Mellahi (2009) and Lewis and Heckman (2006). They furthermore identify a lack of theoretical frameworks to advance academic knowledge in the field of talent management which leaves the field open to tensions, e.g. is talent management inclusive or exclusive in nature (Gelens et al, 2013) with Huang and Tansley (2012) arguing that the exclusive approach not only speaks against equal opportunity statements many firms issue but can also be seen as politically incorrect. McCartney (2010) argues that “Managers selected to take part in talent programmes feel ‘special’, supported and valued by the organisation, and are motivated to go the extra mile” (p. 29), suggesting that an exclusive approach will lead to a more successful organisation.

Finally, Thunnissen et al (2013) focus their critique on the managerialist nature of the talent management literature which accentuates the economic side of work and discusses objectives such as performance, effectiveness and efficiency whilst Vaiman et al (2012) highlight the “considerable debate between researchers with respect to their understanding of the meaning of talent management” (p. 925).
I am interested in exploring talent management as a social process. The review of the talent management literature on the following pages will serve to inform my thesis and the research field work in an effort to present an empirical piece of work which addresses the tension between the rhetoric and reality of talent management, which suggests that talent management is a social construct which varies and depends on the environment in which it is played out and the actors within it. I suggest that there is a gap in empirical research contributions which examine the everyday challenges and realities practitioners in the field of talent management attempt to tackle on a daily basis although there is a body of HR literature which recognises this issue in general.

My aim is to review the rhetoric that exists around talent management in the literature throughout this chapter and to explore and further inform the reality of talent management from the perspective of HR and talent practitioners in this thesis. Section 2.2 illustrates the numerous definitions of talent management with section 2.3 exploring the boundaries between HR and Talent Management. Section 2.4 outlines the political aspects of talent management before moving on to brief concluding thoughts.

2.2 Talent Management: Definitions

What is talent management? Arguably, talent management lacks a common definition, making the field open to interpretation and, according to Burkus and Osula, 2011; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; as well as Collings and Mellahi, 2009, limiting its effectiveness and efficiency for organisations globally. This means that the different types of definitions probably indicate different perspectives towards the subject of talent management. The absence of a clear definition of talent management is lamented by Collings et al (2009) as well as Garrow and Hirsh (2008), the latter referring to and criticising the CIPD definition of the practice which defines talent management as ‘the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement / retention, and deployment of those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to an organisation’; a definition explicitly including the term potential, but it also includes the much more general term “particular value, which can mean just about anything” (p. 390,
original in italics). De Vos and Dries (2013) propose that ‘talent’, at least from an organisational-strategic point of view, refers to “the human capital in an organisation that is both valuable and unique” (p. 1818) but fails to offer concrete examples of how to identify this unique talent. Whelan et al (2010) also comment on the absence of concrete definitions: “Despite the widespread use of the terminology and its perceived importance, there is a degree of debate, and indeed confusion, around the conceptual and intellectual boundaries of talent management” (p. 491). Silzer and Dowell (2010, cited in Lacey and Groves, 2014, p. 401) describe talent management “as the integrated system of strategies, policies, and programs designed to identify, develop, deploy, and retain talent to achieve strategic objectives and meet future business needs”, a perspective echoed by Lewis and Heckman (2006) as well as Iles et al (2010). Bjoerkman et al (2013) describe the following attitudes commonly associated with ‘talent’, including, but not limited to, commitment to increasing performance demand, building competencies that are valuable for their employers, and to actively support the strategic priorities of the organisation. The authors also found that “those who perceive they have been identified as talent are more likely than those who don’t know their talent status to be associated with all the attitudes examined (…) and that, taken together, these findings suggest that informing talented individuals of their status has a motivational effect in line with the predictions of social exchange theory and thus support the general logic of talent management” (p. 207).

Scullion et al (2010, p. 106, cited in Skuza et al, 2013) offer the following definition of talent management: “Global talent management includes all organisational activities for the purpose of attracting, selecting, developing and retaining the best employees in the most strategic roles - those roles are necessary to achieve organisational strategic priorities - on a global scale. Global talent management takes into account the differences in both organisations’ global strategic priorities and the differences across national contexts for how talent should be managed in the countries where they operate” (p. 454). This perspective is echoed by Huselid et al (2005, cited in Zhang and Bright, 2012), who agree with the focus on key roles: “the talent-defining process is closely coupled with the identification of ‘key positions’, which have the potential to differentially impact the competitive advantage of the company.” (p. 156).
Garrow and Hirsch (2008) advocate that talent management is about positive organisational processes which benefit both the individual and the organisation in general. These authors also consider the question as to why talent management is referred to as ‘talent management’ when, in most firms, the practice comes down to what can be described as workforce management processes and the development of all employees. Chuai et al (2008) also argue for the similarities between talent management and HRM, discussing the concept that both approaches place great emphasis on having the ‘right people’ in the ‘right roles’; a view also expressed by Collins (2001). The CIPD focuses on defining ‘talent’ – as opposed to talent management - as ‘those individuals who can make a difference to organisational performance either through their immediate contribution or in the longer term by demonstrating the highest level of potential’ (CIPD, 2009, p. 2; cited in Swailes, 2013, p. 33-34). The definition and assessment of that potential, however, is often left to chance and organisational circumstance. Duttagupta (2005, cited in Iles, Preece and Chuai, 2010) defines talent management as “a lot more than yet another HR process; the talent mind-set is not just another HR fad. In the broadest possible terms, talent management is the strategic management flow of talent through an organisation” (p. 2). Ashton and Morton (2005) concur, suggesting that talent management is not new language for HR and instead, describe it as a strategic imperative for organisations; and one that firms tend to struggle with. Research conducted by the CIPD supports this argument, stating that only a small percentage of organisations (6%) consider their talent management systems to be very effective.

Neil Paterson of the Hay Group is quoted as saying that “there is an element of talent management being both a sound bite and a bandwagon” (Warren, 2006, p. 29 cited in Chuai et al, 2008, p. 907) whereas Wiblen et al (2012) give talent management a more divisive edge by suggesting that the use of the word ‘talent’ in addition to exclusion from talent pools and/or access to related development programs may disengage and demotivate employees not ear-marked for such status through a firms’ talent management process (Wiblen et al, 2012). Nijs et al (2013) believe that “talent can be operationalised as an ability and an affective component which function as necessary preconditions for achieving excellence which, in turn, can be operationalised as performing better than others” (p. not specified). Furthermore, Karaveli and Hall (2003, in Meyers et al, 2013) discuss the word ‘potential’
and the fact that many firms who use the term still struggle to define it and grasp the concrete meaning of the word. Ulrich and Smallwood (2012) suggest that talent is a rare feature and that only a small percentage of the workforce is identified as having high potential.

Tansley (2011, cited in Swailes, 2013, p. 33) points to ‘terminological ambiguity’ surrounding the meaning of talent. This is partly due to talent taking on specific meaning in different professional and managerial cultures – the ‘managerialist’ nature of talent management literature was highlighted in the Introduction as one of the key areas identified as prevalence in academic contributions - and is likely to be seen in relation to the strategic position and challenges facing an organisation. A core assumption in talent management revolves around the attraction, identification, nurturing, development and deployment of talent into key positions which have a significant impact on organisational success, in addition to determining the talent gap organisations face at different levels in an effort to plan for succession (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2008, cited in Bjoerkman et al, 2013; Iles et al, 2010; Oladapo, 2014; Harvey, 2014). Cappelli (2008) offers a critical perspective on how firms apply talent management practices, writing that such approaches have “by and large been dysfunctional, leading corporations to lurch from surpluses of talent to shortfalls to surpluses and back again. At its heart, talent management is simply a matter of anticipating the need for human capital and then setting out a plan to meet it.” (p. 74)

Collings et al (2009) also agree that “most definitions suggest the need to identify, select and develop the right people to ensure they realise their potential and hence make a positive contribution to organisational performance”. Their definition of talent management is “the strategic international integration of resourcing and development of key talent involving proactive identification, development and deployment of high performing and high potential strategic employees on a global scale” (p. 7, 8).

Reilly (2008) offers a more critical perspective, suggesting that the attraction, development and retention of talent are, at worst, “a melange of different concepts strung together without a clear statement of what is meant by talent and how we might manage it” (p. 381, original in italics); a view
echoed by Morgan and Jardin (2010), who state that “For all the talk about talent management it is still a curiously vague subject” (p. 25), the definitions and measurements of which are subjective by nature (Nijs et al, 2013).

Scullion et al (2010) provide a definition of talent management which has the following qualities:

1) it encompasses the employee life cycle in an organisation, from hiring to developing and retaining;
2) it focuses on the most strategic roles which, arguably, have the biggest impact in an organisation to achieve strategic priorities;
3) it takes into account global and national contexts and the differences between the two.

Yet, it also highlights another issue which is whether or not ‘talent’ implies an elitist approach to talent management by focusing on “the best people in the most strategic roles” (Scullion et al, op cit). The definition of talent management I will be adopting for the purpose of this empirical study is closely aligned to the one offered by Scullion et al (2010) but with a crucial difference: where Scullion et al appear to advocate an exclusive approach to talent management, I endorse a more inclusive attitude to the management of talent at all levels of the organisation.

Focusing talent management efforts on the incumbents of critical roles within the organisation only, may result in many disillusioned employees at both more junior levels and at peer level to those singled out for special treatment, including development programmes and promotions (Collings et al, 2009; Burkus and Osula, 2011; Whelan et al, 2009). This sense of disillusionment can have a negative long-term impact on performance and attitude as those individuals not deemed to hold critical roles may question their value to the firm; even though they may well play a pivotal role in the success.

In addition, the rhetoric of talent management paints an overly objective, clean, perhaps clinical picture of a structured and unambiguous process which is predicable, rule-based and part of the reoccurring people processes within a stable organisational environment (Buchanan and Badham, 1999). The reality
of talent management, however, arguably looks different: suggesting it is a social process in 
organisations in which organisational politics, personal connections and sponsorship play an important
and unavoidable role; in which talent demand cannot be predicted not matter how well succession is
planned; in which employees seek to change careers and be acknowledged and in which managers are
anxious about holding open conversations with their team members (Legge, 2005; Cappelli, 2008;
Thompkins, 2007; Scullion et al, 2007).

In the following section, the often blurred boundaries between talent management and HR management
will be further explored as the contribution talent management practitioners in the field can make is
often impacted by organisation structure dynamics and ambiguous definitions of roles and
responsibilities; surfacing the tensions which exist in the field of human resources departments in
general in relation to talent management and HR management. This section will also provide a link
back to the overview of the field of talent management outlined in the Introduction to this chapter which
suggested that boundaries of the field itself are indistinct.

2.3 Boundaries within the field: how talent management relates to and differs from Human
Resources Management

The lines between Human Resources Management (HRM) and talent management are blurred for many
authors and practitioners alike. As will be explored in this section, for some authors, talent management
is but a re-branding of HRM whereas others strongly believe it to be a separate field of focus, requiring
a different level of expertise and attention in organisations in order to maintain a competitive advantage.
Section 2.2 briefly reviewed the various definitions of talent management and it hence appears
appropriate to offer a definition of HRM practice before delving a little deeper into the boundaries
between HRM and talent management. In the context of a study focused on Middle-East enterprises,
Iles et al (2012, pp. 483) propose the following to describe HRM: “It must ensure impartiality in
personnel decision-making, foster competition, build in transparency and openness, structure and
Operationalise competence and merit requirements, enhance collective decision-making, foster an ethical regime through scrutiny, standards and audits, strengthen the appeals and grievance systems, extend ethics requirements to contracted-out/out-sourced organisations, and avoid post-separation conflicts of interest.” Practitioners in the field will likely add aspects such as resourcing, retention efforts, leadership coaching as well as business partnering to Iles et al’s (2012) extensive list, demonstrating the considerable remit of the human resources practice.

As stated above, some authors suggest that talent management is a re-branding of HRM practices in order to keep the latter fresh and up-to-date (Iles et al, 2010; Chuai et al, 2008). Zhang and Bright (2012) suggest that “There is no precise definition of talent management because there are various debates in terms of the conceptual boundaries of talent management.” (p. 149). Lewis and Heckman (2006) offer three distinct views regarding the practice: that it is a collection of typical HR type practices, e.g. recruitment, development, selection and succession planning; that it focuses on the idea of talent pools; and, thirdly, a view that suggests that talent is not hindered by organisational or position boundaries and must be managed mainly based on performance.

Lewis and Heckman (2006) argue that talent management is not essentially different from HR management but discuss the inherent conflict in that some definitions focus on an outcome “ensuring the right person is in the right job at the right time” (Jackson & Schuler, 1990, cited in Lewis & Heckman, 2006, p. 140) or having “the right people on the bus” (Collins, 2001, p. 5). Other definitions address process, e.g. “a deliberate and systematic effort by an organization to ensure leadership continuity in key positions and encourage individual advancement” (Rothwell, 1994, p. 6; cited in Lewis & Heckman, 2006, p. 140); and, thirdly, talent management focuses on a specific decision as suggested by Pascal (2004, p. ix, cited in Lewis & Heckman, 2006) “managing the supply, demand, and flow of talent through the human capital engine” (p. 140). There is a degree of confusion among practitioners in the field of HR and talent management as a result of the various definitions and blurred boundaries, as will be explored in Chapter 4, Data Analysis. Many participants shared data which
suggests tensions between rhetoric (this is what we want the HR / talent management function to do) and the reality of organisational life.

**Inclusive and Exclusive Talent Management**

Gallardo-Gallardo et al (2013) point to the tension between HR and Talent Management, stating that “the main criticism of the inclusive approach to talent is that it makes differentiation between talent management and strategic human resources management more difficult” (p. 295).

In an effort to clarify the boundaries between talent management and HRM, Chuai et al (2008, cited in Gelens et al, 2013), suggest that “Where HRM involves the attempt to manage all employees in an organisation, talent management focuses only on those employees who are high on value and uniqueness” (p. 342). This statement is symptomatic of one of the key debates within the talent management framework, e.g. is it an inclusive or exclusive practice (Downs and Swailes, 2013; Gelens et al, 2013). Some scholars suggest that talent management should not be limited to leadership positions only and employees in other key position make significant contributions to the business (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2008, cited in Bjoerkman et al 2013; Collings and Mellahi, 2009, cited in Collings, 2014) whereas Stahl et al (2012, cited in Collings, 2014) write that global talent management systems tend to focus on the management of high potential and high performing employees only in order to have greater organisational impact. Buckingham and Vosburgh (2001, in Meyers et al, 2013), however, favour a more inclusive perspective.

In addition, the focus on the most strategic roles as per Scullion et al (2010), may be too narrowly drawn as a talent management approach as organisational dynamics change and roles which are deemed critical for success today may no longer fulfil that criteria two years later as external influences force an organisation to rethink its strategy and talent bench-strength.

Collings and Mellahi (2009) and Collings (2014) further advocate the identification of critical roles within an organisation which serves as the basis to identify talent to fill these roles through succession
planning and management. The authors also propose that organisations should invest in ensuring the
critical roles are filled with competent incumbents who are nurtured though talent management
processes. Cunningham (2007), for example, speaks of aligning roles with people or, conversely,
aligning people with roles. Both of these approaches suggest that one of the variables in the equation is
fixed: either the person or the role. However, in many of today’s organisations, it is often the case that
both variables are dynamic and under constant review. Ashton and Morton (2005) write that: “[…] good
talent management is of strategic importance and can differentiate an organisation when it becomes a
core competence” (p. 28). This perspective reflects a need for long-term focus but also highlights the
importance of talent management being a ‘core competence’ in firms.

The aforementioned discussion represents some of the tensions within the field of talent management
and the challenges practitioners have to face on a daily basis. Not only need practitioners discern
whether to focus on all employees or the select few, plan succession, assess and develop talent; but
some talent managers may also have to justify their existence as organisational leaders and scholars
alike seek to understand the difference between talent management and HR management.

Moving further along in the discussion, Brim (2008) offers a different perspective by suggesting that
talent is a natural way of behaving and that talent management is a way to identify the enablers and
limiters of an individual. Cappelli (2008) is critical of the concept of organisations being able to predict
talent demand with certainty, stating that “firms need to own up to the fact that our forecasts, especially
the long-range ones, will almost never be perfect.” (p. 78). He further asserts that being able to predict
the talent demand for an organisation several years’ out is but a myth and therefore part of the rhetoric
of talent management.

Scullion et al (2010) stress the need for organisations to take both global strategic priorities as well as
differences across national contexts into consideration in their talent management practices; a practice
Thunnissen et al (2013) refer to as a people management rather than a talent management system, giving
the practice a more holistic and inclusive perspective. Such an approach, which supports a more
overarching process of anticipating future organisational and related people needs; from attracting and integrating new employees to developing both new and existing members of staff finds support by several scholars (Cappelli, 2009; Mandhanya and Shah, 2010; Morgan and Jardin, 2010). Garrow and Hirsch (2008), on the other hand, argue in favour of focusing exclusively on the ‘best people’ by building on their potential and addressing skill gaps or weaknesses.

In contrast to the view presented by Morgan and Jardin above, Collings et al (2010) suggest that “these are indeed exciting times for HR and OD practitioners and the organisations they serve because the business and socio-economic implications of managing talent have never been so well understood, measurable, or vital” (p. 23). Garrow and Hirsch (2008) highlight the importance of a clear talent management strategy to provide focus for the ‘what, where and when’ of talent initiatives in order to offer success to the business. This view is shared by Morgan and Jardin (2010), who argue that “the demand for strategy-based talent management has never been greater” (p. 23).

Promoting internal talent vs. strategic external hiring

Another area of interest in the literature concerns the management of internal talent, e.g. existing employees, versus the – strategic – hiring of external talent to fill vacant roles and succession gaps. Garrow and Hirsch (2008) argue strongly in favour of a link between talent management initiatives and workforce planning; a view which leaves open the question of whether such workforce planning relates to both internal and external talent or one of these groups exclusively. Collings et al (2009) find much clearer words, stating that “there is a tendency to exaggerate the talents of external staff at the expense of internal staff which can de-motivate a large section of the workforce” (p. 16). However, Schwartz and Menon (1985) counter this statement as their findings indicate, certainly among financially troubled organisations, that there is a propensity to focus on external succession in an effort to strengthen and broaden the talent of the firm.
Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1996) offer a perspective on talent management which highlights areas such as power, politics and the social process, moving away from the managerialist view, in particular on the topic of internal succession candidates, stating that “powerful leaders have a habit of grooming second-rate people to succeed them”, suggesting that “succession crises are likely to become more common on the corporate scene” (p. 116). Kesler (2002) agrees, offering that “It is implied in the notion of developing one’s own replacement, that the judgement of the incumbent leader is the best judgement” (p. 13). Kesler (2002) also raises the concern that many executives hire and promote individuals in their own image and likeness: a built-in limitation of the talent pool, which is likely to weaken the organisation as opposed to strengthening it, Kesler (2002) goes so far as to call the narrow search for internal candidates who have been mentored and selected by the previous incumbent a mistake.

Finally, Powell and Lubitsh (2007) argue that organisations have to think outside the box in their approach to talent management, particularly when it comes to harnessing the skills and ambitions of truly ‘extraordinary’ people. Firms should not shy away from breaking the mould of the talent management strategy currently in place, but to “creatively engage” with situations and people (p. 25). In addition, Yapp (2009) highlights that a failure to invest in talent – and a failure to break the mould – can “compromise the ability of the business to deliver”, including “insufficient creativity and innovation to keep the organisation ahead” and “poor follow-through on strategies” (p. 7). Cunningham (2007, p. 5) shares this point of view, suggesting that “there is a clear need to get potential leaders out of their comfort zones (...) and test them in new and unfamiliar territory”. Whether such ‘social experiments’ are carried out and their level of effectiveness, may well depend on the political and social landscape within the firm; the former to be explored in section 2.3 below.

In the two sections above, I attempted to outline some of the tensions which exist in the field of talent management in relation to the various definitions and perspectives, the debate on the inclusive vs. exclusive approach and the strategic hiring of talent compared to the promotion of in-house talent.
Furthermore, the lack of empirical research in the discipline was highlighted: a perspective echoed by Thunnissen et al (2013) who believe that “until now, the majority of the academic literature is still conceptual, trying to respond to the question of what talent management is” (p. 1749).

In addition, the tension between the rhetoric and reality of talent management emerged as a key theme with Huang and Tansely (2012) addressing this directly: “What is also evident (…) is the way in which the obfuscation of rhetoric eventually becomes normalised at the organisational level. In this, the added role played by HR in the talent management initiative as the police of rhetorical practice cannot be underestimated.” (p. 3688). Section 2.3 will briefly explore the political aspects of talent management, building on the rhetoric versus reality theme, before moving on to outline the research methodology in Chapter 3.

2.4 Political Aspects of Talent Management

Vaiman et al (2012) highlight that even “a cursory examination of organisations suggests that decisions around talent are often made without well-understood frameworks” and that instincts and bias influence talent decisions (p. 927). Buchanan and Badham (1999) comment that “political behaviour plays a more significant role in organisational life than is commonly recognised – or than is openly admitted” (p. 1).

The lack of a theoretical foundation in talent management discussed in section 2.2 leads to scholars perhaps struggling to make sense of talent management data and, consequently, practitioners in the field lack evidence-based guidelines to inform their work in organisations (Gelens et al, 2013). Whilst scholars like Toterhi and Recardo (2013) suggest from a positivist view that HR teams focus on “hard facts and quantifiable performance indicators” (p. 41) not dissimilar to those found in sales performance processes to remove ambiguity from talent management, Huang and Tansely (2012) acknowledge that “talent management is (…) a highly contentious innovation” (p. 3674).
A review of the literature suggests that about an equal number of authors believe that politics harm and hinder organisational effectiveness (Kesler, 2002; Van Hulle and Mathur, 1994, cited in Mathur and Salmi, 2006; Thompkins, 2007; Mintzberg, 1985; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007) as believe it promotes an atmosphere of openness as well as reduced ambiguity (Ammenter et al, 2002; Bolman and Deal, 1991; Pfeffer, 1981, Mintzberg, 1983, 1985).

Among the critical voices, Van Hulle and Mathur (1994, cited in Mathur and Salmi, 2006) suggest that “Political participation involves aggressive energies to be exercised because it is about power rather than achievement” (p. 87); a view shared by Zanzi et al (1991), who state that whilst good politicians may be successful in organisations, they are not necessarily effective in fulfilling their roles. Mellina (2015) paints a similar picture, discussing that ‘dark politics’ consumes brain power and emotional energy which diverts attention from advancing the business. He also criticises managers who play politics for personal gain in organisations.

On the other hand, organisational politics and resulting perceptions of an individual’s relationship with the job and the firm in general were referred to by Reis (2010) as “daily, routine circumstances” which “allow ethical dilemmas to occur” (p. 145). According to Thompkins (2007) an “old-fashioned housecleaning” (p. 28) may help address such political issues – the daily, routine circumstances - as Thompkins believes personal interest is the driving force of politics in firms, requiring tough management and control.

Perhaps one of the most critical voices is raised by Mintzberg (1985) who views the system of organisational politics as “reflecting power that is technically illegitimate [...] in its means [...]”. He further asserts that political behaviour is “neither formally authorised, widely accepted, nor officially certified”, and results in divisive and conflictive behaviour which can see various groups and/or individuals fighting one another’s beliefs and ideology (p. 134). In addition, formal authority may be rejected, leading to further unrest and ambiguity within the organisation. Salimaeki and Jaemsen (2010) suggest that “Organisational politics has the potential to have widespread impact on the effectiveness
and efficiency of organisations through various organisational processes, such as performance appraisals, resource allocation, and managerial decision making. The vast majority of research on organisational politics view it as a negative phenomenon, arguing that perceptions of organisational politics stimulate negative, anxiety-provoking reactions. (…) high levels of politics are often negatively associated with job satisfaction and organisational commitment.” (p. 230 – 231).

An alternative perspective is that organisational politics is a given and an inevitable feature of the social process of firms. This view of organisational politics is discussed by Pfeffer (1981) and Ammeter et al (2002) who see politics “as a neutral, and inherently necessary, component of organisational functioning” instead of viewing the topic as "the dark side of employee behaviour” (p. 754). Ammeter et al (2004) also differentiate clearly between political (self-serving) behaviour and leadership, suggesting that “the potential threat of having to explain self-serving behaviour – to be accountable for the behaviour – makes one less likely to engage in such behaviour.” (p. 50, original in italics). Ammeter et al (2002) furthermore suggest that true political skill manifests itself in adapting one’s personal style, behaviour and communication style to changing situations and the target audience (2004) “in a manner that inspires trust, confidence and genuineness, and effectively influences and controls the response of others” (p. 764); all of the above serving to minimise the ambiguity which is present in the majority of organisations and to “give meaning to organisational phenomenon where uncertainty exists” (Ammeter et al., 2002, in Sheard et al, 2011, p. 70).

Treadway et al (2004) reviewed various definitions of political skill in the workplace, suggesting a focus on persuasion, interpersonal style, astuteness and an ability to understand other individuals in the work environment (see also Mintzberg, 1983; Ammeter et al, 2002). Thompkins (2007) builds on this, stating: “Politics is present in all organisations and is comprised of those activities used at all levels to acquire, develop or use power and other resources to obtain individual choices when there is uncertainty or disagreement about choices” (p. 26).
Morgan (1997) offers an altogether more philosophical view on organisational politics: “By recognising that organisation is intrinsically political, in the sense that ways must be found to create order and direction among people with potentially diverse and conflicting interests, much can be learned about the problems and legitimacy of management as a process of government and about the relation between organisation and society” (p. 154). Vigoda-Gadot (2007) encourages balanced relationships on the basis of fairness between managers and employees as a fundamental organisational strategy, stressing that enhancing “fair social exchange relations may reduce the level of organisational politics and positively influence performance” (p. 666); further suggesting that “leadership style is related to organisational politics” (p. 668). This perspective is expanded by Kakabadse (1983) who states that “it is impossible to escape the power-politics interactions that take place between people at work”, (p.1, in Sheard et al, 2011, p. 79) regardless of rank and status; suggesting that organisational politics ‘is’ and needs to be accepted rather than fought.

As briefly stated above, in this thesis I adopt a view that organisational politics is an integral part of organisational life. From this perspective, politics simply ‘is’ and as such, should be accepted and acknowledged more overtly instead of attempting to bury it or, perhaps worse, pretend it does not exist. Morgan (1997), for example, raises the point that most modern organisations encourage a degree of politics as they are “designed as systems of simultaneous competition and collaboration” (p. 167). I should like to refer again to the discrepancy between the rhetoric and reality of talent management in organisations. The rhetoric – or values and behaviours - of a firm may state that politics is frowned upon and not accepted whereas in reality, particularly the talent management process is likely to be influenced by what can be considered political aspects, such as discrepancies between succession plans and actual promotions, and the identification of key talent through favouritism instead of more objective assessments.

So what does all the talk of politics mean in the context of success or failure of talent management programmes in organisations? Sorcher and Brant (2002), for example, highlight that the selection criteria for identifying and promoting high potential individuals may have been flawed as top executives
are working with “incomplete or inaccurate information that leads them to overvalue certain capabilities and qualities. [...] Superior individuals may be weeded out because they do not wear their ambition on their sleeves.” (p. 85). The inaccuracy of such talent information could be affected by the political and social landscape within that organisation. Kesler (2002) builds on this point, proposing that the ownership of the talent pool within a firm is “one element of the politics that must be confronted” (p. 6). Kesler furthermore highlights turf-wars between executives attending ‘talent calibration sessions’, intimidating behaviour, sandbagging, and a lack of candour as key areas of concern in identifying the ‘true’ talent in an organisation. This view is, to a degree, shared by Sheard et al (2011, p. 81) who explain that “human interactions can spark emotions and actions, transmit values, create heroes as well as villains and can lead to creative or destructive outcomes.” Garrow and Hirsch (2008) highlight the necessity of openness in an organisation and the importance of involving employees in the decision making processes as a result of talent conversations. Hence, building on Sheard et al’s (2011) view above, more creative and positive outcomes may be achieved as ‘secrecy’ is – at least to a degree – removed from the process.

Promotions or horizontal career moves are often seen as key performance indicators to measure the success or failure of a company’s talent management programme. Based on the discussions outlined above, an individuals’ performance over a period of time be taken into consideration, including the impact of implemented strategies and decisions, before career moves are decided in talent reviews (Morgan and Jardin, 2010). Mellina (2015) equally urges that integrity and top performance of individuals considered for promotion be deciding factors as opposed to promoting or otherwise bolstering the career of a ‘political employee’ in favour of ‘more deserving’ individuals, hence offering a more ‘rational’ perspective.

Treadway et al (2004) argue that “it is the political skill construct that offers the most appropriate and potentially useful predicator of leader influence in the politically charged workplace.” (p. 494). Wright and Nishii (2007, cited in Dries, 2013) argue that there is a difference between intended, actual, and perceived practices whereby the intended practice is the one planned by management; once
implemented, they become the actual practice and the perceived practice is the subjective interpretation of practices by employees. The disconnect between the intended and perceived practice of talent management has been pointed out as a concern by HR management (Liao et al, 2009, in Gelens et al, 2013) and is also commented upon by Huang and Tansely (2012) in their study of exploration as to how rhetoric is used by different individuals in an organisation to “construct, express and make sense of their own realities and agendas” (p. 3674). Perhaps the difference between the rhetoric and reality of talent management also impacts on the psychological contract due to the changes which have taken place over the last decade in which tenure and loyalty to a firm are no longer the norm (Calo, 2008).

It is the contrast between the rhetoric and reality of talent management which sparked my initial interest and curiosity to explore this topic in more detail, as mentioned in the Introduction Chapter. The tension which exists in talent management between rhetoric and reality also serves as the theoretical backbone of this thesis and as part of my research and exploration of the social and political aspects of talent management; seeking to highlight how knowledge and acknowledgement of these aspects may enrich and inform the talent process. Ross (2013) suggests that talent management practices: “assume a causal relationship between talent and success; that having talent leads to success. The implied inverse of this is that it is the most successful people who are the most talented.” (p. 167). It is perhaps a manifestation of the reality of talent management that some employees’ potential remains untapped and talent decisions which astonish the average employee are made in organisations.

I also suggest that talent management is a socially constructed phenomenon (see Downs and Swailes, 2013) and that the meaning of talent management is context dependant; the actors within an organisation will attribute different meaning to the rhetoric of the firms’ talent process within the context and organisational reality these individuals work in. Vaiman et al (2012), for example, argue that in order for talent management to be successful in different types of organisations, other forces such as culture, institutional and historical factors need to be considered, i.e. talent management should be seen as part of a whole social system as opposed to a stand-alone HR system or process.
Perhaps it is the conflict between the rhetoric and reality of talent management that creates a vacuum which, in some cases, is filled with social and political elements in firms. Salimaeki and Jaemsen (2010), suggest that “political activities are likely to manifest themselves in settings in which the appropriateness of certain courses of action is sufficiently ambiguous so as to allow discretionary behaviour and one is able to control resources, hence creating a means for political actions to occur.” Arguably, in the majority of firms, the senior leaders are seen as role models for an organisation who, in turn, significantly influence organisational attitudes towards and outcomes of talent management interventions; encouraging positive perceptions if senior leadership visibly supports such interventions (Garrow and Hirsch 2008, Ready and Conger, 2007). Mintzberg characterises organisations as political arenas and referred to organisational politics as a “paradoxical phenomenon” that both irritates and serves a purpose (1983; 1985, p. 152).

Ready and Conger (2007), on the other hand, advocate passion in organisations in an effort to infuse corporate culture and counterbalance bureaucratic routines.

Downs and Swailes (2013) advocate that talent must be “seen as a socially constructed phenomenon that takes on different meanings in different contexts” (p. 268). My understanding of the above statement in the context of talent management is that every organisation is, to a degree, unique in terms of its culture, values, behaviours, purpose, mission and strategy. Talent in one firm may not be seen as talent in another organisational contexts which, based on a firms’ strategy, vision, etc., will place value and emphasis on different personal characteristics, capabilities and skills. Hence, talent should be understood as a constructed phenomenon within a social setting.

At the same time, Downs and Swailes (2013) confront what they refer to as the mainstream view of talent management which focuses on the management of high performing and high potential individuals and provoke conversation on moving on from metaphors of war and “narratives of talent scarcity” although they acknowledge that people have different “qualities, skills and competency, some innate and others acquired” (p. 268). It is the social constructivist perspective, in addition to the tension
between the rhetoric and reality of talent management that I will be adopting for the thesis and field research. In seeking to understand ‘how talent management works’ in participating organisations, I will aim to ascertain the social construction of their respective talent processes; how these are similar or different across the research sample and which circumstances do the organisations operate in that might impact their talent management practice. As outlined above, it is anticipated that the reality of talent management in participating firm will differ from the rhetoric captured in in-house brochures and guidelines published in an effort to streamline talent management, making it palatable for employees.

Greenleaf (1998) suggests that the issues of power and authority in organisations is under scrutiny and that “people are beginning to learn, however haltingly, to relate to one another in less coercive and more supporting ways” (p. 23). From a social and political perspective in firms, this offers a different and more inclusive view of how organisations could manage their talent. Ammeter et al (2004) echo: “Both accountability and trust are central to the social interactions that occur within organisations. The absence of either of these components would result in chaos in organisations as behaviours ran undirected and unchecked.” (p. 61). Perhaps this point of view links to Thunnisen et al (2013) who call for more mature theoretical frameworks to support talent management and also issue an urgent call for more empirical research to develop and test existing frameworks currently found in conceptual literature. In addition, they seek more knowledge about the impact stakeholders outside of HR have on talent management practice so that HR practitioners are better prepared to handle talent management issues faced by and within their organisations, e.g. leadership from senior executives may serve to make talent management clearer and less coercive (Greenleaf, 1977 and 1998). Williams and May (1996) build on this, stating that the “world is either taken to be a product of the mind and the meanings that people attach to their social circumstances or, alternatively, it is their social circumstances that structure the mind.” (p. 103); a perspective with links back to Downs and Swailes (2013) statement on the socially constructed phenomenon of talent management.

Some organisations drive their talent management agenda from the very top, with Salkey (2005) offering the example of a CEO hiring top talent onto his executive staff in the absence of a concrete
vacancy just to secure and bolster the future talent pipeline of the business. Collins (2001) concurs, suggesting that it is important to first “get the right people on the bus by building a superior executive team”, followed by then “figuring out the best path to greatness” (p. 47). Lamoureux (2009) equally suggests success in talent management hinges on the engagement of the CEO and executive team in the process and that HR supports the identification of high potential employees.

2.5 Concluding Thoughts

Value-free and totally objective evaluations of individuals or situations are close to impossible to achieve (Patton, 2002). Buchanan and Badham (1999) expand, stating that “the academic management literature does not adequately explore the shaping role of political behaviour (…)”; leaving organisations open to potential turf-wars which cast a shadow over well-intentioned talent management processes as these, in reality, are influenced significantly by power and politics.

Mintzberg (1985) states that “the purpose of an organisation, after all, is to produce goods and services, not to provide an arena in which people can fight with one another” (pp. 148). 13 years later, Greenleaf (1998) laments the unprecedented leadership crisis in organisations, driven by political motives; a perspective echoed by Zani et al (1991) who state that: “(…) managers who are successful may be astute politicians but they are not necessarily effective” (p. 220; see also Collings et al, 2011).

The essence of my study will explore how individuals in organisations cope with the ambiguity surrounding the reality of talent management; and how they manage the process and consequences of the practice. I will discuss the implications for this study’s design and the choices about methodology in the following Chapter 3.
Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In the context of the empirical research, I wish to discover the views and experiences of HR and talent management professionals in a variety of organisations to seek an answer to the research question proposed below, bearing in mind the overarching desire to explore the social and political aspects of talent management in organisations.

The research question I hence set out to explore in the context of the research field work is as follows:

"How does talent management work in organisations?"

To structure this methodology chapter, I will be referring to the 'research onion' (Saunders et al, 2009). The 'onion' offers a systematic framework for discussing and making choices at each layer, starting with philosophies, then moving on to approaches and strategies; followed by choices, time horizons and, finally, the procedures and techniques.

3.2 Research Philosophies

Turning to the first layer of the 'research onion', Saunders et al (2009) discuss the various research philosophies which underpin the way a researcher views the world. Johnson and Clarke (2006, in Saunders et al, 2009) encourage researchers to be able to defend their philosophical choices "in relation to the alternatives" (p. 108) rather than stating one philosophy is 'better' than another. The question a researcher is looking to answer, e.g. ‘How does talent management work in organisations’, forms the basis for the choices made and this section will seek to explain the philosophical choice made.
Saunders et al (2009) describe four research philosophies: Pragmatism, Positivism, Realism, and Interpretivism; each of which will be described in more detail below with explanations as to the choices I made about each in terms of applicability and relevance to the research question which led to the philosophy of Interpretivism being selected as the most appropriate choice for the research into how talent management works in participating organisations. In an effort to provide a succinct overview, I will refer to the table-format overview created by Saunders et al (2009, p. 119) after providing the following brief definitions of research terms:

**Ontology**
The researcher’s view of the nature of reality or being

**Epistemology**
The researcher’s view regarding what constitutes acceptable knowledge

**Axiology**
The researcher’s view of the role of values in research

Axiology is an important and perhaps 'undervalued' part of research. Acknowledging one's own values and how they impact on research and interpretation of results is crucial in order for the work to be accepted as credible. This will play an important role in the proposed study as my many years’ experience in the field of talent management are likely to have led to bias and may hence undermine the research through embedded messaging in the interviews. I acknowledge a bias toward a belief that politics in one way or another plays a role in talent decisions. The bias, however, that I am most mindful of is one towards fairness, as previously outlined.

**Positivism**

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<tr>
<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Axiology</th>
<th>Data Collection Techniques most often used</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External, objective and independent of social actors</td>
<td>Only observable phenomena can provide credible data, facts. Focus on causality and law like generalisations, reducing phenomena to simplest elements.</td>
<td>Research is undertaken in a value-free way, the researcher is independent of the data and maintains an objective stance.</td>
<td>Highly structured, large samples, measurement, quantitative, but can use qualitative.</td>
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The philosophy of positivism sees researchers work with observable phenomena resulting in 'law-like
generalisations’. Silverman (2010) states that "positivism treats 'social facts' as existing independently
of the activities of both participants and researchers" (p.102). Whilst the researcher can state a
hypothesis on the basis of which the research will be carried out, it is rather trickier to conduct such
research in an organisation with people rather than working in a more controllable laboratory
environment. Such conversations can be difficult to capture in a more purist scientific way; one which
can, however, be expected in positivist research.

Furthermore, Saunders et al (2009) underscore the importance of a value-free approach to research
when using the positivist philosophy. As I am driven by my values - particularly a value around 'fairness'
- in conducting my research and have a strong preference for human interaction in the field work, a
positivist approach does not appear suitable to the proposed research; acknowledging, however, that
personal interaction does not necessarily lead to 'better' research outcomes. I am aware that I can be
negative towards an event I perceive to be unfair. In order to guard against this in my research field
work, I reminded myself of the need for neutrality, avoiding leading questions in my interviews and
taking clues for follow-up questions from the research participants instead.

**Realism**

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<th><strong>Ontology</strong></th>
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<th><strong>Axiology</strong></th>
<th><strong>Data Collection Techniques most often used</strong></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is objective. Exists independently of human thoughts and beliefs or knowledge of their existence (realist), but is interpreted through social conditioning (critical realist)</td>
<td>Observable phenomena provide credible data, facts. Insufficient data means inaccuracies in sensations (direct realism). Alternatively, phenomena create sensations which are open to misinterpretation (critical realism). Focus</td>
<td>Research is value laden; the researcher is biased by world views, cultural experiences and upbringing. These will impact on the research.</td>
<td>Methods chosen must fit the subject matter, quantitative or qualitative.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Realism relates to scientific enquiry and, similar to positivism, assumes a scientific approach to knowledge development (Saunders et al, 2009) with a position stating that “objects exist independently of our knowledge of their existence” (Saunders et al, 2009, p. 599). Realism resonates in the context of the social and political aspects of talent management: just because one cannot see this directly, does not mean they don’t exist. The Critical Realist position suggests that “what we experience are sensations, the images of the things in the real world, not the things directly” and the Direct Realist position is one of “what you see is what you get, e.g. what we experience through our senses portrays the world accurately” (Saunders et al, 2009, p. 591). Organisational politics can be experienced through all three positions outlined above although Saunders et al (op cit) argue in favour of the critical realist position in management research in that this position believes that the social world is constantly changing.

**Interpretivism**

| Ontology          | Epistemology                                      | Axiology                                          | Data Collection Techniques most often used |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------|                                                  |                                           |
| Socially constructed, subjective, may change, multiple. | Subjective meanings and social phenomena. Focus upon the details of situation, a reality behind these details, subjective meanings motivating actions. | Research is value bound, the researcher is part of what is being researched, cannot be separated and so will be subjective. | Small samples, in-depth investigations, qualitative. |

From an ontological perspective, I am predominantly a 'social constructivist' as I believe that the world is socially constructed by the actors within it. This perspective perhaps serves to explain why organisational cultures differ as the people within the firm construct their own version of reality based on values, purpose, and employee backgrounds, to name but a few influencing factors.
For the purpose of management related research, the positivist approach seems too restrictive as I do not believe the social and political aspects of organisational life can be captured applying law-like generalisations. My natural propensity to taking an empathetic stance with people lends itself to research concerning itself with human resources management which involves in-depth investigations into the social phenomena of an organisation. Understanding the roles humans play as 'social actors' in different aspects of their lives - of which work is one - has been of interest to me for some time. In particular, the way in which individuals interact in organisations and the impact this has on other people, e.g. employees at all levels of a firms’ hierarchy, are phenomena I have observed with growing curiosity for a number of years.

Building on the above, and following on from interpretivism in particular, Remenyi et al (1998, cited in Saunders et al, 2009) suggests that the application of social constructionism offers the researcher the opportunity to study "the details of the situation" in an effort to "understand the reality or perhaps a reality working behind them" (p. 111). It is the 'subjective' and constructed nature of talent reviews which first drew my attention to social constructionism [recognising that the word 'subjective' itself has become quite 'loaded' in meaning over the years and now bears a very negative connotation (Patton, 2002)]. Guba and Lincoln (1990, cited in Patton, 2002) stated that "Constructivism begins with the premise that the human world is different from the natural, physical world and therefore must be studied differently" (p. 96). Humans have evolved to the capacity to interpret and construct reality (original in italics), meaning a researcher applying social constructivism will seek to understand "How the people in the setting have constructed their reality? what are their reported perceptions, beliefs and world-views? and, finally, "What are the consequences of their constructions for their behaviours and for those with whom they interact"? (Patton, 2002, p. 96).

The last question offered in Patton's summary on social constructionism resonates particularly in the context of my proposed research on the role of organisational politics in talent decisions. At face value, talent conversations should be straight-forward, observation based discussions about people, their perceived potential to progress in the organisation as well as their performance against objectives.
However, this tends to look quite different on the inside of companies: objectives are set against moving targets, 'perceptions' are 'reality' and those with strong influencing skills - or the most vocal - tend to dominate conversations and assessments. Hence, talent management is best understood as social construction, played out in social interaction and discourse among managers. Therefore, an interpretivist approach is suitable for this research. This approach is also in line with the perspectives offered by Downs and Swailes (2013) who concur that talent management is a socially constructed phenomenon and that the meaning of talent management is context dependant with the actors in an organisation attributing different meaning to the rhetoric of a firms' talent process within the reality the actors work in.

**Pragmatism**

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<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Axiology</th>
<th>Data Collection Techniques most often used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External, multiple, view chosen to best enable answering of research question.</td>
<td>Either or both observable phenomena and subjective meanings can provide acceptable knowledge dependent upon the research question. Focus on practical applied research, integrating different perspectives to help interpret the data.</td>
<td>Values play a large role in interpreting the results, the researcher is adopting both objective and subjective points of view.</td>
<td>Mixed or multiple method designs, quantitative and qualitative.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pragmatism allows for more than one view and approach to be included in the research, giving the researcher more freedom to explore within their own values system (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998 in Saunders et al, 2009). Whilst a number of authors, including Silverman (2010), Ghauri and Gronhaug (2005) as well Sekaran and Bougie (2010) make no reference to pragmatism in their respective work, Patton (2002) is a strong advocate, suggesting it offers the researcher an increase in practical methodologies available, hence "judging the quality of a study by its intended purposes, available
resources, procedures followed (...) for a specific audience” (p. 136). According to Patton (2002), who takes great ‘offence’ at the advocacy of one-sided philosophies in research as stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), pragmatism presents "appropriateness as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality, recognising that different approaches are appropriate in different situations” (p. 73, original in italics).

Subjectivism and objectivism are discussed in the context of pragmatism, with the former holding that "social phenomena are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of those social actors concerned with their existence" and the latter suggesting that "social entities exist in reality external to social actors concerned with their existence" (Saunders et al, 2009, p. 110). For the purpose of this research, it will be assumed that social entities, such as organisations in the broadest sense, are a product of the individuals who work within them and hence shape the culture and ‘way of being’ for all employees; as well as for those associated with the firm, such as customers, partners or suppliers. This relates to the research question as to the role of politics in organisations and their influence on talent decisions. If organisations are indeed a construct shaped by the actors within them, how can politics among individuals not play a role, e.g. are politics endemic to organisations? Patton (2002) offers a contextual view on 'Verstehen', stating "The Verstehen premise asserts that human beings can and must be understood in a manner different from other objects of study because humans have purposes and emotions; they make plans, construct cultures, and hold values that affect behaviour. (...) Human beings live in a world that has special meaning to them.” (p. 52, original in italics). It is the 'construction of cultures' in particular which I will refer to again later in this chapter.

3.3 Research Approach

The preceding overview suggests that an inductive approach to the research field work is appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the research question, e.g. I am not seeking to prove a theory. The inductive approach allows for "understanding of the multiple interrelationships among dimensions that
emerge from the data without making prior assumptions” (Patton, 2002, p. 56). Whilst some researchers combine inductive and deductive methods in their work – in fact, Saunders et al (2009) argue that most research combines deduction and induction - my approach will focus on allowing data to emerge, concentrating on inductive thematic analysis. However, given the years of experience in the field of talent management, I acknowledge a bias toward a belief that politics in one way or another plays a role in talent decisions.

3.4 Research Strategy

Having peeled back two layers of the 'research onion', I now turn to the third layer which discusses the research strategy. A number of approaches are available to support the researcher through the process of collecting 'data' for analysis, ranging from ethnography and grounded theory to experiments and surveys (Patton, 2002; Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005; Saunders et al, 2009).

In term of selecting the most appropriate approach for the field work, I am concerned with impacting and potentially hindering open talent conversations in firms through my presence as an observer, an aspect usually included in research on the basis of ethnography, grounded theory or case studies. Upon careful consideration, I propose a research strategy on the basis of semi-structured interviews, followed by an inductive thematic analysis of the data. Defined as a "purposeful discussion between two or more people” (Kahn and Cannell, 1957, cited in Saunders et al, 2002, p. 318), the semi-structured interviews allow for detailed exploration of the research question ‘How does talent management work in organisations?’ and will be explored in more detail in section 3.6. Whilst not linked to a specific 'phenomenology' the open-ended interviews are assumed to be the most appropriate strategy, given the nature of the research question (Patton, 2002). I furthermore propose that the semi-structured interview approach offers opportunity to build rapport and empathise with research participants in a way which will be more difficult to achieve using other strategies. Interviews also support the collection of small sample sizes associated with Interpretivism; the chosen research philosophy.
Arguably, ethnography, which "seeks to understand the culture of a group of people", and case studies, "studying the particularity and complexity of a single case and understanding its activity within important circumstances" (Stake, 1995; cited in Patton, 2002, p. 297) could have found application in my research. Ethnography, whereby the interactions of people and their behaviours in organisations or in a particular setting are observed over a period of time (Silverman, 2010), would undoubtedly lead to insightful conclusions. Brewer (in Cassell and Symon, 2004) suggests that ethnographic research may include numerous techniques of collecting data, including discourse analysis, in-depth interviews, video and photography as well as participant observation. Although these methods also find application in other, non-ethnographic, research, "what distinguishes their application in ethnography is that they are employed to meet the objectives that distinguish it as a style of research - the exploration of the social meanings of people in the setting by close involvement in the field" (Brewer, 2004, in Cassell and Symon, 2004, p. 313). However, 'good' ethnographic research requires the researcher to immerse herself totally within an organisation in order to gain trust and be more naturally accepted into what are often seen as highly confidential talent review conversations. The proposed study would no doubt benefit from this total immersion approach; however, my full-time employment does not allow for this method and will hence not be considered as an alternative way to research the topic.

Case study research, on the other hand, would have been a potential option. Yin (2009) states that the "desire to understand complex social phenomena" and "investigate to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events - such as (...) small group behaviour and organisational and managerial processes" (p. 4) echoes the desired outcome of the proposed study. Instead of a single, in-depth study of one organisation's process, or two comparative cases, each participating firm could be portrayed as a case study in its own right. Case studies offer an opportunity to deal with a full variety of evidence, gathered through observations, documentation, attendance at meetings and interviews (Yin, 2009; Cassell and Symon, 2004). Most organisations would be willing to engage in interviews and perhaps share talent process related documentation. As with ethnography, observations, however, are significantly more 'tricky': dynamics often change when an external observer enters the room and participants may not feel as free to have an honest people conversation with an 'outsider' present.
Whereas ethnographic research allows the researcher to fully immerse themselves in a setting, hence blending into the background more and, over time, becoming part of the system, case study researchers may not be afforded the same openness. Yin (2003) further highlights that case studies are also very dependent on the context in which they are undertaken, again leading to questions of ‘validity’ of collected data. Case study research will consequently not be considered for the proposed research.

Experiments and surveys tend to be associated with deductive research projects and are hence do not appeal as a suitable research strategy for management research based on social constructivism and will not be discussed further.

Grounded theory may achieve the research outcome as it combines interviews as well as observations; hence offering a broader insight into a firm and its ways of working. Strauss and Corbin (1990, cited in Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005, p. 214) define grounded theory as "theory derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed" (p. 121). Partington (2002) builds that "the twin pillars of grounded theory methodology are constant comparison and theoretical sampling" (p. 137, original in italics). Sekaran and Bougie (2010) offer that "grounded theory expresses the idea that theory will emerge from data through an iterative process that involves repeated sampling, collection of data, and analysis of data until 'theoretical saturation' - when no new information about the subject emerges in repeated cases - is reached" (p. 297). Denzin (1997, cited in Patton, 2002) suggests that 'The grounded theory approach is the most influential paradigm for qualitative research in the social sciences today'. It is grounded in field work in an effort to explain observations, "focusing on the process of generating theory rather than a particular theoretical content” (p. 125). Silverman (2010) points out that 'grounded theory' involves three stages: 1) "an initial attempt to develop categories which illuminate the data” 2) "an attempt to 'saturate' these categories with many appropriate cases in order to demonstrate their relevance”; and 3) "the attempt to develop these categories into more general analytic frameworks with relevance outside the setting” (p. 434). Grounded theory shares with ethnography "the purpose of generating understanding through iterative comparisons of data and theory, and both approaches aim to
develop theoretical ideas which are grounded in data before the ideas are considered in light of existing theory (Partington, 2002, p. 117).

Grounded theory means that theory itself is developed inductively about social processes in particular, making it very suitable for management research. A point of critique, however, suggests that "what we 'see' when conducting research is influenced by multiple factors, one of which is what we already know about the social world being studied" (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005, p. 214). This may leave the study open to being influenced by personal bias. Furthermore, for the purpose of this proposed research, the required observations within grounded theory pose the same challenge as outlined previously under ethnographic and case study research (e.g. personal time constraints) and, as a result, needs to be rejected for practical reasons.

In summary, the semi-structured interview approach appeared to be the most suitable options and was utilised in the research field work. Limitations of this approach are offered in Chapter 6, Conclusions and Recommendations.

### 3.5 Research Choices and Time Horizons

The fourth and fifth layers of the 'research onion concern themselves with 'choices', e.g. mono-method, mixed, or multi-method research, and 'time horizons' respectively. Highlighting the need for 'appropriateness' in relation to the study, Patton (2002) also advocates that "multiple methods and a variety of data types can contribute to methodological rigor" (p. 68). Silverman (2010) suggests keeping research simple, focusing on one type of data to analyse and avoiding the trap of moving on from one type of data to another when evaluation becomes tricky and problematic. With a research strategy focused on interviews and subsequent thematic analysis, it is proposed that a mono-method approach is the most suitable choice. It is not intended to include surveys or questionnaires - forms of quantitative research - to this field work, resulting in mixed method research; nor are interventions such as
participant observations included, leading to multi-method research. I suggest the interviews provide sufficient data to answer the research question. As previously mentioned and also explored in section 3.6, the opportunity to speak to research participants face-to-face offers a conversation-style interview in which interviewees can explore and share what is important to them when answering the question of how talent management works, rather than being constrained either by structured interviews or written questionnaires or surveys. On the other hand, I acknowledge that some research participants may feel uneasy about sharing their firms’ talent management practices and offer less guarded insights by filling in a questionnaire. Nonetheless, this study focuses on a mono-method approach with recommendations for further research offered in Chapter 6, Conclusions and Recommendations.

It is proposed that the interviews are conducted in a cross-sectional rather than longitudinal time horizon. Cross-sectional analysis, according to Thietart et al (2001) "requires the data to be collected at one particular moment, or at least over a period sufficiently short to be considered as such" (p. 333). Sekaran and Bougie (2010) concur: "(...) data are gathered just once, perhaps over a period of days or weeks or months, in order to answer a research question" (p. 119). The challenge is that data gathering in management research can take a considerable amount of time, opening the study up to the challenge of it being longitudinal - "studying phenomena over a course of time" (Thietart et al, 2001, p. 332) - instead of cross-sectional. However, longitudinal research may also be used to study the impact of organisational change, such as leadership changes or new operating strategies, in order to compare research data before and after the event (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010).

It is anticipated that the proposed research will be carried out across all participating organisations (Section 3.7) within a four to six-month timeframe, consisting of a one-time interview. It is possible that one or more participating firms will have changed their talent review process just at the time the proposed research formally starts. Whether this has an impact on how talent conversations and assessments really happen is difficult to ascertain unless a further study is carried out to investigate this particular phenomenon; leading to a longitudinal study. However, the proposed research will not seek
to explore 'cause and effect' and will be based on the assumption that the newness of a revised process is unlikely to have altered any political undercurrents present in the organisation.

3.6 Research Techniques and Procedures

The final layer of the research 'onion' addresses techniques and procedures in field work, e.g. the actual collection of data and analysis thereof.

Based on the research strategy and choice outlined above, it is proposed that the research will be a qualitative rather than a quantitative piece of work, using unstructured interviews to gather data, followed by thematic analysis. This proposal is supported by Strauss and Corbin (1990), who suggest that "Qualitative research is (...) common in social and behavioural sciences and among practitioners who want to understand human behaviour and functions. It is quite suitable for studying organisations, groups and individuals (cited in Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005, p. 111). Remenyi et al (1998) refer to interviews as a "method commonly used in non-positivist research; constituting an effective means of collecting large amounts of evidence in one or across several research sites" (p. 111).

The use of questionnaires - a form of quantitative research - does lend itself to some forms of people-related research, however, it is suggested that the very nature of the proposed research question cannot be fully explored without the benefit of a face-to-face conversation (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010).

Symon and Cassell (2004) suggest that social constructionists focus on the "constructive nature of language, arguing it does not just describe the external social world and people's internal mental states, it actively constructs them through discourse in interaction" (p. 13). This means a statement such as "I am happy" is made by an individual in order to elicit a response from the other person, rather than just sharing a personal feeling. It is a "discursive act aimed at achieving an objective" (op cit). Another key characteristic of a constructivist approach to interviewing is the principle that every text "has an infinite
number of possible interpretations, and no one interpretation can be seen as superior to others” (Symon and Cassell, 2004, p. 13). Silverman (2010) suggests that the constructionist model is "concerned with questions of 'what?' and 'how?' and the realisation that "facts are constructed in particular social contexts" (p. 108). I certainly encouraged research participants to ‘tell me more’ when a fairly sweeping answer was offered in an effort to understand the social and organisational context for the firms talent management practice in more detail to help answer the research question.

The proposed semi-structured interviews will be based on just one open question asked consistently of all participants to start the conversation: "Please tell me how talent management works in your organisation". This approach is echoed by Partington (2002), who also advocates the use of qualitative research into phenomena requiring "exploration of detailed in-depth data" such as the proposed research (p. 109). Depending on the depth of insight offered by interviewees, a potential follow-up question may be asked: "And how does talent management actually happen in this organisation?” The aim of the research is to ‘get under the veneer’ of the organisation and understand what role, if any, politics play in the talent management interventions within the participating companies. I thus intend to keep the dialogue as open as possible while, at the same time, keeping participants focused on the topic, looking to ask suitable follow-up questions, e.g. probes and prompts, instead of working through a ‘catalogue’ of prepared queries to explore with interviewees.

Structured interviews, in which the researcher personally administers a questionnaire to participants, appears quite restrictive for the topic at hand. Conducting such structured conversations across participating organisations is likely to lead to less openness and 'tick-box' conversations whereas the proposed in-depth interviews appear more appropriate in line with the desired interview outcome; an insight into how talent management really works in the firm.

A researcher can chose the most appropriate approach from an array of interviews. Saunders et al (2009) offer a succinct overview of the various typologies, including structured, semi-structured and unstructured or in-depth interviews. Healey (1991, cited in Saunders et al, 2009) differentiates between

The structured interview will often see the use of questionnaires, providing a standardised platform across any number of interviews to be carried out in the study. Responses are often pre-coded in an effort to obtain quantifiable data. It is for this reason that structured interviews are also referred to as 'quantitative research interviews' (Saunders et al, 2009).

King (2004, cited in Saunders et al, 2009) suggests that semi-structured and unstructured interviews, on the other hand, are referred to as 'qualitative research interviews'. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher, within the given context of an interview, to omit and/or re-sequence pre-prepared questions as well as add questions deemed to be relevant to the organisations. Such conversations are typically recorded and transcribed and/or noted down in detail to ensure the richness of the interview is adequately covered and can be reflected in the analysis of data (Remenyi et al, 1998). Saunders et al (2009) point out that the in-depth interview is akin to the informant interview discussed by Robson (2002) whereas the respondent interview compares to the structured interview approach (Easterby-Smith et al, 2008, cited in Saunders et al, 2009).

Researchers seeking informal, more exploratory conversations are likely to choose the unstructured, or in-depth, interview to conduct their studies. Whilst there are no restrictive sets of questions to hinder an open and exploratory conversation, the interviewer does need to remain focused on the question to be explored. Kvale (1996, cited in Roulston, 2010) suggested six criteria for “judging the quality of an interview, including relevant, rich and spontaneous answers from interviewees; a ratio of short questions to long answers; the degree of answer follow-up by the interviewer; the interviewers attempt to verify his/her interpretation of the answers during the conversation; and, finally, the story is communicated as part of the interview and does not require a lot of explanation” (p. 145).
Roulston (2010) points out that the novice researcher in particular needs to find a way “through the maze of advice literature that abounds with respect to qualitative interviews” (p. 204). She further suggests that interview typologies blur and no single interview approach should be seen as absolute. Instead, Roulston (2010) believes that the novice researcher needs to “design a study and learn how to generate data for analysis that will inform their research question; consonant with the epistemological and theoretical assumptions underlying the study's design” (p. 203).

Roulston's (2010) typological conceptions of 'transformative' - "the researcher intentionally aims to challenge and change the understandings of participants" (p. 220, original in italics); 'decolonizing' - a key emphasis being "a contribution to restoring justice for indigenous people" (p. 223) ; and 'postmodern' - "a vehicle for producing performance texts and performance ethnographies about self and society" (p. 219) do not find application in the proposed study and will not be explored further. However, aspects of the concepts described as 'constructionist', in which "the interview is a social setting in which data are co-constructed by an interviewer and an interviewee to generate situated accountings and possible ways of talking about research topics (Silverman, 2001, cited in Roulston, 2010); 'romantic', whereby the "relationship is one in which genuine rapport and trust is established (..) in order to generate the kind of conversation that is intimate and self-revealing” (p. 217); and the 'neo-positivist' concept, in which "the skilful interviewer asks good questions, while carefully minimising bias and researcher influences through taking a neutral role” (p. 204) can find application in the proposed semi-structured interviews. An example of research on the basis of semi-structured interviews and the application of a social constructivist lens can be found in the publication by Wiblen et al (2012).

It is a combination of the ‘romantic’ and ‘neo-positivist’ concepts that was applied to the semi-structured interviews with research participants. Comments such as participants finding the interviews very ‘cathartic’ suggest that the ‘romantic’ notion of genuine rapport and trust was achieved and the quality of data as per Chapter 4 suggest a neutral role was assumed with ‘good questions’ asked to stimulate conversation without bias influencing the tone and direction of discussion.
The field work took place between October 2013 and the end of July 2014. Participants were invited in writing - using e-mail - to take part in the research. Sample selection will be further discussed in section 3.7. Each interview was a one-off intervention; none of which required follow-up conversations, e.g. to clarify unclear voice recordings or to verify statements which did not make sense in the write-up. No data was lost. Interviews took between 60 and 85 minutes. Consent for audio recording of the conversations was requested in the invitation letter and re-iterated at the start of the meeting. The recordings allowed for transcribing to aid analysis of emerging themes in a more structured approach compared to note-taking alone. Furthermore, recording the conversations allowed for focus on the conversation partner, paying attention to body language and maintaining eye contact, as opposed to concentrating only on writing notes and losing the conversation thread and momentum; although some note-taking was useful to track the conversation and make notes of comments by participants to come back to (Saunders et al, 2009). Body language, such as shifting in the chair, rolling of eyes, sighs or raised eyebrows, provided clues as to how the interviewee was feeling (about the topic being discussed) and provided opportunity for appropriate follow-up questions. Other advantages of recording the interviews included the possibility of using direct quotes, where appropriate, and the option of listening to interviews again as and when needed or desired.

As a researcher, I wish to ensure that participants feel comfortable and at ease in the conversations as experience suggests this usually leads to more openness earlier on in the meeting. Relying on my interpersonal skills served to create a relaxed atmosphere. Furthermore, interviews were conducted in participant's places of work unless a request was made by the participant to meet off-site instead as, for some individuals, removing themselves from the work environment resulted in a more detached and dispassionate perspective, leading to increased openness and candour. When setting up the interviews, the question of the most comfortable and convenient place to conduct the conversations was asked. Conference rooms or private offices were used to conduct interviews in participants’ work places; one interview took place in a hotel café and one at a participants’ private home, although the quality of the recording conducted in the hotel cafe suffered with some short statements being nearly inaudible in the recording. Confidentiality was maintained at all times.
3.7 Research Samples and Criteria

I decided to investigate more than one industry sector because, having worked in six international and global companies since the start of my career, I have come to perceive that the talent management challenges are similar, if not identical, across different industries; regardless of how long a firm has been established. Among the issues facing today’s firms, based on experience and conversations with peers over many years, are talent attraction, retention and development; offering career progression opportunities, engagement, diversity as well as the question as to whether talent management is divisive in terms of offering accelerated development for key talent or not. For the purpose of this research and the associated sampling, I believed it likely but wanted to discover whether similar phenomena occur in heterogeneous organisations.

The selection of the research sample took place in two main steps:

1) Drawing up a list of potential organisations to invite to the study;
2) Considering the sample of individuals to invite to the research.

Both of these steps will be explored in more detail on the following pages.

Step 1 – Drawing up a list of potential organisations to invite to the study

The first steps in identifying the research sample was the drawing up of a list of potential firms to contact across various industry sectors including Oil and Gas, Manufacturing, Fast Moving Consumer Goods, Information Technology, Financial Services, Government, Tourism, Consulting and Airline/Aviation with an outcome of having between 15 and 20 organisations in the final sample. This list of firms included numerous companies with which I have some form of connection, either through former colleagues or through individuals I previously met on personal development programmes or events sponsored by shared external suppliers and with whom I have stayed in touch. I expected a number of firms to decline participation so the initial list comprised 51 organisations. However, I did not anticipate the drop-out and decline rate to be as high as it was and will address this in more detail later in the section.
The number of participating firms was also decided upon with reference to Sekaran and Bougie (2010), who discuss the "general rule in qualitative research is that you continue to sample until you are not getting any new information or are no longer gaining new insights. Note that the sample size will, therefore, at least partly, depend on the heterogeneity of the population" (p. 298). Patton (2002) offers a helpful view in relation to sample size in qualitative research: "There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, (...) what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources" (p. 244). Saunders et al (2009) suggest that in this type of study, data saturation will be reached after ten interviews. The field work will continue to include another three to five organisations in order to test this assumption. I also assert that inviting a cross-section of industries to take part in the research will increase validity by incorporating multiple data sources and in that peers from multiple sectors will see themselves reflected in the research and may hence find application of results easier to implement or 'buy into'. This view links to the earlier stated choice of interpretivism and social constructivism in that all organisations, regardless of sector, are socially and politically constructed entities by the players within them; each with their own unique cultures and rituals, on the basis of which talent is managed and developed (Patton, 2002).

Step 2 - Considering the sample of individuals to invite to the research

In narrowing down the choice of which organisations to invite to the study, companies I previously worked in as well as those into which I have contacts emerged as suitable candidates for the study: covering a breadth of industrial sectors; some steeped in over 100 years of tradition with others much 'younger'; and workforce numbers ranging from under 100 employees to nearly 115,000.

Upon consideration, based on choices made about the methodology thus far and the selection applied to potential participant firms, a key informant sample appeared to be a logical approach to selecting interviewees. Patton (2002) defines key informants as "people who are particularly knowledgeable about the inquiry setting and articulate about their knowledge - people whose insights can prove particularly useful in helping an observer understand what is happening and why" (p. 321). This
definition is echoed by Singh and Dickson (in Partington, 2002) who suggest the ideal informant "is an insider who is (...) well enough placed to have the knowledge and understanding to clarify anomalies, and open to talk about the delicate issues" (p.125). Key informants must know about the phenomenon being studied in order to offer the depth of knowledge required for the research. Key informants for this study are senior Human Resources and Talent Management experts; individuals who need to address the daily challenges of talent management in dynamic, changing working environments. The selection criteria are listed in the next paragraph after a brief commentary on convenience sampling as it applies to the research.

Often well placed in an organisation for research purposes are individuals the researcher may know personally. Such individuals potentially make up a convenience sample; one that consists of individuals the researcher finds 'convenient' to select for participation (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005). Patton (2002) criticises the convenience sample as "neither purposeful nor strategic" and "the least desirable" method of selecting participants (p. 241-242). I respect Patton's (2002) view, and acknowledge that three of my selected key informants are also 'convenience' samples: individuals I worked with in the past, one of whom remained in the same firm in which we worked together seven years earlier, and two former colleagues who had moved on to other organisations but are still part of my network. It is implicit that sufficient time has passed since I worked in one of the participating organisations so I anticipated that the talent management processes have moved on and changed, i.e. I am not setting out to look for the 'politics' I may have witnessed in the past. Instead, an open-minded approach combined with the desire for an exploratory, unstructured interview should provide new insights. Furthermore, I used a 'snowballing' approach to seek further research participants, e.g. once an individual had agreed to take part, I asked for recommendations as to whom they know who might be willing to take part in this study. Through snowballing, a further three key informants were identified. I will return to this point in section 3.8 which explores the field work and how I addressed arising issues.

Turning attention back to the key informant sample, it comprised of individuals whose curriculum vitae outlined the following qualities:
• A minimum of eight years of experience working in senior positions within the areas of talent management or learning and development;

• Current role must be a senior level HR position which offers direct access to key stakeholders and decision makers in the organisation; e.g. reporting to or being the incumbent of the most senior HR Director position or reporting to the Chief Executive Officer / General Manager

• Experience working in at least two organisations in an effort to have individuals with broad perspectives;

• Experience ideally in both HR Management as well as talent management positions.

These attributes suggest such individuals are favourable key informants while recognising that any information and insights shared by these individuals represents their bias and world-view; as opposed to truths (Patton, 2002).

Given the level of seniority of the selected key informants within the organisational hierarchies, the average number of years’ experience brought to the interviews was actually 12 years. Participants had a broad background in Human Resources, including ‘HR Business Partner’ type roles as well as Organisational Development and Talent Management. All research participants are currently in roles commanding titles such as 'Senior Talent Manager', 'Senior L&D Manager', 'People and Performance Officer', 'Head of Talent and Learning', 'Head of Organisation Effectiveness', 'Senior Organisation Development Manager' or ‘Group HR Director’.

The following overview depicts the final list of research participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>No. of employees</th>
<th>Remit</th>
<th>KI Number</th>
<th>Key Informant Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT 1</td>
<td>108,000</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>KI 1</td>
<td>Director of Organisation Development EMEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FS 1</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>UK only</td>
<td>KI 2</td>
<td>Group Senior L&amp;D Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMCG 1</td>
<td>114,000</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>KI 3</td>
<td>Head of Executive Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>KI</td>
<td>Position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction 1</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>UK only</td>
<td>KI 4</td>
<td>Group Head of Learning &amp; Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FS 2</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>UK only</td>
<td>KI 5</td>
<td>Head of Talent and Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telecom 1</td>
<td>113,000</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>KI 6</td>
<td>Head of Learning &amp; Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharma 1</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>KI 7</td>
<td>Global Leadership Development Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport &amp; Distribution 1</td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td>UK only</td>
<td>KI 8</td>
<td>People and Sustainability Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMCG 2</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>KI 9</td>
<td>Group Head of Change and Organisation Effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail 1</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>KI 10</td>
<td>Group Head of Talent and Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity 1</td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>KI 11</td>
<td>Head of Talent and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil &amp; Gas 1</td>
<td>84,500</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>KI 12</td>
<td>Head of Talent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public 1</td>
<td>99,700</td>
<td>UK only</td>
<td>KI 13</td>
<td>Director of Organisational Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity 2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>KI 14</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.8 Confidentiality and Ethics

Confidentiality of data and anonymity of research participants are key areas of concern for participating organisations. As such, confidentiality was agreed with all interviewees in the invitation letter and was reiterated at the start of each interview (Saunders et al, 2009). In addition, none of the comments were attributed to companies or individuals within them in the write-up of the interviews (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005), e.g. all participating firms were anonymised in the transcripts and any names mentioned deleted, further underscoring confidentiality.

Organisations were referred to by their respective industry sector, e.g. “Retail 1” or “IT 1”. Where more than one organisation within a specific sector took part in the research, the referencing was adjusted accordingly, e.g. FS 1 and FS 2. None of the participating organisations are unique within a sector, providing further security with regards to confidentiality, e.g. an 'airline in the services industry' could be any major airline (Singh and Dickson, 2002, cited in Partington). Furthermore, researchers are encouraged to deal with issues and concerns of confidentiality at an early stage of the research, ensuring
that interviews happen on the basis of trust and the certainty that no one will be harmed (Singh and Dickson, cited in Partington, 2002; Easterby-Smith et al, 2008).

Ethics are an essential consideration in research. Defined by Ghauri and Gronhaug (2005) as "the moral principles and values that influence the way a researcher or a group of researchers conducts their research activities" (p. 19), "a code of conduct or expected societal norm of behaviour while conducting research" by Sekaran and Bougie (2010, p. 15) and "the appropriateness of your behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work; or are affected by it" by Saunders et al (2009, p. 183), ethics provide a moral compass, ensuring all work is carried out with honesty, integrity and accuracy; ethics deals with judgement and moral evaluation (Partington, 2002). This includes, as previously stated, preserving the anonymity of participants and their respective employers, ensuring stress levels are minimised during interviews through interpersonal skills and observing of body language; ensuring there is no misrepresentation of data collected and subjects are not exposed to harm in any way. Furthermore, it was essential not to pressure participants into taking part in the research and respecting their decision to decline to answer questions during the course of the interview itself (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005; Sekaran and Bougie, 2010; Patton, 2002; Saunders et al, 2009).

Participants were invited to take part in the research via electronic mail to their business mail accounts which I had on file or obtained via the LinkedIn business network. This allowed for inclusion of a 'read receipt' option at the time sending the message to track response rates. In addition, any 'out of office' messages received immediately helped to plan interviews and to manage my own expectations regarding participant availability. A copy of the invitation letter is included as Appendix 1.

A number of key informants were quick to respond, offering to support my research. These interviews were scheduled quickly and were among the first to take place. However, the non-response rate proved challenging as did the number of individuals who initially agreed to take part in the research and then proceeded to postpone the interview several times until, eventually, they no longer responded to my
phone voice mail messages and written follow-up emails enquiring whether they were still available and interested in taking part in the research.

It was at this stage that I realised I needed to adapt my approach to finding and securing further research participants and started the ‘snowball’ principle: at the end of an interview, during the wrap-up conversation when I thanked key informants for taking part, I asked participants whether they knew of anyone within their network who might be open to participating in the research. It is through this approach I secured a further three participants. The drop-out rate was significant and ultimately lead to a research sample of a total of 14 organisations. Information saturation point was reached after 10 interviews but the remaining four interviews still provided valuable insights and numerous quotes which are included in Chapter 4, Data Analysis.

Once a suitable meeting venue had been agreed for the interviews, I met participants on the day agreed: in 12 cases, the meeting venue was the participant’s place of work; one interview took place off-site and one at a key informants’ home. At the start of each interview, participants were reminded of the content of the invitation letter (Appendix 1) and were taken through the following ‘housekeeping’ checklist (Saunders et al, 2009, p. 336):

- Participants were thanked for agreeing to take part in the study;
- The purpose of the research and progress to date was shared;
- The previously agreed right to anonymity and confidentiality was reiterated;
- Participant were assured that they had the right to refuse to answer questions and could request to stop the interview at any time;
- The nature of the outputs and what will happen to the data during and after the project was explained;
- The request to digitally record the conversation was reiterated (to which all participants agreed without hesitation)
• A summary of research findings was offered.

Every participant was comfortable with this outline and during the interviews, none declined to answer questions and no interviews were stopped. Two participants, in fact, referred to the interview as a cathartic experience which allowed them to openly share their concerns about their firms’ talent management process without any fear of repercussions.

By offering a summary of the research data to each participant, I fulfilled an ulterior goal of this project which was to inform practitioners in the field of the concept of politics in talent management; to become more attuned to this and to understand how the overarching social constructs of an organisation influence the political aspects of talent processes and decisions. However, as Thietart et al (2001) point out, confidentiality issues may arise in one or more organisations as the research is carried out, preventing this sharing of information. Such confidentiality concerns could include the emergence of data which could be embarrassing to a firm or individuals within it. Even if data is summarised without mentioning specific participants, it may be ethically unwise to make such information available to third parties. One interview flagged up an organisational issue which helped illustrate a particular point the key informant made in the interview but I decided to delete the section from the transcript in order to protect the anonymity of the organisation. No further rescinding of data was required.

Once all interviews were transcribed, the task of inductive thematic analysis started which will be explored in more detail – along with the research data – in the following Chapter 4, Data Analysis.
Chapter 4 - Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the data analysis and key findings of the interviews carried out between October 2013 and July 2014. An explanation of the thematic analysis process (see Braun and Clarke, 2006) and a presentation of the final thematic map will be followed by an in-depth account of the data provided by participants during the fieldwork. This account will be segmented into the three aggregate dimensions which emerged during the analysis; further detail in each dimension is provided through exploration of the second order themes. Selective participant quotes are included throughout this chapter to underscore the themes and illustrate the social and political aspects of talent management in the 14 organisations which took part in this study. The chapter will conclude with a talent management process map illustrating the ‘reality’ process of talent management as opposed to the ‘rhetoric’ typically outlined in firms.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

This section will offer an overview of the thematic analysis process. Interviews with all 14 key informants (KI) were digitally recorded to which all participants consented again before the interviews started. Participants were also offered the option of stopping the interview at any time or to not answer questions they were uncomfortable with although none of the participants opted for either choice. Throughout the research process, Lincoln and Guba’s (1995) posit of trustworthiness in research was adhered to, establishing credibility – confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings; transferability – showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts; dependability – the findings are consistent and could be repeated; and confirmability – the extent to which the study’s findings are shaped by participants rather than the researcher’s bias and interests. This last point is also echoed by Remenyi et
al (1998 in Saunders et al, 2009, pp. 114) whereby the assumption is that “the researcher is independent of and neither affects not is affected by the subject of research”.

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim by myself. The 14 transcripts were then printed and re-read numerous times and the interviews were also listened to again whilst reading the transcript which allowed for checking of accuracy of the transcripts and confirmation of paralinguistic features used by the participants. Following the process described by Corley and Gioia (2004), I initially identified concepts in the data and first order codes, i.e. language and quotes used by the participants themselves (Van Maanen, 1979, cited in Patton, 2002). The significant amount of paralinguistic features by the participants could not be ignored and as they appeared throughout all 14 interviews, became a first order code. Paralinguistic features will be denoted in italics and brackets as follows throughout this chapter: (paralinguistic feature). Once I was satisfied that all of the first order codes had been identified, I sought to group these according to relationships, leading to the establishment of second order themes. These themes were again assessed for similarities and relationships, establishing the final three aggregate dimensions.

The final step in the analysis, particularly from a trustworthiness perspective, was an inter-rater reliability check. This was conducted with a neutral individual who had no direct or indirect involvement in the research field-work: a senior company director with over 30 years’ experience at executive level of numerous firms. Whilst this individual is not an academic researcher, his extensive business experience, particularly in the fields of business development, remote and matrix team management and executive leadership made him a suitable and qualified individual of sound mind and significant understanding as to how organisations operate and structure themselves – and understanding first-hand the impact this can have on the success or failure of not only individuals but the entire firm. The individual had not previously carried out qualitative research from an academic perspective but has a deep understanding of market research, white papers and customer insight in addition to a keen understanding of how people and organisations work through the lens of internal politics and decision makers. The level of agreement between my groupings of second order themes into the final three
aggregate dimensions that the perspective offered through the inter-rater reliability review was very high with a match of 7 out of 10 second order themes being associated with the aggregate dimension. The review prompted the change of two second order themes to be moved to other aggregate dimensions as, upon re-evaluation, these did fit more comfortably in the new dimension.

As the data was being written up, further adjustments were made to the second order themes which more accurately reflected participant feedback. The final thematic map is depicted on the following page:
Figure 2: Thematic Analysis – Final Map

First Order Codes
- Expectation management
- Managerial capability issues
- Promotion technical experts to people management roles
- Offering training & development not sufficient to up-skill managers
- Batter people into submission
- Consensus driven approach to talent management
- Leaders tend to pick people they know
- Organisational amnesia and pigeon-holing of people
- Performance and potential assessments
  - (Labeling) the nine-box quadrants
  - Static succession plans
  - Talent planning and development planning – Link?
  - Complexity of tools – who can execute what has been designed?
- Use of assessment centres
  - Psychometric testing in promotions / succession mgmt.
  - Is there sufficient rigour?
  - Values-based talent management
  - Redefining the word ‘potential’ in order not to offend people
- Output from talent reviews not shared but organisation says we are ‘open and transparent’
  - He who shouts the loudest wins
  - Avoid thorny issues / conversations
  - Belief in and understand of TM? Revert to type?
- Don’t miss the after-dinner conversation at the bar – this is where it happens!
  - Cultures of fear
  - Hero to zero approach to talent management
  - Inclusive? Exclusive? Top numbers
- Uncountable sighs, rolling of eyes, (nervous) laughs and shifting in chairs by key informants whilst talking about their firms talent management processes

Second Order Themes
- Managerial anxiety and its effect on talent management
- Executive sponsorship and/or endorsement
- Visibility and exposure to executive team crucial to career development
- 9-box grids, TM processes and links between different organisational processes
- Assessing Employees: An effort to make Talent Management more Objective, Fairer and Palatable to Employees
- Frustration with manager behaviours
- Frustrations with the process and managing of the ‘fall out’ of talent management

Aggregate Dimension
- The challenge of maintaining objectivity in talent management
- The desire for more structure and follow through in talent management
- Disappointment and Unfulfilled Promises
- Disillusionment
The aggregate dimensions listed in the thematic map are herewith defined and contextualised:

1) **The challenge of maintaining objectivity in talent management**: with so many varying views and (strong) opinions voiced by managers, how can subjectivity be reduced? Managerial capability is explored as a key area of concern as is the need for talent to have exposure to senior leaders and the impact the (lack of) structured assessment has on talent management.

2) **The desire for more structure and follow-through in talent management**: participants shared how the use of tools, such as the 9-box quadrant, affects talent discussions and how structured, externally facilitated assessment is finding its way into organisations.

3) **Disappointment and unfulfilled promises**: in the context of this research, ‘disappointment’ appears the most suitable term to describe how participants feel about talent management processes in their respective firms. There is a sense of promise that good things could happen, if only managers were more capable, processes less complex and politics openly addressed.

Each theme will be explored in detail, outlining the second order themes within each aggregate dimension with illustrative quotes by participants before moving on to a discussion chapter and conclusions and recommendations.

### 4.3 The challenge of maintaining objectivity in talent management

There are many ways in which ‘subjectivity’ manifests itself in an organisation’s talent management process and, subsequently, in the outputs and actions which follow such conversations. The data reveal important ways in which talent management in practice is a social and political process and a number of subjectivity sub-themes emerged in the context of the inductive thematic analysis. These include concerns pertaining to managerial capability and the effect this (lack of) ability has on talent management; the need for executive sponsorship or endorsement in order to progress one’s career in organisations, coupled with visibility and exposure to the executive team and the tendency for
‘organisational amnesia’ - the ‘pigeon-holing’ of individuals; and the assessment of performance and potential which also includes the (organisation’s) values-based judgments made about people. In this context, KI11 suggested:

“You pigeon-hole people, don't you. You kind of go you are a fund-raiser, you are not a comms person. And, you know, I'm just in HR... So, it's kind of ... you get that and you pigeon-hole people. I guess we do that just as human beings, don't we.” (KI 11, Charity 1)

The sub-themes within this aggregate dimension will be reviewed in more detail on the following pages, building an overall picture as to how the difference between the ‘rhetoric’ of objectivity and the ‘reality’ of subjectivity influences and shapes the social and political landscape of talent management in today’s organisations.

4.3.1 Managerial Anxiety and its Effect on Talent Management

Managerial anxiety was an area of concern raised by 13 out of 14 participants: it would appear that the ‘management of difficult conversations’ by unskilled or inexperienced – and hence often ‘anxious’ - managers as well as by those managers who are well regarded in a company is having a significant impact on talent management processes in participating firms. Participants suggest that even the best intentioned talent review processes have come to resemble ‘expectation and consequence management’ processes instead. Out of fear of raising (false) expectations among their employees, many employers shy away from sharing the outcomes and details of boardroom talent conversations with their team members. This perspective was mentioned explicitly by five participants. KI 3, for example, said:

“I think the primary reason (for not sharing talent review information with direct reports) is fear of consequences. Like: Ohhh Lord! If I've got to tell my employee she's not in the high potential pool .. what a difficult conversation that is! (whispers) I just won't mention it, I won't say anything.” (KI 3, FMCG 1)

Conversations that are shared with employees often do not reflect the true nature of the discussion, e.g. concerns or critical comments are glossed over or brushed aside in order not to upset the employee and hence maintain an overwhelmingly positive picture. KI 2 explains:
"What I would say, and again, because I know this is all confidential and isn't going to be attributed for your research I think this is interesting; the way that's then communicated to the individuals is, is not, ehm, for me, it's not as open and transparent as it should be. And I think there's a bit of a reluctance to have that open and transparent conversation in terms of saying 'we see you as top talent'. And even people who are nominated to go onto the key talent programme have not always had the full explanation and briefing about 'why' other than a pat on the back and 'great job, you are going on this'. Which I found quite amazing. (...) and, you know, there just seems to be a reluctance to actually... it's almost like if you set someone's expectations then you've said it and then you are committed and it's almost like, then you have to follow through and the messages it might send to others that aren't identified. So there's like a nervousness about actually how much you say.." (KI 2, FS 1)

As managers struggle with their own insecurities or lack of confidence in their ability to lead and manage individuals or teams, they offer positive feedback to team members with an underlying positive intent of wanting to motivate and engage their employees in the short-term. Two respondents suggest that talent management in their respective organisations can best be described as a ‘closed system’ whereby talent ratings are not shared and individuals second guess the outcomes of talent reviews on the basis of being invited – or not- to certain events and development programmes. KI 4 believes this aspect of TM needs to be “nailed” in order to create greater levels of openness in the system and the leadership team and KI 12 said:

"I think part of the challenge is I don't think the communication has gotten very far back to the employees. One of the criticisms we are getting is - 'I know what's happening, I know I'm being talked about but I don't exactly know what's being said'. That's another piece of work that we've been trying really hard to equip managers to make sure they are even having conversations and then having quality ones. And I know for a fact that it doesn't happen.” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

Longer term, the approach of painting a positive picture on talent management and being economical with the information shared, can lead to a mismatch of expectations and a conflict between words and actions: employees question why positive talent review conversations don’t manifest in access to learning programmes, promotions and other development opportunities reserved for those branded ‘key talent’. It can furthermore lead to confusion, disengagement and disappointment which may result in
resignations by talented individuals from the firm. KI 2 shared the disappointment felt by a group of individuals when they learned they were no longer classed as ‘top talent’ after a change in leadership and a review of existing talent practices in the firm: many of the group felt their career in the organisation was over even though their overall profile had been raised through the program which was now coming to an end. The sentiment which prevailed for all of these individuals was a grave concern over the perceived absence of future access to the executive team and the sense of having been let down by the organisation. The core issue KI 2 sought to address was the lack of communication and context to the affected group of individuals by their respective line managers which led to her hosting an event for the cohort in an effort to re-engage those affected.

The example above provides an insight into what can happen in a firm when expectations are perceived to have been raised for individuals and subsequently not met – certainly from the perspective of the employee. One question this raises is how organisations prepare managers for their role in general and TM specifically. Several firms in the sample offer ‘management essentials’ type personal development programs, providing a safe environment in which managers can learn about topics such as performance management, motivation, life-positions, and situational leadership whilst also practicing and honing their feedback and coaching skills using role-play exercises and one-on-one coaching scenarios to build confidence and managerial capability. According to key informants, this development approach tends to work best with more inexperienced managers or those new to people management whereas more ‘experienced’ or senior managers are often harder to convince of the need to return to foundations of management and displaying a reluctance to learn.

One possible explanation as to why so many managers are not fully equipped to conduct good people conversations and talent reviews is that many firms promote their best technical experts to people management roles. The track record of success for such appointments in the participating firms is not promising with many of these technical experts not demonstrating what may be considered basic people management skills such as setting performance objectives, giving feedback and team motivation. KI 1 explains:
“The best individual contributors don’t always make the best people managers. I think we still trip over that quite a bit’. (KI 1, IT 1)

KI 3 concurs: "They still promote the best accountant to be the leader! Still! You know, the best sales person to be the leader. They've got skills & competencies (laughs) but they haven't necessarily got leadership capabilities!” (K 3, FMCG 1).

KI 12 agrees “Deep, deep technical experts have no business leading people”. She adds, however that “we've made it that they don't need to. (...) I think it's because we, no different than many other companies, hire ... promote people into people management jobs that are good in their technical area and probably don't have any business being people managers. Eh, the sad thing is that people who are really good people managers have only gotten there because of something else. We don't hire people that are good spokes-people, empower others or motivate others! They have to have something else. And again, in (our) company, we've got a lot of egg heads and technology and engineers that frankly, stereotypically just aren't the best people managers.” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

Participating organisations invest significant amounts of time, effort and funding into educating their managers to be more skilled line managers by offering learning interventions such as basic managerial skill programmes. Three participants highlighted that it is not only new or junior people managers who need this level of support, but that senior leaders equally benefit from such interventions. KI 5 explained:

"But your hands-on management, it’s almost like you want to turn the clocks back and put them through the absolute basics again. And interestingly when we’ve had some new senior managers that have joined, we’ve put them through some of our programmes that we do for middle managers and people have said, you know, that’s a really good refresher because I have kind of forgotten how to do this stuff!” (KI 5, FS 2).

Further evidence of how such management fundamentals programmes are being positioned at more senior levels is offered by KI 2:

"And the idea is that through a 12-month programme they build their capabilities so when they step into a team leader role, they actually have some skills. Because we found that the management capability across our team leader and junior levels was, you know, was lacking. So, we've kind of .. it's been badged-up ‘talent’ but I would argue if you look at
talent programmes it's probably not a talent programme. It's really more of a building capability and succession which is different, really.” (KI 2, FS 1).

Nine participants believe that upskilling line managers will make the biggest positive difference to how talent management is conducted and perceived in their respective firms. Instead of avoiding conversations, more managers need to be confident to have meeting with line staff instead of shying away from these, thinking that it’s ‘all a bit scary’ as suggested by KI 3.

Organisations appear to struggle with the results of low levels of managerial capability and the need to address the impact these leaders and managers have on their teams. On a placatory note, KI 12 recognises that HR professionals – who are steeped in the language of talent, succession, top talent, etc. – may lack understanding of what they ask of line managers in people processes. This will be addressed in more detail in the following sections.

4.3.2 Executive Sponsorship, Executive Endorsement, and the Dynamics of the Talent Conversation

The majority of participants firmly believe that in order to progress one’s career in an organisation, executive sponsorship and endorsement is essential. KI 12 confirmed:

“Oh, yeah! Absolutely! And the sponsorship! So, again, I think a lot of this is ... you don't ever want to put someone in a position and ... especially, if it's your personal credibility ... so I do think people get propped up a little bit longer, potentially, in some cases then they would if they didn't have that sponsorship.” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

Six participants expressed the view that it is very difficult to promote an individual on the basis of merit only: an individual who consistently outperforms his peers and demonstrates leadership behaviours will still only be considered for a bigger role with more responsibility if he has at least one – better two or
three - senior level sponsors or has drawn attention to himself through other channels. KI 4 offered the following:

“We don't have our process by which promotions happen on the basis of a link to any resourcing strategy or a link to a particular vacancy. A promotion happens because someone takes on a bigger job or they are deemed to be sort of cooked and ready or, dare I say, they've been shouting for quite a long time.” (KI 4, Construction 1)

It is important to note that ‘sponsorship’ in this context is different from simply being an advocate for someone: these ‘sponsors’ can change the course of a talent conversation because politically astute individuals in the organisation – who may not actually fulfil key talent criteria – know how to get on the good side of a senior executive and hence win them as sponsors to support ambitious career goals. Unfortunately, such promotions don’t always end well. KI 9 commented:

“We’ve definitely promoted people on the basis of the ‘Peter Principle’. Some folks were way out of their depth once they had the big job they aspired to and fought for and HR was left to clean up the mess and sort out employee relations issues this caused.” (KI 9, FMCG 2)

As stated above, the endorsement - or lack thereof - for individuals being discussed by senior leaders in the context of talent review meetings can be the main ingredient which decides the outcome of the conversation. According to participants, chances of success drop for an individual if they are not known to the team of executives or one of the attendees has had a negative experience with the person in question. KI 4 shared that:

“No one is short of having an opinion! And this is where, you know I've mentioned the word 'subjectivity'. You know, this is kind of where this comes into play. Because, often people are as good as the last experience or the last interaction they've had with somebody as opposed to having that really robust knowledge and understanding of what they are made of. To that's quite an interesting dynamic to observe when we have those discussions. (...) I think anyone could sort of win the argument based on the strength of their case, really. And, as you probably expect, some members of Exco are, ehm, you know, sort of more vocal and passionate than others. So it's.... we land on a place.. but sometimes, the CEO does sort of arbitrate but again, it's not wholly scientific.” (KI 4, Construction 1)
The last words in the above cited quote “it’s not wholly scientific’ illustrate the degree to which talent decisions are based on a sponsor’s familiarity with those discussed as opposed to more objective or comparative analysis. KI 5 (FS 2) goes as far as to say that many talent decisions in her organisation are in fact based on ‘gut’ in addition to the need for exposure of employees to senior leaders.

Continuing with the executive sponsorship aspects, five participants shared that they have seen one senior leader’s comments and views of an individual turn the talent conversation by 180 degrees. The notion of “battering peers into submission” is not unheard of for KI 1:

“Some leaders come in ... they are very articulate, they have more than one example to share, it's very clear that they are not just sharing their opinion. Then there are some leaders who come in and it's obvious they are not as prepared, ehm, may be they are not even as passionate. (...) some leaders are very forceful, some are a little bit more consensus and back-off. (...) Some people just argue for their people and fight and it's almost battered into submission for their peers. Whereas other people raise it once - I don't know that person and back off very easily. So I would say, both the preparation, skill, personality, tenacity .. all those things of the advocate can have a big bearing on the conclusions and decisions.” (KI 1, IT 1)

KI 9 (FMCG 2) has witnessed an individuals’ career in an organisation essentially coming to an end after one senior executive disagreed with five colleagues who all suggested a person was an asset to the team. Because this one individual piped up loudest and most forcefully, all of his peers dissociated themselves from the team member being assessed. KI 12 described how one person in the room changed the opinion of several others to the detriment of the individual being discussed on numerous occasions and comments:

"I think you are right. I think it can happen and I have watched it happen before my eyes as well. And I find myself even getting involved with the discussion especially when you know the individuals!” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1).

Participants, all senior HR and talent leaders in their respective firms, referred to themselves playing a number of roles in the talent conversations; for example ‘policing’. KI 6 (Telecoms 1) observed that
“as an HR generalist, we’d facilitate the discussion”; KI 11 feared that “we are doing a little bit more, ehm, policing then we’d like” (KI 11, Charity 1).

The latter thought was echoed by KI 12 who equally dislikes the “policing” but adds that

“if they (the managers) stop their nonsense of having completely different conversations (…) so at least we are not surprised when you come to me and tell me you want to promote this person or hire that person, right?” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

Talent review meetings are filled with dynamic tension between the actors involved in the process; the managers, the individuals discussed, as well as the HR and talent management professionals facilitating the conversations. These dynamics will be explored in various ways at different sections in this data analysis.

4.3.3 Visibility and Exposure to Executive Team - Crucial to Career Development

A consistent sub-theme which emerged from the interviews is the notion of visibility and exposure to the executive team members of the firm. Six participants agreed that some level of sponsorship by senior leaders in particular is essential for career progression. It is at this stage that the social and political aspects of TM can be witnessed: people looking for opportunities to work with or speak to members of the leadership team; seeking senior leaders as mentors in the run-up to talent reviews; looking for ways to highlight past achievements. In the context of next level managers having to sign-off performance reviews for skip-level direct reports, KI 11 remarked:

“... but it's actually funny how people want that recognition! How people want their manager’s manager to know that they've done a really good job ... for them to be on their radar as well!” (KI 11, Charity 1).

Linked to but distinct from Executive Sponsorship as outlined in section 4.1.2, above all else, perception and perception management – rather than an informed and objective view of an individual – appears to
drive and influence talent decisions. The majority of participants spoke about the need for ‘exposure’ to the executive team as well as the imperative of executive sponsorship and endorsement as a basis of career progression and nomination to the key talent list.

The analysis suggests that senior executives fighting and arguing for team members in the board room is a fairly common modus operandi in talent review conversations. As quoted in section 4.1.2, KI 1 suggested that executives convey very strong opinions on individuals during talent review meetings to ensure an individual was placed on both the key talent list as well as the executive succession plan. This suggests that even though this particular organisation has a clearly defined talent review process with associated tools and templates, the decision for or against an individual comes down to the ability of the line manager to influence and, ultimately, control the outcome of the conversation. Such conversations and findings were not unique to this company. Instead, leaders “who shout the loudest win the talent debate” appears to be a regular occurrence within the participating organisations. KI 10 of Retail 1 summarised this well by suggesting that her organisation is

“a business of great opinions” in which “some key people had really strong opinions and that they were the ones who had to be won over” (KI 10, Retail 1).

Half of the participants stated that some leaders are much better prepared for the talent review meetings than others – in both the positive and perhaps more negative ways. It is commendable that managers prepare numerous arguments in favour of an individual in order to ‘win’ the talent and succession debate. In many cases, however, these arguments are delivered at any cost and can lead to the ‘wrong’ individuals being listed on succession plans and key talent programmes. This, in turn, can have a significant impact on those not listed on the talent and succession plans who were expecting to find a place on these on the basis of previous managerial feedback but also on the organisation as a whole. The other side of the coin relates to individuals who have been held in high regard in an organisation and – through change of management or circumstances – this perception is altered. KI 8 of Transport and Distribution 1 voiced her frustration:
“The talent process hasn't been brilliant. We've had people that have been classed as 'brilliant' for years and all of a sudden, they are not brilliant anymore! And it's this going from hero to zero which I have used with our board to say 'this is where you know it's not right'. If you .. You can't .. if you've held someone in high esteem for so long and all of a sudden, it's not working! That, that cannot be right.” (KI 8, Transport & Distribution 1)

The analysis further suggests that leaders tend to “pick people they know” (KI 1) in order to fill vacancies in their teams. In other words, there could be a better qualified individual for the role somewhere else in the organisation – including in another country or region – but the leader will gravitate towards someone they know instead of trusting an organisational process such as succession planning to find the ‘right person’ for the job. KI 7, Pharma 1, elaborates:

"I think it's quite difficult for leaders when they are faced with 'right, I have a position to fill. Do I fill it with someone I know has done that job externally or I know has done that job somewhere else in Pharma 1, which would be very easy. Or, do I take a bit of a punt on somebody. It's a little bit of a risk and perhaps I don't know that person. They haven't done the job before but have really high learning agility. And, for the organisation it would be the right thing because we've brought them in and put them into that role'." (KI 7, Pharma 1)

Promotions may also be driven by individuals themselves: employees who are astute at driving their careers by seeking and pushing for sponsorship and “doing all the things that they need to in order to get promoted in a large organisation” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1).

In this context, KI 2 (FS 1) shared the surprise of members of a key talent programme – those on track to Managing Director roles – when someone not in the cohort was promoted to an MD role. The perception of this group of peers was that this particular individual was ‘not very good’ and that the promotion was down to his ability to influence the opinion of senior stakeholders in his favour. This situation is not unique to this particular organisation and echoes the sentiment expressed by six informants that those who are apt at ‘self-promotion’ – and hence manage to attract the attention of
senior executives – stand a much better chance of doing well in their career than those who shy away from the spotlight and quietly and perhaps unassumingly perform their jobs.

At least two participants said that visibility to the executive team is included and built into talent programmes as they have accepted this is a key element of the informal talent review process:

"When we launched the key talent programme, I was very clear to make sure that that exposure to the exec team was almost built-in. Sometimes, the exec team can lose sight of how important it is to some people, to get that. Ehm, and to be known by those people and to have the opportunity to shape and influence. And, obviously, for some people in the business, that is their primary focus (laughs)! Kill people who get in their way to get the opportunity to do that! But there will be others who, you know, undersell themselves." (KI 10, Retail 1)

KI 1 of IT 1 suggested that the organisation has often made unfair judgements on people in talent reviews and KI 4, Construction 1, has seen first-hand that talent pipelines have historically been built based on perceptions of people and that views can change 180 degrees without a lot of substance to underpin such decisions. KI 1 elaborates:

“You sometimes see discussions where, eh, VP, the president, has had some exposure to the person. Ehm, that could either be good exposure ... or, you know, in terms of the impression that's left of them. Ehm, and .. that might have been years ago, I mean, three or four years ago that they presented to him or he went on a visit to that country. It's amazing the impact that can have! And so, sometimes the leader will talk about was in that persons development plan and it'll be like 'ah, I don't really know them too well' and at some level will just trust the leader. Whereas if they know this person really well I think that makes a difference in terms of 'uh, ah, I remember that person'. It's amazing how that one little experience can actually change the dynamic of the discussion and it can be a little bit hard to change his mind there to be honest. So, I would say, ehm, exposure, ehm, it is a critical thing in our discussions around talent." (KI 1, IT 1)

The concept of promotions taking place because ‘a face fits’ was described in one guise or another by four participants; an issue even raised in the comments section of employee engagement surveys conducted in two participating firms. One key informant wishes that people in the firm felt that the
selection process for promotion had been made more objective but the reality as perceived by staff is that promotions continue to be based mostly on favouritism. KI 5 (FS 2) is hoping that the introduction of more structured process will support both the HR team and managers in making more sound and evidence-based talent decisions:

“Ehm, but it's a difficult one, isn't it. Because, often, a manager sees something in an individual and the manager could fall into the trap of 'this individual is great! They work a bit like me! (laughs out loud) And my gut is telling me they could progress because actually, they could do what I do!' (...) It feels very subjective. Ehm, so I think what's good about what we are introducing into the talent programme is we are going to see people come through a panel. A selection-type process before they embark on the programme. Because, what we are saying is that you have been flagged as somebody for the next step. We are just gonna check that you are there and you are ready. Because we don't want people to come along and fail either.” (KI 5, FS 2).

Fear of failure and hero to zero cultures were also raised as areas of concern. KI 3 commented:

"How can you be high potential, get nominated by your managers, go on one of the programmes that we throw a lot of resource at and end up firing them?! I hate that! I am sorry, we shouldn't be doing that!” (KI 3, FMCG 1)

This experience was very much echoed by KI 4:

"Alarm bells rang for me one day when I was talking to somebody who, in this business, is very highly regarded and has had a fairly sort of meteoric rise; he's moved up the ranks quite quickly. And this person was in a new senior leadership role and, instead of being focused and preoccupied with all the things that come with that, had a big part of their mind preoccupied with not being the next failure! So, there is a bit of a hero to zero culture and people are aware of that. (…) And so, with some of these promotions comes the 'ok, I know I am golden boy today. How do I make sure I am not tomorrow’s zero?'”. (KI 4, Construction 1)

It is suggested that organisations need to be more mindful of the impact such actions have on all those involved: an individuals’ career and self-perception can be significantly altered through such experiences; organisations and their talent processes lose credibility and add fuel to the fire in terms of the social and political side of how talent management is actually conducted.
The fall-out of the subjective rather than objective or comparative nature of talent reviews is also evident in the amount of ‘damage control’ and expectation management participants tend to perform as an integral part of their role. They bemoaned the challenges of maintaining momentum and enthusiasm in key talent programme participants after individuals not formally identified as top talent were promoted to senior level roles, hence closing off succession and career opportunities for members of the key talent cohort. Perhaps underestimated in this context and equally highlighted as a talent management issue is the ability to retain talented individuals when out-of-process talent decisions have been made. KI 6 explains:

"So, I think our role as generalists was to play devil’s advocate a little bit. Give me the evidence. (...) and if someone is really that good, the other managers should have seen that person. They may not have worked for them, but you'd expect them to have seen them and have had some visibility of it. (...) Visibility was important (from a perspective that there was an expectation that top talent would share their know-how and experience and advise others)". (KI 6, Telecom 1)

Managing the expectations of employees as part of the talent review process is one of the major challenges key informants are confronted by. Employees are disgruntled and disappointed for any number of reasons: they are unhappy because they believe to be solid contributors with potential but have not been identified as key talent; they are disappointed even though they are ‘top talent’ but either haven’t been placed on the 9-box grid where they would have expected themselves to be placed and access to key talent programmes is still limited due to a small number of annual places. Furthermore, conversations among senior managers and executives are often relayed very differently to the employee. The view shared by key informants is that many managers shy away from what they perceive to be difficult conversations with their staff, hence not offering an accurate picture and reflection of the talent discussion. This, in turn, can set-up a skewed dynamic between the manager, the employee and the organisation, impacting trust and consequently, impact individual and, ultimately, organisational performance.
The following long quote from the interview with KI 10 summarises this section as it provides insight into all of the areas participants raised as areas of concerns so far: the expectation management, the exposure and visibility to the executive team, endorsement and the challenge of maintaining an objective point-of-view when assessing employees:

"I think, people have an aspiration to be a great leader and people love being on the senior leaders programme and they are getting loads from it. But they don't have 'well, actually to be a great leader here, I need to be doing these things'. It's more 'to be a great leader here, these people need to value me'. And, those people might have a different view of what they are looking for. He (the new HRD) is personally getting a lot more bold with the exec team around those discussions. So I think, historically, there would have been more of a view of 'my exec person rates me really highly' and they show it loudest in the boardroom, therefore, I will be OK. Whereas now ... last year, for the senior leaders programme and this year, there's people who were agreed right around the boardroom. It wasn't 'well, my person has got to be in there and I don't know your person'. It was a lot more collaborative decisions. We did that last year and that's what I've done again this year. It's actually quite a strong message for the delegates ...to know that they were selected collectively. Because, we have some big personalities on the board, so it would be a bit obvious that some of those louder people would get their people on (laughs)." (KI 10, Retail 1)

Section 4.1.4 below addresses – on a perhaps more optimistic note - how participants are dealing with the challenge of assessing the performance and potential of their employees, particularly in light of many subjective criteria influencing decision makers. Participating firms are looking to counterbalance the subjective and potentially politically motivated approaches to selecting their key talent by working with more concrete data and people metrics in the board room, as reflected in the mentioning of scorecards and templates to support and guide talent review meeting preparation efforts.

Section 4.2 explores the desire of participants for a more structured and consequential approach to talent management in their respective firms.
4.4 The Desire for more Structure and Follow-Through in Talent Management

The subjective nature of current talent review processes in participating firms is leading to an increased desire for more objective methods of assessment and an increased use of talent review templates and guidelines to facilitate this people process in a less subjective manner. There are two main themes which will be explored in this section: the use of templates and documentation in talent management and the link between talent management to other organisational processes as well as the assessment of employees in an effort to make the process more ‘palatable’ to staff.

4.4.1 9-box grids, talent management, and links between different organisational processes

In all of the participating firms, the start of the talent management process is signalled by ‘talent review’ meetings at various levels in the organisation: in order to manage talent, individuals first need to be identified as such. Some firms start with a top-down review process whilst others prefer to commence at middle management and then present summaries to the executive team who check and verify perceptions against their own whilst also building succession plans for the most senior roles; referring to the talent assessments which have been made at lower levels in the hierarchy.

In 10 organisations that participated in the research, the ’9-box-grid’ (Appendix I) is the tool of choice to help structure people discussions on the basis of ‘performance’ and ‘potential’ as outlined above. The origin of the 9-box is contested although the first structured use of the tool is accredited to the ‘General Electric’ company under the leadership of Jack Welch in the 1990’s where it was infamously used – year on year – to identify not only key talent but also the bottom 10% of the workforce who were subsequently managed out of the business to ensure only the ‘best’ employees remained with the firm. The 9-box quadrant has since found its way into uncountable board rooms in an effort to bring structure to talent reviews across the world. The grid is usually made up of two axes, indicating a measure for ‘performance’ and ‘potential’, generally from ‘low’ to ‘high’ in both categories.
As stated above, ten participating organisations opt for the use of a 9-box grid because it is perceived as a tried and tested model that has been around for many years. The majority of talent managers are familiar with the tool and often implement it in firms (including by this author) where it is not present in an effort to focus talent review discussions and provide a visual representation of the talent bench strength in an organisation. KI 9 explains:

"I introduced the 9-box grid into the talent review process because a variation of it was already being used in the performance reviews; so it was a natural extension. The talent reviews hitherto were a mess. A pack of 70 slides or more went to the Exec team and they'd have two or three hours on the agenda to go through that. What was missing for me was the exec summary and proposed next steps. So, in theory we have that now. The pack is down to six core slides which allows for lots more people discussions. Will they be perfect? No, I'm expecting a lot of 'I don't like this guy but this one's OK' type of conversations. It's about educating the exec team and next levels down". (KI 9, FMCG 2)

On the other hand, two participating firms have decided against the regimented use of ‘talent plotting’, arguing for practical and hands-on discussions and, more importantly, not wanting to have names on a grid become a barrier to thinking conceptually and more broadly about ‘talent’. Furthermore, the key informants expressed concerns about and a fear of pigeon-holing people in a box based on the strong views of one or two senior individuals in the room who block and limit fruitful and collaborative talent discussions. The complexity of the discussion which ensue with the introduction of a 9-box grid are illustrated by KI 12:

"But, interestingly, we'd also focus on box 6 to identify, or 6 and 3 so no potential but are they potentially either blockers, so people that are stopping the others from above of moving into roles or people that have some niche skills so we absolutely don't need them to be promoted up but they are deep technical experts for example that would be difficult to replace in the market." (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

The 9-box grid – or variations thereof as 4-box grids or even 21 box grids – dominates talent reviews and, for many participants, is the true barometer of talent bench-strength in their firm. In half of participating organisations, placement on the 9-box grid also determines performance (improvement) actions as well as development interventions to support an individual's career progression in an
organisation. The latter may include access to key talent development programmes or mentoring interventions with senior leaders. However, as previously stated, this explicit link is not necessarily shared with employees out of concern of raising expectations.

Among the main concerns raised by participants about the introduction of a 9-box type of talent assessment once again included management capability in general and the issues which arise as a result of managers interpreting the guidelines issued with the tool differently in particular. Such issues are seen to lead to inconsistent application and talent assessment in the place of structure and desired consistency to create a fairer and more transparent way of conducting talent reviews. Participants agreed that offering managers sufficient levels of training and familiarisation with tools such as a 9-box grid is essential and paves the way to a more successful implementation. Used thoughtfully, talent grids can support the talent review facilitation process and become an asset whereas lack of understanding of how to interpret performance and potential grids can be detrimental. Half of key informants believe that it would be helpful if employees had a better understanding of how managers use the 9-box grid as shared by KI 4:

“That link does exist (between 9-box grid position and attendance on key talent programmes). The really interesting question is, do people understand that? And they probably don’t.” KI 2 concurs: “I think the maturity, you know, of how managers will say you are a ‘3’ and you are a ‘9’... and I’m making it very simplistic... but I think it’s that, that would cause the friction if the employees don’t really understand how the managers are using the tool and it’s not communicated in the right way as a development tool; it could then be seen as a negative component of the performance review process”. (KI 4, Construction 1)

Communication – or the absence thereof – to employees notwithstanding, all of the participating firms who use a talent quadrant or nine-box grid do so with positive intention of applying development principles for those on the talent grid in order to accelerate career progression.

Three participants raised concerns in relation to the complexity of talent review processes and conversations. To a degree, these individuals recognised that the Human Resources function can be
blind-sided by its own processes, expecting those who actually have to execute what they created in a ‘bubble’ and then being surprised when things don’t go according to plan. KI 6 shared:

"To be a manager at (company name) is not an easy place. You have so many tools and systems you need to be able to use and work through; it's a complex company.” (KI 6, Telecom 1)

KI 14 offered a very critical perspective of the extensive use of 9-box grids in organisation, suggesting that managers essentially abdicate succinct thought and unlearn the art of constructive feedback for their direct reports by placing them in a box. He stated:

“We have been implementing 9-box grids in companies of all shapes and sizes for years but I honestly don’t know what good it has done and what it has achieved. We haven’t really cracked a different way of showing a simple overview of the talent strength of an organisation. It’s time we worked on that because what we do today does not work. We have not moved TM forward in the past decade.” (KI 14, Charity 2)

Although many firms closely link the placement of employees on the 9-box grid with access to development programmes, the somewhat contentious nature of the grid should not be underestimated and is the reason a significant section of this data analysis was dedicated to this commonly used assessment tool. However, the 9-box grid does not alleviate the subjective nature of talent assessment in firms. The assessment of employees will be explored in the following section.

4.4.2 Assessing Employees: An effort to make Talent Management more Objective, Fairer and Palatable to Employees

The second theme which emerged strongly in the context of seeking more structure in talent management is the assessment process used to understand the performance and potential of employees; leading to a judgement as to where they are placed on 9-box grids or other talent tools in place in an organisation. All participating firms stated that performance management forms an integral part of their annual employee lifecycle although sophistication levels and standards of execution vary. In the end,
all firms record a performance rating – in the form of a number, word or phrase – to distinguish levels of performance achieved by employees against objectives set at the beginning of the financial year. These ratings typically form part of the talent review process by feeding the ‘high, medium, or low’ levels of performance contribution on the 9-box talent grid.

Performance management does not come easy to many participating firms as managerial capability, anxiety and experience of those making judgements on employees once again play a role in how clearly objectives are defined and set in the first place. This area of difficulty is compounded by the (in)ability of the manager to conduct a structured, effective and meaningful feedback conversation at mid-year and year-end performance review times. If performance management assessments are perceived as ‘tricky’, the assessment of ‘potential’ offers a whole new dimension of interpretation and possible minefields.

For three firms in the participating sample, the word ‘potential’, defined as “having or showing the capacity to develop into something in the future” or as a noun to describe “latent qualities or abilities that may be developed and lead to future success” by the Oxford Dictionary, was seen as too controversial and contentious to use in the talent assessment process. Instead, one firm opted to change the word ‘potential’ to ‘learning agility’ and defined it as the ability to be able to start a new role and learn and adapt quickly. Another organisation chose to redefine potential as ‘scope to take on a new challenge’ in an effort to make the talent matrix appear more open, people centric and less contentious. The participant, however, readily admitted that this revised definition created a number of issues with employees questioning how the ‘scope’ would be assessed and who would ultimately make that decision.

In recognition of the level of judgement and emotion which forms part of the talent and potential assessment process, one firm created a scoring matrix to assess potential in an effort to help its engineering-led management team – which prefers facts and figures to soft skills – to assess employees with formula-like solutions. This firm’s assessment of ‘potential’ and talent was also integrally linked
to its explicitly stated values and behaviours framework which has been embedded in the firm for a
number of years.

"So, for example, one of the things that's been a bit controversial but I've remained steadfast
on it is, we have values and behaviours which have been around for three or four years.
And my view is that's kind of a stage gate. I don't care how much potential you have, if
your values and behaviours are .. if there is a problem with that, as far as I'm concerned,
you don't show up on succession plans and you don't show up on the 9-box grid and the top
two boxes. And, again, that goes fundamentally against the notion of someone having
potential. But my view is that if we are putting people into roles that have obvious issues
with values and behaviours, rather than addressing them first, then I think we've missed the
point of it. So, that's an example of something where we've intervened with something that's
personally very important to us. And we've said if you've got issues with values and
behaviours, then you are not viewed as having potential." (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

This approach has worked well for the organisation in terms of avoiding or storing up future managerial
issues by ensuring those promoted already demonstrate the level of emotional intelligence and
awareness sought.

As previously mentioned, the assessment of values and behaviours displayed usually forms part of
performance assessments in firms which, in turn, feed the talent review processes. The challenge once
again is the interpretation of such values by individual managers or leaders as KI 10 illustrates:

“I think it would be really helpful for us if, within our values collection, we were clearer
about what 'leadership' is about here.” (KI 10, Retail 1)

KI 9 of FMCG 2 echoed this sentiment, explaining that the elaborate behaviour framework in place in
her organisation was so detailed and included numerous duplications of behaviours within each value
that is became a source of confusion instead of guidance; and, ultimately, a cop-out for managers. The
consequences of this were inconsistent application of guidelines and a lowering of expectations.
Performance assessment was patchy and managers often offered their own perception of what a
particular behaviour meant for them, leading to many unhappy employees who felt unfairly treated.
Ultimately, the way in which talent is assessed and identified is fraught with difficulties although few organisations would readily admit to this. The following quote by KI 8 is included in full to further illustrate the point:

"It's always been about the guy or the lady who worked really hard, demonstrated that they were good in a job and they got promoted. Actually, that's been our way of developing talent. He or she is a good soul, they've done this, they are loyal to the business, they've demonstrated that they work hard for us, they are really committed, therefore, we will promote them; really is what we have done. To an extent, we have promoted to a level of incompetence which is a classic of what you hear. (...) And now, of course we've got this sort of .. the bit between the good old souls, committed and they are still classed as talent and these new people coming in who are challenging and difficult ... much more difficult, ehm very different to us culturally and, and ...but they are making some really big strides and some big, big changes to the business.” (KI 8, Transport & Distribution 1)

Employee assessment is a challenging area for talent professionals and leaders at all levels of an organisation to embrace and wrap their heads around. As described previously, most firms rely on the fairly subjective and personal assessments of their leadership ranks to place individuals on 9-box grids instead of combining these perceptions with and comparing them to psychometric tests or assessment centres. The desire for and implementation of assessment processes was a key theme discussed by seven participants during the course of the interviews. KI 12, for example, said that one of her key concerns around executive talent reviews is that although the executive team seems interested in people, they largely continue to come to the review meetings with pre-conceived ideas, leading to subjective and sometimes heated people conversations in the board room. This is very much echoed in the comment made by KI 2 in relation to how executives reacted to external assessment of individuals they would have previously made decisions on without such input:

"... we've had the assessor debrief and then you've had one person who has really taken a dislike to a candidate .. and it is personalities and it is like you say 'halo and horn effect' and yet, they've performed and so those scores and that measure against, you know, sort of clear guides, you know, I was able to say 'really understand you opinion and the fact that you have those concerns, but these scores don't support that. They actually performed at a very high level. Then, it cannot be based on an opinion. That person than cannot change
what that person has done in that selection centre. (...) And those conversations do happen, don't they? I think that's how it works.” (KI 2, FS 1)

In an effort to find more balance between the subjective and objective assessments of their employees, some firms such as the Financial Services firm quote above have established formal assessments, which include assessment centres, competency-based interviews with external assessors or psychometric testing, as an integral part of their TM processes although the implementation of such interventions was not without difficulties. HR teams describe having to overcome internal politics and resistance in order to get buy-in for the use of assessment tools but participants are convinced that external assessors would allow for increased objectivity in TM, alleviating the ‘he who shouts the loudest’ approach seen in so many boardrooms in participating firms. KI 12 suggested that organisations considering the implementation of assessment centre processes invite some of their key individuals – including HR teams – to experience the process and its benefits first hand which will make it easier for them to advise the managers they support to understand the process and outcomes. She elaborates:

"It would be difficult to get traction with that (assessment) had the entire HR team not gone through the process first. The head of HR at the time, she had the entire HR team go through assessment centres and many people left as a result and many stayed. (...) I think it creates that objective, third party view. People would still argue you could probably house that within HR, eh, and that's something they have toyed with and looked at. I could see us doing that for certain level. I still think for, for the most senior levels we will continue to go outside. Because, again, it gives you that level of credibility - the emotive piece is not there. With internal people, there's a chance you could cloud that view.” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

Five participants mentioned that, in their opinion, assessments should be carried out and conducted using external assessors; people who are highly qualified and experienced in such methodologies as opposed to using in-house resources. One option discussed is training in-house HR staff to conduct assessments but only for more junior managers in the organisation. For senior managers and executives, none of the participating firms are willing to consider in-house resources. Instead, it is perceived as imperative to the success and acceptance of assessment for these to be conducted by external providers. KI 8 of Transport & Distribution 1 illustrates the point:
"And actually, what I'm trying to do is to bring in some external support, really. Because that helps drive the objectivity. When people have known people for a very long time it's really tricky. So, actually bringing in some external resource to do some of the feedback helps because they can challenge in a different way. So, I've been trying - through stealth, really - to bring it (external assessment) in where people are happy to use it to demonstrate the value it can add." (KI 8, Transport & Distribution 1)

The reason KI 8 mentions the word ‘stealth’ is because in her case, she started to work very selectively with small groups of managers on the introduction of external assessment centres. Following the idea of ‘going where the energy is’ she suggested assessments as a decision support tool to which some of these leaders were very open. KI 8’s goal is to implement these assessments throughout the organisation in a similar manner over the next two years until those business units who were against these support processes can no longer avoid following suit.

Again, the subjective nature of current talent assessment and review processes and an absence of understanding what the organisation is ultimately trying to achieve through its talent review processes was a theme throughout the interviews. This concern, in particular in relation to the outcome of the talent reviews and the lack of a clear definition of what true talent and leaders ‘look like’ was echoed by at least four key informants. KI 8 in particular shared her concerns regarding the subjective nature of current people assessments in talent reviews:

"... there is a lot of debate still, it's far too subjective, still. And the reality I think of that is, we've probably, the biggest problem we have with that is, we really don't know what a good .. what talent looks like in our organisation. We haven't got a clear definition for it. So, my version of what a talented person looks like is very different to that of the board." (KI 8, Transport & Distribution 1)

Such differences of perception, and a definition of what ‘good’ looks like, appears to be an issue in the majority of participating firms. Key informants lamented that externally supported assessment – and an external perspective as to what ‘good’ looks like for them as professional assessors with insights into other organisations - does not yet form an integral part of talent management. KI 3, working for FMCG 1, made a passionate plea for the use of external assessment as part of both talent management
and associated hiring processes within her organisation even though a number of talent management related processes are already quite sophisticated compared to other firms in the research sample. KI 3’s view was very strong, based on many years of experience working with senior teams and watching conversations unravel and careers being decided based on the subjective perceptions of senior leaders. Her quote below was shared in the context of executive level hiring processes; another aspect of early talent management interventions which she has been supporting through the use of assessment processes:

"Because I don't like screwing people's lives up (through ill-thought through TM)! You know, making mistakes on hiring is just unforgivable when we know so much about it! And too often, you still hear people in terms of the assessment piece, you know, let's interview him. We had a, in one part of the world, a disaster set of GMs that came and went and came and went; and the, ehm, the senior guy responsible said to the last guy, let's call him Joe Blogs, another disaster, had to pay him off and he said, but, I took him out for dinner five times! (very frustrated voice) So I'm sitting there banging my head thinking yes, but there are assessments that we can do!!" (KI 3, FMCG 1)

KI 6 explained in detail how her respective organisation addressed the challenges of subjective people assessments by radically changing the talent management process by introducing tighter and more controlled metrics and . First, it began to be supported by online technology to provide a consistent global overview of the individuals in the various talent pools, including a ‘Top 200’ and a ‘Middle 500’. Furthermore, individual employees were encouraged to nominate themselves to be in the talent pools but first, they had to find an executive sponsor and their application had to be supported by the line manager. Rigorous, externally facilitated assessment centres were introduced at the same time. If either the line manager or sponsor had concerns about the individuals’ ability to perform well in these assessment centres, the self-nomination was rejected and a development plan was put in place. KI 6 explains:

".. the worst thing that you could do is to put someone through an assessment centre and to then flunk it, basically. If you were in any doubt, you didn't nominate them." (KI 6, Telecoms 1)
Not wanting an employee to fail an assessment centre is a noteworthy approach, as often, such an experience can be detrimental to the self-perception of an employee. I have observed some very well respected senior leaders ‘fail’ their assessment centres in the past. KI 6 links such failures – or ‘hero to zero’ experiences to the subjective assessment of talent before the rigorous processes were introduced globally within her organisation:

"You can tell it (the process) was subjective because people weren't passing the assessment centres". (KI 6, Telecoms 1)

Finally, KI 12 raised some thought-provoking points which will be reviewed again in the following discussion chapter, particularly with regards to the early identification of talent:

"If ten percent of our top people are not in the door between the age of 30 and 40 or in that level, they are never going to make it to the top table by the time they hit 45 or 50. It just cannot happen. So it's, we've had that debate. Do we think we actually have the people in the room that can actually ... people in the organisation that can fill the seats in the room. And, not sure! Which means then you go outside and it breaks your build / buy. So, it's this whole fantastic concept of... of ...taking risk with people sooner! (...) And it's again, for me, it's finding talent early. So, I don't know what we did 20 or 25 years ago, but I think we were better at spotting talent early in career then compared to where we are today." (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

Participants face a number of challenges in their talent management processes and activities. This section has provided insight into the extensive use of 9-box grids in talent reviews which integrate performance management, the struggles with ‘potential’ assessment and the desire for more structure and objectivity through the use of externally facilitated assessment centre processes. The third and final aggregate dimension addresses the sense of disappointment and disillusionment participants expressed throughout the interviews when speaking of their firm’s talent management practices.
4.5  Disappointment and Unfulfilled Promises

The third aggregate dimension encapsulates (more of) the emotions shared by participants during the interviews and can best be described and summarised as ‘disappointment and unfulfilled promises’. All but one participant, at some stage in the interviews, became very animated or emotional when speaking about the TM practices within their respective organisations. For some, these emotions appeared as a brief glimpse of letting down their professional guard whilst others were extremely open, with some participants adding comments in whispers – as though they were momentarily concerned someone else was listening – or speaking in high-pitched voices. Every participant underscored the shared sentiments with countless deep sighs, laughs, shoulder shrugs and facial expressions including eye rolling or closing, smiles, grimaces and frowns.

4.5.1  Frustrations with Manager Behaviours

The majority of participants voiced what can best be described as a sense of frustration and disappointment over the behaviours of many managers and senior leaders they work with, particularly in the context of talent management. Performance and talent management processes are perceived to lose some of the potential value they can bring because managers either don’t buy into these initiatives in the first place, don’t execute them according to company expectation and best practice or managers do not understand the processes at all, paying only lip-service to these. KI 5, for example, firmly believes that internal politics affects talent management work and KI 14 of Public 1 said that talent management is unbelievably (emphasising the word) difficult and added that the complexity of the management of talent is just “potty”. KI 11 provides the following insight:

"We kind of underestimated that not even everybody was having an appraisal. There was an assumption that everybody was having monthly 1:1s and annual appraisals. And we were introducing this talent conversation and everyone was going to love it. If you’ve got managers that are so busy that they are cancelling 1:1s and appraisals are being put back and put back and then a talent conversation on top of that is just another thing in their
responsibilities! (...) And, obviously, if you've got your objectives that are all structured around the doing... you know, if no one is interested in your managing stuff, then that's the thing that's always going to get squeezed out.” (KI 11, Charity 1)

This exemplifies the concern the majority of participants share: managers are too busy focusing on the day-to-day running of the business and the people aspects of their role is often neglected as a result.

KI 6 explained how her organisation tackled this particular issue head-on through a restructure which included a clear re-focus of what a manager is expected to do:

"80% of their (the managers) job is to manage, 20% is to provide expertise. Prior to that (the restructure), it was probably the other way around so managers weren't really managing." (KI 6, Telecoms 1)

KI 12 also suggested that much work has been done over the last decade to address the issue of HR work vs. managerial responsibility and the impact this has on the process and outcomes:

"It's great to have a process and tools and all that but to take a kind of step where the business doesn't do it (TM) because they've been told by HR to do it... they are actually doing it because they see the value and it's making a difference." (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

Some executives may well see the value in talent management but that does not mean they necessarily enjoy the process! There appears to be a mismatch between the rhetoric and reality of talent management in that managers don’t necessarily adhere to instructions and processes provided by the HR team. This suggests that participants are victims of company politics in that they are not seen as carrying sufficient gravitas and hence their instructions to management are ignored or, at best, carried out with personal agendas in mind. In many organisations, and certainly in the majority of participating firms, one of the main challenges talent and HR team members are facing talent lists which, in reality, comprise of individuals most liked by senior leaders. Again, this is where the assessment processes and initiatives outlined in the previous section could provide significant support to the HR teams who are trying to bring more objectivity to decisions. The notion of ‘what does good look like’ also plays a significant role in this context as does the managerial capability to have open conversations with direct reports. KI 8 explained what her predecessor in the role was confronted with:
"The previous HR Director to me had a challenge ... fought the Board and said I'm not having a list of ‘I like the following people’. This has to be based on (laughs) some, something objective but she really struggled to get them to come up with objective criteria. One because I think it was difficult because they don't know what it looked like and, secondly, because then it meant that some of their top people who did a great job in a certain area, ehm, would be flushed out as part of that and there would be some difficult conversation to happen with those people..." (KI 8, Transport & Distribution 1)

Another example of how managers use their position power to subvert the organisation-wide talent management process is by refusing to let ‘their’ people move to other roles in the organisation; as was noted by at least four participants. Another area of concern was the issue of letting difficult situations continue for too long before intervention is made, either by the HR team or senior leadership. Of course, in some situations, it is senior leaders who seduce themselves into thinking that all will be well in the end, even if they ignore a situation that may well have escalated already. It is perhaps somewhat disconcerting that senior leaders have to be told that their behaviour is not in support of organisational values or is having a detrimental effect on other employees. This behaviour may be a result of little self-awareness among managers as highlighted in section 4.1.1.; in addition to conflict-avoidance. KI 3 said:

"If anything, we might be guilty of letting things go on for too long. You know, the trust is such that .. so, we had one division - I mean, it's turning around now - but it had a terrible time. And, if you asked the CEO, he'd say 'I left that too long'. It was 'Oh, we'll be alright, we'll be alright, just keep us informed, we are watching - oh, we'll be alright'. We should have gone in earlier! So, if anything, a bit too tolerant of it." (KI 3, FMCG 1)

There appears to be a link between managerial capability and the behaviours observed by participants over the years. Cultures of niceness prevent open and direct conversations as managers shy away from constructive confrontation – e.g. ‘battering peers into submission’ as previously quoted can hardly be described as a constructive conversation. Five participants shared that discussions are becoming more open in their firms but acknowledge there is a long way to go.
"... and I think people are getting more comfortable challenging each other around it as well. We are a very nice organisation (laughs) and challenge is not necessarily something that comes easily to people." (KI 7, Pharma 1)

Similar comments were made by other participants. There is a noticeable discrepancy whereby informants on the one hand speak about the rather robust challenges they have witnessed in the board rooms. Then, on the other hand, the same participants mention the culture of niceness in which difficult conversations with those affected by the talent decisions made in the heated debates are not shared. It would appear that in some firms, executives are comfortable challenging one another – at least to a degree – but shy away from open discussions with their direct reports. KI 8 illustrates:

"... it goes down right to some of the difficult conversations that have to happen as a result of it and we are living some of the problems today putting those right. (Difficult because) I think well, firstly because people know each other and they have worked together for years and I think that makes it very difficult in this particular organisation. I, ... the other bit... if they haven't worked together .. I think ... I think because culturally, we don't like upsetting people. I think it's that fear that they might go away, we might lose them, they might complain about us.” (KI 8, Transport & Distribution 1)

The impressions about managerial behaviour in the TM context is summarised eloquently by KI 8 in the quote below. Combined with other areas of concerns outlined on the previous pages, it is hard to ignore just how difficult the structured, unbiased and objective management of talent really is.

"For me, it (the thing that would make the biggest positive difference to TM) would be to get the board’s understanding to what we are trying to do and achieve. And, real understanding an buy-in, not just talking about it and then going away and doing something else. But understanding it, buying it, really supporting the process, really challenging their own areas and, ehm, challenging their own areas and letting some people go. Allowing people to move between areas and departments. Because there is this bit about not wanting .. oh, he's really good, I don't want to lose him from my team. So, if they could just get what that value, that handling something in that way could bring, that would be great. (...) Because it is a bit of a paper exercise .. I think .. it's being a bit harsh but it is a bit of a paper exercise at the moment. They are not living it and feeling it and understanding it.” (KI 8, Transport & Distribution 1)
KI 4 (Construction 1) and KI 12 (Oil & Gas 1) would concur with this perspective. The latter participant openly discussed concerns with regards to managers needing to “right-size their view” (KI 12) on individuals in the team and coming to term with mismatches of expectations; something KI 8 and KI 10 also echoed. For all these participants, the core issue comes back to the need for more open communication within the organisation. Within KI 12’s company of nearly 100,000 employees, some divisions have elected to share talent review output with employees while others decided to keep this information confidential within the senior management team. She elaborates as follows, illustrating the tension between normative ‘honesty’ and the ‘reality’ of conversations in her organisation:

“It's having that honest conversation and I think most managers don't want to have it. It's just easier not to. So, it's no different to a performance conversation. So, you know, sometimes I think they are glossed over and the honest discussion isn't held so we've got a way to go with that on transparency as well.” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

In the context of organisations prioritising business over people discussions, KI 4 added:

“But the reality is, that at a certain level in the organisation, it's very operationally driven and very operationally focused and there are projects which need to be delivered and there are clients to manage and, you know, it just doesn't really happen!” (KI 4, Construction 1)

KI 7 of Pharma 1 revealed that the relatively new-in-post CEO has established a different team of individuals around him, a team that appears to really believe in talent management and investing in people, and that this sentiment is beginning to cascade in the organisation. The participant further said that she has the impression that explicitly linking talent management and people investment to other core organisational people processes such as performance management and a change in bonus payments is sending a clear signal as to what is expected of leaders and people across this organisation. KI 9 has a similar battle on her hands but explained concerns relating to buy-in of senior leaders:

"We're just in the process of re-writing our purpose, vision, values and also looking at associated behaviours and what changes we need to make there. It will be interesting to see how quickly we'll integrate that into the talent and performance processes. I'm concerned that not everyone has bought into the importance of how such people processes can help
embed new behaviours. At the end of the day, an organisation reflects its leadership and if they are not on board, it will be a tough journey”. (KI 9, FMCG 2)

The observations mentioned above contribute and lead to exploring the next sub-theme to emerge from the interviews: the frustrations participants feel around the talent management process itself and the impact this has on the behaviours of managers and the subsequent people decisions made.

4.5.2 Frustrations with the Process

Perhaps one of the most emotional outbursts recorded in the interviews with participants came from KI 13 who said that in the context of talent management processes:

“You are messing with people's lives! You are, absolutely!” (KI 13, Public 1)

The career changing impact talent management decisions can have on an individual should not be underestimated. As outlined in the introduction chapter and in the context of managerial behaviour in talent review meetings, the career progression of employees can take a dramatic turn – both in a negative and positive manner – as a result of such conversations.

The implementation of streamlined, simplistic and engaging talent management processes appears to be a challenge for numerous firms in this sample. In an effort to cover all bases and eventualities, the talent review processes in organisations become overly complex and, arguably, it is the lack of understanding of desired outcomes that may be leading or contributing to the themes already explored in this chapter. KI 2, for example, elaborated on the recent launch of the first ever talent review process within a Financial Services firm in which she had been working for about 18 months. Following several months of preparation and numerous conference calls and meetings to explain the process, the ‘launch’ button was pressed. KI 2 said that, within weeks, she was:
“Having conversations and I hear things and I go 'oh...that sounds a bit messy and that's not really the right interpretation' but I think that's what happens. Language gets banded about.”

(KI 2, FS 1)

KI 1 (IT 1) shared his frustrations in relation to promotions, believing that about 50% of the people who are promoted will have received that recognition as a direct result of succession planning. The other 50%, however, will come from different places. This may be down to changing structures in which three-year old succession plans are no longer relevant. However, it may also be down to managers having information conversations among themselves to promote certain individuals. KI 11 (Charity 1) shared that such ‘key talent’ individuals are euphemistically referred to as the “golden children” (quote from KI 11) within her firm even though the charity in which she works has made a conscious decision not to establish key talent lists or any kind of favouritism. KI 12 seemed somewhat proud of the achievements of her organisation over time, suggesting that:

“(…) we've done this for a while and I think we can demonstrate the people that are being talked about are the ones that are getting promoted.” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

This, however, might be the results of a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby leaders believe they are talking about the right (type of) person and end up offering the promotion even though there may not be sufficient objective criteria to support such promotion and development offers. KI 7 believes that processes are complex, particularly with regards to promotions and shared:

"It is partly around helping people understand how to do it (TM). But it is also around people taking that leap of faith…". (KI 7, Pharma 1)

Not only do processes become complex in the actual talent management process. The fall-out and results of such conversations and the – at times desperate – desire to create development opportunities for employees can also add significant complexity to the organisation and the hierarchy over time. KI 11 explains how a complex, multi-layered structure with up to eight departmental reporting levels in an organisation of overall 200 employees came about:

"We tried to give people development opportunities and we think we are retaining them by giving them someone to manage, we've actually ended up with quite kind of... quite a lot
of layers. Eh, we haven't really helped. We've got too many managers and, yeah, we have created some problems for ourselves. So I think it's gone a bit ... it's gone a bit crazy over the years. (laugh). Let's take it in hand (laughs again. Note: the nature of the laugh indicated to the researcher that KI knows nothing will change as the issue outlined above is a 'political hot potato'). (KI 11, Charity 1)

A major concern shared by participants in the context of talent management processes is what can best be described as a ‘hero to zero’ culture which prevails in at least half of participating firms. Previously mentioned in this chapter are themes relating to managerial capability, the concept of leaders picking people they know to promote, the promotion of technical experts to line manager positions and rigorous approaches to talent assessment. Talent processes which lead to recently promoted individuals worrying whether they will still be seen as ‘key talent’ in 12 months’ time cannot be healthy for a firm, no matter how big or small the workforce. KI 8 said the following:

"The talent process hasn't been brilliant, is that we've had people that have been classed as 'brilliant' for years and all of a sudden, they are not brilliant anymore! And it's this going from hero to zero which I have used with our board to say 'this is where you know it's not right'. If you .. You can't .. if you've held someone in high esteem for so long and all of a sudden, it's not working! That, that cannot be right." (KI 8, Transport & Distribution 1)

KI 4 shares a very similar perspective when talking about the talent process in her firm:

"And I think we can be quite quick to judge and quite quick to criticise so, where we do take risks on people, you know, for challenging and stretching new assignments, ehm, we can sometimes be quick to criticise if they do then struggle as opposed to supporting. Which, in a sense is quite interesting because it's sort of contrary to our values and our family, ehm, sort of generally the perceived culture of the organisation. But, nonetheless, it does go on!” (KI 4, Construction 1)

The talent management processes in most firms are critically perceived and evaluated by participants. Whilst organisations are keen to show off their processes – often well-documented on paper – the reality of how these processes are implemented is very different from the theory. One area which speaks strongly to the social aspects of talent management relates to the concept of the network behind the
scenes: the talent decisions made outside of the board room when the official conversations have been completed. KI 12 said:

“There is absolutely a network happening behind the scenes (smiles knowingly). Just getting yourself to be part of that network so you can be there to hear it, right!? (…) I joke but I never fail to miss the after dinner bar activities because that's when all the stuff starts happening, right!? You learn more about who they want and don't want in some of those sessions. Absolutely! And sponsorship and all of that, it comes out! I think it's being able to pull that in professionally into the discussions and say, now, wait a minute. We just talked about this person being portable but yet now you've … so again it's being able to challenge and use your knowledge carefully but it's informally happening all over the place! So for me, and my preference is to bring it into the room and call it out!” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

This experience by KI 12 is not unique and was echoed by a further four participants. KI 9 (FMCG 2) witnessed similar conversations during the course of her career and others, such as KI 3 (FMCG 1), are conscious that these discussions take place. None of the participants are in any doubt that these informal conversations have a significant impact on the outcomes of talent management interventions. Combined with difficult to understand talent review processes – which will be explored next - and lack of managerial capability, it becomes easier to comprehend why politics is so widespread in talent management in today’s firms.

A further area of concern for participants is the complexity of talent management processes and approaches in organisations, caused by the numerous pre-conversation templates to be completed and guidelines to be adhered to. KI 1 (IT 1) believes that some of the managerial capability issues she has witnessed in her organisation may well also be a consequence of managers not fully understanding the processes and desired outcomes which, in turn, has an impact on the overall effectiveness of what the firm is trying to achieve. When the time comes to deliver the talent review messaging to employees, it is easier for managers not to have the conversation in the first place or deliver a ‘half-truth’ to the employee in order not to upset them. A similar issue presented to KI 8 (Transport & Distribution 1) who voiced regrets over not spending more time educating managers on what talent management means
to her organisation. Coaching in particular is an area her firm wanted to invest more time and effort in. However, very few managers understood what this actually meant to the interactions they have with their line reports. KI 8 believes that more communication would have made a difference to help alleviate the different interpretations of both coaching and talent management in her organisation.

Another indication that perhaps, over time, companies have over-engineered their talent management processes is evidenced by the amount of time participants and their teams have had to spend educating their HR peers as well as managers on talent review processes and outcomes. KI 12 explained:

“You meet some of the new HR people and you go 'wow they are asking me those kinds of basic questions' but they are learning still. And so to expect them to be in a position to challenge (managers), you can see it's going to take quite a bit of time. And they are more junior so we are hitting them, the lower level folks that in 10 years from now they should be sitting in, they should have the credibility to be able to challenge.” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

KI 7 said that her firm went through a significant education piece with the HR teams:

“Our TM team has spent quite a lot of time running webinars or sessions explaining the talent review process so that HR can play quite a key role in working with the business, ehm, to have those conversations and get more of a rhythm to it.” (KI 7, Pharma 1)

KI 12 (Oil & Gas 1) also questioned to what degree processes are getting in the way of talent management, in particular in the context of being able to identify talent earlier in their career. She believes that process gets in the way and that the firm is “doing something wrong”. A similar sentiment was echoed by another three participants. Furthermore, the structure of the organisation appears to have an impact on the effectiveness of talent management which, in some firms, expands to impact appraisal processes and pay structures. KI 8 (Transport & Distribution 1) was quick to point out that her firm does not have the best structure in place, something that is the result of being a loyal firm which, over time, has created roles for individuals in order to keep them in the company instead of parting company with them. KI 8 did mention that:
“... we are questioning ourselves to see if we need to toughen up. But we are quite paternalistic about that.” (KI 8, Transport & Distribution 1)

In answer to the opening question of the interviews in which participants were asked to explain how talent management works in their organisations, some participants gave towards positive replies, or launched straight into an explanation of their respective talent review process whereas others, exemplified by KI 11, replied:

"That is an interesting question because I don't think it does work!” (KI 11, Charity 1)

KI 12 (Oil & Gas 1) believes in ‘artfully breaking the rules’ when being told that she cannot do something. Her mantra for years has been to continue doing what she’s doing to ensure the right talent gets good opportunities to learn and grow – until someone tells her to stop. Her key concern has always been to retain talented individuals at all levels rather than losing them in the maze of the structured and somewhat unhelpful talent management process. To date, no one has asked her to stop. KI 5 (FS 2), who works in the heavily regulated financial services industry, explained that her firm is very risk averse; a behaviour which manifests itself in talent decisions in that people constantly seek reassurance before making (people) decisions. She continues:

“Ehm, and, politics can get in the way a little bit. There's always a few levels you need to check with first. So, you know, we've had lots of feedback from people to say they don't feel really empowered because, actually, there's a bit of concern they'll make the wrong decisions and be blamed for mistakes. So, I think we've been hurt quite badly. I also - and, again, this is a generalisation - we are quite 'steady Eddie'. Ehm, on the positives, it's extremely friendly! Everybody is lovely to each other but that can mean we are not always as honest as we should be. So, we are nice to you and we don't give you a lot of constructive feedback as a result of that.” (KI 5, FS 2)

The talent management process in KI 12’s firm (Oil & Gas 1) has become well established over the years. The fact that reviews are conducted every year has meant that there is now an organisationally driven expectation on line managers to ‘do’ talent management. This has resulted in managers taking the process more seriously as news will reach executive management if this is not the case. The same
participant added that, even though the firm has been engaging in talent management practices for nearly ten years, 2014 was the first year in which the entire company of 100,000 employees worked to the same timelines and calendar dates in talent management. Furthermore, KI 12 suggested that she has really only seen a step-change in how talent review conversations are approached in the last 18 months. The impact a strong belief in talent management can have on the rigour with which this is approached in the organisation is also echoed in an international pharma firm, represented by KI 7, who said:

"People are starting to see the fruits of our labour and the value that it actually brings. Eh, and we have a real.. I think a really strong, eh, support in our CET, our Central Exec Team who really do believe in this. And they have had .. they have talent reviews regularly. They had one last week. And, eh, and they go through that process and believe in it which role-models it for layers below." (KI 7, Pharma 1)

The final process frustration for HR and talent professionals represented in the research sample is the fact that people who thrive and are fantastic leaders in booming times are not necessarily those that turn out to be strong leaders when things are really tough for an organisation. KI 2 (FS 1) had some very insightful perspectives to share, highlighting that often, talented individuals will naturally surface and questioning whether the complicated talent review processes in place – behaviour frameworks, 9-box grids, assessments, etc. – are getting in the way of finding the real stars in a company. She believes in keeping things simple and focusing on conversations, a sentiment echoed by KI 9 (FMCG 2) whose main concern related to keeping people at all levels of the organisation engaged and motivated even though she witnesses signs of obvious politics and favouritism to which some very talented people fell victim.

4.5.3 Disillusionment

A further key theme which emerged from the research is the collective sense of disillusionment expressed by all key informants during the course of the interviews. Numerous informants were
disarmingly open in voicing their frustrations with both processes and people involved in the TM cycle in their respective firms. However, others were slightly more guarded, keeping ‘sighs’ or ‘nervous laughs’ to a minimum but still very much noticeable.

It might appear tempting to dismiss such emotional displays by the key informants. However, the thematic analysis of the interviews suggests that these are concerns were consistently voiced and should be heard by other practitioners in the field as well as researchers and the academic population as TM is far from a straight-forward process in many organisations.

Numerous themes which have already been covered in previous sections of this chapter re-emerge in the context of ‘disillusionment’, ranging from organisation structures, executive sponsorship, perceptions in relation to the role of HR, talent management processes and buy-in of leaders to talent initiatives. KI 1 covers a significant number of the aspects of disillusionment in his quote below, lamenting the lack of risk-taking on individuals, the lack of vision in talent management and the struggles that practitioners face in the inflexible approach firms have to the management of talent:

KI 1: "I think we should take some more risks on people. I'm in quite a few conversations where, you know, it's like the person has this but they don't have that yet, and, ehm, you're almost waiting for the complete safe bet. Or, what actually happens is, ehm, sometimes you have a talent and you're trying to fill ... I would say our succession and our decisions around talent are often about for the next role. It's not for or about in five or ten year's time. So let's say you've got someone, who, you know, they are the pool of people who could potentially become the CEO or the president of a region. But you know that in the next seven to eight years they need three to four experiences in order to be ready for that. We are not very good at kind of saying ‘alright, let's cycle them through those so they'll be in a strong position to move. I think we are thinking about what's the next role for them but not roles two or three. So what tends to happen is you have a job come up, maybe it's a bit of a unique role that needs a certain set of experiences, an example is, maybe, a strategy role. OK. And, ehm, I think we always tend to go for ‘who are the internal pool, if we are going internal at all, but who in the internal pool is the best person for that job now?. Who is the most qualified, who is the most ready. May be there's someone who is not quite as ready or as qualified for the job and is a much more well-rounded person who we think could be the president one day - and a stint in strategy could really build that strategic skills. So let's make that trade-
off and put them in even though he may only be the second or third most qualified person for the job in a bigger succession planning kind of theme. I don't think we do that.” (KI 1, IT 1)

Another frustration expressed by participants is the lack of status many HR professionals are seen to have in organisations. HR are often perceived as mediators and facilitators of talent review conversations and have the unenviable task of trying to keep conversations on track and challenge discussions as they are unfolding. Furthermore, as evidenced by KI 12 below, HR is often seen a being removed from the business and not having a solid-enough understanding of the business challenges:

"If you come in as a newly minted HR advisor and you are new and you're just kind of learning, you are not gonna make any impact at all. And that, we talked about that on the course and I said it's OK to realise that .. just know where you are at in your position and pick your moments to challenge but recognise that you are not going to influence anything until you have earned that respect and you know what you are talking about and you've got the data to support it. (...) There's always the 'you are not in the business you are HR'. And so it's, how do you move yourself closer and closer to the point that they almost could view you .. as one of their own.” (KI 12, Oil & Gas 1)

KI 5 echoes this sentiment and voices her frustration at HR not necessarily being seen as an integral part of the business, needing to convince business leaders of the benefits HR can bring rather than being perceived as ‘fluffy’:

"The challenge is probably convincing others that, ehm, actually, if we put the time and effort in and actually the investment into some of these people we will reap the reward. Ehm, but I think there is still, certainly in this organisation, a little bit of a perception of HR is the soft and fluffy stuff. And I think until they start to realise the benefits, ehm, which will be sort of post journey or half-way through journey, it will be quite difficult to convince people (sounds pensive).” (KI 5, FS 2)

KI 11 explains another issue also reflected in the conversations with other participants; the limitations HR professionals face as a direct consequence of organisational leadership. In this case, the participant and her team have been unable to gain support for clearly defined and communicated talent programmes although – as previously cited – the organisation is already facing internal criticism by employees who believe that certain individuals are the perceived ‘golden children’ (KI 11, Charity 1)
who receive all the opportunities. KI 11 would like to remove the speculative factor and introduce top
talent interventions and explains:

"We will manage the next few years (until he retires) and then maybe do something ... a bit
more radical! (laughs out loud). Not that I think it is but at the moment, you know, our
CEO is very, ehm, yeah, equality is really important to him. And, for whatever reason, he
doesn't see top talent programmes ... he just doesn't see that. It doesn't fit his beliefs." (KI
11, Charity 1)

Values-based talent management is also proving a challenge for at least two participants. Values
and behaviours are often seen as a part of talent management as these find their way into the
performance review process as a measure to assess ‘how’ objectives were achieved as opposed to
measuring just ‘what’ the individual managed to contribute to the organisation. KI 10 said:

"We have in the last four/five months been reviewing those values because it feels as if
though some of them are ... well, they are not wrong but some of them are almost leading
to wrong behaviour; leading to unhelpful behaviours." (KI 10, Retail 1)

KI 9 had a similar experience:

“Management were quite focused on interpreting the behaviour framework in a way that it
suited their argument on certain individuals during talent reviews which basically meant
that individual never stood a chance of being recognised for his contributions. His face just
didn’t fit and they (management) used the values and behaviours as an excuse. The danger
is that message gets out so the values become irrelevant to the process.” (KI 9, FMCG 2)

Another area of frustration for participants, which is linked to the earlier explored management of
expectations following talent review conversations. KI 7 articulates this as follows:

"People understand that there is a talent review process and somebody holds them in high
regard and this is why. And, I think in some areas of the business there is still a nervousness
around, actually, if we tell people how good they are, they will go." (KI 7, Pharma 1)

The fear of losing talented employees is a concern for many firms as is the impact on talent when
specifically designed development programmes for these individuals are not perceived as relevant and
sufficiently engaging by individuals. Not only is the credibility of the programme at stake, but also the
reputation of the talent and HR teams who are typically responsible for the design and implementation.

KI 13 has had to confront these issues in her organisation:

"We have let gifted amateurs (in-house managers) design our talent process for middle managers! (…) There is no governance, there is no code of ethics for talent planning or any of that kind of stuff, is there? It's sort of marginalised (…), it's not a really recognisable discipline. (…) You would not allow your finances to be run like that, right? You just wouldn't!? You just wouldn't! But it's alright to do this with your brightest and best people!"

(KI 13, Public 1)

The internal practices that lead to career advancement are scrutinised by KI 8 who expressed frustration at just how important exposure to senior leaders is in order for promotions to take place:

"Massive! Massively! Because, really, how else do you judge it!? (KI 8, Transport & Distribution 1)

All of the above comments are reflections of the dynamic tensions surrounding TM in organisations. One area all of the participants are working to define is clarity as to what the TM processes and interventions in their respective firms are due to deliver. This leads to another area of contention: the inclusive vs. exclusive nature of the process. KI 11 explains:

"We need to look at what do we mean, you know, what do we mean (by TM). And, there are differences of opinions about this inclusive/exclusive approach and we need to resolve that. Our CEO has always been firmly in that it's an inclusive approach and fairness and equality are the most important things." (KI 11, Charity 1)

KI 12 (Oil & Gas 1) and KI 9 (FMCG 2) also admitted that not everybody can be covered and discussed in the context of the talent reviews, owing to the significant numbers of employees at each level. This indicates a selective process during the course of which many 'hidden' talented employees which may not be a part of the political landscape of the firm, and hence not have the public profile of other individuals, may miss out on opportunities. One participating firm draws a clear distinction between people managers and individual contributors in their approach to TM whereby the process only applies when an individual wants to become a line manager. Consequently, many individual contributors are
unaware of the TM processes in the organisation; the expectation being that they drive their own career development and seek support from their line managers. The majority of participating firms have ‘key talent’ programmes in place; learning interventions designed to elevate those deemed to have the highest level of performance and potential in combination and are earmarked for bigger future roles. Having gained insight from participating firms, however, into how some of these people decisions come about in the boardroom, it is reasonable to question whether the key talent population really always represents those who truly have the highest potential.

KI 12 (Oil & Gas 1) said that her firm distinguishes between potential and readiness in an effort to counterbalance some of the ‘hero cultures’ which may be seen in other organisations whereas KI 11 shared that the charity in which she has been working for many years has a more stealth-like approach:

"It (key talent initiatives) is not something that we'd overtly do. (...) It's slightly misguided of the CEO to say 'we don't do that' because we do do that! And, actually, because we do that but we are not open about it, what comes back, the feedback that we got from the task groups, ehm, was that there are these 'golden children' who get the special opportunities. Who things are not advertised for; they just get slightly better ... you know, we just slide them into posts. And it's funny because I don't know, you know, no one has told me who these 'golden children' are it's just kind of feedback and it gets talked about but I could probably guess who they would be. And, actually, they probably would represent our top talent. So I think is we were brave enough to talk about them in that sense that I think people would probably accept that instead of them being 'golden children' they are our top talent and actually they are, for whatever reason, they are in critical posts, they are .. they have got unique skill set, they contribute above and beyond to the organisation, they are top talent!" (KI 11, Charity 1)

Finally, KI 3 offered a perspective which advocates a back-to-basics approach to talent management in which respect forms the foundation, rather than elaborate talent interventions. It also speaks to ensuring that managers have knowledge of basic people management fundamentals in order to ensure basic processes such as feedback and coaching can take place and be cascaded to the next layers of direct reports within an organisation structure.
"You know how you treat someone you can either shrivel them up or you can let them blossom. Well, let's do more of that! Going back to treating people with respect, coaching them, giving them feedback, giving them development, you know, all of that stuff. High trust things. All of those things we know which many are still not doing very well. Frustrating!" (KI 3, FMCG 1)

4.5 Synthesis

Talent management has been a key people initiative in many organisations since it first became popular and hence an integral part of company’s Human Resources practice. However, certainly based on the accounts of research participants, it is difficult to get right. Many organisations struggle with the lack of objectivity and questions are raised as to whether the individuals earmarked as ‘top talent’ really are the employees with the most potential – or whether they simply passed the subjective tests and conversations often held at the executive level in the context of talent review meetings.

The social and political aspects of talent management are often brushed aside or ignored; a theme which clearly emerged in the 14 organisations who participated in the research. Following the data analysis and due consideration of the challenges participants face in relation to TM in their respective firms, the key issues flagged by participants were analysed and, over time, two distinct process maps were produced: the first one outlining the rhetoric of talent management which suggests it is a straightforward and unambiguous process; the second depicting the reality of talent management as described by participants and supported by research data.
As stated above, figure 5 suggests that talent management is a streamlined and simple, three-step process for organisations. The rhetoric further suggests rational decisions are made by process participants who, through open conversations and debates, secure the future supply of talent for the organisation, e.g. via succession planning, before repeating the cycle again. The reality in organisations, however, looks very different as depicted in figure 6 below:

Figure 6 illuminates a much more complex process; one that appears linear at first sight but is significantly influenced by two main factors from the very outset – the rhetoric of objectivity and managerial anxiety. Turning to the rhetoric of objectivity first, the majority of research participants
described talent review processes based on 9-box grids and templates such as succession plans and competency or behaviour models to aid the assessment of employees. However, in order to ascertain where an individual is placed on the 9-box grid, lag measures such as performance data and artfully vague assessments regarding an individual’s potential (note earlier discussion on redefining ‘potential’) to progress in the organisation are made.

The aforementioned factors are then combined with managerial anxiety which includes a sense of apprehension by managers to be able to manage direct reports’ expectations following the talent review and issues arising out of managerial capability issues which have not been sufficiently addressed or alleviated by manager development programmes. Both of these factors can contribute to the continuing practice of promotion outstanding technical experts and/or individual contributors to people management roles in order to offer these employees career development opportunities; further fuelling the cycle of ill-prepared or ill-qualified individuals progressing to management who do not have the capability to fulfil the role, leading to further anxiety.

With the above setting the scene, the physical talent review meeting takes place during which subjective (people) decisions are made, influenced by what research participants describe as organisational amnesia – forgetting the skills and past experiences of individuals; the (absence) of executive sponsorship for individuals – or pigeon-holing, which can fundamentally change an individual’s career; a lack of managerial ability and a sense of disillusionment, which is mainly felt and expressed by the HR professionals who desire to bring more rigour, structure and objectivity to the talent review process.

Decisions made in the (board)room during talent review meetings are often rationalised post-meeting through expectation management as outlined above in which managers either remain tight-lipped about the talent discussions that just took place when asked by their direct reports or, also common place, the data is not shared at all with those who were discussed during the review meeting; even though a firm will say it has an open policy about such events. Furthermore, and perhaps more significantly, many of the decisions made in the official talent review session will be questioned, discussed and revised during
what KI 12 of Oil and Gas 1 called ‘after dinner conversations at the bar’ which, incidentally, she suggested should never be missed. This is perhaps one of the most crucial steps in the reality map of talent management as it speaks to the social and political aspects of talent management alike. It is not until talent review participants come together in the more relaxed environment of a restaurant or, indeed, bar, that they feel comfortable to voice their true opinions and impressions of an individual and, consequently, not only question the decisions taken earlier but alter the outcomes of the debates.

The output from the talent reviews hence concerns itself mostly with effort to maintain the impression that talent management is being done ‘properly’ in organisations, e.g. according to the handbooks and guidelines printed and distributed to managers in preparation for another talent review cycle in a firm. Based on the research data, from a perspective of participants who are all HR and talent management professionals, however, the overarching ‘output’ of the talent review cycle is a sense of frustration and disillusionment which is based on a combination of factors, including the lack of managerial capability, the (lack of) process execution and adherence and the ill-disciplined nature of some executives. Talent and HR professionals will often be required by the nature of their roles to uphold the organisations people review process as fair and well-executed. However, as part of the feedback loop, these professionals will often seek to implement more objective assessment processes in their firms in an effort to increase the objective assessment aspects of talent management. As KI 8 (Transport and Distribution 1) stated, such measures are often implemented ‘by stealth’ so as not to upset status quo and make already anxious managers feel potentially threatened by more rigorous HR processes. Before such measures can be addressed and implemented in a manner that will have a significant impact, however, the process typically starts from the beginning with either a mid-year talent review taking place or the process will have come full circle with another annual review session to be scheduled and facilitated.

Figure 6 illustrated the ‘reality’ of talent management in organisations based on the data obtained during the empirical research. However, even this map, arguably, does not depict just how complex, messy and confusing the talent management process in organisations feels for those taking part in it. It is a
process in which the rhetoric and reality of talent management are inter-twined and co-exit, albeit not always in peace! In order to demonstrate the relative ‘chaos’ and complexity of talent management in organisations, the following figure 7 is included in this chapter, which also formed the basis of the more coherent and refined figure 6 depicted and discussed above.

**Figure 7: Draft ‘reality of talent management’ map**

The rhetoric and reality maps depicted above, based on the data received from participants, highlight the social and political dimensions of the talent management process in many firms. Chapter 5 – Discussion – will present an opportunity to explore the themes covered in this Data Analysis Chapter in more detail. In particular, it will allow for an exploration as to how the information shared by participant links to academic literature published on the topic of talent management before drawing Conclusions and offering Recommendations in Chapter 6.
Chapter 5 - Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The following chapter will seek to link the empirical research findings to existing literature in an effort to underscore findings and start to determine the contribution my research has made to the field of talent management. The insights enabled by participants’ data suggests a number of discrepancies between the literature and ‘real life’ experiences of key informants in organisations, which will be explored in this chapter as the three aggregate dimensions identified in Chapter 4 are linked and compared to existing literature. To reiterate, those three aggregate dimensions are:

4) The challenge of maintaining objectivity in talent management;
5) The desire for more structure and follow-through in talent management; and
6) Disappointment and unfulfilled promises

The review of the literature in Chapter 2 included the theme of discrepancies between the reality and rhetoric of talent management (Legge, 2005). Skuza et al (2013) state that “the limited, available empirical evidence on how TM is operationalised suggests that wide differences exist between the rhetoric and reality of what happens in practice” (p. 453); adding that whilst most organisations appear to recognise the importance of talent management, few manage this effectively and efficiently. Huang and Tansley (2012) published a paper with the aim of “examining and conceptualising the rhetorical underpinnings of a talent management programme adopted by a multinational corporation” (p. 3674); recognising a difference between the rhetoric and the reality of talent management in firms.

There are two specific ways in which the research data shows shortcomings in the literature, namely:
1) The gap between the rhetoric and reality of talent management; and
2) An outdated view of the working environment;
Both of these themes will be explored briefly before moving on to a summary overview of what practitioners in the field of talent management can expect to experience in their talent processes as evidenced by the data from the 14 key informants; before progressing to a more specific discussion of the three main themes in relation to the literature which will include a particular focus on the gap between the rhetoric and reality of talent management.

**Rhetoric vs. Reality Gap**

Turning briefly to the rhetoric vs. reality gap, the degree to which talent management processes in research participants’ firms were influenced by factors which are difficult to control or eliminate from talent management was notable. These factors include but are not limited to subjective assessments of employees, variations of power play among senior leaders and the tendency towards organisational amnesia, whereby many employees are pigeon-holed into certain roles and their ability to potentially make a bigger contribution to the firm in other areas of expertise based on previous career experiences are forgotten. The rhetoric would suggest that such events are mostly absent from talent management as little evidence of this can be found in the literature. My study, however, provides data which illuminates the extent to which the rhetoric is detached from the reality of organisational life.

Organisations are social systems (Thunnissen et al, 2013) and the difference between what the literature suggests in terms of definitions and best practice for talent management and the reality of organisational practice described by key informants is noteworthy. Very little academic writing addresses the social and political aspects of talent management and the significant impact this has on the outcomes of talent reviews. Blyton and Turnbull (1992: viii, cited in Iles, Preece and Xin Chuai, 2010) argue that the rhetoric has outstripped the reality of HR management. This observation is reflected in the research data with participants reflecting on the talent management processes outlined in their respective firms’ HR manuals – the rhetoric – compared to the reality in which talent decisions are made on the basis of personal judgements and impressions. Iles et al (2010, cited in Dries, 2013) comment: “The tendency of the talent management literature to slide off into vague but appealing rhetoric is causing commentators to question whether talent management is not just a management fashion, (…)
characterised by conceptual ambiguity, (...) which is yet to be legitimised by sound evidence and robust theory” (p. 274). This rhetoric is reflected in the talent processes in firms where the information being tracked, such as 9-box grid placements and the number of successors for a particular position in the firm, often are not placed in context and are irrelevant to organisational strategic priorities (Toterhi and Recardo, 2013). Perhaps the issue here is that many of the talent management practices in place today stem from the 1950s (Cappelli, 2008) and have not been updated to suit the more dynamic working environments of today as will be explored in the next section.

The outdated view of the working environment

The working environment has changed significantly over the past five to six decades: once stable settings which allowed for life-long careers have been replaced with a ‘VUCA’ world (Tarique and Schuler, 2010) where once undisputed giants such as Compaq Computers, Nokia, Blackberry, Enron and others have all but disappeared or been taken over by competitors – making it nearly impossible to plan for succession or manage talent effectively. The acronym VUCA was first used in the late 1990’s and stands for ‘volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity’; e.g. terms that “reflect an increasingly unstable and rapidly changing business world” (Lawrence, 2013, p. 2).

Cappelli (2008) offers insight into the changing environment of organisations and the (in)ability of firms to adapt their talent management approach: “The good news is that most companies are facing the challenge (of talent management) with a pretty clean slate: Little in the way of talent management is actually going on in them. (...) The bad news is that the advice companies are getting is to return to the practices of the 1950s and create long-term succession plans that attempt to map out career years into the future – even though the stable business environment and talent pipelines in which such practices were born no longer exist.” (p. 76-77).

I posit that much of the talent management literature has not caught up with and does not consider the ‘VUCA’ and changing environments the majority of today’s organisations are working in and the data obtained during my research supports this proposition. Uncertainty and ambiguity are elements of talent
review processes today – as ascertained by key informants – often triggered by anxiety and managerial capability issues: uncertainty over how they and their team members are perceived; anxiety over making decisions over other people’s careers. Although uncertainty and anxiety are not new topics to the academic literature and can be traced to the psychodynamic literature of the 1950s and 1960s, the concern as illustrated in the research data is that limited new research appears to be focusing on how these topics link to and influence talent management in organisations today where the key focus for the past 20 years has been the war for talent and little else.

Addressing the political aspects of talent management, Ready and Conger (2007) suggest that the most senior managers in an organisation must use passion to create a positive corporate culture in order to prevent talent management from deteriorating into bureaucratic routines, which leaves the door open to manipulation and politics rather than creating an environment of trust. How that passion can be created and replicated in a firm where senior leaders are often insecure individuals working in politicised environments, however, is not addressed in Ready and Conger’s work.

Although my research did not set out to explore and find links to the VUCA environment organisations tend to operate in today, the link between VUCA, the rhetoric and reality of talent management and the social and political aspects of talent management may benefit from further research and will be addressed as appropriate throughout this chapter.

My interview-based study illuminated the tension that exists between the rhetoric and reality of talent management in firms and also revealed implications for both theory and practice. The findings of my study imply that practitioners in the field of talent management can invariably expect to witness or experience one or several of the following situations during the talent management process:

1) Rules will be broken, e.g. company guidelines will be interpreted differently by managers to suit their perspective of talent management and of who is talented and who is not. This will most likely
be the case even if a lot of time and energy is invested in training managers on how to adhere to the process and how the guidelines are meant to be interpreted.

2) It is futile to believe that organisational politics can be removed from the talent management process. Instead, practitioners will benefit from embracing the social and political aspects of talent management by joining the ‘after dinner bar conversations’ referred to by key informants, giving them an opportunity to contribute to the debate instead of being caught by surprise when decisions made in the boardroom have changed overnight.

3) Managers are likely to express strong opinions when it comes to talent management discussions. In particular, practitioners can expect such opinions to be based mostly on subjective views formed either over time or by a single interaction with an employee. Being mindful and aware of this possible behaviour will allow practitioners to be better prepared to address such behaviour in a context appropriate manner.

4) In many organisations, talent management decisions are not based on data. Instead, mostly subjective observations and personal perceptions are instrumental in influencing where an individual is placed on the 9-box grid, for example.

5) Many managers are challenged personally by anxiety, often related to their levels of competence to fulfil their role and responsibilities, which impacts their ability to confidently convey messages from talent review meetings to their respective team members.

These five points will be addressed, also in the context of the literature, throughout this chapter and will also be revisited in Chapter 6, Conclusions and Recommendations. I now move on to a more specific discussion of the three aggregate dimensions of the research in relation to the literature.

5.2 The challenge of maintaining objectivity in talent management

Thunnissen et al (2013) argue that “Talent is no absolute, it is relative and subjective” (p. 1751). It is relatively uncommon to read such an explicit mention of subjectivity in the context of ‘talent’ as this
was certainly lamented by the majority of participants during the research interviews. With the perceived need for executive sponsorship and endorsement to progress in a firm’s organisational hierarchy, the recognition by key informants that subjectivity plays a major role in talent decisions was striking. Other key areas highlighted by participants in the interviews were: concerns pertaining to managerial capability and anxiety and the effect this (lack of) ability has on talent management; visibility and exposure to the executive team and the tendency for ‘organisational amnesia’ - the ‘pigeon-holing’ of individuals; and the assessment of performance and potential which also includes the (organisations) values-based judgments made about people.

Downs and Swailes (2013) pick up on a number of these themes, particularly in their assertion that talent management has a ‘dark side’ in relation to the ‘war for talent rhetoric’ and the “glorification of outsiders” (p. 270) in hiring decisions. Both of these can lead to exclusive approaches to talent management where only an organisational elite are considered for talent pools on the basis of often biased selection criteria. This approach, in turn, may lead to a detrimental effect on the majority of employees who are not part of the talent pool, leading to feelings of inferiority.

The extent to which firms inform individuals of their talent pool membership was explored in my research and, overwhelmingly, firms consider themselves open and transparent but, at the same time, fail to convey the full extent of talent review information to their direct reports. Perhaps this can be viewed as a defensive routine by managers whereby they elect not to discuss talent review output with direct reports in order to not have to deal with the consequences of such conversations. Similar observations are made by Bjoerkman et al (2013) with an eye on those individuals who are not identified as top talent: “If talent pool membership is publicised, the motivation of those not on the list of talent may drop. While the question has been posed of whether or not to inform individuals about their possible status as talent, there is little, if any, empirical research on the extent to which firms do this, how, and why. More important, there is no research that analyses this issue in terms of the effects this may have on the individuals themselves”. (p. 196). Issues pertaining to ‘managing expectations’, ‘not wanting to upset those not in the talent pool’ and ‘not wanting to make promises’ were also found in a
case study conducted by Huang and Tansely (2012). Zupek Farrell (2012) on the other hand, suggests that “Some organisations want to avoid making team members feel bad if they aren’t considered ‘top talent’, but transparency can increase legitimacy and trust.” (p. 46). Morten (2006, cited in Iles et al 2010, p. 16) advocates a more exclusive view on talent management on those people “who have the capability to make a significant difference to the current and future performance of the organisation”.

My research suggests that many firms shy away from sharing talent review output as middle managers and senior leaders are unsure how to address the consequences of this information finding its way into the organisation and the differential treatment of all employees versus those identified as key talent that ensues (Bjoerkman et al, 2013). The tackling of consequences includes the management of expectations, particularly of those identified as talented, by managers who do not have the capability and know-how to lead their direct reports and motivate their team, leading to at times significant managerial anxiety. However, many participants in the research sample acknowledged that being identified as key talent in their firm does not automatically result in access to differential development programmes or career opportunities. KI 2 of FS 1 for example, commented on the frustrations felt by ‘talent pool’ members when an individual not part of that group was promoted – and perceived by the talent group to be less competent and skilled for the role than they were and recognising that the person had better access and visibility to the executive team. In terms of access to development programmes, firms such as IT 1 have recently discontinued differentiating key talent programmes as they shied away from the significant investment and questioning to what extent these interventions made a true difference to the promotion pipeline; and to what degree those on the talent programme would have been successful in any case.

Another key issue raised by participants in my research is the promotion of technical experts and individual contributors to people management roles. The link between this issue and the theme of maintaining objectivity in talent management is created through the more subjective perspective and opinion by senior leaders that employees can only advance their careers by taking on people management responsibility. As a result, many technical experts who could arguably have a strong impact by remaining in their specialist role are asked to take on a responsibility they are not prepared
for and are often not trained to succeed in. Several key informants lamented this aspect of talent management in their firms. KI 13 of Oil & Gas 1 had very strong views on the topic and explained the recent introduction of a technical career path in parallel to the more traditional promotions to bigger roles in the corporate hierarchy. Charan et al (2011) highlight the pitfalls of promotions and the need for mind-set shifts as individuals’ progress through what the authors call the ‘Leadership Pipeline’.

Reviewing the participant data associated with their concerns over managerial capability and degrees of anxiety in dealing with their direct reports, it is perhaps reasonable to assume that many of the managers making talent decisions today were themselves promoted up the hierarchy without the necessary transition support. It emerged in the research that the majority of participating firms offer management fundamentals programmes to support those rising in the hierarchy to learn simple and effective management tools. However, it also became evident that the programmes on offer today are inadequate in addressing the lack of managerial capability. Skuza et al (2013) point out that their study showed “that managers (in Poland) were concerned that the development of high potentials could threaten their own status and position in the company”. I suggest that this is not just the case in Poland. The behaviours of managers described by participants is reminiscent of the findings by Skuza et al (2013) in their respective study and may explain why some managers are so keen not to convey the full message of talent review meetings to their staff and have little interest in up-skilling their direct reports; which would show up their own faults and failings. Several key informants believe that management fundamentals programmes tend to work best with more inexperienced managers or those new to people management whereas more ‘experienced’ managers are often harder to convince of the benefits; even though the latter would arguably be better equipped for their senior roles by reviewing management fundamentals as evidenced by participant’s data.

This observation links to the second major contributing factor in talent management as identified in the research: the need for executive sponsorship and exposure to the senior leaders in a firm in order to progress ones career. Toterhi and Recardo (2013) argue that: “Career progression is a function of having the right pedigree, developing relationships with senior leaders, and learning survival skills such as not
making any enemies and avoiding making tough decisions that can come back to haunt you later on in your career” (p. 26). This perspective was echoed by a number of participants who lament that the relationship with – and endorsement by – a senior leader has a significant impact on the way in which talent review conversations are conducted and, ultimately, determine the outcome. My study showed on a number of occasions the link between having a powerful advocate at the top table to fight one’s corner and the influence a relationship like this is perceived to have on the talent review outcome: resulting in promotions and opportunities closed off to other employees who may be equally ‘talented’ but who do not have the executive sponsorship. This supports Skuza et al (2013) who encountered the “perception among many respondents that most individuals are promoted through personal networks rather than based on objective measures of their suitability for the role” (p. 465). However, not to be underestimated is the potentially negative impact a powerful voice at the top table can have: As stated in the previous chapter, a powerful voice at the top table can have a detrimental impact on a career, bringing it to a grinding halt due to a negative – subjective - perception held by one influential individual within an executive leadership team.

The tendency of leaders to pigeon-hole individuals in certain roles was also commented on by participants; it is often very difficult for an individual to re-invent him/herself in an organisation once they have been there for a few years. This can lead to stifled career progression, unless a senior advocate can be secured to promote the contributions the individual has made during talent review meetings.

The main issue and aggregate dimension identified in all of this is the challenge of maintaining an objective perspective in talent management. Objectivity in talent decisions will likely be a challenge for HR and talent professionals, as well as business leaders, for many years to come and appears to form an integral part of the rhetoric of talent management whereas the reality, as outlined in the research data, posits a more subjective approach in reality. As scholars and practitioners alike continue to seek a common definition as to what talent management actually is and means – as outlined in Chapter 2 - organisations globally will continue to proceed with status quo approaches and processes such as 9-box grids in the hope that doing the same thing over and over again will, eventually, lead to a different
outcome. Perhaps there is a degree of support for practitioners in the field of talent management seeking objectivity in the writing of Toterhi and Recardo (2013) who suggest that “there will always be a measure of subjectivity in the selection of talent” (p. 26). To what degree that subjectivity influences talent decisions and, as outlined in some cases by research participants, can bring a career to an end, however, requires further elaboration and consideration as this, combined with politics, appear to be among the key people decision criteria for organisations today. The majority of research participants were critical of the need for employees to have executive sponsorship, without which opportunities for promotion and career progression are limited, with several key informants having built exposure to senior leadership into their respective key talent programmes. My findings support Toterhi and Recardo (2013) who say: “In many organisations, talent assessment is based on relationship management. In such cases, it is possible to make a career out of developing a relationship with a senior executive and following that person up the corporate ladder. The focus in these instances is on not making enemies, avoiding difficult decisions, and managing up. In these companies, the talent management programme can be summarised as “Friends of Executive X” (p. 29).

This ‘friends of Executive X’ approach to talent management, however, brings with it further significant challenges and bears many hidden threats to the robustness of an organisation’s performance as illustrated by Pearce (2011): “Relatively high status in an organisation ‘leads to assumptions by others that the actor is competent and a higher performer (p.9, cited in Swailes, 2013, p. 34) and employees endowed with status can work less hard than colleagues with lower status and yet still be seen as good performers (Washington & Zajac, 2005, cited in Swailes, 2013, p. 34)’. The other issue here is the ‘ripple effect’: as an executive leaves the firm, those who have been closely associated with and linked to that individual start to fear for their future. In relation to visibility and exposure to executive team members – an area mentioned by numerous research participants - Mellahi and Collings (2010) comment that “Talents located in the centre are more visible to, and valued by, key corporate decision makers than talent located in the subsidiary” (p. 22), owing to the fact that such individuals have increased opportunity for self-presentation and image building. Dries (2013) discusses the ‘similar-to-
me’ bias which is echoed by numerous research participants in that leaders gravitate towards people they know in the selection of key talent and succession candidates.

As outlined in Chapter 4, participants lament and criticise the amount of subjectivity present at every stage of the talent review process. This is interesting to note as there appears to be a belief that talent management should be an objective process but the data suggests that participants attempt to counteract subjectivity throughout the process. The majority of participants have already introduced or are planning to implement externally hosted assessment processes in an effort to balance the (strong) views on individuals by influential members of the leadership team in talent decisions. This contradicts the findings of Wiblen et al (2012) whose study suggests that “members of the HR function (…) explicitly referred to subjectivity as both the preferred and adopted method for talent identification” (p. 430). My research suggests that while subjectivity may well be the adopted method, it is not the preferred way according to the data obtained from participants. Wiblen et al (2012) further state that gut feeling appears to remain as a valued form of identifying talent in organisations; a view shared by KI 5 of FS 2 who said that many talent decisions are based on ‘gut’ rather than anything scientific within her organisation. However, KI 5 also elaborated on the assessment processes being introduced to balance ‘gut and subjectivity’ through a more structured approach.

This perception links to the complexity of expectation management as a fall-out from talent review conversations in which many managers are either ill-equipped (e.g. not capable) or anxious about conveying the true content of talent review meetings to their direct reports; instead, opting for a sugar-coated version of events in order not to upset employees. Swailes (2013) offers a powerful argument in support and favour of managers who may be less forthcoming in offering talent review feedback to direct reports: “Signalling that others are inferior is dehumanising and exclusions could have non-trivial effects if the excluded feel that the organisation expects less of them; an action that could trigger negative emotional states” (pp. 37). Huang and Tansely (2012) build on this, addressing the “implications for issues such as perceived unfairness and inequality in career development.
opportunities” for employees as well as the associated obfuscation of the feelings and perception of staff in an organisation in relation to talent management practices (p. 3682).

The definition of talent management, and whether it is just an evolution of Human Resources Management, may be discussed for decades to come. Over time, such definitions may serve to alleviate the frustrations expressed by participants during the research who, at present, are working hard to minimise the subjective nature of talent management in their firms. The rhetoric of the practice claims that talent management should be objective; the data show it is rarely so. Current practice as described by participants suggests they feel disempowered – the word ‘policemen’ was used by four key informants – and are seeking to introduce more objective criteria for the assessment of employees; but recognising that subjectivity is not inherently negative but perhaps could be considered differently in the talent management process.

5.3 The desire for more structure and follow-through in talent management

In today’s working environments, many employees, talent managers and HR professionals alike are arguably seeking stability and, perhaps, more predictability in the work place. This was echoed by a number of participants during the interviews and in their descriptions of talent management processes which included standard 9-box grids, online systems, structured annual calendars of HR events, facilitated conversations as well as debates (Wiblen et al, 2012; Kesler, 2002) to bring predictability, structure and objectivity to talent proceedings. The reason for the above outlined approach is mostly based on historical approaches to talent management defined by participant’s firms. Swailes (2013) notes that “Talent management is typically portrayed as a neutral and normative activity that is free of biases where those with the most promise will get the best chances to rise to the top. However, while there has been no specific study of fairness in relation to the operation of talent programmes, some of the general problems that can compromise HRM practices will inevitably apply.” (p. 35). Arguably, this point is closely linked to section 5.2 above in which the impact of exclusive versus inclusive talent
management was briefly explored. Wiblen et al (2012) found that “the majority of both HR and business unit managers sought to identify talent based on subjective evaluations facilitated through conversations and observations, rather than using the objective metrics potentially provided by HR software systems” (p. 429).

My research suggests that talent management is far from a ‘neutral and normative activity’ and certainly not free from biases. On the contrary, according to the information offered by participants, it is bias laden and appears to operate predominantly in the space of subjectivity in spite of processes, procedures and facilitation by HR and talent professionals. Salimaeki and Jaemsen (2010) concur: “Both the subjective nature of performance appraisals and the use of those appraisals for administrative purposes can facilitate different forms of bias in performance appraisals (Prendergast, 2002), which results in inaccurate ratings. These biases in performance appraisals (…) can be viewed as violations of organisational justice, and/or as forms of organisational politics” (p. 230).

Performance ratings find their way into the talent review process in most organisations which make use of the 9-box grid as this allows managers and HR team members to plot individuals on a ‘performance/potential’ matrix to ascertain future career opportunities and identify ‘key talent’. If, however, performance reviews are biased and flawed to start with, the assessment of an individuals’ level of ‘potential’ as discussed in the previous chapter is bound to be filled with ambiguity and further bias and with potential for favouritism. Longenecker et al. (1987, cited in Salimaki and Jaemsen, 2010, p. 232-233) found that “in certain circumstances, managers believed that it was in their best interest and justifiable to make inaccurate performance ratings in order to maintain a positive work group climate or avoid negative outcomes of the rates”. The above citation highlights just how difficult talent management processes are to navigate in organisations. Managers shy away from assigning tougher performance ratings for low performers which, in turn, suggests they are average or above average contributors to the organisation; which then leads to placing such individuals in misjudged boxes on the 9-box grid. Over time, this can lead to a real weakening of the talent pool whereas this should represent the key individuals in an organisation. The research data suggests that many firms struggle with the
absence of reliable talent management data as so much of this is based on the – mostly subjective – assessments in place today which greatly influence the performance assessments of employees.

The insufficient rigour in talent management processes – in spite of numerous company internal templates, guidelines, competency models, values and behaviours - and the lack of structured assessment weighs heavily on the minds of research participants. Based on the data, participants expressed concern that in all too many cases, the senior leaders making talent decisions do not understand what ‘good’ looks like and hence do not build a strong enough team to enable the organisation to remain agile in times of change. Collins (2001) speaks of ‘level five leaders’ who are humble and unpretentious in his publication; leaders who can create environments in which employees have opportunities to succeed and where leaders have no ego. The data show that, compared to the standard aspired to in the ‘good to great’ research undertaken by Collins (2001) and his team, participants’ firms have quite a gap to fill with their senior leaders who perhaps believe and buy into the rhetoric of Collins’ book but create a different reality in their organisations: one based on position power and internal networks as opposed to the more humble approach to leadership advocated by Collins (2001).

The discrepancies between the rhetoric and reality of talent management outlined above may be a contributing factor to the verbal battles in the boardroom described by a number of participants, often triggered by a lack of understanding of the talent processes by managers who instead focus on reaching their personal outcome: promoting Friends of Executive x. This dilemma was addressed by Telecoms in their restructured approach to talent management whereby line managers were directly responsible for managing their teams with the HR teams playing but a supportive role with no direct access to the online talent management system. Arguably, the processes were still complex and the tools all too familiar to practitioners in the field of talent management in the form of 9-box grids but personal biases were, to a degree, removed through the introduction of structured, externally hosted assessment centres as a result of which final decisions as to whether an individual would be included in the global talent
pool or not where made. In this case, the final decision was actually taken away from management. KI 2 is equally critical of 9-box grids and the “messy language that gets banded around” her organisation as a result of implementing new talent review processes which are not executed in the way HR had intended it.

What other options of talent reviews and identification are there for practitioners in the field? Lacey and Groves (2014) advocate that organisations focus on identifying employees potential by focusing on areas such as learning ability, commitment and emotional and intellectual intelligence as these tend to be more visible to more people in an organisation. On paper, this may appear like a sound suggestion. However, participants discussed having to change the 9-box grid label of ‘potential’ to something less offensive and divisive. It is questionable how firms would measure and evaluate ‘commitment’ as suggested by Lacey and Groves (op cit) without offending employees and disengaging them. Furthermore, focusing on ‘learning ability’ is a sound suggestion by Lacey and Goves (op cit), however, the practical tips on how talent and HR professionals could go about doing this is regrettably missing; demonstrating the gap between academic perspectives on talent management and the reality of organisational life. A perspective equally detached from organisational reality is offered by Garrow and Hirsh (2008) who advocate that “Senior managers (…) need to role-model appropriate behaviours such as not hanging on to talented employees to the detriment of other parts of the organisation, not showing favouritism or solely selecting people ‘in their own image’ and dedicating time and energy to identifying and developing talented individuals.” (p. 399). KI 8 offered strong views on talent not being ‘allowed’ to move to other parts of the business and Garrow and Hirsh’s (2008) suggestion that favouritism and managers not selecting people in their own image are far removed from the information offered by research participants which KI 1 explicitly stating that “leaders tend to pick people they know”. Scholarly acknowledgement of this behaviour is offered by Salimaki and Jeamsen (2010) who believe that “favouritism can be considered an unintended cognitive bias” (p. 232). If this is the case, however, why is it not explored in more detail through further research?
Another issue facing organisations and managers is the consistent and persistent use of lag measures to assess potential which leads to placement on high potential (HiPo) programmes. Referring to the 2007 Hudson Report, Lacey and Groves (2014) assert that “when assessing someone’s suitability for a HiPo program, employers use manager’s performance rating (37 percent) and performance data (35 percent) over other assessment options like 360 degree surveys (12 percent), psychometric assessment (7 percent), or assessment centres (5 percent). In virtually all HiPo programs, managers use lag measures that rate past performance to put forward those names of those they consider as HiPo” (p. 405). As stated in the previous chapter, all firms using a 9-box grid in their talent review processes use ‘performance’ – a lag measure – as one of the two components to determine succession plan places and development opportunities. Burkus and Osula (2011) counsel against the use of performance management data, stating that “past results are not a reliable indicator of future performance” (p. 3).

Changing the measure in the talent review process of organisation would represent a fundamental change in how talent is assessed. If the lag measure of performance were to be removed and the second 9-box grid measure – potential – having caused concerns for some research participants, the 9-box grid could become obsolete. This then opens up the question as to what would replace the 9-box grid which has become so well established in many organisation, 12 out of 14 participating firms.

Transport & Distribution 1 started the implementation of assessment centres but KI 8 had to do this “though stealth” as she firmly believed an open and organisation wide implementation would have failed due to managers not tolerating external interference in their talent decisions. Skuza et al (2013) discovered similar perceptions in their study of Polish firms: “Our study further highlighted that companies generally lack evaluation standards and advanced assessment methods which can be linked to the low importance attached to the evaluation process. Over 90% of interviewed managers from Polish firms claimed that most employees in their companies are evaluated by simple questionnaires and their assessment depends on their superiors. More advanced techniques (assessment centres, psychological tests, evaluation of subordinates and project participants, etc.) were rarely used.” (p. 464). This perspective has echoes of KI 13’s approach who had the entire HR team take part in the same rigorous assessment process which was later implemented organisation wide; the rationale being that
those selling the process internally – the HR team – had to be able to speak authoritatively and from personal experience about the intervention to those about to go through it – the identified talent. A decision made by KI 13 was to ensure that assessments for senior level individuals was facilitated by external assessors whereas junior level staff participated in internally hosted processes. According to Tulgan (2001, cited in Dries, 2013) “A surprising amount of HR practitioners believe that valid identification of talented employees does not require formal assessment policies or even a formal definition of talent; based on the assumption that decision makers commonly and stubbornly rely on intuition and subjectivity, underestimating the validity of assessment centres, structured interviews and psychometric testing”. The empirical study presented in Chapter IV fundamentally disagrees with Tulgan’s perspective, as the majority of participants crave not only more structure, but also objective assessments instead of decisions based on subjectivity.

The introduction of structured, usually externally hosted assessment centres appears to be finding its way into a number of firms which took part in the research; the key driver from the participants’ perspective of reality being the need for more structure and follow-up in talent management processes. Dale and Iles (1992) argue that assessment centres need to be designed for specific roles and for a specific purpose and at a specific time. Whereas some organisations opt for a one-size-fits-all approach, Dale and Iles believe this is not sufficient and adequate as this affects predictive validity and acceptability. There are numerous benefits to the assessment centre methodology, as also identified by research participants. Brownell (2005) argues that assessment centres provide a future perspective of the individuals’ performance and, consequently, should be considered as decision support tools in succession planning and succession management to assist in identifying individuals with exceptional talent (Jones, 1992; Kudisch et al., 1997; Lievens and Conway, 2001; all cited in Brownell, 2005). As with any development intervention, a clearly defined outcome of the assessment centre will pave the road to success by creating an appropriate assessment experience which addresses issues of trust as well as taking cultural differences into account (Brownell, 2005).
Garrow and Hirsch (2008) pick up on this point and the skills required by members of assessment panels, particularly if such assessment centres or other processes are carried out in-house: “Talent panels made up of senior managers and corporate board members, HR and development professionals, and, occasionally, line managers that weigh up the evidence of employees’ potential and performance are tasked with making important decisions about the future of individuals, and panellists require access to a full range of tools and measures. Assessing potential and future skill requirement, particularly in the field of leadership, calls for a high degree of sophistication” (p. 400). With many managers needing support on basic management skills – areas including but not limited to providing feedback, setting performance objectives and understanding action centred leadership (see Adair, 2005) were mentioned by research participants – it is easy to see why so many HR and talent professionals seek to involve external providers to facilitate assessment processes.

Key informants expressed concern that even senior managers require coaching and support from their HR team members to work through talent reviews and understand the life changing implications their decisions can have on the individuals in question. KI 8, for example, spoke of having to educate the board on what the organisation means by ‘talent’ and that this does not equal a list of popular people who have been with the company for many years. This situation as described by participants might be a consequence of the promotions of high performing technical experts or individual contributors to people management positions without offering or investing in management training; another common practice in participating firms.

Toterhi and Recardo (2013) comment as follows on the state of talent management: “Individuals who would spend considerable time stressing over budget line items, inventory levels, and product quality take a comparatively cavalier approach to their people decisions. These subjectively inclined practices have an obvious effect on the careers of individual employees but when adopted as a cultural practice can spell disaster for the overall performance of an organisation.” (p. 26) In order to preserve the anonymity of participants and their respective organisations, I shall not be offering concrete examples of just how true Toterhi’s and Ricardo’s words are and how organisational performance may well have
suffered as a result of lack-lustre talent management processes as described by the key informants. However, the data suggests that the lack of rigour applied to talent management is of great concern to participants, e.g. KI 13 of Public 1 lamented that organisations would not run their finances the way they run talent management; missing structures, guidelines and metrics. Several participants concerned themselves with how subjectively assessed individuals rise to the top of the organisations, often without the managerial know-how to have a positive leadership impact. I also suggest a link here to the social constructivist perspective adapted for this research, e.g. organisations are social constructs which operate according to their – mainly unwritten – rules which have a significant impact on how talent is managed, or not, which, in turn, indicates a theory of how talent management works in organisational reality. Downs and Swailes (2013) offer a supportive perspective in that “as a socially constructed phenomenon, the definition of talent is subject to different professional and managerial cultures” and linked to the extent to which individuals manage to manipulate the perceptions others have of the individual in an organisation (p. 269).

Processes, templates and supporting talent review materials which are produced to enable talent review discussions also need to be assessed as many are overly complicated according to research participants and hence possibly disable managers to prepare for talent management reviews. FMCG2, for example, made use of a multi-page ‘values and behaviours’ document which was used in recruitment, talent management and performance management processes. In principle, this is sound. However, the document was not applied consistently, messaging within the document was mixed, competencies and behaviours overlapped from one behaviour to another and, consequently, left the door wide open to interpretation and confusion. This experience is echoed by Toterhi and Recardo (2013) who suggest that “The competency structure in some organisations borders on ludicrous. Overly enthusiastic HR professionals ask that managers actively assess people on a collection of leadership and functional competencies by level, grade, and position, knowing full well that the actual impact of those factors is but a fraction of the goal-driven performance score.” The authors continue that “Simplicity in all cases should be the watchword.” (p. 25). Ross (2013) is equally critical: “Perversely as the evolution and promotion of models, frameworks and criteria for defining and identifying talent continues, rather than
enabling a more effective approach, we overwhelm ourselves with complexity, conflicting opinion and an ever growing list of attributes to benchmark talent against in order to assess it. By the time we have gone through the lengthy process of benchmarking it, our most talented people are often disengaged.” (p. 169).

Whilst some firms in the research sample are taking concrete steps to introduce consistent HR calendars, tools, techniques and assessment centres to focus conversations on employees – be that an inclusive or exclusive approach – it is perhaps striking just how many firms still appear to give more weight to subjectivity and the ability – or hope - to see and spot talent rather than finding objective measures (Wiblen et al, 2012) to promote fairer and less biased ways of talent management. The sense of disillusionment felt by research participants as a consequence of this is further explored in the next section.

5.4 Disappointment and Unfulfilled Promises

It seems fitting to open the discussion on the aggregate dimension of ‘Disappointment and Unfulfilled Promises’ with a quote from KI 7 who stated:

"People understand that there is a talent review process and somebody holds them in high regard and this is why. And, I think in some areas of the business there is still a nervousness around, actually, if we tell people how good they are, they will go." (KI 7, Pharma 1)

This quote summarises a number of concerns participants commented on during the interviews for which there appears to be no simple solution in the literature: the potentially unintended consequences of talent management; the sense of disempowerment to retain talented individuals who have become disillusioned with the talent management process; the frustration of information not being conveyed openly in the organisation, and the nervousness by managers about their own ability to manage and do their jobs. Communication of talent review outcomes was a hotly debated topic among research
participants with many of them lamenting the amount of fall-out management. Bothner et al (2011, cited in Dries, 2013) advocate that it is better not to communicate openly about talent management policies as it may lead to discontentment among employees; Eisenberg and Witten (1987, cited in Dries, 2013) believe that transparency is desired but not always in the interest of the organisation. It is the latter point that the majority of research participants would concur with even though the desire for more openness and transparency was strongly expressed.

Managerial behaviour is a key worry for participants, describing how some managers attend talent review meetings well prepared and articulate with concrete examples which demonstrate they are not just sharing an opinion on an individual (KI 1, IT 1) while other approaches to talent management discussions involve confrontational debates, shouting, manipulation and literal table banging by leaders to get their point and perception of an individual across (IT 1, Construction 1, FMCG 2, Retail 1). Even when the official meetings are over, the informal conversations continue after hours at the hotel bar and decisions made in the boardroom are revisited and often revised. I believe it is safe to say that none of the academic literature published to date openly acknowledges and addresses these common talent management practices and that my research is adding a new perspective to the literature. Combined with the lack of openness around talent review decisions towards those affected and discussed, participants suggest that a lot of work remains to be done to make talent management a much more accessible intervention. KI 7 and KI 8 in particular spoke of the work they are doing with the board in helping them understand the importance and relevance of talent management to the firm and fostering a sense of belief that it is indeed a worthwhile managerial activity. What is undeniable is the amount of work to be done in terms of internal communication of talent activities, including the formal review sessions and the output of these. The talent management literature suggests this is an extremely important topic for organisations to consider, particularly with metaphors of war being quoted for nearly 20 years. However, it would appear that this message has yet to convince many senior executives to invest more time and, perhaps, resources to managing talent within their firms, leading to the significant amount of ‘work’ to be done on the subject in several participating firms.
Bjoerkman et al (2013) build on this view: “(...) if talent pool membership is publicised, the motivation of those not on the list of talent may drop. While the question has been posed of whether or not to inform individuals about their possible status as talent, there is little, if any, empirical research on the extent to which firm do this, how, and why. More important, there is no research that analyses this issue in terms of the effects this may have on the individuals themselves” (p. 196). Huang and Tansely (2012) also concern themselves with the fate of those not earmarked as ‘talent’ by asking the question: “How would the rhetoric associated with talent management address the diminishing career opportunities for those who are not included in the initiative yet happen to be the majority of the workforce?” (p. 3677). KI 11 of Charity 1 echoed these perspectives, speaking of an inclusive overall approach to talent management within her charity organisation but recognising that there is differentiation among talent; with employees complaining of not being one of the ‘golden children’ – a list of individuals which exists but is not publicised. Hence, she believes her organisation is ‘guilty’ of exclusive talent management even though the ethos of Charity 1, and the values of the current CEO in particular, are very much based on the concept of inclusiveness; leading to tension among leaders and the HR team which desires more openness and transparency.

The overall sense of disillusionment conveyed by research participants was striking. The number of paralinguistic features noted during the interviews were truly astonishing and demonstrated the extent to which key informants appear to ‘hope for the best and prepare for the worst’ by following suit of existing talent review practices and introducing externally hosted assessment centres ‘by stealth’ (KI 8, Transport & Distribution 1) in those departments who are open to change and new ideas. Several participating firms have quite sophisticated approaches to people assessment in place with structured talent review conversations as well as cohesive follow-up meetings once the official talent review sessions have been adjourned for another six to twelve months; as is the case in most participating firms. However, even in these progressive scenarios as described by Oil & Gas 1, FMCG 1 and Public 1, the informal conversations which take place in the aftermath of the official meetings have a significant impact on the final decisions as to who gets promoted and who does not.
Totterhi and Recardo (2013) write: “Despite the efforts of well-intentioned HR professionals, talent management remains a silo-driven, disjointed endeavour that rarely meets the human capital needs of today’s organisations. This failing, which calls into question the strategic value of HR, stems from both organisation-oriented short-comings, such as poor strategy, lacklustre processes, and immature management, as well as more contextual issues that speak to the heart of senior leader bias.” (p. 22).

The data from the research fully supports the comment related to immature management made by Totterhi and Recardo (2013) and was summarised as managerial anxiety and the lack of open communication to the organisation of outcomes following the talent review discussions in participating firms. Furthermore, the senior leader bias toward people they know (KI 1 of IT 1) and the need flagged by two participants to educate their board members on what talent management means, and the absence of conversations between senior executives in two parts of an organisation on talent exchange programmes (FMCG 1) illuminate some of the short-comings pointed out by Totterhi and Recardo (2013).

Cappelli (2008) launched a scathing attack on the talent management practices, particularly in the US, over the past generation, describing them as dysfunctional. He also states that “at its heart, talent management is simply a matter of anticipating the need for human capital and then setting out a plan to meet it” (p. 74). This sounds very simple, however, keeping the VUCA environment and managerial capability issues addressed earlier in mind, appears almost utopian with few or no realistic suggestion as to how organisations can address this challenge.

The bias of managers in talent decisions was also criticised by key informants. As with the simple need of anticipating human capital needs and planning for it (Cappelli, 2008), concrete and workable solutions to counterbalance the natural bias managers show for individuals in the workforce are needed. Lacey and Groves (2014) write: “Managers are human, too. Scholars know that a self-fulfilling prophecy can emerge. Not thinking well of an individual can result in stunted development, and can
eventually impact the person’s motivation and productivity if passed over for plum jobs and HiPo treatment. Perceptions of favouritism can also exist” (p. 406).

A recommendation resulting from this research - which will be discussed in the next chapter, Conclusions and Recommendations – is that the bias of senior leaders in selecting members of the talent pool should be openly acknowledged. The majority of research participants commented on the fact that the person with the strongest views in the boardroom tends to influence the outcome of talent discussions where ‘stars’ rise as well as fall. It is perhaps prudent to note that, because of affiliation, organisational networks are not simply composed of randomly generated connections. Rather, “once stars emerge in an organisation, others will tend to gravitate to them, and these new associations will result in a virtuous circle that further increases stars’ importance and visibility” (Newman, 2002, cited in Oldroyd and Morris, 2012, p. 399). This sentiment was echoed by a number of participants who expressed concern about individuals being hailed as top talent and being dropped from talent lists within a short period of time as they no longer ‘fit’ the profile. It begs the question as to why so little of the talent management literature appears to deal with these organisational dynamics head on, providing sound advice to practitioners in the field rather than seeking to provide yet another definition of talent management.

Totehi and Recardo (2013) offer a fairly damming indictment of the issues organisations deal with from a talent management perspective: “In the war for talent, companies often waste time battling over the wrong people with the wrong skills. The problem is evident in the practices of hiring managers who, under pressure to produce, frequently fill open positions with less than stellar candidates simply because they are available. What should be an opportunity to upgrade talent, reassess skill sets, or better align position holders with company and/or customer culture degrades into a chair-filling exercise where being ‘good enough’ is enough.” (p. 31). This begs the question to what degree the firms who took part in my empirical study believe that their talent management practice actually works - and to what extend it is a self-fulfilling prophecy as discussed by Lacey and Groves (2014). Many managers rely on the concept of hiring a ‘clone’ of peers or carbon copies of him- or herself (Totehi and Recardo, 2013).
Such managerial behaviour contributes significantly to the sense of frustration and disillusionment which surfaced during my research and reflects the ‘reverting to type’ and perhaps not understanding the full implications of talent management stated in the first order codes of the thematic map (see Chapter 4).

Given that the success of businesses depends on – or is intrinsically linked to – the quality of managers (see Skuza et al, 2013), it is thought-provoking to ponder why so many firms appear to compromise on the quality of managers by hiring and promoting in their own image and without tighter assessment criteria, processes and assessments. On the subject of hiring, Huselid et al (2005) state that ‘A’ players ought to be recruited for ‘key positions’ only within an organisations instead of attempting to put ‘A’ players in all vacant roles; simply because most firms won’t be able to afford this. Patty McCord (2014), the former chief talent officer of US-based firm Netflix, disagrees with this perspective as she advocated hiring ‘A’ players into every role so as not to compromise on the quality of talent coming into the organisation. Arguably, however, Netflix may have – had – more money at its disposal than the average organisation! Thunnisen et al (2013) shares McCord’s mind-set that “business leaders consider finding talented people to be the single most important managerial issue” (p. 1744).

Toterhi and Recardo (2013) suggest that one of the main responsibilities of any CEO is to ensure that the talent bank “is not composed of executive committee clones” (p. 29), indirectly advocating diversity among senior leaders. A frustration shared by a number of research participants is that leaders gravitate towards the individuals they know in a firm. KI 1 stated that a better known individual in his firm would be selected for a career opportunity over a less-well known employee who may actually be better suited for the role. ‘Executive cloning’ – hiring like-minded individuals – is not uncommon and a practice regretted by a number of research participants who are concerned that such an approach can become a burden to the organisation through lack of diversity of thoughts instead of being a competitive advantage.
Managing the fall-out of talent management and the frustrations with the process was another key theme in the research. Participants discussed the amount of expectation management that fell on their shoulders as a result of anxious or incapable managers not being able to convey the full feedback on individuals following talent review meetings. For some participants, there is a link to the question of inclusive vs. exclusive talent management (Downs and Swailes, 2013) with the inclusive approach suggesting that all individuals are talented and the exclusive way focusing on ‘key talent’ populations.

Managing post talent review frustrations for some research participants focuses on helping those not identified as ‘talent’ what the process means for the organisation and that they are still very valued employees. Lacey and Groves (2014) have the following observation on the topic which is echoed in the comments by research participants: “Organisation further split the workforce by culling out a small group of up-and-coming performers for special treatment and designating them as High Potentials” (p. 402). (…) High Potentials are viewed as tomorrow’s stewards of the future organisation. They are catered to and nurtured by organisations with specialised, often secret programs and processes offered exclusively to them.” (p. 403). Another potential pitfall of the exclusive talent approach is that it may be seen as politically incorrect and thus “fundamentally acting against the principle of equal opportunity that many organisations strike to achieve” (Huang and Tansley, 2012, p. 3674).

Bjoerkman et als’ (2013) perspective that “inclusion in a talent pool is perceived as a signal that the individual’s contribution to the organisation has been valued and that the employer has fulfilled its contract by deciding to invest in his or her future career.” (p. 197) suggests exclusive talent management as the way organisations should structure and design their talent processes. Talent pools by their very nature are exclusive, which begs the question as to what happens to those not amongst the chosen ones. Ewerlin (2013) suggests that “particularly in the context of Global Talent Management, it is important for companies to send out signals that are perceived positively by talent” (p. 282). However, if talent management continues to be ill defined, how realistic is it to expect well-intentioned talent professionals to achieve the goals and objectives proposed by scholars and authors of papers on the topic of HR and talent management in particular? Lewis and Heckman (2006), for example, lament a “disturbing lack of clarity regarding the definition, scope and overall goals of talent management (p. 139). Perhaps it is
then not surprising that so many firms attempt to tackle their specific talent issues through a combination of standard processes, such as 9-box grids, and more bespoke internal assessments which rely on or involve home-grown competency models and behaviour frameworks.

Considering the above, also in comparison to the experience of research participants, it is perhaps not surprising that so many HR and talent professionals grapple with their profession and question their contributions. They believe they can make a difference to their organisations, in spite of ‘VUCA’ environments, unsupportive or insecure managers, mistrusting employees and questionable talent processes and practices. The sense of frustration of not having a more powerful voice, especially in the context of talent reviews and people decisions, was palpable among research participants with KI 12 (Oil and Gas 1) lamenting that more junior members of the HR team just would not be heard in talent management conversations which, conversely, leads to these individuals shying away from voicing their perspectives. KI 4 of Construction 1 jokingly brushed aside the fact that she is the one doing all of the preparation work for the annual talent review meeting which is then hosted by the firm’s CEO instead of her. Equally palpable was the sense of dedication key informants felt for their roles and the opportunity to contribute to organisational success through effective management of talent. This sentiment is echoed by Oladapo (2014) who, in a survey of HR personnel, discovered that they believe key employee retention is indeed vital to the success and profitability of the organisation. Regrettably, however, there are no suggestions as to what ‘effective talent management’ looks like nor is any information offered on how this would be executed in order to retain talent.

Equally daunting for the talent and HR professional is the view of Iles et al (2012) in the context of a study focused on Middle-East enterprises in which the authors advocate that HRM “must ensure impartiality in personnel decision-making, foster competition, build in transparency and openness, structure and operationalise competence and merit requirements, enhance collective decision-making, foster an ethical regime through scrutiny, standards and audits, strengthen the appeals and grievance systems, extend ethics requirements to contracted-out/out-sourced organisations, and avoid post-separation conflicts of interest.” (p. 483). Again, this is all very well, but how can this standard of
excellence be achieved? The use of technology to facilitate talent management is advocated (Wiblen et al., 2012; Bassi and McMurrer, 2007, cited in Wiblen et al., 2012) in order to manage human capital in a less reckless manner; reflecting the strict introduction of an on-line talent system in Telecoms 1 in an effort to counter-balance the often subjective nature of the talent management process.

Another insight gained from the research is that HR often does not appear to have sufficient power and support in the organisation to enforce the rules of talent management as set out in policy document or guidelines associated with talent management. As a result, one could argue that TM processes are hijacked and – to a degree – sabotaged by management in an effort to have personal gain and increased position power in the organisation. KI 8 of Transport & Distribution 1 elaborated this as did KI 1, KI 2, KI 4, KI 7 and KI 13. An empathetic perspective is stated by Toterhi and Recardo (2013): “In reality, most organisations do not engage in succession planning. Instead, they perform reactive replacement planning. Many leaders go through the motions of superficial talent reviews that have little connection to actual human capital needs, all the while (...) counting on ‘their guy’ to fill a specific role” (p. 41). It is even more problematic when ‘the guy’ is also a best-performing independent contributor who is then promoted to a manager role. As Toterhi and Recardo (2013) discuss “Sometimes this strategy works. At other times, disaster ensues, reminding us of the lesson that some high performers are properly placed and happy in their current role.” (p. 26). Another issue facing some firms is the amount of regulation which controls every aspect of organisational life. KI 5 discussed the risk averse nature of her financial services firm in which reassurance is sought to ensure process if followed. For talent decisions, it means that “politics can get in the way” (KI 5, FS 2) and that the amount of feedback necessary from several hierarchies means employees and HR alike do not feel empowered to make decisions; which in turn leads to a culture of niceness in which constructive feedback is not shared with individuals. A supportive perspective by Toterhi and Recardo (2013) discusses this dilemma: “There are many reasons for lacklustre talent management. It is very difficult to eliminate subjectivity in making talent decisions, program measures are hard to establish and quantify, and success can be heavily affected by political and cultural issues inherent in large companies today.” (p. 22)
One way in which some organisations aim to introduce consistency and clarity in their talent management (and interview processes – author’s comment) is the use of behaviour-based interview techniques. Toterhi and Recardo (2013) offer a perspective which is echoed in the information detailed by research participants: “Even with the increased adoption of behaviour-based interview techniques, managers routinely hire on a series of subjective factors, which may have little to do with the future needs of the organisation. Given the pressure to produce, the tendency to opt for the ‘good enough’ candidate is strong and can lead well-intentioned managers to skew their selection to the familiar – similar pedigree, education or company profile. Other leaders who are insecure would not risk hiring a person who is obviously more highly skilled then they are.” (p. 26) This view has striking similarities with the comments made by key informants in the context of their firms’ talent reviews and demonstrates the systemic issues HR is confronted with today: the often-cited goal of HR to attract, retain and develop people (Stahl et al, 2007; Scullion et al, 2010, p. 106, cited in Skuza et al, 2013, p. 454) is – based on the conducted research - much more difficult than it would at first appear. The 15th Annual Global CEO Survey by PwC, conducted in 2012, revealed that 53% of CEOs see lack of key skills as a key challenge for their organisations. Why then, do so many CEOs tolerate what appear to be lack-lustre approaches to talent management in their firms? Why is it so hard for key informants to convince their leaders that new, innovative, more structured and objective means of assessing employees are needed? (Oladapo, 2014) agrees: “The belief in talent and its impact on the bottom line are at the heart of talent management. To be effective, the talent mind-set must be embedded throughout the organisation (…). If the senior management of an organisation buys into the talent management concept, it will be entrenched into the fabric of the corporate culture. Alternatively, if senior management is not a believer, the firm’s scarce resources will be allocated to other pet projects.” (p. 29).

If talent management is really such a critical aspect of organisational effectiveness and success, why, then, is there such a lack of concrete, clearly articulated guidelines to support HR professionals and talent managers? Section 5.5 will seek to provide a perspective on this.
5.5 Developing a Theoretical Perspective on the Reality of Talent Management and Concluding Thoughts

The data from my empirical research points to a significant gap between the rhetoric and reality of talent management in organisations. Influenced by social and political aspects, such as the informal rather than formal talent conversations and the playing of personal and position power cards to achieve talent review outcomes in favour of certain individuals, the reality of talent management eclipses the coherent and disciplined perspective offered in the majority of the literature published on talent management.

The synthesis map presented in Chapter 4, figure 6, illuminates the real process of talent management as described by research participants. I believe that organisations are social constructs, each with their own set of values, mission statements and objectives. The context and reason for engaging in talent management, however, appears relatively consistent across all participating firms and, at its most basic level, can be distilled down to the need of having the best possible talent incumbent in the most critical roles. What is important is for organisations to enter into the practice of talent management with their eyes wide open, understanding that politics and social dynamics will play a part in the outcome of conversations. As outlined in this and the preceding chapters, the reality of how talent decisions are achieved differs substantially from the rhetoric. I conclude and contribute to the extant literature that talent management is a social process in organisations in which decision makers convene at regular intervals to discuss development and promotion opportunities for (selected) employees, with tools such as 9-box grids and succession plans simply providing a framework on which to base the mostly subjectively formed perceptions managers have of employees in the organisation and which are then voiced in the talent review meetings.

I furthermore conclude that little current literature acknowledges the degree to which organisational politics and the lack of managerial capability – either through promotion of technical experts to management and/or a lack of personal development interventions for newly promoted managers – impacts the potential effectiveness of talent management in organisations. With what appears to be a
relentless focus on the ‘war for talent’ in academic contributions to the literature, the real issue, e.g. the socially constructed reality of talent management, including the role of the social and political aspects of talent management are largely omitted, perhaps avoided. Talent management, from a theoretical perspective, should perhaps be seen as a collaborative and social organisational process in which the actors (e.g. the managers and executive leaders) come together to openly learn about one another’s perceptions of employees and their rationale for such impressions. Supported by external assessment data, providing the actors with a more neutral, external viewpoint on individuals, decisions may then be made based on a combination of data points; including an objective, subjective and comparative perspective. I posit that such an approach would alleviate some of the ambiguity and tension around talent management expressed by key informants and bringing the practice of talent management in line with organisational reality.
Chapter 6 – Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I set out to explore the social and political aspects of talent management. Having analysed data from 14 key informants who generously contributed to the empirical research by offering their time and sharing their experiences in a frank and open manner, I have offered what I believe to be a different perspective on common organisational approaches to talent management through a synthesis map depicting the ‘real’ process of talent management compared to the ‘reality’ published in the academic literature to date (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Scullion et al, 2007; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Oladapo, 2014, Dries, 2013; Iles, 2010).

The thesis has commented on a number of discrepancies between the rhetoric and reality of talent management (Legge, 2005) and highlighted numerous similarities in the concerns and challenges HR and talent professionals across 14 organisations of vastly different size – ranging from 85 UK-only based employees to over 114,000 staff internationally – are facing on a daily basis. The data analysis provided significant insight into the complexity of talent management experienced by key informants with three key themes of managerial capability – and linked anxiety – and behaviours; the search for more objectivity in talent management; and a sense of disappointment and a desire for structure and follow-through.

I conclude that talent management in firms is heavily influenced by political aspects although, officially, this is rarely acknowledged. Salimaeki and Jaemsen (2010) state that “Organisational politics has the potential to have widespread impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of organisations” including managerial decision making (p. 230-231). This perspective was certainly reflected in the information and data gathered from key informants who perhaps struggle to see the upside and benefits of
organisational politics which, according to Pfeffer (1981) and Ammeter et al (2002) are necessary for the survival of organisations. If organisational politics plays as significant a role in a firms’ talent management processes as suggested, it means that it affects most every part of the organisation as talent management processes are usually the basis for people decisions, ranging from promotions, access to learning programmes and, ultimately, increased exposure to the senior leaders; starting the political round-about all over again as described in the data analysis chapter.

This thesis and the associated research by no means provides all of the answers on how organisations could address the social and political aspects of talent management. It is acknowledged that there are a number of limitations to the research and recommendations for further research are outlined later in this chapter; as well as implications and recommendations for practitioners in the field of talent management before offering final concluding thoughts.

6.2 Empirical Findings

The research set out to explore the social and political aspects of talent management. I did not seek to evaluate, analyse or criticise the talent management practices of participating organisations. Instead, through transcribing the interviews verbatim and applying inductive thematic analysis to the documentation, I sought to explore and understand the issues and concerns HR and talent professionals are confronted by and dealing with in their respective firms and environments.

The three aggregate dimensions listed here have been discussed in detail in Chapter 4 – Data Analysis, and in Chapter 5 – Discussion:

1) The challenge of maintaining objectivity in talent management;
2) The quest for structure and more follow-through; and
3) Disappointment and unfulfilled promise.
The main findings of research suggest that HR and talent management professionals are struggling to balance the dynamic tension between the rhetoric and reality of talent management in their respective firms. Inexperienced and/or insecure managers are anxious about conveying accurate messaging from talent review meetings to their direct reports out of fear and nervousness of not being able to meet expectations or deal with the ensuing disappointment of employees if the outcome of such talent discussions does not meet their expectations. The research showed that training alone appears to be insufficient in helping managers boost their skills and abilities, leading to the question whether those in managerial roles should have been appointed to such positions in the first instance. Numerous key informants lamented the promotion of technical experts to managerial roles, a transition which appears to be unsuccessful more often than it is successful. Another area of concern is the need for employees to have executive sponsorship in order to progress through the organisation which is closely linked to needing visibility and exposure to the most senior leaders who may become key advocates – or not - for individuals and significantly influence the outcome of talent review meetings.

Under the dimension of ‘the desire for more structure and follow-through in talent management’ findings suggest that most firms have introduced and, to a greater or lesser extent, embedded the 9-box grid into their talent management practices. Further templates and guidelines exist, mostly in the form of values statements, behaviour frameworks and performance management processes. Some of these processes are connected, i.e. performance review metrics find their way into 9-box grid discussions and placement of individuals on the grid which, in turn, may lead to access to key talent programmes or exclusive learning interventions. A key finding of the research in the context of structure is the desire to implement more objective assessment criteria and processes and the belief in objectivity. Predominantly, this has led to the exploration and introduction of assessment centres in a number of participating firms. Not all participants were in a position to introduce this in an open and structured manner: some are doing this in selected parts of the business where senior leadership have bought into and understand the virtues of such interventions whereas other firms have radically changed their talent management process to a nomination and by invitation only assessment process; successful completion of which guarantees a place in the global Top 100 or Top 500 population.
The final aggregate dimension of disappointment and unfulfilled promise is perhaps the most emotive of the three. Every single participant displayed numerous paralinguistic features at various stages of the interview, including in the very first sentence, which underscored the sense of frustration and dissatisfaction key informants felt when speaking about their firms’ talent management practices and processes. The collective sense of unfulfilled promises, e.g. how great talent management could be ‘if only’, was striking. Among the concerns raised were the continuing discussions about inclusive versus exclusive talent management, the cultures of fear (of failure) which leads newly promoted individuals to focus on staying in the job rather than on the job; and general frustrations with managerial behaviours such as revising their talent decisions made in the boardroom later in the evening at the bar.

The findings are echoed in some of the literature reviewed in the context of this research (Downs and Swailes, 2013; Tansley, 2011). However, the majority of literature published on the topic of talent management to date does not serve professionals in the field as the recommendations and rhetoric offered are too far removed from the reality of organisational life.

I suggest that the research synthesis map depicted in chapter 4, figure 6, provides an alternative to practitioners in the field of HR and talent management by acknowledging that organisational dynamics such as politics and subjective decisions are an integral part of the talent management process and should be acknowledged as opposed to ignored. I furthermore propose that the aforementioned ‘reality’ map points to and allows practitioners to address a number of areas highlighted as concerns by research participants, including the concept of executive sponsorship and managerial anxiety issues. Further recommendations and implications for practice will be discussed in section 6.4.

6.3 Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

It is recognised that the empirical research conducted as part of this doctoral submission was limited to 14 organisations. The main reasons for not expanding the sample included the following:
• Lack of access to more organisations. 52 firms were invited to take part in the study, and, after several weeks of follow-up messages and telephone calls, 14 key informants were available to participate;

• Data saturation point was reached after 10 interviews; the remaining four interviews provided enhanced perspectives on what other participants had already stated, e.g. further extending the sample most likely would not have led to further or new insights;

• Lack of time. This empirical piece of research was conducted on the basis of a cross-sectional study with all interviews taking place in the period between October 2013 and July 2014.

Of the participating organisations, three firms operate only in the United Kingdom, the remaining 11 firms are either international or global firms with an employee base of up to 114,000 people. The first recommendation for future research would be to expand the sample to more organisations as well as to firms with global head offices in Asia rather than focusing on firms which may operate globally but with main operations based in the western hemisphere. In addition, further insights into the practice of talent management could be gained through follow-up interviews with current participants to ascertain whether any of the new and revised approaches and processes to talent management discussed during the initial interviews have come to fruition and understand if these have provided more objective, less biased talent information.

It is also recommended to consider a further qualitative study exploring the way talent(ed) participants feel they have been managed by their organisations. The data suggest that the sense of disillusionment expressed by key informants may also be felt by talented employees who are placed on talent lists but then find that this does not necessarily result in more focused development programmes or, indeed, promotions. KI 2 of FS 1 cited such an example whereby an individual who was not a member of the key talent group being developed for senior positions was promoted to a general management role. The repercussions were significant and the talent manager had to spend many hours with the ‘talent group’ to explain the situation and maintain engagement levels. A focused, dedicated study into the topic of
how ‘talent’ are managed by their respective employers would hence serve to illuminate the conflict between the objective, organisational position on talent management and the personal, more subjective stance by research participants evidenced in the interview data. I suggest a qualitative approach is likely to yield richer and more insightful data than a quantitative study and would allow for deeper exploration of an area of talent management which is currently underrepresented in the literature.

As an alternative research design to this research, a longitudinal study employing an auto-ethnographic approach could be of great interest and benefit to practitioners and scholars alike, providing detail and insights which I argue cannot be obtained in a cross-sectional, interview-based study. The latter approach was not chosen due to time constraints in the context of this DBA research project. However, I propose that further data could emerge in a longer term study in which a researcher truly embeds him/herself in an organisation in order to observe up to a full twelve-month talent review cycle in a firm (or longer). I suggest a lot of research remains to be undertaken in talent management which serves to address the core issues surfaced during my study, providing simple and practical recommendations for managers and HR professionals alike in order to make the process more tangible, meaningful and effective.

I also suggest that a significant body of literature needs to be reconsidered on the basis of the findings documented in this thesis in terms of its relevancy to practitioners in the field as talent management is not the straight-forward administrative process as which it is often portrayed. Instead, it involves multiple interactions at different levels in the organisation with every participant offering a perception and perspective on individuals to be discussed. Position power often influences the outcome of discussions, sometimes over-ruling the views of several other individuals who contributed to the talent review. As discussed, the anxiety managers feel – perhaps owing to lack of experience – significantly impacts on talent management, leading to a sense of disempowerment and disillusionment. None of the literature reviewed acknowledges and addresses these critical aspects of talent management.
6.4 Recommendations and Implications for Practice

My study did not set out to change the talent management processes in the participating firms. Rather, I wanted to explore the everyday issues key informants need to address in an effort to manage talent and, consequently, create successful work places. However, the detailed data analyses in the context of this study allows me to offer the following recommendations to practitioners in the field of HR and talent management, which address the social and political aspects of talent management:

1) Acknowledge that, as long as people assess people, there will be subjectivity, comparisons, politics and bias.

Even though a number of concerns about the social and political aspects of talent management have been explored in this thesis, I argue that acknowledging and working with these biases is a more healthy way of proceeding then to attempt to eradicate it. Managers are human beings: they have feelings, emotions and perceptions which influence their thinking and decision making. Instead of trying to brush this aside, it is perhaps time for firms to acknowledge this as an integral part of the people processes, including performance management, resourcing planning and talent management in particular.

Once acknowledged, it will be easier for other managers and HR professionals alike to speak up during talent management processes when bias and politics appear to be influencing decisions or discussions; raising their concerns and encouraging others present in the room to share their perspective as well, leading to a more holistic approach and decision process about people.

I conclude that organisational politics cannot be extinguished and any attempt to do so simply does not reflect the reality of talent management in organisations; nor does it reflect human nature and the need for social interactions which form part of the political landscape in the working environment.
2) Employees should be assigned (or find themselves) a mentor within the first year of joining an organisation.

Executive sponsorship and endorsement was described by research participants as a key influencing factor in talent review discussions. Key informants also commented on how the opinion of one executive can change the dynamics of the talent review conversation, often made possible because not every senior leader has had exposure to the individuals being discussed. Through a process of mentoring (Barton, 2008), exposure by senior leaders to their peers’ direct reports can be significantly increased, leading to perhaps more balanced perspectives on employees throughout the talent management cycle. This may in particular benefit employees who are not based in a head office environment in which exposure to senior leaders is more likely to occur naturally; through project work, for example, than it is in satellite offices across the globe.

3) Implementation of structured, externally hosted assessment centres in combination with a personality inventory / psychometric assessment

A key recommendation to practitioners in the field of HR and talent management is to implement structured assessment centres which also include psychometric assessments/personality inventories which have high levels of reliability and consistency, particularly in re-testing. It is recommended that the psychometric assessments are carried out before individuals attend assessment centre processes in order to ascertain how candidates are likely to perform during the evaluations. This may be particularly important if attendee ‘A’ is highly introverted and candidate ‘B’ has a more extroverted and boisterous personality, in which case it can be expected that candidate ‘A’ receives the feedback that he needs to be more forthcoming and outspoken – which is not the individuals’ natural style. I posit that if organisations had better insight into the personalities, styles and preferred ways of working of their employees, some historic talent decisions may well be revised and employees could be placed into roles which naturally suit their preferences and thus lead to more consistent levels of performance.
The assessment centre process found great support among research participants. Psychometric testing and assessment centres, particularly when externally facilitated, offer a very rigorous yet neutral perspective on how an individual is likely to perform in certain environments and circumstances. In combination with in-house perspectives, a more holistic view of employees can be formed, which may arguably lead to more sound people decisions.

4) Educate HR professionals to work with the social and political aspects of talent management

The research data suggests high degrees of frustration and disillusionment by participants who, in three cases, referred to themselves as the ‘talent police’ who need to uphold high standards of talent management whilst being quite disempowered to significantly influence the process. HR professionals perhaps need to be educated and more skilled in spotting politically motivated behaviours and, as a strategic partner to the organisation, have ‘carte blanche’ to call this out in meetings and challenge managers without fear of repercussions.

In this context, another key suggestion is that talent professionals need to be given more opportunity to fill the gap left as a consequence of managerial anxiety and the associated difficulties such managers face to provide their team members with feedback. This may be achieved by providing personal development opportunities to talent and HR professionals which allow them to develop their coaching skills to support managers as these go through the talent review cycles. Such support may manifest in HR and talent professionals joining feedback conversations with a manager’s direct reports following the talent reviews which may lead to more accurate and honest information being provided to employees. In addition, astute and highly skilled talent professionals may be perceived in a similar way to the external providers and facilitators of assessment centre processes in that the view of such talent and HR professionals is seen as objective rather than subjective. This, in turn, would allow them to more overtly coach senior organisational leaders throughout the entire talent management process. Over time, such interventions may also build the confidence levels of managers - through observation and
potential role-play with HR and talent management professionals - to be better able to handle such meetings without direct HR support as I suggest it is important that line managers can fulfil their role to lead their direct reports and provide open feedback to them.

Based on the findings of this research and the ‘reality’ map of talent management outlined in Chapter 4 of this thesis, I propose that the recommendations outlined above can have a significant positive impact on the talent management practices of organisations. It will likely offer a starting point from which more employees find themselves in an environment in which they are able to flourish, with the right levels of support, and in which organisations can move on from conversations of scarcity of talent to more holistic ways of managing talent (Downs and Swailes, 2013).

6.5 Final Conclusion

The tension between the rhetoric and reality of talent management is likely to exist for the foreseeable future and will continue to play an integral part in the management practices of organisations. Combined with the social and political aspects of talent management as explored in this thesis and expressed in the data provided by key informants, it is perhaps time for a more pragmatic approach to the process of talent management.

I suggest that what is needed is not another definition of talent management, but recommendations which will allow practitioners in the field to work in partnership with their employers to create an organisational environment in which the political aspects of talent management are not only acknowledged, but addressed and counterbalanced by data and perspectives obtained through structured interventions such as assessment centres, which will offer a different approach to the organisational talent review processes.
Perhaps it is also time for scholars and practitioners to work in collaboration in an effort to find a suitable approach to talent management for organisations at different stages of their evolution and development. Instead of each side judging the other for being either too far removed from organisational reality or, conversely, for not embracing academic research and scholarly contributions to the field of talent management, the two brought together could lead to something rather special and powerful.
Chapter 7 - Reflective Diary

“The real journey of discover lies not in discovering new lands, but in seeing with new eyes”.

M. Proust

7.1 Introduction

Without a shadow of a doubt, the past six years have been the most challenging, rewarding, frustrating, emotionally draining and exhilarating years of my life. The DBA has been a constant companion – and not always a welcome one – in my life since September 2009 when I attended the first structured DBA workshop at the Surrey University School of Management (as it was called in those days). During the course of the past six years, I have changed my job twice, each time moving into significantly more senior roles – culminating in a Chief Human Resources Officer position - was made redundant once and consequently left unemployed for nine months, gave birth to my two gorgeous children, Rebecca and Matthew, and, most recently, had to come to terms with my partner of 17 years, Robert, suffering a heart attack. To say it was an emotion rollercoaster ride is an understatement and it was quite fascinating for me to observe how my emotional state of mind impacted on my ability to focus on my DBA studies; or not, as was the case, too.

One temporary withdrawal of 12 months and five years later, the end of the journey is now in sight. The overall learning journey, however, is far from over: life-long learning and a passion for continuous personal development have been a driver for me for many years and I shall continue to seek out opportunities to enhance my subject matter expertise as well as becoming a more holistic practitioner and person.

Although DBA cohort 5 started in September 2009 (with only four students), my DAB journey arguably commenced over two years earlier in March 2007 on the Thai island of Koh Samui: enjoying an afternoon cocktail by the pool, I was busy studying for my MSc in People and Organisation Development at Roffey Park Management Institute. I had been enjoying the learning and personal
development offered by the programme from day one and felt my confidence as a practitioner grow with every assignment. It was at this time that my partner, Robert, suggested I explore further study after MSc completion by looking at doctoral programmes. I shrugged this off at first, wanting to finish the MSc project at hand before changing focus and getting absorbed in a new venture. However, the DBA seed was well and truly planted, and shortly after graduating, I started to enquire about further studies and eventually settled on the University of Surrey DBA programme.

This reflective diary concentrates on two key areas of personal learning and development over the past six years, which are as follows:

- Persistence and resilience - making difficult decisions and then seeing them through;
- Personal changes and personal development

I will comment on each in two separate sections but both areas of learning are closely linked and form a holistic learning experience which, I believe, have made me a more competent and confident practitioner in the field of HR and talent management.

### 7.2 Persistence and Resilience - making difficult decisions and seeing them through

The first difficult decision was signing up for the DBA programme in the first place! Even though I love learning and have invested heavily in this both from a time and financial perspective since 2002, a further four to five year commitment did seem rather intimidating.

Working full-time and studying part-time worked well for the first 14 months of the DBA and weekend study sessions followed by assignments were both enjoyable and stretching at the same time. I quickly realised that simply maintaining the already high standard of the recently completed MSc programme would not be sufficient for the DBA and that I needed to ‘raise my game’ and increase my attention to detail in my writing and critical analysis skills.
Upon passing all of my assignments in the first attempt in part I, the taught element of the DBA, my confidence grew and was pleased to have Paul Tosey and Eugene Sadler-Smith appointed as my primary and secondary supervisors respectively for the second part of the programme: the research and thesis. My focus shifted away from the DBA in January 2011, the day my daughter Rebecca was born. Suddenly, compared to holding and caring for my little girl, work and study felt rather irrelevant and insignificant. I very much neglected the DBA for the next five months, dipping in and out of reading for the literature review and managing to complete some writing.

I then started a new, more senior talent management role reporting to the Group HR Director of the firm in December 2011, having decided that my former role would not offer me the career opportunities I had hoped for. This new role absorbed me completely for the first few months. It was important to me to start new initiatives quickly and coherently as I was expecting my second child and needed to be seen to have a positive impact on the firm before starting a period of shortened maternity leave. Matthew was born in March 2012, fourteen months after his sister. Resilience levels needed to be high: looking after two children under the age of two, having a senior role and a doctoral programme on hand was rather challenging and very daunting.

Once I resumed full-time work in August 2012, the pressure became too much and I finally agreed to the University of Surrey’s generous offer of a back-dated period of temporary withdrawal from the DBA programme. I felt like I was admitting defeat at the time but it bought me more time to finalise the studies; and I knew it would not get any easier from a time pressure perspective! It was around this time that I became extremely unhappy in my job, mostly owing to organisational politics caused by what I would describe as a dysfunctional HR structure and team. There was a lot of conflict within the team which created a very difficult and demotivating working environment. At the same time, I had re-started the DBA and was struggling with the Methodology Chapter. After a tough conversation with Paul Tosey, I made a decision to give the Methodology Chapter one last try, working late in the office on three or four days per week to focus on the study and, as hard as it is to say this, be away from my children who proved to be too much of a wonderful distraction when I got home in the evenings!
I came to the conclusion that if the next iteration of the Methodology Chapter would again be insufficient, I would withdraw permanently from the DBA as continued study seemed unrealistic under those circumstances; I was falling behind on the rest of my DBA work and needed a sense of progress. Upon reflection, the fact that I felt so unhappy, undervalued and cynical at work was echoed in the DBA work completed around the same time. Once I gathered up my self-belief again, I made progress on the Methodology Chapter but I had to isolate this from my day-job in order to achieve this. Having said that, even today, that particular chapter would benefit from another iteration! I will briefly return to the concept of ‘good enough’ at the end of this diary.

With the aforementioned chapter finally reaching doctoral standard, I focused on the research field work which I was very excited about. However, my persistence and resilience were tested yet again when I was made redundant from my role at the end of October 2012. To say this was unwelcome news would be an understatement.

I spend the following nine months interviewing research participants, transcribing the interviews and conducting the thematic analysis; getting to a point where I was able to present and discuss the initial findings and thematic map during a DBA workshop, discuss details with Paul and Eugene and present the findings at an international talent management conference in Berlin. The pressure of finding a suitable new role, however, was immense and all consuming, but inner resilience and persistence eventually paid off when I was offered the CHRO role with my current employer. Whilst absolutely delighted, I also knew I was in trouble from the DBA perspective again as the job was bound to be demanding … and I was right! Within four months of joining, a new CEO took over and the organisational transformation the company has now embarked on is rather amazing (and would make a great case study for anyone wanting to evaluate the change management process - though it won’t be me, for sure!).

Time and again, I found myself struggling to meet the demands of the DBA and the job which regularly sees me working 12 hour days, weekends and on holiday. When I requested the extension of my DBA
studies in the late spring of 2015, I knew this was the final attempt to bring this project across the finish line and submit the thesis to the university by the end of October 2015. The personal effort and time involved in finalising the DBA was significant. The need for perseverance was enormous and, at times, very, very stressful. Study days and family holidays were all consumed by work priorities until I finally drew a line in the sand and requested study leave to complete the DBA as not finishing and submitting the thesis at this last stage was not an option for me.

I have learned a great deal about persistence and resilience and I believe that this has positively impacted my confidence as an HR and talent management practitioner: if I am convinced a certain project or initiative will benefit the organisation I work for, I will gather data to underscore my perspectives and present a compelling business case to my manager and peers on the executive team. I have also learned that if I at first don’t succeed to try again, e.g. if an initial proposal is not met with approval, I reposition the case, gather further evidence and loop around again. Perhaps I’ve become a little bit too persistent for some of my work colleagues but it is certainly helping to reposition the HR function as a strong, invaluable and trusted partner in the organisation. I am not sure I would have been able to achieve all that I have in the past 14 months since starting my role – and have the confidence to push through some of my strategic HR objectives - without the DBA learning, which taught me the need for discipline, succinct communication, reference to data to underpin my arguments.

7.3 Personal Changes and Personal Development

Changes and transitions in my personal life were quite a prominent theme throughout the six-year long DBA journey. What I find most insightful about these changes, however, is how they have impacted me and changed my attitude towards work and life. I mentioned the birth of my children, job losses and changes in the previous section and remember a DBA workshop in the summer of 2014 when fellow students suggested I was ‘mad’ trying to finish the thesis with so many other commitments. But I decided to pull through as I had progressed too far to stop.
From a practitioner perspective, the DBA has undeniably made me a much more self-assured and self-reliant individual. In fact, in some work situations I have become quite a lot bolder with more courage of conviction than I had five years ago. Perhaps I had to go through the difficult experience of redundancy and the preceding challenges at work – which massively impacted my self-esteem and self-belief to do my job and complete the thesis – in order to emerge as a stronger, more resilient and perhaps rounded individual.

Over the course of the last decade - as I matured, became better educated and more experienced in work and life - my tolerance levels for organisational politicking and the pandering and propensity to the ‘this is how we’ve always done it’ mentality declined significantly and has been driving me to seek ‘better’ and alternative solutions and approaches to talent assessment and organisational culture development.

As a result of the DBA research and data analysis in particular, I have gained a heightened awareness of the impact the social and political aspects of talent management have on organisations; especially the impact on individuals, and how to come to terms with these. I was on key talent programmes in the past and it meant very little, as the annual intake of key talent for the accelerated development programme was limited to 60 per year, creating a three-year waiting list! So I have experienced the sense of disappointment and unfulfilled promise expressed by research participants both from the perspective of a talent/HR manager as well as from that of an employee. What I have taken away from this is to not repeat the mistakes of the past in my current role in which I am fortunate enough to basically create the HR function and its focus areas from scratch (the Group HR role was only created three years ago). It is not often in life that a work opportunity comes along which allows for an entire function to be rebuild with all global people processes needing to be designed and implemented. The DBA learning has been invaluable in this context in that I look for data to underscore suggestions rather than basing it just on my opinion and experience. Furthermore, I question team members to be more rigorous in their work approach.

The above describes just one aspect of how the DBA programme has changed me as a practitioner. However, I think the biggest challenge for me in writing the thesis was to stick to data, facts and
literature instead of personal opinions and experiences. This was hard. Very hard. Having seen so much fall-out from talent management processes in different firms since I started working in HR in the year 2000 - which ultimately triggered my interest in researching the topic in the context of the DBA - it was incredibly difficult for me to stand back and detach myself completely from the data analysis, discussion and conclusions and recommendations without adding my version of events; letting the data speak instead. In my daily HR role now, I firmly keep this particular learning in mind: although still driven by emotion and the desire to do the right thing for the organisation, I am nonetheless much more data-focused and factual than before I embarked on the DBA.

I also believe that I am a more confident and capable people manager as a result of completing the DBA. The level of guidance and advice I can offer team members is more fact- and experience based than ever before, grounded in rigorous scholarly thinking and analysis. Where I used to have a fairly black and white approach to solving issues, I now have a more diverse perspective which allows me to ‘dissect’ a problem in order to ascertain the root cause whereas, previously, I would have taken issues at face value and jumped to conclusions. I encourage my team to seek different perspectives in solving the cultural transformation challenges we are currently working on and the success we have had in the last 12 months is indicative that, perhaps, this approach is yielding benefits.

7.4 Concluding Thoughts

If someone asked me whether attending the DBA has made me a better practitioner in the field of HR and talent management, I would answer with a resounding ‘yes’. At the same time, I believe many of the benefits of the DBA will take years to emerge in terms of continued personal learning and career progression.

What I do know is that I have matured greatly over the past six years and feel like a very different person: more capable, skilled, confident, astute, analytical, inquisitive and demanding of myself and
others. On the other hand, I also had to learn the difficult lesson that sometimes, ‘good enough’ really is ‘good enough’. I am writing this reflective diary four days before the DBA submission deadline and I still have three chapters to complete. I have simply run out of time: the day job and family commitments have had a significant impact on my ability to concentrate on the studies but I would not have wanted to miss out on any of the experiences over the last six years.

However, I know my data analysis chapter contains very relevant information for practitioners in the field of HR and talent management and I feel a sense of pride for having made that contribution although the sense of frustration over how much more I could have done to round off the other chapters, the literature review and methodology chapters in particular, is quite strong and truly ‘bothers’ me as I feel that I have let myself down. But I also know that no matter how many more weeks and months I could spend enhancing my work, there will always be something else to edit.

From a work perspective, I am hoping to remain with my current employer for another three to five years as the HR function will play an integral part in the culture change and organisational transformation and I’d very much like to be a part of this change, consolidating my experience as a practitioner as well as drawing on the academic learning through both my MSc and the DBA. After that, I may consider independent consultancy, which will allow me to bring further focus to my practice and work with numerous organisations in an effort to advance their talent management practice.

I close with a sense of privilege to have had the opportunity to study for this degree, a sense of relief that it is over and a sense of having a much deeper appreciation for the Marcel Proust quote included at the beginning of this diary: The real journey of discovery does indeed lie in seeing with new eyes.
References


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Appendix I – 9-Box Grid Examples


The Korn/Ferry Lominger Matrix (http://leadershipall.com/succession-planning-identifying-talent/):
Appendix II – Research Invitation Letter

Dear XXX,

Subject: Invitation to participate in a doctoral research project

I hope this message finds you well. (As you may be aware,) I am currently studying for a Doctor of Business Administration at the University of Surrey and will shortly be starting my research field work. I am writing to invite you to take part in this study.

The purpose of my research is to understand how talent management 'happens' in organisations. The study will comprise a ca. one hour conversation to explore this one core question with you. In total, 14 organisations across multiple industry sectors have been invited to participate in this research.

If you agree to participate in this study, I would like to ask your consent for the interviews to be recorded using a digital recording device, ensuring that your feedback is captured and reflected accurately. Confidentiality will be ensured and respected at all times. The research write-up will not refer to any participating organisations - or individuals within them - directly. Instead, your organisation will be referred to by its respective industry sector, e.g. FMCG 1, IT 2, etc.

I would be delighted if you agreed to take part in this study and look forward to hearing from you by (date) with potential dates and times for us to meet for the interview. We can agree the most appropriate and convenient place to meet closer to the interview date.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Kind regards,

Barbara
Appendix III – Sample Interview Transcript

Interview with KI 8 - People and Sustainability Director

Organisation: Transport and Distribution 1

B. Which industry sector are you in?

KI 8 We are in 'transport and distribution'.

B. Thank you, I put you down as 'food service'!

KI 8 Yeah, well, we do class ourselves as food service, but, basically, what we do, is we sell food..

B. Hmh.

KI 8 ... we sell product, we then buy in the product to distribute. So, we've got sales teams, warehouse and distribution so, we class ourselves as food service, because that's what we do in the marketplace. Ehm, but it's quite an interesting, it's a very big marketplace but there aren't that many players in it at a national level.

B. Hmh, so would (name of company) be somebody you compete with?

KI 8 Yes, they are a big competitor...

B. ...they are a bit competitor.

KI 8 That's exactly the type we'd be competing with. (Name) and then at a smaller level, local providers, really, like (name) and (name). Just very small players like that. So, that's the marketplace, really.

B. Interesting. And, are you UK only or do you operate internationally?
KI 8 We, and it's interesting, we are actually called T&D1x as of today. So, we've changed our... actually, this company just operates in the UK but X as a whole is international and has food service markets, ownership and distribution, whatever you want to call it, in Belgium, Holland, China...

B. OK!

KI 8 .. but we operate very much on a country-by-country basis; we don't really operate on an international basis.

B. OK.

KI 8 Yeah, so, purely UK.

B. And about how many people do you employ?

KI 8 4500

B. So quite a good size business!

KI 8 Yeah! We've got depots range from Scotland, Edinburgh, Inverness down to Leigh Mill, Battersea. Outbase really in Northern Ireland.

B. One of the things I've found so fascinating are the companies you get to know through this process and what they do!

KI 8 Mhm! You'll see our vehicles everywhere now! (laughs)

B. Exactly. Your competitor now has a big distribution centre in (name of city).

KI 8 Yeah, we've got a smaller one (…) in the business park but it's a lot smaller. We are almost like for like with the competitor, there's not much to differentiate is which is one of our challenges, actually, how do we differentiate ourselves from Competitor. In terms of things like talent management.
B. Yeah, good. Well, anything you share is confidential (explained agreement again and KI8 is perfectly happy with this).

B. I'd like to start with an open question...

KI 8 Sure!

B. How would you describe talent management at T&D1? How do you think it works?

KI 8 Specifically within T&D1?

B. Yes.

KI 8 Well, that is an interesting question because I don't think it does work within T&D1! Which is why we are quite a challenging organisation from this perspective. Ehmm, pause, as it is as the moment... if I just let you know the processes we have at the moment?

B. Yes, please.

KI 8 .. and then some of the challenges we have around the processes. Obviously, what we have in place, we have annual appraisals, standard appraisals, personal development plans and what we call 'let's talk people sessions' where departments and regions, depending on the company structure, will discuss their people and identify through that discussion who they believe their most talented people are. And we map that against the 9-box grid.

B. Hmh

KI 8 It's the standard CIPD 9-box grid. So, we map that. And really, we've only started to embed that properly this year. And then, what we try to do is moderate the names that appear in the 9-box grid as top talent at a Board Level, at a regional level, at departmental level; just to try and say 'is this right'. Are these employees... do we have the right names in the right frame.

B. Hmh
KI 8 Ehm, and that kind of works but there is a lot of debate still, it's far too subjective, still. And the reality I think of that is, we've probably, the biggest problem we have with that is, we really don't know what a good .. what talent looks like in our organisation. We haven't got a clear definition for it. So, my version of what a talented person looks like is very different to that of the board. So there's a big differentiation between what some people class as talent and what others would class as talent. So, that's challenging from that perspective. Then you add in identifying what you want to do with those people in the future, ehm, where the gaps are, how we are going to recruit to replace, what development plans we put in place and, ehm, you've got an even bigger gap (laughs) in terms of agreement at a Board level specifically, because, what I think people need to professionalise them and take them on would be very different to someone else.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 So, we have processes in place and they are good processes. But to try and, ehm, to try and moderate these processes and to gain agreement on the people that come through and the gaps and what we need is something that is very difficult for us.

B. Hmh. (7:29)

KI 8 .. and something I am still trying to work through with our board, at the moment.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Now, partly, my view on this and I have to say it's the boards as well, is because, ehm, because of this, there's this sort of lack of fit between those people who think it's what we need and have today - who do we need today to do this now - and those people who think it's actually people for the future. So, we've got a massive split in terms of the today.. the people for today and those for in two years time. Eh, because we are a business that operates very much on 'we've got a disaster today and how are we going to cope with it' and how are we going to put that disaster right...

B. Hmh.
KI 8 ... rather than actually, in the future, this is where we want to be and these are the types of skills we need to develop or bring in for the future. So, ehm, it's a struggle (laughs) for us, to, ehm, to really - what's the word I'm thinking of - to really define the list we are looking for and to be clear what it is that we need.

B. You mentioned that you would define talent very differently to how other board members would..

KI 8 Yes. There are ten of us on the board so it's a big board anyway and that makes it more challenging. And whilst I've been with the business for a long time, I think there are what I would call some more longer term thinkers on the board. I think we are split sort of 50% new thinkers and 50% traditional thinkers and trying to get that balance between the lot of us is quite, quite difficult.

B. Hmh. It sounds like a 'chicken and egg' scenario?

KI 8 It is!

B. You are trying to define what talent do we need for the future but we don't actually know what talent looks like?

KI 8 Exactly! But we don't really know what culturally we want to look like and we don't really know ... The market place changes to quickly. Everything changes so quickly these days!

B. Hmh.

KI 8 So, what we've got is ... we've got a stated business plan strategy, we have stated cultural ethic that we want to work to but it's very varied, very complex, it changes regularly and it's very different to determine then what's the set and the type of talent you want coming through to support that. It's a challenge but actually, I'm hoping this year we'll get there. Because we've got some other plans in place to try and move the thinking forward and on, but, yes, it's not easy.

B. Hmh. So, have you done talent management hitherto? You said you now have a 9-box..

KI 8 Yeah..
B. .. and you've now defined what you are going to do.

KI 8 I would say that previously, we probably haven't.

B. OK

KI 8 Specifically. Albeit... I think every company does do something in terms of talent management, whether you have a formal process? That's the process we have in place. Historically, really, I guess our recruitment methods I suppose ... we've always done appraisals to certain degrees of .. with some of them being done well and some of them haven't been done very well. I think that's the principle. Ehm, in terms of how we recruit people it's been very much from within; probably until about five/six years ago. It's always been about the guy or the lady who worked really hard, demonstrated that they were good in a job and they got promoted.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Actually, that's been our way of developing talent. He or she is a good soul, they've done this, they are loyal to the business, they've demonstrated that they work hard for us, they are really committed, therefore, we will promote them; really is what we have done.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 To an extent, we have promoted to a level of incompetence which is a classic of what you hear. Ehm, and we did an awful lot internally. Probably in the last five years or so, we have started to go at changing our thinking. We have started to go into the market place and we have recruited in some of the skill sets we've needed. So, marketing would be an example of that. Some sales, IT, so some of these areas where we want to progress we've gone out into the market place and bought a load of people in which is now starting to challenge the thinking. And now, of course we've got this sort of .. the bit between the good old souls, committed and they are still classed as talent and these new people coming in who are challenging and difficult ... much more difficult, ehm very different to us culturally and, and ...but they are making some really big strides and some big, big changes to the business.
KI 8 So I think, we sort of went, well, we did but we didn't go anything formally but now we are trying to find people, bring in new ideas, fresh blood, really.

B. Interesting. And, when you have your people on the 9-box-grid, for example, would you from there - I believe you said you have a top talent pool...

KI 8 Yes.

B. Do you then offer any targeted development programmes to those individuals at all?

KI 8 We are in the process of working with them to assess what that could be.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 So the answer is, or will be 'yes' but it isn't at the moment. If we are looking for people who are potential successors to the board, we think that things like the Institute of Directors would offer a programme of activity that would suit that, those individuals. At a, ehm, at a sort of more junior level to that, we have a programme which we call 'leadership in action' which is all about developing leadership skills and being very clear about what the, ehm, standards are in our business for a leader.

B. Yeah

KI 8 So we do have them. Not... they are a bit 'sheep dip' approach at the moment, ehm, and we aren't... we aren't specifying them as individual needs but we do have these programmes that run internally. And the same... we have one programme aimed at sales, which is particularly and purely sales development at the moment but again, it's just purely sheep-dip approach, rather than tailored and this year, we want to look at how we tailor it..

B. Hmh.

KI 8 .. probably through coaching or mentoring, that type of stuff, really.
B. Yeah, yeah. Very interesting.

KI 8 (Laughs) yeah!!

B. It sounds like you've got your work cut out!

KI 8 (laughs) yeah, yeah, yeah! And that's just one part of it! (laughs) It's a great opportunity because as a board, they know we need to do something but we've also got the succession planning. So, this is the succession planning rather than talent management. But, yeah. But there's a lot of recognition that we need to do something at that level now, which is great. The trouble is investment. Which is why we've done a lot of things internally, because having the money to spend in this climate is difficult for us.

B. Yeah, yeah. You mentioned earlier, I, that quite a lot of the people assessments are quite subjective.

KI 8 Yes.

B. Can you talk me through a little bit more about that?

KI 8 Eh, in terms of ... so, there's two bits were I think this falls down. One is in appraisals, where the line manager is giving feedback. And, particularly within this organisation we find giving 'constructive feedback' really hard.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 I think, whenever, ehm, .. a 'values' I think, well, I know, in our organisation has always been about positivity so appraisals are always about telling people how great they are, great results, largely because they haven't done the 1:1 meetings during the year so they can't really pick up on anything else because they haven't been picked up at the time. So, giving people that constructive feedback has been a really big challenge for us and knowing what 'good' looks like in a manager when they are giving that constructive feedback is hard. Eh, then, when it comes to the top
talent piece, ehm, the .. the difficulty there is again because we don't really define 'what does a
great leader look like' and there's a little bit about 'if we like that person, they must be good'.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 And, actually the previous HR Director to me had a challenge ... fought the Board and said 'I'm
not having a list of I like the following people". This has to be based on (laughs) some, something
objective but she really struggled to get them to come up with subjective criteria. One because I
think it was difficult because they don't know what it looked like and, secondly, because then it
meant that some of their top people who did a great job in a certain area, ehm, would be flushed
out as part of that and there would be some difficult conversation to happen with those people...

B. Hmh.

KI 8 .. and we don't like having them. Really don't like having them. Which is interesting... (laughs).
So they leave it to the HR team to have them! (laughs) It's a lovely technique! (laughs). But we
do it well!

B. (laughs)

KI 8 But we are getting better, but it's one of those things that we've had to tackle before we could do
what I call proper talent management, which, as I said, we are in the early stages of is ...

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Perform.. what I call performance management where we are having conversations with people
about what good looks like. Where they may be falling down, how we can help them develop
and very basic conversations at a, I would say at a grass roots level, but right through the whole
process.

B. Yeah.

KI 8 Because, otherwise, what comes out at the top is just ... is actually, that person turns up to all the
events and we like him. And that's just not talent in my mind.
B. Yeah. One of the questions I have in the back of my head is when you look at the talent review process as you are doing it today - so, you have people mapped on a 9-box-grid, for example ...

KI 8 Yeah.

B. Do you share any of that output with the individuals?

KI 8 Ehm... yes, we ask, again, so this is where it's quite interesting because we are starting ... so, this year, we are.

B. OK.

KI 8 Ehm, which has had an interesting impact, obviously, on people. Because, some of them are happy, some of them aren't so happy. Some of them are surprised, some of them are angry. But we are starting to share that through. But, as I said, this is the first year of it...

B. Yeah.

KI 8 Two or three years down the line is when we'll know the difference from it, really. But the people in the top talent box - it's not a great surprise. Ehm, it will be interesting whether in two or three years time it will be the same people.

B. Yes.

KI 8 But for me, having been here for a very long time, and this is where I know the talent process hasn't been brilliant, is that we've had people that have been classed as 'brilliant' for years and all of a sudden, they are not brilliant anymore!

B. Yeah.

KI 8 And it's this going from hero to zero which I have used with our board to say 'this is where you know it's not right'. If you .. You can't .. if you've held someone in high esteem for so long and all of a sudden, it's not working! That, that cannot be right.

B. Hmh.
So, yeah. It's interesting (laughs). But we are starting to share it now which is driving its own ... which is driving a different level of conversation.

I bet.

Yeah!

Because if you say that, ehm, regular feedback doesn't happen between a manager and an employee...

yeah.

... and then you have the performance management cycle and that's then difficult to manage, and then you layer on top of that the talent review output conversation..

yeah. Yeah!!

Then I suppose it's probably no big surprise that you have the 'surprise', the disappointment...

yeah, not at all! But it will vary. There are some departments where it's really great and some departments which just aren't so good at it. And those are the ones we really need to work on.

Yeah.

Ehm, for example, this department (HR) - and we've done this for years - nobody is surprised about where they are; nobody is surprised about what's going on. Ehm, how we define talent is pretty much in line with .. and I wouldn't say it's brilliant, still, because we still have a lot of work to do but the, ehm, there's no surprise in this department whereas others would be. Might be a surprise for them, and they are not happy about it. It's largely sales, it's very difficult (laughs).

Yeah

Sales is the challenge. Because we have two sets of sales teams, structured differently. So, it's quite challenging for us.
B. So, how are you managing through those difficulties with those individuals?

KI 8 Eh, really just through talking to them.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Talking to them, going along... we've brought in some new self-assessment tools...

B. Hmh.

KI 8 ... and we've used 'insights', actually, which has worked really well for this business. Eh, so we are doing some assessment, getting them some 360 feedback, we are looking at coaching, mentoring... so, it is just through talking, taking the time to talk to them to help get them to a better place..

B. Hmh.

KI 8 ... and, actually, the few that I'm aware of.. and I'm not aware of all of them, it works. It's working.

B. It sounds as though you are trying to bring a bit of objectivity to the game as well.

KI 8 Very much! And actually, what I'm trying to do is to bring in some external support, really.

B. Yeah.

KI 8 Because that helps drive the objectivity. When people have known people for a very long time...

B. Yeah..

KI 8 .. it's really tricky. So, actually bringing in some external resource to do some of the feedback helps because they can challenge in a different way.

B. Hmh. Would you consider bringing in external support for assessment as well?

KI 8 We've actually done some external support from ... we've used ... I cannot remember the name of the company... but yes, we have used it. But again, in pockets. It's where it's accepted and where it's not. We don't have it, eh, nationwide, across the board...
B. ... across the board...

KI 8 .. at the moment. So I've been trying - through stealth, really - to bring it in where people are happy to use it to demonstrate the value it can add.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 And, our national account team, we did that a year ago. Great feedback, great development plans. And, as a result now, as we go through this process, the 9-box-grid process, it's quite easy for them. Our other sales team, where they don't want to know, much more difficult.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 And, in fact, they still don't know 'what good looks like' in their area. So, yeah.

B. Do you have correlation between where people are on the 9-box grid and where they are on the succession plans?

KI 8 Yes. Well, because this is the first year of 9-box and we are linking it through. But, ehm we've had an interesting debate quite recently. Because what we are trying to do with our succession plans was box people in. Ok, right, he's talent, he'll go there. She's talent, she will go there. Where actually, and keep them within their specialism. Where, actually, at a certain level, ehm, we've talked about being change ready or change capable. And actually, there's no reason why, particularly at this leadership level, people can't move between departments.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 It's not necessarily about knowing their technical stuff, it's about direction and strategy, all of that type of thinking.

B. Yeah.

KI 8 So, it's a different way of looking at what we've got already which we are trying to get our heads around, really.
B. Yeah. Some more talent pooling rather than...

KI 8 .. more pooling, yes.

B. ... planning for one particular role.

KI 8 Yes. And I think that would work better for us. And, ehm, because the conversation we had, which was lead by the external resource, was actually, structures of businesses are changing so rapidly now, you know, they very rarely stay in place for more than two or three years, really...

B. Hmh.

KI 8 ... it's all very well to say 'I'm lining him up to the finance director in three years time'; well, that role might not exist in three years time! So, what's the point. So we are lining him up for a board position in three years' time so he is capable of doing everything or, well, three or four roles within the board. It's much better for the business rather than silo-ing people. It will be quite a thing for us to break out of because we do work in silos at the moment. Yeah. (laughs) It's all there! It's just getting ... We all know what we want to do in our team, it's just getting everyone else to see it, too (laughs)!

B. (laughs) getting everyone else to see it!

KI 8 .. and spend the time and dedicating the resource to it. Because going back to that point it goes down right to some of the difficult conversations that have to happen as a result of it and we are living some of the problems today putting those right.

B. Why do you think it is that people shy away from the 'difficult conversations'?

KI 8 ehm .. pause.

B. Why 'difficult' rather than just calling it a conversation?

KI 8 Hmh.. I think well, firstly because people know each other and they have worked together for years and I think that makes it very difficult in this particular organisation.
B. Yeah.

KI 8 I, ... the other bit... if they haven't worked together .. I think ... I think because culturally, we don't like upsetting people. I think it's that fear that they might go away, we might lose them, they might complain about us. Am I right .. I think it's a lack of ... I just don't think people feel comfortable doing it, people always like giving positive feedback. I just intuitively .. it doesn't feel right to say to somebody 'actually, this isn't an area of strength for you.'

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Don't like that feeling - that negative feeling it gives. Ehm, and I cannot think of.. define it in any other way. It really .... (laughs) really, you know in relationships people don't like giving that bad feedback; in relationships. And, actually, this is very similar. When you are sitting down with somebody and saying to someone I don't think this is handled, or this isn't as good as it could be, eh, very tough! And particularly when people say let me give you an example, I think the other bit is that some of it is behavioural.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Most of the time, it's a behavioural thing rather than a 'I think you are doing that form wrong'. That's easy to sort of show somebody. When it's a behavioural thing, a lot more difficult to explain (laughs) what you need them to do.

B. Yeah.

KI 8 And they will challenge, I think they can challenge back. It makes it much more difficult and it's not as defined I don't think. It's hard for people.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Yeah, and that's why I think it's interesting when people say 'fluffy HR'. When actually, I think, the HR stuff is much more challenging than 'is that right or not' because it's actually trying to get someone to do something in a different way for them.
B. Yeah, and, do you address things like 'giving effective feedback' as part of your development programmes?

KI 8 We do! Yeah, we do. So, we are trying to pick that up now and giving our leaders the tools, so tools that we hope are easier for them. Getting their feedback on the tools and help with it, because we know how difficult it is. And, actually, we have done a lot of one-on-one coaching with managers as well, so actually sitting with them to help them give that feedback where we know they are going to find it difficult. So, yeah, we have done a lot of that. I think the difficulty is, the challenge is that they don't like doing it at board level. So they are the ones I need to get to in order to set some examples...

B. Top down...

KI 8 ... top down, exactly. Yeah, we've done a lot of bottom up because that's easier for us to do. Easy in terms of delivery, not so easy in terms of sustaining because it has to come top down.

B. May be you should try 'reverse mentoring'..

KI 8 Yeah!

B. ... where more junior members of the organisation who have gone through the leadership programme..

KI 8 Yeah (enthusiastic)..

B. ...mentor board members.

KI 8 Yeah. Actually, that is not a bad idea (laughs). Some of them have been at the board for a long time and they could learn a lot from more junior members of our team who really get this principle.

B. Yes.
KI 8 Ehm, and I think that new people coming in don't seem to struggle so much. It's the sort of 'old school' of our organisation where we find it challenging.

B. Hmh. You've been with the organisation for a long time?

KI 8 Since 1998, yeah! A long, long time. Which is why I can see ... I get the old T&D1 problem, eh, but I also know .. well, I have a view on what we need to do to change it.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Ehm, and the challenges

B. Of the talent and performance management processes that you have in place at the moment, what would you describe as currently the most positive aspects?

KI 8 You know, the one that is working for us at the moment is the 9-box grid.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 And I think, really, it's working because it has given some definition within it and people can start to see where that fits. And that's from our customers .. that's the feedback that I get, is that they really like it, because it has given them some structure, given them something that they can work to and justify in their own minds .. I think they want to do it it's just finding something across the businesses that works that's the struggle. Eh, that's probably, rather sadly (light laugh) the best one we've got.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Ehm, and then, how we use that 9-box grid in let's talk people sessions. We've run that for three or four year, we haven't really had the structure we have now. The 9-box-grid adds to the structure of that so that has helped to generate some interesting and positive discussions. So I would say those two.

B. ok
They are really linked together. But, what we learned and I wish we'd known this before, we have taken time to brief that out. It seems like two very simple things with a long time to brief and to coach. A lot of communication, still not as good as it could be but a lot of work has gone into trying to get these two bits of it working for us.

B. Yeah. And the 9-box, do you have the 'classic' performance/potential in there?

KI 8 Yes.

B. Do you have any specific definitions around 'potential'?

KI 8 (inhales audibly) We probably do but I cannot remember off the top off my head which is ... I'd need to dig it out. We do, I know we do but potential is about moving. So, let me think about it so we've got potential and performance and perception I think is the other one. So where those align. So I think perception is not quite the right word for it. It's more around their networking and their breadth of knowledge of the business outside of their own area. So we have tried to get it broken out of HR, broken out of finance and the silos and branding, it's about the individual brand the person carries.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Eh, so where those three align is where we would say is 'top talent'.

B. OK.

KI 8 Eh, but potential is they are capable and have an ability to move on and the timeframe I think is 18-24 months. That's what we give it.

B. OK. So, on the flipside, the things that are not working so well .. you mentioned a couple of things that you feel should improve in the way talent management is done here ...

KI 8 Yeah.
B. If you had a magic wand and could say, 'right, this is the one thing that will really make a difference', what would it be?

KI 8 pause ... for me, it would be to get the boards understanding to what we are trying to do and achieve. And, real understanding an buy-in, not just talking about it and then going away and doing something else. But understanding it, buying it, really supporting the process, really challenging their own areas and, ehm, challenging their own areas and letting some people go. Allowing people to move between areas and departments. Because there is this bit about not wanting .. oh, he's really good, I don't want to lose him from my team.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 So, if they could just get what that value, that handling something in that way could bring, that would be great.

B. Yeah.

KI 8 It would massively change how we run the whole thing.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Because it is a bit of a paper exercise .. I think .. it's being a bit harsh but it is a bit of a paper exercise at the moment. They are not living it and feeling it and understanding it.

B. Yeah.

KI 8 So that would be the one for me.

B. And probably seeing some of the outputs from these conversations as well?

KI 8 Absolutely!

B. Because, presumably, if you haven't had the structured talent management approach, things like promotions and moves have been a bit of 'oh, we like him, we'll put him in that role' type of conversation or has it been a bit more structured than that?
KI 8 A little bit more structured than that but not much more. Actually, I think very rarely it hasn't been formalised in the same way but very rarely are they being challenged. So people aren't challenging about why someone has been promoted. They get it. Even if we haven't got a formal structure around it but, absolutely, could be handled better than that. And there must be people who, and I don't know here, who would be disenfranchised by that approach. It's the 10 people that you see regularly that we think are talented. There are probably hundreds of them out there that we just aren't getting sight of at the moment through that way of working.

B. Yeah, I think 'exposure' is something that often comes up...

KI 8 Massive! Massively! Because, really, how else do you judge it?

B. Yes.

KI 8 So, yeah (laughs)! It's not something we've worked on for years. And because I think our board has been static for nearly 10 years, you know, that ... that ... it's the same level of thinking year in and year out that you are trying to change and move and it's a very, very slow process. And, as an HR team, ehm, we haven't been very reactive but we are seen as very reactive because in this business, HR is classed as being 'disciplinaries, grievances, unions', that type of thing. The value add stuff they don't really get so there's a lot of work to go on to get that right. But that's an industry thing. I think we are quite 'backwards' compared to 'retail' and others because 'T&D competitor' is exactly the same from a food service industry, it's quite backwards. (32.36).

B. Yeah .. maybe we should try rebranding HR?

KI 8 Actually (laughs) - we are doing that now! (laughs again) We are working with the IPD on what we want to do and how we are going to deliver it. Just to try and move it to a different place again.

B. Interesting!
KI 8 Yeah, yeah yeah. So it's good. All of it is great. It's like three steps forward and then you go back two steps and you keep ... but we are ... we've made incredible amounts of progress. The fact that we are discussing this type of stuff now and we've got these processes in place is really positive for us. But there's a lot more we can .. we need to do.

B. Yes. I suppose it's the classic 'eat the elephant one bite at a time'.

KI 8 It is, it is! And you have to strike in some areas before you can move onto the next thing. I mean, literally, as I was saying - because we went onto, ehm, electronic appraisals only three years ago so that actually drove up .. because they were paper based and we couldn't get people to complete them. Now we are at least getting to complete them so we know the conversations are happening. Now we are upping the standard so it's an ongoing growing project. So, yeah (laughs). I'll be here until I retire trying to get it right (laughs)!

B. (laughs) you might be!

KI 8 (laughs) I hope not! Wouldn't be good for the business - it needs a different thinking. I've been to ... joking aside - because I have been here since 1998 I do think if somebody else came in, a new HR director, what would they do, how would they bring it about? Would it change the thinking?

B. Yeah...

KI 8 Obviously, it would. Eh, I'd like to see how it would be done because the thinking is so, so difficult to get them to concentrate on this stuff, I wonder how somebody else would do it. I know they would do it, and you would look to say 'if I were new to this business, what would I do and what would I tackle first? And I'd tackle some of these big issues sooner rather than later because (inaudible, too mumbled)... Because I grew up with the organisation, it's a bit more difficult of course.

B. Yeah. Well, you've got a big network, you could always say to somebody 'can you come and spend a day with me'.
KI 8 Yeah!

B. .. and just talk through some of the processes and have you got any ideas.

KI 8 Yeah, yeah, yeah! Any tips and stuff.

B. Because it sounds to me like you are bang on the right track!

KI 8 (laughs) We know what we are gonna do, we just have to make it happen (laughs).

B. Exactly! I, is there anything else around talent management, performance management, people processes within this org that you feel you haven't covered that you would like to share?

KI 8 Ehm ... I don't think so. I think the only other area that links into this is obviously the organisation structure that you work to.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Appraisal structures and how you pay people. Again, we have a structure in place. Organisationally, I don't think we have the best structure we could be in, largely because, again, we are a very loyal organisation to our people as well. So, we kind of create roles to keep people in jobs rather than take a very robust challenging position to say 'you are out'. We don't do that. And, we are questioning ourselves to see if we need to toughen up.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 But we are quite paternalistic about that. Ehm, our pay structures .. as a team we cannot get, we struggle to get, I want to get a hold of them but because we cannot get any data to analyse it, to demonstrate what they are doing, ehm, I struggle to, at the moment, to get any semblance of actually, we are paying people in the right way to attract talent. So those are the two areas that we are sort of .. so, process wise I suppose, performance management wise, we are trying to get people to have the right conversations but there's sort of this big elephant over here about grading and how to reward people that, really, I cannot get a hold off at the moment. Although, hopefully, I've .. it's not easy access for me, people data, in this business. It's because of the systems.
Hopefully, in the next years as that is tightened up and improved, that will help me with some of that data. So, yeah, I feel like we are doing the surface, but there's a big piece here...

B. Hmh.

KI 8 .. that has to do with tackling to get it right.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Lots of opportunity! (laughs loud)

B. Definitely...

KI 8 If you want a job (laughs)... It's very frustrating, it's a wonderful business to work in and the people are talent people and what they get is a lot of great, broad experience, lots of energy, a lot of opportunity to do things differently but actually, they haven't got any structure that they are operating within. People come in and either love that or they find it really hard. And, what we are trying to do is to put bits of structure around people without crushing the ... without stifling it all.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 Yeah, difficult (laughs)! Anything else I can help with on that? You are looking gobsmacked! (laughs)

B. No! I think you've covered an awful lot! The only last question that just popped into my mind is when you get your senior managers into the room, and you talk about the 9-box grid, does that happen at different levels in the organisation or just at Board level at the moment?

KI 8 Different levels. Well, I say different levels... The Board will look at what we call our 12s and 14s which is the level beneath the board and the level below that again. Within my department, I will look at, with my direct reports, I will look at my department. And, within the region, they will look at everyone within that region. Eh, the 9-box grid itself at the moment doesn't run
down as far as drivers and warehouse operatives. Which is... we don't extend as far as that which is an issue we need to pick up. It really covers down to people managers...

B. yeah.

KI 8 ... technical leads, people managers. But each region will know where their talent sits, right down to a certain level.

B. yeah.

KI 8 Ehm, and then we take the top level to the Board. So, that's how it works at the moment. And the conversations should happen quarterly.

B. Hmh.

KI 8 It's challenging to have them quarterly and I think quarterly is possibly too often for us. On the basis that even if it's just rubber-stamping names, names, progress quarterly, I'd rather keep the conversation on the table and push it and then go back to ... go to twice a year for the dynamic and wait until it's more embedded.

B. Just keep the momentum...

KI 8 Just keep the names, the momentum, the progress in place for the time being. Hmh...

B. Thank you!

KI 8 No, no, no problem at all! If there's anything I can share with you and documents that would be useful, I'd be happy to. They'd be in the common domain so that would be fine.

B. Very good. And conversely, if there's anything I can support you with, let me know.

KI 8 Great, thank you. And if you need to get a hold of me, just contact my PA for assistance.