

Talent management and the HRIS specialist: A narrative analysis

Carole Tansley, The Nottingham Trent University, UK
carole.tansley@ntu.ac.uk

Carley Foster, The Nottingham Trent University, UK
carley.foster@ntu.ac.uk

***Abstract.** Researchers are required to make methodological choices about the underlying nature of phenomena being investigated, which appropriate research methods to use and how to present valid evidence. Information systems (IS) is a discipline originally rooted in a single overarching perspective, the positivist/realist domain, but critics of such a narrow view have encouraged a move towards more interpretive approaches in order to understand human thought and action in social and organisational contexts. Addressing this gap, we demonstrate, using examples from case study and ethnographic research on human resourcing information systems (HRIS), how four analytical 'tools' (contextual narrative, personal narrative, template analysis and evaluation) can be used to interpret respondents' accounts. It is found that narratives can provide a meaningful description of events and experiences through time and go some way to encourage an informed consideration of alternative approaches to the positivist research dominating the IS domain. Critical reflections of narrative analysis are also provided in the paper.*

Keywords: Qualitative; ethnography; talent; narrative; template analysis.

1 Introduction

Those engaging in social science research have a range of research perspectives to choose from [1, 18; 48; 51], offered by researchers from different disciplines (sociology, anthropology, psychology, administrative science). However, such a range of traditions has not been widely evident in the arena of IS research [50], which was originally rooted in a single overarching perspective (the positivist/realist domain) that exhibits a single set of philosophical assumptions regarding the underlying nature of phenomena being investigated, the appropriate research methods to be used and the nature of valid evidence. Critics of such a narrow view [65, 66, 34] encourage a move towards more interpretive approaches [49] as they can help IS researchers to understand human thought and action in social and organisational contexts [41]. To aid these fresh approaches to studying IS work in greater depth, Currie and Gallier [23] also recommend utilisation of methodological approaches from other disciplines. However, this has only happened to a small degree in IS research [5, 6].

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In this paper we present a *methodological story*, derived from two studies (on talent management and human resource information systems (HRIS)) undertaken between 2007 and 2009. This story consists of a reflexive journey of our interpretive research practices derived from narratives from nine talent management case studies in the first instance and a longitudinal ethnography in the second instance, where we examined talent management at project team level on the HR component of a global, enterprise-wide information system. We demonstrate the utility of such ‘tools’ as template analysis, context narrative and personal narrative analysis for understanding the context and lived meaningful experience of those involved in IS work. We also discuss how such research might be evaluated. This has produced lessons for talent management practices generally, with prescriptions for the study of IS work in particular.

1.1 Narrative approaches and IS research

The ‘linguistic turn’ across the social sciences has generated an increasing interest in stories and narratives [31, 32, 55]. Narrative has been construed as ‘the meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole’ [52, p18]. Hinchman and Hinchman similarly take narratives to be ‘discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it’ [37, xvi]. One constant debate is whether there should be delineation between a narrative and a story. Scholars have not reached ‘consensus on how stories and narratives may be distinguished from definitions, proverbs, myths, chronologies and other forms of oral and written texts’, but rather their ‘key concern is with accounts of sequenced events, with plots that weave together complex occurrences into unified wholes that reveal something of significance [14, 15, 32, p195, 16, p324].

Whilst there has been ‘a long literary tradition of studying the art of narrative’ [27, p3], the application and analysis of narratives in human and social sciences is also extensive [2, 3, 29, 37, 47, 57], although not without critical debate [54]. Narrative analysis has been undertaken on a variety of topics: ill health, with its impact on individual identity [42, 40, 20]; sexuality in modern society [53] and management [13, 24, 25; 28]. Whilst there has been some narrative analyses in the area of information systems development (see Brown [14] on IT implementation; Brown et al. [13] on games software project team work and Wagner and Newell [64] on ERP implementation for example), little, if any, has been undertaken on HRIS work or, indeed, talent management initiatives of IS specialists.

1.2 Conceptual distinctions of narrative

We follow Polkinghorne’s suggestion that “‘Narrative’” in the singular is used to refer to the general narrative process or form, whereas “‘Narratives’” as a plural refers to the diverse individual stories, which differ in content and plot line’ [52, p188]. With regard to narrative, various conceptual distinctions have been made between different types of narrative for the analytical task. Elliott advises there are three key features of narratives: *chronological* (as temporal representations of sequences of events); *meaningfulness* and that they are inherently *social*, in that they are produced for a specific audience [27, p4].

1.2.1 Narrative orders

Carr [19] provides two ‘orders’ of narrative. First order narratives relate to the ‘stories that individuals tell about themselves and their own experiences...The special

significance of these ... is that they can be understood as in some senses constitutive of individual identities [hence ‘ontological’] [19, p12]. Second-order narratives are not necessarily individually-based but, rather, are those accounts we as researchers construct in order to present our interpretation of social, cultural and historical knowledge. Elliott gives Abbott’s [4] account of the formation of a profession as an example of a second-order narrative [27, p12]. Somers and Gibson [58 in 27, p12] prefer alternative terms ‘ontological narratives’ and ‘representational narratives’. For our study we coined the terms *personal narratives* which reflects Carr’s first order narrative definition and *contextual narratives* to denote the existing conditions of the milieu or social, cultural and historical environment in which the actors telling the narratives enact their practices.

1.2.2 Contextual narratives of talent management

With regard to *contextual narratives*, we begin our methodological story by focusing on our research on talent management. The term ‘talent management’ became common parlance at the end of the 1990s when used by McKinsey consultants in their report, ‘The War for Talent’ [8]. The profile of talent management was raised as organisations responded to increasing competition for those high performers with high potential across sectors at all levels, including graduates, individuals with a particular aptitude for leadership or the next CEO. As ‘talent’ came to be perceived as the primary source of competitive differentiation, organisations started to think about the steps they needed to take to ensure they identified, developed and retained the ‘brightest and the best’ people. Talent management practice was initially linked to recruitment then changed to encompass all HR activities but is still rather focused upon high performing individuals with senior leadership potential.

In 2007, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) provided a definition of *talent* 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 levels of potential’ [21, pxi]. Similarly, their research into the processes of *talent management* also identified a wide range of practices that tended to be organisation-specific and dependent upon the context within which talent management was taking place. But once more a definition was derived from various examples of successful practice in this and other research projects as: ‘The systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment of those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to an organisation’ [21 pxi].

In our study we examined nine organisations representing a wide range of sectors which included manufacturing, finance, hospitality, e-business, the NHS and local government to highlight different issues and challenges for talent management. Our aim was to obtain *contextual narratives* of a broad range of stakeholders to understand how they defined talent and what they were doing in managing and nurturing this talent. Over 100 face-to-face interviews were undertaken with senior executives, HR directors, HR professionals, talent management specialists, line managers and individual employees. Our research protocol was constructed from a literature review and a focus group discussion with 10 leading ‘expert’ practitioner HR directors. Interviews in organisations were supplemented with employee focus groups. At this stage we interviewed specialists from the finance and other functional groups such as sales and marketing, although they were targeted as leadership material rather than ‘pure’ functional specialists. Strangely, we were given no access to specialists from the IS discipline at any level of the case study organisations.

1.2.3 Methods for identifying/constructing contextual narratives

Data was transcribed, loaded into an NVIVO database [56] and analysed to identify narratives about organisational talent management initiatives. We used a grounded theory approach [36] to assign initial concepts and theme codes about talent management generally to all the research data. We analysed the three types of coding during the analysis. For example, 'open coding' was used to examine the data and assign codes by giving conceptual labels to the phenomena as they were discovered (e.g. 'organisational talent'). We compared the concepts being examined with those that had already been devised from the initial expert focus groups and coded whilst keeping an open mind during this process to avoid the concepts inherent in the data being obscured by any predetermined theoretical basis (such as those found in the domain of human resource management (HRM)).

We then provisionally combined the concepts into related categories to reduce the number of concepts to be handled (such as 'talent') and provide a stronger conceptual basis to the themes discovered. Next, 'axial coding' commenced where we examined each category in terms of: the conditions that cause it, the context in which it occurs, actions and interactional strategies by which it is managed or handled and the consequences which arise from the category. By examining these factors, it becomes possible to link categories and to verify the linkages by testing them against the data. This enables the researcher to ground their theory on the data. The final result of axial coding is a very rich description of the phenomenon being researched. From this we began to produce case study reports of contextual narratives for each organisation for collation in the final research document. As the research was geared to practical recommendations rather than actual theory we did not undertake the final stage of 'selective' coding, which enables the development of a grounded theory by integrating the categorized material into a theory which accounts for the phenomenon being researched. (This integration is done by selecting one of the categories as the focus of interest and making it the 'core category' or 'story line' around which the rest of the categories are organized. This creates a theoretical framework, which is validated against the data).

1.3 Displaying the findings: Template analysis

In order to make sense of the rich data from the case study research we chose template analysis to display emerging themes. The term "template analysis" refers to a particular way of thematically analysing qualitative data [see 69]. The data invariably comes from interview transcripts, but may be any kind of textual data, including diary entries, text from electronic "interviews" (e-mail), or open-ended question responses on a written questionnaire. Template analysis involves the development of a coding "template"; that is to say, broad themes (e.g. "Employer branding") encompass successively narrower, more specific ones (e.g. "employer value propositions"). Such a template has three levels but here we present an example of the coding template which summarises themes identified by the researcher(s) as representing the talent management themes overall and some of the practices. We can see that with template analysis hierarchical coding is emphasised. In column one are the *a priori* codes we constructed from the original talent management research material. In column two are the specific themes we found relating to the talent management processes in the case study organisations. This helped to provide a structure to focus the next steps of the HRIS study. The template analysis in table 1, below, shows some of the categories:

Key theme	Practices
1. Constructing talent categories	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Defining ‘talent’ as those with leadership potential only 2. Exclusive labels for talent (e.g., ‘high performers’; ‘rising stars’; ‘emerging talent’; ‘entry level talent’).
2. Acquiring talent	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ascertaining talent supply and demand inside and outside of the organization 2. Talent review panels identify talent for succession planning of two or more levels of promotion 3. Employer branding 4. Succession planning 5. Recruitment strategies, policies and practices 6. Selection strategies, policies and practices
3. Developing talent	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Leadership development only 2. Regular ‘talent reviews’ of individual development needs, plans and objectives in key workforce groups linked to a coherent succession planning process. 3. Coaching, mentoring, job rotations and international transfers frequently used as career development tools in preference to investment in formal post graduate educational programmes.
4. Managing talent	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Active inclusion of succession planning and leadership development in the talent management strategy 2. Developing clear policies and resource planning for identification, nomination, selection, engagement and retention of internal and external talent 3. Employer branding has a strong and positive image in the marketplace 4. Review panels to identify talent across the organisation 5. Performance management processes designed to provide robust evidence about individual’s high performance 6. Provision of regular feedback on performance 7. Line managers involved in all areas including coaching, mentoring and trained in giving performance assessments

Table 1: Template analysis: two out of three levels of talent management themes

1.3.1 Talent management and the IS specialist

A key finding which had not been part of the original study protocol was that in over 80% of the interviews with line managers and HR respondents there was a concern that their talent management processes did not facilitate the inclusion of specialists who

were not suitable or did not want to pursue management roles. This prompted the researchers to embark on a new study with a different organisation to those in the original study in order to explore the extent to which those working specifically in the IS domain were taken into account in talent management programmes.

We had been undertaking ethnographic research with 'Flow plc.', for over a decade in project teams developing global HRIS. Flow plc. is a leading power-systems company manufacturing in 20 countries, employing approximately 38,000 people worldwide and serving customers in 150 countries. The HRIS project leader offered to provide further funding for a study to consider talent management issues related to his project team members, who were involved in developing global HR information systems. Gathering new research material from this organisation would enable us to collect another, more specific, data set, apply it to the initial template and modify it in the light of careful consideration of each transcript. Once a final version was defined, and all transcripts coded to it, the fully completed template would then serve as the basis for our interpretations and illuminations of the data set and we could then write up the findings. However, we had a way to go yet.

2 Ethnographic work and the challenges of interpreting fieldwork in the HRIS culture

Van Maanen [63, p1] described ethnography as the coming together of fieldwork and culture, resulting in a written representation of that culture. He describes cultures as comprising the knowledge that members ('natives') of a given group are thought to more or less share. This knowledge subsequently informs, embeds, shapes and accounts for the routine and not-so-routine activities of the members of that culture [22, 11, 60]. Ethnography has long been a recognised research method for studying information systems work on topics ranging from ethnography in systems design [38] to critical ethnography studies on IS developments as an inherently political activity [9]. In particular, using an ethnographic approach to study project teams as they develop and implement their systems can enable enhanced understanding about local project routines and the complex problems that practitioners face during their daily work routines and help account for how practitioners address these problems.

2.1 A contextual narrative about Human Resource Information Systems

Over the years, to orient our research with our sponsor, Flow plc., we had constructed a *contextual* narrative about the development of HR information systems (HRIS). HRIS are increasingly being used to ensure human capital data is utilised in a strategic way to both collect relevant data and enable the sharing of common data across the enterprise in a real-time environment [12]. However, these can involve major technical and organisational challenges, for example, from business process reorganisation, and this often involves delays and budget over-runs and result in major organisational challenges [59]. One possible reason for this is that talent management for those working on international project teams is not in place, with a number of gaps being identified [68]. Firstly, the 'hybrid' knowledge and skills requirement of functional HRIS teams, typically composed of both IT personnel and representatives from the departments where the system is going to be used, are generally not acknowledged and understood. Secondly, there is often a lack of understanding of the key roles required on the project and lack of appreciation of the relational knowledge and skills required of HRIS specialists in order that the system provided meets their clients' needs [61, 30]. Thirdly,

there is little aligned appreciation of a 'supply chain' model to the attraction, development, engagement, mobility and reward of team talent.

In order for HRIS to be used effectively both now and in the future, it is clear that those designing, implementing and operating those systems need to be recognised as core staff fulfilling business/operation-critical roles who have specific talents which can enable systems for the provision of effective strategic HRM. The strategic importance of these 'niche' roles is not recognised either by HR management or within organisational talent management systems. We suggest that the reason for this is that the elements and importance of these roles are not understood and we had two key questions to explore in the next stage of our research:

1. How is the 'talent' of specialists in the HR IS domain defined in practice in comparison to generalised talent management initiatives?
2. How is HRIS talent nurtured and their careers developed?

3 Conducting the ethnography

In Flow plc., focusing upon specialist talent, we conducted 25 interviews with stakeholders from their HR and IT functions in the UK, Germany, Canada and the USA, each lasting up to two hours and tape-recorded. Ten interviews were with members of the HRIS team at the corporate headquarters and their HR and finance 'clients', the other interviews were undertaken by telephone. Those not interviewed included the IT supplier's consultants, country business managers and employees who were not part of the global HRIS programme. Extensive notes were also taken of informal discussions and telephone calls with various members of the HRIS team. All interviews were undertaken using a narrative interviewing convention with a chronological underlying form. In this study the use of narrative in examining lived experience as it happened provided a unique opportunity to see how 'continuity and change are emplotted in narrative form...where "a good-enough" narrative contains the past in terms of the present and points to a future that cannot be predicted, although it contains the elements out of which the future will be created' [39, p35].

However, given the 'alternative' interpretive nature of this study, we had to take care that appropriate methods of evaluating the research are undertaken. Here we use Bryman and Bell's [17] criteria for evaluating qualitative research as a checklist for undertaking 'alternative' interpretive research in IS:

Criteria	Evidence from the HRIS study
Authenticity	Frequency of ethnographic researchers on Flow plc's company premises meant that narrative findings were fed back to the project team on a regular basis. This raised awareness of relevant issues amongst the HRIS team, enabled reflection on their practice as a result of reading their own narratives and encouraged changes to the perception of the researchers on the situations occurring. This provides for authenticity in the narratives produced from the study.
Trustworthiness Credibility	When respondents from the HRIS team were asked to read their own narratives in the interview transcript, we requested they highlight any issues they felt they missed or did not report correctly in their account. If necessary, amendments were then made to the transcripts. Informal meetings were also held to ask team members for feedback on observations the ethnographers had made about the project team and talent management.
Trustworthiness Transferability	Rich descriptions were achieved by asking each respondent, where relevant, to use real-life examples and to describe their experiences of this in detail. Probing questions were asked. Narrative construction was undertaken by supplementing individual descriptions with observations made by the ethnographers, meeting discussion notes, notes from informal discussions and telephone calls with the HRIS team.
Trustworthiness Dependability	The ethnographer always has to be vigilant that she is not sacrificing 'truth' for dramatic effect (Denzin, 1997, p142). Electronic and written records were made throughout the research process and shared between the research team, with academic colleagues auditing the process. The records detailed how decisions were made e.g in relation to the respondent sample, interview questions and what to observe.
Trustworthiness Confirmability	A research protocol was used to ensure consistency across the interviews. Respondents were asked to comment on their transcripts and observations the research team had made and any amendments made. The ethnographic nature of the study also meant that the ethnographers were aware of any internal politics which may have influenced the researchers' objectivity.

Table 2: Alternative criteria for evaluating qualitative interpretive research (Bryman and Bell, 2003)

It has been proposed that the validity and reliability of qualitative, interpretive research can be evaluated based on two key criteria: trustworthiness and authenticity [44, 45, 17]. Authenticity refers to the wider impact the research might have and in this sense shares similarities with action research [9]. Trustworthiness consists of four elements. Bryman and Bell [17] describe the first element 'credibility' as being concerned with the feasibility of the account and the extent to which the researchers have consulted the

respondents to check that they have understood their accounts correctly (respondent validation). The second element refers to ‘transferability’ and the degree to which the rich descriptions provided by the respondents could be applied to other settings. ‘Dependability’ is the third element. This considers how the research has been conducted and whether records of the different stages have been kept (such as interview transcripts, field notes and data analysis decisions). It also relates to the extent to which this process is audited by peers. According to Bryman and Bell [17] the final element ‘confirmability’ considers whether the researchers have remained objective throughout the research process.

4 Analysing narratives from ethnography

Ethnographic narratives are highly reflexive in content and in construction. They involve self reflection and critical interpretation, with the researcher interpreting the interpretations of others. In this part of our methodological story we foreground Elliott’s highlighting of three key features of narratives: *chronological* (as temporal representations of sequences of events); *meaningfulness* and that they are inherently *social*, in that they are produced for a specific audience [24, p4].

4.1 Chronology, meaningfulness and social specificity of personal narratives from Flow plc. HRIS

Throughout this ethnography the *chronological* aspect of narrative was engaged by asking questions such as ‘Tell me about your experiences of the project from the day you became involved’ and critical incident questions such as ‘Tell me what has happened since we last talked’ [10]. To identify *meaningfulness for the individual*, these questions were linked to probing questions, particularly about each interviewee’s feelings about chosen critical incidents along the course of the project. For *social specificity* we gathered personal narratives embedded in contextual narratives reported in documentary materials such as house magazines, internal memorandum on company activities generally and global information systems developments specifically.

Contextual narrative analysis was still being undertaken during this. All tape transcripts, a number of contact and document summary sheets [46] and research journal notes were input into a qualitative software analysis database (NVIVO8), where they were coded for *narrative themes* to add to the template analysis at levels one, two and three. Next, emerging narratives across ontological groups over the history of the project were identified and then analyzed to identify key themes in relation to talent management issues perceived by individuals to be important, including concerns about career development.

In the next section we provide a contextual narrative analysis of HRIS within the organisation and then an example of a personal narrative analysis from one of the participants on the project. In constructing each personal narrative we drew upon Labov and Waletzky’s [43] temporal framework with its six separate elements for analysing individual or personal narratives in order to provide a clearer frame for the analysis of first order narratives of the HRIS team members in our study:

A: the abstract (a summary of the subject of the narrative);

O: the orientation (time, place, situation, participants);

Ca: the complicating action (what actually happened);

E: the evaluation (the meaning and significance of the action);

R: the resolution (what finally happened); and lastly

C: the coda, which returns the perspective to the present

4.2 Contextual narrative of Flow plc's talent management

With regard to talent management generally in Flow plc., management and leadership development teams had constructed a contextual narrative about managing talent. In the first instance they were *implementing rigorously designed talent management strategies*. Whereas talent management had previously consisted of separate HR activities to engage and nurture talent, their strategy was now about *using all three recruitment, performance management or leadership development to get the best results*. The narrative continued that *the growth of talent management from all of these initiatives is also driven through solid executive board support and an awareness of how closely talent management initiatives need to be linked to the goals of the organisation*. However, one jarring aspect of this contextual narrative is that *talent is only taken to be those who have potential to progress to senior executive level*, with specialists such as scientific, engineering, IS or HR specialists not considered for talent pools.

4.2.1 HRIS implementation in Flow plc.

Flow plc. found itself in the invidious position of operating many legacy systems across functions, with 1600 for HR alone. It was decided to implement an enterprise resource planning system which would reduce wasteful repetition and align data management across functions. The HR component of the system had a number of different elements: personnel administration; organisation management; reward; time management; payroll; resourcing; travel and expenses; training and events management; global mobility; occupational health and reporting and personal development. Stakeholders involved in the project included: business managers, HR clients as system users, IS project managers, IS designers, HR IS developers and maintainers and several external to the organisation, such as consultants.

Flow plc. experienced a number of challenges in competitive international and local labour markets in attracting and identifying talent with key skills or with high professional, technical and/or leadership potential. Their recruitment processes encompassed external candidates and internal recruitment through intra-, inter- and cross-functional moves, secondments and rotations. Many see talent management programmes as capitalising on internal talent. And so it was the case here that it was decided that HRIS team recruitment would be from within Flow plc. and the project team leader used his network to identify 'suitable people' so there were names against various jobs.

The Flow plc HRIS development team responding to client needs had grown organically over the last 10 years, rather than being designed and developed strategically. This growth had been driven both by embracing and expanding SAP HR technology and functionality in the UK and the addition of different parts of the business operating in different countries (USA, Canada and Germany). This meant there were eight members on the UK central HR IS team and six in HRIS teams in other geographies. Among the recruits was Phil.

4.3 Personal narrative analysis: A Flow plc HRIS project team member

Phil had been with the company in roles other than HRIS for 37 years, such as working with the organisation's financial systems, in HR, as a systems analyst and being responsible for the finance component of ERP. Although there were formal company recruitment practices, staff on IS projects tended to be recruited by word-of-mouth. And so it was that Phil was informally recruited to his present role to act as a trouble-shooter for the HRIS team since the team were experiencing problems integrating data from the German business unit. Here is an extract from his personal narrative which explores his recruitment to the HRIS project team, analysed according to Labov and Waletzky's [43] temporal framework.

Element	Evidence
A	When my last ERP project finished in 2003 I started to look to the future.
O	My boss said basically, you are on maintenance; we've got nothing on the horizon in finance. And they knew I liked challenges. So in the development reviews we discussed it. And I knew they were having problems with integration issues in Germany. John [HRIS project team manager], who I'd known from when he first came in the company, I was talking to him about it.
Ca	And then John rang me and asked me if I wanted a job with him. There aren't many people like me who come from finance to HR and vice versa. Apparently he was told through the development review process that I was looking for project work. He just said I guess I'm just going to give you a lot of rubbish to do really, all the difficult things, and I said that's fine with me. It was all to do with audits and a whole host of jobs including the trouble with the Germans and integrating their financial operating costs. He wanted me to be the Germany account manager, if you like.
E	It would be a feather in my cap so that's exactly why I went. I calmed the team down, and any time they had a problem I could deal with that straight away. John was a bit fearful but I'm the only one who understands how it all fits together. I spent a good few years in HR and finance.
R	And sure enough, John stopped getting the aggro from the team.
C	But we'll just have to see how it goes now though because I'm getting on a bit, and I'm only good for a few more years. I'm 59 in January. I'm looking perhaps at another 3 years, but that's it.
Key:	A = abstract; O = orientation; Ca = Complicating action; E = evaluation; R = resolution; C = coda

Table 3: Personal narrative analysis

We see here how Phil's narrative is *chronological*, in that it takes us across the time scale of the recruitment process and beyond. Distinctive to Phil's personal narrative was his *meaningful* way of presenting his joining the project as a tale of his rescuing a

difficult situation through his personal attributes and his extensive knowledge and experience. Finally, although there were company policies for formalised recruitment practices, we found time and again that Phil’s story of being recruited through a process of serendipity was a common one and he would have spoken to the condition of many others in IS teams as his narrative had *social* meaning.

Collating the various narratives of the interviewees on the project we were able to add to the elements at third level of the template analysis (we show only two rows as an example):

Key theme	Practices	IS talent
1. Constructing talent categories	Defining ‘talent’ as those with leadership potential only Exclusive labels for talent (e.g., ‘high performers’; ‘rising stars’; ‘emerging talent’; ‘entry level talent’).	No shared organisational definition of, or special ‘labels’ for ‘specialist’ (non-managerial) talent No recognition that talent exists at team level as well as individual level
2. Acquiring talent	1. Ascertaining talent supply and demand inside and outside of the organization 2. Talent review panels identify talent for succession planning of two or more levels of promotion 3. Employer branding 4. Succession planning 5. Recruitment strategies, policies and practices 6. Selection strategies, policies and practices	1. & 2. Reactive human resource planning for specialist talent 2. No clear perspective available across the organisation. 3. Employer brand shows no IS staff ‘employment promises’ 4. No formal succession planning for HRIS jobs

Table 4: Level three completion of template analysis

5 Discussion

Researchers adopt narrative analysis for a number of reasons: an interest in people’s lived experiences and an appreciation of the temporal nature of that experience; a desire to empower research participants and allow them to contribute to determining what are the most salient themes in an area of research; an interest in process and change over time; an interest in the self and representations of the self and an awareness that the researcher him- or herself is also a narrator [24, p6]. Personal narratives are important because 'a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor ... in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual's biography...must continually integrate events which occur in the external world and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self' [35, p54].

Narratives (understandings, meanings and stories) of organisational practice, then, are constructed and negotiated by researchers and the subjects of their studies through dialogic and reflexive processes relating practice, context, language, discourse and interaction. These narratives are: ongoing and open-ended; mediated through processes of interpretation, reflection and theorising and occurring in a dialogue with self and between self and others. In telling the ongoing story about self, individuals are interpreting and reflecting upon their 'real life' experiences as they engage with different forms of empirical material and draw upon concepts and theories in order to bring about new and critical understandings of organisational work .

5.1 Interpretation of narratives

Taking an interpretive ethnographic stance as we have shown here produces distinctive and problematic challenges for those trying to understand the 'lived experience of others' and raises concerns for the subjects, the producers and the consumers of ethnography [63]. Denzin [26] describes a triple crisis of representation, legitimation and praxis, with legitimation a key element requiring some rethinking in relation to the terms validity, generalizability and reliability (with 'truth' and verisimilitude problematic concepts here).

With regard to making truth claims, we take the position of pragmatists in our analytical presentation of contextual and personal narratives. Watson [67] helps us delineate three ways of understanding theories of truth. A *correspondence* theory of truth involves judging an item of knowledge in terms of how accurately it paints a picture or gives a report of what actually happened. A *coherence/plausibility* theory of truth involves an item of knowledge being judged in terms of how well it 'fits in with' everything else we have learned about this matter previously. A *pragmatist* theory of truth involves judging knowledge in terms of how effectively one would fulfil whatever projects one was pursuing in the area of activity covered by the knowledge, if we based our actions on the understanding of those activities which it offers.

By taking a pragmatist approach to the utilisation of contextual narrative analysis of the literature, we were able to develop a typology of talent management narratives to map against the first level narratives of HRIS specialist talent management on this project. By using template analysis for the *context narratives* from case studies of talent management generally and Labov and Waletzky's [43] framework to analyse a *personal narrative* from an ethnography of an HRIS project from HRIS specialists in particular, we have attempted to show how an examination may be undertaken of the critical incidents related to management of their talents.

6 Conclusions

Previous research on talent management has argued that a clear position needs to be taken on how the talents of all employees might be optimised, not just those who are chosen for the 'future leadership' talent pool [21, p5]. In the methodological story in this paper we reflexively considered our utilisation of narrative methods of research collection and analysis in two research projects on talent management undertaken between 2007 and 2009. The first consisted of case study research with nine organisations undertaking talent management. By using 'template analysis' [69] to identify a typology of narratives in the talent management *context*, we identified how systems designed in this way tended to focus only on those who were regarded as having leadership potential and neglected specialist talent.

We then took these findings to another research project we were involved in, an ethnography which was focused on the talent management of project teams working on a global, enterprise-wide IS designed for use by HR and management. Here we used analytical tools of contextual and personal narratives to demonstrate how findings can emerge from interpretive research material.

The investigation highlighted the contextual challenges of attracting and nurturing specialist talent for global project teams working on an enterprise-wide system operating beyond the usual functional HR department boundaries targeted at enabling significant innovation of HR business processes in the networked organisation. In order to test out our emerging propositions about specialist talent highlighted in the talent management template analysis, we used Labor and Waletzky's [43] hierarchical framework to analyse *personal narratives* derived from that ethnography. This illuminated how such an individual, through his narrative, discursively made sense of his career transition as it emerged over time and in different geographical spaces

Through such insights, the narrative analyst can construct a rich, complex, multifaceted and aligned picture from the voices of situated individuals. As Giddens [35] would have it, in the post-traditional order of modernity, against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour. The 'reflexive project of the self which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narrative, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems' [35, p5]. Highlighting the serendipitous nature of interpretive and ethnographic research shows that such 'alternative' methods of analysis have great value for the organisational analyst examining the IS domain.

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