

On doing knowledge work and being a knowledge worker: A discursive analysis of the accounts of HR professionals

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Abstract

There is an increasing 'prefixation' with knowledge within the relevant literature that reinforces its importance to organizational success. In this paper we respond to recent calls to adopt a more sceptical view of knowledge and focus on unpacking the way in which notions of knowledge and knowledge work are constructed and the resources employed in such constructions. Specifically we employ a discursive approach to explore the accounts of three participants involved in a HR project within a company in the UK financial services sector to examine how they accomplish such representations of knowledge and knowledge work. We believe this research is an important first step in building a broader research agenda within the field, which too often seeks to find knowledge rather than examine its construction.

Keywords: knowledge work, discourse analysis, human resource management

Suggested track: The nature of knowledge work and knowledge workers

1. Introduction

Drawing on the resource-based view of the firm there has been an increasing interest in 'knowledge' amongst both academics and practitioners (Barney, 1986). Although knowledge as a concept remains "much talked but little understood" (Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001, p973) it is frequently used as a prefix to distinguish groups of workers and work. More recently however, concern has been expressed about the assumed importance of knowledge, resulting in calls to adopt a more sceptical approach (e.g. Hull, 1999). In Section 2 below we review the academic literature regarding knowledge and knowledge work(ers) and position our own research in relation to such calls for scepticism. We also review the literature relating to HR professionals more broadly, suggesting that they are a particularly interesting group to examine from the perspective of knowledge work. Since we adopt a discursive approach to explore the construction of knowledge and knowledge work, some background regarding discourse and the relationship to knowledge is also provided in Section 2. Further detail regarding the study itself, approach to data collection and analysis are provided in Section 3.

Our research was carried out in a company in the UK financial services sector and the analytical focus of this paper is on accounts of knowledge and knowledge work that emerged within a HR project being developed for a specific area of business within the organization. The findings of our research are presented in Section 4 in three sub-sections: participants' initial positions; examination of individual accounts; and analysis across accounts. Further discussion of the findings is presented in Section 5.

2. Theoretical Background

In this section we summarise key areas of the existing theoretical and empirical literature that relate to our study. The three areas addressed are knowledge and knowledge work, human resource professionals and discourse.

2.1 Knowledge and Knowledge Work

Knowledge

There has been considerable emphasis on understanding the nature of and defining knowledge itself within the theoretical literature (Davenport & Hall, 2002). Largely drawing on Polanyi's (1962, 1966) notions of the tacit and explicit dimensions of knowledge, many classifications or typologies have been suggested to distinguish between various knowledge types (e.g. Birkenshaw et al., 2002; Lam, 2000; Lowendahl et al., 2001; e.g. Stenmark, 2000; Thomas et al., 2001). Such definitions are often approached through a strategy of divide and conquer resulting in what Alvesson (2004, p44) terms "the curse of the four-fielder". It is not our objective to review such classifications in detail (see for example Davenport & Hall, 2002 for a review of this area) but to highlight that, as Tsoukas and Vladimirou suggest, "knowledge is much talked but little understood" (2001, p973).

However, despite conceptual difficulties, ideas relating to different forms of knowledge have been adopted by those who examine knowledge processes within organizations, especially when placed under the broad heading of 'knowledge management'. The emphasis here is on the organizational processes necessary to leverage different types of individual and collective knowledge for organizational competitive advantage. Nonaka and Takeuchi's model of a "knowledge spiral" in which "new knowledge is...created [by]... continual cycling from ...tacit to explicit...explicit to tacit" (1995, p70) is an influential example of how such processes are envisaged. The need to maximise these processes is often particularly presented as a concern to managers who are responsible for 'knowledge work' or 'knowledge workers' or those within 'knowledge intensive firms'. There has indeed been an increasing 'prefixation' with knowledge, which is discussed further in the section on knowledge work and knowledge workers below.

In contrast authors adopting a social constructionist perspective have embraced the ambiguity of knowledge. Rather than seeking to understand knowledge through a process of conceptual isolation and abstraction, research aims to “seek richer explanations by looking at the context and looking at knowledge via practice” (Brown & Duguid, 2001, p200). Attention is drawn to both “the social nature of knowledge construction” and the “socially constructed nature of knowledge itself” (Alvesson & Karreman, 2001, p999). Building on ideas emerging from the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on communities of practice in particular, there has been a rise in both theoretical and empirical work that examines the social and situated nature of knowledge and knowing in practice (e.g. Cook & Yanow, 1993; e.g. Orr, 1996; Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001; Wenger, 1998). However the focus on practice in such studies has tended to ignore the importance of discourse as a means through which ideas about knowledge and knowing come to be constructed within the work place. In particular there has been a focus on examining the practice of highly skilled manual or craftwork and on product development teams, who, it could be argued, are producing tangible outputs. As Bechky, suggests there is a need to broaden the empirical base to consider “non-technical occupations” (2003, p328) and we would argue that considering language in such studies becomes even more important in developing our understanding of how knowledge and knowing may be “continuously in the making” (Hassard & Keleman, 2002, p332). Providing this perspective is a key objective of our paper.

Knowledge Work and Knowledge Workers

As highlighted above, knowledge has become a popular prefix to distinguish a particular type of work or group of workers. It is unsurprising, given the ambiguity of the concept of knowledge itself, that defining knowledge work and knowledge workers has also proved problematic. After all, as Swart and Kinnie remark, “all types of work and work organizations appear to involve knowledge” (2003, p61). Typically, definitions stress the non-routine, problem solving, intangible and creative aspects of the work, which is as a result frequently difficult to evaluate, and the autonomy and education levels of those who perform it (see for example Elkjaer, 2000). Identifying “knowledge workers” as a distinct and recognisable group has also required a differentiation from the historically significant category of “professionals” - itself a contested term (May et al., 2002; Nelson & Barley, 1997) - although definitions of the two groups share considerable common ground.

However, there is concern about the importance of ‘knowledge’ in this context (see for example the Special Issues of the Journal of Management Studies in 1993 (30:6) and 2001 (38:7)). Attention is drawn to the need to be “sceptical that knowledge is an important entity of some sort” (Hull, 1999, p 417). Further research is required that explores the constructed and

contested nature of knowledge work, reflected in Alvesson's (2004, p14) call to "look clearly at the claims of KIF's and professionals about knowledge, its use and its outcomes". Our research is a direct response to these concerns, as by adopting a discursive approach to the investigation of accounts of work by HR professionals we aim to highlight the construction of accounts of knowledge work, positions adopted by individuals as knowledge workers in relation to these accounts and the means used to establish credibility of both their work and their role.

2.2 Human Resource Professionals

In light of the debate about the categorisation of knowledge workers as different from professionals mentioned above, HR professionals¹ may seem a perplexing choice for our study. However we would suggest that HR professionals are a particularly interesting group to examine from the perspective of knowledge work. Their work is often problematic as they attempt to negotiate tensions between employee and organizational interests (Truss et al., 2002; Watson, 1977). This is compounded by the ambiguous nature of HR techniques, unclear boundaries between line management and specialist HR functions and the dual pull of professional and organizational allegiances and influence (Legge, 1995). Specifically, HR professionals may need to distinguish themselves as having particular knowledge to contribute that is of significance to the effective functioning of the organization and the well-being of its employees (Francis & D'Annunzio-Green, 2003; Watson, 2004).

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In terms of academic interest, there has been significantly less devoted to HR professionals themselves than to the definition of the overall system – Human Resource Management (HRM) – within which they are assumed to operate. Lado and Wilson (1994, p699) define HRM as "a set of distinct but interrelated activities, functions and processes that are directed at attracting, developing and maintaining (or disposing of) a firms human resources". The role of the HR professional in relation to these activities is highly variable and is frequently captured in (yet more "four-fielder") typologies (e.g. Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 1997). It is interesting to note, in relation to our research endeavour and the literature on knowledge workers discussed above, that many such typologies – and indeed research that questions such representations (e.g. Caldwell, 2001) – are based on research that accepts at face value HR professionals' own descriptions of their work and knowledge.

Beyond the role-typology literature, detailed examinations of the work of HR professionals are relatively scarce. Watson's (1977) study remains one of the most comprehensive, drawing on interviews, participant observation and documentary evidence. In addition to the characterization presented above, Watson highlighted the ambiguous nature of HR work and

¹ Within this section the terms HR professional and personnel manager are used interchangeably.

suggested that within this “the claim of competence” is highly significant. Although Watson’s book is now 27 years old (and therefore predates HRM) he has recently suggested that the “issues facing personnel specialists haven’t changed” (Watson & Watson, 1999) while other general studies of the work of HR professionals have reflected the key themes of Watson’s study (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1995; Legge, 1995).

2.3 Discourse

In recent years, there has been growing attention to discourse within the social sciences generally: it “has become interesting per se rather than being taken for granted as a direct access route to the real psychological business” (Wetherell et al., 2001, p10). The term discourse itself is ill defined, being used to refer to many forms of language and language-use (including text and talk) but also to denote “a group of statements that provides a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge about that topic” (Du Gay et al., 1996, p 265). The relationship between such Discourses and the local production of discourse is complex and multifaceted.

There is of course a longstanding discussion regarding the relationship between knowledge and discourse, most particularly in relation to the writings of Foucault (1974, 1980) and Lyotard (1984) who further position knowledge as embedded within power relations. However, despite this debate, we know little about the relationship between knowledge, language and practice within an organizational context (Thomas, 2003). In particular, although social interaction and communication processes are clearly central to the ideas encapsulated in the social and situated nature of knowledge and knowing, there has been little research that explores this from a discourse perspective. We suggest that temporarily “displacing knowledge as the object of study” (Garrick, 1988, p32) is an important move if we are to extend our understanding.

In this section we have reviewed three broad areas of literature and highlighted how these have informed the research undertaken. We now move on to describe our research questions and approach in more detail.

3. Research Approach

In this section we set out the background to this research together with an overview of our methodology. As set out above, our interest is in the constructed nature of knowledge and knowledge work in the context of the work of HR professionals. Within this broad area of interest, our research questions are:

- How are accounts of knowledge work constructed by those involved?
- How do individuals position themselves in relation to their descriptions of this work?

- What means are used to establish credibility of a) the work and b) the individuals' role in relation to the work?

3.1 Background to this study

Agreements reached during access negotiations and consideration of the ethical rights of participants limit the amount of background information that can be provided. However, a brief overview of the company and general research context is provided below. This is followed by a consideration of the emergent nature of the research relationship.

Research context

The research was carried out within a company in the UK financial services sector. It forms part of a broader research project investigating the ways in which knowledge is constructed in the work of Human Resources (HR) professionals being carried out as part of the first author's PhD studies.

The analytical focus of this paper is on accounts of knowledge and knowledge work that emerged within a HR project being developed for a specific area of business within the organization. This project involved a review of the business's current HR issues and planning to address areas of concern for the year ahead. This covered a number of well-known HR topics including management development, diversity, communications and succession planning. Various committees were established to oversee the project and review the outputs at key stages and the work was spread across a number of different individuals within the business and various teams within the HR department.

The HR project was initiated in response to a major restructuring of the business although similar projects had previously existed. It also came at a time of change for the HR department, who had recently reorganised along process and functional lines broadly along the general principles of 'matrix management'. A new workflow management computer system was also introduced which, in principle, meant all the work undertaken by the HR department is logged and tracked.

The participants in this research were identified through a tracer study (see below). The extracts analysed in this paper relate to three individuals who (by their own and others' accounts and according to the workflow management system reports) were key players in the management development and diversity aspects of the HR project. To preserve anonymity the three participants are identified as SP, TP and BP. TP is a member of the HR team with responsibility for implementing management development and training within the company, a remit that also covers diversity training. At the time of the interview, TP was working full-time on the HR project. SP is identified as a 'specialist' in the HR function, with a particular remit for

diversity and some related aspects of management development. SP has a complicated reporting line that includes links into TP's team and other specialists. While TP and SP are members of the HR department, BP is a member of the business department for which the project is being developed and has a role that is broadly in the area of management development (including training and mentoring for example). BP was also working full time on the HR project at the time of the interview.

Research Relationships

The first author has been involved in this HR project for some months and in addition to the interviews that are used in this paper has attended meetings and been party to many informal discussions with the participants, both in relation to the tracer study and the broader scope of research being undertaken within this HR department. This is inevitably drawn on both explicitly and implicitly in our analysis.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the role of relationship between participant and researcher in the interview process itself (Symon, in press). Such a relationship is never fixed or certain. Within the interview process, both participant and researcher may adopt various positions that reflect assumptions about roles of and relationships with the other. In this case, from the researcher's perspective such positioning involved both creating association with the participants (for example HR background, familiarity with the organization) and identifying differences (for example between academics and practitioners). This is particularly relevant given the discursive focus of our analysis and attention is drawn to this in our presentation of findings.

3.2 Approach to data collection and analysis

The research findings presented here emerged from a discursive analysis of three interviews that took place within the broad framework of a tracer study conducted in late 2004. The ways in which the tracer study and discourse analysis were applied in our research endeavour are described below.

Data Collection

Our approach to data collection is based on the concept of a tracer study (see Hornby & Symon, 1994 for a review). In a tracer study a specific organizational process is identified and followed via the use of "tags" which provide the basis for identifying participants and their involvement. Potential "tags" typically include reports, meeting minutes or, as in this case, automated records (Symon et al., 1996). Tracer studies may be either concurrent or retrospective and can employ a variety of techniques for collecting data about the process from the participants identified, although interviews are the most common. In this respect a tracer

study can generally be viewed as a methodological framework that provides a means of focusing the research effort and providing a basis for selecting research participants.

Our tracer study involved following a number of different HR processes and projects that involved many different aspects of HR work and areas of the function. In this paper we report findings from the 'tracing' of one specific HR project (described above). The tag employed was the automated record² contained within the workflow management system that essentially provided a diary-like record of the activities undertaken and the participants involved. From this, participants could be identified as either those who had made an entry on the system reporting their activity or were identified by these entries as participating in some way.

The first step in our study was to review this record with the person identified on the system as the 'owner' of this HR project. The purpose of this review was to gain background information about the project (as the actual entries contain many short-hand abbreviations and acronyms) and to review the list of individuals referenced on the system. As a result of this review, participants were identified and then invited to take part in the study.

As highlighted above tracer studies are usually categorised as retrospective or concurrent. We have incorporated both approaches within our study. As the HR project had been underway for a few months when our research began, we first conducted semi-structured interviews with participants regarding the process and their involvement to date. These interviews were recorded and transcribed using a simplified version of the Jefferson notation provided in Appendix A (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984).

At the same time the first author was invited to 'trace' the on-going project through attending meetings, reviewing project documentation and conducting repeat interviews with participants. As this phase of research is still on going, the data presented here relates to the initial phase of retrospective interviews. Specifically we focus on the accounts of three participants who were identified as being heavily involved in this phase of the project (see above for further details).

We found the tracer study approach to be particularly useful in the context of the broader programme of research being undertaken by the first author within this organization. The concept of a tag and the process of tracing provided a tangible and focused way of positioning our research with those involved. By providing a means to focus on organizational processes in situ, the tracer study approach also seems particularly well suited to empirical studies investigating 'knowledge' from a variety of perspectives.

² For reasons of confidentiality we are unable to provide specific details or a copy of this record.

Data analysis

Selection of a discursive approach to analysis reflects our interest in the way in which knowledge work is constructed within participants' accounts.

Our data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews that were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Thus our analysis focuses on this particular representation of discourse (as opposed to, for example, other forms of recorded interaction or documents written by the participants themselves). This is not to say that such data is any less 'valid' than other forms, but that the particular circumstances of its production are important – as indeed they would be in the other examples identified above.

Discourse analysis is an umbrella term that can and is used to refer to an enormous range of analytical approaches. Keenoy et al. suggest that in general such approaches can be viewed both as “methodological device[s] for making linguistic sense of organizations and organizational phenomenon” and “as a means of revealing the ambiguities of social construction and the indeterminacy of organizational experiences” (1997, p148).

Within our broader research project we are drawing primarily on the ideas of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992, 2003) and elements of this approach have been employed in the analysis presented in this paper. CDA enables consideration of both “how people use language” and “how language uses people” (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p1126). Furthermore it offers a ‘middle road’ in terms of analytical focus by suggesting a framework for analysis that guides attention to, and between, both what is happening on a micro-level within the text and how this in turn relates to broader Discourses. In particular CDA allows the researcher to consider different “layers of analysis” (Willig, 1999, p2) and encourages movement between these as an essential part of the analytic process. The three layers Fairclough (1992) identifies are: text (how it is constructed), discursive practice (the relationship between local context and text construction), and social practice (the relationship with broader ‘Discourses’). In our analysis we have focused primarily on text and discursive practice, with some reference to the relationship to social practice. We also recognize that our analysis and conclusions as presented in this paper fall some way short of the broader critical agenda to which CDA seeks to contribute. As outlined above, our research endeavour is on going and this is an aspect that we intend to develop further in the future.

As the term ‘framework’ suggests however, there is not a detailed guide for “how to” perform CDA. The approach adopted in our analysis was based on a thorough research of the theoretical and empirical CDA literature. The first step involved repeated close reading of the individual interview transcripts. During this reading, analytical notes were made relating to the

topics and discursive features of the text. These initial notes were also reviewed while listening again to the actual recordings of the interviews. Next we looked across the analytical notes for each participant to compare and contrast our emerging understandings. At this stage we began to develop analytical themes related to our research questions. These themes were then developed in an iterative manner which involved going back and forth to the data contained in the transcripts, analytic notes and research questions to refine and develop our ideas.

4. Findings

The findings of our research are presented here in three sub-sections: participants initial positions, examination of individual accounts and looking across these accounts. Some extracts have been edited to preserve anonymity of both the company and the participants themselves. In these cases replacement words or phrases have been inserted in capital letters. Where it is necessary to provide an explanation for a specific term this is included in double brackets - ((explanation)) - within the extract. Particular phrases that are mentioned in the subsequent analysis are highlighted in italics in the extract itself. Appendix A provides an explanation of the transcription notation used.

Given the limitations of word count and the volume of data available from these interviews (the transcripts total 39 typed pages) we have only been able to present a small sample of our analysis. We have selected extracts that most closely relate to our research questions and in particular illustrate the range of discursive resources employed and positions adopted. By presenting the majority of our analysis by individual account we have sought to retain a sense of the flow of discussion within each interview. We have also added further detail on the context of these discussions where this will aid the reader in interpreting our findings for themselves.

It is not our intention to suggest that one account (or indeed our interpretation of any aspect of one account) presents a 'true' picture of the 'reality' of the HR project that is the subject of these discussions. Rather we are interested in how participants construct their accounts, the positions they adopt in relationship to it and the means used to establish credibility of both the work and themselves.

4.1 Participant's initial positions

By way of introduction to the analysis that follows in 4.2, we first discuss the initial positioning of the three participants in the interviews as they set out the area of work to be discussed and their relationship to it. We suggest that the opening exchange in an interview is particularly

important to consider, as there is a great deal of work being undertaken (by both participants and indeed the researcher) to create a 'good' first impression.

TP's initial position

As explained earlier, TP is a member of an HR team with primary responsibility for implementing management development and training projects (referred to throughout as training and development) and has been working full-time on the HR project.

Extract 1

TP: She is the senior HR GENERALIST³ for this business and *she brought me in as a specialist* in TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT to support her on the HR PROJECT

A1⁴: (.) right

TP: *So she sits on HR PROJECT from the business part of the perspective, I sit on it from the TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT perspective=*

A1: right=so before this you and HR TITLE had some sort of discussion?

TP: Yes. And we agreed that we would (.) *we would um run this together* (.)

In this extract TP uses hierarchical relationships (through invoking a relationship with a senior other in HR) to establish personal credibility for involvement in this work as a "specialist" with specific responsibilities. It is worth noting that TP is, according to the organizational hierarchy, a relatively junior member of the team. TP then moves to create a position of parity with this senior other in the closing stages of this extract in stating, "we would um run this together". The term "specialist" has specific connotations within this HR department, as it is the official title of a small group of experts of which TP is not part. By using the term to describe the role, TP can further bolster credibility as an expert.

SP's initial position

Extract 2 is the opening discussion from the interview with SP who works as one of the aforementioned specialists in HR:

Extract 2

Basically, how I came to be involved with this, TP was, obviously TP was doing a piece of work and kind of *mentioned it in passing and I said the usual thing you know, anything I can help with* and TP went well actually yes there probably is and I guess my, this links back primarily to my job in two ways, one from the SPECIALIST HR ROLE obvious SPECIALIST HR ROLE point of view.... and *the fact that you know as an organisation we're increasingly looking at this kind of thing....but obviously because of my role, I*

³ This individual is also mentioned in BP's initial position, extract 3. At the time these research interviews took place this individual was absent from the organization for over a month due to serious health problems. An interview was conducted in early 2005, but there was insufficient time to incorporate the data into this paper. This individual is also involved in the ongoing or concurrent aspect of the tracer study.

⁴ A1 = first author of this paper.

oversee all the SPECIALIST HR WORK and *I said to you know TP, there's probably like quite a lot of information I may have already got access to, or can get access to all this kind of stuff.* But also I suppose, it's because in my you know general day to day job on SPECIALIST HR ROLE I get to hear what's happening internally, externally with our competitors, you know things the Government may be saying or doing or things like that. *So it's kind of, I think TP was trying to tap into my knowledge base so I could help TP, you know really give TP a bit of guidance and say perhaps how TP should, sit there and TP should focus on and things like that.*

Here SP uses direct reported speech, bringing TP into the text, to present a casual conversation that is constructed as both "usual" and "obvious" in terms of SP being the expert in this area. This is backed up by a series of links that tie SP into this specialist area via references to his role, the organization and indeed the government. Finally these linkages are brought together in terms of the representation of SP's "knowledge base". Overall this account contains a lot of hedges (e.g. *it's kind of, I suppose, a bit of, perhaps how*) that may reflect an attempt to balance the construction of personal expertise while not undermining others.

BP's initial position

Extract 3 is taken from the interview with BP, who has an HR background but now works within the business unit for which the HR project is being developed.

Extract 3

we ^had this PREVIOUS HR PROJECT, and *I think it really started from there*, in that we had a sort of agenda and an action plan throughout the year. But this was just very much business specific, and *I ran that in conjunction with NAME, my manager.* Um And then I would say round about, ^well maybe June, July this year there was the BUSINESS RESTRUCTURING and then *we, I suppose ^rejuvenated* the HR PROJECT and that's really why TP um and HR GENERALIST particularly got involved in this new expanded HR PROJECT. And so *I think to an extent we followed the same model* as we did for the previous one.

Here BP gives some history to the HR project, making specific links between the present work and the past ("really started from there", "we followed the same model"). By taking ownership of the past work BP can create a position of influence in the current HR project without having to make a direct claim. The use of "we", particularly in the opening section of the extract, makes this construction less obvious and less likely to be challenged. As TP does in Extract 1, here BP establishes a level of responsibility by mentioning they "ran it in conjunction with" someone in a higher hierarchical position. When TP is introduced (alongside the HR

generalist) the increase in scale of the new project is mentioned. This positions the increase in size as the rationale to bring HR resources onto the project, avoiding any suggestion that BP was not in some way capable of managing the content of the project. Indeed BP's earlier point that it "was just very business specific" provides a reason for HR's lack of involvement at that stage. This could also be seen to indirectly suggest that BP was able to deliver this particular kind of plan that is somewhat different from a typical HR project and therefore acts to support a claim to knowledge.

Initial positions: summary and comments

The primary work in these extracts is in establishing a credible position for the participant. This may be particularly important in this specific interview situation, as an external researcher may not be perceived to have the necessary background (such as detailed knowledge of the organization, familiarity with the individual and their work) which might enable this to be taken for granted. Furthermore, as is common in research interviews, the first author provided personal and research background in advance of these discussions. This, along with a discussion of ethical rights, was recapped at the outset of the interview. The stage was set for participants to respond in a similar manner.

One of the main tactics used here is to establish linkages: participants' roles are compared and contrasted with others in respect to hierarchical position and/or role and present work is compared to past work to suggest continuity of responsibility. This is particularly apparent in TP and BP's accounts. Furthermore there are both direct and indirect references to some form of personal knowledge in these accounts. This is done indirectly in TP's self-identification as a specialist, directly in SP's development of having information and a knowledge base and indirectly by BP's references to the HR project as "very business specific".

In the more detailed examination of the individual accounts that follows we further discuss the ways in which these positions vary as they discuss the work involved in this particular HR project. We also highlight how individuals dealt with challenges to the constructions presented in these initial positions.

4.2 Examination of individual accounts

In this section we present further extracts from the interviews with TP, SP and BP in which they described the process and their involvement in the HR project to date.

TP's account

Having outlined the broad scope of the HR project, in the extract below TP describes the development of a plan for the management development and diversity aspects of the project.

Extract 4

for HR topic area I spoke to *SP* who is sort of who focuses on this, so I talked to him as a subject matter expert um.....so as well as doing internet research I spoke to subject matter experts in these...so a whole host of=*I had to go to a whole host of different places and talk to various people to get a background* (.) %knowledge%=to get ^my understanding of it, also the leads ((business managers given responsibility the HR project)) to get their understanding up as well.

There is significant emphasis here on “I” and considerable work undertaken to suggest a personal responsibility for a large piece of work. There is an initial vague construction of SP before their acknowledgment as a “subject matter expert” (a term which, in the language of the HR department’s organizational hierarchy, is used interchangeably with “specialist” to denote membership of a particular team). This acknowledgement may be problematic for TP who in the opening statement applied the term “specialist” to herself. By referencing other aspects of the research process and the scale of this (“a whole host”) TP is able to reclaim ownership of the work being undertaken. We see the first reference to knowledge in TP’s account, which is spoken quietly here and positioned impersonally (“a background knowledge” as opposed to “my understanding”). The introduction of the business “leads” here provides a useful reminder of a less knowledgeable other and provides a rationale for the work.

Extract 5

^They thought work life balance was about flexible working, so before we could even get to the action plan, I mean I met with them the most actually, I—we had to take a step back and I had to do this, *I wrote this article on work life balance and what it actually means in the broader sense of work life balance*, and until ^they understood that we couldn’t move forward with the plan, so that was a challenge in terms of bringing them up to speed in terms of what work life balance ^actually means, broader than flexible working. Um *But I was actually really pleased with the article*, it’s quite a good article that we can use more broadly, but *again that was researched of the internet, also knowledge of, SP the subject matter expert here.....there was statistical information in there, all sorts of things, there was the business case, all sorts of things, it was research I’d done on the internet.... I knew that it was broader than flexible working but I didn’t have the data to back me up. So it helped me to have the data but it also helped them understand.*

In this extract TP further expands on the issues surrounding the business managers. Interestingly there is little description of “work life balance” rather it is positioned against what it is not. Again perceptions of the interviewer may influence this construction: if A1 is familiar with the area TP could risk insulting A1 by offering a definition; alternatively TP may fear losing

credibility by expanding on this if A1 is an expert in the area. SP is mentioned again here with the idea that his knowledge has been incorporated into an article in a manner that allows TP to leverage his credibility. However, TP retains a sense of ownership by also referencing her own research on the Internet. This and other features of the article provide the evidence that allows TP to be “pleased” with the article produced. There is also a brief shift between “I” and “we” in the middle part of the turn to reinforce the perception of ‘goodness’ by drawing anonymous others into the discussion and positioning the article as useful (again in relation to the need to develop others knowledge). In the closing stages of this turn TP rephrases the opening argument for producing the article but builds in a defence against an interpretation of lack of personal knowledge by drawing a distinction between this and having “data to back me up”. As mentioned earlier, this account was produced to the first author, and references “research” and “article” may be used to further establish credibility of the process discussed here by drawing on similarities with academic research.

This next extract is taken from a later stage in the interview in which TP is discussing the content of the management development aspect of the HR project.

Extract 6

TP: So then you get down to the third one which ^was my idea, which is a modular approach to manager, *I can't even call it training really*, manager learning, whereby I come up with a *list of subjects which ^intuitively I have realised over the over my time as a generalist and a development person this is the kind of info=^knowledge that managers lack the ability to apply to their role as managers.*

A1: right

TP: the idea is they're facilitated interactive sessions to try and build manager's awareness=*I can't say it's skills training because I'm not a trained trainer.*

A1: right

TP: But that's *based on ^my intuition around what managers need* to start thinking about in their roles. (.) So that's how I came up with that... I plan to do a session on that with all managers so they can understand what *their leadership styles is=so this is pulling together what I've learnt in my job over the years, but I think they need, they don't know what they need.*

Again in this extract we see the ongoing positioning of TP at the centre of the work, here ownership is explicitly claimed at the outset (“my idea”). There is interplay here between the admission of lack of expertise (“I’m not a trained trainer”) and the account of the ideas as based on “intuition”. Offering an open admission of the first (on two occasions) creates a basis on which the other claims here (which build to “I think they need”) can be accepted. Intuition is

linked to time and experience throughout and TP stresses personal insight, which is very difficult for A1 to challenge without potential risk to the relationship within the interview. It also serves to highlight the intangible nature of the work being undertaken (“so that’s how I came up with that”), although it is still constructed as taking place within a logical process (achieved, for example, via the references to planning). The use of a recognised HR concept (“leadership styles”) in the closing stages firmly links “intuition” to potentially credible ideas within the HR field more broadly, while the final statement (“they don’t know what they need”) also reinforces TP as the expert.

The final two extracts are taken from the closing stages of the interview in which TP is reflecting back over the discussion and experiences on HR project to date.

Extract 7

TP: I personally have learnt more about these subjects...I learnt a lot by researching, management development, *I pretty much knew but any research I did backed up my approach, (.)* so I've learn a lot personally, so I feel I'm better able to inform the business

A1: TP'S MANAGER mentioned that there's quite a lot of working in [partnerships

TP: [Yeah] and research. So again the way in which *I've developed my knowledge on these subjects is myself going away and finding out. Nobody's taught me* with the management development, what should be incorporated

Here TP balances an account of existing knowledge and ongoing learning particularly using the notion of research to explain how this has been achieved. As highlighted earlier the use of the term research may also be used to draw credibility through association with the academic research process. The statement “I pretty much knew” attempts to avoid learning being seen as an admission of previous ignorance, which, given TP's earlier self-positioning as a “specialist” is potentially damaging in terms of the credibility of the account thus far. Overall there is an image of self-reliance and determination built up during this extract.

Extract 8

I don't think we ^know, *I think that's probably the one area where we just don't know how to measure the impact of anything we do. As a team I don't think (.) we know.* And I don't know whether that's because we haven't, most of us have not had a statistical (.) statistical training, I think it's because a lot of us haven't got occupational psychology as a background, ^I certainly haven't...I think it's only NAME and NAME that do, nobody else does, so I think in some ways we're lacking in the team that %background understanding of (.) the impact of all this stuff%

The issue of assessing the impact of the HR project is being contemplated in this turn. In contrast to earlier extracts (and indeed much of the interview) “we” is used frequently here. This is presented as a broader team concern rather than relating to TP specifically. TP’s statements are hedged to suggest this shouldn’t be regarded as an area of major concern in terms of relating back to the HR project (“a lot of us haven’t”; “nobody else does”). There is a connection built in this turn between measurement, statistics and the occupational psychology background and as this providing the knowledge that seems to be “lacking”. By being vague in the closing of this extract (“all this stuff”) TP effectively avoids creating the impression that these concerns may be specifically applied to the HR project being described in the interview.

One of the most striking features of TP’s account is the central position “I” occupies within it particularly in regards to the ‘doing’ aspects described. Although others are used (SP particularly) to build the credibility of both the work and TP’s position, such references are always part of a broader story that involves “I” (for example in Extracts 4 and 5 when SP is mentioned it is adjacent to a description of TP’s own “research”). In the later extracts presented above where the topic of discussion is more problematic there is a marked change in the subject position adopted – a shift from “I” to “we”. Looking across the extracts (and more generally within the full interview transcript) the HR project is largely described in terms of process and activities rather than the actual content. This process is largely represented as under TP’s control (see Extract 5) and considerable work goes into building up the scale of the task. The notion of “research” is prevalent in many of the extracts, which is positioned as important for both TP and people within the business. However, in Extract 6, where the HR content is the focus of discussion, personal experience and “intuition” are emphasised. In general references to broader HR themes and ideas are somewhat tangential and largely underdeveloped as a means of reinforcing either the validity of the HR project or TP’s role.

SP’s account

We now move to examine the account of SP, a specialist in a particular aspect of HR, starting here with his explanation working with TP on the HR project.

Extract 9

A1: So how did it actually pan out?

SP: Um lots lots lots more, once again a lot of *conversations* because *we only sit across the desk* from one another.

A1: Yeah right

SP: Yeah, a few emails, *I showed TP* the internal intranet pages, where the information was and the case studies, where to get it. *I gave TP* all the contact details for the network groups

A1: And did you get involved in any of the meetings?

SP: No I didn't

A1: So you didn't [actively?]

SP: [No, but] TP did, I know for a fact TP quoted me *'cos TP said to me oh I've been branding your name about all over the meeting and I went oh great!* ((joint laughter)) But yeah, so I didn't actually go to any of the meetings but I think that TP had felt, if TP had wanted me to then I would have done.

A1: And did you go through the plans [or was it?]

SP: [Just *giving TP* really the contacts, giving TP any information and *really letting TP run*] *with it* cos it was TP's thing *but I guess just being there*, TP knew to *answer any questions* or help or, cos it's *huge*, it can be a huge area

The early turns here present an informal and collaborative working relationship (which itself is an interesting contrast with TP's more formal account) reinforced by the image of physical proximity ("we only sit across the desk"). The concept of physical presence crops up elsewhere in this extract too in relation to the meetings and "just being there". During the fourth turn SP responds to the potential criticism of not attending the meetings by creating a surrogate of presence – being quoted. The truth of this story resides both in the "I know for a fact" and its reinforcement through reported speech. Although the relationship with TP is presented a friendly and informal, SP is still "giving" information and in one instance is more clearly suggesting a degree of control in "letting TP run with it". Particularly at the end of this extract, we see how the description of the work involved allows SP to build up the 'fact' that this is a "huge" area. This further develops the impact of the image of credible expert that is built up in earlier sections of the interview. Though it is interesting to reflect that it is size rather than complexity or any other attribute that is used to achieve this.

In the following extract SP relates the specific example of this HR project to role and work processes more generally.

Extract 10

I think I try and make the team kind of *fully aware of stuff that's going on or even just sharing information with them* so that they know, we do have shared ((computer)) drive but to a point *a lot of it is up here* ((taps head)) but I think also a lot of *people assume that it's up in my head when it's not actually and I may have to make a phone call or I may have to look back on something um but a lot of it is up here.*

The initial vagueness in this turn, particularly "kind of fully aware of stuff" suggest the difficulty of this role especially when backed up by the "even just" and "to a point". However unlike TP in

Extracts 5 and 6, SP does not employ the use of 'unknowing others' directly as this could carry the risk of being seen to undermine HR colleagues. There is an interesting dilemma presented in terms of what is "up here", perhaps the caveat prevents A1 challenging the potential conflict between this statement and earlier claims that this was a "huge" area. However, overall this extract further reinforces a personal sense or ownership of being the expert in this area.

Extract 11

A1: So how, for example, when you were discussing this with TP, what are you basing the advice on, your [sort of experience here?]

SP: *[Partly my own knowledge] and when I say knowledge that's some kind of knowledge gained from stuff I see on a day to day basis, and then partly ((coughs)) you know by giving TPr stuff to read and saying you may find this useful, I'm not actually sure what's in it, so kind of a mixture of both cos I'm a bit, and that's why I said at the beginning, I'm trying the most to be careful in my job you get your name attributed to stuff because sometimes it is personal opinion that you're saying because there may not be something written down (.) you know and my view on HR TOPIC may be different to NAME for example.*

Here SP produces an account that almost mirrors the academic debate about tacit and explicit knowledge but also there appears to be a balancing of both claiming personal ownership and a distancing from this "knowledge". However the construction of "personal opinion" here further reinforces his position as an expert and there are some similarities with how, in Extract 6, TP focuses on the intangible nature of this expertise.

Extract 12

A, it's a huge area, B, its relatively new and C, no one has got really real qualifications in it, you know none no-one in COMPANY for example has got a degree in it 'cos it just wasn't, you know so a lot of it is personal experience or personal knowledge and its I guess that's where sometimes I can't I'm conscious that I can't always necessarily meet peoples expectations straightaway on something because I think well actually I've never been asked that before, I don't know. Um. I mean I love my job, I just sometimes wish I could have a little bit more time to read up on stuff, you know I wish I could think ok I'll take, I'll spend today just reading stuff you know 'cos there's so much research on it and it's so useful. COMPANY doesn't have the special remedy... there's no winning formula, there may be stuff you do, different programmes, different initiatives and its, COMPETITOR ORGANIZATION might have a fantastic thing for making people aware about it and you think well actually what a fantastic idea, you know so it's all about, and going back to what I said we're expected to be subject matter experts, for me I was fairly knowledgeable before I joined them and my learning curve is growing and growing and it will continue to grow

and grow and grow, I'm never going to (.) it's good but just too much. But then you could argue, you could have 20 people working on it and yet it probably still wouldn't be enough

Here again the complexity and difficulty of the HR topic is established, this time by use of a clear three-part list, beginning with the scale of the area that has already been established in previous turns. The general absence of academic qualifications inoculates against any criticism that "personal experience" is an insufficient base for SP's claims of expertise, which might be perceived to be particularly relevant given the interviewer's academic role. This may prompt the discussion of research and wish to have the time to explore this. The use of "I love my job" just before those statements guards against this being taken in a negative light. It is also interesting to note the difference here with TP's account in which "research" was constructed as central to the work process. There are traces here of assumptions about approaches to HR which involve "projects" and "initiatives" to achieve change or change people, although the difficulty of this task is captured by the fact that "there is no winning formula" and the idea that there is a potentially limitless amount of activity one could undertake. The construction of the scale of this HR topic is matched by the stress placed on the amount of learning SP has personally experienced. This makes the admission that some expectations are difficult to meet a function of this set of circumstances - rather than any personal failing.

A key aspect of SP's account is the emphasis placed on the scale and complexity of this HR topic area. This is used to both support claims for knowledge and defend against potential failings (see Extract 12). Like TP, comparisons with others serve to help SP justify his position as "specialist", but SP also makes broader linkages (for example with competitor organizations). Within this the notion of personal knowledge and experience is frequently reinforced, both directly and indirectly (for example the references to being personally named or quoted). There is a more informal, even casual, feel to the depiction of the way work on the HR project is carried out than in TP's account. Yet, within this, SP is still able to imply a sense of control over the use of his specialist "knowledge base".

BP's account

In the first two extracts explored in this section BP is describing both the work undertaken and working relationships with TP during the course of the HR project to date.

Extract 13

So TP and I have been, well speaking probably every other day and meeting most weeks, um and *running the different work streams together*. I think in terms of the plans, um *we both brought very different things to the equation because obviously I brought the business knowledge and the experience of what we had done* when it was just the BUSINESS

AREA. *Whereas TP brought the wider view, um you know the sort of up to date HR ideas and so I think just looking back what we did is we actually took um we split the work streams between us. We had initial meetings with all the work-stream leaders to talk to them. Um we looked at all the data we ^had which could help us understand the current state. And then we just really brainstormed an action plan, um put it down on paper, yet again met with work-stream leaders to go through it, and then we went from there.*

In this extract BP attempts to manage both associating and distancing from TP. The initial association (achieved by a three part list of how they work together) may be necessary to leverage a perceived credibility of expertise that TP may have by being within the HR department (at the time of the discussion BP was aware that A1 had already interviewed TP). However this then requires BP to justify what each brought to this relationship; why running it together makes sense. There is considerable work done within this turn to establish differences between BP and TP based on knowledge and experience (collectively referred to as “things”). It is not just the source of these that is established but also a working up of some sort of value. The use of “obviously” is intriguing as it is applied to BP while there is less clear construction of what TP is bringing (“you know the sort of”). BP is also credited with bringing two things and TP only one. The second half of this turn sets out the process by which work was undertaken but there is significantly less focus on the research aspect that featured in TP’s account, rather the notion of brainstorming suggest a collaborative development of the plans. Here again the account suggests the idea of personal knowledge being applied to add value.

Extract 14

I think you know it was very refreshing to be able to bounce ideas around with someone who had similar knowledge, had similar types of experience. Whereas in my role it’s very much, I was the person who was saying, well you know maybe we should do this and what about this but everyone else was coming at it from a business point of view.

This extract is interesting in comparison to Extract 13 above. Here it is similarity that is emphasised rather than difference. The idea of brainstorming is developed here in terms of “bouncing ideas” around which again emphasises the collaborative and knowledge creation aspects of the process. Rather than building on the difference to TP’s role, in this turn “everyone else” is others in the business area. BP uses reported speech (“well you know maybe we should do this”) to make a convincing case in support of the implicit idea that it is BP that has the “ideas”.

Extract 15

I think it’s important to maybe have a number of key things in your pocket, and say, well these are the options, how can we make this applicable to this business. So you wouldn’t

necessarily roll out the same plan or the same the same training courses ^exactly for other businesses.

In expanding the discussion about the content of the HR project the construction here suggests that there are a number of pre-defined solutions to the issues faced in the organization (“key things in your pocket”). However, BP positions this very generally via use of “you” and “we” rather than “I” elsewhere. This suggests perhaps a description of an ideal or generalised process rather than an account of this particular HR project. The hedges in here (“maybe” and “wouldn’t necessarily”) are important as they also guard against the process appearing standardised and protects the earlier investment in establishing BP’s role and value added to this project.

In this final extract, BP reflects generally on the project:

Extract 16

Although it has been great and I’ve had some very good practical experience, I don’t think it’s ^necessarily supported those studies ((CiPD HR qualification)) ^particularly. Or vice versa, because there’s nothing particularly ^theoretical that I’ve been able to bring from my studies and put into place in this role.

There are several hedges in this turn and considerable work done to balance negative with positive statements. This statement seems to be problematic for BP who attempts to avoid being overtly critical of either the HR project or indeed the HR qualification. This may be important since during the interview BP drew on both the project and the qualification to construct a position of credibility and expertise. Invoking the difference between practical and theoretical may be an attempt to resolve this issue.

One of the key features within BP’s account is the ongoing balancing act of “business” and “HR” knowledge and experience and how this is achieved through comparing and contrasting with TP in particular. Within this, BP attempts to create a space within which personal own credibility and knowledge can be seen as significant and valuable. There are many similarities with TP’s account of the HR project although it is described in more collaborative terms and there is less focus on research as a key underpinning of the process.

4.3 Looking across the accounts

In the extracts reviewed above we can see that establishing knowledge and knowledge work are outcomes that require considerable work and effort to produce. The main work undertaken by the participants in their accounts to A1 is to establish personal credibility for their role, demonstrating how they have exercised (and developed) their knowledge on the HR project

and inoculating against criticism for potential weaknesses or failures. Our analysis presented above highlights how this is achieved through, for example, making associations or establishing differences between self and others, the personal position adopted within the account (particularly the use of “I” vs “we”) and providing evidence for accepting claims to knowledge.

In terms of comparing the different accounts of the same HR project, different features are emphasised in ways that support the claims of each participant. This is particularly evident when looking across TP and BP’s accounts. So for example, TP’s account includes many references to the research undertaken and the scale of the challenge while BP emphasises the similarity with the previous HR project and how the current work has developed from this base. However, such positions are sometimes problematic for the participants involved. This may well reflect awareness that interviews were being conducted with all those involved in the HR project and therefore a risk of appearing to be in conflict with others’ accounts.

There is relatively little discussion within these extracts of the HR concepts and ideas that underlie the HR project work, although all three participants make general references that acknowledge their existence. Again, and as explored specifically for Extract 5, this may relate to a particular positioning vis a vis A1, the interviewer. Alternatively, perhaps the participants did not see such concepts as “useful” resources.

5. Discussion

There is an increasing ‘prefixation’ with knowledge within the literature that reinforces its importance to organizational success. In this paper we respond to recent calls to adopt a more sceptical view of knowledge and focus on unpacking the way in which notions of knowledge and knowledge work are constructed and on the resources employed in such constructions.

We have deliberately moved away from much of the empirical literature in the field that emphasizes the presence of knowledge in other non-discursive aspects of practice and/or the contribution of knowledge in achieving some positive outcome (such as learning, process improvement or business results). We have presented a detailed examination of extracts from three interview transcripts in which we draw particular attention to the construction of accounts of knowledge work, positions adopted in relation to these accounts and the means used to establish credibility by participants of both their work and their role. By employing discourse analysis to unpack these accounts we have drawn attention to both the resources used to construct ‘knowledge’ and the way in which notions of ‘knowledge’ are used as a resource. We would therefore suggest viewing knowledge and knowledge work as outcomes of these discursive processes rather than objects, processes or concepts that exist independently of

them. We believe this research is an important first step in building a broader research agenda within the field, which too often seeks to find knowledge rather than examine its construction.

Our analysis presented above acknowledges the role of the interviewer, and the research relationship more broadly, in producing these accounts. The participants were to a degree “forced” to come up with a story to meet the needs of the interview situation. However, we suggest that these participants may frequently be put in the position of producing such accounts in the course of their work. Descriptions in the literature of both knowledge work and HR professionals suggest that the intangible nature of the processes and problematic evaluation of results are common issues that result in the need to produce accounts of this type. Certainly our understanding of this organization would suggest that such accounts (both verbal and written) form a key element in performance appraisals, team meetings, reports to project committees and the like. While the accounts analysed above were developed under a particular set of circumstances and in interaction with an external researcher, they nevertheless provide a possible source of exploring how such accounting is achieved. Our research within this organization is, as identified earlier, on going. By capturing accounts produced under a variety of circumstances (such as HR professionals presenting proposals to business clients, internal HR progress reports) and in different formats (written, one-to-one discussions, group discussions etc.) we plan to further develop the findings presented here. In particular we also aim to extend our analytic approach to consider the broader organizational and professional contexts within which these local discursive constructions are situated.

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Appendix A: Transcription notation

Details here relate to the notation used within the extracts, rather than the entire transcript. This is based on a simplified version of the Jefferson notation (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Some symbols were substituted with more readily available keystrokes to simplify the transcription process (for example the notation for speech which is noticeably quieter was changed from the degree to percent sign).

(.)	pause (unless exceeding 1 second pauses were not timed)
^word	rise in pitch
A: word word [word B: [word]	Overlapping talk(starts at [and ends at])
=	No discernable pause between two speakers' turns or, if put between two sounds within a single speaker's turn, shows that they run together
Wo(h)rd	Laughter within word
((joint laughter))	Laughter within the discussion rather than within specific turns
<u>word</u>	louder talk
%word%	quieter talk
((sobbing))	representation of something hard to write phonetically

Please note that in this paper double brackets were also used to add explanation of organizational specific terms.