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Sorting Talents Out:

Talent identification and its consequences

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Abstract

Talent Management (TM) has been argued more important than ever, especially in Multinational Corporations (MNCs). Previous research on the subject has however paid little attention to illustrate how TM processes unfold in practice, and has also neglected the political processes involved. This article mitigates these shortcomings by illustrating how local translations flourished when a TM practice was initiated. This article, based on a field study from a Swedish Medical Technology MNC, further demonstrates TM, and in particular talent identification, as a crucial classification activity, in which talents are sorted out. Our study indicates that a classification system can include a certain degree of heterogeneity that even can produce and maintain rather than dissolve a social order. Despite this, the classification activity proves to be highly political, where some actors become constructed as powerful and some factors become valorized while others become silenced, as a result from power struggles. This study illustrates the micro-politics of the use of classifications in the daily practices of one organization.

Keywords

Talent Management, Talent Identification, Classification, Actor-Network Theory, Translation.

Introduction

Being in an economic downturn with increased unemployment rates, one could imagine that the *War for Talent* (see Michaels et al., 2001) would be halted, and be of lesser importance for organizations. However, with further globalization and increasing competition that have become more generic, organizations are facing increasing difficulties in finding, retaining and managing key talent (Kim & McLean, 2012; Farndale et al., 2010). The global competition together with the perceived critical role that talented employees play in ensuring the success of multinational corporations (MNCs) has in turn boosted the war for talent even further. Talent management (TM) could therefore be considered more important than ever (Aguinis et al., 2012; Sidani & Al Ariss, 2014; Schuler et al., 2011), and a critical practice for ensuring competitive advantage in MNCs (McDonnell, 2011; Garavan, 2012).

Being a research area that only in recent years has attracted most of its attention, TM in general is an intricate subject; it is unclear in its definition and in an early stage, both as a

managerial practice and especially as a field of academic research (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Tarique & Schuler, 2009). However, it is most often referred to as a company's efforts to attract, identify, develop and retain talented employees (Stahl et al., 2012). Although approaches vary, TM usually focuses on specific pools of employees who rank at the top in terms of motivation, performance and competencies (Michaels et al., 2001; Mäkelä et al., 2010; Nijs et al., 2014; Smart, 2005), and their perceived value in creating long-term organizational competitive advantage (Iles et al., 2010; Turner et al., 2007). They are usually considered leaders either at present or at some point in the future (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Björkman et al., 2013) and identification of these is commonly done with help from performance ratings done by immediate superiors.

Previous research can roughly be categorized as either concentrating on how and to what extent companies are engaging in TM (descriptive), how TM can be seen as a factor for understanding company success (instrumental), and/or the perceived best practice of TM (normative). While recognizing that the practices of TM vary depending on context (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Mäkelä et al., 2010), researchers such as Cascio (2006) describe the practice of employee evaluations based on performance appraisals as the most used input for talent identification. McDonnell et al. (2010) found that American MNCs adopt TM mechanisms and systems, but that many also adopt ad hoc approaches. When it comes to TM as a means to achieve organizational success, many (e.g. Cheese et al., 2008; Wright et al., 1994) have pointed out that superior human resources (HR) are crucial to, and even directly tied to, organizational competitiveness. Other scholars have focused on how TM should be practiced. Lewis and Heckman (2006) advocate that TM should focus on employees with high-value competencies who are hard to replace. Other researchers (e.g. Scullion & Collings, 2006; Beechler & Woodward, 2009), discuss the need for combining local/global talent and gender/cultural diversity. The normative approaches can however be questioned, as TM can be seen to be contextual. This is shown for example by Mäkelä et al. (2010), who stress that the implementation of a performance management system (e.g. performance appraisals) can be challenging, and that actual practices may differ notably from intended ones.

Despite the increased attention to TM in organizations, academic research on managing talents has not fully addressed the issue, and has several weaknesses (Burbach & Royle, 2010; Collings et al., 2009). One particular weakness concerns a lack of research exploring how organizations actually operationalize TM (Vaiman & Collings, 2013; Jones et al., 2012; McDonnell et al., 2010), because even if a growing number of studies are focusing on recognizing the various TM practices that organizations undertake, these studies are merely contributing to the "what" rather than the "how". This lack of understanding regarding how the TM activities unfold in practice remains since much existing evidence, which usually comes from US-based research (McDonnell, 2011, Thunnissen et al., 2013), is largely based on anecdotes and consultancy reports (Iles et al., 2010; Preece et al., 2011). Further, as mentioned, TM and TM research also tend to focus merely on the view of talent as people with managerial competences (Tansley, 2011), and therefore neglects other types of talent.

The scarcity of empirical evidence in the field is especially evident when it comes to the process of *identifying* talent (Tarique & Schuler, 2009). Relatively few studies examine how institutions carry out their everyday business in practice by means of category systems

(Lampland & Star, 2009), such as the system of classification of employees as talents or not. More specifically, as Mäkelä et al. (2010) argue: the practice through which a person is classified as talent or not and therefore included in or excluded from a talent pool is seldom problematized. Also, as indicated earlier, since the practicing of TM can be considered contextual, it is surrounded by several factors that eventually will have impact on the talent identification process. As Mäkelä et al. (2010) exemplify: performance ratings do not automatically lead to talent pool inclusion or exclusion. This indicates that the practice of identifying talents is political, something that Mäkelä et al. (2010) point out has not been investigated. Previous research therefore neglects broader issues related to power and how political processes are involved in TM (cf. McDonnell et al., 2010 & Van den Brink et al., 2013). Relating to this, there are some dimensions of TM that scholars urge further research on: Lewis and Heckman (2006) imply a need for studies that include multiple-level analyses of the company and the specification of the effect of talent-related decisions throughout it, and that research is needed on who is considered a talent and why. Tarique and Schuler (2009) stress the need for further research investigating the relationship between talent identification and its organizational consequences.

To study the actions and politics that can be involved in talent identification, it is relevant to understand this practice as a classification activity (Bowker & Star, 1999). Classifying in this case means that employees first become sorted into different categories in a performance matrix, and from that defined as talents for key positions (Bowker & Star, 1999). To at close hand, get an understanding of the practicing of this activity, we have in this study placed ourselves into the context of the Headquarters (HQ) and two local sites at MedTech Group; a medical technology MNC that recently started to engage in TM. At first, their talent identification work seems somewhat taken-for-granted, but as the story unfolds, a complexity is revealed as the idea of TM travels from a central to a local level. To follow the actors that are involved and have impact on the unfolding of the initiative, it is therefore studied from a combination of theories of classification (e.g. Bowker & Star, 1999; Foucault, 1970) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and in particular the 'sociology of translation'.

Based on this discussion, the first aim of this study is to investigate how talent identification unfolds in practice in one specific organization. This will allow for an elaborated understanding of the second aim, which is to investigate on what grounds an employee becomes labeled a talent. The study will also, as a third aim, discuss some subsequent consequences this may have both on an organizational level and more specific consequences for the people being directly affected by the TM system.

This article firstly provides a theoretical framework describing relevant concepts from classification theories and ANT. Secondly, a description of the methodology used to conduct and analyze the study is presented. Thirdly, our findings are presented, starting with an introduction of the studied organization and how their TM initiative took a formal shape, and proceeding with how complexities in form of local adaptations ended up changing the initial shape and content of the initiative. Fourthly, the findings are discussed in light of the theoretical framework. Finally, the conclusions and implications of the study are presented.

Introducing Classification Work

The practice of classifying is an important part in organizing, and it has been said that to classify is human (Bowker & Star, 2000). By classifying, people sort phenomena, events, and people into different categories. Things are thus being put into a set of boxes in order to accomplish some work, and classification may therefore be seen as the process whereby things are sorted out (Bowker & Star, 1999). Things or objects may in this way be examined and evaluated on the basis of their differences and similarities. The world is therefore with the help of classification work divided temporally, spatially, and spatial-temporally indicating that any classification is bound in space and time (ibid.). All classification and standardization processes are a mixture of physical entities such as paper, forms, software programs, and conventional arrangements such as rhythm and speed, and how specifications are implemented (Bowker & Star, 1998). Bowker and Star (2000) argue that classification systems are built on consistent principles and unique characteristics that are mutually exclusive, but also point out that the sheer density of classification systems also means that they likely meet up in different ways.

Bowker and Star (1999) describe the classic divide between Aristotelian classifications and prototypical, or Platonic, classifications. The former works according to a set of binary characteristics that “the object being classified either has or does not have” (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 62), resulting in that the object being classified either presents or does not present a category. An Aristotelian classification thus sets up a series of criteria putting objects into one group or class. The prototypical classification on the other hand contains abstract examples that are symbolizing different categories, against which the object to be classified will be assessed. This type of classification is therefore based on an assessment of whether the object is perceived as similar to a certain class or category (Bowker & Star, 1999). These two means of classifications are however often used together, and Bowker and Star (1999) put forward that classification systems usually impose a stable, Aristotelian structure on the world, but that classification work in practice does not unfold in this way. In real life, “the classical beauty of the Aristotelian classification gives way to a fuzzier classificatory system that shares in practice key features with common sense prototype classifications - heterogeneous objects linked by metaphor or analogy.” (Bowker & Star, 1999, p.65). The distinction and interplay between the formal and the informal, the Aristotelian and the prototypical, become important in order to understand what classification mechanisms are made visible. Adding to these classification systems, is the scientific classification (Foucault, 1970), in which socially produced specifications and categorizations act out to specify social norms. An example illustrating a socially produced specification, is what constitutes health and illness.

Classes in different social contexts may only seem natural and well-ordered, but there are no given or universal system of classification (Diedrich et al., 2011). Following Levi-Strauss (as cited in Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013), notion of floating signifier, categories that may seem definitive and stable, may in fact mean nothing in themselves, and therefore also carry a diversity of definitions. Work performance, work capacity and employability may produce the appearances of categorical stability, but are rather open to be shaped by organizational, administrative, political and human priorities and concerns. For instance, as Mäkitalo and Säljö (2002) describe; when classifying, people often start to supervise their own decisions in terms of considering possible consequences and feedback from various stakeholders. This is called reflexivity, and although this is seldom visible to the public, it usually increases when a

high degree of flexibility is built into the classification system. People who classify are therefore often in intermediary roles. This receptivity to different influences is why it does not make sense to see classifications as ready-made things, existing out there in the world with predetermined attributes (Lampland & Star, 2009). This is further elaborated on by Foucault (1979), who argues that most people presume their own classification system as an objective reality, but that there are numerous alternative systems, and the categories therefore exist in our minds. He also highlights that a particular classification system is a set of deep-seated rules for ordering that is embedded in our language. So, even though there may exist formal definitions of classification systems, stating what category a specific person or entity belongs to, everyday working life with time constraints and conflicting goals and priorities makes classifications complicated (Dupré, 2006; Roth, 2005). This is especially visible in loosely coupled organizations. In these, the classification intends to serve as the principal means for integration, but where the vocabulary in use often differs between groups and divisions or where meaning is constituted locally and not shared between organizational units (DiMaggio, 1987; Heikkinen, 2005). Loosely coupled organizations therefore involve individual participants with a great latitude in interpreting and implementing directions, and since there is always a need for some human judgment, categorization is never algorithmic. Categories are in this way not simply mimetically representing the world, but rather simultaneously creating and limiting it (Foucault, 1970).

Following this reasoning, classifications may therefore be seen as social agreements, indicating that such systems are local and contingent rather than universal. This also implies that classification work, contrary to its original intent, may produce a certain degree of heterogeneity, which is illustrated by Diedrich and Styhre (2008) by showing how newly arrived refugees in Sweden are not singular but multiple as they are being conceived of in different terms. Classification work may therefore produce objects that are multiple rather than unified (Diedrich & Styhre, 2008). Drawing on Mol's (2002) study of atherosclerosis in a Dutch hospital, in which she found that this illness is not one thing but "many things", this heterogeneity is not something to be treated as problematic per se, but instead as an effect of complementing domains of expertise taking part in a social activity.

Members of organizations often tend to overlook or ignore how the organizational classifications they use are constructed. The classification process becomes "black-boxed" as the factors that go with it are taken-for-granted (Kaghan & Bowker, 2001). An example illustrating this is Walter's (2005) study of a temporary work agency, where the classification system through which the agency connects workers and clients appeared as linear and uncomplicated. However, as Walter (2005) managed to open up the "black box", to use Bruno Latour's (1987) term, the process was later described as rather complex and corrected. The black-boxing involves placing a boundary around a certain set of practices and identifying appropriate inputs and outputs that then become stabilized as producing particular outcomes (Kaghan & Bowker, 2001). Classification schemes often become taken-for-granted as long as they function as intended (Star & Griesemer, 1999), and the self-perception of the people being classified may start to appear as unquestionable facts (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013). However, the process of sorting people often leads to the stressing of single categories, and may end up as a process involving certain categories that dominate others. In examining processes of classification, Bowker and Star (1999) argue that each standard and category

valorizes some point of view and silences another. By this, classifications determine what will and will not be visible in a network, and thus they “(...)give advantage or they give suffering” (p.6). Consequently, regimes of classifications consist of political and social struggles; struggles through which power is exercised (Foucault, 1970).

Power of interpretation and the right to define may be achieved by controlling the classification system (Foucault, 1970), something that was exercised by the mentioned temporary work agency through deciding what aspects were important and what aspects were less important in their classification taxonomy (Walter, 2005). The classifiers may start to compete in order to establish their preferred classification system as legitimate and to institutionalize it across social contexts. Following this, Bourdieu (1985) assumes that all parties will seek a monopoly of legitimate classifying employing symbolic capital in that struggle. Actors may in this sense not only adopt a proposed classification system but can choose to adapt it, making it be seen as competing (Lampland & Star, 2009). Foucault (1980) describes this as apparatuses of control, and also highlights that this control and power can be exercised by not only using coercion but also by empowering actors. Classification interpretations are therefore valuable for capturing how power is mediated. However, they do not contribute much to how the classes or categories are produced in the first place, or how they are spread and maintained. How do situated statements about people or entities become codified into “truths” that are rigid and enduring enough to shape knowledge and practice? To explore this, and to understand the mentioned political and social struggles, we need to follow the actors (Latour, 1987) as they create and evaluate new facts and instruments, and attempt to stabilize and circulate them. “Opening” black boxes like this becomes elementary to map the power and arrangements by which some factors and processes in a talent identification process become important while others become silenced. ANT and the sociology of translation offers one way to study these relationships in networks of actors and how the classification work has been translated into local practices (Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005).

Actor-Network Theory: Unpacking the Classification System

ANT traces the ways in which both human and non-human actors, all assumed to have an agency, are enacted as they become enrolled into collectives of activity (Callon, 1991). These actors are interconnected in networks in which there is a variance in each actor’s resistance to and influence over others (Callon, 1986; Law, 1992). Through the process of translation, different actors are persuaded or enrolled to comply with an initiating actor who secures their active support (Latour, 2005). One way in which such persuasion or enrolment is attempted is via the category of interests, in which actors try to persuade by telling one another that something is in their interests as well (Callon & Law, 1982). Actors also seek to define their own position in relation to others by noting that something not only is in the interest of others, but also that it is in their own interests. Callon (1986) argues that there are continuous negotiation processes between the actors in the network, and this demonstrates how even a simple process may be translated and used in ways unexpected by the designer (Latour, 1991). It therefore becomes interesting to explore how it is that actors enroll one another, and why some succeed whereas others do not. Callon and Law (1982) highlight that this enrolment is concerned with ways in which provisional order is proposed and sometimes

successfully achieved. The mapping and transforming of interests are in this way means to impose order on a part of the social world (ibid.).

When these mentioned negotiations seem to end, black-boxing occurs, and a boundary is drawn around the network. When this occurs, the network may be treated as a simple input/output device that performs in accordance with an unambiguous set of specifications. How actors inside the black box translate or transform inputs into outputs becomes unimportant (Latour, 2005). However, as discussed, the black boxes are always the outcome of negotiations, namely of socio-technical character, and the outcome is highly uncertain since when actors pass things on to each other, these are translated. Each actor is acting in many different ways; altering, adding to, appropriating, and prioritizing ideas and things, based on its own interests and experiences (Latour, 1987). Therefore, it becomes highly relevant to open up the black box, by using the sociology of translation model, to be able to describe how ideas and models travel and come into being (cf. Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996).

In order for an idea to travel, it must however first be separated from its institutional surroundings, and translated into an object such as a guideline, text or a prototype. After the object has traveled, it lands in a new time and space, in which it is unpacked. The traveling idea thus meets local procedures, and experiences something Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) call “ideas in residence”. Friction may arise as traveling ideas encounter these ideas in residence, but this may be seen as adding energy to the translation and fitting the new idea into the local practice through negotiations and matching of different interests. However, this also means that ideas in residence become translated, and the idea translated into a new local practice may become black-boxed with time, as it becomes taken-for-granted. The story told about how something come into being becomes different when adopting a translation model compared to the diffusion model, in which an idea becomes widespread due to its intrinsic properties (Latour, 1986). By recognizing this, ANT and the sociology of translation become helpful in order to open black boxes and by that investigate on-going interactions in networks, such as in the classifying of talents in organizations, which has been shown to be affected by many different contextual factors and challenges (cf. Mäkelä et al., 2010). By looking at the output of the process, a foundation for discussing consequences of certain classification systems will also be provided.

Methodology: Design of the Study

Since the study aims at providing a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon or practice; how MedTech Group is engaging in the classifying of talents and how it unfolds in practice, a case study method was adopted (Czarniawska, 2014). The method was further appropriate as it is suggested in novel research areas where few theoretical frameworks have been defined that allow themselves for detailization and careful empirical texting (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), which as shown earlier, is the case for the field of TM. By placing us as researchers within the studied context, an advanced form of understanding was achieved (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This made it possible to recognize also how employees at MedTech Group interact with each other in different settings (Silverman, 2011), something that was highly interesting for us since the work with TM seldom is done in isolation of others, but rather constitutes a network of actors who all have their own agendas.

We divided the data collection into different phases. The first phase aimed at getting an initial and informative insight of how MedTech Group engages in TM. This phase included a contact person, a HR manager from the HQ, providing us with an overview of the TM process as well as with internal documents. The first phase was not only informative, but also guided and directed us towards the search for relevant employees to interview in our second phase. Although we were aware that this could imply degrees of nominator bias, this snowballing method (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008) was useful for us as outsiders since we had limited knowledge of which people were affected by TM at MedTech Group. As we gradually got to know the organization better we could also start suggesting interviewees ourselves.

Phase two consisted of interviews with three HR managers from the HQ, out of which one was the HR Director, and of interviews with HR managers and HR generalists (hereby referred to as HR specialists), line- and middle managers (hereby referred to as line managers), and non-managerial employees (hereby referred to as employees) in the two local sites. All of these interviewees have been anonymized in the article and been described with role, site and a number based on order of appearance. As could be read earlier, the organization itself has also been anonymized. In this phase, as will be described further in the next section, we also conducted informal observations. We continued to collect field material as long as it brought us new relevant information, something referred to as saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which meant a rounding-off when 22 interviews had been conducted. This was to leave time for additional interviews required to understand potential issues brought up earlier, and to further examine aspects that became interesting during the research process. Some of these aspects were how the talent identification process was perceived and acted upon differently, and where the idea of implementing a TM system originated from.

By the end of the data collection period, a headcount reduction was announced at MedTech Group, and due to the sensitivity concerns, we were kindly asked not to talk about our specific subject with employees. Our distribution of interviewees therefore became slightly dominated by managerial employees. This was however not considered a disadvantage as the collected material from non-managerial employees was considered both satisfactory and substantial enough to fulfill the aims of the study.

Collection of Field Material

The field material was collected at three of the company's sites in different parts of Sweden, the HQ being one of them while the other two (hereby referred to as the North Site and the South Site) represented two different business areas within the organization. This would pose a possibility to better understand TM practice as contextual and allow for potential comparison of findings or narratives (cf. Eisenhardt, 1989). The collection was done through semi-structured interviews (see Table 1) and through reading TM-related company-internal documents. HR managers at the HQ and HR specialist at the local sites were interviewed in order to understand how they view their work. Also several line managers were interviewed since they are the ones responsible for the initial identification of talents. To further widen the point of view and to fully understand how talent identification and its consequences unfold in practice, we also interviewed non-managerial employees. These employees are the main individuals that become assessed and sorted out. The interviews were open-ended (Silverman, 2011; Kvale, 1996) in order not to steer the interviews, but rather allowing the interviewees to

talk freely about their work and letting them manage the performance and impression of TM and its consequences (Czarniawska, 2014). Twenty-two interviews were conducted and lasted between 60-90 minutes, which was seen as enough to deeply acquire the interviewees' accounts. Even if notes were taken during the interviews to remind about issues needing to be further explained (Czarniawska, 2014), the focus was on listening and trying to understand the interviewees' accounts. Since MedTech Group has various sites within Sweden we traveled to their locations (see Table 1) and conducted the interviews where the current interviewee normally works. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Site	Position	# of interviews
The HQ	HR managers	5
The North Site	HR specialists Line managers Employees	2 5 3
The South Site	HR specialists Line managers Employees	2 3 2
TOTAL		22

Table 1. Showing the site and positions of the interviewees.

Atkinson and Silverman (1997) highlight that, in our interview society, we are relying pervasively on face-to-face interviews, and often without critically reflecting upon their shortcomings. A general drawback with interviews is put forward by Czarniawska (2014), who argues that interviewees may be concerned with saying the “right” things, and therefore become tempted to answer the questions in a way to please the interviewer rather than sharing what they do, something also referred to as ‘Social Desirability Bias’ (Nederhof, 1985). To mitigate this potential drawback, we included several methods for collecting the field material (see, e.g. Silverman, 2011; Spradley, 1979). In addition to interviews, observations by participating in informal meetings and discussions were adopted. By spending time at the different sites' offices and eating lunch with employees in the canteen we could observe relationships in a natural setting. These informal meetings and discussions did not have a formal agenda, but consisted of small talks, how the participants viewed the talent identification process in general, and some of its consequences. As we will show in this article, exposure in the form of being seen by the “right” people turned out to be important in order to be identified as a talent. The observations were occasions where we could observe the physical aspect of how this played out in reality, which enabled us at close hand to encounter the everyday work life of the relevant actors (Watson, 2011). During these occasions, we took notes and wrote field stories based on these notes (cf. Schwartzman, 1993).

Furthermore, during both interviews and observations various documents and review matrixes involved in the practical work with TM were mentioned and discussed. In specific; performance and potential identification guidelines along with material for yearly manager-employee discussions. We analyzed them in order to acquire an understanding of how they contribute to the work with TM. To also understand how these documents and matrixes had

been translated, we asked for earlier versions as well. We were aware of the notion that for whom and by whom these documents are directed affects both their content and structure (Silverman, 2011). By examining these organizational documents it provided us not only with important background information about the studied company, but also functioned as a complement to the interviews and observations. This therefore gave us a broader understanding of how the talent identification process plays out locally and individually.

The field material allowed us to identify various narratives concerning how the talents are being classified, and we recognized that these narratives at times could be seen as competing. Some of these competing narratives were, how the guidelines were supposed to work, if the whole process benefitted them or not, and the purpose of the process. As suggested by Czarniawska (1997), we did not attempt to narrow these differences in any way. We rather tried to understand how they arose and the role they play. Our hope was that this would allow the story to unfold as multi-sided and leave the readers to make different interpretations regarding what the case is a case of (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Furthermore, since some of the interviews involved stories of events that took place prior to our arrival, different documents, memoranda and reports were gathered in order to identify and analyze some of these events.

Analysis of Field Material

The collection of field material was divided into different phases. This in itself implies the appropriateness of using a grounded theory approach, since it consists of a continuous comparative analysis when analyzing the field material (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Further, it is stated that this approach is useful in dealing with large amounts of qualitative data from, for example, semi-structured interviews in case studies (Turner, 1981). In this vein, a grounded theory approach was highly relevant for really understanding how talent identification is done in practice at the chosen organization.

The collected field material was analyzed in different stages. The first stage involved transcribing the first set of interviews, coding and categorizing them into relevant concepts by using concepts cards as suggested by Martin and Turner (1986). Our interviews ended up with a large amount of data, and as discussed by Martin and Turner (1986) perhaps too many concepts and themes arose in the initial stage. We identified approximately 40 concepts that included a wide range of themes, and with the help of grounded theory we could focus on the most relevant concepts with regards to our aims. We decided to focus on how the corporate idea had been locally adapted, involving more emphasis on engineers at the local sites, and how informal rather than formal criteria were dominating. Van Maanen (1979) describes these first-order concepts as “facts” of an ethnographic investigation, and consists of both the descriptive properties of the studied scene and the member interpretations of what stands behind the properties. After identifying relevant categories we compared them with each other to search for connections between them (cf. Czarniawska, 2014).

The second stage involved coding and categorizing the observations and documents, and comparing these with the interviews. The interviewees’ descriptions were in this way triangulated (Silverman, 1993), by cross-checking with documents and observations. This constant comparing of material allowed us to discover relevant theoretical concepts useful to address our study. After it became evident that the talent identification process included micro-politics and resembles a classification activity where talents are sorted out, we

identified concepts from classification theories as useful for our study. Further, since the classification work at the local sites seemed to differ from what the HQ were favouring, we identified ANT, and in particular the sociology of translation as analytical heuristics in order to organize the field material. Organizing and connecting the field material with theoretical concepts is also a way of moving up in the level of abstraction (Martin & Turner, 1986). At the lower level of abstraction we included data as it was presented to us, but moving to higher levels of abstraction we focused on concepts that took on a more theoretical meaning (Martin & Turner, 1986). These concepts mainly focused on the translations of the TM idea, how the translations lead to the emerging of heterogeneity in the classification system, and how the system maintained something that could be seen as a negotiated social order and created multiple talents. Van Maanen (1979) describes these second-order concepts as “theories” an analyst uses to organize and explain the facts. The organizing and explaining the field material were in this way done by drawing on the sociology of translation, which enabled us to understand how the idea of talent identification traveled to new localities. This helped us to further understand how the classification work, involving various actors, was unfolding in practice, and how it became situated and translated.

Introducing MedTech Group and the Setting

MedTech Group is a leading global provider of medical technology systems and equipment that contribute to quality enhancement and cost efficiency within healthcare and life sciences. The main market of MedTech Group is Western Europe, and their growth, especially the last decade, has been steady and mostly based on acquisitions: since their listing in the early nineties, more than 50 acquisitions have been completed. They employ approximately 16.000 employees in over 40 countries, and had a turnover of almost SEK 27 billion in 2014, which they intend to double in the next few years. Except for the HQ, the group, in Sweden, includes sites in four different cities. The North Site, standing for the majority of Group sales, was from the beginning a foreign company that had operated and reached high results in the industry for around 150 years when it was acquired by MedTech Group some ten years ago. The South Site was acquired earlier as a younger, Swedish company that some years ago also went through a merger with another similar company acquired by the group. Only recently this site moved into a brand new office. The HQ did too, even relocating to a new city.

MedTech Group is a knowledge-intensive firm that to a large extent is regulated by external institutions. Both within and outside the commercial functions they employ a large deal of engineers with technical competencies, which in many cases are unique and would be difficult to replace. Many of the employees, including the CEO, have worked for the company for a long time, often 15-20 years, and the work they do is usually done in projects.

In general, the company is seen as having a strong financial focus with high, imminent pressure to deliver on quarterly targets, while at the same time having relatively long product cycles. Interviewees at the local sites express that the financial targets often are not broken down to fit the long product cycles in the local settings. Combined with the fact that the company has grown through acquisitions and that the companies acquired so far have already been quite successful in themselves, this, according to some, has created a culture in which the company focuses on short-term gains. The history of acquiring many companies has also created a relatively scattered organization in which it is perceived to be “little common DNA”

and exchanges between business units. Within the units the ambiance is often perceived to be a bit insular. The link between local sites and the HQ varies, but is generally quite vague with the local sites being highly empowered.

The last years the organization has had some stagnation in its growth. Interviewees ascribe this to the organization reaching a stage in which there is a need for optimization rather than continuing acquiring other companies. To mitigate this, the group has for some years focused on finding synergies within and between existing units, for example by establishing the company's first common HR function in 2008. Also, to be able to meet the high requirements from inspections by external regulatory institutions, something that quite recently hit MedTech Group hard, several reorganizations have taken and are taking place together with having to down-prioritize what is considered less critical business agenda items. However, many interviewees state that the company is on the beginning of a journey, on which most of them sense a development from being scattered to becoming more structured, unified and mature, trying to establish a coherent brand with their now very broad offering. As a step to reach more structure and at the same time ensure that the right knowledge and talent always permeates the organization, a TM Platform has become an important part of HR.

Are We Just a Bunch of Idiots?

Benefitting from the fact that people are just getting fatter and sicker, to use one of the HR managers at the HQ's own words, MedTech Group had so far not been in any need to optimize processes or to integrate the business areas. Realizing that this would not last forever, especially not coupled with the aim of doubling the turnover in the near future and a more competitive market, they perceived they could no longer rely on their flagship products doing the trick. Parallel worries regarding what they would do if the CEO would go away for some reason, and how other important leader positions could be replaced, started to bother the Board of Directors. Two of the last three business area CEOs had been hired externally, and it was believed that it took quite some time for them to settle in their roles. Further, the insight that the size of the organization implied more sophisticated HR activities to meet external stake- and shareholders expectations, initiated discussions of why the organization had not been able to find or build talents within the organization. In frustration about this, one of the founders raised the question: Are we just a bunch of idiots? They realized that this could not be the case. Hence, in 2012, a seed to a TM process was planted.

We Need a Structured Process to Identify Our Talents!

If the organization did not only consist of idiots, it meant that it could have talents not yet identified. With this awareness, the work started with how to identify these hidden talents. The idea was a corporate initiative driven by the Executive Vice President of HR and HR managers from the different business areas. It was presented in 2013 at a meeting with the top 200 managers, and consisted of a structured process with different phases representing the identification and development of internal talents on white-collar level. The idea was translated into a written TM guide, called 'the MedTech Group way', consisting of approximately 100 pages of guidelines, and templates for conducting what they call Performance and Development Dialogues (PDDs), i.e. performance appraisals. The process would consist of the minimal requirements for all business areas and be cascaded from a

central level, through the vice presidents of HR in each business area. It would however be owned at a local level, since local line managers were seen to be the ones knowing the employees, which meant they would play an important role in the identification of talents.

The first phase of identifying their talents starts with the PDDs. In these, the line managers annually evaluate their employees’ performance based on a three-point scale (see Figure 1) according to two dimensions; ‘what’ and ‘how’, and plan for the employee’s next year goals. The ‘what’ dimension represents what objectives the employee has or has not achieved, and the ‘how’ dimension represents how these objectives have been achieved. In order to evaluate the latter dimension, MedTech Group has incorporated Cornerstone Behaviors and Core Values as behavioral guidelines that employees are evaluated against. The two dimensions (‘what’ and ‘how’) are supposed to be of equal weight and constitute 50% each of the total performance evaluation.

Rating	Needs Improvement	Meets Expectation	Exceeds Expectation
Definition	Performance needs improvement	Meets expected results	Above the expected results
Score	NI	ME	EE

Figure 1. The three-point performance scale

As can be seen above, the scale consists of three performance boxes: Needs Improvement (NI), Meets Expectation (ME), and Exceeds Expectation (EE). NI means the employee needs improvement, and an improvement plan is required to ensure that this becomes possible. If not, an exit plan might be needed. ME means that the employee is doing what is required and is perceived as meeting the value standards and therefore not requiring any immediate action plans. EE means the employee has done more than required in a way that exceeds the expectations according to the ‘what’ and ‘how’. This rating implies that the manager should challenge the employee with stretch assignments and create development plans to prepare for a more challenging role.

Before the line managers’ ratings are considered definite, they should be calibrated with a manager colleague in a so-called “buddy-meeting”. This is characterized by the “buddy” asking questions and challenging the line managers’ evaluations and ratings. After that, to further calibrate the evaluation, a manager on the next level, called a “grandfather”, oversees and approves or disapproves the ratings. The PDDs are then sent to HR who collects the templates, evaluates them and construct talent pools, not only for their own purposes, but also to inform the HQ about who the talents are in the organization. This part consists of a consolidation of the work at the local sites up to the HQ, and is mainly done through filling out high potential lists that the HQ are sending out once a year to the local sites. Apart from basing these on the performance evaluations done in the first phase, there are also some additional requirements, such as a mobility criteria highlighting the importance of being able to move, and ‘potential’ indicating that the employee is not just performing well, but also would be able to advance one or two levels. Additional criteria are focused on leadership and commercial abilities such as motivating colleagues, having a strategic focus, and driving

innovation. This phase is meant to identify the talents that might be potential higher-level leaders in the company now or in the future.

It's Not As Darn Easy As It Looks on Paper

The description above illustrates a process that according to a HR manager at the HQ is quite unproblematic and also similar to how other organizations identify their talents. This manager stresses that the process is implemented and put in place in the organization: The process is up and running in all local sites and there's no problem in that. They know what to do and we get all the templates back. It goes quickly after launching talent management to get the managers to know what to do. (HR manager 1, HQ).

A lot of responsibility is assigned to and taken by the local sites since the organization consists of many different companies. Reflecting on this, an HR manager expresses:

I think it's a strength in one way. I love having people on the ground that take on responsibility. I think it's in our DNA. (HR manager 2, HQ).

However, empowering the local sites like this also brings about some complexities and ambiguities that are not brought up initially. The story therefore seems to end somewhere else, because even the HQ started to express challenges in how the initiative eventually was used, or not used, despite stating a "love" for local initiatives. As a HR manager puts it:

...and then you enter reality [local sites] and badoom(!), they have never even heard about it. It's hard to reach out and compete and get attention, it's not their top one priority. (HR manager 3, HQ).

Apart from the perception that the initiative does not seem to reach out sufficiently and in its full importance, it is also expressed by all three HR managers at the HQ that the main challenges come with the humans involved, not the system itself. Or as one HR manager at the HQ puts it: "It's not as darn easy as it looks on paper". It was thus indicated that the process was more complex than first thought of. Adding to this complexity is the way in which people often are identified and pushed forward locally was seen as conflicting with what the HQ is favouring. As one of the HR managers puts it:

Often we don't agree with the assessment that's happening locally, right. We ultimately do have a view of what talent and potential looks like. (HR manager 2, HQ).

Further, although without having or wanting a so-called "forced ranking" for the NI, ME and EE distribution, another HR manager at the HQ states:

If you'd take the data directly from the local sites then you'd have 35% talents, and that'd be great. But it isn't accurate. (HR manager 1, HQ).

From a HQ perspective, there seems to be a pretty clear definition of how proper TM should

be conducted and what a talent is. As indicated above, there are certain aspects that managers at the HQ are valuing in their view of a talent, as opposed to what they perceive that the local sites do. To illustrate this contrast, one of them describes:

A manager might identify a co-worker as hands-on, a doer - then they [the line managers] know things happen. And that's a great attribute, but then you lose the strategic capability or to think ahead and have a plan, and it becomes very operational here and now. (HR manager 3, HQ).

Apart from indicating the importance that the HQ assigns to having strategic capability, HR manager 3 also states the importance of moving across niches and trying some "uncomfortable" areas. Illustrating the importance of this mobility, an HR manager exemplifies:

In France, we have an extremely strong sales manager who is really great but only speaks French. He will never be a top talent because we can't move him. (...) Even if he has very high performance. (HR manager 1, HQ).

The talent shortlist the HQ had of executive talents adds to the perception of the HQ having a clear definition of what a talent is, and how they are valuing experience from certain areas. HR manager 2 describes the shortlist as containing of a majority, even an "overweight of people working in commercial functions". These are, for example, sales or country managers.

As can be seen, the general perception among the managers at the HQ is at first glance that the talent identification process is implemented and functions properly. At second glance, it is however indicated that there is a complexity in how their idea of TM is enacted upon by different actors. At the same time, they explicitly state that the local ways of working with TM are incorrect, and that they themselves ultimately do have a clear view of what talent is. As indicated, MedTech Group wants to, on the one hand, have a standardized process with less local interpretation, but on the other hand expresses that they want to allow some degree of freedom, which may seem contradicting. What does this lead to? How is the initiative enacted upon by the local actors?

Doing It Our Own Way - The Idea of TM Adapting to Local Realities

The idea of talent identification did not reach the local sites without some questioning, and the belief that the process was up and running as initiated by the HQ, without complexities in all sites, was not quite accurate. As the idea of a TM process and the search to identify talents reached the local business units, it was, to begin with, met by some resistance. The North Site had already started to work on performance development in a similar way as the central initiative implied. However, they had just identified their own core values that, although they did resemble the group's values, can be viewed as quite strong, in the way all interviewees talked in favor of these. In fact, at the same time as the HQ had worked with their own identity and tried to create 'One MedTech Group', the North Site had worked on their own 'One North Site'. In other words, they had begun to put their own processes in place. When the previously mentioned High Potential lists were sent out, they were therefore perceived by the local line managers as requiring a great amount of extra time and energy to fulfill. Also,

there were some, sometimes different, factors that were sought for than they were used to locally. As one line manager describes:

There was a drop-down menu with different attributes, and then you'd fill in different individuals. Then you notice what the person behind the creation wants, and what I especially noted last time was the criteria to want to take jobs internationally. Movement and the like came up and that's something I haven't been thinking about myself when working with talent. (Line manager 1, North Site).

Apart from sending out these lists, there were additional instructions that the high potentials should not be told that they were high potentials, which in some cases led to the line managers making some assumptions about their employees. As one HR specialist describes:

There is a box where you fill in whether the person is willing to work abroad, and then we are to decide that without having talked to the person. (...) Our assessment often turns out to be that you're not willing to move because you know quite a lot about the person - children and kindergarten and all that stuff. (HR specialist 1, North Site).

The HR specialist argues at the same time that it needs to be that way so potential talents would not get too high expectations about their growth opportunities. This also seems to be the case in the way an employee describes how it felt when being labeled a talent, something that actually was communicated to this specific employee:

Then it was just 'wow', oh my God, now I have entered something. What if they call me and want me somewhere? It increased the expectation that they perhaps would start working with this [TM] systematically. But then MedTech Group never came back to us and that was demotivating. (Employee 1, North Site).

However, even if indicating a disappointment from first being labeled a talent and then finding out that nothing happens, the same employee also highlights the problematics of having managers guessing rather than asking about talent criteria:

It was a bit weird that I wasn't asked, because that's [mobility] something you cannot know if you don't ask the individual. As I perceived it they didn't know and had to guess, and this can have negative consequences for one's career and development opportunities. (Employee 1, North Site).

The feedback from the HQ to the local sites after the High Potential lists were filled out, was basically non-existent. HR specialist 1 at the North Site expressed in frustration that it felt like they just "threw the CVs out in cyberspace". The frustration of not getting anything back from investing time and energy, led to the local sites starting to realize they would need to work in ways that benefitted also themselves. Thus, they started to adapt and alter the ways of working with talent identification to fit their own reality and find out who their own "real talents" were:

We know when they will ask for the list [the High Potential list], and it'll be on top of everything during summer, so we'll start working on it earlier this year and implement it in our daily work in order for us to benefit from it. (HR specialist 1, North Site).

Doing it their own way was also strengthened by the various and sometimes conflicting views the actors at the local sites had on how the identification should be done. For example, in interpreting what placing an employee in NI, ME or EE meant, some line managers at the local sites highlighted that labeling an employee as NI or EE requires an action plan. This was expressed as quite too much; at the one "extreme" sending out signals that the employee would be a troublemaker when all that would be needed would be some minor corrections, and at the other "extreme" giving the employee expectations that, in the managers' opinions, the organization would not be able to meet. A consequence of this thinking was that managers expressed an hesitation of placing employees in the lower and higher box:

It feels like 'Meets Expectation' is very wide, and that only a few may be placed in 'Needs Improvement' and 'Exceeds Expectation'. This tool is very blunt and almost no matter how you [the employees] act they will end up in the middle box. (Line manager 1, South Site).

This example highlights how potential consequences of placing employees into a certain box affect how some line managers perform this activity in practice. However, other line managers express that they would never hesitate to place an employee in 'Needs Improvement', because it would require them to construct an activity plan. It is in this way, up to the individual line manager if they become affected or not, by the consequential thinking.

Similarly, there seems to be a difference in the interpretations of what it takes to be put in the EE box. For some line managers, placing an employee in this box is merely about performing more than expected and something that is highly achievable. Others express that one needs to have revolutionized the whole organization, and that you in this case should take the next step immediately. One of the employees brings up two extremes and indicates a danger in interpreting the scale differently, with such "blunt" rating:

We have Andrea as a manager and she did not give anything else than 'Meets Expectations'. 'Needs Improvement' would mean that you are very close to being fired and the 'Exceeds Expectation' is so brilliant that you are the best in the building. That is how she interpreted it. And then we have Peter, who's way more generous when it comes to the top score. By just having this three-point scale it comes down to how you interpret the lines, and it can have huge consequences. (Employee 2, North Site).

Apart from interpreting the scale differently, the line managers' ways of seeing whether someone is a talent differed. Some of them stated that they base their evaluation of their employees on the formal criteria, i.e. the ones stated in the PDD's 'what' and 'how', and praised the value of this tool. However, others base their assessment on other grounds and referred to their aggregated, long experience and gut feeling. One line manager at the North Site describes:

A talent is someone who glows. You just know. (...) It's people that you talk about. (Line manager 3, North Site).

Another line manager agrees, and also stresses that the assessment is not only based on formal criteria but also on factors the managers believe are important:

It is an accumulated experience, based on a long experience in what I believe are important talent factors. I have a certain picture of what I think a talent is. (Line manager 4, North Site).

The line managers are therefore incorporating their own views on what the different performance boxes mean and what it takes to be placed in these. The extent to which the given assessment tools are used in this way also varies, something that seems to cause a certain degree of confusion among the employees:

It has created a lot of irritation in how one is supposed to act in order to be excellent. There have not been any clear instructions making it easy to understand what they [the HQ] are searching for. This confusion causes frustration and sometimes it feels like it's not even possible to be excellent. We want to know what it takes to be excellent. (...) As I perceive it now, it's very subjective with few examples of what excellent behaviour is. (Employee 1, North Site).

Further, when evaluating employee performance and therefore also identifying talents, some line managers state that they compare the employees with each other while others do not. One HR specialist states that employees need to be compared:

You are compared with others. Why should this person be identified as a talent if this person isn't? So, there'll be a lot of those discussions about who does the most or who has the most important role. (HR specialist 1, North Site).

In this way, some employees become identified as talents if they either outperform their colleagues, reach the formal 'what' and 'how' criteria, or fit the image of a talent that the assessing managers have in mind based on their own experience. Apart from this, the different line managers with their own interests, roles, resources, daily work and the like also prioritized their work quite differently. One line manager says:

I think it's very important, so I devote a lot of time to try to develop talents, and especially talents within my organization [the North Site]. I try to find talent and see what potential they have - not only within leadership and management, but regardless of what talent they have. So I work with that continuously. And it's something that I do because I'm interested in it myself, not that much because the organization expects it from me. (...) You have quite limited resources. I wish you had more possibility and freedom to tailor projects and exercises from the people's perspective and develop their talent better, but there are loads of activities and jobs that need to be done, and individuals who are to do the jobs, so a lot of focus is on solving that situation all the time. And try to find something that suits the best for some talents. But it becomes a bit secondary. (Line manager 1, North Site).

Even if the line manager states that the TM becomes a bit secondary, a lot of energy is still devoted to working with it. However, this is not the case for all assessing managers. A line manager at the South Site shares some thoughts about feeling set aside:

Historically, and from what I've heard, it falls between the cracks when it comes to performance development talks between managers and the like. So, my boss is located in the US, for example. The idea is that it should be done in the same way, but it doesn't seem to be of highest priority. I think it's a pity because I should have the same right as everybody else to have performance development talks. But when I ask my boss, he says: 'Oh, right, perhaps we should have that', and then I get one offhand. (Line manager 1, South Site).

So, the way the line managers choose to prioritize and do their TM work can be very unfortunate for some, which is further exemplified by a line manager at the North Site:

There's of course other examples where we see that this is a real superstar, but we do not really get her to fly because we have prioritized tasks that prevent this person's growth. Unfortunately we have ended up there because of workload and prioritization reasons. (Line manager 2, North Site).

Related to this is also the fact that line managers feel like they need to keep their valuable people, or 'vulnerable single competencies' as one HR specialist calls them. This is perceived by both line managers and employees and exemplified by a line manager:

...this situation with the person I talked about before who had manager potential (...); during two years I've stimulated and developed her. (...) That part is fun, but I know it has appeared a vacant manager position which she has applied for and I'm very ambivalent when it comes to that. Professionally, I think it is good and I want to push for it since it's probably the best for the company, but for my own situation I only see problems with it in the short term. Because then I have to replace a person delivering very well. (Line manager 1, North Site).

There appears to exist a dilemma in which, professionally, some want to give their employees more opportunities, but where they personally feel like they do not want to, which is another example of consequential thinking affecting the talent identification work. The employees notice that this is the case, and one of them feels frustrated about it:

Sometimes I think it's a bit lazy, even if I definitely think I've been acknowledged. I think he [the employee's manager] thinks it's pretty convenient that I'm sitting there in the group, doing what I'm doing. I've been saying now that we need to concretize what I should be doing because now I'm starting to get frustrated, but I feel like it's up to me. (Employee 1, North Site).

Another employee means that this dilemma also leads to a static organization:

There is a thing I think is a bit daunting here, and that is that we have very few examples, not only where people do not move vertically, but not horizontally either. Instead you get stuck in one domain and when you have learned that domain, you continue with it. So we have a very static and cementing thinking. (Employee 2, North Site).

So, the line managers feel like they personally do not want to develop someone that performs very well where they are right now, seemingly because of the pressure to deliver in the short term. It leads to them, in different ways, keeping their employees in their current roles and can be seen as conflicting with the HQ ideal of talents being broad and mobile.

The Engineers Versus the Business People

Some of the interviewees from the local sites expressed a disagreement on the way the criteria for identifying high potentials focused on a certain type of employees while neglecting other types:

They [The HQ] are searching for business people, consultants that know change management. They ask for people that can lead and change others, and that's important. (...) But we don't have all the products, and they need to be developed all the time since we're in the MedTech industry. Our technical experts can therefore not be neglected since they are so valuable for us. (Line manager 2, South Site).

Following this, another line manager expresses a problem with the profiles that are asked for from the HQ:

Engineers do not seem to be as valuable here as in other organizations. (...) It becomes a skewed picture when focusing on the business thinking, something that the engineers not always can identify themselves with. (Line manager 3, North Site).

The same view is shared by the employees, and one of them also describes the consequences:

There are many great people here that are not seen for their full value (...). The deep knowledge about the products and their usage and construction does not exist in the decision hierarchy and then it easily happens, when you place this knowledge hierarchy next to the decision hierarchy, that you have a hard time achieving understanding and acceptance when it comes to decisions. The other thing is, if you don't meet and affirm that the expertise is a talent, you easily make it seem very odd and you create an us and a them. (Employee 2, North Site).

These expressions illustrate how there seems to be a discrepancy between the HQ and the local sites on the view of what a talent is, and therefore also how the identification of talents should be done. Interviewees from the HQ were often mentioning and referring to MedTech Group's Leadership Competencies when explaining how employees are assessed as talents. These competencies mainly highlight broadness, strategic capabilities and people skills, such as motivating others. The HQ therefore seems to focus more on classical, broader leadership and managerial talent, while the local sites focus more on the technical and engineering talent. One line manager at the North Site argues that a well functioning TM process involves talents that are not necessarily potential leaders or managers, but also has a "local flavour". The important role of the experts and hence why the talent identification should include this aspect is indicated. Even the HR department at the local sites stressed the engineers as important:

We were highlighting when we sent in the lists of talents [the High Potential lists] to the HQ that names on the lists were not only managerial potentials, but some of them were also very important technical experts. (HR specialist 2, North Site).

Many of the employees stressed the importance of good leaders also being people with a high technical knowing. The strong focus on the engineers and their technical abilities with regards to talents was therefore prevalent also for managerial careers. This view of talents and talent identification as a social agreement at the local sites differs from the HQ perspective that focuses much more on the leadership and managerial abilities, including having moved across niches, in favor of the technical abilities. One line manager illustrates how the mentioned social context affects how it plays out:

I become affected myself by our projects, and manager forums where a lot is about making technical and important decisions. I perceive that the technical aspect is asked for, and then it also becomes what I am looking for in a talent. Then I know that these persons will have it easier to advance and make progress, that is part of our culture. (Line manager 1, North Site).

The ways in which there seems to be a distinction between the engineers and the business people, is further produced by the employees. This can be seen in how the employees, i.e. the engineers, construct themselves as experts/technical knowing and distinct themselves from being leaders or managers, and therefore add to the mentioned social agreement:

I believe that the best engineer isn't a good manager. Engineers aren't good managers since they're so odd, I know since I'm an engineer myself. (Employee 3, North Site).

The Role of Exposure and Support

A recurring pattern among the interviewees indicated that performance alone could not describe or explain how employees were identified as talents. The importance of having support and being exposed, especially by and to the “right people”, was mentioned multiple times by both non-managerial and managerial employees as critical factors for being identified as talents. As an HR manager at HQ states:

There is perhaps a tendency that it sometimes could be the usual suspects, right, so who's identified as a talent is whoever senior management sees and meets and has exposure to. (HR manager 1, HQ).

An employee further stresses the importance of exposure and support, and also gives an example of how this can play out in the organization:

I would say it's a combination of working hard together, and the fact that we're an exposed group in the organization. We often work with highly prioritized projects and in a close relation with the management team. I also have a manager that has lifted me up during presentations and such. This has given me exposure. (Employee 1, South Site).

Our observations add the insight that certain employees, especially blue-collars, are placed further away, even in a separate building, from management. Various managers mentioned

that exposure, by having close physical distance to employees, increases the employees' chances of being observed at formal and also at more informal occasions. By walking down the corridors at MedTech Group it became evident for us that employees closer to management are being significantly more exposed to managers' observations, and that it therefore can be argued that the physical aesthetics of the sites may have implications for how exposure becomes possible.

To further illustrate the importance of exposure and support, two mini-cases are presented. During the interviews and informal discussions, these were frequently mentioned as examples of how the organization actually has talents internally and at times is able to find them. However, these stories, we argue, also exemplify how exposure and support become important in the identification of talents at MedTech Group.

The first case concerns MedTech Group's CEO, who became a manager relatively early, in his late twenties. It was one of the founders who identified him as a talent, long before the company had started working actively with TM. The HR in Sweden did however argue that he was too young to take on a managerial position. He was therefore put under the wings of his guardian angel, the mentioned founder, who made him a top manager in another country instead. After performing well in this role he was moved around in the organization with the help of his guardian, and finally ended up as the CEO in Sweden, for the whole group. Commenting on this story, and answering if MedTech Group could be better at identifying their talents, a HR manager at the HQ highlights this story as a reminder that MedTech Group can foster talents internally and find them early. However, we argue that the story reveals what factors that become important in order to be identified as a talent.

The second case concerns a young employee in her early thirties. She had been working at MedTech Group for three years and after performing well in her junior role, she was identified as a talent and later appointed line manager at one department at one of the sites. She is described as responsible, open and very outgoing. She also proved herself worthy when succeeding as an acting manager. One HR specialist, being the one hiring her initially, expresses the role in the identification of her as a talent: "I pushed and cheered for her. I was not responsible for her, she was not under my umbrella".

These two cases illustrate how the identification of talents is being done. Both indicate that performance is important, but having someone who can take the talent under their wings becomes highly important in order to be seen. In the first story, the CEO had a strong founder pushing for him, and moving him around when meeting resistance. In the second story, which takes place after the TM initiative started, the employee in question had an HR specialist not even in direct relation with her daily work cheering for her. According to herself, she was good at specific aspects, but not outstanding, when she was identified as a talent.

These stories seem to be examples of systematic manager/champion-employee relationship importance. This indicates that employees become highly dependent on if the relation with their manager or another champion is working properly, in order to be identified as a talent. In this way, it can be argued that exposure becomes important in order to be seen, and that support may be a way to get exposure. However, this seems contradicting, as many employees expressed a lack of support from their managers, and an uncertainty if anyone would hold their hand when the wind blows. One employee explained this lack of support:

The tradition we have here means that you throw someone out the window and then let them flap their wings for all that they have got, to see if they can fly. (...) That is part of the culture here which is very destructive. (Employee 2, North Site).

Discussion: Talent Identification Translating Into New Localities

In order to understand how MedTech Group's talent identification practices have come into being, the translation model proves helpful. For the idea of talent identification to travel, it was separated from its institutional, i.e. corporate, surroundings, and translated into a TM Guide and template. The HQ requested white-collar employees that had broad experiences from more than one area, including sales and commercial functions. As the engineers more often were described as employees with expert knowledge in a more narrow field, the designer of the talent identification process was therefore already from the start valorizing talents as business people and leaders while marginalizing the engineers and the blue-collar (cf. Bowker & Star, 1999). However, as the corporate idea traveled and reached the local sites, it did it with some resistance. The local sites had a quite different view of what a talent is, in which they valued their engineers and their technical abilities to a much higher extent. Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) call this the ideas of residence, causing friction that fosters negotiations between the actors in the network and therefore leads to a translation and use of the identification process in ways unexpected by the initial designer (Latour, 1991). The ways in which the classification work was being done may therefore be seen as a result of a translation process in which the classification system is being added to, appropriated and sometimes a bit set aside based on each actor's own interests, experiences and conditions, and in which it also seems like a lot of communication is lost on the way between the HQ and the sites (cf. Latour, 1987). The ways of working with talent identification differed, not only from what the HQ was favouring, but also between different line managers. Doing it their own way by questioning what is in it for them, and interpreting and enacting upon the initiative differently, affected how the work unfolded in practice.

Some managers evaluate their employees and identify them as talents by assessing if they achieve EE in the PDD, and is similar to what Bowker and Star (1999) label an 'Aristotelian classification'. The line managers are in this way assessing if the employees do or do not have some predetermined characteristics. Others seem to evaluate their employees by comparing them with each other rather than setting up a series of criteria putting the employee into the box of talents. The line managers are therefore assessing the employees according to a broad picture of a talent that they have in mind, a prototype, and can be seen as what Bowker and Star (1999) labels a 'prototypical classification'. However, many line managers express that they not only assess their employees against a set of criteria, but also rely on their experience from what they believe are important qualities. This supports the argument that the two types of classification often conflate (Bowker & Star, 1999), illustrating a much fuzzier and complex classification than first thought of. The distinction between the two classifications may not empirically be seen as very useful, but theoretically it is both important and useful, since it helps us see what the classification system makes visible (Bowker & Star, 1999). When line managers are identifying their employees in line with an Aristotelian classification, they make visible norms and standards that are present at MedTech Group. However, when in line with a prototypical classification, the classifier makes visible prototypes or role models

for the group of talents which could be based on nothing else but own opinions and views of what traits a talent should have. These seemingly definitive and stable categories therefore mean nothing in themselves since they carry a diversity of definitions, and are dependent on what the classifier puts into them. This is why it does not make sense to see classifications as things out there in the world that have predetermined attributes (Lampland & Star, 2009). Instead, we argue in line with Bowker and Star (1999) that different social groups, and individuals within these, tend to have quite different prototypes in mind when classifying, thus creating identification of multiple talents rather than one certain type. This creates messiness and quite extreme consequences for those involved, especially since employees need to be in line with the prototype that the classifier has in mind. The system demands an Aristotelian classification in the ways the talent should fulfill the formal criteria for the EE box, but in practice, the assessment was also based on what the classifier thought was important talent criteria, and how the classifier experienced the potential talent.

Another example causing complexity is the role that informal factors played in the classification of talents. On the one hand employees seem to need both exposure and support in order to become talents, but on the other hand they express that there is a lack of support particularly. It can therefore be argued that the system is not allowing for what it is asking for. The importance of especially exposure and support hence becomes quite problematic. Furthermore, what is put in the categories and communicated to the employees is not only results from the classifier's own opinion, but also from reflecting on consequences from certain classifications. Mäkitalo and Säljö (2002) describe this as reflexively attending to the consequences of the classifiers' actions and a monitoring of what this classification work will imply. In our case this reflexivity becomes particularly obvious as the line managers are given a high degree of freedom in working with TM while at the same time being quite constrained especially by time and resources available for this. In this way, initial classifications become modified depending on anticipations of feedback from stakeholders as results from their concerns and expectations, and resources and time available for developing an employee available in the organization, which we could see often resulted in the mid category becoming very wide and the organization being perceived as static. As we could see, the managers perceive that their teams with their valuable people need to deliver in the short term. Therefore they hesitate to place employees in the EE box, as they do not want their employees to leave their positions to develop somewhere else, because that would imply that the manager would have to invest time in hiring someone new for their position. The line manager therefore becomes reluctant to classify the employees as talents, and hence also prevents the employees from gaining the broadness requested from the HQ. This can, from an employee perspective be seen as examples of classification giving suffering (cf. Bowker & Star, 1999).

In line with Mäkitalo and Säljö (2002), we argue that the line manager role implies that they become important intermediaries that close gaps and see possibilities. However, line managers' struggles and their reflexively attending to the consequences, as well as the employees' frustration and confusion as regards how they should behave in order to be identified as talents, are seldom visible to the public. The ambiguities seem to become invisible when they are translated onto paper and into seemingly rigid categories. The problems that these actors encounter thus become hidden, as do the problems the organization

has in providing proper support for their employees, which appears evident when managers at the HQ first state that the system is in place.

We have shown how the local translations flourished, and one could imagine that translations as these would not only alter the content of a system, but also its shape. This together with the consequences for the output of the work with talent identification is further discussed in the next section.

A Heterogeneous Classification System

The idea of talent identification and how this classification work is being done in practice differ within MedTech Group. The official categories provoked resistance from the local sites who perceived a lack of fit between the classification system and the identities of their everyday work life (cf. Bowker & Star, 1999). It may therefore be argued that the classification initiated by the HQ became an object of contention (Bowker & Star, 1999). Furthermore, since the local sites made clear that their talents were the experts and engineers rather than the managers or leaders, they started to produce their own way of classifying within the system, exemplifying Bourdieu's (1985) assumption that all parties will seek a monopoly of legitimate classifying in that struggle. The classifiers started to compete in order to establish their preferred classification work as legitimate and to institutionalize it across social contexts. Actors may in this sense not only adopt a proposed classification system but can adapt it, and by that changing both its content and shape (Lampland & Star, 2009). The local sites and the HQ hence developed their own way of classifying, consisting of what Foucault (1979) calls socially produced specifications that are acting out to specify social norms, here also reinforcing the 'we and them' feeling. The socially produced specifications that were present at the local sites, was further strengthened by the way the employees seemed to distinguish themselves as engineers rather than leaders and even partly rejecting the manager role. The talent identification can therefore be seen as a two-way process, in which also the employees are co-constructors of the talent identification system.

Creating Multiple Talents

The general perception among the managers at the HQ was the aim of a more structured and standardized process for identifying their talents, with less interpretation and more standardized outputs. It may therefore be seen as quite surprising and even contradicting that they allowed such a high degree of freedom to the line managers as they actually did. As the line managers were allowed this high degree of freedom in how they identified their talents, they not only became important for how the process unfolded in the local sites, but also contributed to the creation of multiple talents.

By illustrating how newly arrived refugees in Sweden are not singular but multiple as they are being conceived of in different terms in different organizations, Diedrich and Styhre (2008) showed that classification work, contrary to its original intent, may produce a certain degree of heterogeneity. Classification therefore produces objects that are multiple rather than unified and we follow this reasoning. However, we argue that the heterogeneity may also be produced by complementary and sometimes conflicting classification work that may exist within one single organization. Because even if MedTech Group is using the so-called buddy meetings and the grandfather principle in order to calibrate the identification process, the

flexibility still creates multiple talents rather than talents that are similar. In the present organization, though, it might be relevant to consider that the sites are seen to have “little common DNA”, and seem quite loosely coupled from each other. While this could be seen in that the older North Site, where the ambiance was seen to be insular, already had initiated some ways of working with TM, we still saw many similarities horizontally between the sites. In this direction the classification systems varied surprisingly little, but vertically, between the HQ and the local sites, the difference was more obvious.

We argue that the single idea of talent and what it constitutes, as a result of the heterogeneity within the classification system in use, become multiple in practice. This is similar to Mol’s (2002) study of the treatment of atherosclerosis in a Dutch hospital, where she suggests that atherosclerosis is not a single thing but “many things” depending on context. The idea of talent is conceived of in different terms and from a variety of perspectives, and we therefore argue in a similar way as Mol (2002) that in this case, the idea of talent needs to be described as a part of the practices in which it is enacted. One can of course argue that we humans all are different to each other, and no matter what classification system involving human judgment is in use, this difference will be present and part of the outcome. By drawing on the work of Mol (2002), the different and sometimes conflicting views is however not necessarily a negative thing, but the systems can be more or less conflicting. If aiming at more standardized outputs an alignment of the classification work may therefore be considered. The HR managers at the HQ had a clear picture of what a talent looks like and should be like, and they often did not agree with what the local sites viewed as talents. The local sites’ responses to that was irritation and a ‘we and them’ feeling, and choices to work in a minimal way, or use other methods in parallel with the given assessment tools. Classifications are often seen as creating and maintaining social order (Bowker & Star, 1999), but what happens when different ways of classifying are meeting, or working in parallel?

Producing and Maintaining a Negotiated Social Order

It seemed like the HQ was somewhat aware of the local sites’ competing views, since they for example expressed that the experts and engineers were important. This awareness was however not explicitly observed by the local sites. It could therefore be argued that they were not fully working to perform a more aligned classification system. Coherence was however developed and maintained across the different intersecting worlds with the PDD. Basically all line managers fulfill the minimal requirement of using the PDD framework with regards to the talent identification. The classification work has in this way been able to foster some cooperation across the social worlds of the HQ and the local sites (cf. Bowker & Star, 1999). In fact, even if various line managers expressed a dissatisfaction with the classification system, they did use it in what can be seen as a way to please the HQ, illustrating that people can use categories without actually believing in them (Bowker & Star, 1999). However, our field material shows that the conflicting and competing views on how the classification work should be done have led to the production of a heterogeneous classification system that seem to function as a way to produce and maintain a negotiated social order. One could imagine that a incoherent classification system would rather create a failure in the production of social order, but we argue that the heterogeneity in the classification system at MedTech Group instead allowed for somewhat settled negotiations, and by that fostered a social order. The

various ways of classifying within the system did however not work in isolation, but both the HQ and the local sites highlighted important aspects within their contexts and how the whole organization could benefit from focusing on these. Callon and Law (1982) describe this as how actors try to persuade one another, by saying that ‘it is in your interest as well’. As the local sites started realizing that they would need to work in ways that would benefit themselves, they were also seeking to define their own position in relation to others by noting that ‘it is in our interests to...’. The actors were thus trying and actually succeeding to impose an negotiated order on a part of the social world. Again, it seemed like the HQ to some extent was aware of the local sites’ competing views, but despite this they did not seem to be actively working to act in the local sites’ interests. This raises the question of what the result could be if one classification system would be pushed over social contexts without considering local interests, experiences etcetera; perhaps a social disorder or a breakdown.

We have showed that different interpretations and enactments are causing a certain degree of heterogeneity within the classification system to emerge, leading to the idea of talent as becoming multiple in practice, and a social order to be negotiated and maintained, but how is the mentioned political power and struggles expressed, and how is the system functioning?

The Structural Expression of Power

As discussed earlier, the local sites started to work with talent identification in a way to better fit their realities. This indicates that they started to compete with the HQ in order to establish their preferred ways of classifying as legitimate. At first glance, the local sites and the line managers therefore seemed quite important for how the identification of talents unfolds in practice. As they were given such a high degree of freedom, and as the HQ’s way of classifying talents became objects of contention, the local sites and the line managers were at first sight constructed as powerful. Using Bowker and Star’s (1996) words, they were able to set their own terms when deciding who is a talent and were therefore afforded power. Foucault (1980) describes this as the power of interpretation, and in our case this means that they have the right to define what a talent is, and also to decide whether identifying talents is something that they want and have time to work with at all.

However, by not a priori determining what actors play important roles, but rather following the actions we were able to identify the roles of the local sites and the line managers as more complex than first thought of. At second glance, the power and the importance of the local sites and the line managers reached only to a certain degree, as it was somewhat constrained by the HQ, and, arguably, also by the distinction the employees themselves made between being an engineer and a manager. They were able to put their own stamp on their own local site, but as the HQ had a pretty clear picture of what a talent is for them, and that they often did not agree with the local sites, the line managers were frequently questioned and corrected in different ways by the HQ. This is similar to Walter’s (2005) study of the temporary work agency that decided what aspects that were important in their classification taxonomy. We argue that this did in fact limit the line managers’ power while also creating a ‘we and them’ feeling. Hence, as stressed by Bowker and Star (1999), classification work consists of political and social struggles, and power is exercised in these struggles in its way of praising some categories while silencing others (Foucault, 1970). Recalling the statement from HR manager 1 from the HQ about the process being up and

running in all local sites and without problems, illustrates that once a system is in place, practical politics and social struggles like these are often forgotten (Bowker & Star, 1999). As reminded by Bowker and Star (1999), these tensions between locales is however not something to be avoided or deleted, but it is rather about fostering stable relationships by artful integration.

The (Dys-)Functionality of the System

As argued by Bowker and Star (1999), no classification system is ever perfect, and the classification work at MedTech Group has multiple limitations. Firstly, the various and sometimes even conflicting views at MedTech Group, and the allowance for the local sites and the line managers to have a high degree of freedom and flexibility, may from a classification logic be interpreted as a quite dysfunctional system. This since the aim of standardizing the process and having valid outputs may be seen as lost or impossible. It is however questionable how much of the flexibility and the local interpretations that actually permeate beyond the local sites. The HQ did in fact maintain the power of interpretation and the final right to define (Foucault, 1970) as they had the final saying on aspects that were considered important and aspects that were considered less important. This leads us to another limitation of the system, the way the local sites' interests and important aspects become bypassed by the HQ. By not fully letting the local views and interpretations be permeating beyond the local sites, they also risk getting lost in these processes.

However, a Foucauldian perspective offers an alternative way for perceiving how the classification system is working. Rather than thinking in standardized terms of valid outputs, and so on, this perspective emphasizes how the system employs disciplinary practices, creating outputs that are analyzable and manageable. We argue that the same system may also be seen as functioning properly, in the way the limitations of the classification work also provides advantages when trying to make things work. One advantage in the system's incompleteness is the HQ's allowance for flexibility and local adaptations. This may not only be seen as a failure of standardizing the process, but also as a way to make the local sites interested and feeling valued. Bourdieu (1985) describes this as the way parties employ symbolic capital in the struggle to legitimate classifying. By empowering the local sites and the line managers they felt some autonomy and flexibility, and it also made them control important elements of their job. The system therefore enabled the local actors to draw upon the system to structure their field of possibilities (cf. Foucault, 1979), but it also prevented the problematization of the existing order of things. The HQ could in this way continue to have the final right to define, and without being further questioned. Empowering in this case therefore has disciplining effects where a simultaneous production of empowerment and control emerges, illustrating what Foucault (1980) describes as apparatuses of control. This illustrates how control and power can be exercised by using more freedom (Foucault, 1979).

Another limitation that provides an advantage is how the HQ often questioned and corrected the outputs that were put forward by the local sites. This does not only risk the local sites' views getting lost in the processes, but also makes them calculable (Callon, 1988). The different actors with conflicting views and interests become too complex for the HQ to handle, and by holding on to the HQ's own views, subjects that are analyzable and describable are created. One HR manager at the HQ expressed that they would have 35

percent talents if taking raw data from the local sites. One could imagine that this would imply complexities on how to construct development plans for all those employees. By reducing the complexities and ambiguities, the systems' calculability and manageability is enhanced. Power does in this way not only have negative consequences (Foucault, 1970), but may in fact be productive and necessary for the organization to be able to handle the complexities embedded in everyday life.

As shown, the classification work has multiple limitations, but these limitations also provide advantages in getting things done. The dysfunctionality of the system hence becomes its functionality. However, as these complexities and ambiguities were hidden and almost taken-for-granted, we argue that the talent identification process was somewhat black-boxed for those involved. In this study we have managed to open this black box.

Conclusion and Implications

At first glance, this is a straightforward story about how a MNC sets out to identify their talents. However, in fulfilling our first aim, to investigate how the talent identification unfolds in practice, a more complex process than first thought of is revealed, one that played out in ways unexpected by the initial designer (cf. Latour, 1991). Illustrating how the local translations flourished, we have been able to show that the specific activity of talent identification can be characterized as processes of translation. These processes usually remain hidden, but as we opened the black box, to use Latour's (1987) words, we could highlight the seemingly definitive and stable categories as dependent on what the classifier puts into them, and that they therefore mean nothing in themselves.

Our second aim was to investigate on what grounds an employee becomes labeled a talent, whilst our third aim was to discuss some of the consequences the TM work has throughout the organization. Our study illustrates how talent identification, in line with Mäkelä et al. (2010), is based on a performance appraisal, but also that it does not automatically translate into talent pool inclusion or exclusion. We managed to show that exposure and support, in the relation between employees and managers or other champions, seem to be equally, or even more, important than performance when it comes to ways of becoming identified as a talent at MedTech Group. The importance of a manager/champion-employee relation can have both positive and negative implications. On the one hand it keeps the local flavour, but on the other hand it creates confusion and frustration among the employees, not knowing how they should act in order to be a talent. In addition, the importance that was given to exposure and support, indicates that informal criteria are given a higher voice than formal ones, and may in fact impede the aim of standardizing the process.

Our study indicates that a classification system can include a certain degree of heterogeneity, that in some regards can be seen as quite conflicting. The study further indicates that this heterogeneous system even can produce and maintain rather than dissolve a social order. Coherence was developed and maintained across the different intersecting worlds with the PDDs. The plasticity in the PDDs allowed for making the idea of talent multiple. We therefore argue that also the outputs of the system include some heterogeneity as a result of the complementary and sometimes conflicting aspects that exist in the classification system. This is something that may be seen as quite contradicting to how

classifications are supposed to work, and we argue that the idea of talent needs to be described as a part of the practices in which it is enacted.

This paper contributes to the TM literature in several aspects. Although it has previously been argued that TM is something contextual (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013 & Sparrow et al., 2013), little attention has been paid to illustrate how TM processes actually unfold in practice (Iles et al., 2010 & Jones et al., 2012). We have analyzed the processes through which a company sets out to identify its talents, and we argue that classification work plays a fundamental role during the identification of talents. Our study thus responds to the call for more empirical examples of how organizations engage in TM. We are also illustrating the problematics of having a TM system that only recognizes a narrow definition of talent. In addition, we believe that our ANT approach stresses the importance of understanding how TM processes are translated as they travel throughout an organization, something that contradicts the more naïve TM literature consisting of normative views and best practices, and further highlights the importance of studying TM in practice rather from a distance. This study further illustrates the micro-politics of the use of classifications in the daily practices of one specific organization. Viewing the identification process from a classification perspective highlights the importance of understanding how certain criteria are valorized and others marginalized, and the struggles by which different parties try to legitimate their own ways of classifying. Our study thus also responds to the call (cf. McDonnell et al., 2010 & Van den Brink et al., 2013) for a better understanding of the political processes involved in TM.

Further, this paper also contributes to classification theory by answering the call for more practice-based research of how classifying is part of everyday working life (cf. Bowker & Star, 1999). We add an example of how categories are not given or stable but rather local and contingent. This insight may perhaps not be something new, but we have further showed how these categories leads to the emergence of heterogeneity within a classification system, which contrary to previous views maintains a social order rather than dissolves it.

The study also allows us to reflect upon what practical implications this may have for the organization. For a TM system to function, there is a need to build a certain degree of flexibility into the system. The limitations of a system can provide advantages, but it is however naïve to believe that this would remove the problems and ambiguities for those actors involved. The struggles in what foregoes an ultimate classification become hidden and the ultimate talent pool eventually shows the result of the power expression in which the HQ, without removing the local sites' perception of having power, has legitimized their own perspective of what is functional over what the local sites think. This implies that the final talent pool might only to a certain degree mirror the actual talent situation, even if this can be seen as functional from a HQ perspective. Further, despite the contested power of the line managers, their ways of classifying become the obvious reality for the employees, and it can be seen as the greater the possibility to create and use conflicting ways of classifying locally, the further away are employees kept from becoming seen as talents from an HQ perspective. This seems to create a static organization in which employees feel stuck and frustrated.

A limitation with our study is that we have not been able to adopt a longitudinal approach, and to follow the organization for a prolonged period of time. This would be of interest since we have showed that MedTech Group is on a journey of developing their TM practices, and we have solely captured the initial and immature part of that journey. For future

research, we therefore suggest studies examining how an initiative like this develops over time. Also, as MedTech Group is considered a quite scattered organization due to acquiring many different companies, further research may therefore explore how classification systems operate in other contexts where organizational divisions or sites are perceived as more integrated with each other and the HQ. Do heterogeneous classification systems emerge also in these more integrated organizations, and if so, how is it affecting the social order?

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