

MASTER THESIS

# **ALIGNING HR PORTAL USE IN A SHARED SERVICES SETTING**

A STRUCTURATIONAL APPROACH

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# SUMMARY

The human resources shared services model promises both cost reductions and improvements of the service delivery by blending the centralized and decentralized model in a hybrid shared service center (SSC). By doing so, the shared services model would reap the benefits of both while minimizing their drawbacks. However, scientific research has been unable to uncover these theorized benefits in practice. This thesis will continue on the argument that the end-user and its use of the provided services by the SSC play a crucial role in the ability of the shared services model to materialize the expected benefits (Meijerink, 2013). More specifically, this research will focus on how end-users' interactions with HR portals conflict with HR-management's prescribed use and aims to uncover the source of this conflicting behavior by end-users.

Giddens' structuration theory is used as a theoretical lens to understand discrepancies between prescribed and enacted use. To uncover the social structures drawn upon by end-users and HR-management during their design and use of the HR portals, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted at a Dutch subsidiary of a multinational corporation. Respondents were questioned about one of two HR-portals. One recently introduced application for finding, managing and publishing job opportunities and an online tool for annual activity and professional development discussions introduced six years ago.

Findings presented in this paper show that actual use of the technologies were not in line with management's envisioned use. Some end-users avoided the official channels while others stated that they used the tools simply because they were obligated to. As a result, the quality of the data in the tools was low and employees used the tools only as a formality. These forms of conflict are the result of five themes of contradiction that were uncovered after analysis of the gathered data.

This paper argues that these themes of contradictions are rooted in the central question the shared service model tries to answer: should support services be centralized or decentralized? Each element of the themes can be seen as related to either centralization or decentralization efforts. Results show that HR-management mainly drew on social structures related to centralization. Their responsibility of the performance of the SSC and their goal of reducing costs resulted in efforts that would improve efficiency for the centralized SSC. End-users on the other hand drew mainly on social structures related to decentralization as they believed technology should create value for them through improved effectivity. These contradictions resulted in several forms of conflict that hampered the materialization of the expected benefits of the shared services model.

Results of this empirical research imply that the success of the shared services model is depended on how managers can reduce contradiction of structures related to centralization and decentralization as this would result in alignment of enacted and prescribed use.

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# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND

The human resources shared services model, often referred to as the HR shared service center (SSC), promises both cost reductions and improvements to the HR service delivery (Janssen & Joha, 2006; Redman, Snape, Wass, & Hamilton, 2007). However, scientific evidence is less optimistic as it was unable to uncover these results in practice (Janssen & Joha, 2006; Maatman, Bondarouk, & Looise, 2010; Meijerink, Bondarouk, & Looise, 2013; Redman et al., 2007). The main idea behind the shared services model is that staff, activities and resources are centralized in a semi-autonomous business unit, while the control over this business unit is decentralized in the organization (T. Davis, 2005; Maatman et al., 2010; Ulrich, 1995). Therefore, SSCs are seen as a hybrid of both the centralized and decentralized models (Bergeron, 2003; Janssen & Joha, 2006; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013) and should reap the benefits of both while minimizing their drawbacks (Farndale, Paauwe, & Hoeksema, 2009; Maatman et al., 2010; Quinn, Cooke, & Kris, 2000; Ulrich, 1995). The discrepancy between the theoretical benefits and scientific evidence has led to increased interest by researchers for the last few decades. Scholars have tried to gain more insight into the concept of the shared services model by focussing mainly on two perspectives: motives for adopting the shared services model (e.g. Farndale et al., 2009; Herbert & Seal, 2012; Janssen & Joha, 2006; Maatman et al., 2010; Quinn et al., 2000; Reilly, 2000); and how value is created by the properties of the shared service center (e.g. T. Davis, 2005; Janssen & Joha, 2004; Meijerink, 2013; Redman et al., 2007; Reilly, 2000). One of these latter studies showed that characteristics of the shared service center only have a limited impact on the perceived value of end-users (Meijerink, 2013). Instead, it argued that the end-user, and his use of the SSC, plays a crucial role in reaching an acceptable level of performance for the HR SSC. This finding is the starting point for this thesis.

Meijerink's (2013) research took a *quantitative* approach for studying the use of the SSC's services. Results showed that the amount of use has a positive impact on end-user's perceived value. In contrast to his research, this study will adopt a *qualitative* approach to uncover *how* employees actually use the services offered by the SSC. This is important because the success of the shared services model will depend on end-users' behavior in regard to the SSC. Not only are employees tasked with providing the HR SSC with the necessary personal information (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013), they also have to enact control over which services are offered and how these are delivered (Ulrich, 1995). Therefore, instead of focussing on the properties of the HR SSC itself as many researchers have done, the focus should shift to the end-user and his *use* of the HR SSC's services.

## RESEARCH FOCUS & GOAL

Since research covering an entire HR SSC with all the services it provides is too time consuming for this thesis, one aspect of the SSC was selected as the object for this research: the online HR portal. Portals used in enterprises provide users with applications, knowledge, and job- and task-related information (Feng, Ehrenhard, Hicks, & Maathuis, 2010). Portals that are specifically designed for HR activities often include self-service applications and HR specific information that employees need to consume or deliver HR services (Florkowski & Olivás-Luján, 2006; Meijerink, 2013). This technology is seen as “tier 0” in the multi-tiered structure of SSCs, meaning that it is designed to be the first point of contact for the end-user (Farndale et al., 2009) and thus an important aspect of the HR SSC (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009). The HR portal can facilitate both the benefits of the centralized and decentralized models and therefore provides an interesting research object. Technology can help to standardize and automate processes, making the service delivery more efficient and cost effective (Ruta, 2009). Additionally, the HR portal can be used to decentralize the control to the business-unit by providing them information and tools to better adapt the services to the employees. Furthermore, the HR portal can be used to improve the service delivery because it “speeds up transaction processing, reduces information errors, and improves the tracking and control of HR actions” (Lengnick-Hall & Moritz, 2003, p. 369).

Similar to recent insights into the important role of the end-user and his use of HR SSC’s services, scholars acknowledge that end-user’s use is also crucial for value creation of information systems. Effects of technology are not seen as a function of the technologies themselves, but rather as how they are *used* by people (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). Indeed, users may use technology differently or choose not to use it at all, which consequently has dissimilar outcomes (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Orlikowski, 2000). This is especially true for an HR portal since it often offers self service applications that only create value for the organization if they are used by the employee in the intended way. If for example an employee does not use the HR portal to keep his personal information up to date, the HR SSC is unable to provide adequate and personalized services. Therefore, it is essential for organizations to align the actual use of the HR portal with the intended use designed by management. The goal of this research is thus to gain insight into how management can improve alignment of end-user’s enacted use of the HR SSC, in particular the HR portal, with their prescribed use.

## RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

This thesis will have both theoretical and practical relevance. First, researchers in the field of HR have mainly focussed on characteristics of HR SSCs and how these contribute to the overall success of the shared services model. By shifting the focus from the SSC to the end-user, this research will provide new insights into how these aspects of the SSC are enacted in practice. This is important because similar to technology (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), effects of the SSC should be seen as a

result of how it is used by employees. Second, this thesis will focus specifically on the HR portal, which is seen as an important part of the HR SSC (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009). However, research on the topic of HR portals is scarce, with the notable exception of Ruta's work (Ruta, 2005; 2009). His research looked at issues with the implementation of HR portals and how they align with the overall HR strategy. Research focussed specifically on end-users' use of the HR portal is missing. Additionally, even though technology is seen as an initiator for the restructuring of HR to new forms like an SSC, in depth research on technology in an HR shared service setting is scarce. This research aims to fill this gap in today's literature. Thirdly, besides these theoretical contributions, this thesis will have practical relevance as well. Results from this research provides HR managers with insights into how end-users may use the HR portal as provided by the HR SSC. Additionally, it will uncover the reasons why employees use the HR portal in a certain way. By comparing these reasons with managers' vision of the HR portal contradictions may arise, which can explain why the actual use may not align with the intended use. This insight is the first step into providing managers with solutions to improve the alignment between the prescribed and enacted use.

This thesis will continue as follows. The next chapter will provide in depth descriptions of the shared services model and the HR portal. Additionally, the theoretical lens that was chosen for this research will be outlined. This section will also present the research question. Following this theoretical framework will be the methodology chapter. Here, the research setting and process of data gathering will be described as well as the process of data analysis. The following chapter will present the results from the conducted research. The final chapter will discuss the research findings and outline implications for research and practice. This chapter will end with the limitations of this research and directions for future research before presenting the main conclusions.

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will hold the theoretical framework. Here, the concept of the shared services model as well as HR portals will be outlined. Subsequently the main aspects of structuration theory, which will form the theoretical model, will be described. Finally, the main research question of this thesis and related sub questions will be provided.

## THE HR SHARED SERVICE CENTER

The implementation of a shared service center is seen as a response to the question if support services should be centralized or decentralized (Farndale et al., 2009; Quinn et al., 2000; Strikwerda, 2010). The popularity of this new type of service arrangement can be assigned to the fact that it combines aspects of both the centralized and decentralized model (see table 1). Centralized models create efficiency due to economies of scale and standardization but are less flexible and have slow response time to changes in the business units (Bergeron, 2003). On the other hand, decentralized models are more capable in adapting to the needs of the business unit due to their flexibility. However, decentralization means that resources are duplicated throughout the organization which makes it less efficient (Janssen & Joha, 2006; Reilly, 2000). So both models have their advantages and disadvantages where benefits of the one are mirrored by the drawbacks of the other (Meijerink et al., 2013). The shared services model is seen as a hybrid form of the centralized and decentralized model (Bergeron, 2003; Janssen & Joha, 2006). In theory, it would reap the benefits of both models while minimizing their drawbacks (Farndale et al., 2009; Maatman et al., 2010; Meijerink et al., 2013; Quinn et al., 2000; Reilly, 2000; Ulrich, 1995).

*Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of centralization and decentralization models for service delivery (Adapted from Meijerink et al., 2013)*

CENTRALIZATION MODELS		DECENTRALIZATION MODELS	
<i>Disadvantages</i>	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>	<i>Advantages</i>
Limited local responsiveness	Economies of scale and scope	Higher costs	Local responsiveness
Inflexibility	Consistent service delivery	Inconsistent service delivery	Flexibility
Slow decision-making	Efficiency	Duplication of recourses	Speedy decision-making
Little consideration for local priorities	Strategic alignment	Inconsistent standards	Extensive control at the business unit level
Large distance to business unit	Best practice sharing	Little sharing of best practices	Responsiveness to end-user need

In practice, the SSC is a semi-autonomous business-unit where activities and resources across different parts of the organization are consolidated (Maatman et al., 2010). This centralized service center is shared by several units in the organization (Bergeron, 2003) and could result in an 'easy' 25-30% reduction of costs due economies of scale (Janssen & Joha, 2006; Quinn et al., 2000). This reduction is the result of decreased operational, maintenance and control costs (Janssen & Joha, 2006). Additionally, practitioners expect that the centralization will improve the quality of their service delivery. SSCs can be seen as a 'one-stop-shop' for employees that can help them with all their questions and issues thus eliminating the need for redirecting employees to different locations (Reilly, 2000). Furthermore, centralization allows for standardized processes in the entire organization which will make the service delivery more consistent (Reilly, 2000).

Although the shared services model incorporates several centralization aspects, it cannot be seen as a completely centralized model. Ulrich (1995) even states that the shared service center is the complete opposite of centralization. The reason for this is that with a centralized model the control rests with a corporate level entity, whereas at the shared service center the control is decentralized in the organization (Meijerink et al., 2013). This means that with a shared services model, the business units that share the centralized SSC hold the power as they decide which services they acquire and at what price (Redman et al., 2007). Or as Ulrich (1995, p. 14) phrased it: "the user is the chooser". By delegating the control over the SSC, the shared services model becomes more flexible and promotes business unit responsiveness (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013). It is assumed that this will result in an improved ability to deal with changes in the business unit (Reilly, 2000).

Although practitioners have numerous reasons for setting up a shared service center (see Farndale et al., 2009; Janssen & Joha, 2006), researchers to this day are still skeptical if the expected results can be materialized (Janssen & Joha, 2006; Maatman et al., 2010; Meijerink, 2013; Redman et al., 2007). It seems that bundling resources and delegating control is not enough (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013). However, scholars remain positive that the shared services model holds potential. Therefore they have shifted their attention. Recent research has focussed on understanding which factors play a role in the creation of value for both the organization and the employee. Meijerink showed in his publications (Meijerink, 2013; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013) that the end-user plays a critical role in the process of value creation. Employees' use of the shared service center would increase their HR specific knowledge and in turn would improve their perception of the SSC. Additionally, end-users and the SSC are interdependent because the decentralized aspects of the shared services model asks for input and control of the end-user. This means that the end-user is responsible for providing information to the SSC and should be able to keep this information up-to-date. Without actions from the end-user, the decentralized benefits of the shared services model would evaporate and thus hampering materialization of the decentralized models' benefits.



## THE HR PORTAL

In the previous section the important role of the end-user for the success of HR SSCs was stressed. This paper will continue on this insight by further investigating how end-users use the services provided by the SSC. More specifically, the focus will be on services provided through HR portals.

Enterprise portals are online tools used to manage information and knowledge within the organization and are designed to support business-to-employee processes (Tatnall, 2005). HR related portals thus offer information and applications for employees concerning HR activities and processes (Ruta, 2005). This information may include HR policies, FAQ's and HR related news. All this information from different sources, both internal and external, are *integrated* into a single gateway. Additionally, HR portals often offer self service applications through which employees can maintain their personal information and initiate actions. This means that portals are *interactive* instruments because they allow for bi-directional flows of information. A third aspect of portals is that they can be *personalized*. Information and tools are available according to the needs and tasks of the user. They thus take individual differences, preferences and roles into account (Ruta, 2005; 2009). For this research, HR portals are defined as online tools that provide and support HR services and incorporate the three aspects of integration, interaction and personalization.

HR portals can create a substantial value for the organization (Ruta, 2009). They can be seen as a part of organization's intellectual capital as they enhance flows of knowledge through the organization. To optimize these flows, the HR portal should align with the overall HR strategy of the organization. This means that objectives and plans of the HR portal should support the mission, objectives and plans of the HR department as a whole. If this alignment is realized, users will be more likely to accept the technology which is essential for its ability to create value (Ruta, 2009). For the shared services model this means that HR portals should facilitate both the centralization and decentralization aspects so that users accept and use the HR portal. They can do this in several ways. The centralization aspects are supported by HR portals as they can automate and standardize tasks and processes. This would result in a more efficient HR SSC and consistent service delivery. Decentralized aspects of the SSC are facilitated through the HR portal by providing business unit managers with information and tools for controlling the centralized SSC from a distant location. Furthermore, the goals of the shared services model and HR related technologies align with each other. Both aim to reduce costs and improve service quality (Janssen & Joha, 2006; Ruël, Bondarouk, & Looise, 2004).

The ability of the HR portal to facilitate both the centralized and decentralized aspects makes it an important part of the HR service delivery in the shared services model. HR portals are designed as the first point of contact for employees concerning HR related questions and activities (Farndale et al., 2009). In theory, employees should find answers to their questions and initiate or perform activities themselves with the available information and self service tools. This means that end-users should not only accept the technology, they also should use it in the intended way so that the cen-

tralization and decentralization benefits of the shared services model can be materialized. Therefore, the important role of the HR portal together with its ability to facilitate the centralized and decentralized aspects of the shared services model make it an interesting research object for this thesis.

## STRUCTURATION THEORY

In publications on both HR shared service centers and information systems, it is acknowledged that the user and its use of the services and technologies is crucial (Meijerink, 2013; Orlikowski, 2000). For further understanding the employees' use of the HR portal, as part of the HR SSC, we propose structuration theory as the theoretical lens. This theory is widely used in information systems literature for the last few decades (see Jones & Karsten, 2008 for an overview) but is less prominent in HRM publications. Structuration theory, developed by Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1976; 1979; 1984), provides a sociological perspective to analyze human behavior in a specific context. It acknowledges that human behavior is constrained and enabled by institutional factors, called the structures, while at the same time accepting the notion that humans have the power to behave in another way (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Instead of a dualistic view where social phenomena can be explained either by properties of society or human actions, structuration theory sees these phenomena as a *duality of structures* (Jones & Karsten, 2008).

Before expanding on Giddens' idea of the duality of structures, the two main aspects of structuration theory will be outlined: *structures* and *agency*. Giddens (1984, p. 25) defines *structures* as the "rules and resources organized as properties of social systems." Rules, he argues, are "techniques or generalizable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social practices" (Giddens, 1984, p. 21). Humans draw on these generalizable rules in their social activities to understand and legitimate their own and other's actions. This does not imply that actors have to understand the meaning of these rules or that they can describe the underlying principle. The rules simply help them to know how 'to go on' in certain situations (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Resources are described by Giddens (1984, p. 25) as a "transformative capacity generating commands" over objects and people. This transformative capacity implies that action is essential for something to be regarded as a resource. So even tough material goods may have a real existence (such as land, goods and money), only in the process of structuration do they become resources (Giddens, 1984, p. 33).

Structures, seen as the abstract aspect of social systems, have no material aspects and are not situated in time and space (Orlikowski & Robey, 1991). They only exist in the mind of individuals as *memory traces* (Giddens, 1984). Giddens compares his analysis of structures with linguistics, which makes this abstract concept more comprehensible (Giddens, 1976, p. 127). People who are speaking (the action) draw upon certain rules of a language, such as grammar. The language (the structure) itself only has a virtual existence in the mind of the speaker and cannot be seen as something external to the human being. Similar to structures, language is only structuring conversations (the action), when this action is actually performed and thus the structures are enacted in practice.

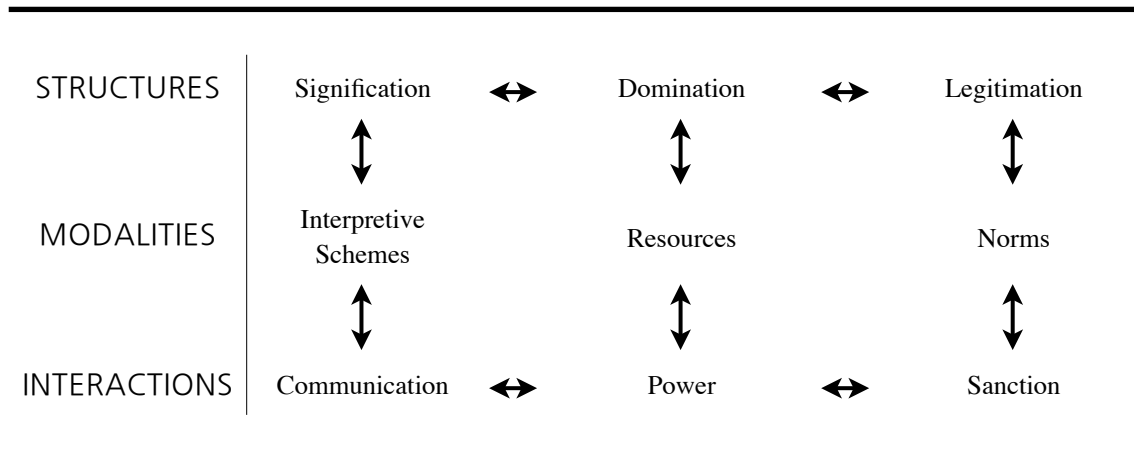
The second concept of structuration theory is *agency*. Giddens (1984) sees agents as human beings who are knowledgeable and capable of acting. Only in a situation where an individual is “drugged or manhandled” (Jones & Karsten, 2008, p. 132) he might be incapable of ‘doing otherwise’ and thus cannot be seen as an agent. This strong voluntaristic view means that an agent always holds some amount of power in a power relationship. Even in a situation where an individual is subordinated, he holds power in the way that he can refuse to do something. This is what Giddens refers to as the *dialectic of control* (Whittington, 1992), and the reason why power relations for Giddens are a two-way street. This also means that at every moment of action from an agent, he can choose to act differently and thus choose to reproduce or change a structure, or even produce a new structure. Therefore, Giddens sees structures as both constraining, in the way that they structure how people ‘go on’ as well as enabling actors to act in a different manner.

## Duality of Structures

At the heart of structuration theory is Giddens’ notion of the duality of structures. He sees “structural properties of social systems [as] both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize” (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). So human agents draw on structures for their actions while at the same time these actions produce and reproduce these structures (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Or in other words “man actively shapes the world he lives in at the same time as it shapes him” (Giddens, 1982, p. 21). So in case of the comparison of linguistics, the action of speaking will reproduce the rules of the language. Therefore, their action of speaking will also structure their future action of speaking. This also means that when a language stops being spoken, it is no longer being reproduced. And since it cannot be seen external to the human mind, it will eventually stop to exist as it no longer will structure the human action of speaking.

Giddens makes an analytical distinction of three dimensions of structures: signification, domination and legitimation. Corresponding to these are the dimensions of interaction: communication, power and sanction. The modalities (interpretive schemes, facilities and norms) form the link between the structures and human interaction (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Human action and structures are composed by elements of each of the three dimensions and are closely interlinked with each other (Jarzabkowski, 2008; Walsham, 2002). Figure 1 represents a graphical interpretation of the duality of structures and its dimensions.

Figure 1: Dimensions of the duality of structures. (Adapted from Giddens, 1984)



The first dimension, signification, represents structures that people use to interpret human behavior and social events. They do this through the modality of interpretive schemes. These are standardized shared stocks of knowledge that actors draw upon to make sense of themselves and the world (Orlikowski & Robey, 1991). By communicating these meanings, they are shared among individuals which reproduces the structures of signification.

Structures of domination, the second dimension, are linked with the action of power. As stated earlier, Giddens sees agents as having the ability to do otherwise and therefore they hold power. Power is not seen as a type of act (such as making people do something against their will) or as a stock of capital (such as land or money), but as a capability manifested in action (Jones & Karsten, 2008). In other words, humans have the power to transform the social and material world through their actions. This action is mediated by people's ability to allocate material and human resources (Ehrenhard et al., 2012).

The third dimension are structures of legitimation. Human beings sanction their and others' actions by drawing on norms of morality (Ehrenhard et al., 2012). These norms can be seen as rules or conventions that govern legitimate or appropriate behavior. Structures of legitimation are not only guiding human behavior, they are also an outcome of the continuous use of sanctions by agents in human actions (Orlikowski & Robey, 1991).

People may draw on different structures in their actions or value similar structures differently than others. This in turn will lead to variations of modalities among individuals and ultimately will mean that people may act differently in similar situations. These dissimilarities in structures are a result of divergent modes of life (Giddens, 1984, p. 198). Humans have different experiences, knowledge, cultural background and roles. These can result in contradicting structures between individuals or groups and eventually lead to conflict (Giddens, 1984). Giddens sees conflict as the actual struggle between actors or groups that can be the result of contradicting structures (Walsham, 2002). He sees

conflict as human action while contradiction is a structural concept. Contradiction does not mean per se that it will be acted out in the form of conflict. Only when actors feel that the differences affect them negatively and they are able and motivated to act on this, they will take action (Giddens, 1984; Walsham, 2002). For example, Walsham's research (2002) shows that people act differently when faced with contradicting structures. In his case study he saw that some individuals would accept a specific software application because it did not affect their day to day activities. Others would show forms of passive resistance by not using the new application, action in the form of inaction.

## Structuration Theory and Technology

Structuration theory has been widely used in research on information systems (see Jones & Karsten, 2008 for an overview). However, Giddens' almost total neglect of the technological artifact in his publications (Jones & Karsten, 2008) has resulted in various applications of structuration theory. Since structures are seen as memory traces in the mind of an individual, an object cannot be seen as something that holds structures. Only when an object, such as a technology, is being used in some ongoing human action, the technology can be seen as to 'structure' human behavior (Orlikowski, 2000). So for example, until a software application is being used in some form of human action, and thus becomes part of the process of structuration, it is not more than some program code filling up hard drive space (Orlikowski, 2000, p. 406). Or as Giddens (1998, p. 82) stated it: "Technology does nothing, except as implicated in the actions of human beings". This approach is in contrast to some popular publications that argue that technology is embedded with structures (e.g. DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Orlikowski & Robey, 1991; Walsham, 2002). However, this thesis will use Orlikowski's (2000) later view that structures are emergent when users recurrently interact with a specific technology. This does not mean that technology or other material artifacts do not affect human behavior at all. Although technology itself cannot circumscribe the way users may use a certain technology, it does not mean that it is open to any and all possibilities (Orlikowski, 2000). The physical properties of a technology will always create boundaries to how people may use it. Therefore, properties will limit the possible variations of how the technology can be used. Or as Giddens (1998, p. 82) phrased it when talking about material objects: "you cannot just walk through a wall."

So how then can information technology be studied with Giddens' structuration theory? For this we refer to the work of Orlikowski (2000). She developed a practice lens for studying the use of technology that she termed *technology-in-practice*. This technology-in-practice is a kind of structure that users draw on when they interact with a certain technologic artifact. These can be properties of the technology or the skills and assumptions they have of the artifact. They also draw on other knowledge and experiences in the institutional context of their lives and work. Their use thus becomes structured by all these experiences, values, knowledge and expectations. Furthermore, their future use will be structured by the rules and resources that are enacted by the ongoing situated use of the technology. Therefore, "continued habitual use of a technology will tend to reenact the same

technology-in-practice, thus further reinforcing it over time so that it becomes taken for granted” (Orlikowski, 2000, p. 410). In organizations, employees with similar work processes may enact the same technology-in-practice. This is because they might have received the same training, their experiences with the technology can be similar and they socialize with each other and by doing so share their knowledge and values. Because of the similarities between the technology-in-practice, they may use the technology also in the same way. However, people are not situated in a vacuum and draw on multiple structures besides the technology-in-practice. For example, religion and cultural values are all enacted upon when using a technology and can result in different ways of using a technology.

## APPLICATION OF THE THEORY & RESEARCH QUESTION

In the introduction, the relevance and goal of this thesis was outlined. The proposed theoretical model, Giddens’ structuration theory, can help to reach this goal because of several reasons. First, structuration theory can help to determine how people use the HR portal. Recent studies on HR SSCs have shown the importance of the end-user’s use in creating value for both the organization and end-user (Meijerink, 2013). This corresponds with structuration theory that states that material artifacts (such as the SSC and the HR portal) can only be seen as a resource when they are incorporated in the process of structuration. In other words, only when the SSC or the HR portal are actively being used, one can say that it will create value for the employee and the organization. This is in contrast to most research on the topic of SSCs as they have focussed on the properties of the SSC itself while ignoring the end-user and its use. With structuration theory, the focus will shift from the material artifact (such as the HR portal or the SSC) to employees’ interactions with these material artifacts. This provides a new perspective for HR SSC research.

Second, Giddens’ theory can help to understand if and why people use the SSC or HR portal differently. While structuration theory accepts that human behavior is constrained and enabled by social structures, at the same time it emphasizes the power of the individual to ‘act differently’. This means that humans may draw on different structures in similar situations or value similar structures differently. In turn, this can result in different behavior. Structuration theory allows us to uncover these social structures that people draw on when they use the HR portal and thus can help to explain variations in use.

Third, structuration theory can be used to illustrate contradictions and explain forms of conflict between groups or individuals. Employees and managers may have contradicting interpretations of the HR portal (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009). This can be a result of contradicting social structures between employees and managers and may lead to some form of conflict. Employees may knowingly avoid using the HR portal, or even actual struggle between people may arise. By comparing the emergent social structures that people draw on in their interaction with the HR portal with HR-management’s social structures, these contradictions can be uncovered.

Finally, Giddens' theory states that social structures are both a medium and outcome of human behavior (Giddens, 1984). And because humans have the power to act differently, there is always an opportunity for change. The relation between social structures and human behavior is mediated by the modalities of interpretive schemes, resources and norms. By transforming these modalities, the structures and behaviors of employees can be influenced. Structuration theory can show which modalities management can reform in order to better align employees' enacted use of the HR portal with their prescribed use.

The following research question combines the goal of this thesis presented in the previous chapter with the theoretical lens of structuration theory:

*In which way do contradictions between management's and end-user's social structures impact HR portal use in a shared service setting?*

The process of answering this research question has been divided into four steps. First, the social structures that managers draw on during the implementation and design of the HR portal have to be exposed. Second, end-users' social structures that emerge during their interactions with the HR portal have to be uncovered. The third step consists of comparing these social structures so contradictions can be identified. The final step will determine if and how these contradictions impact end-user's use. Below, these steps are reflected in four sub questions.

- *What social structures emerge among management when designing and implementing the HR portal?*
- *What social structures emerge among end-users when using the HR portal?*
- *Where do management's and end-user's social structures contradict?*
- *What impact do the structural contradictions have on the end-user's use of the HR portal?*

# METHODOLOGY

This chapter will describe the methodology used to answer the research question. A description of the research setting where the data was gathered will be provided. Additionally, the process of data gathering and sample selection will be outlined. Finally, the steps of data analysis that have been performed will be explained.

## RESEARCH SETTING

As reflected in the research question, the goal of this thesis is to uncover structural contradictions between managers and end-users concerning HR portal use in a shared service setting. By understanding the practices enacted by end-users and finding conflicts with the prescribed use of management, these structural contradictions can be exposed. As was shown by Heracleous and Barrett (2001), the implementation of a new information system can often lead to social and organizational issues because of contradicting structures among stakeholders. Therefore, it is likely that an organization that recently implemented a new HR portal would show contradictions and possible conflict between managers and end-users. Hence, such organization would pose an appropriate setting for this research.

The organization that was selected for this study is Thales Nederland, a subsidiary of a multinational corporation that designs and produces professional electronics for the defense and security market. Thales was chosen because it recently started their transformation to an HR shared service center and was in the process of implementing HR specific IT systems to support their new HR strategy. Because of these significant changes, it was assumed that structural contradictions would emerge that might lead to some form of conflict. The organization was fully cooperative and provided physical access to the offices for data gathering so possible forms of conflict could be identified.

The selected information systems for this research have to incorporate the three aspects of HR portals as was described in the previous chapter. This means that they should integrate information; allow for personalization; and should hold interactive features (Ruta, 2009). One recently introduced tool is Taleo, an online tool for creating, publishing and managing both internal and external vacancies. The tool is used by several HR employees such as recruiters, secretaries and HR managers. Additionally, it is the gateway for employees to discover and apply for new job opportunities. The tool qualifies as an HR portal because it integrates all vacancies from the organization in one central location; it can be personalized by the user to show only relevant job opportunities; and because employees can use the tool to apply directly it holds interactive features. During visits to the organization, even before Taleo was selected for this research, it became clear that the implementation of this system caused some friction among HR employees. HR staff often discussed technical issues with the



tool and ambiguities concerning the process. Therefore Taleo was presumed to be an ideal research subject for this thesis.

During the first interviews related to Taleo, respondents often referred to an HR tool called eHR-Together, a web based application for professional development and annual activity discussions. In contrast to Taleo, eHR-Together was introduced in 2007 and was already embedded in the organization and its processes. However, respondents explained that there were still significant variations in how the tool was used by employees and line-managers. Similar to Taleo, eHR-Together meets the requirements to be regarded as an HR portal. It integrates all evaluations from every employee; it shows the personal information of the user and potential subordinates and thus is personalized; and is interactive because it allows for self-evaluations. eHR-Together thus posed an opportunity to extend this research with an additional research subject. By comparing the results of the two systems additional insights could be found.

## DATA GATHERING & SAMPLE

In line with other empirical studies using structuration theory (e.g. Ehrenhard et al., 2012; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Jarzabkowski, 2008), semi-structured interviews were conducted. This approach resulted in a rich qualitative dataset which is necessary for uncovering the emergent structures when individuals interact with a technological artifact. Interview questions were developed for all three dimensions of structuration theory: signification, domination and legitimation. Additional, interview questions related to the concepts of contradiction and conflict were also added. These questions helped to expose forms of conflict in the interactions with the HR portals. These latter questions also served as control items as the structural contradictions and forms of conflict should already have been exposed by the previous questions (Ehrenhard et al., 2012). The interview questions were adapted to the situation at Thales from the works of Ehrenhard (2009), Orlikowski (2000) and Walsham (2002). Additional questions specific to this research were also included. The questions formed the general framework for the interviews. During the interviews, follow-up questions were asked to gain a deeper understanding of respondents answers. Because of the semi-structured setup, these follow-up questions could be tailored to the specific situation, role and answers of the respondent. Table 2 summarizes the operationalization of structuration theory for this research.

In order to uncover contradictions among managers' and end-users' social structures, two types of respondents for each system were selected. Respondents for Taleo included the general HR director and HR SSC director. They are responsible for the design of the process and implementation of the tool. Data gathered from their interviews formed the prescribed use case of the tools. The end-users that were selected for Taleo consisted of two groups. The first group consisted of four HR staff members who used Taleo in their daily activities. These included two HR SSC members and two HR employees located in the business. These respondents were selected because of their extensive use of Taleo and important role in the process. The second group included three work-floor end-users who

have used Taleo to search and/or apply for a job opportunity. These were selected in consultation with HR-staff in order to ensure that the selected respondents used Taleo.

For eHR-Together the HR SSC director and an HR manager located in the business formed the managers group. They were responsible for the processes of annual activity and professional development discussions and therefore have a prescribed use of the tool. The respondents who were characterized as end-users for eHR-Together were two line-managers and two work-floor employees. Line-managers used the tool to document the annual activity and professional development discussions of their employees. Work-floor employees used eHR-Together to input their self-appraisal and are responsible for inputting their professional development wishes before the discussions takes place. In total 14 different individuals were interviewed where one of the respondents, the HR SSC director, was questioned about both systems. All interviews were audio taped so they could be transcribed afterwards.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis process consisted of five steps. First, all interviews were coded following the framework of the interviews. For example, a remark about unclear responsibilities would be coded as 'responsibility\_unclear' while a positive experience with the tool due to the user friendliness would be coded as 'experience\_friendly'. For this process, a computer-assisted data analysis application, Atlas.ti, was used. This allowed for non-destructive analyzation of the data and greater flexibility in the coding process. After all interviews were codified, similar codes were grouped and irrelevant codes were discarded. This resulted in two datasets and two code list, one for Taleo and one for eHR-Together.

The second step of the analysis consisted of identifying forms of conflict. As stated by Giddens, forms of conflict are seen as a form of action as a result of contradicting structures (Walsham, 2002). For this study we identified actions from end-users that were not in line with the prescribed use from HR management. These included end-users using the tool differently or even behavior where people would avoid using the tool, action in the form of inaction (Walsham, 2002). Next, related codes to these forms of conflict were grouped. For example, applicants would work around Taleo because they found the sign-up process not user friendly. So the code 'description\_not friendly' was related to avoiding the system.

The third part of the process consisted of visually mapping the grouped codes that were related to a form of conflict. Visual mapping is an intermediary step of creating a conceptualized understanding from raw data and may include local 'causal maps' (Langley, 1999). For each form of conflict, the relation of the codes to the action of conflict as well as the relations between the codes were visually represented in Atlas.ti. For instance, avoiding the tool was related to the description of it being unfriendly which again was the result of the fact that the tool had an extensive question list. Up until

this step the analyzation process was performed separately for Taleo and eHR-Together. This allowed for identifying similarities and differences between the two systems.

During the fourth step, the visual maps for both Taleo and eHR-Together were compared to find commonalities (Langley, 1999). The goal was to identify several overarching themes that would explain the identified forms of conflict. This step relied more on interpretation and creativity than an analytical strategy, which Langley (1999) states is inescapable to generate a theory from qualitative data. The result of this analyzation step were five themes of contradiction. Each form of conflict for both systems were rooted in one or more of these contradictions.

As a final step of the data analysis, the themes of contradiction were linked to structuration theory. Similar to other studies (e.g. Ehrenhard et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski, 2008), the three dimensions of structuration theory were used to analyze on what dimension social structures contradicted. For this, the coded remarks related to the forms of conflict were used to find structures of signification and modalities of interpretive schemes that were being drawn upon by the respondents when giving meaning to the tool and the process. Structures of domination and the related modality of resources were identified to understand how material resources were allocated and responsibilities and authorities changed. Finally, remarks related to structures of legitimation and norms were recognized. Although the three dimensions of structuration are distinct on an analytical level, they are empirically interrelated and inseparable (Jarzabkowski, 2008). Therefore every theme of contradiction represents structures from each dimension. This process was done for the three groups of respondents: HR-managers, HR-staff and end-users. This allowed for identification of contradictions between these groups.

Table 2: Operationalization of structuration theory

CONSTRUCT	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE QUESTIONS
<i>Signification</i>		
Signification	Structures that humans draw on to interpret human behavior and social events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What were the mentioned reasons for the implementation of system?*</li> <li>• How would you describe your experiences with the system?*</li> <li>• Do you feel you have the necessary knowledge to understand and use the system?***</li> </ul>
Interpretive Schemes	Modalities that concern standardized stocks of knowledge.	
Communication	The action of sharing meanings of human behavior and social events with others.	
<i>Domination</i>		
Domination	Structures that humans draw on to transform human behavior and social events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which functions of the system do you use and what do you use them for?***</li> <li>• What features are missing in the system? **</li> <li>• Does the system in- or decrease your responsibility and autonomy?*</li> </ul>
Facilities	Modalities that concern the ability to allocate material and human resources.	
Power	The action of mobilizing facilities to transform the social and material world.	
<i>Legitimation</i>		
Legitimation	Structures that humans draw on to legitimate human behavior and social events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why do or don't you use the system?***</li> <li>• What are the benefits/drawbacks the system provides you?***</li> <li>• Are there any consequences for not using the system?</li> </ul>
Norms	Modalities that concern rules and conventions that govern appropriate behavior.	
Sanction	The action of governing appropriate human behavior by punishment or rewarding.	
<i>Contradiction &amp; Conflict</i>		
Contradiction	Contradicting structures as a result of divergent modes of life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you feel that there are contradictions between how HR sees the system and your own experiences?*</li> <li>• Do you know of any employees that knowingly avoid using the system or work around it?***</li> </ul>
Conflict	Actual struggle between actors or groups that can be the result of contradicting structures.	

\* Question adapted from Ehrenhard (2009).

\*\* Question adapted from Orlikowski (2000).

\*\*\* Question adapted from Walsham (2002).

# RESULTS

This chapter will present the findings from the analysis of the gathered data as described in the previous chapter. First, the identified forms of conflicting behavior will be outlined by describing the prescribed use by HR-management and actual enacted use by end-users. Next, the five themes of contradiction that resulted in these forms of conflict are described. These are illustrated by quotes from the interviews that have been translated to English. For every theme, a table will be presented that summarizes the contradictions between the groups of respondents and assigns respondent reasonings to one of the three dimensions of structuration theory.

## PRESCRIBED & ENACTED USE

The HR-managers that were interviewed expressed a clear vision of the role of the HR portals in their new shared services model. In line with other publications, they saw the HR portals as the first channel that employees and line-managers should use when confronted with HR related questions and processes (Farndale et al., 2009). Before, employees would often drop by the office of their business unit's HR-manager to ask questions. Additionally, most activities were performed by HR staff. With the introduction of new tools, HR-management envisioned that employees would search the HR portal for information and that they would perform simple administrative tasks themselves before contacting HR-staff. As a result, it was expected that the work load for the HR staff in the business would decrease so that eventually some of them could be relocated to the shared service center.

*“For us as HR the advantage is that people search for information themselves. This means they will not contact us anymore and then start waiting for an answer. Also, we do not have to do all the work which is an efficiency benefit.”*

*- HR-manager*

Furthermore, with the new approach HR-management wanted to make HR-staff multi-disciplined so that task sharing would improve. Before, there was a lot of task specialization for the centralized HR staff. For instance, one employee would manage and publish all vacancies while another would handle sick leave. This resulted in consistency issues when an employee would be absent. In the new situation, more staff would get access and were expected to use the new tools so that the most part of the process was performed through the new portals.

Although HR management was clear in their new strategy for their HR department, the reality was that the organization still struggled with the change to the new shared services model. For instance, the introduction of Taleo resulted in misunderstandings and resistance. For some employees it was unknown where they could find the job opportunities. Before, job opportunities were posted on physical bulletin boards across the office which some employees preferred. Furthermore, respon-

dents described that both internal and external applicants would work around the tool. They simply contacted the hiring manager directly instead of using the prescribed tool. One respondent stated that even though he already was accepted for the job, he was asked by HR to use Taleo to formalize the process. Moreover, there were also hiring managers and even some HR-managers that would not direct applicants to Taleo at all, strengthening the behavior of avoiding the official channel. Forms of conflict were also identified at the shared service center. Although SSC-staff was overall satisfied with Taleo as it made them more effective and efficient, the changes in responsibilities and the novelty of the tool created some confusion. This was worsened by the reversing of some initial decisions to decentralize certain tasks to HR-staff located in the business.

*“You can see the status of the applicant [in Taleo]. So you can see who is responsible. [...] But there is still a lot of confusion. [HR in the business] sometimes ask us to reject an applicant when it is their job to do this.”*

*- HR-employee*

Overall, there was little resistance and fewer issues with eHR-Together. According to HR-management, more than 90 percent of the employees at Thales Nederland completes both the processes of annual discussion and professional development every year. Respondents also stated that the tool had improved over the last year and that it became more reliable. Furthermore, the tool did what the end-users believed it was supposed to do: structuring and formalizing the processes of the annual discussions. However, the quality of these discussions and in turn how the tools were being used varied. For instance, one respondent stated that he and some of his colleagues found the tool to be unclear. They were unsure as to what they had to enter into the tool and what information HR and their line-managers thought was important. Therefore, one respondent just entered something and hoped that it would get signed-off.

*“What do you have to fill in at the annual activity discussion? I just type something and it gets approved. But it is not really clear what they want to know.”*

*- Employee*

Concluding, the enacted use of the HR portals did not always align with the prescribed use of HR-management. For Taleo, some HR-staff located in the business who were supposed to work with Taleo did not use it at all and others had problems with adapting to their new roles and tasks. End-users circumvented Taleo by e-mailing directly to the hiring manager while others only used it as a formality. Use of eHR-Together was more in line and respondents were overall more satisfied with the tool. However, it became clear that some employees and line-managers only used the tool because they were mandated by the organization. They saw using the tools as a form of system gratification as they did not believe it would create value for them or the organization.

The following sections will describe five themes of contradiction that were identified as the source of the forms of conflict described above. These themes provide an insight in to why the enacted use was not in line with management’s prescribed use.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CAPITAL vs END-USER EFFECTIVENESS

According to HR-management, one of the main benefits that Taleo provided the organization was the ability to create organizational capital. HR related organizational capital can be defined as knowledge which is contained in HR processes, HR information systems and databases (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013). Before Taleo, information and resumés from applicants would be scattered over different e-mail inboxes of several HR-staff and line-managers. This meant that HR was unable to efficiently scan previously rejected candidates when a new position opened up. With Taleo, this would change. The tool provided the HR SSC with a rich database of every individual, internal or external, who applied for a job opening. The recruiters could use this database to search for suitable applicants when a new vacancy became available. By increasing this database with rich data, Thales can create a digital talent pool. HR-management and HR-staff believed that this would make the organization more effective in finding suitable candidates in the future.

*“Imagine that someone does not get the job, but might be a match for another job that becomes available in six months. With Taleo, we can do a search if he is in the database.”*

*- HR-employee*

The stored information is not only used by the SSC, it is also essential for several end-user features. Taleo provides end-users with the option to set up a vacancy alert. If a new vacancy is added that matches an end-user's profile and certain criteria set by the user, he receives a notification via e-mail. And because his profile is saved into a database, he only has to perform this action once. Therefore HR management believed that Taleo and its organizational capital would also provide benefits for end-users.

*“That you have to sign-up once and that you receive an e-mail of a relevant vacancy. [...] A one time action that might take a bit of time, but in the end it will benefit [the end-user].”*

*- HR-manager*

For Taleo, the end-users are the source that provides the data for the system. Applicants have to input personal information, level of education, past experiences, special skills and other professional details. The more information that is entered into the system, the richer the data and the more effective the HR SSC staff can perform their tasks. However, this focus on organizational capital resulted in decreased effectiveness for the end-user. Effectiveness involves the ease of use and the usefulness of a tool (Ruel & Kaap, 2012). Ease of use is the degree to which users expect using it does not involve effort. Usefulness is the user's believe to which the system can help them perform the intended task (F. D. Davis, 1989). End-users stated that they now were confronted with an extensive and complex sign-up process which made the process less effective for them. Furthermore, they felt it was redundant because they believed all the information they had to input was information that was already available to HR.

*“In my opinion, you should be able to apply with one click and then they can check my file. Why do I have to input that information? They know exactly what I’ve done.”*

*- Employee*

Before Taleo, employees could just e-mail the resumé to either the hiring manager or HR. In the new situation however, the extensive sign-up process was seen as a major barrier because respondents stated that it was confusing and time consuming. One respondent even believed this was on purpose so that only applicants who had serious interest would apply. Another illustration of the complexity of the process is this remark of an HR employee:

*“We joke about this sometimes. ‘If someone has completed the sign-up process, then you better hire him on the spot.’ [...] If I was applying, this would be a real deal breaker for me.”*

*- HR-employee*

Although the end-users that were interviewed had a negative attitude towards Taleo as they felt it decreased their effectivity, they did not circumvent it. However, one of them did note that he had heard from external candidates that were trying to circumvent Taleo by e-mailing directly to the hiring manager.

*“I haven’t created a profile yet, but from what I’ve heard, people find it unnecessary. [...] People say ‘Do we really have to complete the entire form? Or can we just send our resumé via e-mail?’ They do not see the added value. It is just putting up a barrier instead of making it more clear.”*

*- Employee*

The focus on organizational capital by HR-management contradicted with end-users’ idea of technology making tasks easier and faster. Taleo was designed and implemented with the idea to create a talent pool. Consequently, it did not make the process of applying for an open position any more effective. Therefore, some end-users circumvented Taleo by applying directly with the hiring managers instead of using the prescribed tool. This improved their effectivity of getting the job done.

*Table 3: Organizational Capital vs End-User Effectivity*

	SIGNIFICATION	DOMINATION	LEGITIMATION
<i>Organizational Capital</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizational capital speeds up recruitment process<sup>1,2</sup></li> <li>Saving profiles makes end-user more effective<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Database provides competitive advantage<sup>1,2</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quick actions are necessary in competitive market<sup>1,2</sup></li> </ul>
<i>End-User Effectivity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tool is not an improvement<sup>3</sup></li> <li>Complex process is a deliberate barrier<sup>2,3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Question list is time consuming and complex<sup>2,3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Technology should make user more effective<sup>3</sup></li> <li>Barriers should be minimized<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> HR-management, <sup>2</sup> HR-staff, <sup>3</sup> End-users



## STANDARDIZATION vs FLEXIBILITY

For HR management, standardization was seen as one of the most important reasons for implementing Taleo. They believed that streamlining the process would create efficiency for the SSC and a uniform process for all applicants would promote transparency and reduce the chance of nepotism. With the introduction of Taleo every applicant, both internal and external, would have to use the online application feature. This meant that the sign-up process and corresponding question list was identical for every applicant and vacancy. The standardized data would then be stored in a central database. This database provided HR staff with a better overview of the status of each vacancy. For example, they could easily see how many people had applied and if there were applicants that needed to be rejected.

*“Eventually, this will be the only channel [that you can use to apply] If someone doesn’t take the effort to use Taleo, then he will not be in the running for that job application. Or we will have two process which we do not want.”*

- HR-manager

The processes of the annual activity and professional development discussions were also standardized. There was a specific period when eHR-Together is open and the discussions needed to be performed. Additionally, the interface and questions asked are identical for every Thales employee world wide. These questions also formed a guideline for the discussions between line-managers and their employees. And because everyone has the same process, Thales headquarters could easily compare statistics from different countries on how many employees have followed the entire processes. Furthermore, since everyone works in the same tool, data can easily be shared between managers when employees shift teams.

*“The discussions are now performed in the same format. Before, every [line-managers] would do it in their own way. Now we have this guideline that signals ‘this is how we do these discussions’. This also makes it easier to measure.”*

- Employee

As a consequence of the standardization, flexibility for the end-user decreased. Before Taleo, employees could send an e-mail directly or drop by the office of the hiring manager to apply for a job. The hiring manager would also use more informal channels to fill his available positions by contacting possible candidates from his personal network. This flexibility meant that end-users were more effective in their task of applying or recruiting a candidate. Some believed that an informal process was easier and more useful than using the formal process of Taleo. However, the standardization would make an end to this. In the future every applicant had to use Taleo to formally apply for a vacancy, which was seen as a decrease in flexibility and therefore very bureaucratic. Hiring managers were also expected to direct people to Taleo if they contacted them directly.

*“People find it bureaucratic. ‘Do I really have to use Taleo?’ They find dropping of their resumé directly at the hiring manager’s office easier and more effective than using the tool”*

*- HR-manager*

The processes related to the annual activity and professional development discussions provided end-users with even less flexibility. The strict deadlines and limited access to eHR-Together meant that employees and managers did not have the freedom to perform these activities when they felt like it. Moreover, the tool did not allow for multiple discussions during a year even though managers stated that they had several discussions with some of their employees. Professional development, especially for younger employees, was seen as a continuous process. The tool and the process did not take these differences among employees’ needs into account. HR management did also state that it was a continuous process and that managers should have multiple discussions with their employees. According to them, end-users should not let the limited availability of the tool deter them from this.

*“As an employee you should see the tool as something that helps you. [...] The fact that the tool is closed in January should not be seen as a barrier if you want to talk about your professional development at that time.”*

*- HR-manager*

With the transformation to a shared services model, HR management focussed mainly on standardizing the process at the cost of decreased flexibility. This resulted in end-users creating their own flexibility by interacting differently with the tools or even avoiding them. For instance, respondents stated that there were still people who directly applied with the hiring manager instead of using Taleo. One of the respondents who applied for a job stated that he used Taleo because he was asked by HR. However, this was purely a formalization as he was already accepted for the job. Furthermore, hiring managers stimulated avoidance of the prescribed channel by asking suitable candidates to e-mail them their resumé directly instead of directing them to Taleo. This could be explained because hiring managers do not have access to Taleo and still receive the information of applicants via e-mail from the HR-staff. So for them, the process did not change and the tool did not provide them with any value. Therefore, there was no incentive for them to direct applicants towards the official channel.

In case of eHR-Together, the process was even more standardized. However, this did not prevent end-users from taking flexibility. One manager stated that he used a text document on his computer to document the discussions he had outside of the prescribed period. When the tool was open he would summarize this information and enter it into eHR-Together.

*“Once every eight weeks I have a talk with my younger employees about their professional development. I document this in a word-file on my laptop. [...] I only take the main points and input these in eHR-Together [when it is open]”*

*- Line-manager*

The discussions associated with annual activity and professional development also provided managers and employees with an opportunity to adapt the process. Respondents stated that although the process was structured, the discussions could vary notably between different managers. This also meant that the quality of the data entered into the tool would differ. However, HR management was not interested in the quality of the data, as they only were responsible for the amount of discussions that were performed. Therefore, the quality of discussions or data that was entered into eHR-Together was not being monitored.

Summarizing, standardization was an important part of the change to a shared services model according to HR-management. They believed it would reduce costs and provide HR with a better overview of the process. However, it made the use of the tool feel forced to end-users. They felt the tool did not adapt to their personal needs and wishes. As a result, some end-users would work around the tool to enact flexibility.

Table 4: Standardization vs Flexibility

	SIGNIFICATION	DOMINATION	LEGITIMATION
<i>Standardization</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process is transparent<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Easy way to compare data<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tool provides overview of process and responsibility<sup>1,2</sup></li> <li>• Reduced chance of nepotism<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost reduction<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• One official channel<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Increase reliability<sup>1,2</sup></li> <li>• Improve sharing tasks<sup>1,2</sup></li> </ul>
<i>Flexibility</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of tool feels forced and formal<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tool formalizes process<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Tool does not adapt to user<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applying is informal<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Employees are not equal<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> HR-management, <sup>2</sup> HR-staff, <sup>3</sup> End-users

## COMPULSORY vs OWN RESPONSIBILITY

HR-management was in the process of making their employees self responsible by offering tools that would increase their autonomy. The notion of being responsible for your own career was shared among all respondents of this research. Contradicting to this idea, was the fact that end-users were often mandated to use the HR tools and perform certain HR activities. For example, line-managers were obligated to have one annual activity and one professional development discussion with each employee every year. The period when these discussions needed to be performed was also fixed. HR management stated that this created a deadline for line-managers which forced them to have the discussions each year. Without mandating these processes HR management believed that employees and line-manager would simply not perform these activities. This was important to HR management because they were responsible for making sure every employee had their discussions each year. They had to justify the percentage of employees that did not perform these actions to the headquarters in France.

*“It forces people to think about it. We know that if we allow them do their [professional development discussion] the entire year, less people will do it.”*

*- HR-manager*

While the use of the tool and performing the discussions were mandated, the quality of these processes were the responsibility of the employee and his line-manager. HR management stated that the quality of the input and the discussions was not being monitored. Before the process was finished, the employee had to sign off stating that he agreed with the content entered by his line-manager. For HR management, this control mechanism was sufficient. Furthermore, once the discussions were held and documented in eHR-Together, it was the responsibility of the employee to make sure the agreements were upheld. According to one HR manager, there was no one at HR who would keep track of this.

*“No, [we do not monitor the quality of the input] If someones enters ‘zzz’, and everybody signs-off, than I don’t really care.”*

*- HR-manager*

The mandated use of the tool and performing the processes on the one hand and the responsibility of the end-user concerning the quality of the data on the other hand resulted in a negative attitude towards the process among some employees. Although almost all employees perform these activities, not everyone sees the value in it. This can be explained because of variations in the quality of the discussions and hence the quality of the data in eHR-Together. This is illustrated by a remark of one of the respondents.

*“If I look back at the previous years than everything is a copy from the year before. The information that was entered last year is just copied to the next year. ‘Whatever..’”*

*- Employee*

Because the quality of the data is low, the respondent did not see any value in the discussions. He and his manager only performed them because they had to. These negative experiences also shaped their future use where they would simply copy the information of the previous year in the tool. And because no one was monitoring this process, this interaction continued for several years. The process became a form of system gratification instead of creating value for the end-user or the organization.

Table 5: Compulsory vs Own Responsibility

	SIGNIFICATION	DOMINATION	LEGITIMATION
<i>Compulsory</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fixed period is seen as a deadline<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Without obligation people do not perform the process<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use is mandated by French headquarters<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Every employee has to perform the process<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>
<i>Own Responsibility</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of tool feels as system gratification<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of the data is responsibility of end-user<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee is responsible for own career<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> HR-management, <sup>2</sup> HR-staff, <sup>3</sup> End-users

## PROACTIVE HR vs AUTONOMY OF EMPLOYEE

With the transformation to a shared services model and corresponding implementation of IT applications, HR management wanted to make employees more autonomous. Before, employees would walk into their HR-manager's office when faced with an HR related question or issue. As one HR management exaggeratedly stated it, employees were being pampered. With the introduction of new self service tools, they wanted to change this. Now, employees were expected to perform trivial HR activities themselves and only contact HR staff when faced with issues they could not resolve themselves. This meant that employees who were interested in job-opportunities, had to take deliberate action by logging in to Taleo. HR management would also like to see that employees take the initiative and think about their future career in the organization. eHR-Together was seen as a tool that would support the employee with this processes as it featured a self-appraisal feature and the possibility to express future career wishes. With making end-users more autonomous, HR management wanted to reduce the workload of HR and hoped that this would eventually lead to a smaller HR staff which would reduce costs.

*"We have to make clear that employees are responsible for their own career. [...] That employees are in control and that they can use their manager to help them."*

- HR-manager

A consequence of making employees autonomous was that it made HR more reactive. This was not seen as a downside by HR management, as it was one of their goals. However, other respondents stated that a reactive HR department could hurt the organization, even though they believed that the employee is foremost responsible for his own career. For instance, one employee that was interviewed stated that HR did not have any contingency plans in place when an essential employee would leave the organization. HR would start thinking about a replacement only when the employee would actually leave. In the eyes of the respondent, this reactive attitude could have serious implications for the organization because there might not be a suitable successor if needed. Some respondents also believed that it was an illusion to think that every employee would think about his career

ambitions and act upon it. When a line-manager was asked if his employees took the initiative to talk to him about their career, he answered the following:

*“[Laughing] No. Let me put it this way. I think maybe 10 or 20 percent of my employees come to me to talk about their career path. [...] That’s a fraction of the population.”*

*- Line-manager*

From the analysis of the data it became clear that there were some strong contradictions concerning employee autonomy and the proactive role HR should have. HR management wanted that employees take their own responsibility while end-users saw it more as a shared responsibility. Purely focussing on the autonomy of the employee would result in less mobility according to the end-users. Remarkably, improving internal mobility was seen as an important goal for HR management. The importance of a stimulating role was illustrated by the experiences of one of the respondents. He stated that he never really thought about his career and the possibilities that Thales provided him. Only when pushed by his line-manager did he start to take several courses and taking on new responsibilities. This example shows a line-manager who took a more proactive role in order to develop his employee. However, another respondent stated that line-managers might not always feel it as their responsibility to help employees in their careers. Some line-managers are afraid to loose their top performers if they encourage them to develop themselves according to a respondent. They hope that by not motivating their employees, the employees stay with their team or department.

*Table 6: Proactive HR vs Autonomy of Employee*

	SIGNIFICATION	DOMINATION	LEGITIMATION
<i>Proactive HR</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HR becomes more reactive<sup>2,3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee does not take responsibility<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Line-manager is afraid to loose top performers<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HR should be proactive<sup>2,3</sup></li> </ul>
<i>Autonomy of Employee</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee no longer depended on HR<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tools provide employee with power<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost reduction<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Employee is responsible for own career<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> HR-management, <sup>2</sup> HR-staff, <sup>3</sup> End-users

## SSC EFFICIENCY vs SPEEDY DECISION MAKING

Before the introduction of Taleo, all relevant information for a new vacancy would be sent to an HR staff member via e-mail. This employee would input all the information in a web tool and publish it on the website and external online job boards. With the introduction of Taleo, HR management wanted to decentralize this activity to the HR staff in the business unit. During the first few months, HR staff in the business would gather all the information for a job opening and enter it into Taleo. The HR SSC would check this information and publish it on different websites. However, this decision was reversed when it became clear that the vacancies lacked consistency in the formatting. This

meant that the SSC had to redo much of the work which was very inefficient. According to HR management, the tool was not intuitive enough for people who do not use it on a regular basis and therefore they decided to centralize the activity to the SSC where staff uses the tool on a daily basis. This was also the reason why they did not provide line-managers with access to the tool. The HR SSC would send a shortlist of applicants and their resumé's via e-mail and the hiring manager would let the HR staff in the business know who he would like to invite via e-mail as well.

*“We might have focussed too much on decentralization which resulted in people not having enough experiences with the tool. But if you centralize these tasks, you'll get people who have more knowledge and can perform the tasks much faster.”*

*- HR-manager*

While centralizing activities and denying line-managers access to the tool created some efficiency and consistency, it also worsened the decision time and responsiveness. This was a result of centralizing the control to the SSC. For instance, when a line-manager would have a vacancy he first had to gather all the approvals and information and send this to the HR staff in the business. This information was then sent to the HR SSC where it was entered into Taleo and finally published. Not until the HR SSC has created a shortlist of candidates and send this via e-mail to the hiring manager, did the hiring manager have any indication of the status of his vacancy. The line-managers who were interviewed about eHR-Together were also asked about their attitude towards Taleo and the fact that they had no access. The respondents stated that they would like to have a more up to date status of their vacancies. They believed that it was in their own interest that a vacancy would be filled quickly.

*“Why would you create such a complex process? [...] Why can't we just log into the tool? That way you can see which applicants HR has rejected and why. That way we can simply choose who we want to invite.”*

*- Line-manager*

Communication about who to reject and who to invite was also done via e-mail. The hiring manager would select the applicants he wanted to meet and who he wanted to reject. This rejection was done in Taleo by the HR staff situated in the business. The complex process where some tasks were not performed in Taleo created a distance between the hiring manager and HR. This meant that the organization was unable to make quick decisions and therefore unable to respond to changes in the business.

The contradiction of efficiency versus speedy decision making resulted on occasion in forms of conflict. HR management stated that hiring managers still accepted applications from people who did not use Taleo. This was especially the case when line-managers contacted eligible candidates in their personal network. This behavior can be explained because the hiring manager does not work with Taleo and therefore it provides no value for them. They have no incentive to direct people to Taleo since they eventually will receive the applicants information via e-mail. For them, there is only a downside because the official process is more time consuming and less responsive.

Table 7: SSC Efficiency vs Speedy Decision Making

	SIGNIFICATION	DOMINATION	LEGITIMATION
<i>SSC Efficiency</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tool is not easy enough to decentralize access<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Task specialization<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost reduction<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Consistency<sup>1,2</sup></li> </ul>
<i>Speedy Decision Making</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tool provides no value for line-manager<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Formal process is too slow<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Line-manager has no access to tool<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quick action is necessary to attract qualified people<sup>2,3</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> HR-management, <sup>2</sup> HR-staff, <sup>3</sup> End-users



# DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This final section will start off with a summary of the findings presented in the previous section. The chapter will continue with a discussion of these findings and elaborate on the implications for research and practitioners. Next, the limitations of this thesis and directions for future research will be outlined. Finally, the main conclusions that have been drawn from this study will be presented.

## KEY FINDINGS

Results of this research show five themes of contradictions between and within the groups of respondents. These contradictions are the origins of forms of conflict where end-users avoid using the tools provided by the HR SSC or use them in other than prescribed ways.

The first theme that was uncovered is *organizational capital vs end-user effectivity*. As was illustrated in the results, one of the main goals for Taleo was to create organizational capital for the HR SSC. By saving and bundling applicant information in a central database, the HR SSC was creating a talent pool that would help them to fill future open positions more quickly. According to HR management, the saved information would also create advantages for the end-user through features as one-time-signup and the vacancy alert. To generate this rich organizational capital, end-users felt they had to complete a complex and time consuming sign-up process reducing their effectivity. Furthermore, they did not mention the features of one-time-signup and vacancy alert as a benefit. Therefore, they saw the new sign-up process as a barrier which resulted in applicants working around the tool. Some respondents even believed that this barrier might discourage people enough so that they would not apply at all.

A second theme of contradiction that was uncovered is *standardization vs flexibility*. In order to gather all the information and compile it into a rich database, HR management was standardizing the processes. The standardization not only resulted in usable organizational capital, it also would create a more efficient and effective process as it made it easier to manage. A consequence of this standardization was that it decreased the level of flexibility. End-users were not able to adapt the process or tools to their needs. Therefore the use of the tools felt forced. As a result, end-users would take their own flexibility by working around the provided tools and formal channels. For instance, applicants would work around Taleo by applying directly with the hiring manager and line-managers would create shadow administrations of professional discussions when eHR-Together was not open.

Another theme that was discovered is *compulsory vs own responsibility*. HR management wanted to make clear to employees that they are responsible for their own career. However, at the same time they mandated the discussions and the use of eHR-Together. By mandating this activity, HR management created a deadline which they believed was necessary to ensure that every employee would have their discussions. This was important to HR management because they had to report the num-

ber of completed discussions to the international headquarters. However, they did not monitor the quality of the discussions or input. This was seen as the responsibility of the employee and his line-manager. Therefore, some end-users only used eHR-Together because they were obligated to and since the input was not being monitored, they could simply copy their input from previous years.

The fourth theme that resulted from the analysis of the interviews is *proactive HR vs autonomy of the employee*. Related to the concept of employee's own responsibility was HR management's vision of making employees and line-managers more autonomous. With the introduction of self service tools, they hoped to lower the work load of the HR department. Eventually this could lead to a reduction of the number of HR staff and thus reduce costs. However, end-users stated that this attitude made HR more reactive. This was believed to be a real issue because employees at Thales were not taking control of their own career. Therefore, focussing on the autonomy of the employee would decrease the mobility of the employees which was the opposite of HR management's intentions.

The final theme of contradictions that emerged from the interviews is *efficiency vs speedy decision making*. Taleo was not seen as intuitive enough for people who would not use it on a regular basis. HR management was therefore hesitant to decentralize access and activities because they believed it would result in inconsistencies and inefficiencies. Instead, they centralized actions such as entering and publishing vacancies to the SSC. A consequence from this decision was a complex and extensive process from the need of the line-manager up to the point where a new employee was hired. Hence, they were unable to make quick decisions to adapt to changes in the business. Furthermore, by not providing line-managers access to Taleo, the tool did not create any noticeable benefits for them. As a result, they did not always direct applicant to Taleo, as it was faster for them to receive the résumé directly.

## DISCUSSION

The five themes of contradictions described above are rooted in the central question the shared services model tries to answer: should organizations centralize or decentralize their support services? Each side of the themes is related to either the centralization or decentralization model (see table 4). Indeed, some of these elements were already presented as advantages of either one of the models in table 1. The shared services model theorizes that advantages of both models can be combined while minimizing their drawbacks (Farndale et al., 2009; Maatman et al., 2010; Quinn et al., 2000; Ulrich, 1995). However, as noted by others, the advantages of these models often conflict (Janssen & Joha, 2006; Meijerink et al., 2013). This is also true for the aspects of the five themes presented in this paper. Each element of the themes is negatively reflected in their counterpart. Therefore, an increase in one could consequently result in a decrease of the other and thus increasing the level of contradiction. In other words, the arrangement of the shared services model can lead to increased contradiction between and within groups of stakeholders.

Table 4: Themes of contradiction assigned to centralization and decentralization models

CENTRALIZATION	DECENTRALIZATION
<u>Organizational Capital</u>	End-user effectivity
<u>Standardization of processes</u>	Flexibility
<u>Compulsory</u>	Own responsibility
Proactive HR	<u>Autonomy of employee</u>
<u>SSC efficiency</u>	Speedy decision-making

*HR-management's focus is underlined.*

HR managers of the organization that was the setting for this research focussed mainly on the centralization aspect of the shared services model. They were creating rich organizational capital, standardizing processes, mandating the use of the tools and focussed on efficiency for the HR SSC. Only for the theme of proactive HR vs autonomy of the employee did they focus on the decentralized aspect: making employees autonomous. An explanation for this focus on centralization can be found in the fact that the HR-managers were responsible for the performance of the HR SSC. For them, the main legitimation was to reduce costs by creating efficiency. Therefore, they focussed mainly on initiatives that would create value for the centralized SSC. This also explains why they did not choose to focus on making HR more proactive, as improving employee autonomy would reduce costs for the SSC.

In contrast, end-users drew on social structures that were related to the opposite aspects of the five themes of contradiction. They focussed more on decentralization aspects and how the new tools and processes could create value for them. Their norms thus contradicted with HR-management's focus on costs reduction. Furthermore, their norms often did not align with their interpretive schemes and resources. Or in other words, their experiences and attitudes of the tools and processes did not match their vision of HR and its tools creating value for the end-user. For example, end-users stated that applying for a job should be as easy as possible. However, they experienced Taleo to be complex and time consuming and therefore not an improvement over the old situation. As a result, people would avoid Taleo by applying directly with the hiring manager.

The third group of respondents, the HR-staff, drew on social structures that can be related to either centralization or decentralization. For their own tasks they felt that the standardization and organizational capital improved their effectivity and efficiency. However, they also expressed some downsides of the new tool and related process. For instance, Taleo created some confusion about responsibilities and from employees and external applicants they received complaints about the extensive sign-up process. The fact that HR-staff drew on both centralization and decentralization related structures can be explained by the fact that they are situated between HR-management and the end-

users. Moreover, the HR SSC respondents were more in line with HR-management while HR-staff in the business showed more alignment with end-users. This might imply that the larger the distance to the SSC, individuals might draw more upon social structures related to the decentralized aspects of the themes of contradiction.

Findings presented in this thesis have shown that increased structural contradiction of centralization and decentralization efforts can lead to forms of conflict. The HR SSC's dependency on the end-user's actions (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013) means that these forms of conflict can have negative consequences for the theoretical benefits of the shared services model. For example, the organization that was central to this research focussed on centralization efforts to create efficiency for the HR SSC. An important aspect of this was the standardization of processes which was done through HR portals. However, this research has shown that end-users would use other than prescribed channels to get their job done as they believed the official channel was less effective. In terms of structuration theory, they enacted their agency. This is problematic for standardizing processes and thus hampering the centralization benefits. Hence, ignoring the decentralized aspects of the shared service model might not only mean that the decentralization benefits will not materialize, it also hampers the centralization advantages if it leads to a discrepancy in prescribed and enacted use. Therefore organizations adopting a shared services model should limit the chance of conflict by decreasing structural contradictions related to centralization and decentralization efforts.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

This thesis contributes to literature on HR SSCs in several ways. First, this research focussed on the end-user and its use of the HR SSC. Although other publications have already argued the important role of the end-user in the shared services model (e.g. Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013), empirical research has focussed mainly on motives for adopting the shared services model and properties of the SSC. With a qualitative approach this paper expands our understanding of how and why end-users interact with the SSC. More specifically, this study focussed on the use of HR portals. Technologies, such as HR portals, are seen as one of the most important factors that influence the HR function (Adler, 2003) and an important aspect of the HR shared services model (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009). However, empirical research that focusses on the use of HR portals in a shared services setting is still missing in today's literature. This research has provided a first step to fill this gap.

Second, this thesis used a structurational lens that provides deep insights into the underlying reasons for end-users' behavior. This approach uncovered five themes of contradiction that resulted in several forms of conflict. This understanding explains why organizations have difficulties to materialize the theoretical benefits of the shared services model. Moreover, these contradictions also explain why ignoring the decentralization aspects can have a negative impact on the expected centralization benefits. Structuration theory can thus explain the effects of the HR SSC arrangement on end-user's

enacted use and provide new insights into how the combination of centralization and decentralization may lead to success.

Third, this study has shown that the materialization of the theorized benefits of the shared services model are a result of how the SSC is being used. The forms of conflict that were uncovered in this research resulted in an inability to materialize either the centralization or the decentralization benefits. These findings are in contrast to other publications that have assumed that properties of the SSC can explain how the shared services model can create value. However, similar to technology (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Orlikowski, 2000), the arrangement of an SSC cannot fully prescribe how it is being used as humans always can enact their agency and thus act in a different manner. Therefore, researchers who wish to understand the value creation of the shared services model should focus on how properties of the SSC are enacted by end-users.

Fourth, the structural lens provided deep insights into the underlying reasons for both HR-management's design and end-users' enactment of the SSC and its related tooling. This approach uncovered five themes of contradiction that can explain the congruence between HR-management's prescribed and end-users' enacted use. For instance, structuration theory might explain why line-managers in some cases did not refer applicants to Taleo. Since they were not required or able to use Taleo, the process did not change in their eyes. They still received information from applicants via e-mail. Therefore, they drew upon the same social structures as before, when applying directly with an hiring manager was still acceptable. As a result, their actions did not change and thus they reproduced the same social structures as before.

Finally, this thesis underlines the conflicting nature of the combined advantages of the centralization and decentralization models (Janssen & Joha, 2006; Meijerink et al., 2013). Findings in this paper show five themes of contradiction that are rooted in the question if support services should be centralized or decentralized. Similar to the conflicting advantages of these models, the elements of the themes are also negatively mirrored in one another. Therefore, while the shared services model might provide a hybrid of centralization and decentralization models (Maatman et al., 2010), it cannot combine social structures related to centralization and decentralization. As a result, contradictions may arise which in turn result in forms of conflict that hampers the materialization of the assumed benefits. Hence, academics should focus on how these contradictions can be resolved so that prescribed and enacted use will better align.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings presented in this thesis have several implications for practitioners. The main argument suggests that managers who are tasked with implementing a shared services model should minimize contradictions of social structures in order to align actual with the prescribed use. If contradictions rise and people find they impact them negatively, it may lead to forms of conflict. Since the themes

of contradiction presented in this paper are rooted in the central question of centralization or decentralization, organizations could improve the success of their SSC by creating congruency between social structures related to centralization and decentralization.

A possible solution for creating this congruency can be found in structuration theory. Although social structures themselves cannot be seen as external to the human mind and therefore cannot be changed directly (Giddens, 1984), they can be influenced through the interactions of communication, power and sanctioning and their related modalities of interpretive schemes, resources and norms. These interactions and changes to the modalities can change the social structures over time and by doing so minimizing contradictions.

Contradictions in structures of signification can be minimized by communicating interpretive schemes (Giddens, 1984). For Taleo, end-users did not see how the technology would make them more effective as they did not see the value in the new process and related tool. However, HR-management stated that the tool not only helps the SSC to become more effective and efficient, it also provides advantages for end-users. For instance, they stated that the new process is more transparent which reduces the chance of nepotism and the new vacancy-alert notifies users about matching job openings. By communicating these advantages to end-users, they may see how the new tool can improve their effectivity. Furthermore, HR-management stated that Taleo was not easy enough to use for decentralized HR-staff and line-managers. By providing training and improved documentation to those employees, their knowledge will increase which will increase the perceived ease of use. This would improve end-user effectivity and provide end-users with the necessary knowledge to take their own responsibility and become more autonomous. In other words, communication of the advantages and providing training could change end-users' interpretive schemes. Over time, these actions may bring end-users' structures of signification closer to HR-management's structures.

Managers can affect structures of domination through allocating and changing resources (Giddens, 1984). Therefore, by adapting the HR portals, organizations should facilitate both centralization and decentralization efforts. Over time, this could improve structural congruency between social structures related to centralization and decentralization. The three aspects of integration, interaction and personalization can be used to increase end-user effectiveness. By providing personalized interfaces for different types of end-users, the tools become easier to use and can provide more flexibility. Furthermore, the improvement in ease of use allows for decentralized access to the tools so line-managers have up to date information which improves decision making times. At the same time, all the data that is entered into the tool can be integrated into a standardized database that will improve the organizational capital and will make the SSC more efficient. Thus, HR-management can adapt the resources to increase power for both the end-users and HR-staff. End-users enacting this power will reproduce structures of domination that will be more in line with HR-management's social structures.

Issues concerning structures of legitimation can be solved by sanctioning behavior through formal and informal norms (Giddens, 1984). One type of sanctioning human behavior is by mandating people to do something. This was the case for eHR-Together where employees were forced to use the tool at least two times a year. The findings show that end-users were overall more satisfied with eHR-Together and that their enacted use was more aligned with the prescribed use. The fact that the tool was used for a couple of years and employees were mandated to use it resulted in a relative high level of experience. Other research has already stated that a higher amount of use of SSC's services would increase the perceived value (Meijerink et al., 2013). Therefore, mandating the use of tools could reproduce a norm and eventually could change structures of legitimation. However, end-users can still enact their agency and thus choose to avoid using the tools or using them in a different manner (Orlikowski, 2000). Furthermore, mandating the use of Taleo could also improve end-users' perceived effectiveness. The advantages of Taleo for employees as described by HR-management were not mentioned as such by end-users. An explanation for this could be the fact that these advantages, one time sign up and vacancy alert, only become an advantage after the first time it's used because it needs personal information from the end-user. However, every respondent that used Taleo, only used it once. Therefore, they might perceive an increased effectiveness in their future use. By mandating employees to use Taleo and creating a profile, end-users may see the new benefits in their future use and structural contradictions might decrease.

## LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has attempted to uncover forms of conflict rooted in contradicting social structures. Therefore, an in depth case-study with semi-structured interviews was performed to gain understanding of end-users' enacted use and the emergent structures that constrain and enable this interaction. Because of the limited time and intensive form of data gathering, this research is limited to one case study which limits empirical generalization. Social structures that are emergent during interactions with HR portals depend on many factors, including organizational culture, the artifact itself, attitudes towards the HR department and environmental factors (Orlikowski, 2000). So social structures and contradictions between these structures could vary in different settings. Future research could address this problem by studying HR portal use in various types of organizations that have adopted the shared services model. This might lead to identification of different themes of contradiction that explain variations in use. Furthermore, it would also be interesting to see if contradictions arise at an organization that is more focussed on decentralization efforts.

Additionally, the selection process of the respondents may have limited the ability to generalize the presented findings. Respondents of the end-users groups were selected in consultation with HR-management. A random selection was not possible since the organization was unable to provide a list of internal applicants who have used Taleo. Therefore, the internal validity might have been decreased by a possible selection bias of these processes (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). In other

words, the social structures found in this research might not be representable for every end-user at the organization.

As pointed out by others, structures may change over time by human action (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Giddens, 1984; Orlikowski, 2000). Therefore, to understand the duality of structures where they recursively impact human action, longitudinal data is necessary (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). However, this study was limited to gathering data at one point in time due to time constraints. Therefore, changes in social structures and hence an increase or decrease in structural contradictions over time could not be identified. Nevertheless, a comparison of the two studied tools where one was more recently introduced than the other, showed that there was less conflict and contradiction for the more institutionalized eHR-Together. This may imply that end-users' social structures change over time so that they become more in line with HR-management's. To validate this premise, future research could benefit from longitudinal data that may explain how interactions change social structures over time.

## CONCLUSION

The research presented in this paper tried to answer the question in which way contradictions between management's and end-users' social structures impact HR portal use in a shared service setting. The analysis of the data uncovered a discrepancy between HR-management's prescribed and end-users' enacted use that hampered the materialization of the theorized benefits of the shared services model. Five themes of contradiction were identified that were the source of these forms of conflict. Each element of these themes can be seen as related to either centralization or decentralization efforts. Findings show that HR-management focussed mainly on centralization efforts in order to create efficiency for the SSC and ultimately reduce costs. End-users on the other hand, drew more on social structures related to decentralization. For them, the new technologies should make them more effective in getting their job done and thus should create value. Because they did not believe the tools provide them with any real benefits, they enacted other than prescribed interactions. Based on this research, the main argument this thesis tries to convey is that in order to materialize the benefits of both centralization and decentralization models, contradictions between social structures related to centralization and decentralization should be minimized so that enacted and prescribed use will align.



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# APPENDICES

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR END-USERS

### Introductory Questions

1. Are you aware of the existence of the portal? How often do you use it?
2. What is, according to you, an HR portal? Does this correspond with the actual portal at Thales?

### Signification

3. What were the mentioned reasons for the implementation of the portal? \*
4. How would you describe your experiences with the portal? \*
5. Do you feel you have the necessary knowledge to understand and use the portal? \*\*

### Domination

6. What do you use the portal for? Which functions help you to do this? \*\*
7. What functionality do you feel is missing? \*\*
8. Do you feel that the portal in- or decreases your responsibility and autonomy? In which way? \*

### Legitimation

9. Why do or don't will not you use the portal? \*\*
10. What are the benefits/drawbacks of using the portal for you? \*\*
11. Could you describe you interactions with the portal and the related process?
12. Are there any consequences for not using the portal? For example, are you referred to the portal or mandated to use it?

### Contradiction and Conflict

13. Do you feel that there are contradictions between how HR sees the portal and your own experiences? \*
14. Do you, or colleagues, knowingly avoid using the portal? \*\*\*

\* Question adapted from Ehrenhard (2009)

\*\* Question adapted from Orlikowski (1991)

\*\*\* Question adapted from Walsham (2002)

# INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR HR MANAGERS

## Introductory Questions

1. What is, according to you, an HR portal? Does this correspond with the actual portal at Thales?
2. Do you think that employees are aware of the existence of the portal? And do you feel they use it?

## Signification

3. How are you communicating the existence and benefits of the portal to your employees? \*
4. How do you think employees would describe their experiences with the portal? \*
5. Do you feel your employees have the necessary knowledge to understand and use the portal? Have you done anything to improve their knowledge? \*\*

## Domination

6. What should the portal be used for? Which functions do you think help employees with this? \*\*
7. What functionality do you feel is missing from the portal? \*\*
8. Should the portal in- or decreases your employees' responsibility and autonomy? In what way? \*

## Legitimation

9. Why do you think employees do or don't use the portal? \*\*
10. What are the benefits/drawbacks of using the the portal for employees? \*\*
11. How would you describe the ideal process for employees to get their task related to the portal done? Do you feel this is currently how employees do this?
12. Are there any consequences for not using the portal? For example, are employees referred to the portal or mandated to use it?

## Contradiction and Conflict

13. Do you feel that there are contradictions between how HR sees the portal and how employees experience it? \*
14. Are you aware employees avoiding the portal? \*\*\*

\* Question adapted from Ehrenhard (2009)

\*\* Question adapted from Orlikowski (1991)

\*\*\* Question adapted from Walsham (2002)