

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The duality of HR analysts' storytelling: Showcasing and curbing

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**Abstract**

Given the increased popularity of HR analytics, a particular focus has been placed on its enactors - HR analysts. Their capabilities are believed to entail analytical and storytelling skills. While we acknowledge the importance of analytical skills, this study utilises an exploratory and qualitative approach to extend our understanding on the storytelling of HR analysts, which remains less understood in the HR analytics research. Data from HR analysts shows they engage in *storytelling as showcasing*, incorporating a narrow approach to *translating* and *selling*. The latter is a broader form of institutional work to gain legitimacy for HR analytics on a general level. New insights are also offered on how HR analysts engage in *storytelling as curbing*, a form of institutional work linked with decoupling HR analytics policy from daily practices and projects. HR analysts engage with these two seemingly contradictory aspects of storytelling to develop sustainable and legitimate HR analytics.

**KEYWORDS**

curbing, decoupling, HR analysts, HR analytics, institutional theory, selling, showcasing, storytelling, translating

**Abbreviations:** CA, Conducting HR analytics; HR, Human resource; IA, Implementing insights based on HR analytics; LA, Leading HR analytics.

All authors have equally contributed to this article.

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## Practitioner notes

### What is currently known about HR analytics?

- Both scholars and practitioners acknowledge the importance and necessity of using HR analytics.
- To effectively perform HR Analytics activities, HR analysts require both analytical and storytelling skills.
- HR analysts need to promote, advocate for, and sell HR analytics to gain managerial buy-in.

### What does this paper adds to this topic?

- Focussing on the work of enactors of HR analytics—HR analysts—to advance our knowledge in this field.
- Mobilising theory on institutional work and decoupling to provide a more nuanced understanding on the duality of storytelling by HR analysts, that is, showcasing and curbing.
- Providing practitioners with timely insights on how to successfully implement HR analytics and in this regard delineating the importance of storytelling in both showcasing (e.g., translating and selling HR analytics) and curbing (e.g., slowing down, hiding and refocusing HR analytics).

### The implications of study findings for practitioners

- Storytelling is more than translating HR analytics into business narratives.
- HR analysts need to engage in other sides of storytelling including stories of selling and curbing.
- The skilful institutional work of decoupling policy and practice can be a valuable target for the development and training of HR analysts.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

HR analytics has attracted increased attention so much so that a policy to adopt analytics appears almost compulsory for self-respecting HR functions (Angrave et al., 2016; Boudreau & Cascio, 2017; Greasley & Thomas, 2020; Margherita, 2022; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; McCartney & Fu, 2022a; Minbaeva, 2018; van der Togt & Rasmussen, 2017). HR analytics is also referred to as workforce analytics (McIver et al., 2018), people analytics (Ryan, 2020), and human capital analytics (Huselid, 2018; Schiemann et al., 2018). Despite these different titles and definitions (McCartney & Fu, 2022b), HR analytics is broadly viewed as an analytical practice involving the collection and analysis of data, gaining actionable insights from this, and using technology and tools to solve HR and business challenges (Angrave et al., 2016; McIver et al., 2018; Minbaeva, 2018). While technology-enabled digital transformation (Kim et al., 2021; van Esch & Black, 2019), increased availability of data (Jeske & Calvard, 2020), development in algorithms (Cheng & Hackett, 2019; Duggan et al., 2020; Gelbard et al., 2018), and enhanced analytical abilities of HR professionals (Kryscynski et al., 2018) are all factors perpetuating the growth in popularity of policies to pursue HR analytics, pressures from the environment on HR functions and organisations to adopt an analytics policy have also grown tremendously.

The claim that organisations should adopt HR analytics conforms to the idea of rational myths or 'institutionalised conceptions of the appropriate way to achieve goals that emerge from the environment (Dobbin, 1994; Meyer & Rowan, 1977)' (cited in Dick, 2015, p. 900). The literature highlights, for example, that 'HR analytics tops most conferences' (Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015, p. 236) and that the 'HR world is abuzz with talk of big data and the transformative potential of HR analytics' (Angrave et al., 2016, p. 1). Alignment with rational models prevailing in the broader environment affords legitimacy to organisations, and HR functions, which is crucial for viability and survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Given that organisational rationality is never independent from the environment in which organisations operate (Dobbin, 1994), the decision to adopt HR analytics may be driven as much by institutional pressures to align with expectations as by advances in technology and data science.

As the enactors of HR analytics, HR analysts' work is also shaped by the institutional expectations regarding developing effective policy and practice for HR analytics. Existing research suggests that HR departments benefit from several new opportunities provided by HR analytics via taking a data-driven and evidence-based approach to make decisions on strategic business issues (Bartel, 2000; Ben-Gal, 2019; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Rousseau, 2006; van der Laken, Bakk, Giagkoulas, van Leeuwen, & Bongenaar, 2018). For example, in order to make an impact, and effectively perform HR analytics activities (i.e., running reports, co-designing visualisations and dashboards, and building predictive models), HR analysts need to develop analytical skills, many of which have been well described in the literature (Andersen, 2017; Angrave et al., 2016; Edwards & Edwards, 2019; Guenole et al., 2017; Margherita, 2022; Minbaeva, 2018; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015). The other key capability of HR analysts which has been constantly emphasised but relatively less understood, is storytelling skills (Guenole et al., 2017). Storytelling allows HR analysts to craft and sell their stories to varied stakeholders including the senior management team (i.e., Davenport & Kim, 2013). HR analysts need to interact with multiple stakeholders including other HR professionals and managers in various departments and at various levels with senior managers, front-line managers and employees (Angrave et al., 2016; Guenole et al., 2017). Similarly, they need to advocate and engineer consent for HR analytics (Belizón & Kieran, 2021) in order to gain resources for developing the analytical capabilities of their organisations (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021).

While the importance of analytical skills in effectively performing HR analytics activities is acknowledged in the existing HR analytics literature, this is not the main focus of this study. Rather, this study aims to address the storytelling capabilities of HR analysts, and illustrate how the stories they tell also play a significant role in the work of the HR analyst. In addition to exploring how HR analysts translate data into business narratives and communicate HR analytics' insights to stakeholders, we explore more broadly the type of work which is involved in storytelling beyond translating. The HR analyst is a relatively new profession and only recently are we beginning to see in-depth studies of their work, the influences framing their contributions (e.g., Jörden et al., 2021), contextual enablers and constraints on their work (e.g., Ellmer & Reichel, 2021) and their institutional work in gaining legitimacy for HR analytics (e.g., Belizón & Kieran, 2021). What remains unclear, however, is how this work shapes the stories that HR analysts need to tell, what factors shape which stories are told, and why.

To gain insights on this issue, we adopt an exploratory approach based on 15 semi-structured interviews with experienced HR analysts and HR professionals who have a role in HR analytics. We address questions pertaining to what kind of work HR analysts are performing through their storytelling? How do they promote and sell HR analytics to other organisational actors and what else might be involved? Understanding why HR analysts use storytelling to make an impact on organisations is important. Theoretically, improving insights on this will advance our knowledge about this new HR profession and how they deal with institutional complexity to drive positive changes. Furthermore, it will extend HR analytics research by improving our understanding of the enactors' role in moving HR analytics forward in organisations. In the next section, we review relevant literature on HR analysts' storytelling capabilities, and introduce theoretical perspectives from both normative strategic business literature on HR analytics, and from institutional theory. We then present our research questions, method and findings before presenting our discussion, limitations and areas for future research.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 | Storytelling of HR analysts

Given concerns that the adoption of HR analytics has been slow in many organisations (Boudreau & Cascio, 2017; Fernandez & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2020; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015), scholars have urged researchers to explore the experiences of HR analysts and to shift focus 'from the macro-level of demonstrating and evaluating the potential benefits....to the micro-level of the social contexts in which PA [sic. People Analytics] work is performed' (Jörden

et al., 2021, p. 3). Accordingly, existing HR analytics literature has concentrated on exploring two broad skills required for HR analysts to perform HR analytics effectively. First, several scholars have pointed to HR analysts requiring a high degree of analytical skills in order to perform day-to-day HR analytics activities (Andersen, 2017; Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; Falletta & Combs, 2020; Yuan et al., 2021). These skills allow HR Analysts to identify patterns in data, design data visualisations and dashboards, along with performing statistical and predictive analysis that will offer insight and elicit recommendations to HR and business challenges. For instance, according to Andersen (2017), HR Analysts require the ability to perform various statistical tests (i.e., simple regression, factor analysis, t-tests) that will aid in building actionable solutions. Moreover, McCartney et al. (2020) claim that it is imperative that HR analysts are able to effectively identify patterns in large data sets and be able to apply statistical and advanced analytical techniques. Altogether, scholars agree that given the highly technical nature of the role, HR analysts require a high degree of analytical ability.

Second, while analytical skills are linked to the performance of HR analytics, we know little about how storytelling skills impact the ability to perform analytics, which has also been deemed by many scholars as an equally important skill (Boldosova & Luoto, 2020; McCartney & Fu, 2022a; Minbaeva, 2018; Peeters et al., 2020). For instance, existing literature suggests that HR analytics can improve workforce strategy implementation and value creation by generating *and communicating* valuable data-driven insights (Fernandez & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2020; McIver et al., 2018; Minbaeva, 2018; Ulrich et al., 2013). Likewise, storytelling skills allow HR analysts to effectively translate raw data into actionable insights for different stakeholders, specifically, non-technical audiences. Taken together, storytelling enables the translation of insights derived from data into a clear and simple story which is one critical element of conducting HR analytics (CA).

In a similar vein, HR analysts are also required to use their storytelling skills to promote, advocate, or sell the benefits and success stories of HR analytics in the hope of advancing the HR analytics agenda. For example, according to Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015), HR analysts must use their storytelling skills to frame the investment in HR analytics such that it is viewed as a compelling business proposition to potential stakeholders who may benefit from HR analytics. However, despite promoting the benefits of HR analytics, scholars have noted that managerial buy-in and support for HR analytics remains low (Minbaeva, 2018). The reasoning for this lack of support is two-fold. First, many senior managers do not believe HR analytics is currently an essential element of HR strategy (Angrave et al., 2016; Minbaeva, 2021; Shet et al., 2021). Following Minbaeva (2018), many members of top management teams are not interested in HR analytics as they are unsure of the benefits it may offer. More recently, Minbaeva (2021) also concluded that despite the need for analytics during the Covid-19 pandemic, a significant number of organisations still push HR analytics projects, which are perceived as non-business critical, aside. Green (2017) suggests that this comes as a result of HR analytics being seen as new in most organisations. Second, many organisational stakeholders remain sceptical towards HR analytics impact given the lack of analytical and technical sophistication seen in HR functions (Angrave et al., 2016; Fernandez & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2020; Shet et al., 2021). For example, according to Boudreau and Cascio (2017), some organisations still find it challenging to move from regular operational reporting to analytics. Likewise, many HR departments struggle to move beyond base level HR analytical infrastructure and are focussed on past performance (i.e., what has happened) rather than acquiring future insights (i.e., what is coming) (Levenson, 2005; Minbaeva, 2018; Pessach et al., 2020). Given these constraints, it is evident that to help increase awareness, raise excitement about the benefits HR analytics, and enhance managerial buy-in and support, HR analysts need to constantly promote, advocate, and sell the value of HR analytics and its capabilities to senior managers and other stakeholders (Green, 2017).

Based on the above analysis, this study does not focus on stories for the purpose of translating data as prominently shown in the existing HR analytics literature (McCartney et al., 2020). Rather, to fully understand the storytelling of HR analysts, we introduce broader ideas from theorising on institutional work to explore how HR analysts see storytelling and its (varied) uses in their work. This broader perspective on storytelling as a type of institutional work allows for a wider understanding of the storytelling inherent to the role of HR analysts. In the next section, we

discuss two theoretical perspectives from HR and institutional theory which offer insights into the type of storytelling HR analysts need to do.

## 2.2 | Theoretical perspectives on HR analytics and storytelling

### 2.2.1 | HR analytics-business strategy alignment

The first theoretical perspective we draw on to help explain the importance of storytelling capabilities among HR analysts comes from the normative HR analytics strategy literature. The importance of HR analytics-business strategy alignment, and the contribution of HR analytics to business performance, are significantly stressed in the existing literature (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007; Davenport et al., 2010; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Samson & Bhanugopan, 2022). According to this perspective, HR analytics must be guided by strategic business goals, and these must frame the way HR analytics projects are established, conducted, and sold within organisations to the diverse range of stakeholders who are involved (Falletta & Combs, 2020). Accordingly, Rasmussen and Ulrich (2015: 239) argue, for example, that 'HR analytics findings are products that have to be sold to have any impact', and that 'this story should always start with the business challenge'. Therefore, HR analysts require a high degree of storytelling skills to translate insights from data, while also promoting, advocating and/or selling the benefits of HR analytics to a variety of stakeholders. Likewise, storytelling can convey the nuances and meaning of complex HR data for different audiences, but also frame the investment in HR analytics as a compelling business issue and a critical policy to improve how decisions are made. *Storytelling as showcasing* aims to ensure that insights derived from data are simplified for non-technical audiences and communicated effectively in business terms.

### 2.2.2 | Institutional theory, institutional work, and storytelling

Another theoretical perspective, institutional work, can also explain the importance and nature of storytelling by looking beyond the focus of enabling business-strategy links or narrowly translating findings from HR analytics into clear business implications. Historically, HR departments have had low levels of legitimacy in the eyes of broader organisational functions (Brandl & Pohler, 2010). Subsequently, HR analytics has also suffered from the HR function's lack of legitimacy among senior decision-makers despite organisations placing a high emphasis on implementing HR analytics (Angrave et al., 2016; Minbaeva, 2021; Shet et al., 2021). For example, during the early stages of HR analytics adoption, Falletta (2014) expressed that only 15% of organisations consider HR analytics crucial in decision-making and HR strategy formulation. More recently, Fernandez and Gallardo-Gallardo (2020) echo this sentiment stating that only 20% of 1200 HR executives indicated that organisations view analytics as a strategic HR practice over the next few years. As a result, HR analysts need to engage in institutional work to gain managerial buy-in from senior leaders (Davenport, 2013; Huselid, 2015; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Minbaeva, 2018) and persuade companies to make decisions to support a policy to implement HR analytics (Vargas, Yurova, Ruppel, Cynthia, Tworoger, & Greenwood, 2018).

To this extent, HR analysts need to promote the concept and use cases of HR analytics to inform business decisions. The concept of entrepreneurial legitimacy (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994) is used by Belizón and Kieran (2021) in their discussion of institutional work involved in the introduction and development of HR analytics in three case companies. They argue that the uptake and advancement of HR analytics projects is related to decisions and events that influence whether and how HR professionals attain legitimacy for their knowledge (also referred to as cognitive legitimacy), their position in HR analytics projects (also referred to as socio-political legitimacy) and in terms of the technology use underpinning analytics (also referred to as technological legitimacy). From this perspective, HR analytics adoption is hindered by the low power and status of the HR profession in organisations. Promoting the importance

of HR analytics becomes crucial for HR professionals who tend to occupy a peripheral position in organisational hierarchies (Angrave et al., 2016; Legge, 1978; Marchington, 2015). HR professionals thus often adopt roles akin to institutional 'entrepreneurs [who] must engineer consent, using powers of persuasion and influence to overcome the scepticism and resistance of guardians of the status quo' (Belizón & Kieran, 2021, p. 5).

This type of institutional work relies on *storytelling as selling* capabilities of HR analysts and teams. A recent study by Ellmer and Reichel (2021) underpins this by highlighting the contested nature of analytics products and ambiguity regarding what such outputs mean to different audiences. They view the work of HR analysts and teams as 'recurrent activities of developing, acquiring, and validating knowledge (Knorr-Cetina, 1999, 2005)' (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021, p. 2624) in light of the expectations of diverse stakeholder groups. The knowledge validation efforts observed by Ellmer and Reichel (2021) entail relationship building work at different levels for HR analysts and teams, work that is also highlighted by Belizón and Kieran (2021) in their analysis of the relational (institutional) work undertaken to advance HR analytics projects. These studies underscore the importance of HR analysts' storytelling capabilities acting as a catalyst to building relationships and to convey the meaning of analytics outputs in persuasive and compelling ways that support HR analytics adoption.

These insights from institutional theory dovetail with concerns of several scholars who challenge the overly normative view on the business rationale for HR analytics. They ask why HR analytics continues to fall short of the ideal image rooted in business imperatives and organisational benefits (Angrave et al., 2016; Greasley & Thomas, 2020; Jörden et al., 2021) and suggest that HR analysts' storytelling capabilities are critical in ensuring success in multi-stage, multi-technology, multi-stakeholder, and multi-infrastructure endeavours (Minbaeva, 2018) with high levels of complexity. This complexity infuses the work of HR analysts at the coalface shaping the stories they tell and why they tell them (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; Jörden et al., 2021). The complexity of HR analytics projects, for example, ultimately needs to be translated back into 'a simple story that decisionmakers within the organisation can understand, so that it becomes a guide to future management actions' (Angrave et al., 2016, p. 8). This places a premium on HR analysts' storytelling capabilities without which the most sophisticated analytics projects - from a technical perspective - may fail to have an organisational impact. Minbaeva (2018) highlights the importance of HR analysts being able to tell a compelling story beyond the data and statistics since this will enable them to demonstrate their core capability referred to as the strategic capability to act.

### 2.2.3 | Institutional theory, legitimacy, and decoupling

A final theoretical perspective we consider in framing HR analysts' storytelling capabilities similarly draws on institutional theory however focuses on organisational institutionalism and the concept of decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). According to this perspective, an organisation may prioritise and invest in certain activities (i.e., HR analytics) because doing so aligns with rational models accepted by other relevant stakeholders and organisations. Indeed, it is evident from the literature that HR analytics is highly profiled at conferences, seen as potentially transformative for HR practice and decision-making and sold heavily by consultants to practitioners (Angrave et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2022; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015). Institutional theory holds that organisational alignment with rational models of organisation that prevail in the broader environment affords legitimacy which is crucial for viability and survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Given that organisational rationality is never independent from the environment in which organisations operate (Dobbin, 1994), HR analysts stories may reflect the divergence between the lived experiences of doing analytics on the ground and the images of analytics that organisations adopt in response to institutional pressures. Such images shape HR analytics policy, while the complexity outlined in the previous section could influence practices, and lead to divergence between them. Following Brandl et al. (2021: 5), 'organisations may strive to look like they are doing all the right things even when they are not actually doing things in ways that are verifiably or factually "true" to ideal models (Suddaby et al., 2017)'.

The failure to live up to the ideal forms of HR analytics is not necessarily a problem however, because partial adoption may well be favoured for reasons of institutional legitimacy. We can explain this using the concept of decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Decoupling is a way for organisations to achieve legitimacy by partially or selectively adopting rational models (or parts of models) such as HR analytics as an ideal type. A stated ambition or policy of pursuing ideal type HR analytics may go hand in hand with only partial follow through in practice and in HR analysts work. The choice of how far to adopt HR analytics may reflect decisions 'that produce least or little conflict with other priorities co-existing in the same environment' (Brandl et al., 2021, p. 5). Evidence of appointment of experts, or training of HR professionals in sophisticated analytics techniques, may co-exist with low levels of adoption or sophistication in day to day practice. For example, a recent study by Jörden et al. (2021) studies a people analytics team operating within the HR function of a European multinational corporation. They find that despite the teams' analytical capabilities to conduct advanced and rigorous analytics (akin to the ideal type processes described in the literature, e.g. Rasmussen and Ulrich (2015)), they experience dissonance between the actualities of the work they were asked to performance and images of advanced analytics.

While Jörden et al. (2021) do not mobilise the concept of decoupling, this case hints at the kinds of policy-practice gaps that institutional theory helps to explain (Bromley & Powell, 2012). In their study, Ellmer and Reichel (2021) observed the complexity of HR analysts work due to outputs of analytics projects needing to meet different stakeholders expectations such as HR priorities and business priorities while also needing to be communicated in light of broader 'compliance issues, dependencies, political tensions, and a prevailing data-driven decision culture' (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021, p. 2622). Leveraging the concept of decoupling, HR analysts' storytelling skills may reflect accommodations and trade-offs arising from contradictory factors in the institutional context which compel organisations to adopt analytics but which constrain their full development and practical use in ways predicted by the normative literature. Institutional theory and decoupling may therefore shed light on HR analysts' storytelling and raise questions about what kinds of stories are being told, and why, providing an explanation for why many organisations fail to live up to the normative models of high maturity HR analytics (Margherita, 2020).

## 2.3 | Research questions

The importance of HR analysts' storytelling capabilities is already evident, and the complexity associated with them is slowly becoming apparent from the literature. What is not clear exactly is what stories HR analysts tell or why they tell them? Following Ellmer and Reichel (2021) 'we know little about how practitioners actually mobilise these skills and resources in daily practice'. What kind of work do HR analysts associate with storytelling? Is it mainly about translating, as the HR strategy and normative literature suggests? Do HR Analysts use storytelling to win support, compel adoption, and achieve recognition and (different types of) legitimacy (Belizón & Kieran, 2021)? Is it really necessary for achieving support that the 'story should always start with the business challenge'? (Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015, p. 239). Or are HR analysts' stories aimed at both promoting analytics as well as protecting the organisation by concealing gaps between the ideal model of HR analytics as it should be, and the reality of HR analytics as practice which lags behind the ideal model?

## 3 | METHODOLOGY

To explore what stories HR analysts tell, why they tell them, and whether their storytelling capabilities enable them to showcase projects to win support, recognition, and legitimacy, this study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design. The rationale for conducting a qualitative study is three-fold. First, qualitative research is centred upon gaining insight into individual experiences, in this case of doing HR analytics, that may lead to empowerment through challenging existing structures and processes (Kvale, 1996). To ensure a trusting environment for people to share



their perspectives on working in HR analytics, we spent time explaining the rationale for the study and ensuring respondents of confidentiality and anonymity of the process. Second, a key concern for qualitative researchers is trustworthiness of the data and its analysis (Pratt et al., 2020) which is linked, among other factors, with making efforts to give voice to different constructions of reality found in the data by, for example, pursuing 'negative case analysis' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 309). We harnessed the strengths of qualitative research by taking time to understand counter-intuitive patterns in the data related to HR analytics work and the role of storytelling. Third, by leveraging the contextual knowledge of each participant, we were able to explore information relevant to participants that research teams may not have previously considered (Keegan and Den Hartog (2019)). This exploratory approach to the research was deemed appropriate because of the dearth of studies that empirically investigate the lived experiences of those responsible for HR analytics in organisations, coupled with the lack of theoretical development in the extant literature concerning how and why HR analysts engage in storytelling. In the following sections, we discuss the participant profile, data collection process, coding, and data analysis.

### 3.1 | Participant profile and data collection

Given the specific nature of the research questions, the select group of individuals capable of answering them, and to ensure trustworthiness of the data, maximum variation sampling, which is a form of purposive sampling was employed (Bloor & Wood, 2016; Campbell et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Suri, 2011). In terms of purposive sampling first, it was critical for all participants to have direct roles in HR analytics and selecting these was the first priority for sampling. Empirical research demonstrates the limited progress made in developing HR analytics capabilities in organisations (Falletta, 2014; Boudreau and Cascio (2017), a pattern that is evident also in the Irish context. As a result, our pool of potential interviewees was limited. In September 2021, we approached individuals who attended specialised HR analytics workshops organised by a professional HR association in Ireland, delivered by one of the authors. Of the total number of participants, we recruited 15 for involvement in the study. Each participant was carefully selected to ensure they are either responsible for CA, leading HR analytics, or implementing insights based on HR analytics (implementing insights derived from HR analytics) in their respective organisations. Those who attended the workshop with an interest in HR analytics but who are not actively involved with conducting, leading or using HR analytics in their work roles, were excluded from the study.

Although this reduced the number of interviews we report in our study, our aim was to gain rich insights from people well placed to discuss HR analytics work. We chose therefore not to increase the number of interviews despite pressure to conform to the assumption that the larger the number of interviews, the better. There is little consensus among qualitative research experts about the number of interviews required to validate qualitative research studies (Francis et al., 2010; Sandelowski, 1995) but trends indicate that journals seek increasing numbers of interviews for successful submissions alongside adoption of other templates or boilerplates for qualitative research that may be unhelpful or at least require more discussion (Pratt et al., 2020; Pratt et al., 2022). While inflating participant numbers to conform to growing expectations for large qualitative interview datasets was possible in our case, we decided not to do this, as we risked diluting insights when participants were included who were not able to fully engage with the topic under exploration. Once our sampling priority was established, we recruited only participants capable of discussing in-depth the work entailed in doing HR analytics. We were fortunate to recruit 15 informed participants coming from different industries, sectors and organisational contexts providing the opportunity to increase the chances of gaining rich insights into different facets of analytics work (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Albeit recruited in one country context (the country where the university is located), which is a limitation of the study, some participants work for international companies and some participants work across country boundaries. The companies where the participants work also vary according to how long they are engaged with analytics, and how advanced their analytics functions are with a mix of companies at early and later stages of development rather than all being either in their infancy, or highly advanced. Table 1 summarises the demographic profiles of the participants.



TABLE 1 Participant profile

| Interviewee | Title  | Level of responsibility for HR analytics | Gender | Sector               |
|-------------|--|--|--------|----------------------|
| P1          | HR data analyst  | CA                                       | F      | Retail               |
| P2          | Global head of people, organisational data and analytics | LA                                       | M      | Pharmaceutical       |
| P3          | Director, talent relations EMEA and APAC                 | LA                                       | F      | Professional service |
| P4          | Payroll data specialist                                  | CA                                       | M      | Retail               |
| P5          | Associate director of HR, Europe and Australia           | IA                                       | M      | Retail               |
| P6          | HR manager   | IA                                       | M      | Construction         |
| P7          | HR manager   | CA                                       | F      | Retail               |
| P8          | HR business partner                                      | IA                                       | F      | ICT                  |
| P9          | Regional people operations manager EMEA and APAC         | LA                                       | F      | Retail               |
| P10         | HR manager   | CA                                       | F      | Professional service |
| P11         | HR operations analyst                                    | CA                                       | F      | ICT                  |
| P12         | Senior manager, HR operations                            | LA                                       | M      | ICT                  |
| P13         | Group head of HR technology                              | LA                                       | F      | Healthcare           |
| P14         | HR partner   | LA                                       | M      | Professional service |
| P15         | HRIS and data analyst                                    | CA                                       | F      | Insurance            |

Abbreviations: APAC, Asia-Pacific; CA, conducting HR analytics; EMEA, Europe, the Middle East and Africa; HRIS, human resource information system; IA, implementing insights derived from HR analytics; ICT, information and communications technology; LA, leading HR analytics.

In line with qualitative data collection methods, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by the research team with each of the 15 participants. Semi-structured interviews were selected as they are flexible and allow researchers to modify questions, change their order, and ask more questions depending on the answers they receive (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Saunders & Townsend, 2016). Accordingly, we developed an interview guide to elicit insights on broad issues including (1) the work of HR analysts and the context of their work in terms of stage of development, types of data collected and analysis deployed, and support for analytics; (2) their perspectives on the capabilities needed by HR analysts; (3) their views on how insights derived from HR data are put into action; (4) how they judge their work as successful or not and (5) questions regarding the enablers, barriers, and challenges facing the development of HR analytics in their organisation. We also allowed interviewees to set the pace of each interview, and we followed their lead in terms of pursuing more depth on the issues they wanted to raise regarding the work of HR analysts and the role of storytelling. It is well recognised that 'qualitative researchers often must tweak and hone questions in the moment of data collection, following the insights as they emerge in conversation with informants' (Pratt et al., 2020, p. 7). Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim for the purpose of analysis (See Appendix A). The research team met to discuss findings, re-analyse previous interviews and determine if any additional or different questions might be posed in subsequent interviews, all of which is appropriate for, and indeed the benefit offered by, qualitative research (Pratt et al., 2020).

### 3.2 | Data coding and analysis

To identify, analyse, and report patterns within the interview transcripts, we carried out a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This allowed us to work flexibly with

codes and interpret shared meanings regarding aspects of the work of HR analysts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding involved several meetings between the research team to ensure a valid and trustworthy analysis of the data (Pratt et al., 2020). To begin, each member of the research team read all 15 interview transcripts to familiarise themselves and acquire a high-level understanding of the perspectives of each participant. This also involved each researcher generating initial codes which relied on keywords, terms and phrases used by the research participants. We openly coded the data to explore experiences and perceptions on the part of participants, and in the words used by participants to discuss the capabilities needed by HR analysts. Once all team members had identified a set of initial codes, the first meeting between the research team was held. At this meeting, each member discussed the initial codes identified and the team reached an agreement on the codes to be generated that were most appropriate for the patterns in the shared meanings underlying different aspects of HR analytics. This exercise led to the development of codes which focussed on the importance and nature of storytelling capabilities. The decision to focus on storytelling arose from preliminary analysis indicating that these capabilities were highlighted by the participants, but also discussed in a surprising or counterintuitive manner raising new issues not previously discussed in the literature.

Next, using the coding scheme, each member of the research team individually coded three interviews. This was done to further refine the coding scheme and to generate additional codes that were not previously discussed through flexible, iterative analysis. Once complete, a second meeting with the research team was held to define the codes and to finalise the coding scheme. The remaining 12 interviews along with the 3 previously coded interview transcripts were then imported to an NVivo project and coded by the research team. Finally, once all interviews were coded a final meeting was held to discuss and refine the codes, and to aggregate the codes into their respective themes and subthemes.

## 4 | RESULTS

HR analysts must develop analytical and storytelling skills in order to effectively perform and make an impact through HR analytics. Although analytical skills are not the main focus of this paper, it is worthwhile observing that analytical skills such as the ability to gather data from various HR systems, build predictive models, and visualise insights, are all vital. These are coupled with engaging in storytelling as showcasing/curbing, our focus in this paper and discussed in depth below. Preliminary analysis of the interview transcripts confirmed that storytelling is indeed a critical and under-appreciated aspect of the HR analysts' role which deserves more scholarly and practical attention. Specifically, we identified two main topics which reveal how HR analysts see storytelling and why, that is, showcasing and curbing. Respective behaviours and reasons for these two seemingly contradictory aspects of storytelling were identified.

### 4.1 | Storytelling as showcasing

First, we present the results on the topic of *storytelling as showcasing*. Two types of behaviours - translating and selling behaviours - were identified whereby HR analysts were found to constantly engage in to promote HR analytics in their organisations. Three reasons for showcasing are discussed, that is, HR analysts' passion and professional identification with HR analytics, the needs for HR analytics, as well as leadership readiness and support for HR analytics. Table 2 presents the quotes, subthemes, and themes for showcasing HR analytics.

TABLE 2 Illustrative quotes, subthemes, and themes for showcasing HR analytics

| Illustrative quotes   | Subtheme  | Theme                    |
|---|---|--------------------------|
| "I would supply the raw data at the back end of something, but what I do is I mean it's storytelling. I kind of give some core information, what that actually means and how that impacts the business, and then looking at the industry trends." (P12)           | Translating   | Behaviours of showcasing |
| "One of my biggest realisations in this role and biggest learning in this role is (that) it's an ambassadorial role. it's almost like I've gone into a foreign country that does not understand my culture and my country, and I'm trying to build bridges." (P2) | Selling   |                          |
| "Not everyone in my team, either had an interest in this or they focus on different things, and it's something I expressed interest and they wanted to grow into, so I started to like learn more." (P11)   | Passion and professional identification with HR analytics | Reasons for showcasing   |
| "I think the appetite is really strong, the operational reporting is really strong, but now we need to evolve, so we are not doing regular reporting on even basic HR stuff like turnover rates." (P1)  | Needs for HR analytics                                    |                          |
| "HR Analytics are being driven by senior leadership. The vice president of HR globally and it is delineated across the business." (P7)  | Leadership readiness and support for HR analytics         |                          |

#### 4.1.1 | Behaviours of showcasing HR analytics

##### *Translating*

This subtheme is in line with current theorising and confirms that HR analysts need to possess the capability to make insights from their analysis intelligible and convincing for stakeholders. This commonly described form of storytelling as translating is well recognised by the participants.

I think it's always storytelling actually if I'm being honest with you, you need to be able to pull data but tell a story from that data in simple terms, because not everybody understands. So, I think yeah you need to be a good storyteller. (P14)

Storytelling can be quite direct and relate to concrete projects where data has been generated and insights have emerged. Storytelling then takes the form of translation. It involves using lay-person language, avoiding technical terms, and linking to business logics to try to convince others that the data on HR outcomes is important for them and practically relevant. To achieve this, HR analysts reflect on and consider their style of delivery and how best to make it work:

I found just keep the conversation like, just keep a conversational, try to keep it as business like, as you can rather than technical talk. (P1)

HR analysts think proactively about what to do when the insights are finally available and how to convey their meaning for stakeholders:

You need to understand what the data and what the story the data is representing and to be able to present that story. (P3)

Most storytelling as translating is linked with business logics and making links from HR to the business. Once a project or investigation is initiated, the business rationale most infuses the stories told to translate the findings into meaningful results or insights for stakeholders.

### *Selling*

Storytelling as translating is clearly a critical skill required by HR analysts. However, another finding that emerged is the importance of HR analysts *selling* the contribution of HR analytics, and its importance for the organisation, at a broader level. Concretely, it involves HR analysts using cases to illustrate at a meta-level how HR data can be leveraged to improve HR decision-making and overall business outcomes more generally. Participant 2 captures the emphasis on advocacy needed for this broader showcasing role:

One of my biggest realisations in this role and biggest learning in this role is (that) it's an ambassadorial role. It's almost like I've gone into a foreign country that does not understand my culture and my country, and I'm trying to build bridges.

This bridge building, ambassadorial role involves raising the profile of HR analytics as a body of work and leveraging, as Participant 3 states '*all that work*', to convince stakeholders of the general importance of the HR analytics policy agenda:

Analytics is about getting all that work that we do and getting it almost in a language that is understandable by the business. Every business, at the end of the day, is interested in the bottom line... So, HR analytics helps to join the dots and helps tell the story.

Likewise, according to Participant 10, is it about convincing stakeholders of the need for a data driven strategy:

We need to build a picture, we need to present it to the business and make sure that they make their decisions based on data and obviously business needs as well. But the data definitely helps.

The two types of stories discussed so far are inter-related, but they vary in terms of the breadth of effort required as well as the timing of the stories. Success at translating specific outputs and insights from particular projects, effectively over many projects, may make showcasing easier over time. Likewise, failure to develop stories that translate the meaning and importance of HR findings for the business can undermine the legitimacy of HR analytics in general and undermine stakeholder support for adopting an analytics policy. Storytelling as selling engages HR analysts in more political work than mere translating and involves change management and consulting type activities. These stories advance a policy of HR analytics, over time, as opposed to directly conveying the meaning of data derived from a particular project or investigation.

#### 4.1.2 | Reasons for showcasing HR analytics

For most participants showcasing the HR analytics agenda at a broader level is important, and the three main reasons that emerge from the study include: (1) HR analysts have a passion for and professionally identify with the goals of HR analytics, (2) HR analysts perceive a need for HR analytics within their organisations, and (3) They are motivated to develop the agenda by leaders who show readiness for and who support the development of HR analytics. The following sections will describe the behaviours and causes associated with the showcasing of HR analytics.

### *Passion and professional identification with HR analytics*

When it comes to why HR analysts engage with *storytelling as selling* (part of the showcase theme along with *translating*), one of the reasons mentioned by participants is that they are themselves passionate about using HR analytics to help make business decisions and are therefore motivated to advance the policy to adopt analytics. For example, according to Participant 1,

To have the opportunity to come in and really shape [the role] and get buy-in from people, get them using HR data, seeing it make a difference on business outcomes, I personally love that... I love that kind of problem-solving feeling.

Similarly, Participant 4 stated that,

Maybe I just like data. I've been on this waggon for years, you know, so I think companies are catching up now, and they see the value and how powerful the data can be.

### *Needs for HR analytics*

Another reason for promoting HR analytics identified by the research participants is the growing needs for HR analytics in organisations. Participant 14 suggested that HR analytics is beyond simply looking at profit but rather addresses a serious need for a more employee-centric focus. For example, he/she claimed that,

It's about understanding our business from a non-financial perspective so looking at our headcount, looking at our growth plan, looking at why people are leaving, looking at reasons why people aren't leaving, even looking at gender. It basically tells us the story of our business from a people lens as opposed to the profits we made... It's actually understanding the people within our business and using analytics to get a lot more information, information that we have never needed before.

This has been particularly true given the disruption of COVID-19. In discussing the need for HR analytics during COVID-19, Participant 14 also stated that, 'We're looking at things we have never done before.

We're looking at absence a lot and sick leave, is it COVID or COVID-related? or mental health? ill family member? or whatever it may be. So, we're looking at a lot of data that we would never have looked at [prior to the pandemic].

Likewise, Participant 15 said

When COVID-19 hit there were more all of a sudden things that we needed to look at. Like how many people we had at each location, so it [COVID-19] definitely increased in demand the number of reports, basic reports, and descriptive analytics.

### *Leadership readiness and support for HR analytics*

It was discussed by several participants that leadership readiness to support HR analytics was imperative. Many suggested that having the right leadership in place, focussed on and pushing for using data to drive decision-making, allows HR analysts to have a platform to showcase the potential of HR analytics and promote its importance for organisations. For example, according to Participant 3,

There has been a big cultural shift in our company in the last 2 years. There's been a new CFO introduced, a new President, and they're much more progressive. Now, in terms of getting these things

done, they want to see the dashboards and they want to see the information coming through. So, it's almost like we've come from one end of the spectrum to the other.

This is echoed by Participant 1 who stated that

The HR leadership team and director changed in December. She's very much data-driven, so she's really on board with [using analytics], I don't have to get her buy-in. She created the vacancy because she believes in that, so that's awesome... She definitely sees the value of [analytics], so that's brilliant.

## 4.2 | Storytelling as curbing

While *stories for showcasing* HR analytics are an important theme, we also find evidence to suggest that HR analysts use stories to slow down, delay and hide HR analytics. This counter-intuitive theme relates to engagement in behaviours that lead to (1) slowing down, (2) hiding and (3) refocusing HR analytics. All serve, somewhat against the expectations from the current literature, to reduce enthusiasm for HR analytics in organisations. HR analysts discuss stories of protection rather stories of promotion, and holding back projects rather than advancing and selling them to stakeholders. Table 3 presents the quotes, subthemes, and themes for curbing HR analytics.

TABLE 3 Illustrative quotes, subthemes, and themes for curbing

| Illustrative quotes   | Subtheme                         | Theme                 |
|---|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| "Right now 70% of my job is evangelising to share with the various stakeholder groups, how should we plan and how should we set up things in a way that we are able to get value out of it." (P2)   | Slowing down                     | Behaviours of curbing |
| "I'm kind of a bit hidden at the moment, because if I put myself out there and meet the business right now and they start telling me their requirements, it will be really helpful, but I actually can't deliver until the operational side is up and running." (P1)            | Hiding                           |                       |
| "Even though a team comes to you and asks you well, I want to see this and you really need to understand the need, even though they're asking us, it might necessarily be what they want or vice versa. So ability to get into the detail to understand the requirements." (P9) | Refocusing                       |                       |
| "So we use Zellis for time and attendance and then we use Mega HR software for HR and payroll. And we have Success Factors SAP for performance management." (P6)  | Too many systems                 | Reasons for curbing   |
| "The reliability of the data. That's the biggest barrier to success. The reliability of the data." (P13)  | Lack of data quality             |                       |
| "One of our biggest constraints is time." (P10)   | Lack of time                     |                       |
| "Doing analytics isn't really the job at the minute, it is operational reporting because the system that we're using is that end of life... we don't even really have dashboards here at the moment." (P1)  | Lack of technical sophistication |                       |
| "I am a little bit nervous when it comes to the confidentiality and data and what we're going to be able to use going forward. I think GDPR has restricted a lot of what we can use." (P14)   | Data privacy concerns            |                       |

Abbreviation: GDPR, General Data Protection Regulation.

### 4.2.1 | Behaviours of curbing HR analytics

#### *Slowing down*

The first way that HR analysts curb enthusiasm for HR analytics is through actively engaging in the process of slowing things down. For example, in response to managing expectations Participant 2 said that

Whenever you turn on the TV, any social media, or attend any conference you hear everybody saying AI and data science is going to change the world. So, you become part of the wave... And you think, well, if Uber can solve it and Facebook is doing such great work, maybe we do it in our organisations. And I fully understand that enthusiasm. However, these companies have made dedicated upfront investments in a lot of infrastructure, both human and otherwise for them to be in a position to be they are today. We need to go through the steps, we need to walk before we run.

#### *Hiding*

HR analysts told *Stories of curbing* relating to efforts they made to be less visible and to hide. They actively avoid engaging with stakeholders. For example, Participant 1 said that

I'm kind of a bit hidden at the moment, because if I put myself out there and meet the business right now and they start telling me their requirements, it will be really helpful, but I actually can't deliver until the operational side is up and running.

Another Participant echoed the reluctance to be visible and out there for stakeholders:

I suppose, if you go talk to someone I'd want to be able to follow through. And at the minute, I can't follow through this. What's the point of making a commitment. (P6)

Hiding also occurs when HR analysts keep information to themselves to gain time and space to build something robust. For example, Participant 6 shared:

Overall, I'm trying to build it up in the background... we sit on a lot of data, HR people data, safety data, which would be big in our industry, [especially] the health and safety side. It would be great to start using this in a classic HR analytics way to prove our point or help or support our case... so I suppose it's more for myself at the moment and I just try to track it. It's not a top agenda item.

#### *Refocusing*

Participants also discussed the importance of engaging critically with stakeholders when they submit data or reporting requests to HR. The HR analyst needs to refocus requests, divert attention from some possible directions, and push stakeholders to reflect on data and reporting needs which often involves curtailing projects which, although possible, may not make much sense due to lack of focus. This theme appears to be linked with the hype around HR analytics, and the anxiety this causes for HR analysts, who need to ensure projects are not initiated without extremely careful thought and focus. For example, Participant 1 said

One thing I have learnt from my past experience is not to ask the question like what do you want, or what do you need because firstly, it may be something that you can't deliver but, more often than not people don't actually know... You need to get a sense of what their day-to-day looks like, what do they get the most queries from in relation to HR. You're trying to get a sense of what kind of challenges they face initially because challenges tend to be the areas we can help the most.



Similarly, Participant 2 claimed that

Even before we pick up our toolkit, do we clearly truly deeply understand the question we are trying to address? and oftentimes this question needs to come from the business...That's step number one. This is key.

Moreover, refocusing also occurs when the HR analyst is required to shift priorities and the selection of HR analytics projects given resourcing constraints. For example, Participant 11 said

I feel like last year was anything but unusual as well. We have to focus a lot more on prioritising, a lot of projects and focussing more on core work, and which case that means a lot of the time that data piece would have been a little bit put on the back burner.

#### 4.2.2 | Reasons for curbing HR analytics

Behind stories for curbing HR analytics, we find several factors explaining why HR analysts engage in *curbing*: (1) too many systems, (2) lack of data quality, (3) lack of time, (4) lack of technical sophistication, and (5) data privacy concerns. Similar to curing behaviours, the reasons behind those behaviours indicated analysts curb enthusiasm for HR analytics to protect their organisations in the long term via high quality data and appropriate HR analytics.

##### *Too many HR systems*

The first explanation for why participants actively curb enthusiasm for HR analytics, or slow things down by hiding capacity or refocusing potential projects, is because they are faced with too many HR systems to perform at the level they desire according to their professional norms. These systems contain fragmented access to several types of potentially useful data and as a result, require additional data sourcing from HR analysts to meet the growing and more complex data requests they encounter daily as talk of HR analytics, and its promise, grow. For example, according to Participant 9,

It is difficult working in a company where the systems are running to catch up with analytics [demand]... Up to now we've had difficulty trying to get data, pulling from different systems, trying to unify it and really use it.

Similarly, Participant 2 discussed how wrangling data from different systems is a necessity when dealing with fragmented data from various systems but one that constrains performing projects to a desired level. For example, he/she commented that

We have to pull data offline and then wrangle it and then analyse it separately, using other engines and other capability software plugins that help us to use, Python etc, depending on the nature of the problem... So, we are pulling data out of systems for analysis. At the same time, there are other satellite systems as well... Impact metrics might sit somewhere else. For example, if you're looking at how a certain uptake of learning behaviour has allowed salesforce to become more productive, then you're pulling out some data from the HR system and you need a separate dataset to come from your commercial restaurants. By design, by necessity, we need to pull it out.

In these cases, a key part of the HR analysts work is to achieve better coherence and alignment between systems as a priority for achieving longer term 'better' analytics outcomes closer to the ideal type of policy propagated by the literature:

that is the change management piece that we continue to work through and again we use our analytics within [one favoured system] to help to derive and understand not who down to the person level, but like where are our problems, what are we looking at? (P13)

#### *Lack of data quality*

A lack of data quality was a key motivation for curbing enthusiasm for HR analytics projects. Highlighted by several participants, the reliability of data is extremely important to enable analysts to promote initiatives in a sustainable manner yet remains a challenge faced by HR analysts in the pursuit of their daily work. For instance, Participant 13 said,

The reliability of the data. That's the biggest barrier to success. The reliability of the data.

According to Participant 1:

The data quality on the systems is pretty poor. It's definitely a challenge. It is getting people on board to realise the importance of what they put in. And value in, value out, bad data in, bad data out.

Likewise, Participant 4 offered the following example concerning the lack of data quality within their HR system,

I've had requests come through asking if I can run a report for the contact centre on absence? and then you find out that the absence is all recorded on somebody's excel spreadsheet rather than on the system. So, it doesn't go in, it doesn't get out... It's only as good as the information you put on into the system...It needs to be reliable so people can depend on the information. If I ask two people in the reporting department for the same report, am I going to get the same piece of information? I should every time but if I don't, somethings wrong.

#### *Lack of time*

HR analysts also curb enthusiasm for HR analytics due to their lack of time. Many participants mentioned that although their role focuses on reporting and evaluating HR analytics, other pressing issues arise that may cause them to shift focus. For example, Participant 10 said,

One of my biggest constraints is time and I mentioned I'm the only one who does [analytics], and yes it's 70% of my job, but there could be something [maybe] other projects, there could be a big employee relations issue, or there could be something bad going on in the firm at any one time, and your attention present to that.

Similarly, Participant 7 mentioned that

It's a time factor, just getting into the nitty-gritty and seeing what [the data] is actually telling us... The challenge is getting to the stage where we are going to have time. We're just lacking resources at the moment... Eight hours isn't long enough in the day.

*Lack of technical sophistication*

Although several participants cited that they had access to an HR system or multiple systems, many also suggested that these systems lack the technical sophistication required for performing some types of analysis. For example, Participant 5 said

I don't think our systems can measure, for example, where our new hires are coming from. Currently, we don't have a field to put into our systems that we are relocating these people. We are relocating from overseas, we are relocating from Dublin, for example, to move to Dundalk, they are remote. Or even, for example, their background in terms of education.

In addition, some participants also mentioned that having systems that can create dashboards is something they do not currently have access to. For example, Participant 3 mentioned that,

Believe it or not, we are still very much at a stage where a lot of our HR analytics are done on a very manual basis. We don't have HR analytics tool per se.

*Data privacy concerns*

Data privacy and recently established regulatory policies surrounding data protection such as General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe are other reasons why HR analysts adopt a protective rather than promotive stance towards advancing analytics projects. As suggested by several participants, HR analysts need to be careful with the type of data they are collecting and reporting on. For instance, Participant 14 said in relation to demographic reporting

We could probably ask for more data than we currently do, but obviously we're restricted in what we can ask for... I think GDPR has restricted a lot of what we can use. I think there's a lot of data in the systems that we can use, and so I am just a little bit nervous about how we can use data going forward or how long we can use data for... I am concerned that in the future, will I be able to look at age profile? I don't know. Are we going to be able to look at gender in the future? I don't know... I can see the GDPR is good in some ways, but bad when we're trying to tell a story.

Similarly, Participant 4 said concerning personal data:

We need to kind of protect that data...When [the Analyst] is creating a report and they have included the reason why [an employee] had been off, that could be depression or any other reason. That would be too personal to be shared with certain individuals, so you need to be careful with what we report on and how we share it out.

**5 | DISCUSSION**

Storytelling emerges as a critical capability for HR analysts in this study. While our findings align well with existing literature, our contribution in this study is to offer novel insights on the range of stories HR analysts tell, and elucidate the reasons for these stories. We identified two types of stories, one of which is already evident, to some extent, in the extant literature and which is labelled *storytelling as showcasing*. This theme aligns most clearly with literature on HR analytics as practice and the skills needed by HR analysts. Showcasing HR analytics involves translating the results and insights from HR analytics to different stakeholders to take actions, that is, revising, updating, or initiating new policies. It also involves selling HR analytics as a whole by HR analysts to stakeholders more broadly to advance

the HR analytics agenda in organisations at a policy level. Recent studies address this to some extent in highlighting the institutional work involved in gaining legitimacy for HR analytics (Belizón & Kieran, 2021; Ellmer & Reichel, 2021). We build on this work to draw attention to the advocacy and ambassadorial work HR analysts engage in to win support for the broader policy agenda, often driven by their own professional goals and interests and/or stimulated by the expectations of their leaders to promote a policy where HR decisions are made based on data and insights derived from analytics.

Most importantly, we offer novel insights from this study on *storytelling as curbing*, where enthusiasm is dampened, and HR analysts aim to slow the progress on analytics projects and plans on a daily practical level. HR analysts carefully curate projects in the short term, motivated by a desire to protect the quality of implementation, employee interests including privacy, and to establish solid analytical principles based on sound data and systems which their organisations do not currently possess. While some of the institutional work done by HR analysts aims at eliciting support, engineering consent, and persuading stakeholders to support HR analysts' projects and investments (Belizón & Kieran, 2021), *storytelling as curbing* indicates pressures on HR analysts to both delay and slow down ambitious aims for HR analytics, and protect daily analytics practices from too much enthusiasm through hiding, and through making analytics and even HR analysts less visible.

Stories of curbing and slowing analytics can be understood by mobilising the concept of decoupling from institutional theory. Decoupling is institutional work driven by a desire to protect the organisation and the integrity of HR analytics projects from the over-enthusiastic selling of HR analytics. Contextual factors that underpin these protection-based efforts include the duality of having leadership support and stakeholder enthusiasm on the one hand, while struggling with poor data quality and multiple HR systems on the other, all of which makes performing analytics projects at a high level consistent with professional norms (Jörden et al., 2021) difficult in the short term. Keeping stakeholders and observers enthusiastic about HR analytics as a broad policy means carving out time to tackle practical problems with systems and data quality so that HR analysts work can be performed to high levels of technical sophistication. Protecting policy level ambitions means HR analysts slow things down based on concerns about data access, privacy, and employee interests. Curbing enthusiasm in the immediate term means that data and systems problems, and conflicts about privacy and employees' interests, can be more adequately addressed. Participants appear to believe that systems and data issues can likely be solved over time and in many cases, the HR analysts we interviewed are actively working on improving things. This means HR analytics is showcased at a policy level to retain legitimacy and support from leaders and stakeholders while the practical day to day work is less about talking-up and driving projects than it is about maintaining focus on responsible developments, and curbing enthusiasm for analytics in the short-term. Full implementation of HR analytics and its enactment in daily practice appear, surprisingly at first, to be worked against by HR analysts who sometimes hide their capacity, work in the background and make themselves less visible so they can funnel requests to which they respond, and possibly avoid taking on projects that are technically, or ethically, irresponsible.

## 5.1 | Storytelling as dualistic institutional work

The stories that HR analysts in our study tell about their organisations' policy aims, and their own professional passion and identity, suggests that they are often 'walking the talk' (Bromley & Powell, 2012, p. 483) in their daily practice. Conveying appropriate and legitimate expectations that HR practices should be based on data-driven and evidenced based insights, they tell stories that align with expectations that organisations should be competent in HR analytics. These stories align with observations from current research on HR analysts seeking legitimacy of different kinds for the ideas, for their technological approaches and for their social-political status (Belizón & Kieran, 2021). The other stories we identified in the data, those they tell about curbing enthusiasm and slowing progress, also align with insights from institutional theory and in particular with Bromley and Powell (2012) on policy-practice decoupling in which a policy is adopted but not actually (fully) implemented acting as a form of symbolic or ceremonial adoption

(Dick, 2015). A temporal explanation for policy-practice decoupling in the organisations where our participants work seems plausible. A lag exists between reaching the ideal-type mature HR analytics lauded in the literature on the one hand (Margherita, 2022; McCartney & Fu, 2022b), and the current state of data, systems and privacy concerns on the other (Guenole et al., 2017; McCartney & Fu, 2022b). Such lag suggests that HR analysts need to both advocate for and sell HR analytics policy - towards the outside world and also towards internal audiences. Meanwhile, they also work to prevent lots of projects being initiated that are likely to fall short of professional norms and that may even damage employees or risk privacy breaches.

While storytelling that promotes HR analytics policy is motivated by a desire to conform to 'rational myths' (Dobbin, 1994; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and to live up to the idea that HR analytics are necessary (Angrave et al., 2016; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015) storytelling to curb enthusiasm is closer to the daily action of HR analytics. Our findings highlight that HR analysts operate in pluralistic institutional environments which exert pressures to adopt and implement HR analytics policies while dealing with practices which are difficult to align to ideal images, and pull in different directions (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Dick, 2015). Stories of translation and of showcasing align with current insights, while stories of curbing offer novel insights suggesting that HR analysts engage in different kinds of institutional work to maintain a belief in the policy while engaging in policy-practice decoupling, often to buy time to remedy problems with data and systems that prevent HR analytics practices from living up to the ideal-type policies advocated in the literature (Angrave et al., 2016).

## 5.2 | Implications for future research

HR analysts storytelling indicates policy-practice decoupling which could be widely evident in organisations. Our exploratory study does not permit generalisation to organisations but future research could examine how widely decoupling occurs. Research on whether lower stages of development and maturity are associated with stronger decoupling would also be very insightful. For example, do stories of showcasing and curbing change over time, and does the balance between them shift, as problems with data and systems are remedied? Is skilled decoupling protective of the organisation, perhaps shielding it from revelations of the gap between ideal-images and actual practices? At what costs to HR analytics as professionals is decoupling achieved? Does it lead to emotional tensions and frustration (Jörden et al., 2021)? Is dualistic storytelling a key skill at all stages of HR analytics maturity and will it remain necessary even at later stages of development when data quality and systems alignment become less problematic, but where privacy and GDPR issues, for example, are not yet resolved? As analytics' capabilities mature, does storytelling to prevent legitimacy damage remain in demand if projects threaten expectations for privacy and alignment with regulations governing that? The theoretical concept of institutional work is helpful here by explaining why HR analysts might only partially push through a stated HR analytics policy while decoupling it from aspects of daily practice (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Practical barriers and constraints facing HR analysts including data quality, privacy and GDPR concerns, and challenges of systems integration, may all play a role in shaping their work as institutional work. Although decoupling helps to explain our observations of selective or partial alignment of daily practice to HR analytics policy aims (in ideal terms), more research on HR analysts' stories can reveal the intricacies of skilled decoupling, the challenges for individuals, and how the dynamics of decoupling unfold over time with changes in HR analytics maturity.

## 5.3 | Implications for practice

The current research and prescriptive writing on HR analytics suggest a one-sided focus on showcasing HR analytics through storytelling. Storytelling capabilities highlighted in the literature are mainly oriented to advocating and talking analytics up, gaining support for projects, and translating the meaning of data about HR developments for

stakeholder from different disciplines and organisational functions. We have no doubt these capabilities are important to developing the long-term analytics agenda in organisations and encouraging them to invest in HR analytics. However, the capabilities required by HR analysts to skillfully navigate the challenges of developing robust, responsible, and valid analytics projects seem to lean also on storytelling capabilities that curb enthusiasm and slow down projects that are not aligned with the professional values of HR analysts and/or the data quality and systems level characteristics of the organisation in context.

Managing expectations, refocusing efforts, and encouraging stakeholders to slow progress at a practical level may need to be balanced against advocating for sustainable analytics at a policy level. The literature to date on HR analysts' capabilities, especially the prescriptive literature, has not conveyed a nuanced approach to storytelling that acknowledges the challenges of telling dualistic stories at policy and practice levels. Accordingly, this study identifies several reasons why HR analysts engage in curbing behaviours including (1) too many systems, (2) lack of data quality, (3) lack of time, (4) lack of technical sophistication, and (5) data privacy concerns. To reduce curbing behaviours, organisations are recommended to invest in HR systems/platforms to integrate varied HR systems and/or implement one platform for all HR functions. This is challenging however doable as there are many HR platform vendors providing one-system cloud solutions. Investing in HR systems/platforms can also provide organisations with resources of dashboards/reports as most HR systems/platforms now generate visual dashboards for organisations and managers. In addition, integrating and investing in HR systems/platforms helps to ensure high-quality, that is, accurate and timely, data to be collected for organisations to analyse and use for decision-making. Integrated HR systems, high-quality data and visual dashboards, also afford HR analysts with more time to initiate strategic projects using HR analytics which has been found to be a major constraint, leading to the curbing. Crucial to this is the capacity of HR analysts to understand and navigate what is often a contested institutional context which requires organisations to give leeway to these actors to recognise and accommodate the needs and concerns of key stakeholders including employees when approaching and seeking to resolve more practical issues as noted above that often cause concern.

Skilful decoupling of ideal-type HR policies for analytics from daily practice may be highly valuable for organisations. However, training and development of HR analysts in these capabilities is rarely discussed. The skills required to both advance policies, and tame practices, may be different to the those linked with achieving entrepreneurial legitimacy (Belizón & Kieran, 2021) and convincing stakeholders to support HR analytics, as policy may only be half the work of achieving sustainable and responsible approaches to analytics in the long term (Angrave et al., 2016). Therefore, we recommend that organisations need to invest in developing HR analytics experts who can understand the technical elements of HR analytics but more importantly understand the dual challenges deriving from broader institutional factors as well as business needs, and have strong storytelling as well as strategic capabilities to take actions based on the HR analytics results.

We know little about how HR analysts can become skilled in communication about why some projects cannot be done before more mundane tasks are achieved (i.e., relating to data quality and systems coherence and integration). This need for HR analysts daily 'working the pumps', to borrow a phrase from Roche and Teague (2012: 1333), compels more attention to laborious and time-consuming operational tasks needed in the short-term to clean up data, align systems, and establish fundamental ethical principles for analytics projects. It may be seen as too slow, reactive, and simply as HR dragging its heels. However, without such mundane work which slows things down and establishes solid foundations, achieving full implementation of sophisticated HR analytics policies would appear difficult if not impossible. Investing in practical skills and confidence of HR analysts to tell stories of showcasing and curbing *at the same time* could be valuable for building confidence in establishing analytics that are not just technically sophisticated but also responsible and contextually appropriate. It may also mean HR analysts can stop hiding, or trying to be invisible, but learn to tell stories that both promote and protect the analytics agenda, their own work, and their organisations.

## 5.4 | Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, qualitative research findings are usually unique to the study's participant and as such the study results might not be generalised (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Future studies are encouraged to use different methods such as surveys and experiencing sample method to explore the living experience of HR analysts and their role in driving HR analytics agenda.

The second limitation is the focus on HR professionals who are involved in HR analytics. Such focus could result in self-report bias. While this may be the case, the findings suggest that HR analysts do not only talk themselves up and enhance their own roles, but also highlight the challenges they face by engaging in work that slows HR analytics down and that curbs the enthusiasm of others for analytics. We found participants surprisingly frank in telling us about the lack of progress and problems they encounter as well as the successes they have achieved and perceive are possible in the future. Future research to collect data from more sources, that is, managers that they work with, would be valuable to capture the full range of storytelling behaviours of HR analysts. A final limitation is that the study was conducted with participants in a range of industries. Doing so enables us to identify the shared understanding of storytelling as *showcasing* and *curbing* among varied industries. Nonetheless, different industry contexts may influence the extent to which HR analysts develop these storytelling capabilities. Future research is encouraged to focus on similar industries to further explore how HR analytics is adopted and how HR analysts make HR analytics work.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

HR analytics is rapidly growing and is changing the business landscape via data, technology and evidence-based people management. This study aims to move HR analytics research forward by investigating the work of the enactors of HR analytics, that is, HR analysts who are moving and driving HR analytics in their organisations. It draws on the institutional complexity of organisations and reveals the duality of HR analysts' storytelling to both showcase HR analytics via translating the results of HR analytics and selling HR analytics to varied stakeholders. More importantly, this study finds that HR analysts are also curbing HR analytics, a form of institutional work we argue is linked with decoupling HR analytics policy from daily practices and projects. Engaging with the two seemingly contradictory aspects of storytelling, HR analysts strive to cope with inadequacies in data quality and systems, and to develop a sustainable and legitimate HR analytics policy bearing in mind privacy concerns and the well-being of workers. This involves remedial work to address data and systems constraints and develop solutions for concerns for privacy and employee interests. These aspects of the work can be laborious and unglamorous and can also explain the slow progress often observed in the normative and prescriptive literature. We hope our study serves as a starting point to encourage more research to better understand how to make HR analytics work and create value for businesses and produce responsible practices in terms of privacy and employee interests, in the future.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SEMI -STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

1. Can you tell us about your current role?
2. Can you tell us what HR analytics means to you?
3. How did your team/did you/your organisation HR analytics journey get started?
4. In the beginning, did your organisation support HR analytics? How about now/how has this changed?
5. How would you describe the stage of development or where you are in your HR analytics journey in your organisation?
6. What kind of workforce data are you currently collecting, and when did you start?
7. How is the HR data you collect analysed?
8. Have the insights that are derived from the data been put into action?
9. In your opinion, what are the key skills HR Analysts need to be effective in their role?
10. How does your team define or evaluate success when it comes to HR analytics?
11. What future challenges does your organisation face in adopting data-driven decision making based on HR analytics?
12. Is there anything we have not asked you that you think is important in terms of HR analytics in your organisation?