THE MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES BY SPANISH PROFESSIONALS: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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Summary: INTRODUCTION. 2.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK. 2.1. Motivations. 2.2. 3.QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY. 3.1. Choice of sample and data. 4. RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS. 5. CONCLUSIONS. 6 BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES.

Abstract: This research examines some of the key factors that impact human source management performance drawing from the practical experience of Spanish professionals. Given the scarcity of Spanish studies on variables involved in human source management through expert analysis, a qualitative expert reflexive thematic analysis employed as an analytical technique to systematize the operational knowledge they provide. The study objectives seek to identify psychological factors that increase success in source management such as motivations that either facilitate or hinder information acquisition, effective techniques for building trust-based relationship, and quality indicators of these operational relationships, thereby addressing the proposed hypotheses. The results, including the finding that ideological or moral motivations are highly reliable factors, following effective operational protocols and eliminating ineffective ones, or being guided by a systematic approach, among others, provide an empirical basis for refining engagement strategies and developing HUMINT training doctrine.

Resumen: En esta investigación se analizan cuáles son algunos de los elementos que impactan en el desempeño de la gestión de Fuentes Humanas desde la experiencia práctica de profesionales españoles. Ante la escasez de estudios españoles publicados sobre el estudio de factores implicados en la gestión de dichas Fuentes a través de expertos, se emplea el método de análisis temático reflexivo cualitativo de expertos para sistematizar los conocimientos operativos que aportan. Los objetivos del estudio buscan identificar factores psicológicos que incrementan el éxito en la gestión de Fuentes: motivaciones que facilitan u obstaculizan la obtención de información, técnicas efectivas para establecer relaciones de confianza, e indicadores de calidad de estas relaciones operativas; y así responder las hipótesis planteadas. Los resultados, como el que las motivaciones ideológicas o morales son factores de alta confiabilidad, el seguir unas pautas de actuación efectiva y eliminar las ineficaces o estar guiado por un sistema de actuación, entre otros; proporcionan base empírica para refinar estrategias de aproximación y desarrollar doctrina de entrenamiento en HUMINT.

Keywords: HUMINT, human sources, applied psychology, motivations, experts.

Palabras clave: HUMINT, fuentes humanas, psicología aplicada, motivaciones, expertos.

ABBREVIATIONS

APA: American Psychological Association

CIFAS: Centre of Intelligence of the Armed Forces

CNI: National Intelligence Centre

CNP: National Police Force

CNV: Non-Verbal Communication

CV: Verbal Communication

FH: Human Source

FsHs: Human Sources

CG: Guardia Civil

HUMINT: Human Intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Practical experience is a source of knowledge in the field of human intelligence (hereafter HUMINT), particularly in the field of Human Sources management. The complex nature of the interactions between agents and sources demands a deep understanding, no longer only through conventional theoretical frameworks, but requiring the systematic incorporation of the accumulated knowledge of practitioners with real operational experience.

This methodological approach is not new in the international arena. Allison D. Redlich and colleagues (2014) focused on determining which methods interrogators perceived to be effective by systematically surveying 152 US military and federal subject matter experts. Similarly, Nunan (2020) interviewed a variety of practitioners to learn about the relevance of the relationship for acquiring intelligence. However, having information on the psychological elements and variables that influence the management of FsHs is currently fundamental for strategic decision-making, as it allows for anticipating behaviour, identifying vulnerabilities and designing more effective security policies adapted to emerging threats. Despite this relevance, few studies have been published in Spain on this subject, leaving a significant gap for obtaining excellent intelligence analysis.

Reflective thematic analysis (RTA) of information provided by experts has been considered a suitable methodology for capturing, systematising and validating knowledge (Naeem et al., 2023) developed through years of operational practice. This qualitative approach allows for the identification of patterns, techniques and strategies that have proven effective in real-world contexts, providing a solid basis for the development of doctrine and training methodologies.

Thus, the importance of qualitative analysis in applied research is rooted in its ability to explore complex phenomena from the perspective of those who have directly experienced them (Lim, 2025). Consider for a moment how, in the context of HUMINT, where each interaction could be understood as unique and contextual variables may be multiple, the experiences and perspectives of experts provide insights that would be difficult to obtain through other methods. It is not uncommon to hear from experienced practitioners that they have developed insights and skills in this area that, if systematically analysed, can reveal principles for effective source management.

In this research, the specific objectives of the content analysis are oriented towards the identification of some psychological elements that provide a greater likelihood of success in human resource management. The motivations that facilitate obtaining relevant information and those that impede it are sought, as well as establishing some of the most effective techniques for establishing and maintaining trusting relationships with sources. Finally, we aim to delimit the indicators that allow us to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of these operational relationships, following the studies of Moffett et al. (2021), where they conducted a review of the literature that identified six categories likely to impact the management of a covert human intelligence source (CHIS) or informant.

This study continues the line of research opened by Moffett et al. (2021), analysing three of these fundamental categories: informant motivation, rapport building and

information gathering, given that they constitute the fundamental pillars for the development of effective operational relationships in the HUMINT context.

In terms of hypotheses, this analysis is based on the premise that not all sources' motivations are equally conducive to fostering sustainable trusting relationships. In this regard, the following hypotheses were put forward:

"Ideological motivation can foster a trusting relationship, while coercion can complicate it (H1)".

"Within the approach techniques, to establish a trusting relationship, the most important elements are to generate positive emotions, to adapt the communicative style of the Source with active listening and the least will be to present oneself in an excessively formal way (H2)".

These are the ones that were contemplated and we tried to respond to them, thus allowing us to refine the understanding of the factors that influence the effectiveness of the approach strategies and the sustainability of the link with the Source.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Psychology applied to source management is the theoretical foundation on which the effective practice of HUMINT is based. This discipline integrates principles of operational psychology with the specific needs of intelligence operations, providing a scientific framework for understanding and optimising interactions between agents and Sources.

Operational psychology, as defined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2023), is the application of the principles of psychological science to operations conducted in support of national security, homeland defence and public safety (Staal and DeVries, 2020). This approach is presented as the area best suited to meet the functions and needs of human intelligence operations, providing psychological principles and skills that contribute significantly to more effective decision making.

The application of operational psychological science can be highly beneficial to intelligence in offensive and defensive operations, ranging from gathering information, conducting interrogations or identifying cognitive biases in the performance of intelligence members (Heuer, 1999). In addition, it can be crucial in identifying vulnerabilities, opportunities and/or risk factors associated with FsHs.

Some other contributions of psychology to the field of intelligence materialise through the formulation of personality profiles and the study of behaviour, supported by scientific methodology. These profiles seek not only to decipher the psychological predisposition of a Source and the strategy to address it, but also to analyse how certain personality traits, together with motivation, can influence the performance of the Source and the agents.

2.1. MOTIVATIONS

Understanding motivation strengthens relationships. Some previous observation-based research has highlighted the relevance of understanding Source motivations on the part of Source handlers (Dabney and Tewksbury, 2016; as cited in Moffett et al., 2022). For this reason, the accurate identification of an informant's motivations to collaborate allows handlers to treat them in a way that allows them to more effectively influence their behaviour and decrease the associated risks.

Recruiting new potential informants and managing established relationships relies heavily on understanding the informant's motivations, interests and lifestyle traits. To this end, there are various models that facilitate the identification of the typology of motivations.

For Ian Stanier and Jordan Nunan (2021), the "FIREPLACES" model serves as a mnemonic tool designed to facilitate the structuring of a Source's motivational analysis and thus ease the cognitive burden on the handler, being one of the most widely used frameworks in the context of HUMINT. This model emerges as a response to the limitations of the traditional "MICE" (Money, Ideology, Coercion, Ego) framework that has been widely challenged as lacking solid foundations in actual scientific research, resulting in limited predictive capacity and notably simplified motivations (Charney and Irvin, 2016).

The motivations for the FIREPLACES model were derived from extensive research into autobiographies and biographies of real informants that were submitted to dedicated Source units for exploitation in the UK (Stanier and Nunan, 2021). From this analysis, Stanier and Nunan significantly expanded the MICE model, adding new motivational dimensions: revenge, excitement, protection, lifestyle, access and sentence, thus providing greater depth and enabling better identification of the informant's underlying motivations.

Thus, the acronym FIREPLACES, encompasses and structures the main motivations that can drive a Source to collaborate, which can be "Financial" (monetary rewards), "Ideological" (political or moral convictions), "Recognition" (search for prestige or status), "**Ego**' (satisfaction of personal narcissism), 'Personal' (revenge or individual grievances), 'Lifestyle' (lifestyle enhancement), 'Affection' (emotional bonding), 'Coercion' (pressure or threat), 'Excitement' (seeking strong emotions) and 'Sentence' (avoiding convictions or reducing penalties). It is important to highlight that, in order to understand why a Source decides to provide information, it is essential to analyse these specific motivations in depth, as they allow the manager to build more effective and personalised strategies for recruiting and maintaining the relationship with the informant.

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that, in addition to the early and accurate identification of the dominant type of motivation in a Source, which is a determining factor for the success of the operation, the manager must assess its nature or reasons, such as the magnitude or degree of commitment to the action, . In that sense, each motivational category has specific characteristics in terms of reliability, temporal stability and susceptibility to external manipulation.

Therefore, it could be concluded that motivation is a central element in Human Resource management, as it determines an individual's predisposition to collaborate and maintain an ongoing relationship with the manager. Understanding what drives a source to provide information allows the agent to adapt his or her relational strategy and anticipate behaviour.

In this respect, Vroom's Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), widely used in the organisational field, provides a framework also applicable to the relationship with sources. According to this model, a person's motivation to act depends on three factors: expectancy, which is the belief that his or her effort will produce the desired result, instrumentality, or the conviction that this result will lead to a reward, and valence, which is the value that the person attaches to this reward. However, it has been argued that this theory has the limitation of not considering social expectations and group conformity, so it is important to consider and include social impact as a fourth element (Fang, 2023).

Applied to the HUMINT context, taking this into account, a source will collaborate if they believe that their information will be valued, that their collaboration will have positive consequences (protection, recognition, economic benefit, personal satisfaction) and that these consequences are meaningful to them. Thus, identifying what the source really values - security, status, ideology, affection or material resources - can enable the manager to build a solid and lasting relationship, tailored to the informant's specific expectations.

Techniques for establishing and maintaining trust are based on well-established psychological principles, particularly the concepts of rapport, emotional synchronisation and social reciprocity. Rapport, understood as the psychological connection between the Source and the agent that facilitates collaboration, which helps to establish a solid basis for cooperation (Goodman-Delahunty and Howes, 2016), not only fosters mutual trust, but also enables smooth communication, creating optimal conditions for information gathering.

Indicators of effectiveness in the agent-source relationship encompass both verbal and non-verbal elements. From a behavioural perspective, they include aspects such as maintaining eye contact, gestural synchrony, use of inclusive pronouns and willingness to share personal information. From an operational perspective, effectiveness is assessed by the accuracy and relevance of the information provided, the temporal stability of the relationship, and the fulfilment of the information goals set.

This is important because the integration of these conceptual elements provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexity inherent in the management of Human Sources, enabling the development of systematic and evidence-based approaches to optimise these interactions in the intelligence domain.

3. QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

This study adopted reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as the main analytical technique for processing the information collected from the experts. This methodology, originally developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) as Thematic Analysis (TA), has evolved in recent years explicitly incorporating the active and reflexive role of the researcher as a fundamental part of the analytical process, as pointed out by the authors themselves

(Braun and Clarke; 2021) and suggested by Pérez-Mena and Sánchez (2021). RTA was selected, for the purposes of this research, for its ability to identify, analyse and report thematic patterns within qualitative data, providing a systematic and rigorous framework that recognises interpretation as an interactive process where the researcher actively participates in the construction of knowledge from the experiences and perspectives of the practitioners consulted".

The implementation of the thematic analysis followed the six phases outlined in Braun and Clarke's methodological guide, specifically adapted to the characteristics of expert content in human resource management. The first phase began during the transcription of the recorded interviews, a process that allowed an initial familiarisation with the data and the identification of relevant elements for the subsequent analysis, with the researcher exercising an active reflective role on the content and its interpretation.

The first-order coding process constituted the second phase of the analysis, characterised by a systematic examination of the data to identify and code meaningful expressions and phrases. During this stage, first-order codes were extracted and organised into a structured document and reviewed to avoid redundancy. An example of this systematisation was the merging of expressions such as "who analyses well" and "analytical skills" to create the unified code "analytical". The reflexive process allowed the researcher to question and justify these coding decisions, ensuring methodological coherence and transparency.

The third phase involved the amalgamation of related first-order codes to form second-order codes, a process that culminated in the creation of general categories. This stage required a deeper interpretative analysis, looking for conceptual connections between the identified elements and grouping them according to their thematic relevance and conceptual coherence, thus maintaining a reflective stance on the interpretations made.

Phase 4 developed the categorisation into main themes, where potential emerging themes were reviewed and compared both to specific data extracts and to the full set of information collected. This process ensured that the themes identified were representative of the data corpus and maintained internal consistency.

The criteria for theoretical saturation were applied during the fifth stage, which involved defining and naming the themes, ensuring that they were interrelated without conceptual overlap. Saturation was considered achieved when no new codes or relevant themes emerged during the analysis of the last interviews processed, indicating that the corpus of data had been exhaustively explored.

The final phase consisted of the production of the analysis, integrating both the specialised literature and the extracted data to generate a comprehensive synthesis. The reflexive approach applied throughout the process allowed for a deeper and more conscious interpretation of the data, recognising the researcher's influence on the construction of knowledge. This methodology allowed the individual experiences of the experts to be transformed into systematic and transferable knowledge, providing a solid basis for the development of practical recommendations and doctrinal guidance.

3.1. SAMPLE AND DATA SELECTION

In order to gather specialised information, a purposive sample of 17 experts was drawn from different institutions in the field of intelligence and security in Spain. This sample included six professionals from the National Intelligence Centre (hereinafter, CNI), two from the Armed Forces Intelligence Centre (hereinafter, CIFAS), four from the Guardia Civil (hereinafter, GC) and four from the National Police Force (hereinafter, CNP). All of them voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and, as a whole, the participants had an extensive professional career, accumulating between 20 and 30 years of experience in their respective organisations, with age ranges between 31 and 65 years, mainly in the field of Intelligence, and within this, in the management of FsHs. The sample consisted mostly of men (70.59%; n=12), while women accounted for 29.41% (n=5).

In particular, the majority of the CNI experts (n=6) had the highest level of experience, 30 years, and an upper age range of up to 65 years. Participants from CIFAS and the Guardia Civil, with 20 years of experience, were in the 31-50 age range, while those from the National Police, with 25 years of experience, were between 51 and 65 years of age.

The initial selection process was supplemented by a chain or "snowball" sampling strategy, asking the first participants to contact other experts who met the study's criteria. Following researchers Kitchenham and Pfleeger (2002) this snowball technique is widely used when the population is difficult for researchers to identify.

Depending on the availability of each subject, different modes of data collection were applied: semi-structured face-to-face interviews (n=4), recorded semi-structured telephone interviews (n=4) and written questionnaires sent by email or Google Forms (n=9). The interviews had been designed in advance with clear and measurable objectives, using a flexible script that allowed for a deepening of relevant emerging aspects during the conversation, thus maintaining a certain balance in the conversation. The oral interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes.

The questionnaire used was designed specifically for this research by the researcher himself, based on the literature review and specialised knowledge of the HUMINT field. The instrument was reviewed by two psychologists, who made corrections aimed at improving the clarity, relevance and appropriateness of the questions to the context. In order to minimise response bias, open-ended questions were used in , which avoided leading the participant to be suggestive, and the absolute anonymity of the participants was guaranteed, thus reducing social desirability bias. In addition, active listening and rephrasing techniques were applied during the interviews to ensure the correct interpretation of the answers without influencing the content of the responses.

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, the confidentiality of all participants was guaranteed and they gave their verbal consent for the exclusive use of their contributions in the framework of this research.

4. RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis of the interviews with FsH management experts revealed six main themes related to aspects of professional practice in HUMINT:

I. Adaptation to the Source and preparation of the agent as key elements.

Participants were asked to share their views on the essential attitudes and skills that a sourcing technician must possess to achieve his or her goal of acquiring accurate information to enrich the analysis. Complete adaptation to the Source was identified (n=15) as an essential element to take into account:

"From my point of view you must be reflective, patient, able to adapt to the profile of the interlocutor and above all know perfectly well the objective you want to achieve and establish a strategy to reach it" (Participant 10).

"For me the most important thing is that the technician adapts, adapts in all senses to the person, both in actions, thoughts and emotions. To the virtues and defects of the person you have in front of you. If you have to interview a terrorist, a paedophile or a rapist, which is unpleasant for the technician, then the technician has to adapt to the source and thus acquire the information" (Participant 6).

When an officer is faced with an interview with a Source, he/she has the obligation to suspend his/her ego, to plan and prepare the topic to be addressed in the interview, as well as to get to know the Source himself/herself. This involves seeking prior information through open sources about the person and acquiring in-depth knowledge about the Source. Thus, this process should reveal personal interests, aspects of life and motivations that can be used as key points for making connections. This is aptly explained by the following participants:

"A humint operator has to put aside his ego, suspend it and, above all, plan meticulously. The manipulator has his goal clear in his mind. If it is necessary for him to act like a fool, he will act like a fool. If he has to do x, he will do x and if he has to put up with being corrected by the Source, he will. For the person in front of him is neither friend nor foe; he is a receptacle full of information. My pride is not in whether he corrects me or not, but in getting the required information" (Participant 13).

"Talking about the management of human resources, it is key to have the analytical capacity to evaluate the source objectively. This includes considering aspects such as education, language proficiency, possible biases, accessibility of information, different types of data, motivations and vulnerabilities, as well as the availability of the source" (Participant 6).

"In terms of interaction, the handler must be able to exploit the Source strategically at any given moment, making effective use of encounter planning. Exploitation should be planned based on the assessment made earlier" (Participant 2).

"A Source handler must have a deep knowledge of the topic that the Source provides information on. It is advisable to speak the language of the Source. The main attitude is to be empathetic" (Participant 1).

With regard to the attitudes that a sourcing manager should have, several participants stressed the importance of being sociable, reflective, empathetic and observant, with attention to detail:

"An ideal sourcing technician has to be sociable, empathetic, conciliatory" (Participant 3).

"An ideal technician has to be characterised by observation" (Participant 4).

"Emotional intelligence, attention to detail and observation, empathy" (Participant 8).

Some highlighted the importance of having a background in psychology to understand the mental processes involved in obtaining information, ranging from how information is received to how it is stored and can be evoked and facilitated later:

"If we consider that the information to be obtained from a Source lies in their brain, we must have training in psychology to know how the processes involved work from the reception of information, through its storage, to those affecting evocation and facilitation" (Participant 2).

It is essential that the practitioner is guided by a system marked by each phase of their interaction with the Source. This not only promotes effectiveness, but the importance of not undertaking this task alone, but as part of a collaborative team. One participant emphasised that the team enhances analysis and allows the evolution of relationships to be tracked and possible adjustments to be detected:

"You must follow a doctrine of action that allows you to be methodical in all phases of the relationship with a Source and it is always advisable that the person does not act alone, but as part of a team, with that team analysing the evolution of the relationship to detect aspects that need to be corrected. In information relationships, links can be established that affect the information objective and often the relationship officer is not aware of this" (Participant 14).

Table 1: First coding of the thematic analysis.
First coding of the thematic analysis.

General category	
Adaptation of the source and preparation of the officer as key elements	
Second order codes	
Necessary traits of the agent	Resources and preparation of the agent
First order codes	
Social skills; Adequate listening; Suspension of ego and empathy; Broadly cultured and intellectually awake; Observant, analytical, attention to detail; Foresighted and adaptable; Flexible and reflective; Patient;	Organisation, method and doctrine of action; In-depth knowledge of the subject; Psychological training; Team with support and verification; Adequate knowledge of the subject matter; A team with support and verification

Note. Own elaboration

II. Understanding the mix of motivations and having resources available strengthens relationships.

Initiating the process of influencing a source involves, indispensably, understanding the motivations that drive them to collaborate, which are often varied and susceptible to manipulation by the manipulator. According to participants, each motivation has advantages and disadvantages, and in reality is an amalgam of incentives where individual motivations intertwine, shaping the responses and actions of the FsHs:

"To start manipulating a Source it is essential to know their motivations to collaborate which are generally several" (Participant 10).

"The underlying motivation, once identified, can be addressed to get the information we want" (Participant 11).

"They all have their pros and cons. In a way, it is a combination of motivations and within these there are their motivations, if you are a person who is going through financial difficulties, maybe you are interested in getting money, but maybe you prefer to get a job and be grateful to be paid that way" (Participant 10).

However, one of the experts stated that the responsibility lies with the information gatherer and the importance of having adequate means to address the Source's motivations:

"It is the job of the information gatherer to have the necessary resources to be able to satisfy the Source's motivation. If these resources are not available, I consider that there is no motivation that is more or less "facilitating". You have to know and be able to provide what the Source needs in order to establish a good connection and gain their trust" (Participant 11).

In turn, participants discerned between different motivations, assessing them according to their suitability for providing information and determining, in some cases, a preference for the short or long term. A general consensus was reached (n=15) highlighting the high reliability of motivations such as ideological, while those linked to coercion, financial or emotions were considered less reliable:

"Coercion doesn't work, it can be used to give you false information" (Participant 1).

"Someone who collaborates because of ideology is, in principle, the most reliable because it is logical that these principles are maintained over time. Someone who collaborates for a payment of any kind is easier, but more unstable because they can always be offered a higher amount unless they can only get the payment they want from the manipulator" (Participant 11).

"The ideological one I think is the best, the financial motivation is not, nor the emotional one because they are very fluctuating, you have to be pushing from one side to the other to get it on the right track. It is true that it can give you good results in the short term, the high of emotion is good for once and the next one has

to be a bit more, that is to say, in the long term it can give you problems. Like money, they can go to the highest bidder, and the same goes for emotion, if someone else gives them more emotion, they can leave" (Participant 13).

"The economic consideration is important and often necessary in an informational relationship, but we have to be careful in the long term and avoid it becoming a habit or a routine, so that the quality of the information decreases and the consideration becomes an obligation. It is always better to arrive at an economic consideration depending on the quality of the information received" (Participant 14).

"On the one hand, the moral/ideological part is very important, if you have it eh, careful, if you have it. Secondly, money is money. Most things are driven by money, getting some kind of reward is fundamental in many cases, but in this world, there are people who go to the highest bidder and you have to discard that source. Experiencing emotion for the sake of being a Source is not advisable, it is usually set aside as well. When a person needs protection, it becomes a priority" (Participant 16).

"Regarding ideology, revenge or protection, the information obtained is supposed to be quite reliable, they can help a lot when ideology is an important part, but you have to be very careful and always and systematically contrast it and complete it with other sources to prevent it from leading to exaggeration or manipulation" (Participant 14).

"The worst is coercion and financial, and the best is ideological. For example, some years ago, a pro-Spanish Moroccan citizen was offered a holiday in a Spanish military residence. His experience of coming to Spain was extraordinary and coming to Spain was already a great experience for him, but on top of that, the fact that it was such a residence made him feel important" (Participant 12).

"If you are going to have a long-term relationship with a source, they can become complicated over time and you have to be very careful, because it can happen that the source becomes dependent among other things" (Participant 15).

However, one of the participants pointed out that at the beginning of relationships, prior knowledge of motivations is not so much prioritised as the application of rapprochement techniques:

"In principle, none of the above, since, if the manipulator is in the early stages of the relationship, the best tool is always through active listening, empathy and rapport building. The better we use these approach techniques, the more detailed the identification of motivations to be exploited will be" (Participant 2).

Table 2
Second coding of the thematic analysis

General category	
Understanding the combination of motivations and having resources available strengthens relationships.	
Second order codes	
Those that are most reliable	Those that work worst
First-order codes	
Ideology; Protection	Coercion; Financial; Revenge; Emotion; Emotional

Note. Own elaboration

III. How to proceed in order to effectively establish a trust relationship

The most and least efficient techniques for building a trusting relationship between an agent and an FH were explored. Three themes emerged from the responses: establishing a baseline, following effective guidelines and avoiding ineffective strategies.

In this context, the process starts with the objective of establishing a baseline that allows to draw an initial profile of the Source's personality and to pick up patterns, seeking to create a calm environment:

"In the first instance, the aim is to create a baseline and thus establish the target's personality profile. First we want to create a calm situation, talking about topics that are not complex or emotionally relevant for the Source, for example, asking open questions or dealing with topics that we have researched and know well, so that we can see the way in which the Source expresses and behaves, adapt to it and observe elements to create that personality profile" (Participant 5).

In order to establish a trusting relationship, it is important to follow effective guidelines. Various cognitive biases are used, because human beings tend to make judgements on a regular basis. We use pre-existing information as a mental shortcut, seek familiarity with our environment and fill in information gaps (Brod et al., 2013), among other cognitive processes. In the context of interactions, the halo effect[1] plays a significant role: if initially good performance patterns are applied, the first impression will be positive and the overall evaluation will also be positive.

For this, the building of rapport, understood as the psychological connection between the Source and the agent that facilitates collaboration, emerges as a relevant element. This relationship fosters mutual trust and allows for fluid communication, i.e. synchronisation with the Source. Several participants agreed on the importance of listening, empathising, using first names, making the Source feel comfortable, adjusting our tone of voice to theirs, sharing personal experiences:

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[1] This effect manifests itself when we erroneously generalise from a single characteristic, attributing positive or negative qualities based solely on one aspect (Solano-Gómez and Smith-Castro, 2017, as cited in Rodríguez-Fandiño, 2022).

"Active listening and empathy. In general, the techniques and strategies that encompass Rapport should be applied" (Participant 2).

"It is always good to approach in a friendly way, making jokes, you can use specific references..." (Participant 5).

"Having good guidelines for action, always taking the initiative, taking into account the informative interest to be achieved, but without this meaning that the Source should be left in the background. You have to give him his space, listen to him, motivate him and pay attention to everything that makes the relationship climate appropriate" (Participant 14).

"Of the ones that I think may be most important are empathy, closeness, the existence of bridges, ties. You always have to weave as many links as possible between the two parties, whether it be language, history, knowledge of the country, interests of some kind" (Participant 6).

"Establish a good rapport, i.e. listen, empathise, use their first name, make them feel involved and valued" (Participant 8).

"The more natural and assertive the attitude of the acquirer, the more trust he/she will generate. You have to let the Source speak and listen to him, tell personal experiences that do not necessarily have to be real" (Participant 10).

"You should try to find common ground, talk about the issues of interest to the source, that is why it is important to study the source thoroughly" (Participant 12).

"It is important to apply the techniques associated with generating rapport and to try to be in tune with the source because a person tends to trust people who are similar to them. We can establish trust by smiling, using the name of the Source, physical contact at specific moments, looking for connections, commonalities, eye contact, copying body posture" (Participant 13).

There are ineffective elements and strategies to avoid. Not confronting ideas, not maintaining a dominant position, being authoritarian, not listening or being cold are aspects to avoid:

"Entering too soon into volatile motivations, such as economic, entering into ideological issues, tending towards arguments or leading the meeting towards issues that the Source shows not to want to deal with" (Participant 2).

"We must avoid entering into confrontation of ideas with the other person, be it religion, politics, etc. We cannot maintain a dominant position over the other person. We cannot hold a position of dominance over the Source, this should never happen" (Participant 6).

"Authoritarianism and superiority" (Participants 8 and 9).

"Talking too much, not listening, trying to show how much you know about the subject, being impatient..." (Participant 10).

"Those that go against the personality of the Source. Strategies have to be adapted to the personality and motivation of the Source" (Participant 11).

Table 3 Third coding of the thematic analysis
Third coding of the thematic analysis

General category		
How to proceed in order to effectively establish a trusting relationship		
Second order codes		
Create baseline	Having good guidelines for action	Undesirable patterns
First order codes		
Generate calm situation; Talk about non-complex issues; Ask open-ended questions; Observe CNV and CV of FH; Psychological profile of the Source;	Applying Rapport techniques; Weaving maximum binding links; Natural and assertive attitude; Empathy and listening; Preparing perfectly for the interview; Paying attention to everything; Motivating him/her and giving space	Entering ideological issues too soon; Authoritarianism; Superiority; Not keeping promises; Coercion; Confronting ideas; Being impatient; Distant and cold; Not taking into account the character and disposition of FH.

Note. Own elaboration.

IV. How to proceed in order to effectively maintain a relationship of trust: weaving as many links as possible.

Overall, Source handlers (n=12) were found to perceive trust-building behaviours, focusing on reciprocity and accommodation between agent and Source, as effective strategies for maintaining strong relationships. This effectiveness is reflected in actions ranging from regulating contact to progressively meeting the needs and motivations of the Source:

"Reciprocity, that is, responding in an appropriate way to the actions of the Source, generating exchanges, strengthening the relationship, its needs, etc., is something that must be done categorically" (Participant 15).

"Everything that generates trust in the Source, and this will influence the personality of the Source. Security and tranquillity tend to generate trust" (Participant 10).

"Keep communication brief and not always for the purpose of obtaining information. Be interested in their personal status and situations. Involve them in the objective, make them see the importance of their collaboration" (Participant 8).

"I would say that Maslow's pyramid should be applied here, i.e. satisfying the steps of the Source's needs" (Participant 6).

"In a relationship of trust, we cannot only aim to "get", we must also "give". We have to generate a kind of symbiotic relationship, always within limits" (Participant 3).

Participants recognised the importance of properly exploiting motivations once they have been identified during the first contacts:

"Appropriate exploitation of the motivations of the Source, without going into complex promises. For example, exploiting idealism towards one's own country, exploiting coherence on the basis of a job, or helping a loved one who is ill, without ever losing sight of what the Source can bring us" (Participant 2).

Most argued that it was imperative to avoid behaviours that create insecurity at the Source. Coercion, pressure, authoritarianism and forgetting the Source were seen as ineffective strategies:

"Coercion, failure to keep promises is an ineffective strategy to maintain that relationship of trust" (Participant 1).

"Getting carried away by the needs of the Source, making promises that we are not able to keep or resorting too soon to financial remuneration" (Participant 2).

"Forgetting about him except when you are looking for something, making him feel that he is used and that his involvement is not valued" (Participant 8).

"The arrogance, authoritarianism, superiority..." (Participants 9 and 17).

Table 4
Fourth coding of the thematic analysis

General category	
How to proceed in order to maintain a trusting relationship effectively: weaving as many links as possible	
Second order codes	
Anything that builds trust in the source: Reciprocity	Avoid insecurity of the source
First order codes	
Regulating contact; Exploiting motivations of the source; Satisfying steps of needs; Generating security and reassurance; Giving and not just taking	Coercion or pressure; Failure to keep promises; Being dragged by the source; Forgetting about the source; Authoritarianism and superiority

Note. Own elaboration

V. Effective behaviours to obtain information.

The majority of participants (n=13) perceived that questions are key and play a fundamental role in allowing the Source to express itself and feel listened to. Specifically, they highlighted the importance of open-ended questions. Examples include:

"Asking open questions" (Participant 1).

"With open questions and asking you to describe the situation and your feelings" (Participant 8).

"Open questions create a climate in which the Source feels she can give her point of view, she feels listened to" (Participant 15).

Likewise, one of the participants pointed out that the key is to manage the typology of existing questions appropriately:

"Solvent handling of questioning techniques. Knowing when to use each style of questions (...) there are also closed questions in case you need to obtain a specific piece of information. Hypothetical questions, which are good to ask at the beginning, so that the source opens up. And then there are the argumentative ones, with a trusted source. It is also good, as they do in psychological tests, to ask the same question in different ways and so cross-check the information. It's always good to go through the questions in outline" (Participant 13).

In eliciting information, several participants (n=7) felt that the strategies are varied and adaptable to the specific nature of the Source:

"Talking about information gathering techniques is very variable. Strategies are variable, they are changeable" (Participant 16).

"With a neurotic extrovert profile you can play with silence and in the end he will talk out of necessity" (Participant 13).

"For example, it is known that mood predisposes to cognitive ease or that physical contact triggers the release of oxytocin and this not only boosts trust, but predisposes a subject to go into a low elaboration pathway" (Participant 6).

However, some participants pointed to a number of strategies whose use, in general terms, from adopting a naïve attitude and appearing clumsy, to boosting the ego of your interlocutor, helps to provoke the flow of information with a Source:

"One can use a number of basic behaviours that help you, from playing naïve and looking a bit silly, to inflating their ego by telling them they are the smartest guy in the room. There is also the option of provoking a bit or pretending you made a mistake so that the other person corrects you, complaining about something that you know that the Source is also bothered by, keeping quiet in certain cases, cracking jokes to create a good atmosphere" (Participant 12).

"Probe and see what the source thinks" (Participant 15).

"Empower him, make him see that the information he gives us is important and gets results" (Participant 3).

Finally, one emphasised that it is important to avoid behaviours that do not favour the creation of a free environment:

"I consider that directed, captious, closed, closed, suggestive, manipulative questions are not effective because they deprive the Source of freedom to inform. It is necessary to create an environment of freedom in which the source feels that he/she can reveal the information available to him/her without being bound by any pre-established criteria" (Participant 11).

Table 5
Fifth coding of the thematic analysis

General category	
Effective behaviours to obtain information	
Second-order codes	
Sound handling of questioning techniques	Simple but effective strategies
First order codes	
Open-ended questions; Closed questions; Clarifying and/or argumentative; Hypothetical or conditional	Playing naïve; Inflating the ego; Provoking; Pretending to have a bad memory; Complaining about common ground; Creating silences; Humour; Not letting the source speak; Physical contact; Using probes; Using probes.

Note. Own elaboration.

VI. Indicators of the materialisation of the trust relationship

From the participants' responses and the information provided, a number of indicators, both verbal and non-verbal, were identified to determine whether a bond of trust has indeed been established with a Source. Participants highlighted that the assessment could be based on the daily interaction with the Source and the accuracy and reliability of the information provided:

"The assessment can come from the accuracy of the information it gives, which can be verified with other Sources. Daily work with the Source will give you an indication of that trustworthiness, which will always be progressive. In the manipulation of human sources it is very difficult to speak clearly in black and white, there are always many shades and greys" (Participant 1).

"The results obtained from the relationship: the information it provides, if it is good and reliable; if it fulfils the objective we had set at the beginning" (Participant 10).

In addition, some of the participants indicated that the analyst plays a very important role as he/she has a global vision:

"Actually the analyst helps a lot because he is the one who has the whole picture and can guide you and clarify whether the information that a Source is giving you is correct or not. In the end they are like our orchestra conductors" (Participant 15).

As another clarified:

"You can very well ask something that you already know the real answer to and so you know if he trusts or if he is trying to "sneak" it to you" (Participant 4).

Several participants agreed that certain aspects of the interaction can indicate whether a trusting relationship has been established:

"By the number of encounters established. Doing it in different environments provokes moods that can help to assess that relationship" (Participant 9).

"Imagine you are with a person and you are asking him to betray his organisation, the country or the idea he believes in, you are asking him to go against himself. If he is willing to do that, you can conclude that you have achieved a relationship of trust' (Participant 6).

From a non-verbal perspective, they noted that observing specific behavioural elements is key to assessing this connection, such as avoiding constantly looking at the clock, maintaining normal eye contact, exhibiting a genuine smile, positioning oneself in front of us and demonstrating gestural synchrony. Verbally, the use of the pronoun "we" when referring to the agent and the Source, the willingness to share personal aspects and adopting a calm tone of voice are indicators that confirm this relationship:

"By the degree of warmth in manner, relaxation and naturalness in the relationship and communication. Ease of changing the subject without implying distrust or tension" (Participant 8).

"(...) trust is perceived in the Source's willingness to share experiences, experiences, emotions, information, feelings, ideas, thoughts, real, true, certain. When the Source "opens up", with the information obtained it is important to develop a verification process to detect if this "openness" is sincere" (Participant 11).

"When the Source, for example, does not look at the clock continuously, looks into the eyes, smiles, but with a genuine smile, uses concepts like us and them, us as him and me, (...) the silences are no longer awkward, he stands in front of us and the feet are not looking away, there are no gestures of reactance or distancing" (Participant 13).

"To verify this relationship, I can start making gestures at a moment to observe if he repeats them back to me, and if he repeats them back to me consecutively, that is, there is a gestural synchronisation, it is highly probable that there is this relationship of trust" (Participant 6).

Table 6
Sixth coding of the thematic analysis

General category	
Indicators of the materialisation of the trust relationship	
Second order codes	
Accuracy of information	Aspects of treatment
First order codes	
Daily work with the Source; Analytical check; Questions with known answers; Doesn't look at watch; Looks at eyes; Genuine smile; Stands in front of the source	Does not look at watch; Looks into eyes; Genuine smile; Stands in front of us and feet in our direction; Gestural synchrony; "We"; Naturalness, relaxation in communication; Availability d; Silences not uncomfortable; "The Source opens up".

Note. Own elaboration.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Despite unstoppable technological progress, the human factor remains the cornerstone of any conflict or operation. The true test of intelligence effectiveness, in many cases, lies in HUMINT. Intelligence is not only shaped by technology, which admittedly contributes the most information, but by people who can be the primary source of high-value information.

Direct contact with reality, in a VUCA environment, is a litmus test for intelligence. Information acquired "in situ", in contact with the FsHs, is an essential element for analysis, providing precise clues that can prevent potential threats. Thus, psychology applied to intelligence not only helps to understand individual behaviour, but also becomes a valuable instrument or tool that contributes to success in obtaining strategic information in sometimes critical situations.

The conclusions, along with the above, of the present work are the following:

1.   **Precisely the adaptation of the technician to the personality of the FH is perceived as essential and of utmost importance to achieve optimal performance**. The feeling of uncertainty causes discomfort, but not certainty. Any factor of unpredictability significantly increases people's discomfort, but not security, reassurance and predictability. That is, there is a tendency to fear what is unknown and to trust what seems known or similar. Consequently, there is a considerable part of this that is due to interpretation, and that interpretation can be positive if one adapts oneself to the Source in question. Everything that generates that similarity, security, trust, serenity, should be applied, because it brings the Source closer to the agent, because it enhances the feeling of closeness and because it will ultimately be an indispensable aspect of security in the relationship.

2.   **There is a consensus among experts that ideological or moral, protective motivations are highly reliable factors in obtaining information, while those linked to coercion, financial or emotional motivations are considered less reliable in the long run.** Mistrust of the latter is due to their constant variability or fear of the Source itself, requiring great efforts to correct

and guide the Source in the right direction, and thus being considered less reliable over time. Initiating the process of influencing a Source involves a proper understanding and appreciation of the underlying motivations, which are often varied, to create sustainability of the collaboration.

3. **The agent must be part of a whole and be guided by a system of action, marked by each phase of his or her interaction with the Source.** This not only promotes effectiveness, but also the importance of being part of a collaborative team, which can and should be able to detect changes in the relationship and enable their correction. The agent, as a person and the Relationship Officer that he or she is, can be influenced by the bonding bridge with the Source and be affected by emotional biases that he or she does not consciously detect. Therefore, being part of a whole is essential to make the consensual contribution more valuable than the individual one.

4. **Following effective guidelines and eliminating ineffective ones when it comes to establishing a relationship of trust will bring us closer to the success of the information objectives to be achieved.** Building rapport, listening, empathising, using first names, making the Source feel comfortable, adjusting our tone of voice to theirs, telling personal experiences, not confronting ideas, not maintaining a position of dominance, being authoritarian, not listening or being cold, among others, as we have seen in the analysis, are factors that will help to generate this initial ground of trust.

5. **Weaving as many links as possible, either by doing everything that generates trust in the source or by avoiding insecurity in the source, will be an effective way to maintain the trusting relationship.** What is incompatible with maintaining a relationship of trust is not only creating insecurity in the Source, but also putting pressure on the Source, failing to keep promises, being dragged along by the Source, forgetting about the Source except when it is in our interest, not valuing the Source and showing oneself to be superior. Therefore, everything that revolves around reciprocity, such as generating that symbiotic relationship without always expecting to get without giving, regulating contact, generating greater security or satisfying the steps of their needs, should be valued by the one who has the responsibility to initiate and materialise that informative relationship.

6. **Based on the experience of experts, there are both effective behaviours for obtaining information and a series of indicators that facilitate the determination of the bond of trust.** Appropriate handling of the typology of existing questions is essential because they act as keys, unlocking a different understanding and revealing deeper information and layers. Experts are knowledgeable and recognise that, in order to obtain "complete" answers, it is essential to tailor the interrogative approach to the unique nature of each situation and character of the Source. In addition, various strategies, such as adopting a naïve attitude and appearing somewhat awkward, even boosting the ego of your interlocutor, help to provoke the flow of information with a Source. On the other hand, participants stressed that the assessment of the effectiveness of the bond could be based on the daily interaction with the Source and the accuracy and reliability of the information provided, as well as whether the intended goal is achieved or other elements of verbal and non-verbal interaction.

7. **"Failure to prepare is preparing for failure".** The handler's responsibility for planning, organisation and foresight is seen as key. These are indispensable tools, and it is the meticulous preparation of each step that

strengthens the effectiveness of information gathering. The right training and experiences act as a solid foundation, providing the necessary skills to navigate the complexities of human interactions. In psychology, there is a cognitive bias called the Dunning-Kruger effect which dictates that there is a tendency for individuals with limited knowledge or skills in a specific area to significantly exaggerate them. To avoid falling into this, it is essential to plan and work with firmness and confidence, but with humility; and to try to maintain a perspective that values personal strengths and weaknesses. In some ways, setbacks are acceptable, but relationship action in the absence of planning is unacceptable. Taken together, this not only defines the competent professional, but is also key to achieving success in procurement.

Likewise, the hypotheses posed at the beginning of this research were answered as follows:

"Ideological motivation can foster a trusting relationship, while coercion can complicate it (H1)."

It was accepted. The results reflect a consensus among experts that ideological or moral motivations, especially those related to the protection of people, values or institutions, are the most reliable for establishing sustained, information-oriented relationships over time. In contrast, motivations based on coercion, economic interest or the emotional component - such as revenge or resentment - are seen as less stable and therefore less reliable in the long term.

"Within the approach techniques, to establish a trusting relationship, the most important elements are to generate positive emotions, to adapt the communication style of the Source with active listening and the least will be to present oneself in an excessively formal way (H2)".

This was accepted, being broadly supported and complemented by multiple observations. Experts highlighted concrete practices such as using first names, making the Source feel comfortable, modulating the tone of voice to align with the other person's, sharing personal experiences, avoiding direct confrontation of ideas, not adopting postures of superiority or dominance, and avoiding authoritarian, cold or disinterested attitudes. These elements are considered essential to build a genuine bond of trust during the initial phases of the source-operator relationship.

In terms of the research contribution, the main contribution of the research lies in the systematisation of the tacit knowledge of experts in human resource management, identifying seven critical dimensions based on actual operational experience. This study provides a conceptual framework that integrates psychological principles applied to HUMINT, providing practical guidelines based on qualitative evidence that can serve as a basis for the development of training and action protocols in the field of intelligence. It also contributes to reducing the existing gap in the scientific literature in Spanish on psychological factors in the management of human sources.

On the other hand, among the limitations identified is the sample size, although it may be adequate for an exploratory qualitative study, it limits the generalisability of the findings. The sensitive nature of the HUMINT domain may have conditioned the depth

of some of the participants' disclosures. In addition, the reliance on self-reported testimonies and the absence of formal psychometric validation of the data collection instrument are methodological limitations that must be considered in the interpretation of the results. Variability in operational contexts and participants' experiences also represent a factor to be taken into account.

This is why this research opens up several lines of investigation that can and deserve to be explored in depth. It would be valuable, for example, to develop longitudinal research that analyses the evolution of operational agent-source relationships over the long term and the factors that determine their sustainability. Comparative studies on the effectiveness of management techniques in different cultural and operational contexts would also be relevant, as would research on the integration of emerging technologies as complementary evaluation tools. Finally, it is necessary to make progress in the development, albeit complex, of validated measurement instruments that allow us to evaluate with a certain degree of objectivity the quality of the relationships established and the effectiveness of training programmes in psychological competencies for human resources managers.

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