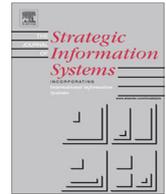




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Identity ambiguity and the promises and practices of hybrid e-HRM project teams

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ABSTRACT

The role of IS project team identity work in the enactment of day-to-day relationships with their internal clients is under-researched. We address this gap by examining the identity work undertaken by an electronic human resource management (e-HRM) 'hybrid' project team engaged in an enterprise-wide IS implementation for their multi-national organisation. Utilising social identity theory, we identify three distinctive, interrelated dimensions of project team identity work (project team management, team 'value propositions' (promises) and the team's 'knowledge practice'). We reveal how dissonance between two perspectives of e-HRM project identity work (clients' expected norms of project team's service and project team's expected norms of themselves) results in identity ambiguity. Our research contributions are to identity studies in the IS project management, HR and hybrid literatures and to managerial practice by challenging the assumption that hybrid experts are the panacea for problems associated with IS projects.

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1. Introduction

Information Systems (IS) projects invariably require team members to engage in 'hybrid' roles, that is, they are experts working on the project in more than one discipline who draw upon functional knowledge and expertise in hybrid practices and processes in order to 'make possible lateral information flows and cooperation across the boundaries of organisations, firms and groups of experts or professionals' (Miller et al., 2008, p943). The notion of the hybrid has been defined in a general sense as 'new phenomena produced out of two or more elements normally found separately'. Hybrids are variously identified as: 'actors, entities, objects, practices, processes and bodies of expertise' with 'distinctive and relatively stable attributes and characteristics, and are not merely intermediary or transitory forms' (Miller et al., 2008, p943). Research on hybrids has been undertaken across disciplines, studying topics such as the changing location of accounting practices and expertise in doctors' education (Jacobs, 2005), managerial hybrids (Rees, 1996), 'hybridised' medical expertise in Finland (Kurunmäki, 2004) and the interplay between organisations and the wider structure of IS expertise (Scarborough, 1993). In this paper we focus on those hybrid project teams engaged in the implementation of electronic HRM (e-HRM) systems, which are comprised of web-based systems designed to support the implementation of human resourcing (HR) strategies, policies and practices in organisations (Ruel et al., 2004) by a variety of organisational actors (Strohmeier, 2007).

It is important for those managing e-HRM projects to understand the hybridised context of project team members, not least because of the way potential ambiguity and fragmentation may result from the design and enactment of such projects. This is because their activities involve constant engagement in a dual hybridization process: forming and reforming at the

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margins of other practices and disciplines, such as information technology, human capital management and human resource planning (Tansley et al., 2001), while at the same time re-hybridising through other encounters. The enactment of such a dynamic context can produce a serious lack of understanding of internal clients about what the project team is there to do for them, thus impacting on the client's perception of service quality, which, in turn, may negatively influence such key relationships when the pressure is on to deliver global functional strategies (Tansley and Newell, 2007a, 2007b). We suggest that this means that project team members are consistently engaging in *identity work* (Ashforth et al., 2000), both as individuals and as a project team, as a way of constructing a positive team identity which can strengthen the building of both social resources (Dutton et al., 2010) and social capital (Newell et al., 2004) for successful project completion.

In order to expand further the theoretical aspect of our research, we critically reflect on the conceptual grounding of personal and social identity.

1.1. Framing personal and social identity

Self-identity has been described as referring to subjective meanings and experience by drawing upon feelings, values and behaviour whilst considering 'Who am I?' and 'How might I act?' (Cerulo, 1997). However, because identities are constructed in relationships with others (Gergen, 1994), collective notions, such as social and organisational identities ('Who are we?'; 'How might we act?') are also essential aspects of identity studies. Although identity is a popular concept for investigating a number of phenomena in a wide variety of organisational settings, such as: seeking competitive advantage (Fiol, 2001); undertaking organisational routines (Brown and Lewis, 2011); diversity and leadership (Eagly and Chin, 2010); role performance (Burke and Reitzes, 1981), organisational politics (Thomas and Davies, 2005) and, increasingly, working in information technology (Nach and Lejeune, 2010), there has been little empirical examination of identity work of individuals (Storey et al., 2005; Watson, 2008) and no explicit studies of social identity work at project team level in the context of e-HRM.

Several different ways of philosophically framing the notion of identity have been identified by various authors in organisational analysis. Alvesson et al. (2008, pp. 8–9) identify three distinct frames (functionalist, interpretivist and critical) used by scholars which, whilst using different ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches, all include a link between identity and action in some way, albeit taking different stances when identifying what practical steps might be taken in any interventions. Drawing from Habermas (1972), they advise that the dominant approach is the functionalist 'technical' frame, which 'aims at developing knowledge of cause-and-effect relations through which control over natural and social conditions can be achieved' and which 'may hold an important key to a variety of managerial outcomes and thus the potential to improve organisational effectiveness' (op.cit, p8).

A second frame is the 'practical-hermeneutic', concomitant with interpretivist scholarship and where the focus is on 'how people craft their identities through interaction, or how they weave 'narratives of self' in concert with others and out of the diverse contextual resources within their reach' and which for 'interpretively inclined organisational researchers', provides 'a vital key to understanding the complex, unfolding and dynamic relationship between self, work and organisation (Alvesson et al., 2008, p8). The third frame, 'emancipatory', involves a critical approach highlighting how power relations which constrain agency might be identified and addressed through relations of control and resistance.

Although we recognise that all three frames have value (Alvesson, 2010), given our interpretive orientation as researchers, we take the second, practical-hermeneutic, frame as a way of examining the lived meaningful experiences of e-HRM project team members in their social and organisational milieu. We also look to critical management scholars for pointers on the dangers of taking a purely managerialist perspective.

1.2. Framing identity stability: identity as a static entity or as fragmented, in flux and ambiguous?

Those who take an interpretive, practical-hermeneutic frame to identity studies are particularly sensitive about the way in which concepts used in their studies are ontologically and epistemologically construed, for example, in a consideration about the *stability* of the identity concept as applied in practice. In the past there has been a tendency for (functionalist) organisational scholars to construe identity as 'a subjective sense of invigorating sameness and continuity' (Erikson, 1974, p17 in Wetherell and Mohanty, 2010, p278). This 'static' notion is also invoked in Albert and Whetton's (1985) seminal work on identity as 'central, distinctive and enduring' (Schulz et al., 2000). In their typology of different approaches, Beech and McInnes characterise this static 'ideal type' as a functionalist scholarly frame where 'individuals are singular and consistent, they have attributes that may change over time, but which are consistently located within the person, and boundaries between that person and others are clear and incontrovertible' (2005, p9). This approach has been found, not unnaturally, to be naïve and analytically limiting, not least because of the sole focus on the individual.

The notion of social identity has also received much functionalist attention by scholars, who have produced a variety of essentialist definitions of the concept. Ashforth and Mael define social identity as 'the perception of oneness with a group of persons' (1989, p20). Kogut and Zander (1996) argue that organisations can be categorised by social identity, given that organisational actors connect together in their joint endeavours to support their organisation in survival and expansion. Tajfel and Turner (1979), Haslam (2001), and Oakes et al. (1991), amongst others, suggest that social identity provides for 'ways in which individuals can be seen as part of a collective entity in the mind of themselves and others, by analysing processes of (self-) categorization and psychological commitment' whilst elaborating 'on the likely causes of such ties between the individual and the collective', specifying 'the circumstances under which these ties are likely to increase or decrease in strength'

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