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# THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN THE CHOICE OF EMPLOYMENT

## Identity theory at work

An important aspect of identity theory that has been widely acknowledged is the need for human beings to categorise themselves as forming part of a social group. For instance, in his hierarchy of needs, Maslow (1968) considered the need to belong as one of human beings' primary drives (coming after satisfaction of hunger and safety but before the need for esteem). Research carried out in the 1970s and 1980s recognised that individual behaviour is not just a product of personal identity and individual differences but also influenced by groups which people belong to. Tajfel's (1981) social identity approach explains how through the principles of self-esteem (a feeling of personal self-worth) and distinctiveness (the need to feel unique), individuals seek to become attached to a social group that allows them to experience these elements. Individuals define themselves as part of a group so as to enhance their identity through that group's function, image and achievements. Self-categorisation with the group develops – a cognitive mechanism involving the 'switching on' of social identity which results in behaviours that are aligned with the group's goals and norms (Turner, 1982).

Building on the social identity approach, Breakwell (1986) adds two other guiding principles which influence behaviour – temporal continuity (between the past, present and future), and self-efficacy (denoting the belief in one's capabilities). Essentially, individuals choose to take part in activities that uphold the four identity principles of self-esteem, distinctiveness, temporal continuity and self-efficacy, and avoid threats to their existing state. Such threats can be internal, caused by a situation which creates conflict between the prime principles, or external to the individual, mainly because a situation they face is incongruent with the present value they attribute to the identity principles. Once threats become conscious, the individual seeks to apply a coping strategy at an intrapersonal, interpersonal and/or

intergroup level. An individual may resolve the threat by altering his or her identity structure both in terms of content and value and/or in relation to the priority given to any of the identity principles. Otherwise he or she might decide to move away from the present social context that is creating the threat.

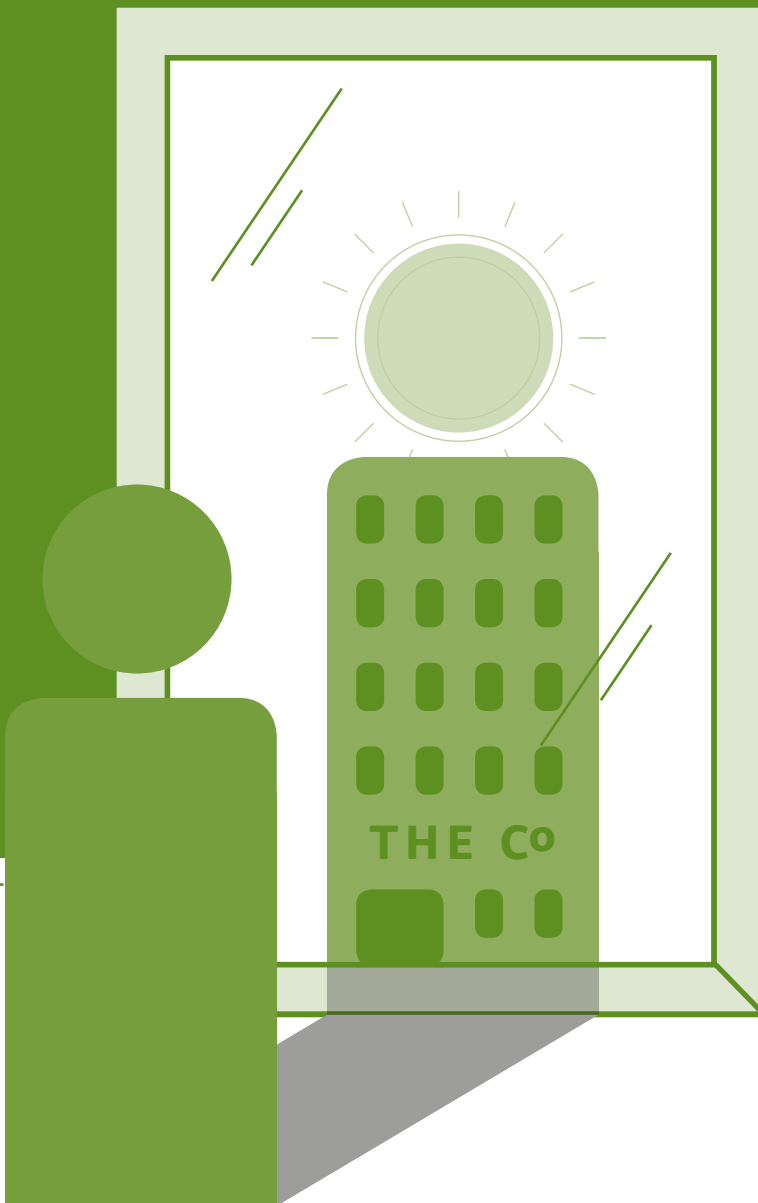
## Developing a social identity at the workplace

Belonging to an employment organisation is a form of social identity, referred to as organisational identity (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2007). An individual internalises his or her own membership and role within this specialised social group to become established as part of his or her self-concept (the individual's image of him- or herself), taking on the organisational values, interests and norms as his or her own. From a subjective point of view, 'a career is about the meaning of self in connection with the world of work' (Millward and Kyriakidou, 2004: 14), where the individual continuously negotiates his or her identity, aiming to sustain an affirmative, consistent evaluation of the self. The crucial question of *who am I?* is defined by individual attributes and roles. People choose what affiliations and roles they decide to engage in, opting for situations that are congruent with their identity. In this respect, it seems plausible to suggest that an individual chooses to become involved with an organisation that complements his or her present identity rather than one that might generate an identity threat. An individual's interaction with an employing organisation, both in terms of the occupation and the social group in which it pertains, becomes part of this self-definition.

In this context, this paper considers what potential applicants look for when accepting a position within an organisation; why they decide to join one organisation over another, even if both offer the same objective conditions; and why employees choose to stay with a particular organisation.

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### Gaining the employees' perspective

The explorative nature of this study demanded an inductive approach, adopting a longitudinal qualitative design. An opportunistic sample of twenty-six newly recruited fulltime employees, thirteen males and thirteen females, aged between 23 and 50 from across different organisations were included. Fourteen participants were managers in the hospitality industry while the remaining twelve were secondary school teachers. These two types of employees were selected because all the recruits initiated employment concurrently, minimising the time over which data was collected. In depth semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted at three, six and twelve months from initiation of contract.

At the initial interview, participants were first asked to talk about their role within the organisation and how they came to choose that particular employer. They were invited to point out any significant events that occurred within this initial time period, between starting on the job and at three months from commencement. Such events could be any instances that stood out and which caught their attention. Finally, these new recruits were asked about what would ensure they would stay in the organisation and what might make them consider quitting. Similarly, participants recounted occurrences that happened within the following time periods at the six and twelve month interviews. The participants' narratives were examined and their accounts are summarised here under three main themes. Quotes from the interviews are used to support the analysis.

### Establishing a meaningful employment relationship

Integration within the organisation takes priority in the respondents' agenda of settling into their new role and work setting. Interviewees expressed a sense of urgency in their need to move from being at the periphery of the group and feeling like an outsider to perceiving themselves as part of that new social group. One way of doing this was by making great effort to become acquainted with the organisation's mode of operation and to get to know the other members and their roles.

Participants expressed how they chose to become part of the organisation which they believed fitted with their values and ideals. They enjoyed the positive association that the organisation offered and started to describe themselves in terms of their membership. Feeling part of a team that functions well is central to the new entrants' positive perception of their employing organisation, as below:

*I'm very much a team player. I love working with my team. It's a lovely place, lovely environment (emphasis added). (Manager).*

Their integration is enhanced through the acceptance and acknowledgement shown by other group members. They invested energy in managing the relationships that developed, and maintaining the ones that they considered beneficial, principally those which offer organisational support to establish



themselves as part of the group. As new entrants, they were willing to give their utmost but also expected the organisation to provide them with the required assistance in learning how to perform their duties well and are grateful that they receive it:

*This department is very supportive and I can certainly feel as part of a team here and everyone is very willing to give me advice and to give me practical support. (Teacher)*

Besides having people who are easily accessible, support also takes the form of formal training and the supply of mechanisms that enhance efficiency. Employees also believed that the employment relationship should be a balanced system of mutual benefits for them and the organisation. They expected a reciprocal relationship of trust, loyalty and mutual attention to each other's well-being. Their work role was also expected to fit in with their pre-existing roles outside work and any other roles that they might acquire during their employment.

### Applying skills and knowledge

Interviewees explained how they hoped that the organisation would serve as an outlet for displaying their true self, channelling their energy and fulfilling their aspirations. They believed that they could maintain their personal goals and practice their values through their engagement with work. They regarded their employment as providing a challenging and motivating environment:

*I'm enjoying the challenge of running this business so as long as this continues, I'm happy to be here for the rest of my working life. (Manager).*



*Employees' confidence and self-efficacy was directly influenced by their job satisfaction, which was the main measure they used to scale their intention to stay or leave the organisation*

It was also perceived as a setting where they could bring new input through their independent contribution:

I will stay here for as long as I know that I could make a difference and I can drive it forward. I think when I'm bored, when I feel I can't do any more, then it's time to leave and move on. (Teacher)

Organisational support was seen as crucial to become confident in their assigned role and to perceive themselves as competent:

You can do your job because the back up is there... it's great to have people behind you. (Manager)

These new recruits considered the organisation responsible to provide them with the necessary training and tools needed to conduct their job well. Furthermore, they expected to have opportunities for career progression, which was their aim when joining the organisation.

Notably, the focus on personal and professional development was much more prominent in the second six months of employment than in the initial period of employment. They sought knowledge about training and progression opportunities available to them and wanted to establish a concrete career plan. It was also part of their reality check. For instance, one interviewee expressed how she realised that a low employee turnover, which she considered a positive factor when she was recruited, meant that her options for progression in her desired direction were not available to her.

#### **Maintaining a positive sense of identity**

New recruits continuously engaged in a process of self-appraisal as they need to feel sufficiently confident in their assigned role to maintain a positive self-concept. Any form of feedback served to uphold a positive self-image. They sought affirmation from members of their new social group, particularly those in more senior positions (such as their line manager). In the managers' group, feedback was obtained through identifying tangible outcomes, such as positive business results:

The most positive thing is seeing the business grow, and then beat budget and you know, make extra profit. Erm, so that kind of reinforces hopefully that I'm doing a good job. (Manager)

In the teachers' group, respondents sought feedback from their students' performance:

I'd say my confidence has grown because I used to think 'Oh the kids aren't learning much' but now I've seen that... looking back over their books... some of what I'm teaching them has actually sunk in. (Teacher)

Perceiving oneself as self-efficacious is important. One participant explained the process of evaluation that this entails:

I think this is what happens. This is what the story is all about really. It's realising that, 'Yes I am able to this and yes I am doing this well. (Teacher)

Employees' confidence and self-efficacy was directly influenced by their job satisfaction, which was the main measure they used to scale their intention to stay or leave the organisation. Job satisfaction level is gauged against past experiences of work, or their perceptions of the role and/or the organisation prior to initiation of the current employment.

It is interesting to note that there were no identifiable differences between the teachers' and managers' accounts, and their experiences and expectations were comparable. Understandably, this does not mean that the outcome can be generalised to other occupations, particularly since the two types of employees included in this research were managerial and professional. Moreover, this study excluded part-time and contract workers, and did not account for age or gender differences.

#### **Making sense of the employees' narratives**

The participants' accounts show that the salience of a social identity as defined by Tajfel (1981) is central to an employee's engagement with an organisation. Individuals strive for inclusion and use the socialisation process to make sense of their experience. They speak of their work teams as being distinctively well-functioning, supporting them in enhancing their self-esteem, as they define themselves as part of their successful organisation. However, the interviewees' narratives indicated that around six months from entry into an organisation, the focus of their initial enthusiasm to establish themselves as part of their new social group shifts onto more personal matters (see Figure 1 overleaf).

The concern for temporal continuity and self-efficacy as defined by Breakwell (1986) becomes salient once they are confident in their new responsibilities. Having gathered sufficient







**FIGURE 1:** The balance of the exchange within the first year of employment

insider information and formulated a more realistic picture about the organisation’s way of functioning, individuals seek a defined career plan which can fulfil their aspirations set prior to joining and which can take them forward, beyond their present employment. At that point the new recruits questioned whether their present employment fitted well with their personal values or needs, and evaluated whether it was posing a threat to their ideals. A decision was made, consciously or not, about their longevity in their employment. If their new employment relationship was seen to be threatening their personal identity, then individuals would seek rectification, either by altering the present arrangements or through moving on to another organisation. Indeed the subjective point of view on career matters (Millward and Kyriakidou, 2004) and cannot be underestimated or dismissed when examining career decisions.

**Implications for practice**

Employers know that their workforce is their best resource. Long serving employees are more likely to reflect the organisational culture and goals, so retaining satisfied workers with a strong organisational identity is important. Here are some recommendations for employers derived from this study. The analysis showed that employers should:

1. Develop a system of regular informal ‘health checks’, particularly with new recruits. When individuals join an organisation, they have their own expectations and requirements which they believe they can satisfy and fulfil through their employment. Dialogue in the first months allows for the alignment of the employee’s individuality with the organisational aims and this will generate opportunities for self-expression. A formal performance appraisal at the end of the first year might be too late to retain a new recruit.
2. Acknowledge that the relationship with employees goes beyond its transactional nature of payment against services. It needs to be nourished and maintained. It is important to get involved and invest in employee development, both in the short and long term, specifying how the organisation will support them.
3. Recognise employees’ efforts to promote business success. Rewards do not necessarily have to take the form of a financial gift, employers also value other forms of rewards.

The benefits of adopting these measures outweigh the cost of recruitment and training of new staff members. It is also interesting - and perhaps counter-intuitive – to note that besides the financial gain, a low staff turnover projects a corporate image of stability and success, and thus attracts both future employees and customers.

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