Identity and Significance in the Design Team

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Abstract

The paper examines the nature of *personal identity* individuals in the design team are perceived to have, derived from behavioural evidence provided by other members of the team.

Personal identity is conceived to comprise of acceptance, security and significance. The evidence for this study comprises of behaviours related to *personal significance*. The levels of significance and the types of behavioural patterns are analysed for the design team as a whole and by professional role. Particular behaviours are analysed, conceptualised in terms of performance related behaviours, appearance related behaviours, blame based behaviour, shame based behaviour, humility based behaviours, and confidence related behaviours.

Keywords: Acceptance, Adversarial Behaviour, Appearance, Blame, Confidence, Humility, Identity, Performance, Shame, Significance

Introduction

"Who am I?" "Why am I here?" Two questions that many of us may of asked and joked about, especially in teenage years and early adulthood. Both questions relate to our *personal identity*. The concept of identity encompasses both sameness, that is the extent to which one object is identical to another, *and*, individuality, that is the extent to which an object is different. Taking one object as an example, "chair" is a name that denotes sameness, yet individual chairs are different: antique Chippendale, a Charles Rennie Mackintosh chair or a chair purchased and assembled from Ikea. Taking the human subject, "human being" is a category of sameness and each of us are made different, both biologically and socially through experience. Perhaps the angst of growing up lies behind jokes about, "Who am I?" as we each try to establish an identity.

Examining *identity* in the human context is complex. Identity is not merely a product of sameness, nor difference, but an interaction between the two. This interaction means change and our identity is not 'manufactured', like a chair, and then fixed in an objective sense, but unfolds and evolves over our life. Indeed, many of us find part of our identity in work. To the extent that we feel *significant* in our work, we take

to give and reinforce identity. Work is a particularly potent force in Anglo-Saxon culture, derived from the protestant work ethic, and is reflected in identity in so much as one of the first questions we asked someone we are introduced to is, "What do you do?"

The paper will also begin to explore the extent to which people find their significance and identity through work in healthy and constructive ways. In other words, is the behaviour of individuals concerned helping efficiency and effectiveness in the workplace? This paper is a tentative exploration, drawing upon some data solicited in a study concerning trust within a design team and broader client-professional coalition (Smyth, 2005; 2006). Whilst the data set is small, there is sufficient to begin an exploration and provide a stimulus for further consideration.

Identity and Significance

Personal identity comes from our sameness as human beings. Ontologically, there are characteristics of sameness that constitute our essence as humans, such as the ability to think and feel, and included is the social nature of humans. Therefore, our identity is not something that arises in a vacuum nor is created and fixed in the sense of an object like a chair. It is our sameness as social beings in this ontological sense that creates the interaction between sameness and individuality that together forms our personal identities. Anderson (2000) claims that identity can be broken down into three components:

- Acceptance
- Security
- Significance.

Acceptance is personal within a social setting – parents, family, friends and colleagues. Security is both physical and emotional (Maslow, 1954; 1968). Significance is primarily derived socially. Significance is derived from both the value we have in relation to others and our perception of how we are valued by others (McGee, 1998).

Four behaviours have been identified by McGee (1998) that people pursue to increase their sense of significance, yet ultimately have a detrimental affect upon the individual and those around them:

i. An unhealthy *performance orientation* or striving
ii. A tendency to *blame* others rather than take responsibility or take initiative
iii. An unhealthy *appearance orientation* where the individual tires to look good in the eyes of others but does not believe they are really good enough
iv. A tendency to feel *shame* as a result of being the victim to others and circumstances.

There are two positive behaviours (Smyth, 2004) that contribute to a sense of significance:

v. A healthy *confidence* in self which includes an assurance of one's own ability
vi. *Humility* which combines firmness without the need to impose upon or impress others.

Excellent work results in efficient and effective performance, however, a performance orientation, is unhealthy and is marked by the individual always feeling that they have either fallen short or that they have to do better to be satisfied. In such cases, the focus is not really on execution of the task, but how the person feels in a negative sense, whereas excellence is task focused, resulting in the person feeling good. Such behaviour is based upon the negative meaning of *pride*. The tendency to blame others is also based on pride, judging others to have fallen short. Both an unhealthy appearance orientation and shame are based upon *fear* in the sense the person does not believe they are good enough. In the case of concern about appearance the person does not want others to know that, so a mask is created, yet there is always the risk of being "found out". Someone who feels shame is a victim to circumstances and others, fearing that others will pick upon them or ignore them. Shame based behaviour makes it difficult to take positions of responsibility. All these negative behaviours try to erroneously support a sense of significance and hence falsely bolster personal identity. On the other hand, confidence and humility arise from learning from experience – in just the same way that organisational learning and knowledge management are proposed to improve firm performance – so that current issues and problems are turned into benefits for the future. Such experience is used by the individual to gain a realistic assessment of themselves in relation to activities and others. Confidence and humility combined help to provide an identity of *wholeness*.

Significance and the Design Team

It would be expected that those involved wit the design and the realization of a major development is generally satisfying and hence would provide significance above a more mundane, repetitive work. Those directly involved with the design process it is surmised would have a heightened sense of being involved in satisfying work. Such creative opportunities have the potential downside of trying to seek significance through work in a detrimental or unhealthy way, in the sense that those involved have an imbalance in their life.

The case comprises a design team and wider coalition involved in a major multi-use redevelopment in the heart of London for a leading property development and investment company. The speculative development consists of prime retail, offices plus residential use and the organizations involved are:

- client – one of the foremost property development and investment companies in the UK
- design team – four practices: architects, quantity surveyors (QSs)/cost consultants, structural engineers, services engineers
- real estate consultants – four firms: retail agents, office agents, residential agents
- surveying agents acting as planning advisers.

Key decision-makers were surveyed, comprising partners/directors, associates and project managers. The response rate was 82% among the client and design team, and 87% among the client and broader professional coalition, which included the real estate consultants. There were 59 relationship responses in all, each relationship response being an evaluation of the relationship between one individual and another organization, which may involve an evaluation of several individuals. The methodological justification is that an assessment is being made of the identity and

significance of the type of people working in an organization rather than any individual *per se*. The relevant part of the survey is shown in Appendix A.

Table 1 shows the perception by others of the predominant orientation of the design team members.

	Architects	Structural Engineers	M&E Engineers	QS
Performance	0	2	2	1
Blame	0	0	0	0
Pride	**0**	**2**	**2**	**1**
Appearance	1	1	1	1
Shame	0	0	0	0
Fear	**1**	**1**	**1**	**1**
Confidence	5	4	3	1
Humility	0	0	2	6
Wholeness	5	4	5	7
Net Significance	4	1	2	5

Table 1. Perceptions of Design Team Identity and Significance

Table 1 shows that the design team have a reason able wholesome sense of identity. The QS and architect have a strong collective sense of significance in their respective compared with the engineers. However, the M&E engineers in particular have managed to combine humility and confidence, which is difficult, marred only by some apparently unhealthy tendencies to be over-concerned for performance (cf. Smyth, 2004).

The real estate and surveying agents are considered in Table 2 below.

	Client	Real Estate Agents	Planning Advisor
Performance	6	3	1
Blame	0	0	0
Pride	**6**	**3**	**1**
Appearance	0	0	0
Shame	0	0	0
Fear	**0**	**0**	**0**
Confidence	4	3	1
Humility	0	0	0
Wholeness	4	3	1
Net Significance	-2	0	0

Table 2. Perceptions of Client and Real Estate Agents' Identity and Significance

Table 2 shows that the sense of identity is not as healthy amongst the other parties. The client has a strong performance orientation, possible at unhealthy levels from the

perspective of individuals leading a balanced life; on the other hand, it might be a function of being quoted on the stock market and in a competitive market, which attracts individuals who rise to key decision making positions who have such an orientation. While confidence is high, humility is not present on the client side. Whilst market power might puts the company in a position of dominance it does not automatically follow that employees need to lack humility and act in pride in the sense of arrogance. It has also been suggested that the combination of confidence with a strong performance driver leads to controlling behaviour that may be unnecessarily domineering (Smyth, 2004), which certainly is possible given the market position of power occupied by this client.

A similar position is echoed amongst the real estate agents responsible for letting, although the 'voice' is weaker in this respect. Whilst they do not occupy positions of market power, they do have considerable influence, which is bolstered by their position in the sense of representing tenants in terms of how demand is perceived to be expressed through the market and representing the interests of the client in that market.

The planning advisor seems to occupy the middle ground: a professional that has leanings towards design team interests, working in a commercially minded consultants firm.

The analysis shows that despite the intensity of internal business drivers and competitive pressures, there remains a difference between working in one of the traditional professions, at least as far as the built environment is concerned, compared to corporate or consultant organisations where profit is a key driver. It may well be the case that the professions, especially concerning the built environment need to keep a strong orientation towards their service rather than commercial criteria *per se* (Coxe et al, 1987). It may also be the case that these are services where core competencies generally and knowledge management in particular are strong drivers and to gain competitive advantage in this way the focus is on the service primary (cf. Dunn and Baker, 2003). Whether this is the case can only be induced from the case and thus further evidence would need to be collected both form a number of cases and with a more reflective consideration of causality methodologically (Smyth *et al*, 2006).

Conclusion

This paper has reported on a short exploratory piece of research, which has linked significance people obtain at work and how that feeds into their personal identity. Whilst the study has not singled out any individuals, it has been able to reflect upon the findings in terms of the types of employers key decision makers work for or in some cases may hold part of the equity of professional practices. Therefore the research sheds some light upon the personal significance and personal identity employees derive in so far as their employment is influential. As has been shown, some employment tends towards an unhealthy performance orientation, hence an imbalance to life. Such employees derive too much of their significance from the workplace and probably have an emotional driver to do so because of a lack of acceptance, security and significance in their personal history, which is reflected in their current condition too.

The paper has also reported upon findings that suggest that working for the professions tends to induce a more balanced outlook and sense of identity. The old

adage of pre- and post-war parents, "Find employment in the professions, dear boy!" appears to still has resonance it would seem for young women and men today.

The research cannot be considered robust in terms of quantitative nor qualitative significance. The findings are too slender to be indicative. However, it tells a 'story' and analytical reflection upon the findings make the paper a think piece worthy of attention, for the story scopes a issue to the extent that it suggest that there is a substantive research problem requiring further investigation.

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Appendix A: Survey Question

Which of the following most accurately describes the behaviour of representatives from **Company X?**

They drive themselves and others to achieve exceptionally high levels of performance and perfection. **(i)**

They are unwilling to accept responsibility for things that fall short or go wrong. They will "pass the buck" at times and may seek to blame others when pushed. **(ii)**

They drive themselves and others towards excellent levels of performance. They tend to share credit when things are going well. **(v)**

They serve others and don't "pull rank". They acknowledge, accept and address short falls and failures. **(vi)**

They lack courage and appear unable to address shortfalls and problems. They may seem unable to embrace circumstances, their behaviour being either passive or unreasonably aggressive and sometimes swinging from one to the other. **(iv)**

They are positive, emphasising the best possible position. They may have a tendency to conceal shortfalls and failures. They may also fail to anticipate problems and sometimes deny their existence. **(iii)**

The lower case Roman numerals added after each option correspond to the categories provided in the text of the paper, in summary:

    i. *performance orientation*
    ii. *blame orientation*
    iii. *appearance orientation*
    iv. *shame orientation*
    v. *confidence*
    vi. *humility*.