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IT-driven identity work: Creating a group identity in a digital environment



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ABSTRACT

While organizational scholars are increasingly interested in issues of identity, identity work, and identification, in-depth empirical studies analyzing the process of identity creation have lagged behind, particularly when such process is triggered by the digitization of a work environment. In this longitudinal case study, we take a social constructionist perspective to investigate the identity creation process of a group of librarians in charge of a new information commons library. We call attention to the dialectic forces underlying this process, emphasizing how the librarians' image, as reflected by the patrons, led the librarians to try multiple provisional identities, which were supported by liminal actions reminiscent of either "who they were" and/or "who they could be." We also consider how technology was appropriated throughout this dynamic and suggest a technology identification process model that parallels the group identity creation process.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, technological innovation and digitization have increasingly affected a variety of industries, such as banking, medicine, education, journalism, and librarianship. As these institutions rely more on information technologies and sometimes adopt digital forms (e.g., e-commerce, "citizen journalism," electronic health records, electronic banking, digital libraries, telemedicine, massive open online courses), specialists in these fields must adapt their skill sets, service approaches, and relationships with customers (Fourie, 1999); that is, they need to reconsider, and possibly change, their work practices.

Information technology (IT) driven changes in work practices can be greatly influenced by the sensemaking process that organizational members go through as they appropriate new information

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technologies or digital work environments. For example, Hsiao, Wu, and Hou (2008) studied how taxi drivers ascribed different meanings to an information technology (i.e., a GPS-based vehicle dispatching system) and, thus, devised new work practices, both during the introduction of this technology and during its ongoing use. Many other studies have used a sensemaking lens to explore the manner in which individuals interpret and react to information technologies (e.g., Barley, 1996; Boudreau & Robey, 2005; Orlikowski, 1996). Whereas these studies are insightful in explaining how individuals and groups enact novel work practices as they make sense of new information technologies, they neglect to address one of the core properties of the sensemaking process, the establishment and maintenance of the sensemakers' identity (Weick, 1995).

Indeed, the way organizational members think of themselves within their work context (i.e., their group identity) heavily influences their interpretations of their job environment and the work practices they devise. This collective identity defines the shared "internalized cognitive structure of what the organization stands for and where it intends to go" (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000, p. 13). Thus, workers' group identity is critical for organizations because it provides stability and guidance, both internally within an organization and externally in terms of how outsiders view the organization. This stability and guidance are necessary for the organization's sense of legitimacy and survival (Tripsas, 2009). Assimilation of IT in the workplace, however, often plays a pivotal role in redefining workers' roles and serves as a destabilizing force that challenges workers' identities (Alvarez, 2002; Lamb & Davidson, 2005). For example, Bartel and Wiesenfeld (2013) discuss a group of local newspaper journalists whose sense of group boundary and identity had been blurred by technological innovations such as social media and teleworking. Because a group's identity serves as a guidepost for its members, disruptive innovations that alter the group's sense of direction and purpose trigger confusion and force members to consider how to change their existing identity or create a new one (Tripsas, 2009). The mechanisms that underlie this process are important to uncover so that practitioners and researchers alike are able to discern ways to avoid the negative pitfalls of such transitions and instead facilitate the group members' journey in defining who they are.

However, despite identity's fairly wide application in the management and organization literatures, the IT-identity landscape is relatively uncharted in the information systems literature and, thus, inadequately understood (Gal & Kjaergaard, 2009; Nach & Lejeune, 2009; Schellhammer, 2010; Stein, Galliers, & Markus, 2012; Tripsas, 2009). In particular, existing IT-identity research primarily views identity as an antecedent or outcome in relation to IT or explores the theme of virtual self-presentation (which, as we explain later, is more akin to the concept of image rather than identity). For the most part, this body of work is limited in its approach (mainly cross-sectional methods) and focus on individual level identity concepts. Therefore, although there are many potential ramifications of technological transitions on collective identity, current research concerning this topic offers little guidance in terms of how to theoretically frame IT-driven identity dynamics.

One particular lens that we leverage to frame IT-identity dynamic processes is "identity work," or the activities that an individual, or group of individuals, engage in to create, present, and sustain their identities (Snow & Anderson, 1987). Specifically, when a group of individuals is faced with a new technological environment, it may need to reenact a previous, familiar identity (i.e., "who we were"; e.g., Walsh & Glynn, 2008), defend its current identity (i.e., "who we are"; e.g., Corley & Gioia, 2004), or devise a new one (i.e., "who we could be"; e.g., Reger, Gustafson, Demarie, & Mullane, 1994). Moreover, because identity is relational (Weick, 1995), how outsiders perceive a given group (i.e., the group's image) will influence the group as it seeks to establish its identity, giving rise to a dialectical interplay between identity and image.

Addressing this important area of research, we investigate the group identity creation process of library professionals who were recruited to run a new unit characterized by a completely digitized work environment. For the most part, these library professionals did not share a common, past identity; most were recruited from other organizational areas (and in some cases, from other organizations) to staff this new work environment, which was hosted in a new building. This group of professionals was transplanted directly into the new digital environment (versus participating in its evolution from traditional to digital), and thus faced the challenge of creating a new identity consistent with its new reality, while considering how patrons viewed the group in this new reality (i.e., its image). Our research seeks to provide theoretical insights into the dynamic nature of group identity creation when a completely digital environment becomes the new work environment of that group.

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