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PERFORMING IDENTITIES AT WORK:
EVIDENCE FROM CONSTRASTING SECTORS

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Abstract

This paper argues that in making products and services organizations shape (create, sustain and/or change) the way workers individually and collectively think about themselves and the way they are seen by others. The empirical results are drawn from interviews, observations and periods of work shadowing in the service sector, the 'knowledge based economy' and traditional manufacturing. The findings highlight the particular ways in which organizations mould and shape worker identities. This includes the creation of new identities for workers to inhabit, the sustenance of existing identities formed elsewhere and the realignment of well established identities in the context of work reorganization.

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1. Introduction

'Identity', like many other concepts regularly used and debated by social scientists, is also in common use in everyday language. In both academic and common parlance, it has historically been associated with the world of paid work, so that individuals are marked out by what they do for a living rather than what they do in their 'spare time'. However, the once fixed contours of a job – such as its permanency, number of hours, regularity and location – have been challenged by the growth of non-standard forms of employment and rising levels of job insecurity (Felstead and Jewson, 1999; Heery and Salmon, 1999; Felstead *et al.*, 2005). This has sparked a debate about the saliency of paid work as the defining feature of who people are, leading some to suggest that personal meaning is increasingly being based on patterns of consumption rather than patterns of employment (Woodward, 2002; Ransome, 2005).

Nevertheless, paid work remains an important anchor (among others) of personal meaning for many employed people, not least because it provides individuals the means to (re)construct themselves in the sphere of consumption outside of work if they wish. Another feature of the 'identity' debate, therefore, is the extent to which workers have a say in: (a) the making of employment-centred images; (b) their reproduction over time; and (c) and the ways in which they may be changed. The aim of this paper is to examine empirically these three questions through case study research focused on what and how people learn at work.

However, before proceeding further our use of the concept of 'identity' needs clarification. For the purposes of this paper, identity is defined as a perceived sense of belonging to a collective entity such as occupation, profession or organization. Defined in this way, identity goes beyond mere *membership* of a collective group (e.g. 'a class in itself') to include membership *consciousness* (e.g. 'a class for itself'). This moves the notion of identity from a passive to an active sense of belonging. This has echoes with

the concept of identity formation as the process of becoming which occurs through participation in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The research findings – reported later – also make use of a further distinction between personal and collective identities. The former refers to an individual's knowledge that he/she is seen by others and regards him/herself as a member of a particular group. The latter refers to the ways in which groups themselves develop a sense of belonging over and above individual members' own personal awareness of how they are viewed.

All identities have to be performed; that is, actively and convincingly presented and represented to others. This has prompted considerable interest in the techniques of impression management, spearheaded by Erving Goffman who set out to 'consider the way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself [sic] and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may not do while sustaining his performance before them' (Goffman, 1959: xi). However, there has been a revival of interest in the extent to which these impressions are created, explicitly or implicitly, by others (e.g., Witz *et al*., 2003; Bolton, 2004). The aim of this paper, therefore, is to add to this debate by arguing that in making products and services organizations also influence (create, sustain and/or change) the way individual workers think about themselves and the way they are seen by others (i.e. personal identity), and how groups of workers develop a sense of belonging (i.e. collective identity).

The paper is structured accordingly. The following section outlines the three case study sectors, the jobs under examination and the research methods used. Subsequent sections present the findings from each sector and highlight the particular ways in which organizations mould and shape worker identities. This includes the creation of new identities for workers to inhabit, the sustenance of existing identities formed elsewhere and the realignment of well established identities in the context of work reorganization. The paper ends by arguing that worker identity is in reflexive relation with, and needs to be understood in the context of, what and how the organization makes the products and/or services it sells.

2. Research Sites, Foci and Methods

The paper draws on research data collected as part of an ESRC-funded project which investigates the links between workplace learning, the organization of work and performance in a range of economic sectors. The issue of worker identity has appeared in almost all of these sectors. However, in this paper we present evidence on just three in order to provide contrasts between service provision, the 'knowledge based economy' and traditional manufacturing. We consider each of these research sites in turn.

The service sector accounts for a growing proportion of GDP and employs large numbers of workers. An example of this can be seen in the opening of more and more health and leisure clubs in response to a more fitness conscious nation. Since the turn of the century membership levels have risen by over half from around 6% to 9% of the adult population. In 2005 around 4.5 million people were members of private health clubs in the UK. In addition to an estimated 2,700 members-only clubs, there are almost 4,000 local authority leisure centres open to the general public on a pay-as-you-go basis (Mintel, 2004 and 2005).

The majority of these venues offer group fitness training classes. These are usually held in a dedicated room set aside and equipped with a music system, loudspeakers and full-length wall mirrors. The activity itself is led by an exercise to music (ETM) instructor who is visible in front of the class or on a platform – this is commonly known as aerobics. The instructor wears a headset radio microphone for large classes or simply uses her/his voice for smaller classes (or when the headset does not work!). Music is used to accompany the different stages of activity, and the instructor's voice is made audible above the sound tracks. Although usually in front of the class, either facing or with her/his back to them, the instructor may also move around giving brief comments to participants. However, in general, the instructor participates fully in the class and, therefore, directs, describes and teaches movement sequences at the same time as moving their own body in time with the music.

The job of an ETM instructor can be conceived of as a 'performance' in the sense that it is an activity which serves to influence other parties involved, and in particular class participants who either pay for each class they attend or do so as part of their club membership. It is on the creation of an instructor's identity that the following section is focused. The evidence presented draws on the instructors' experience as captured in 15 interviews (preceded by a short period of work shadowing), the role of management in shaping instructor identity through 20 interviews, and participant observation in classes, at exhibitions and on training events (see Felstead *et al*., 2006).

Alongside the growth in the service economy, there has been the rise of the so-called 'knowledge worker'; that is, workers who apply esoteric bodies of knowledge, acquired in formal and informal learning situations, to the solution of work problems to produce *intangible* products. This is in contrast to those who deliver a service such as aerobics instructors or those who make tangible products such as toolmakers. Software workers are often cited as the prime example of a group of knowledge workers since they 'can trade on their skill, expertise and intellectual capital' (Leadbeater, 1999: 228-229; see also Tam *et al*., 2002). At the same time, there is a tendency to portray software workers as 'lone wolves' and 'geeks', preferring to work alone, or in very small teams with peers they respect (Carmel and Eisenberg, 2006).

The software workers discussed here are employed by one company, started a quarter of a century ago by seven individuals who were previously employed by a multi-national IT corporation. It develops software and hardware products and solutions for a wide range of customers, including the US and UK military and several multi-national companies. The main office is in the south of England, where most of its 350 workers are based. However, 50 sales people are employed in the US, the source of 90% of the company's sales. Around 30 people are based in a small office in Scotland and a small number of people work from home. The company has built an international reputation for being both cutting-edge and able to deliver on time. The profits of the company are shared annually among the employees with each employee's cut determined through

reviews of individual performance. The software engineers are recruited straight from Oxford and Cambridge and a small number of other top UK universities at the age of 21 or 22. They are nearly all male, reflecting the gender balance across the company where, currently, only 69 out of 350 employees are female.

Data was collected through observations of everyday work and team interaction in the main office, in-depth interviews with 25 engineers, and observation of the recruitment process. The latter proved to be crucial for two reasons. First, it enabled us to compare the way in which potential recruits to the company conceptualized their personal identities as software workers with those of existing employees, and to listen to the corporate narrative fed to interview candidates over a 24 hour period by company directors and managers. Secondly, it revealed the very high value that managers placed on technical competence, to the extent that they were prepared to recruit candidates whose communication skills were poor during the interview process, and even those who were not particularly innovative or adventurous in their behaviour and thinking (see Brooks, 1995).

To complete the picture, we focus on a sector that has had to cope with contraction rather than growth. In general, manufacturing in the UK has lost over a million jobs since 1997. Automotive component suppliers have suffered a similar fate with industry estimates suggesting that one fifth of business has been lost, mostly to Eastern Europe, over the last decade. Nevertheless, 17 out of 20 top European automotive suppliers still operate in the UK with the sector as a whole providing work to around 200,000 people on a turnover of £15bn a year (SMMT, 2002). Our research is focused on two of these suppliers. One manufactures wheels and cylinder heads which it sells to two major car producers, while the other supplies pressed steel parts to its one and only customer which also happens to wholly own the supplier. Both employ around 900 to 1,000 people, but have experienced recent job losses as a result of heightened competition. In response, both are seeking to develop hybrid categories of worker which challenge well established occupational boundaries and associated patterns of identity. It is on this issue that the data reported here is focused. The interview material is based on

interviews with 40 employees located across two companies and in a variety of job roles. These have been augmented by work shadowing and observation of shop floor work processes as well as two focus groups with employees involved in interdisciplinary training in mechatronics.

The bulk of the paper is structured around the findings from these three contrasting research sites. They are presented as exemplars of the creation, maintenance and challenges to identity formation in service provision, the 'knowledge based economy' and traditional manufacturing respectively.

3. Creating New Identities

The central argument of this chapter is that organizations not only make products and services, but in the process they shape the way those who produce these outputs think about themselves and the way they are seen by others ('personal identity') and how groups of workers develop a collective sense of belonging ('collective identity'). In service organizations, the influence is even greater since a significant part of what is being sold is the person to person interaction. The aim of this section is to examine how organizations seek to influence the nature of that interaction and thereby give service workers an identity to be played out. The section also considers how service workers resist becoming 'capitulated selves', hence ensuring that some elements of the image they portray is of their own making (Collinson, 2003). The empirical focus of the section is on a particular group of service workers who lead group exercise to music (ETM) classes – commonly referred to as aerobics.

Participants attend classes for a variety of reasons but typically group activity masks the pain of exercise, fosters social bonding, aligns workouts with music and minimizes the risk of injury from inappropriate movements. Hence, for the interaction to be effective, instructors need to appear in front of their audience both as a 'friend' but also as an 'expert'. This involves 'stage management', that is, setting the parameters of the performance *before* it takes place and 'stage craft', that is, delivering a 'good

performance' *while* on stage (Goffman, 1959). We consider both of these aspects in turn and focus, in particular, on the role played by management and its agents in framing how instructors are presented and present themselves to an expectant audience of exercisers.

Managing the Stage

A unique feature of many services is that they are produced and consumed at the same time and in the same place. In other words, the consumer is 'in the factory' with little hidden from view. Furthermore, the physical surroundings can serve as a motivator for purchasing behaviour and can have a strong impact on the perceived quality of the service experience. Ambient sounds (such as pop songs) and fragrances can also prompt individuals to approach or avoid particular shops, hotels, restaurants, cafés and shopping malls. Each 'servicescape' projects a particular image, and provides the scenery and stage props to the service encounter (Bitner, 1992).

In the case of aerobics classes, studios are often part of a private health and fitness club or part of a publicly accessible leisure centre. Their boundary walls vary in permeability. As a result, instructors face audiences that have different expectations. Private membership clubs, for example, tend to attract more regulars because of the annual membership costs (used, in part, to pay for the higher specification servicescape), whereas public leisure centres which are open to the public on a pay-as-you-go basis tend to attract more transient users. The connections between instructors and participants tend therefore to be stronger in the former than in the latter. In these circumstances, participants and instructors are more likely to develop *cognitive* recognition of one another ('recognising faces and getting to know names' as one respondent put it) which may lead into knowing something about one another beyond the studio. In the absence of the development of this *social* recognition, greater emphasis is placed the 'instructor-as-expert' rather than the 'instructor-as-friend' (cf. Goffman, 1961: 15). The servicescape therefore has a bearing on how instructors present themselves to and are seen by different audiences.

The timing and billing of classes also influences how instructors are required to present themselves. Leisure centre or club management set class timetables and allocate instructors to particular slots. The timetable is the equivalent of a restaurant menu in that it lists the exercise classes which participants can consume by taking part (Korczynski and Ott, 2004). Classes are billed according to their focus and the type of equipment they use such as spinning on indoor cycles, stepping on raised benches, dancing to music and punching with pads and gloves or shadow boxing. More detailed descriptions which include intensity ratings are often given in the explanatory notes on the timetable. Hence, class type, intensity ratings and the time of the day sessions take place give participants the illusion of choice, while subtly constraining their options. One respondent characterized class participants accordingly. She referred to those who attend on a Monday night as 'our front row people who will like loud and fast music', those who go to classes billed as high impact aerobics as 'your fitness junkies … they're going to want everything hard and fast', and those who 'like it more gentle will go to "legs, bums and tums" … young mums or ladies that aren't as fit and just want to do a bit of toning and conditioning'. Instructors have to present images and tailor classes in line with these expectations. As a result, some instructors prefer to stick with classes and audiences they feel comfortable with, while others have to present images not of their choosing. For example, one instructor remarked:

> 'You develop your personality. You develop a niche that you're good at.
> I don't teach hard and fast aerobics. That is not me. I've had a go. It's
> not me. It doesn't suit me. I don't enjoy it'.

However, there are many instructors who teach outside of their comfort zone because of economic necessity. To do so they use a range of tactics to trigger the 'personality switch' such as changing into workout clothes (referred to as the 'Lycra syndrome'), hearing the music and putting on the headset.

A key difference between machine-based workouts and those carried out in studios is the nature of the social interaction. Machine-based workouts are individualized, while studio-based classes are collective. To set the stage for greater

levels of collectiveness, studio timetables typically give the first name of the instructor. However, unlike other gym workers, instructors do not wear name badges. As a further leveller, management often requires participants to sign in for the classes they wish to attend, so that the instructor is – in theory – on first name terms with those in the class. This is in stark contrast to other service interactions where asymmetrical forms of address are commonplace; that is, service-recipients are encouraged to address front-line workers in familiar terms, while receiving the respect of formal address when being spoken to.

Nevertheless, in addition to being 'friendly', instructors also have to appear as 'experts'.   Unlike personal trainers who are promoted as experts through client testimonials and short biographical/qualification displayed on noticeboards, ETM instructors have to rely on their on stage performance and word-of-mouth recommendations.

Managing Stage Performance

In essence, ETM is about making exercise fun. This is made easier for instructors to convey since they are often motivated to 'step over the white line' because of their genuine interest in exercise to music as a leisure pursuit. This means that for them ETM switches from a hedonistic, pleasurable leisure activity to a site of paid work designed to maximize the fun and enjoyment of others (Guerier and Adib, 2003). However, unlike other front-line workers in the leisure industry – such as bar tenders, restaurant staff, hotel workers and airline stewardesses – ETM instructors carry out their work while participating fully in the activity. Indeed, one of the main roles of an instructor is to lead class participants, not only in terms of technique but also in terms of effort. This cannot be done from the sidelines (as in personal training) and is instead done from the front of the class through active participation. In many cases, instructors reported genuine enjoyment:

> 'Because I am passionate about it … I come across that I'm enthusiastic about it, I'm enjoying it and I don't mind looking silly … I really do enjoy it!'.

However, there is recognition that this is something that class participants are paying for and therefore expect from instructors (i.e. those working at leisure). Although an instructor's enjoyment is mostly authentic, it is now a requirement of the job:

> 'It's an entertainment business, you know, you get paid for doing it. But don't just think it's a job, it's a passion, it's a love, you know, cos if it's just a job, then you're not going to be able to pick yourself up, you have to go into it and want to entertain. Those people have paid … they want you to give them exactly the same as you did last week'.

Private health clubs and leisure centres therefore recruit only those who invest a great deal of themselves into their work. This is displayed by their enthusiasm for ETM and a keenness to convey this to participants. To get a regular slot teaching, auditions are often held – sometimes in front of a 'live audience' but more often in front of other hopefuls. At these events, management respondents reported looking for 'natural smiles', 'being energetic', 'someone who enjoys what they do' and 'being there for their paying public, not just themselves'. Nevertheless, instructors did admit to having to fake their enjoyment at times.

> 'There's a tiny bit of acting in it always. You can't love it 100% all the time … there's always tiny bit of acting going on because you have to … gain the rapport of people … sometimes you really don't feel like clapping your hands but you will clap your hands in such way that people will go "yeah" and they will clap their hands too'.

As well as being seen to have fun, participants also expect an instructor to lead a class with moves in time with the music, count the class into each movement sequence by good cueing, know the routine well, and demonstrate good technique and high fitness levels. Instructors can either make their own routines up ('freestyle') or follow a number of ready made routines that are now available ('pre-choreography'). The latter have grown significantly in the last decade and are the primary focus of the following discussion.

The largest producer of these 'pre-choreographed' classes has seven separate programmes in its repertoire, all marketed under the Body Training Systems (BTS) brand name. In 2005, BTS classes were being offered in some 10,000 venues in 55 countries with an estimated 4 million participants a week. The seven programmes focus on different activities in order to deliver contrasting workouts. These foci include stepping, dancing, kicking, punching, weight lifting and cycling. Although the UK launch only began in 1997, BTS has a presence in almost 1,300 venues (see Felstead *et al*., 2006). Instructors receive initial training, attend Quarterly Workshops, and are issued with new CDs, training videos and class plans every three months. This means that a BodyPump (weight lifting) class is using exactly the same music and doing the same sequence of moves wherever it is taken in the world.   Standardization minimizes the variability of the class content, and makes it easier and quicker for instructors to appear on stage as 'experts'. While this can be particularly helpful to novices trying to 'pass' as instructors by 'covering' their inexperience to an audience, the same rigidity can be frustrating to experienced instructors who would prefer to invest more of themselves in the classes they deliver (Goffman, 1961: 92). In other words, it may enable some instructors to convey a 'ready-made' personal identity, while for others it may act as a constraint on how they wish to project themselves.

Each type of 'pre-choreographed' class also has its own brand image and associated emotional atmosphere that instructors are required to adopt when teaching. BodyCombat, for example, aims to provide a 'fierce, energetic experience', BodyJam 'unlocks everyone's rhythmic and dancing instincts' and BodyBalance 'brings the body into a state of harmony and balance' (quotes taken from www.fitpro.com/bts). Instructors are expected to alter how the image they convey to the audience accordingly:

> 'It's like putting on a performance … you have to put a different head on, you know, like Wurzel Gummidge [a 1980s children's TV series character who changed heads to switch personalities] … One of the things that they [BTS] drill into you is this playing a role, playing a character … It's like Wurzel Gummidge, you put on a different head, depending on what different discipline you're teaching. Combat, RPM, Balance, Pump are completely different characters in every one. You've got BodyBalance,

which is mellow, gentle person, so you've got be calm. RPM, you've got
to keep them going. Combat you're just like an animal, you're punching
… you've got to be different in each class'.

Instructors are reminded of the importance of these personality switches in the
Educational Updates that accompany each new release:

'If you teach a number of programmes, you may need to change costume a
number of times in one day – step out of one world almost directly into
another … If you can't project the feelings specific to each individual
programme, it's going to be more difficult to correctly interpret the
specific emotions of each individual track and let the music speak for you
… It's essential that you step into the character of each programme'.

To help instructors step into character, different styles of dress are suggested.
Trainers, therefore, encourage instructors to 'dress in programme costume' in order 'to
stand in the spirit of the programme'. This message is repeated again and again during
initial training and via the Educational Updates included on the DVDs that accompany
each Quarterly Release. This drilled behaviour begins at the first weekend of initial
training with notable consequences:

'They say to you on the first weekend, "In two weeks' time, it's a good
idea if you come in something that looks the role, because if you look the
part then people are going to want to copy you" … Most people came
back in combats and people had wraps and things like that, so yeah. And
there were loads of people who … had gone out and bought like the whole
kit, like the proper Combat trousers'.

Here, 'proper Combat trousers' refers to a clothing range that is branded according to
each of the BTS programmes. Each has its own logo, colour scheme and dress code (e.g.,
bandanas for BodyCombat and RPM, calf length loose trousers for BodyBalance and
elasticated leggings for BodyAttack). The recommended clothing range follows these
branding principles. It is a clothing range which some instructors aspire to purchase
since they consider themselves to be representatives of the programme-provider.
Trainers at the Quarterly Workshops and on video are dressed in branded clothing as are
many instructors they meet and see at these events. There is pressure to conform to the

format with instructors becoming – in the words of some respondents – 'clones' or 'mini-mes' of the trainers who are treated as celebrities in their field.

More recently, the Educational Updates have extended their reach even further by giving advice to instructors on how to reshape their own bodies. Participation in ETM has been likened to entering 'a factory in which motion becomes an instrument for dominating and shaping the body' (Kagan and Morse, 1988: 177). This is echoed in the marketing slogans used to promote these classes. The BodyPump programme carries the slogan: 'Warning: this will change the shape of your body', while the BodyCombat programme is sold under the slogan: 'It's a constant battle to remain in shape'. This adheres to the dominant reading of group exercise classes and club membership, in general, as a means of keeping thin and losing weight with associated gendered overtones (see Collins Haravon, 2002). Previously, instructors were expected to look fit. This was never directly expressed, but implied through the Quarterly Workshops and videos that instructors had to take part in and watch:

> 'You've got to show that you're a BodyPump instructor, that you're BodyPump trained and you can lift these big weights. And they're really strong on that on the training … it just keeps covering over and over … being fit, very fit and having a fit body'.

However, a recent Educational Update – contained on DVDs across the suite of programmes – has gone a step further by giving instructors advice on what to eat in order to lose body fat and look the part.

Image making also extends to the use of language and particular phrases. While most of the instructional language relating to each exercise is taken from the various disciplines on which 'pre-choreography' is based, the coaching cues are the choreographer's creation. These are codified in the choreography notes which have three columns – one breaks the music down into segments and blocks; another gives the exercise rhythm and repetitions; and the third gives verbal cues to be used at particular points in the class. Often these verbal cues are tied to the music but others are more

generic such as 'real sloooow', 'reach for the sky' and 'graze the knees'. The notes, video and Quarterly Workshops drill trainees into using this language.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that instructors who teach 'pre-choreographed' classes exercise no agency in the identities they present to their exercise audience. Instructors may actually relish being told what music to play, what moves to do at what time, how they need to be dressed and what they should say. Conformity may actively be sought as a means of securing greater security than the fears associated with having to make these decisions and choices themselves. For example, instructors recognize that musical selection is their way of stamping their own personality on the classes they teach:

> '… my personality is so through the music and it's coming from you isn't it and you can project you, I think, better than you can project somebody else's programme'.

However, making musical choices can be daunting, stressful and time-consuming as the same instructor went onto explain:

> 'It's more stressful and you think, "Oh Lord, what music am I going to use now?", you know, and the thought of picking the right music for the customers … whereas with BTS they give it you … it's exercise to go, you know, just look at it, take it and go'.

Other instructors we interviewed also recognized the paradoxical benefits of having the music selection decided for them by the producers of 'pre-choreographed' classes:

> 'Music-wise, I don't have the freedom. To a certain degree, I like it because I don't have to do the thinking'.

Instructors may also resist becoming 'capitulated selves' by splitting their personalities and refusing to reveal their inner feelings when at odds with the image externally portrayed. One instructor revealed that she never let the class know her real musical likes and dislikes, and instead she was most passionate about those tracks she liked least:

'Those tracks I don't like I'll say, "I love this track. This is an amazing track" … I don't ever say I don't like a track ... The minute you say, "It's awful", then you've set the scene haven't you, you've killed your track … [sometimes] I don't like the music, but it looks like I really like it … You have to act'.

Another tactic is to deflect criticism of the music onto the unknown individuals who have selected it for worldwide use. In these circumstances, rather than defend the music selection and fake their interest in the chosen tracks, instructors openly join forces with participants to criticize the choices made.

This section has shown how health club management attempts to make aerobics instructors perform an identity which combines the dimensions of 'friend' and 'expert'. This involves the management of the stage on which instructors appear to perform and the props they use. This includes the nature of the servicescape, the arrangement and presentation of the timetable, and the use of symbolic levellers (such as the absence of name badges and standardized uniforms). The section has also shown how club management attempts to influence the content of the classes themselves i.e. how instructors appear on stage to perform their craft. This is exemplified by recruitment strategies that seek to take on the most enthusiastic and the use of 'pre-choreographed' classes which aim deliver standardized classes in terms of the music, moves, look, dialogue and atmosphere. Finally, the section has suggested ways in which instructors are able to exercise agency by resisting the rigidity of 'pre-choreography' through irony, a heightened sense of acting or as a welcome refuge from making the decisions and choices associated with 'freestyle' classes.

4. Reinforcing Existing Identities

Some individuals demonstrate strong inter-connections between their personal interests and their work activity. This certainly applies to the aerobics instructors discussed in the preceding section since for many it is a hobby they have been able to turn into a job, albeit with particular identity expectations demanded by employers and

class participants. The research carried out in software engineering suggests similar processes at work with personal interests and paid work combined. Nevertheless, rather than creating well marketed identities for workers to inhabit, management in this particular case seeks to build on and sustain software engineers personal feelings of 'intelligence' fostered by prior success at school and university and convert these into a collective identity of belonging to an 'intelligent, technical community'.

Before discussing the interview data in detail, it is worth outlining two significant features of this relatively new economic sector. First, it is important to remember that the history of modern software development is rooted in the production of early computing hardware during the Second World War, which built on the Babbage principle of breaking production down into smaller and smaller segments. Secondly, despite these origins, the sector's complex and continued evolution has resulted in two labour process paradigms. These have been referred to as the 'formalist' and 'pragmatist' paradigms (Quintas, 1994). In the formalist paradigm, software development is regarded as an engineering discipline in which product development follows set procedures and stages, hence following the Babbage principle. In the pragmatist paradigm, on the other hand, software development is an 'ad hoc process of "hacking" (i.e. writing code without rigorous planning and then hacking at it to remove bugs and achieve results)' (Barrett, 2001: 26).

Other authors (e.g. Robinson *et al*., 1998) conceptualize this dichotomy as a 'hard/soft' division, where 'hard' relates to the designing of systems with a precise function, and 'soft' to the need to make a system compatible with the 'human system' that surrounds it. As Robinson *et al*. (1998: 372) argue, however, the need to reconcile the needs of multiple stakeholders in an information technology system means that the 'modernist' foundations of computing (emphasis on form and function and a belief in the existence of a rational solution to a problem) have to be transcended by a more pluralist approach. This requires 'encouraging teams that flourish across the divisions of manager, user and developer' and an end to the 'single hero and the single voice' model in which lead designers and system architects passed down their instructions to subordinates.

These paradigms have consequences for the way software engineers see themselves and are treated by their employers. They also have consequences for the way in which researchers conceptualize software workers. Marks and Lockyer (2005: 148), for example, argue that software developers operating under the pragmatist paradigm can be described as professionals since 'they have an implicit set of professional codes and common beliefs, values and ceremonies' and are viewed as such by many employers. This is exhibited in the way work is organized such as the opportunity developers have to work closely with peers, and their ability to exercise autonomy and discretion.

Interpreted in these terms, there is no question that the case study software development company we studied was using the pragmatic paradigm and was consequently treating its employees as professionals. The research data also suggest that it was recruiting employees who fitted the profile of individuals with excellent academic credentials, while internally emphasizing the importance of technical intelligence over other attributes. We will consider these two dimensions in turn.

Recruiting Intelligent Others

The interview data revealed that the single most common way in which the engineers in our case study identified themselves was as 'highly intelligent' people and many cited the chance to join an 'intelligent' community as the key reason for accepting a job in the company. Some engineers described themselves as 'techies', in that they had been interested in computers from an early age and spent time out of work designing software to be posted on the 'open source community' websites. Others, however, confined their software interests to the workplace. The following comment, from a male engineer who joined the company straight from university four years ago, is typical:

> 'The kind of people we have, this will sound arrogant and elitist, but they're sort of, a long way above the average you might encounter, if you go on a "how to program course", the people working on that course generally would be of a lot lower ability than the people here'.

The belief amongst the engineers that they comprise a highly intelligent community is multi-layered. It begins with the company's brochures for potential software engineering applicants, which seeks young people with 'A' grades at A Level and destined for First Class Honours Degrees from top universities. It is fostered at the interview stage where applicants spend time together as a group listening to presentations from engineers who recently joined the company that standards are very high, but the rewards are great. It is also reinforced by the engineers themselves who appear to internalize this aspect of their identities in order to cope with the pressure of problem solving for the company's high profile customers, while at the same time, believing that they could trust their equally intelligent peers and managers to provide appropriate, collegial support. One recently employed engineer said:

> 'Well you've got to be clever enough technically to do it, to have a technical/problem-solving set of skills. Determination to carry on in the face of this going wrong, resolve kind of thing. And confidence. Yeah, I guess that's very strongly attached to determination isn't it … I guess belief in one's own ability … but I knew when I'd need help the help was there'.

Another recent recruit, who had struggled to reach the required standard in his first year said:

> 'I must admit I was, it was quite a humbling experience really – without sounding big-headed. I suppose at school I tended to be, higher up the grades if you like than some of the people there and the same at university. And coming here it was quite a different experience, I suddenly found myself sort of quite near the bottom of the stack … you always measure your performance against the people that you're with … I think that changes your own perception of the way you perform'.

Part of the corporate narrative that candidates hear throughout the recruitment process promotes the company's sense of itself as a 'hothouse of talent and professionalism', whose structures are designed to counteract the possibility of boredom. The main structure for this is through the organization of work in small teams that stay together for a maximum of nine months before engineers are rotated. Engineers are also

allowed to work flexible hours and take 'sabbaticals'. The following comment is from a senior engineer who joined the company ten years ago and recently decided to work four days a week:

> 'I do lots of things that I don't have time for if I work five days a week ... I'm learning Chinese ... for the mental exercise … I like keeping my brain busy … I picked Chinese because it was, it's very much one of the most difficult languages and that was the most challenging … Other kinds of things … I do board games … there's a group of people who come up to my house and we play … Again it's solely about intellectual exercise but then there's also an aspect of competing against other people rather than as against a computer or something, it's like computers are not as clever so there's more satisfaction'.

This comment reveals the fusion of the professional and personal identity (as highly intelligent people) in that they gain pleasure from intellectual challenges both in and out of the workplace. At the same time, the company is sensitive to this fusion and has constructed a working environment in the main office that mimics, to some extent, an Oxbridge college, whilst also giving consideration to work-life balance needs (see Scarborough, 1999). For example, the Scottish office was established ten years ago despite the fact that the company had – and continues to have – no Scottish clients. It was set up purely because, as one of the directors said, he and a small group of other employees 'were very happy to stay in the company, but basically could not settle in the South East of England'.

More significantly, the performance review system and annual profit share arrangements serve the important functions of visibly and concretely rewarding expertise as well as stitching employees into the fabric of the company since as 'knowledge workers' they could easily get employment elsewhere. The power of this self-reverential community spirit is manifested in the lack of any evidence of worker resistance. The only critical remark we encountered was the view that the lack of off-the-job training for managers meant that the management was not exposed enough to new thinking.

Emphasizing Technical Intelligence

According to Barrett (2005: 3-4) exaggerated claims that software workers would become the 'future aristocrats of the labour market' have 'served to obscure much of what the people developing software actually do from day to day at work'. Despite the hyperbole surrounding the excitement of software engineering, interviewees in our case study spent a great deal of time applying their technical know-how to a range of diagnostic activities such as writing thousands of lines of computer code, testing software systems and computer routines, and designing new software architecture to build new products. They also had to demonstrate their technical intelligence on a daily basis with customers seeking updates and progress reports. For many, therefore, the label 'engineer' aptly describes the reality of their occupational role and captures their professional identity. They are also working in a relatively stable and very successful commercial environment where employee turnover is low. In that sense, they conform much more to the Japanese model of the loyal career professional who progresses through a highly structured internal labour market, rather than the highly mobile, risk-taking 'knowledge worker' in the new economy. A company director explained this as follows:

> 'We're talking about a lot of propeller heads here you see, and they want to know what the next exciting technology they're going to be working on. They don't particularly want to know that I have recently negotiated so and so with customer X or whatever ... I think that culture comes partly because ... the company is full of engineers, it's very engineering dominated and they tend to not really be that interested in business an awful lot, but also it comes from the fact that they've grown up with a company that's always successful, that's always stable, that always makes its targets. And so there's not that underlying paranoia, if you like, that I think exists in the real world, you know, is our company going to go bust next year or whatever?'

Given that the engineers are all highly qualified in academic terms and many graduated from Oxbridge colleges with prestigious degrees in mathematics and sciences, it is perhaps surprising that several mentioned they had deliberately rejected offers from

financial companies in the City of London offering much larger salaries. One engineer, who joined the company six years ago said:

> 'I did look at other things. I never really had a very good idea of where I wanted to go to. One of the things I was looking at was banking because that's got a lot of … a lot of my friends are interested in that kind of thing. And yeah, like I went for a summer job at a bank and I got offered a place at [famous City bank], but I decided it just wasn't really what I wanted to be doing. I'm a Christian and my church doesn't have paid ministers, so we all give our spare time … my weekends are busy with meeting church friends and I give sermons, like next weekend I'm doing that … and I thought this company would let me work hard in the week, but my free time would be my own'.

Another engineer, who had spent four years as a researcher in particle physics, also reflected the desire of several colleagues to find a job that offered stimulation but also stability:

> 'I wanted something a little bit more stable, I wanted a job that wasn't, you know, some city job where you're, you're working all hours, something a little bit more balanced, something a bit more interesting'.

The evidence presented in this section suggests that some so-called knowledge workers find themselves in (and may deliberately seek out) workplaces where they can enjoy applying their expertise, but at the same time find the conditions to sustain the type of work-life balance that becomes more important with age. The majority of software workers we interviewed and observed identified themselves primarily as intelligent professionals with high levels of technical ability and, hence, were keen to call themselves 'engineers'. The sense of being 'top of the class' had been forged early on in life, at school and then again at university. Becoming part of an 'intelligent, technical community' at work was the next natural step. The company they had joined was managed by people from the same mould who used their understanding of their own personal identities to develop structures and an over-arching cultural narrative designed to attract and retain engineers with a similar outlook. In effect, the technical and social

relations of production here appear to have created collective organizational and personal identities that are generally mutually constituted and reinforcing.

5. Changing Well Established Identities

According to our research, management steerage of worker identities is far less developed in the automotive component sector and instead workers are able to exercise greater levels of agency than in the two other sectors examined in this paper. This is in line with research carried out by Brown (2004) on identity formation in similar sectors across Europe. Nevertheless, in the context of work reorganization, we do find examples of management attempting to refashion how workers see themselves and are seen by others. We consider both aspects to our findings in turn.

Taking Control

Our interviews focused on production workers involved in the manufacture of wheels, cylinder heads and pressed steel for use in car assembly. The centrality of work to interviewees' lives differed markedly. For some work remained a key determinant of how they saw themselves and were seen by others, while for other interviewees work played a minor part in their personal identity (mirroring the debate discussed at the beginning of the paper). This had consequences for the take-up of learning opportunities which interviewees were all too well aware. A training manager, for example, explained how after setting up machines operators could spend time taking a look or helping out others on the production floor:

> 'Now while those machines are running there's not really much you can do, as I say, it's keep your station clean and keep it organized. But, as I say, if you do have a bit of time there is other things you can do from brushing the place up to maybe going and seeing what, you know, if the dye coat needs a hand doing anything. I've found there's people have the attitude where they just want to sit about and I've always found that you get on a bit better, don't get me wrong I like having a wee natter myself like but at the same time you keep yourself busy'.

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Similarly, an engineer noted that while learning opportunities were abound, their take-up in the workplace depended on how hungry for success workers really were:

> 'Even an organization that seems to be in decline there are still opportunities and it just depends what an individual is prepared to give to go up that greasy pole'.

Those taking up these opportunities could be regarded as adopting a 'career identity' with people, projects and organizations treated as the means to achieve career progress (Grey, 1994). For some, natural inquisitiveness quickly snowballed into formal courses followed by promotion. A production supervisor, for example, explained how one thing led to another:

> 'I thought it was very interesting to find out about a cylinder head and how it works … I'd assume probably maybe a percent of the people on the shop floor wouldn't know how an engine works either or how it runs ... I mean I was just like any other production operator – I'd come in, done the job and go home again – until I done this NVQ and from that I thought to myself "well I could do better for myself here I can and I can maybe step on to the rungs of the ladder, so I can" you know what I mean? … the company give me opportunities to do the next NVQ level 3'.

However, some interviewees were more career-minded from the outset and therefore they actively sought out and were pro-active in seeking workplace development. This often meant paying for courses and/or studying in their own time:

> 'I've come in as a press operator, I learnt the ropes and all the tricks of the trade there and as I progressed I then I was able then to take on personal learning throughout the different job roles that I've had … We both participated in the [supervisory management] programme … but that was all run in our own time. Because, I will say it, we are highly motivated so we're happy to put in the extra work because we know that we're going to benefit from it'.

Other respondents developed multiple identities, where they preferred to move habitually from job to job, even employer to employer. This, in turn, provided an

enhanced range of learning opportunities, and indeed required them to pick new skills up quickly:

> '… in a different company, this is where I sort of got involved in that side of it, as a general operative. From there, I was promoted into a sister company as a team leader and I sort of, you know, it went from there. So, I've worked in many very different environments, it's been 2 to 2½ years on average … So, a lot of very different experiences and a lot of very different learning, but very much on the job and doing it and learning … But it has been more the practical just get on, see, and take the experience with you to the next place and learn something … that's the good thing about changing jobs every so often, the change. You can take your skill with you, the process will come'.

For this interviewee change continued with an impending move to a different department as a manager, where once again he was excited by the prospect of 'seeing something different'.

Nevertheless, others on the shopfloor had a weak worker identity and were not eager to advance their career. In the words of one respondent, 'they don't like being told anything … [and] they're just not interested in their jobs'. This connection was made by several interviewees with one manager providing a three-way categorization of self-starters, the unaware and the disinterested:

> '[There are] two different types of individuals, those who are self-starters who want to learn and who will actively seek to learn, and others who say "well, I've never been given any opportunities" … And actually there is a third level as well, people who are doing a job and have got to a point where they say "no, I like this level, I like this job, I'm happy here, I don't want to do more"'.

Policing Identity Boundaries

Another key feature of identity is the policing of boundaries which establish who belongs to the group and who does not. In the workplace, these identity boundaries are often marked by the activities that individuals carry out. While these boundaries may be

agreed by management and employers with both parties sanctioning transgressors, economic pressures may prompt management to reorganize work reorganization and therefore destabilize the agreed order. This can result in the work boundaries of jobs changing and with them the identity of job holders. Heightened international competition, recent jobs losses and pressure from customers for quality assurance necessitated the 'hybridization' of some jobs in both component suppliers studied here. This entailed a widening of job roles – upwards in one case to include managerial responsibilities, downwards in the other to encompass 'less skilled' work tasks. Not surprisingly, managers and workers had a different 'take' on the same process.

In these circumstances, continued policing of identity boundaries became increasingly unhelpful to management's plans to reorganize the work process. According to them, there are technicians who are disinclined to develop managerial skills, on the one hand, and managers who refuse to 'get their hands dirty', on the other. The resulting gap is therefore a function of different types of employee asserting their identity through the boundaries of their work. One manager summarized the situation in the following terms:

> 'You have engineers who want to be managers and you have good, solid, technical people who don't want to be managers. And, of course, what we all too often need is a hybrid person … you've got your maintenance and electrical people, but then you've got an engineer level before you get the managers and in our environment most of our production managers are engineers of some description. But in between you've got your technicians … who need to have a degree of people-management awareness because some of them will have direct reports … we have some excellent hands-on people but don't ask them to write a report. And we've got others who are excellent, yes, give them all the data and the stats and they'll write a report but "I've got to get my hands dirty – that's not really my scene"'.

While the above provides a management perspective on the tensions created when there is a clash of occupational identities, our worker interviews offer a different account. Workers with a strong (and fixed) occupational identity provided the greatest contrast. The opportunity to take on a hybrid role was greeted with dismay by one of our worker interviewees. He perceived the opportunity to take on a different (less skill based role) as a threat to his occupational identity and, therefore, declined the invitation to move from

his role as tool maker/fitter to the newly created role of 'line tech'. This was despite the fact that the latter role was associated with higher pay. It is clear from the following extract that his occupational identity was bound up with his status as a skilled man who had served a craft apprenticeship. The role of 'line tech' was open to both 'skilled' (those who had served an apprenticeship) and 'unskilled' (those who had no apprenticeship) employees, which made its skilled status ambiguous. In addition, to losing his valued skilled status by making the move, he also expressed concern that it could also adversely affect his job security:

> 'The thing is that when you learn to build the tools that's probably the most difficult thing to do … That's part of your apprenticeship anyway … You've probably got about a fifth have served an apprenticeship and the rest haven't … They call you a fire-fighter. What you do is the line goes down, you have to go out and fix it so they can keep producing the panels. We fix the dies, the actual tools that are in the presses, and the maintenance and fix the presses. The only area that's slightly grey, it's sort of a grey area, is you've got what they call line techs. Now you've got some skilled and some unskilled but the unskilled ones won't touch the tools … So there is a big divide between skilled and unskilled'.

This narrative suggests a close linkage between personal identity at work and how the job is carried out – in particular, the length of training required, its status as 'an apprenticeship', and the customs and practices of the job itself. This is reminiscent of Bensman and Lilienfeld's (1991) argument that the way people make sense of the world, find their place in it and interact with others is determined by their occupation. They argue that it is the actual processes involved in practising the 'craft' that has such a powerful effect on development and maintenance of occupational identity. This can be seen in the reluctance of some skilled workers to move away from what they knew best:

> 'Personally, I wanted to stay doing the job I was trained to do. I look at myself as a tool maker and I'd like to stay as close to that role as I possibly could … I wasn't really sure what the role was going to be … you didn't know how it was going to develop … I'd rather be a hands-on on the tools, building the jobs or fixing them and doing the job that I was trained to do'.

6. Conclusion

In an increasingly image conscious world, it is not surprising that discussion of identity excites so much interest in both academic and popular discourse. In the course of our research on workplace learning, how individuals present themselves and are presented by others (cf. Goffman, 1959) is a recurring theme. However, the importance of identity work *for the organization* – that is, the time and effort spent on looking, sound and being the part – varies markedly from sector to sector.

In making products and services organizations shape (create, sustain and/or change) the way workers think about themselves and the way they are seen by others (i.e., their personal identity). This is most evident in the service sector where the quality of service often depends on the one-to-one treatment received. The example presented in this paper is the aerobic instructor who has to provide a fun, but effective workout for class participants. In this case, management goes to considerable lengths to stage manage the encounter and even uses tried and tested class formats for instructors to deliver – this even includes guidance on the clothing to be worn, the language to used and the demeanour to adopt. In software engineering, the mechanisms are subtler but still evident. The organization under study in our research sought to build on and sustain the collective feeling of always being 'top of the class'. Engineers were given latitude in how they organized their work, and recruitment decisions were made on the basis of technical aptitudes and proven academic ability. The organization's success, therefore, was based on being an 'intelligent, technical community'. However, in our traditional manufacturing case study management had far less to gain from the well established personal identities held by skilled craft workers. In fact, these identities acted more as a hindrance than a help in times of work reorganization as it emerged that such workers were more likely to experience, express and perform an identity shaped by the processes of skill and status formation associated with the collective identity of the craft. This case study, therefore, reveals how workers may become more attached to the identities that their occupational role provides and may find it difficult to give up – even in the face of higher pay – symbols of prestige such as 'apprentice-trained' and 'skilled worker' labels.

This paper has provided examples of how identity issues are played out in three contrasting sectors. In the service sector, there was evidence that the personal identities of ETM instructors were subsumed within the strong concept of collective identity being promoted by employers and their agents. In the 'knowledge intensive' company, there was evidence of a close alignment and compatibility between personal and collective organizational identity. In the manufacturing sector, the evidence suggests that a weaker organizational identity created more space for the assertion of personal identities, particularly those characterized by their association with a strong alternative (to the company) collective identity. The discussion has demonstrated the usefulness of placing an 'identity lens' over the interviews, observations and work shadowing carried out to investigate learning at work. It is hoped that other researchers will see the benefits of this approach and will use the 'identity lens' to recast their own findings in a new and revealing light.

Acknowledgements

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