

Identification processes in “horizontal” multinational firms: the case study of a “newtech” company

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We propose a study that intends to contribute to understanding the processes of identification in “flat”, horizontal organizations, based on matrix/project team transnational structures.

The first part of the paper describes the theoretical framework of the research. It deals with the issue of the construction of individual identity within a complex and “quasi-

virtual" flexible organization, facilitated by distance and computer mediated communication. We adopt a processual oriented identity approach and argue identity emerges from different forms of identification processes, that are the result of the interplay among individual, social and organizational factors. These identities may become more or less salient, in different contexts, including the virtual social space produced by Computer Mediated Communication and other distance communication technologies.

In the second part of this paper, we report the results of a field study (field researches based on qualitative methodologies).

The case study is the Italian branch of a Nordic "newtech" company, that operates in a global scenario. The company has an "horizontal" organizational structure, based on business units, cross-organizational global service groups and project teams. The subsidiary employs local workers and a few expatriates. Roughly the 20% of the staff is employed in transnational/global teams.

The field research shows people identify with their work group, even though the spatial distance and cultural differences (among team mates of different nationalities) affect the perception of workers. People seem to respond to virtuality building up social networks based on spatial proximity, personal bonds, etc. We found also a conflict of identities related to company and social units (multiple) affiliations. And likewise the conflict between national and transnational identities that affects some members of transnational teams, that operates across the global structure of their organization.

We argue that individual identity is the result of a complex process of construction and adopt the concept of "multiple identities" to explain some outcomes of the research. The process of identification is likewise related to national and organizational culture and other salient aspects of organizational life.

We argue physical/virtual dimensions are a critical factor in the identification process. People come to terms with distance communication and relationship, but this does not exclude the need of face-to-face relationships, at least in the sample studied. When face-to-face and "the spot" relationships and virtuality co-exist, as in the case of people

working for virtual teams but employed in a local subsidiary, conflicts of identity and process of “identity losing” could emerge.

We conclude different type of relationships (“real” and virtual) can produce different and multiple forms of identification processes. And so managerial practice may benefit from an increased focus on the “multiple” processes of identification in mixed forms (virtual plus “real”) flexible organizational structures.

Theoretical frame

Identity issues are related to the questions: “Who am I?” or “What are we?”, and concern the meanings of own life and work experiences. According to Berger & Luckmann (1979) the development of a professional and organizational identity is part of the so called secondary socialization. While primary socialization refers to the process of education and inculturation of individual, that learn to become a member of the society, secondary socialization comes, instead, later on, after childhood, and involves socialization agencies like school, peers-groups, organizations, etc. (Bagnasco, Barbagli, Cavalli, 1997). This process is related to the internalization of “institutional worlds” and involves the acquisition and development of specialized knowledge (including professional knowledge), values, attitudes, languages, etc.. Such specialized knowledge is associated to particular fields of activity that produce specific symbolic universes (ibi).

Dubar (1991) considers that the construction of social identity involves two complementary processes: the biographical process, e.g. the internal construction by individuals; and the relational process, that involves external transactions between the individual and significant others.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests that individuals experience their own identity referring to their collective identity (Ashforth e Mael 1996). In particular Brewer (2003) categorises three individual identity levels:

1. the individual personal level which refers to the distinctive characteristics of the individual, and consists of being the unique biological entity that he is;
2. the relational level which refers to the roles characteristics and consists of having certain roles;

3. the social level which refers to the identity of the individual belonging context, and consists of being member of groups.

Organizational identity defines the individual identity experience of the last two level. So that role identity characteristics (relational level) and member identity characteristics (social level) are strictly tied to organizational identity.

Alvesson and Willmott (Alvesson and Willmott 2002) suggest that in the context of work organizations the answer to the question "Who am I" or "What we are?" may consist of formal and informal attributions:

- 1) formal: professional or occupational affiliation (e.g. architect, chemist) or organizational position (e.g. head of the sales department),
- 2) in less formal terms: "highly interested in ideas and experiments" or "a people manager".

Anyway, Alvesson and Willmott (ib.) argue that "The organizational regulation of identity is a precarious and often contested process involving active identity work, as is evident in efforts to introduce new discursive practices of 'teamwork', 'partnership', etc. Organizational members are not reducible to passive consumers of managerially designed and designated identities".

According to Alvesson and Willmott (ib.) the identity construction is a process in which different elements interplay. In particular they identify five interrelated ways of constructing and exploring identity: central life interest, coherence, distinctiveness, direction, positive value and self-awareness. The authors define the five path as follows: -"*Central life interest* refers to questions about a person's - or a group or a social institution's -feelings and ideas about basic identity concerns and qualities...*Coherence* describes a sense of continuity and recognizability over time and situation...*Distinctiveness* means that somebody is definable, by herself and others, as different to someone else...*Direction* implies what is appropriate, desirable and valued for a specific subject. The identity or self-image of a person offers guidelines for decision-making (Mitchell et al, 1986)...*Social values* refers to the idea that Identity is invariably related to self-esteem as aspired-for identity is attributed a positive social meaning...*Self-awareness* concerns the fact that identity is also an 'object' of self-consciousness. " (ib.)

Sveningsson and Alvesson (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003) analyzed the interplay between organizational discourses, role expectations, narrative self-identity and identity work. They conceptualized identity in processual terms as identity work and struggle and argued both fragmentation as well as integration are the result of the interplay between organizational discourses and identity.

According to Giddens 'Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person ... self-identity is continuity (across time and space) as interpreted reflexively by the agent.' (Giddens, 1991, p. 53). So self-identity concerns reflexively organized narrative and assures a certain degree of existential continuity and security.

Moreover in late modernity, identities are supposed to be "open and achieved rather than given or closed" (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, see also Bauman, 1999).

According to the theoretical frame, we agree with the assumption that people construct and show multiple identities throughout life, such as their professional identities.

Whyte (1956) have described the ways in which people identify themselves with the kind of work they do and the organization where they work.

Of course the workplace strongly influences individual identities and self-presentation, but, as we have already said, educational background such as membership in professional associations also shape our sense of who we are, how we should conduct our professional

activities, and how others should regard us (Larson, 1977).

According to this viewpoint individual identities are tied to social structural positions (i.e., that individuals' memberships and roles in the groups, organizations, and networks to which they belong form the basis of many of their identities). These multiple identities are activated by individuals in different occasions of their life, providing guidance for their perceptions and behaviors.

Structural symbolic interaction theory (Stryker, 1980) suggests a number of ways in which the identities may relate to each other in terms of the way in which the positions are connected within the social structure. The research conducted by Stryker and Serpe (1982) was particularly important. The author developed an explicitly ecological understanding of the multiple-identity self.

Smith-Lovin (2003) tries to find an answer to the question: when people are more likely to have more complex selves? According to this author –“given a larger number of potential self-identities, it is more likely by chance that an actor will enter a situation where more than one of these identities is relevant and operates as an active identity standard for interaction”- So, multiple identity is a reply to the complexity of self –“that is, when the individual has a relatively large number of identities in his or her salience hierarchy”- (ib.).

Burke (2003) notes three different conditions of multiple identities activation:

1. Multiple identities within a single group. This condition refers to two different situations: having several roles within a group; or having an activated identity in one group and something in the situation activates an identity that the individual has in another group.
2. Identities based on a common role within multiple groups. In this case the multiple identities are multiple in a sequential and not synchronic sense.
3. Multiple identities in intersecting groups. In this case, the different identities that a person has in different groups become simultaneously activated when these different groups interact.

Identity relates also to other organizational factors such as geographical space, nationality, core business, product or technology niche or expertise, organizational design, gender, values, strategy, or knowledge base among others (Bouchikhi & Kimberly, 2003).

The idea of organizational identity has been recognized as a critical construct to understanding organizational behaviour both on an internal level in relation to organizational cultural issues, as well as having significant impact on the management of external issues and mission related concerns (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Ravasi & Rekom, 2003). Who are we as an organization? The question proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985) has developed beyond what was once perceived to be exclusively a management decision (Hatch & Schultz, 1997) to a multilevel notion (Gioia, Schultz & Corely, 2000) providing insights to organizational, cooperative and individual behavior (Dukerich, Golden & Shortell, 2002). As problematic as it might be for theorists and researchers to identify a collective organizational identity, and as much as the notion might be little more than a comprehensive construction by upper-echelon executives, by a relatively

small subset of organization members, and/or by observing theorists and researchers, the notion is nevertheless metaphorically and analytically revealing (Amon 2004).

The process of identity is context bound and so can be associated to different configurations in different contexts, including the virtual social space produced by Computer Mediated Communication and other distance communication technologies.

During the last years, organisations have gradually revised and changed their organisational structure and management practices, as a consequence of the complexity of the business landscape. The environment less stable and predictable and the competitive advantage of knowledge have made organizations more flexible, flat and characterized by entrepreneurial designs. New organisative models have been adopted, far from weberian bureaucratic paradigm. In fact the bureaucracy model seemed to be inappropriate for a global, volatile marketplace.

T. Burns (T. Burns, 1963) categorised the organisation according to two opposite management systems: the mechanistic and the organismic.

a) The mechanistic management system, appropriated to stable conditions, is characterized by a hierarchic structure of control, authority and communication.

b) Organismic management system, appropriated to changing environment, is characterized by a network structure of control, location of knowledge and communication direction.

Moreover Lawrence and Lorsch in 1967 suggested that there isn't one best way to organise, but organization must be able to adapt themselves to the environment conditions. In particular they suggested that the more complex the environment becomes, the more flexible the structure should be to allow for rapid responses.

So that in the last century we have assisted, simultaneously to the evolution from the industrial society to the information society (Drucker, 1993; Castells, 2000), to the development of centralised, hierarchic organizations, focused on national market, in decentralised network organizations acting in world economy (Castells, 2000).

By the late 1990s, the 'networked organisation paradigm' has been adopted by theorists. Hames (1997), for example, proclaimed "what hierarchy was to the 20th century, the distributed network will be to the 21st ... the network is the only organisational type capable of unguided, unprejudiced growth ... the network is the least structured organisation that can be said to have any structure at all".

In this kind of organization separated functional departments have been replaced by cross-functional teams. People have become fundamental strategic assets, because of

they have know-how, competences, knowledge, resources that make competitive advantage.

Moreover, as a consequence of what we have already said, nowadays many organizations have begun experimenting with virtual ways of working.

Virtual organisations appear as an emergent way of working (Wiesenfeld et al, 1998), characterized by the removal of physical proximity, and so of physically bounded and centralised places of work.

According to Daft and Lewin (1993) "Computer-mediated communication technology is becoming the backbone of many organizations, supplanting the formal hierarchical structure to achieve coordination and manage relationships within and between organizations. Electronic communications fuel the growth and effectiveness of an organization and its parts. Information, rather than being limited, controlled, and a source of power, appears to be instrumental for greater effectiveness when widely disseminated and freely available in so-called virtual electronic organizations."

During the last few years theorists have focused on virtual organisations and have identified various types of them.

Virtual organizations consist of networks of interconnected segments that could be individuals, groups, firms or other institutions. Virtual networks nodes are geographically dispersed and collaborate on a joint project or common tasks, and communicate electronically.

So that information technology and computer-mediated communication (Rockart, 1998) take a fundamental part in building and maintaining networked virtual work teams and organisations by allowing members separated by time and space to engage in collaborative work.

There is a substantial literature about the relationship between social systems and network characteristics. Some authors sustain that "larger size leads to increased internal differentiation, with a concomitant rise in role differentiation" (Mayhew, 1983;; Mayhew, James & Childers 1972; Mayhew & Levinger 1976; Mayhew, Levinger, McPherson & James, 1972; Kasarda, 1974). Relations between individuals shift from "Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft as systems grow large". (Smith-Lovin L. 2003)

In addition to that, virtual teams or work groups are often formed on a temporary basis to meet the needs of a specific project. As Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998) noted, virtual

teams are often temporary in nature, and they consist of members who have never worked together before and don't expect to work together in the future.

Discontinuity and temporality appear in this viewpoint main characteristics of this kind of organizations. Human coordination and flows of information have become, therefore, essential to bring together all the dispersed segments of a network.

Infact, the flattening and decentralization processes in organizations, together with the emerging virtual ways of working, raise new opportunities but also new challenges to them.

This in particular regards the creation of a linkages between the employees and the organization.

Identification, in particular, is a means by which organizational members define the self in relation to the organization (Turner, 1987); it concerns the social and psychological tie binding employees and the organization. According to Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) "When an organization becomes a significant source of identification for individuals, corporate identity (the perceived core characteristics of the organization) then informs (self-) *identity work*".

The current literature acknowledges that certain visible signs of affiliation, such as shared dress and other artifacts surrounding one in a conventional office facilitate organizational identification (Dutton et al., 1994).

While in traditional workplace individuals meet frequently colleagues, superiors and in general other organization members, and cues that traditionally created organizational identification, like shared language and routines, dress code, and so on, are readily available, in a virtual context, links between employees and their organizations may be less tangible and more social and psychological in nature (Heydebrand 1989) .

Research on organizational and member identification has suggested that the strength of identification correlates to some critical beliefs and behaviors, like, for example, interpersonal trust, goal-setting processes, internalization of organizational norms and practices (see, for example, Dutton et al., 1994; Kramer, 1993).

In a decentralized context, it could be often very difficult enforcing organizational rules, internalising organizational values and practices, and complying standard procedures.

In this situation communication may take a fundamental part in create a sense of belonging and affiliation to organization.

In particular research has found that communication can affect employees attitudes that may be strongly related to organizational identification.

Employees can create and share their own perceptions of the organization's features such as norms, values and culture, interacting and communicating. This creates a sense a shared interpretive context (Zack, 1993). Consequently communication contributes to create a clear sense of the organization's identity, and thus may strengthen individuals identification.

Furthermore, according to Huff et al., frequent communication leads individuals to feel active participants in the organization (1989).

Anyway, according also to *Information Richness Theory*, different media produce different effects on various dimensions (Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987).

As a consequence this may have implication for the communication impact on creating and mantaining employees' organizational identification.

So face-to-face communication is supposed to vehicle social context cues very strongly (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; 1991), and to be very effective in creating social presence (Fulk & Boyd, 1991) and a shared interpretive context among individuals (e.g., Zack, 1993).

Moreover Markus' research (Markus, 1994) suggests that the social context has also a fundamental part in determining the impact of different communication media on individuals. So the study run by Markus highlighted the relevance of the social context (norms, values,culture) in building up the frame of communication.

Further findings support the co-evolutionary perspective and assume a dialogic relationship among individuals, organizations and technology (Orlikowski, 1992),.

This perspective emphasizes the role that the virtual context and member identification plays in influencing communication technology as well as the role of the technology in creating the virtual context and member identification.

The case study

The case study is the Italian branch of a Nordic "newtech" company, that operates in a global scenario.

The company is a leading MNC operating in the TLC sector, has 15 manufacturing facilities in nine countries and research and development centers in 11 countries. At the end of 2005, the MNC employed approximately 58,900 people.

The company has an "horizontal" organizational structure, based on business units, cross-organizational global service groups and project teams. The company comprises four business groups and two horizontal groups. The Italian subsidiary employs approximately 500 people. Roughly the 20% of the staff is employed in transnational/global teams.

The Italian branch of the company is also divided into different divisions and each one is organized in "sub-units". The main two divisions operate respectively in the BTC (goods market) and BTB (service delivery) sectors. The Italian branch of the company has different offices situated in the south, the center and the north of Italy. The headquarter is situated in Milan.

The research design path is "explorative" (G. Di Franco, 2001). The goal of the study is to define post-hypotheses and find out drivers for further researches. So the approach was mainly "qualitative", according to social research methodology (C. Guala, 2000).

The field research followed in both case studies the following steps:

- a) Field research, based on qualitative methodologies;
- b) Data analysis and interpretation, aimed to the formulation of *ex - post* research hypothesis for further investigations

The field research began with informal interviews with Human Resources, internal and external Communication managers. These open-ended interviews were used to get a general understanding of the organizational context and to build a preliminary set of hypotheses. Then we collected and analyzed various organizational documents, in order

to define the organizational structure, the functions and the basic processes of the two organizations.

After the preliminary phase of the research, we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with managers and key roles of the organization studied (5 managers and five employees interviewed). The purposes of these interviews were: to explore the main topics of the field research, to draw up a general picture of the organizational relations and to develop “operationalizations” of the central constructs for inclusion in a survey.

Then, we conducted 4 focus groups. Each group was composed of managers and workers collected on a geographical base (2 focus groups were composed of manager and workers based in Milano, two focus groups of managers and people based in Rome). The sample (4 focus groups) was composed of 32 people.

A focus group interview has five central traits. It is “(1) a small group of people (2) meeting in a non-threatening central location (3) to participate in an intensive and carefully planned discussion (4) conducted by a skilled moderator (5) who focuses the interaction around discussion of predetermined questions” (Lamp 1994).

The purposes of focus groups include exploratory work, pretest work, aiding event recall, and triangulation with other data collection methods (for example, creating a contextual forum for individual responses) (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, Bristol and Fern 1996).

The group process stimulates individual respondents and allows observation of interaction (Madriz 2000, Krueger 1994). Focus group participants enrich the quality of the data, by questioning each other, and providing reality checks on each other's responses (Jarrett 1993). They allow probing for attitudes and opinions and provide valuable qualitative data and broad insights that would be difficult to obtain in other ways (Billson 1994, Krueger 1994, Lamp 1994).

At the same time, the multivocality of the participants results in limited researcher control

over the focus group process, and the relatively unstructured nature results in limited researcher control over the interview (Krueger 1994). Other disadvantages include that

focus group results cannot be generalized or replicated, that group expression can interfere with individual expression, and that results may reflect a 'groupthink' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

Gearin and Kahle (2001)

In order to ensure replicability, use a generic set of questions in a loose running order, with specific prompts to facilitate participant understanding and to encourage responses

- Opening questions should be used to identify common characteristics among the group.
- An introductory question can be used to introduce the topic of conversation and foster conversation.
- Use 2-5 key questions or topics that drive the study.

Use an ending question to establish closure:

To extent possible, analysis should be systematic and follow a prescribed, sequential process that is verifiable and potentially replicable. The moderator(s) should participate in focus group analysis.

- Assemble all raw materials to get a picture of the entire process. Use any combination of transcripts, tapes, notes, and memory-based analysis.
- Listen for inconsistencies in the focus group, probes for understanding, and vague comments.
- Consider actual words used and their meanings, context, internal consistency, frequency of comments, intensity of comments, specificity of responses, and emergence of any big ideas.
- Note nonverbal communication.
- Organize and divide data into useful segments (mechanical analysis) and also criteria for organizing data into patterns and conclusions (interpretative analysis).

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- Code data into distinct segments on manuscript early in analysis stage. Use short, descriptive words to summarize codes. Include nonsubstance codes for possible illustrative quotes.
- Create overview grid/table to sum up focus group content (ie topic headings X

focus groups identifiers) and cells with ghost summaries of discussion group content per topic. To assess reliability, have each team member construct own overview grid.

- Highlight any patterns in moderator/ assistant moderator comments and corroborate with tapes, and highlight any patterns within and between focus groups.
- Demonstrate validity of focus group research by evaluating whether the report measures what it set out to; whether it looks valid (face validity); whether the results are borne out by future behavior (predictive validity).

The main findings related to the paper's topic are reported in this paper.

The outcomes of field research were presented to and discussed with the steering committee (board of top managers), the Human Resources, Internal Communication and External Communication managers. A summary of the findings were communicated to employees.

Interviews

10 (managers and workers) interviewees.

According many interviewees, there are many differences in the organization studied, concerning languages and business priorities. Then, many respondents believe identity is influenced by organizational positions. Furthermore, many interviewees affirm the perception of employees is influenced also by organizational affiliation, particularly if we refers to members of transnational business units:

Quot:

- "100 individuals among 460 do risk to not live the italian reality, because they live mainly the vertical function"

Interviewees believe there is not a common perception of being part of the same organization. Respondents affirm people do not feel to belong to a unique company.

Quot:

- "Customers perceive ourselves as "One-Company", but this doesn't happen inside (our organization)"
- The culture "We vs You" is often present in peripheral offices.
- "The challenge is to belong and have (share) common elements"
- "(the problem is) to find out the common platform to identify with"

Interviewees believe the company needs to develop a sense of belonging and to facilitate the integration of local processes.

The communication in Business Units is perceived as a critical factor: (people with) different professional backgrounds speak different languages (for example technicians vs business experts). Interviewees believe Business Units are fragmented in sub-units and sub-groups.

Quot.:

"articulations emerge even inside Business Units"

We are not exactly "xxx Italia" (name of the company) ... I feel more (a member of) yyy (the local office), because there are not so many opportunities to interact.

Focus Groups

According to focus groups participants, the company is a horizontal organization that implements "matrix" structures. The typical organizational form of the company is associated to some critical issues, proper to flat organizations, based on project and matrix structures: low definition of roles, creation of closed subsystems (silos structures).

According to interviewees, complexity is part of organizational members' experience. There is the need of facilitating the integration of different divisions, business and consequently behaviours.

The horizontal structure seems to facilitate the formation of "organizational subsystems" (also in terms of cultural "articulations") and so, according to interviewees, there is the need to facilitate the integration of different identities (personal and professional, concerning team membership, the local subsidiary, the business unit, the division, etc). According to participants, the virtual organization and the consequent physical distances, together with a sense of dissatisfaction with procedures and organizational processes, facilitate the forming of internal networks, based on personal relationships and physical proximity, that sometimes are used to by-pass and overlap disfunctions in formal organizational structure.

The lack of a homogeneous and univocal organizational identity does n't correspond to a low level of attachment of employees to their company:

Quot:

"It is worthy to work for this company", "I would recommend this company to a friend of mine"

Participants believe the organizational climate is positive and informal.

Organizational fragmentation is noticed by all participants: according to interviewees there are significative differences between the main division (BTC and BTB) but also among sub-groups inside the same divisions.

- Most of interviewees believe international environment is a satisfactory factor.
- Some participants think instead the double role (local and global) cause a sense of identity "losing". They affirm workers affiliated to transnational teams feel to be stretched (role "stretching"), beside the global and the local context.

Some interviewees are motivated by the opportunity of traveling and working abroad. Other, instead, are worried by internal cross-border mobility, facilitated by market changes.

Quot: "I am the breadwinner, my son is attending the kindergarten and i wish he could attend the same school for the next twelve months"

Quot: "there is also a conflict between things our company ask us (to do) and the right things to do, from a local viewpoint".

Some interviewees believe the matrix structure could affect organizational relationships, roles and communication, because there are multiple key roles to report to. For example, in the BTB division it can occur that an employee is member of a "stream group" and so he has to report to a "stream manager". But he could also be "rented" by another project and so he could be asked to report also to the manager of the other project.

Quot: "so, eventually, my stream manager does n't know at all what i am doing there (for the project team)".

The BTC division has also a horizontal structure, but the matrix organization is not implemented so massively as the BTB one.

Quot:

"I report to one manager, but sometime happens that different positions ask you for something and several internal clients address request to you, apart of external clients. So it si difficult to make people understand your actual priorities".

So, emerge an issue, typical of horizontal structures: the overlapping of command and report lines.

Some interviewees believe the lack of integration and homogeneous organizational behaviours don't facilitate the creation of a strong sense of belonging to the company (at a corporate level).

Quot:

"If you mean a strong sense of belonging, no. I respect the company and i am happy to work for my organization but if you ask me if i have a stronger feeling, the answer is no"

Generally, people seem to identify more with their unit than with the company (at corporate level).

Then, organizational diversity is considered a specific trait of the company that does not help people to feel to be part of a unique organization.

Quot:

"But this may depend on the fact there is a heterogeneity in our company, that is different from what happens in other corporations, where there is the tendency to foster uniformity, also in terms of dressing, behaviours, and that create a bigger sense of belonging to the company. Instead in our company there is heterogeneity, also in terms of personal background "

Some respondents believe the subdivision of BTC division in business units contributed negatively to the sense of belonging, because people have more difficulties to feel part of the same organization.

Quot:

- "Before we were xxx, then we became yyy and then we were divided in other two groups, so there was a "detachment".

- "We were "unpacked". Even though we worked together for a long time, before the unpacking there was more sense of belonging to the company, at corporate and divisional level. Before there was much perception of being part of the same company".

Interviewees identify themselves more with their units: the business unit or the division or the local site's offices.

Participants believe that working for BTB division is very different than working for BTC one. They are perceived as two separate firms. BTB division is considered the "poor cousin" of BTC division (the "rich relative"). Participants believe differences are structural and cultural and concern the different market and the activities carried on by each division.

There are differences between BTC and BTB divisions concerning names (and obviously) competences attributed to organizational positions. For example, the project leader is

called "line manager" in BTC division. Instead, in some Business Units belonging to BTB division, the "line manager" is the position in charge of the coordination of different project teams working for the same Business Unit.

Quot: -"inside xxx we have Business lines. Each Business Line has a line manager. I report directly to my boss for every day activities, he is the "project manager". But, if i want to ask for a new mobile phone, i have to send the request to my line manager, that has an assistant. So we have to refer to different people, i have an assistant but, if i want to order a new pc, i don't have to use directly our platform (internal services services platform) but I have to contact the line manager's assistant, so is to her telling me what i can do, may ask etc.." -

According some participants the lack of integration affect external client relationships.

Quot:

- "For example, i work for yyy project...inside the other division there is for sure some one in charge to carry on relation with the same client...i am not saying i should be always in touch with this person to understand their strategies, but is very likely i can be asked to anticipate news about a new product (sold by BTC division), when i am with the client.

Many respondents agree people working for different groups, units and divisions do not know each very well.

Quot:

"Also because we have not opportunities to work together, we do different things".

Some interviewees believe things have changed a bit in the latest years and, even though people perceive the two divisions as distinct realities "they are trying to make people feel to belong to one company".

Many interviewees complain about differences in compensations and benefits policies, career opportunities etc, among groups and units. This differences regards also internal mobility, attribution of charges and responsibilities.

According some participants, corporate guide lines are not always applied in the same way in all divisions and units. The guide lines compliance depends also to people and to managerial skills and behaviours.

According to participants, cross-cultural issues have an impact in Business Units management: there are "differences of mentality" among people of different nationalities. -"There is the need of understanding one each other".

Participants believe there is the tendence to think in terms of "we" and "you" (Global and Italy, employees and managers, the local offices and the Headquarter, BTB nad BTC divisions).

The transcription of focus group discussions and observations of group dynamics highlighted a shared perception of many aspects of organizational life, common values, a shared language.

So far, at the end of the focus group sessions, many participants, observing the significative level of convergence of participants' view points concerning many aspect of organizational life, noticed: "may be we are more similar than we supposed to be" - So, presumeby members of the organization studied are not completely aware to share values, emotions, competences, work experiences with colleagues of different teams, units, offices, divisions, etc..

Discussion

The field research showed people identify more with own work group, unit, local office, etc., than with own company. People are attached to their company and are happy to work for it, but don't have a strong sense of belonging to their organization, if we refer to the corporate level. Simply, it seems the "hic et nunc" experience of working for a Business Unit, a project team, a division is stronger than the perception/feeling of being part of a bigger picture. Employees presumably share a common bond to their company, but this bond seems to be weak, or better saying, "weaker" than the day-by-day experience of working and living with own work group. Or, within own local workplace (local office or headquarter). But, as we reported in this paper, the perception of interviewees changed during the process: in fact, at the end of focus group, many participants affirm to have changed their view about individual and organizational differences in their company. People seem to realize, eventually, there are more similarities among employees than they supposed before. New pieces of the puzzle, make people be more aware of the common language and values shared by company's people.

People seem to respond to virtuality building up social networks based on physical proximity, personal bonds, etc.. CMC impacts to individual perception and feelings, but personal ties seem to be stronger, in terms of level of emotional impact and affective intensity. The virtual organization does not take the place of the "physical" one. Maybe we can use the concept of "multiple dimensions" of organizational experience, in order to describe the parallel existence and the reciprocal "permeation" of cyber and real workplaces.

We found also a conflict of identities related to company and social units (multiple) affiliations. Sometimes people seem to "choose" own favourite identity ("project team member" or "local office employee", for example) as we illustrated before, sometimes people live their experience with a sense of confusion, identity struggle, internal conflict.

Another critical point is the conflict between national and transnational identities, that affects some members of transnational teams, that operates across the global structure of their organization. "I am Italian, I work for a transnational business unit, my project

team is definitely multicultural, but i was recruited by my italian subsidiary that pays my salary...So, which is my real identity?".

We argue that individual identity is the result of a complex process of construction and so identity could be described as a dynamic phenomenon. We assume identity process is the result of ongoing interactions of "self", group and organizational context. CMC plays a role in this process but, at least for employees involved in this study, it is only one of the main factors involved in the process of identification. So, the continuous interplay between virtual communication and face to face interaction is one of the key factors that explain identity processes, at least referring to employees involved in our study. Virtual relationships and "on the spot" direct interactions seem to contribute both to the process of reality construction.

We argue physical/virtual dimensions are a critical factor in the identification process. People come to terms with distance communication and relationship, but this does not exclude the need of face-to-face relationships, at least in the organization studied. When face-to-face on "the spot" relationships and virtuality co-exist, as in the case of people working for virtual teams but employed in a local subsidiary, conflicts of identity and process of "identity losing" could emerge.

We adopt the concept of "multiple identities" to explain some outcomes of the research. The process of identification is likewise related to national and organizational culture and other salient aspects of organizational life. The relationships between national culture and organizational identity is a topic that needs further studies. Some authors (see Maimone 2005 a) affirm that cultural identity is static and so cross-cultural management have simply to recognize and manage diversity, as it is. Some researchers instead assume national identities are dynamic and can change as a consequence of processes of ibridation and cultural change (Elfenbein Anger and Ambady 2002, Maimone 2005 b). Cultures interplay is not neutral nor easy to face. Identity lost and intra-personal conflicts are the unexpected outcomes of this process.

The case study, in our opinion, shows different type of relationships ("real" and virtual), typicall of new organizational forms, can produce different and multiple forms of identification processes. Space (virtual and "real"), time, personality, role, professional

background, national cultures influence the ongoing process of identity building. Multiple identities seem to be the final result of the equation.

It seems that ambiguity and identity struggle are a unexpected consequence of new flexible form of organization. We can't say the case studied shows a complete disintegration, nor a real integration of identity. The outcomes of field research seem to draw up a sort of "hologram", and may be this is a sort "functional" response to complexity.

If we analyse the outcomes of the research from the organization's view point, it seems that the organizational identity follows the same process of fragmentation of individual ones. A multidimensional identity take the place of the old fashioned "corporate identity". Workers share a core of values, beliefs, languages and so it seems they have a shared image of own company. But the common portfolio does not produce a unique organizational identity, because is likely the position of the workers in the organizational universe (composed of real and cyber space), their team affiliation and their network of relationships influence the organizational perception of the employees. So, we could say that a "multiple" organizational identity is the result of the interplay among individual, social and contextual factors in flexible new form of organizations, at least in the case studied.

We argue managerial practice may benefit from an increased focus on the "multiple" processes of identification in mixed forms (virtual plus "real") flexible organizational structures. Flexible quasi virtual organizations seem to have specific characteristic and so it is worthy to adopt proper and ad hoc managerial policies and practises, in order to manage identity process and to copy with critical issues in identification processes in new form of organizations.

Individual and organizational identities seem to be the result of the interplay of several factors and may be the outcome of the "weak" influences of many variables, more than the consequence of the "strong" influence of a few elements, like hierachy, gender, age, etc. The proactive management of multiple foci and processes of identification and the systemic and integrated development of CMC and direct communication processes are presumeably the first step toward a successful organizational development of new forms of organizations.

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