

EXPLORING MULTIPLE IDENTIFICATIONS AND IDENTITIES IN THE HIGH PERFORMANCE CALL CENTRE: A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS?

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ABSTRACT

The paper is based on exploring the multiple identifications and identities of employees within a contemporary call centre in the UK. The paper presents empirical evidence from VoiceTel, a single case study of a successful high performing call centre. This study addresses the issue of how processes of employee identification, social constructions of identity and identity regulation influence the adoption and adaptation of management practices in the workplace. The paper shows how, contrary to other critical case examples and in contrast to expectations of conflict, discontent and disconnection, employees reported high levels of commitment and satisfaction. This is explained by recognising that, unlike most examples, the multiple identificatory references of employees, the espoused organizational identity of the company and the processes of identity regulation found in the organization are connected and coherent in encouraging mutuality between employees and between employees and employers. This outcome can only be understood by reflecting upon the content of work, the local economic and societal context of the workplace and, the experiences of the working class female employees.

INTRODUCTION

Recent research on the adoption and adaptation of management practices in organizational settings has recognised the emergent and negotiated nature of these practices. Pentland and Feldman (2005) discuss "Performative routines", which centre on the specific actions of people in specific places and times'. This local and micro level focus has become increasingly influential in studies of management practices but there has been relatively little concerted attempt to incorporate conceptions of employee identity into theorising the adaptation and negotiation processes that influence performative routines. This is a particularly surprising omission in the study of how high performance work systems (HPWS) are implemented because these have been the subject of much debate by researchers in the sociology of work and employment relations (see review in Wall and Wood 2005). For Godard (2004) and Thompson (2003) the paradigm of HPWS is problematic because these approaches fail to incorporate the political economy perspective. Although some of the quantitative studies have identified the successful implementation of these practices, there remains the question of the so-called 'black box' of HPWS, where causal relations have been assumed rather than examined. As we have discussed in relation to HPWS in manufacturing settings (Jenkins and Delbridge 2007), a number of disconnections emerged at workplace level and these result in conflicting interests between employees and organizations, the fractured identities of both individual and collective employees with that of the organization and fragmented relations between employees themselves. Research on high commitment management in call centres is equally empirically problematic. Kinnie *et al's* (2000) study finds, HCM have sought to engage workforce identifications and commitment to the organization by attempting to create a 'fun' work environment to offset the negative consequences of the labour process. Whilst, Houlihan's (2002: 69) study noted that the aim of these practices is to engage workers' commitment to the organization in order to mobilize their involvement and discretionary effort (Houlihan 2002: 69). Both of these studies identify the disconnect between management practices which focus on eliciting employee commitment whilst at the same time the labour processes of call centre organization is often tightly controlled.

This paper addresses how processes of employee identifications, social constructions of identities and identity regulation influence the adoption and adaptation of management practices in the workplace. The paper presents empirical evidence from a single case study of a successful high performing call centre. Unlike most call centres reported in the literature, this organization had successfully implemented a form of high performance work system (MacDuffie, 1995) and exemplified high commitment HR practices. The paper shows how, contrary to other critical case examples and in contrast to expectations of conflict, discontent and disconnection, employees reported high levels of commitment and satisfaction. This is explained by recognising that, unlike most examples, the multiple identificatory references of employees, the espoused organizational identity of the company and the processes of identity regulation found in the

organization are connected and coherent in encouraging mutuality between employees and between employees and employers. This outcome can only be understood by reflecting upon the local economic and societal context of the workplace and the personal histories and experiences of the individuals in question. We propose two contributions to the literature. Firstly, there has been little theorizing of the intersections, tensions and overlapping nature of multiple identifications and identities, this study attempts to examine these features in order to explain the successful adoption of HPWS. Secondly, in relation to the identities literature, we offer a complex, multi-dimensional and contextualized account of multiple identifications which adopts a perspective that workers are knowledgeable actors capable of making informed decisions about their workplace. To expand on these themes we now turn to an examination of identities in the literature.

LITERATURE EVALUATION: EXAMINING IDENTITIES

There has been a burgeoning of research on matters of identity in organizations (see review Alvesson *et al* 2008), which these authors stress offers both opportunities and challenges – these include the development of, ‘novel and nuanced theoretical accounts, to produce rich empirical analyses that capture the inter-subjectivity of organizational life in a thoughtful and empathetic fashion, and to demonstrate how individual and collective self-constructions become powerful players in organizing processes and outcomes’. (Alvesson *et al* (2008: 7). They distinguish between studies which adopt an ‘identifications’, ‘identity work’ and an ‘identity control’ perspective. In this paper we adopt a multi-dimensional perspective to examine identity in order to address the complexity of our case study. This focuses on three categories; *identity formation* which examines the development of self and social identities, secondly, how *identifications* are formed and developed in organizations and finally, issues of *identity regulation* focuses on how organizations attempt to manage identities. Each of these approaches shall be examined.

In terms of identity formations, Jenkins (1996: 142) makes the distinction between ascriptive identities which are socially constructed and based on the contingencies of birth, such that gender is an ascriptive identity, and achieved or acquired identities which are assumed over time and are generally the outcome of self-direction. For Giddens’ (1984) self-identity is based on individual’s attempts to construct a narrative of them selves which allows individuals a sense of security and a source of meaning. Workers are likely to pursue a course of action which reinforces this notion of them selves rather than an approach which contravenes their sense of self. This emphasizes the knowledgeability and capability of human agency. Alongside self-identities, the concept of social identities refers to the interaction between personal identities and the social context. Closely related to understandings of identity formations is the next category of *identifications*. Identification is the process by which our interests are aligned and is the expression of our self and social-identities. This has become a significant theme in organizational research and especially within the context of service work because it relates to how employees as individuals and groups identify them selves. However, Alvesson *et al* (2008: 13) have been critical of the technical/functionalist stance of much of this work because as they claim there is an overly static and stable conception of individual perceptions of self and the organizations as the main source of identifications. Instead, they urge that a more critical reading of the research into this area should view identifications as a complex and fluid process which can involve multiple targets of identification beyond the organization. We would endorse this view to develop an approach which acknowledges multiple identificatory references by illustrating different affiliations beyond just the organization. In some cases, these different affiliations can be a source of conflict, for example, an employees’ identification to their trade union may be a source of tension with the employer.

The third area in the literature focuses on identity regulation and control. This is defined by Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 625) as involving, ‘the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction. Notably, induction, training and promotion procedures are developed in ways that have implications for the shaping and direction of identity’. They stress that when an organization becomes a significant source of identification for individuals, corporate identity then informs (self-)identity work’ (Alvesson and Willmott 2002: 625). They also illustrate the different ways in which identity is influenced, regulated and changed within work organizations, these focus on *the employee* – these are directly defined or implied by reference to the Other; *action orientations* – in which the field of activity is constructed with reference to appropriate work orientations, *social relations* – regulations of belongingness and differentiation and *The scene* – regulations indicating the kind of identity that fits the larger social, organizational and economic terrain in which the subject operates (p.632). For Alvesson and Willmott, (2002: 632) ‘these modes of regulation offer a broad view of how organizational control may operate through the management of identity, primarily by means of discourse’. Additionally, the critical literature has focused on the problematic nature of identity regulation at workplace level; a range of this

research focuses on call centre to illustrate how attempts to build commitment through normative controls frequently result in employee resistance and misbehaviour (Taylor and Bain 2004). These studies highlight how workers defend their own interests and identities as opposed to that of the organization. Additionally, the development of the concept of dis-identification focuses on how cynicism becomes a feature in how employees respond to normative controls which seek to manipulate identities (e.g. Fleming and Spicer 2003). To examine our empirical data we adopt all three approaches to provide a multi-dimensional and contextual account of employees' multi-identificatory references which explained the successful adoption of HPWS in this call centre.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research is based on a single case study of VoiceTel, a high performing call centre. The main method for data collection was semi-structured interviews which were conducted with 67 respondents (75% of the workforce): Three senior managers, 48 interviews with receptionists and 15 with the range of support services. All of the receptionists are female, two senior managers are male and one female and all the support staff are female apart from the two male IT managers. The average length of interview with receptionists was 49 minutes, all were digitally recorded and transcribed. In addition, periods of observation provided valuable insights into the workplace. These involved three features. Firstly, prior to the commencement of the field-work one of the research team 'shadowed' a receptionist for the day to gain an insight into the work process. Secondly, the research team spent some limited time with receptionists listening in to calls before the interview process began. These periods were valuable because they allowed us to develop interview schedules which were meaningful to the receptionists. Descriptive observational notes were made during the field-work to build up a picture of the atmosphere and culture of VoiceTel. The third aspect involved the focused observation of the recruitment assessment day – one of the researchers attended the assessment day for recruiting and selecting new employees. This involved formal presentations by the owner and a series of different assessments including shadowing a receptionist. The researcher also attended the discussions which led to the hiring of successful candidates.

EXAMINING IDENTITIES AND IDENTIFICATIONS AT VOICETEL

In this section we set out our empirical data to demonstrate the key features of employee identities and identifications within this case study which addresses the questions of why this organization has overcome some of the disconnections previously associated with HPWS.

The nature, content and context of work

VoiceTel provides an out-sourced answering, message and reception services to a range of businesses across the UK. It has a unique technological innovation on which the work process is based which allows client's customer calls to be re-routed to it. When the call is received, the receptionist's screen displays a range of information on the client so they know whom they are taking the call on behalf of, who is available to take calls and other relevant information. VoiceTel staff re-direct the call or take a message and e-mail, text or fax it to the client. The work of receptionists involved receiving and processing information, accurately relaying messages in real time and maintaining a social display which required their discretionary judgement. There are no scripts or standardised practices, every receptionist has approximately forty clients and they are encouraged to get to know them through the initial set-up call, to develop a rapport and to establish the type of service the client will require. The client base was extremely diverse. Some clients require a straightforward answering and message service, whereas others provide detailed directions on how they want their receptionist to emotionally respond to their customers. This can involve the requirement for a 'bubbly', 'chatty' and enthusiastic telephone manner, whereas other clients such as solicitors and accountants require a more sober, reserved and mature manner. Other clients engaged in counselling and personal advice required receptionists to be caring and empathetic. The work involved a high degree of emotional dexterity and juggling as reflective of Bolton's (2005) concept of 'emotional management'. As such, the labour process of receptionists was marked with a high degree of autonomy and discretion (see Jenkins *et al* 2008). Relatedly, there were few attempts at overt performance management; there are no targets for call handling or time limits on the duration of calls. Significantly, there was no attempt at electronic monitoring of calls. Although, the technological sophistication of the telephony system allows for the detailed monitoring and therefore could be labeled as surveillance-capable, the founders chose not to adopt this approach. This was a conscious decision by management as it was understood that this would contradict trust relations.

Additionally, work is organised into teams of four with a team leader. Receptionists are expected to answer calls without letting them ring over, but if a specific receptionist is busy calls are re-routed to another team

member. Receptionists have to be familiar with their own clients of which they have approximately 40, and also to have a cursory knowledge of their team members' clients. The team leader role was considered supportive rather than sanction-based and teams were given freedom to grow organically and develop their own identities. This view was widely supported by the interviewees, all of whom noted that the role of the team leader was to support, encourage and lead through example by providing advice to receptionists. This had partly been facilitated by the careful selection of team leaders who were overwhelmingly described as 'approachable' and 'open'. The next section shall focus on issues of identity regulation to examine how VoiceTel communicates its culture and how this is supported through recruitment, selection and human resource practices.

Identity Regulation

Narratives on the values and ethos of the organization are dominated by the two owners Vicky and Tim. For example, the story of the inception of VoiceTel centres on Tim's own negative experience of using a message service. The business developed from their recognition of the need for a high quality reception service which offered dedicated staff who genuinely cared for the clients they worked for. Client care is promoted through paternalistic relations inspired by the founders. Their vision to provide a quality service required highly committed, motivated and satisfied employees who would care for their clients. To achieve this they wanted to create a business where employees 'genuinely wanted to come to work' and identified with the values of VoiceTel. Neither Tim, nor Vicky had previously employed staff and they described how they sought to create the employment context based on workplaces where they had worked which they had appreciated. As Vicky commented, 'It comes down to the caring thing. What people say they take away from the assessment days is the fact that, you know, we firmly believe that if you're going to spend eight hours working somewhere then you might as well enjoy it'.

The two core values of the organization are care and trust and this is transmitted in terms of the management style and practices, and included the design of the work environment. The office is spread over two floors of a new office block. It is a pleasant and relaxed working environment – open-plan, light and airy. The walls are decorated with large modern pictures and receptionists' desks are adorned with a range of personal artifacts. There is a kitchen on each floor and receptionists can take breaks when there are quiet periods. VoiceTel provides free tea and coffee and trust is an essential feature of this as workers are trusted to take breaks when in it is quiet. The atmosphere is very friendly and relaxed; receptionists can wear the clothes they choose and during quiet moments they are free to read books, magazines and to browse the internet. The two owners' offices are situated on the second-floor of the two storey building, all offices are glass fronted and they operate an open-door policy for staff.

This fits with Alvesson and Willmott's (2002: 30) categorization of identity regulation in that the organization explicates a set of morals and values. To enforce these values, the recruitment process selected employees on the basis of value congruence. As many studies have highlighted, the culture was shaped and sustained through the recruitment and selection process (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Grugulis *et al.*, 2000) by hiring on the basis of espoused values. Vicky noted, 'What mistakes I made when I recruited people for their skills and not their attitude ... if somebody walks in and they've got the right attitude, I will take them on, even if they've never seen a computer in their lives or can't type'.

Normative controls were also enhanced via a policy of 'recruiting a friend' which served to ensure that potential employees had prior knowledge of the organization and value system. Employees who recommend someone attain a £250 bonus and as such, VoiceTel hadn't advertised for recruits for two years. This is also reinforced through the assessment day which includes staff spending time with potential recruits and decision of who is hired is based on discussions with staff about whether the candidate will 'fit in'. The key criterion applied is whether the candidate will care enough for the clients and 'go the extra mile'. Once recruited the probation period identified if recruits can complete work tasks as well as well as fitting in to the team. This period starts when all new recruits are taken to lunch by the owners and each employee's name is remembered and personal details elicited (for example, partners' and children's names) to 'get to know' employees better.

A range of HR perks and practices have also evolved which are aimed at developing positive reciprocal relations. The average salary for receptionists is £15,500 which compares favourably with comparable work in the local labour market, holiday provision is good and there is a private health care plan. Informal practices were developed to communicate that each member of staff was cared for, valued and appreciated. These include one off bonus payments; on one occasion £50 notes were attached to the under-side of receptionists' chairs. Staff are given Easter eggs, Valentine's presents, Christmas presents and birthdays are celebrated by the whole workforce. Additionally, VoiceTel's annual company parties - a

trip to the races in the summer and the Christmas party - are famously lavish. Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 630) note how social events and the management of shared feelings engender a group affiliation which is a powerful device in the regulation of identity through, 'by engendering feelings of belonging and membership, a sense of community, however, contrived can be developed'. The expectation surrounding these practices was that if employees felt valued, cared for and trusted they would return the same feelings towards VoiceTel and the clients they work for, 'To have good people doing this job, the job had to have responsibility and accountability cos otherwise people would see it as a really tedious job if you didn't have that relationship with your clients. I mean if we're trusting people to look after our clients' calls, we should be able to trust them' (Vicky).

It is evident that these practices are concerned with eliciting employee commitment through identity regulation and normative controls. However, the responses of employees cannot be described in terms of their identities being easily manipulated, or them being cultural dupes. Instead, we see these employees as knowledgeable actors capable of making an informed judgment about the organization. A significant factor in this study is gendered and classed relations of the workforce, as working-class women within the confines of this labour market had few opportunities for 'good' work with a 'good employer'. Many had limited expectations about work, the age profile of the workforce was mixed; but most had worked previously for what they considered poor employers and recognized that VoiceTel was a different kind of employer. Therefore, the local labour market context is an important dimension in understanding employee identifications, significantly, many of the women had previously worked for a high volume call centre (CallCom) in the local vicinity and for them, the experience of work at VoiceTel could not have been more different. We describe this in terms of dis-identification.

Dis-identification

As noted, the concept of dis-identification has previously been used to examine how employees respond to normative controls which seek to manipulate identities (e.g. Kunda 1994; Fleming and Spicer 2003). In the context of this research; the 'other' relates to CallCom; where many had previously been employed. The contrasting experience of work in the two organizations, greatly enhanced identifications to VoiceTel, Libby explained how she disliked the target focused nature of work at CallCom. And Caitlin described that although there were 'perks' at CallCom such as gym membership which she described as 'golden handcuffs' these were not enough to compensate for the content and experience of work. 'I worked at CallCom before and I wanted to slit my wrists [she laughs]....I hated it... they give you like free gym and stuff like that, but I mean if you really hate it then....well to go the gym for half an hour after work ain't going to make you feel any better [she laughs]. So I left'.

This extract shows that workers are not easily duped by the 'added extras' and perks offered in these workplaces to offset the harsh labour process. As such, employees struggled to relate the labour process at VoiceTel with that of a call centre. As Tanya notes, 'People will call it (VoiceTel) a call centre, but I don't think that it is because I think that if you walked in.....and looked at it....I think that people on the outside would say like it is a call centre, but I don't feel like it is a call centre. I went for a job at 'CallCom' ages ago...and THAT is like a call centre, they have like boards up around and you are like in your little pod... I don't even like people saying that it is an answering service, well it is...but we are more...we are like their receptionists, we are somebody who works for them really, it is not as if we are just saying hello and good bye and that is it. I don't think that it is fair to say that we are a call centre or just an answering service'.

The spectre of CallCom loomed large in the organization and was a useful counter-point to describe everything that was good about VoiceTel. This is significant because we shall now turn to the multiple identificatory references of employees to explain their identification and an important dimension of which relates to the content and context of work.

Multiple identificatory references

This section shall consider the multiple identifications which employees espouse, these relate to three points; identification to the owner, the clients and the team.

Identifications to the owners

In relation to the values of care and trust which the founders have developed and which transcend the organization. The familial culture and the informal communication transmitted to employees that they were valued and appreciated. As the following extract from Laura, 'I'm proud to work here ... they [owners] make you feel appreciated and grateful for what you do. They are forever saying VoiceTel is what it is because you do such a good job ... This is a fab place to work'. Flora noted, 'It's not just a company, you feel part of a family ... they [the owners] are always very approachable ... they have an open door policy ... People generally are proud to work here, cos it is genuinely a good company to work for'.

The ways in which the owners demonstrated their appreciation for staff was highly significant in terms of the identifications experienced. As Andrea explained, 'It is just little things, to show that they do care, and I think that they do care as people, I mean e-mails come around from Tim, Vicki and Steve saying "we think that you are fantastic, you are doing a fantastic job", I mean how many companies do you go to? A lot of companies you are just.....a number or a name, you are not a person, but I feel here that you are a person, you are an individual and you are appreciated for what you do and I think that that carries a lot of clout, I don't care what you say, it does.

The notion of reciprocal relations between the organization and the employees was central to understanding these views and identifications. However, care and trust related to the content of work. Therefore, it is important to note that these values were not just evident at the level of discourse but reinforced through practices in the way work was designed and managed. The fact that employees were trusted to use their judgment and discretion in how they did their job was key to understanding identifications. This extended to not only the emotional management they performed in relation to clients' requests but also in how they organized their work. As, Kirsty noted, 'You have to use your initiative if your clients send you updates, you have to take that on yourself, to organise everything ... faxes and certain things like that come through it is up to you to sort your ones out, you don't get watched or anything like that, it is up to you'.

As Houlihan (2002) and Kinnie *et al's* (2000) studies of HCM in call centre contexts reveals there is evident disconnect between management practices which seek to engage employee commitment through 'fun' and sociability in the workplace and the actual content of work. The content and context of work at VoiceTel provided the basis for meaningful work and which reinforced workers positive self-identity. Additionally, a unique feature of this organization which helps to explain the positive identification with the organization was that the main driver of work was the clients. However, despite this identifications to the clients were also powerfully expressed by the receptionists.

Identification to clients

The employment relationship was mediated through the clients as they generated work for the receptionists. As Naomi, stressed, 'You do feel like you work for your clients coz they are the ones that you speak to everyday and they are the ones that talk to you about how they want you to do things in terms of your job here, you know, it comes from both angles, but you tend to get left alone here, and then your clients just pester you do everything!' [laughs].

Despite this, the words used to describe these relations was extremely positive, it was evident that the values of trust and care which VoiceTel espoused were transferred in relations to their clients. Many talked about the clients were the most important source of their identification, as Jainey noted, 'I think the client relationship is key purely because you have got to have a really good relationship with them to be able to give them the service that they have come to VoiceTel for.... It is important that you have that relationship with your clients because they trust you in taking their calls and handling them professionally'.

Many of the receptionists discussed the close relationships which have developed with clients. These range from clients sending Christmas and birthday presents to the office, invites to workplace social events, to close personal friendships developing. A common occurrence which was noted by receptionists and which researchers observed through shadowing of the work process was that some clients were paying more for the service from VoiceTel by not using it appropriately. If clients didn't inform receptionists that they would be unable to take calls then receptionists would continue to pass messages on, which would incur a cost to the client. Receptionists had to use their judgment to decide whether to inform the client of incurring additional costs. This could be perceived as a conflict in identifications, as it signifies whether the receptionist is seeking to protect the interests of the client or their employer. However, it became apparent throughout the interviews that receptionists did guide their clients on how to use the services in the most efficient manner. Most receptionists agreed that despite the financial incentive for VoiceTel – the key priority was to care for their clients. Therefore, commitment to the client is something which VoiceTel communicates beyond any short-term financial incentive, as they believe this leads to a long-term relationship of trust with their clients, which is more likely to lead to their continued use of VoiceTel's services. As Kay explained, 'I mean obviously there is a loyalty to VoiceTel, I think if they found out that you were keeping that quiet to make them more money, I don't think that would make them happy coz then you are not looking after your clients, and then they know that they have got a good receptionist'. The third feature of identification was evident in the way that employees talked about their teams.

Identification to the team

The organization of work into teams was also a key source of employee identifications. For Elsie, this enhanced her sense of belonging to the organization, 'I think that you get that sense of belonging within

being in the team....you start to get into it, you are a part of this team now, and you are handling calls for this team, and then all of a sudden you get your own clients, and you and your team are handling calls for your clients, and you are handling their calls. And when you get to that stage, you feel as though you belong, and you feel as though you are a part of a team and a part of the company'.

Team loyalty was important because workers are free to take breaks during quiet times and their team covers their absence. As such, we were interested to identify if this could be a source of conflict if some team members abused the system, however, as Christina illustrated, 'if you are missing your calls, your team members are going to get them, so, why should they have smoke coming out of their fingers when you are just sat there with a cup of tea and a biscuit, and just letting them go...And that is why I think you don't find it happening very often because everyone is loyal to the team'.

This was reinforced in the way that VoiceTel had developed teams, it was not reflective of the type of peer controlled disciplinary functions of teams associated in some examples of HPWS. In this case, teams were allowed to develop organically which meant that most had strong social bonds with one another.

The above section has focused on three features of employee identifications at VoiceTel, however, rather than these multiple identities being the source of fragmentation and conflict, they co-incided and served to connect employees identities to the organization. This is described in the words of Kathleen, 'It would be very, very difficult to prioritise, and that is genuine. We work for VoiceTel, we do what VoiceTel wants us to do, but we also do what the clients want us to do, but we also do what fits with the team as well. So it is a natural fit, it is not anything that is forced, it is not anything that is uncomfortable, it is just really, really natural. And I think that that comes from the ground up and that comes from how VoiceTel started and how the standards continue. And I think that that is, and I suppose initially it's what VoiceTel is all about and how it started, it's what VoiceTel does and continues to do, but they have got the balance so right and so well. They have really hit the nail on the head and have got it right'.

The connected nature of these of identifications at VoiceTel can partly be explained because the identity regulation focused on transmitting two core values of care and trust which synchronized with employees' self and social identities of workers. However, these values were not just espoused in terms of discourse but were also evident in the way the labour process was designed and managed, the content of work and in the management style of the owners.

CONCLUSION

Our empirical study of the successful adoption of a HPWS within a call centre in the UK has sought to explain the reasons why there was such a high degree of employee commitment and satisfaction. To do so we have examined this through the lens of identities. Few studies have taken employee identities into consideration other than to account for why HPWS rarely delivers what is promised to employees. This study however, has illustrated the multi-layered connections between the employees and the organization at VoiceTel. A number of features coalesce in this case which makes it unique and which emphasize the mutual alignment of multiple identities. To examine this we offer a complex, multi-dimensional and contextualised account of multiple identities which notes that although the organization used identity regulation and normative controls to manage the values of the organization, these factors are not the main explanation for employee identifications to the organization. For us, a large part of this explanation rests also on the content, management and organization of work. The work allowed a degree of discretion unusual in many call centre contexts, workers were trusted and valued and the work was meaningful in the sense that imbued workers with positive self and social-identities. Another significant factor was the labour market context and the dis-identification of VoiceTel from a high volume call centre in the local vicinity. For us the content and context of work are significant factors in the explanation because the working class women in this study had few expectations to work in a 'good' job for a 'good employer'. Additionally, as Thompson and Findlay (1999) acknowledge, the fact that work can be meaningful is often a neglected feature in research on identity manipulation. In setting out the multiple identificatory references we have also sought to explain the range employee reference points by taking issues of agency seriously. We conceive of employees as knowledgeable actors, capable of forming their own strategies to reinforce a positive sense of self-worth and self-identities and to maintain social identities which are meaningful to them. In some of the critical literature it is assumed that employees enter the workplace with their set of identities pre-formed that become subjected to manipulation as such, employees are conceived of as either cultural dupes who are ignorant of organizational manipulation or, hoodwinked as reflective of false consciousness (see Rhodes *et al* 2007: 89). However, despite these findings demonstrating that VoiceTel seems to have uncovered a recipe for organizational success, we would offer a cautionary note. As highlighted, there are a range of contextual features which explain employee commitment in this study. Organizations are dynamic and fluid entities and as VoiceTel is a growing organization, there is a possibility that the multiple-identifications which were evident can also serve to create a collectivized

workforce. For example, a harsh sickness policy had been implemented just prior to our study and it was evident that employees felt that it contravened the values of care and trust on which the company prided itself. Therefore, management practices such which transgressed workers sense of self and social-identities could lead to tensions and conflicts between employees and the organization with the potential to fracture and fragment the current inter-connected nature of employee identifications and identities.

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