

Chapter 12

Occupational Networking as a Form of Professional Identification: The Case of Highly-Skilled IT Contractors

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ABSTRACT

The impact of virtual networks on economic activity and organizational affairs has long occupied the Information Systems (IS) academic community. Yet what has been paid less attention is the impact of networks on the way contemporary workers perceive themselves at work. Taking into account this gap in the literature, the paper aspires to bring forward issues referring to the implication of virtual networks in the construction of occupational identity of highly-skilled Information Technology (IT) contractors. Drawing upon data from interviews with thirty highly-skilled IT contractors, the paper suggests that the virtual networks among IT contractors and individuals who share the same occupational interests become for the contractors the locus of social interaction, the hub of knowledge generation, the source of occupational control and thus the primary object of professional identification.

INTRODUCTION

The networks within which organizational actors are embedded are proved to have important consequences on their working lives and organizational affairs in general. Over the last decade, from Castell's (1996) seminal study of network society till Benkler's (2006) work on social modes of production, and even long time before that

(Granovetter's, 1983) study on social ties), we have learnt a great deal about the various desirable outcomes which stem out of the proliferation of network-like forms of organizing and networks in general.

A long-standing literature analyses the significance of networks among individual organizational actors and refers to the study of *virtual teams, communities of practice* (Brown & Duguid,

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1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and *social networks* (Benkler, 2006). Individuals with common interests come together and collaborate gaining advantage from the associated economies of experience and specialization inherent in collective action (Kallinikos, 2006; McLure Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Nardi, Whittaker, & Schwarz, 2002; Sassen, 2001; Sinha & Van de Ven, 2005). Through their participation in these open and fluid patterns of interaction and collaboration, individuals manage their *knowledge capital* (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Osnowitz, 2006; Zammuto, Griffith, Majchrzak, Dougherty, & Faraj, 2007), seek for *job referrals and job opportunities* (Granovetter, 1983; Laubacher & Malone, 1997; Nardi et al., 2002) and become the producers of information based goods and services (Benkler, 2006; Von Hippel & Von Krogh, 2006).

Common to these studies is that are mainly concerned with the perceived benefits for individuals and organizations as a result of their participation in these networks. Focus of the above research is how the mode of production has been revolutionized as a consequence of the networks' impact on the organization of the resources in the economy. Yet, today we still have much to learn about how networks impact on the way contemporary workers perceive themselves at work. In other words, little is known about the way networks are implicated in the individuals' attempt to make sense of their professional identity and the roles ascribed to it.

Such a research scope is well-timed, since contemporary workers seem to have been left all alone without a strong institutional setting providing guidance and meaning to their work-related actions. In the absence of a "lifetime employment", an "organizational tenure", a stable "career ladder", the individual move from the one organization to the other or enter the contingent workforce according to the fluctuations of the labor market and the conditions governing the corresponding business sector. In a workplace, where an individualized work ethic dominates and the only constant is change, the individual's

struggle to find a source of professional identification is stronger than ever before. This paper seeks to reveal where highly-skilled Information Technology (IT) contractors draw upon in order to construct their professional identities. In particular, it portrays how virtual networks are implicated in the attempt of IT contractors to construct a meaningful and coherent professional identity.

Assuming that the notion of professional identity is very much related to the roles that the individual is expected to fulfill, we investigate the way highly-skilled IT contractors perceive the roles they are called to play in today's turbulent environment. We show how three roles that contractors perceive as being core ones to their professional image (Barley & Kunda, 2004) are influenced by the contractors' participation in virtual networks. We show how the IT contractors' attempt to a) build meaningful careers in their own eyes, b) prove their competency in performing the assigned task in the eyes of the managers and permanent employees, and c) embrace the values of reciprocity and trust in the eyes of the virtual and informal networks, is supported and partly shaped by their participation in virtual networks with other IT contractors/IT peers.

The empirical data indicates that virtual networks among IT contractors and individuals who share the same occupational interests become for the contractors the locus of social interaction, the hub of knowledge generation, the source of occupational control and thus the primary object of professional identification. Although these networks do not have the formal power of traditional occupational communities, they are still powerful social formations. Virtual networks are found to implicitly or explicitly invoke particular patterns of behavior and rules of conduct and be strongly implicated in the construction of IT contractors' professional identity.

The paper is organized as follows: The next section outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the professional identity and a brief literature of IS profession. The third section presents the

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