Chapter 6.5
A Research Agenda for Identity Work and E–Collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

Many recent management programmes have sought to establish organisation-wide collaborations that connect people in different functional and occupation groups (Blackler, Crump, & McDonald, 2000). Typically, these programmes are made possible through the deployment and use of e-collaboration technologies such as groupware, workflow systems, intranets, extranets, and the internet (Ciborra, 1996; Hayes, 2001). Examples of these technologies include the use of shared folders for reports, coauthored documents, completed electronic forms, and discussion forums. Through the use of such technologies, work and views are made accessible to staff working within and between functional and occupational groups. Such management programmes are reported to have brought about significant changes in the nature of work within and between intra organisational boundaries, including the erosion of functional

and community boundaries (Blackler et al., 2000; Easterby-Smith, Crossan, & Nicolini, 2000; Knights & Willmott, 1999).

A research topic that has been largely ignored in literature that has examined work-change is the formation of individual and group identities group identities through e-collaborations within and between occupational groups. The ways in which e-collaboration technologies are implicated in shaping the production and reproduction of identity is the focus of this article. We ask what identity work is, and why it is important. We then consider the effect of electronic collaboration on identity work both within and across occupational groups. Focusing on cross-occupational collaboration, we then consider how individuals rehearse their identity with others in their own group before collaborating with others, the role of hierarchy in identity work, and the role of technology and visibility in preserving dominant occupational groups. Finally we conclude the article with directions for future research.

WHAT IS IDENTITY AND WHY "IDENTITY WORK"?

We collectively refer to the things that distinguish one group from another—its culture, history, and language and interpersonal relationships—as its *identity*. As dictionary.reference.com (2006) defines it, an identity is a "set of behavioural or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group." These identities are viewed as capturing the essential features of an individual in a specific domain or group (Gioia, 1998), and are important in the production and reproduction of *social capital*, which is "the existence of a certain set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permit cooperation among them" (En. wikipedia.org, 2006). Given this, the construction of individual and group identities in general, but also during e-collaboration, is an important question.

How one addresses the study of identity depends on one's philosophical viewpoint. From a functional perspective, individual and group identities can be stable and measurable, produced through cognitive processes. In contrast, a relational perspective considers identities as unstable and immeasurable, produced through dynamic interaction amongst individuals within complex and specific contexts (Ashforth, 1998). Harqual (1998) exemplifies this perspective noting that "an identity must be negotiated between the self and others (the social public) in order for that person to be said to have an identity" (p. 230). Sveningsoon and Alvesson (2003) refer to this process of constructing identities as *identity work*, which they argue is an ongoing accomplishment that "is fluid, uncertain, in movement" (p. 1164). They claim that in only highly stable circumstances will individual and group identity work be limited and invisible. In contrast, identity work will be significant and visible in complex and fragmented contexts, where identities are unclear, and where individuals feel especially anxious, insecure or defensive in their interactions with others.

However, even in stable circumstances, identity work is constant and on-going. As Knights and Willmott (1999, p. 163) explain, individuals both look inwards at themselves and at the identities that have been constructed by others. They argue that as a consequence of this, an individual's perception of their identity is shaped by the perception of others, and by the individual's presentation of his or her identity to others. Identities thus depend upon the judgements of colleagues in particular circumstances, which are uncontrollable and unstable (Alvesson & Willmott, 2004; Knights & Willmott, 1999; Sveningsoon & Alvesson, 2003). Given this, individuals are constantly involved in the construction and reestablishment of their identity with others, even in what appears to be relatively stable situations (Parker, 2000).

It is this relational and unstable view of identity construction which we adopt in this article and in our research, because there is significant and on-going work involved in identity construction and preservation, especially when individuals encounter people in different groups during e-collaboration, because identities are destabilized by these encounters. Given the expanded use of e-collaboration tools to cross boundaries in the formation and dissolution of cross-occupational teams, it is these unstable circumstances which are increasingly numerous and of interest to us in this article.

E-COLLABORATION AND IDENTITY WORK

The introduction of electronic collaboration technologies has led to the increased intersection of many different occupational groupings in organisations. It is at such intersections that identity work is most noticeable (Alvesson & Willmott, 2004). Increasingly, who collaborates

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