

Inside Out? Organizational Membership, Ambiguity and the Ambivalent Identity of the Internal Consultant

Christopher Wright

Discipline of Work and Organisational Studies, Faculty of Economics and Business,
University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia
Email: c.wright2@econ.usyd.edu.au

Changes in organizational structure, roles and technologies have led to an increasing appreciation of the complexities of organizational membership. While a growing literature has focused on this issue with regard to precarious and marginal employees, this paper explores how senior and middle managers in ambiguous roles make sense of their work identity and organizational membership. Based on extensive interviews with human resource and organizational development managers operating as ‘internal consultants’, it is argued that managers in such ambiguous roles seek to develop a preferred identity which balances both organizationally distinctive and inclusive elements. While potentially conflicting, this ambivalent position can also be a source of strength and differentiation, involving claims to structural autonomy and specialist expertise, aligned to an intimate understanding of organizational politics and personalities. Through analysis of the interview data, the paper highlights the boundary dimensions around which managers in internal consulting roles develop such an ambivalent organizational identification, the ways in which distinctive and inclusive aspects of identity are rationalized, and the constraints upon the achievement of a preferred identity as an internal consultant.

Introduction

The study of organizational identification has stressed the growing complexity and ambiguity of organizational membership. For example, the promotion of cross-functional and inter-organizational collaboration, new technologies which facilitate the spatial integration of employees, and the use of flexible employment, challenge conventional conceptions of organizational boundaries and hierarchies (Balogun *et al.*, 2005; Barrett and Walsham, 1999; Marshall, 2003; Rubery *et al.*, 2002). These trends highlight not only structural changes but also shifts in individuals’ subjective perceptions about their organizational acceptance, location and status. As Bartel and Dutton (2001, p. 115) note, ‘organizational membership is less a matter of

being in or out than knowing when and to what degree one is a member’. This shading of organizational membership raises questions about the ways in which individuals in ambiguous boundary-spanning roles manage and construct their work identities.

While studies of ambiguous organizational membership have focused on teleworkers, contract and agency employees (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Garsten, 1999; Henson, 1996; Padavic, 2005), less attention has been paid to senior and middle managerial employees engaged outside of traditional hierarchies (for an exception see Ibarra, 1999). The example of ‘internal consultants’ is particularly revealing in this respect. Internal consulting is a derivation of the staff concept of management, in which specialist managers assist others in the organization ‘in

identifying and studying problems and opportunities, preparing recommendations and assisting in their implementation' (Johri, Cooper and Prokopenko, 1998, p. 4). Modelled on the practice of external management consulting, internal consultants often adopt a project approach to their interaction with internal 'clients' (other managers or business units) and promote change through advice and facilitation rather than their formal authority (Lacey, 1995; Scott, 2000). Unlike contract employees who might be engaged to fill a temporary resource gap, internal consultants are seen as having an on-going role within their organizations and usually enjoy permanent job status (Neal and Lloyd, 1998). Internal consultants therefore operate within an ambiguous organizational location, in that they are permanent employees but also operate outside the traditional activities and structures of the business organization. While not a new concept (Dalton, 1950), in recent years the idea of 'internal markets' (Johri, Cooper and Prokopenko, 1998), as well as the restructuring of management functions such as human resource (HR) management and information technology upon a 'shared services' basis, has resulted in the increased promotion of internal consulting (Caldwell, 2003; Forst, 1997; Ulrich, 1995).

This paper explores how managers in internal consulting roles develop varying degrees of organizational identification based on their ambiguous status as both within the organization but also separate from it. Based on semi-structured interviews with a range of HR and organizational development (OD) managers, it is argued that adopting a preferred identity which stresses their specialist expertise, their independence from existing reporting relationships, and their boundary-spanning role across the organization, can improve these managers' organizational status and legitimacy as 'outsiders within'. However, these managers face a tension in balancing this distinctive identity with the need for organizational acceptance as a loyal 'insider', privy to the informal networks through which influence can be enacted. While potentially a source of conflict and confusion, such an ambivalent identity can also act as a source of strength and differentiation by highlighting these managers' organizational allegiance, as well as access to external knowledge and networks. Through analysis of the interview data, the paper

highlights the boundary dimensions around which internal consultants develop their organizational identification, the ways in which distinctive and inclusive aspects of identity are rationalized, and the constraints upon the achievement of a preferred identity.

Organizational membership, boundaries and ambivalence

While traditional interpretations of organizations envisaged a simple distinction between those inside the organization and those outside, a growing body of literature has emphasized the increasingly complex and multi-faceted nature of organizational membership. For instance, social identity theorists have emphasized how individuals' identities as organizational members may be combined with other identities which reflect 'lower-order' group memberships (job, team, department), as well as 'cross-cutting' identities (cross-functional task forces or informal cliques and networks), and broader occupational and professional identities. Rather than exhibiting a singular organizational identity, individuals are seen as prioritizing different identities depending on the subjective importance of the identity to the individual's sense of self, and its situational relevance (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001; Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

The contingent nature of organizational membership has also been emphasized in the earlier literature on organizational socialization, in which individuals were seen as encountering a variety of internal boundaries which shape their organizational identification (Schein, 1971; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). While functional and hierarchical boundaries align to tangible features of an organization's structure in terms of expertise and rank, 'inclusionary' boundaries are seen as more intangible social and interpersonal processes that underpin the degree to which individuals are accepted by other organizational members. In particular, newcomers to an organization are likely to start on the periphery of such an inclusionary dimension. As Van Maanen and Schein (1979, p. 222) note, 'movement along the inclusionary dimension is analogous to the entrance of a stranger to any group ... to cross inclusionary boundaries means that one becomes an *insider* with all the rights and privileges that go

with such a position'. More recent literature has also emphasized how the degree to which one identifies with an organization, and is accepted by others as an organizational member, is shaped by differing organizational boundaries (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Hernes, 2004; Paulsen and Hernes, 2003). As Hernes (2004, pp. 15–16) argues, boundaries act as ordering devices within organizations which set limits on actions and behaviour, as a source of distinction and identity for individuals and groups, and as thresholds through which organizational members may pass with varying degrees of difficulty. These include not only physical boundaries which are related to organizational structure, but also social boundaries reflecting issues of norms and social bonding, and mental boundaries linked to ideas and beliefs (Hernes, 2004).

Organizational membership then is not simply an expression of one's job role, or functional or hierarchical location in an organization. Rather it is seen as the product of individual construction shaped through interaction with others on a contingent basis. For example Bartel and Dutton (2001), citing Goffman (1959), argue that individuals in organizations engage in a form of 'identity work' to clarify their membership status. This involves on-going social interaction in which individuals claim a certain membership or identity status, which is only achieved through the granting of such claims by other organizational members. In a similar vein, Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 626) argue that individuals in organizations engage in an on-going process of 'identity work' involving 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness'. In situations of job or role ambiguity, it is likely that such identity work will involve attempts at maintaining a coherent organizational identity, while at the same time developing 'distinctiveness' in terms of who they are, what they do and what they aspire to.

This tension between the need to belong but also be different has also been highlighted by other writers exploring 'change agents' within organizations (Klein, 2004; Meyerson, 2003; Meyerson and Scully, 1995). For example, Meyerson's (2003) concept of 'tempered radicals' is particularly informative here. Such individuals may be highly committed to, and identify

strongly with, their organizations; however, they may also be committed to causes and ideologies (e.g. feminism, social equity, racial equality) which are at odds with the culture of those same organizations. While ambivalent identities have often been viewed as either temporary or problematic states resulting in uncertainty and confusion (Merton, 1976), Meyerson suggests such 'dual subjectivities' can also provide a positive source of creativity and transformation for such individuals. This suggests that organizational and other identities (e.g. occupational, professional) are not only of varying salience for individuals, but can also coexist rather than representing alternative options (see also Zabusky and Barley, 1997).

The ambiguous nature of organizational membership is particularly pronounced for boundary-spanning roles such as 'internal consultants' who like Meyerson's 'tempered radicals' are very much 'outsiders within'. Structurally, the internal consultant is a member of the business organization; however, commentators also emphasize the need for the internal consultant to act outside this hierarchy and stress their objectivity and independence in advising 'clients' and solving their problems (Lacey, 1995; Neal and Lloyd, 1998). Working within a single organization, internal consultants need to carefully manage and maintain their relations with clients and other key stakeholders. As 'change agents', they need to be aware of the complexities of organizational politics and be skilful political players in their own right (Balogun *et al.*, 2005; Buchanan and Badham, 1999). Hence, observers highlight the importance of developing strong client relationships and using informal networks of power. However, internal consultants are also advised to avoid the perception of being too close to organizational cliques (Scott, 2000). Executive support for the internal consultant is necessary in providing sufficient legitimacy to undertake their work, but internal consultants also need to avoid being seen by other managers as simply the agents of senior management. Further, the expertise of the internal consultant is seen very much as a two-edged sword. On the one hand, the internal consultant's greater familiarity with the organization and its technical and social idiosyncrasies is often cited as a major advantage (Berthoin Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath, 2001, p. 463). However, critics argue this may result in an

insular perspective which ignores new developments outside of their specific organizational context (Kubr, 1996, p. 40). Moreover, their legitimacy as experts may be discounted simply because they are from within the organization – the problem of being a ‘prophet in your own land’ (Block, 1999).

Taken together the available literature suggests internal consultants operate in a highly ambiguous space, in that they are both within and also outside the traditional activities of the business organization (Kanter, 1979). While external consultants must also bridge organizational boundaries (Kitay and Wright, 2004; Sturdy *et al.*, 2004), this process is intensified for ‘internals’. In an early study of OD consultants, Ganesh (1978, pp. 13–14) noted the contradiction of adopting an ‘expert role’ and ‘outsider stance’, but also requiring a ‘high need to belong, to be members of the client systems, to be insiders’. In many ways this mirrors Gouldner’s (1955, 1957) earlier characterization of the latent identity of the staff expert as a ‘cosmopolitan’, who can advise but cannot command, who needs to ‘sell’ ideas to management, and who is often outside the promotion track of the ‘company men’ or ‘locals’ who are seen as loyal members of the organization. As one practitioner text summarizes the dilemma:

The internal consultant is constantly working at the edge, disturbing the boundaries, and serving as a bridge between two worlds that have differing values and norms. Finding this balance is difficult and . . . can be a source of conflict. (Scott, 2000, p. 6)

While it is tempting to see such individuals as conflicted, isolated and excluded from the status of full organizational membership, this downplays the potential to construct and manage a positive ambivalent identity based upon dimensions of *both* distinction and inclusion. The research that follows explores how internal consultants seek to create such a preferred identity, the boundary dimensions that underpin it, and the challenges that they face.

Research methodology

The data for this paper are based on detailed semi-structured interviews conducted with HR and OD managers employed in large Australian

and global businesses. Interview respondents were recruited by targeting organizations identified in professional HR publications as using an internal consulting approach. Requests for interviews with internal consulting staff were directed to the senior HR managers in these companies, resulting in interviews with 30 managers from 24 organizations (see Table 1). Respondents were selected upon the basis of being specialist full-time managers who assisted other organizational employees in solving problems and implementing change through the provision of advice and expertise rather than direct authority. In many cases, respondents’ job titles indicated their consulting role, while for others the concept of ‘internal consultant’ was one they implicitly recognized and identified with, but which they kept to themselves rather than explicitly marketed within the organization. While often part of the HR function, unlike other ‘staff’ specialists respondents interacted directly with ‘client’ managers and departments across their organization typically on a project by project basis. This included diagnosing problems for their ‘clients’, conducting interventions to improve managerial and employee skills, developing and implementing new techniques and methodologies, and facilitating and coaching groups and individuals. Respondents were predominantly permanent employees (the exceptions being two respondents who had been engaged as contractors on long-term projects within a larger internal consulting group); however, there was significant variation in job tenure from several months to nearly eight years in their current job. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and transcribed. Interviews focused on respondents’ educational and professional backgrounds; their location within the organizational structure; their role and activities as internal consultants; the nature of ‘client’ relationships; and relations within the rest of the organization. The interviews were supplemented with documentary data, including organization charts, strategic reports and internal publications.

Given the rich and extensive nature of the qualitative data (the combined interview transcripts amounting to over 300,000 words), the qualitative software QSR NVivo was used to assist in data coding and analysis. This software allowed for an iterative and flexible process of initial data coding, hypothesis development,

Table 1. Details of interview respondents

Title	Organization	Years in current job	Age	Gender
1 Director, Professional Education	Accounting and consulting firm	4–5	45–50	M
2 Best Practice Consultant	Automotive manufacturer	1–2	30–35	F
3 National HR Director	Industrial services company	4–5	40–45	F
4 Divisional Manager, HR and Strategic Management	Local government	5–6	40–45	M
5 Director, People and Performance	Accounting and consulting firm	<1	40–45	M
6 HR Manager	Airline company	4–5	45–50	F
7 Group HR Manager, Australia and NZ	IT systems company	1–2	30–35	F
8 Manager, People and Performance	Retail bank	3–4	45–50	F
9 HR Manager – Organization and Development	Retailer	<1	30–35	F
10 Director, Learning and Development Asia-Pacific	Investment bank	6–7	35–40	M
11 Global Head of OD	IT software company	7–8	40–45	F
12 OD Manager	Pharmaceutical company	4–5	35–40	M
13 OD Director, Asia-Pacific	Engineering consultancy	1–2	25–30	F
14 Leader, Culture and Capability	Telecommunications company	4–5	40–45	F
15 Learning and Development Manager	Law firm	4–5	30–35	F
16 Organizational Change Consultant	Insurance company	2–3	30–35	F
17 Senior OD Manager, People and Culture	Accounting and consulting firm	<1	35–40	F
18 Consultant, People and Performance	Investment bank	1–2	30–35	F
19 Group Manager, HR	Oil company	1–2	40–45	M
20 Business Improvement Consultant	Equipment hire company	1–2	30–35	F
21 Customer Retention Manager	Insurance company	<1	30–35	F
22 Change Consultant	Retail bank	<1	30–35	F
23 Learning and Development Consultant	Oil company	<1	30–35	F
24 Change Manager	Airline company	1–2	30–35	F
25 Head of Cultural Transformation	Retail bank	4–5	40–45	F
26 HR Manager	Engineering company	1–2	35–40	M
27 HR Director, Organization and Development	University	1–2	35–40	F
28 Manager, Learning and Development	University	<1	40–45	F
29 Director, HR	IT company	5–6	45–50	M
30 HR Partner	IT company	4–5	40–45	F

testing and recoding (Crowley, Harré and Tagg, 2002). In the first stage of open coding, interview transcripts and accompanying memos were analysed, focusing particularly on the interviewee's perception of their role in the organization and their interactions with 'clients' and other organizational stakeholders. An early distinction was made between interview respondents who saw themselves primarily as organizational 'insiders' as opposed to 'outsiders'. However, analysis of the initial coding revealed this distinction was far from clear cut and most respondents outlined an ambivalent interpretation of their organizational membership, seeing themselves as both within, but also separate from, their organization. Based on the literature on organizational boundaries and socialization (Hernes, 2004; Schein, 1971; Sturdy *et al.*, 2004; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979), a secondary stage of data coding focused on how respondents constructed their organizational membership around four key boundary

dimensions. As outlined in Table 2, *structural* boundaries related to respondents' roles and positions within the organizational hierarchy, including reporting relationships, levels of seniority, and degree of operational autonomy. *Knowledge* boundaries referred to individuals' functional and technical expertise, linked to their educational and professional background, as well as external networking and affiliations. *Political* boundaries reflected respondents' organizational legitimacy and power, e.g. through their access to strategic decision-making and senior organizational stakeholders. Finally, the nature of respondents' personal relationships with clients and other managers formed a fourth *interpersonal* boundary dimension. Within each of these dimensions, analysis of the interview data revealed images of both preferred and 'spoiled' identities, reflecting the need to emphasize themselves as different from regular managers, but also committed to their organization and accepted by others as

Table 2. Organizational boundaries of internal consulting

Boundary dimension	Description	Coding concepts
Structural	Respondent's role and position in the organizational hierarchy	Operational autonomy Reporting lines Authority Proactive versus reactive Financial autonomy Fee for service
Knowledge	Respondent's functional and disciplinary expertise	Educational and professional background Consulting skills Methodologies Knowing the business Transactional versus strategic External affiliations Professional networks
Political	Respondent's organizational legitimacy and power	Legitimacy Executive sponsorship Reputation Managing impressions Power Resistance
Interpersonal	Nature of respondent's personal relationships with clients and other organizational stakeholders	Client relationships Trust Socializing Friendships Organizational networking Cross-cultural issues

loyal organizational citizens. As we shall see, balancing these identities can be difficult and often contradictory, requiring a constant process of 'identity work' for differing circumstances and audiences. However, for many individuals such ambivalence can also be a source of strength and differentiation.

Crossing boundaries: the structural ambiguity of the internal consultant

Structural boundaries represent an important aspect of identity construction within organizations, designating one's formal role and location in the broader entity (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001; Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Schein, 1971). For many of the managers interviewed in this study, however, operating outside of conventional reporting lines and authority structures resulted in significant ambiguity in terms of their structural location. This could be a source of both positive and negative identity construction.

Interviewees typically interpreted the role of 'internal consultant' as a largely autonomous activity that worked outside of the traditional reporting relationships that characterized operational and functional activities. This was pronounced in the imagery of the 'change agent' where respondents talked about their activities in diffusing corporate culture and change programmes within their organizations. As the head of the culture change unit in a large retail bank outlined, 'Nobody tells me what to do. I essentially run a consulting practice here. I've got 30 people internally . . . So essentially we run an outfit which manages the [Company] culture but also provides a service.' Characterizing one's self as a 'change agent' was often closely aligned with the imagery of being a 'boundary-spanner', working across the divisional and geographic boundaries of the organization. Hence, several respondents spoke of their 'roving brief' across their organizations underpinned by their 'client' relationships with senior managers and department heads. As the OD manager in a global engineering consultancy emphasized, a lot of her time involved travelling within the Asia-Pacific region working with the regional managers in the firm. She had the authority to initiate and develop programmes at will and often floated throughout the organization in a largely autonomous manner:

You know I disappear from my office for weeks at a time and then I'll come back and I'll run into someone, 'where have you been?' 'I was in Japan and Korea,' and they're like, 'oh wow!' So there's a little bit of a mystery about what I do.

Hence the structural ambiguity of being an internal consultant could promote a strongly positive self-identity, denoting autonomy and an ability to cross internal structural boundaries to a degree other managers could not. This structural 'otherness' in some cases extended to being able to charge organizational sub-units for their services. As the HR partner in a leading IT company noted of her role, 'It's very much just like running my own business'.

Highlighting their structural ambiguity, respondents viewed their role as internal consultants as based upon the use of expert power and influence, rather than their position power and authority within the organization. As the senior HR manager in a large industrial services

company argued, her identity hinged upon the use of influence rather than directive authority or a 'policing' identity as she phrased it:

Because all people use influence in the organization, but I'm talking about the way that you approach your everyday job is influence first, power second. Most people approach their jobs power first, influence second. And I think it's a fundamental shift as to what your primary approach is.

Underpinning this distinction was the imagery of being a 'trusted adviser' or 'partner' to their clients. Hence, the change consultant in an oil company contrasted this more elite identity with the traditional administrative character of human resources: 'we as a team are being asked to position ourselves as a trusted adviser versus just being their HR person, their "HR go to"'. Here there was less emphasis upon a managerial identity of enforcing policies and practices because of a hierarchical relationship, and more of a focus on the imagery of 'influence'. As the Best Practice Consultant in a major auto manufacturer noted, 'I don't like to necessarily be seen as a manager, more as facilitating groups and helping them to do things'.

However, in contrast to the preferred identity of 'boundary-spanner' and 'trusted adviser', other respondents noted how achieving such a high status identity was dependent on organizational and senior management acceptance of such a role, which if not granted left individuals on the periphery of the organization and relegated to more mundane administrative activities. For example, other interviewees noted that in their organizations the term 'consultant' was a 'dirty word' and avoided using such terminology in their interactions with managers. As one manager who had worked as an internal consultant in several companies noted, 'It's very hard to be an internal consultant because it depends what role the organization wants you to play. If they want you to be "hand maiden" or "doormat" or "fix-it person" or "fire-fighter" then it's very hard.'

Internal consultants therefore faced constraints in the extent to which a more autonomous, elite identity would be entertained, as opposed to a more traditional bureaucratic role. As is outlined in the following sections, gaining such organizational acceptance related to how individuals managed the knowledge, political and interpersonal boundaries within their organizations.

Specialist expertise: distinctive knowledge and the internal consultant

A second dimension of identity formation for respondents was the nature of their expertise, in particular the distinctiveness of their disciplinary and functional knowledge, which distinguished them from other employees in the organization. In line with Gouldner's (1957) 'cosmopolitans', many of the interviewees highlighted a strong commitment to specialized skills, as well as an outer reference group orientation. For instance, in terms of their disciplinary and technical knowledge, the respondents' roles and titles as 'human resource', 'learning and development' or 'people and performance' managers clearly demarcated them as staff specialists with unique skills and competencies. Many had undertaken postgraduate education in HR management or OD, and maintained their technical knowledge through reading and external affiliations and networks. A number had also developed consulting skills in client and project management which further demarcated them from mainstream operational managers. These distinctive technical and functional skills served to reinforce the 'outsider' status of many of the respondents, who often utilized the imagery of esoteric expert or professional. As the recently appointed OD manager in a national retailer stated:

I think the key is that for me personally I was brought in for the expertise I have to run particular types of projects and so I have a certain level of leverage because of that. People are probably going to take what I say a little bit more seriously than if I was just an internal employee and just doing the same job as other people. So I have a unique role and position in the organization.

Similarly, the training manager in a Big Four accounting firm highlighted how his distinctive background from outside his firm allowed him to challenge prevailing norms and behaviour:

So I'm different enough. I'm not an accountant. I come from the military so people expect me to be blunt and straight to the point ... it enables me sometimes to ask the hard questions and challenge them and say 'to me, looking at what you do, I understand what you do, but it just doesn't make any sense, so you explain it to me'. So having that insider knowledge but outsider perspective, and not

having been marred and had my brain moulded by the system, is a big advantage.

Indeed for some respondents the esoteric nature of their expertise allowed them significant autonomy in managing their day to day work. As the OD manager in a global pharmaceutical company noted:

OD in its purest sense has no form. People around here used to call me 'Manager Stuff'. That was my pseudo title. 'Who's this?' 'Oh this is our Manager Stuff.' 'What do you mean?' 'Well he does stuff, but nobody actually knows what it is.'

As a result, the mystique of an internal consultant's expertise could heighten their claims to a distinctive and elite identity. Several respondents for example contrasted the novelty and variety of their work with more mundane middle management roles which were characterized in a negative sense as 'business as usual'.

However, in some organizations the internal consultants' distinctive expertise could prove counter-productive. For example, the focus on people management and so-called 'soft management skills' could be a source of criticism. Hence several respondents recounted examples of managerial resistance and rejection of their programmes on the grounds that their advice was too far removed from the core business or culture of the organization. As the OD director of a global software company related:

... so there is some tension at times between our team being perceived as being realistic, and trying to push the boundaries ... they (client managers) can think that we're airy-fairy, 'oh, they're training people, they're different, sensitive, you know, a bit more volatile' and all this stuff. You know, these perceptions are made.

Moreover, interviewees noted how their distinctiveness could also decline over time, as they became increasingly embedded within their organization. In this sense becoming an organizational 'insider', in which an individual becomes a known quantity, could serve to undercut claims to expert knowledge. Hence, the regional OD manager in a global investment bank recounted:

Once you become known to people as a person day to day, some of the mystery, the gloss goes. You are not enigmatic to them any longer. So your expertise becomes devalued; your technical expertise, your

knowledge as a theoretician and expert is presumed to be not as strong.

In these cases, client managers were sometimes found bypassing the internal consultant and seeking out external consultants who were seen as having a more legitimate (outside) expertise. While respondents described how they thwarted such attempts, the danger remained that the internal consultant's claims to distinctive expertise could be rejected and he or she could be relegated to the more mundane status of internal HR functionary or 'service provider', overseeing routine HR activities.

A common response for many respondents to this deterioration of expert status was the maintenance of external linkages, peer networks and affiliations, as a source of both renewing their expertise and reinvigorating their identity as a member of a broader occupation or profession. As one respondent characterized his interactions with other OD managers from other firms:

... it is more emotional support really; it is like 'How are you going, how do you feel?' 'Oh, they drive me crazy, they do this, they do that.' It is venting. It is the principle of psychologists; therapists have a supervisor that they are related to. It is the same principle, just get it out, deal with it, get ideas from one another on how to cope. So we do that a lot.

Playing the game: political dimensions of internal consulting identity

While the structural and knowledge dimensions of an internal consulting identity stressed distinctiveness and difference, the reality of being embedded within an organization also required that individuals gain a level of organizational acceptance. Managing the political boundaries of the organization involved a range of issues for respondents including being sensitive to the culture of the organization, developing senior management support, and cultivating strong client relationships which could reinforce the consultant's organizational legitimacy. Hence, unlike the 'outsider' identity many respondents emphasized in terms of their structural position and expertise, for internal consultants to be effective at the level of organizational politics required a

contrasting 'insider' identity of inclusion within the power structure of their organization.

For many respondents developing such an identity required time spent in the organization understanding its complexities and culture and gaining the trust of others, i.e. crossing the organization's 'inclusionary boundaries' (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). As the training and development manager in a professional services firm characterized his experience after seven years in his firm:

I think I've been around the organization long enough where people probably now trust me and from that point of view I'm an insider who's known. The other advantage I think that I have is that being around the organization for that time, I now know the jargon, I now know enough about the business to be able to throw in the right sort of questions, I think I have a good understanding of the issues and I think I understand how *they* think.

Interestingly, while this manager saw himself accepted as an organizational 'insider', he still emphasized his distance from other employees due to his separate expertise and structural location, highlighting the ambivalence of both being inside but also different. By contrast, another respondent who had been recently hired from overseas as OD manager noted how she had yet to be accepted within the organizational politics of her company and was seen very much as an 'outsider' who had yet to absorb the norms, rituals and culture of her host organization:

So they bring in external consultants or external professionals but you are really not going to be seen as an insider probably for a good two to three years, because you haven't adapted to the culture, you haven't learnt all the ways, and they do have an actual way of behaving and doing things, getting the job done. So there's the sense that I'm still sort of there consulting and giving them information about what I already know, what I've brought to them, but that I don't have deep enough knowledge of their business, so that's really why it still feels like I'm an outsider.

This acknowledgement of exclusion was also noted by other respondents who were typically recent hires and who felt alienated from the prevailing organizational culture.

Internal consultants also needed to be sensitive to the power dynamics operating within the firm. Lacking a clear line of authority, most inter-

viewees stressed the importance of influencing skills and the ability to 'sell' client managers on the benefits of their proposals. Hence the training manager in a major airline outlined how her initiatives often relied upon a careful consideration of key organizational 'players' and what issues might lead them to support her proposals:

I mean, it's that whole thing about networking and pulling in favours and about being politically astute. If you want one of the business units to sponsor something, what's in it for them? So, working out what benefits they'll get, and how you're going to support them to get that. Then they get brownie points.

Organizational legitimacy as an internal consultant also relied upon senior management patronage. As many respondents noted, irrespective of their quality as consultants, the support of senior management was critical to their long-term success in their organization. Respondents provided a number of examples of how senior management support not only allowed them to overcome managerial resistance to their initiatives but also allowed them to take risks. For example, the stereotypical image of the internal consultant as 'court jester' was raised by several respondents (see also Ganesh, 1978, pp. 15–16). Here the internal consultant is given licence to challenge organizational taboos and question underlying norms, precisely because they are 'insiders' who are accepted by senior managers and can be trusted. As the learning and development manager in the global investment bank outlined:

I am always conscious that I am designing things to challenge, and I think of it in terms of the Jester. He was the only person in the court who was allowed to make fun of the King, and in that, permission was given because the court understood if nobody could challenge the King then we will have corruption. So there is a role for senior HR people and internal consultants and OD people to go and whisper in the ear, to have private meetings with senior executives and say 'you know what, this isn't working, you have got to do something different'. To stop them, and challenge them and make them think about things differently.

In a similar manner, another OD manager characterized himself as the 'organizational conscience', confronting issues that other managers could not because of political sensibilities. Hence in describing his role in facilitating a recent group

development workshop of senior managers, he stated:

There was a point where I said, 'come on, let's talk about what's really bloody going on because I'll tell you what, I can see it. There is an elephant under the coffee table in this group and no one wants to talk about it. You know what? You're going to have poo in the corner, and it's going to smell eventually, so let's see if we can talk about it.'

In these cases, the internal consultant had developed a sufficient level of senior management patronage and trust that he or she could actually challenge prevailing norms and assumptions. They were 'insiders' but also unique ones in their ability to discuss taboos and confront assumed wisdom with senior and politically powerful client managers.

Building relationships: interpersonal aspects of internal consulting identity

Closely related to the management of the organization's political boundaries, the fourth dimension of respondent identity involved the social dynamics of internal consultants' client relationships. Here, as was the case with the political dimensions of their work, respondents stressed a preferred inclusive identity, emphasizing the importance of developing close relationships with key clients based on trust and mutual understanding. Building strong client relationships was seen as the key to having an impact within the organization and served to balance the internal consultant's status as a structural and knowledge-based 'outsider'. As one of the respondents noted in outlining his role as a 'confidant' to the senior managers in his organization:

That's all about trust. They will not tell you stuff if they don't trust you. People have to be able to know that it isn't going to go any further. You're working with succession plans and discussions about people at all levels of the business and with the directors, and if they don't think that they can trust saying what they think about people in front of me, then I'm stuffed. Without that, I can't do my job.

Building close collegial relationships with client managers provided organizational legitimacy for respondents' activities as internal experts. For instance, the learning and development manager in the global investment bank outlined how his

personal friendship with the chief operating officer of the company allowed him to take risks in designing organizational interventions. As he related of one project:

... we designed a programme around partnership and creativity and innovation. And we used a jazz band to demonstrate that in real time and as an experiential activity, that people could draw from. And he (the COO) was up to his neck in that with me; he was delighted with that idea and he encouraged me with that idea and I encouraged him. So we got together and we were partnering; we were egging one another on to see how outrageous we could get without going over the line. So that is how that relationship works ... If I didn't have him, I would have been out there on a limb on my own and it probably wouldn't have happened.

Building client relationships also involved a strong awareness of self-image and the need to manage impressions in order to form a connection with individual clients. As one younger female respondent noted:

... as much as I hate to admit it I use my looks, I use my personality to find a connection ... Sometimes I'll play the blonde klutz and, you know, 'I don't know what I was thinking!' But each of them (client relationships) are different and each of them works.

The need to be flexible in managing one's self-image in order to build a connection with different clients was particularly pronounced where internal consultants had to manage cultural as well as institutional boundaries. For instance, the same manager highlighted how many of her clients were located in different Asian countries, and each had distinctive social and educational backgrounds which she focused on in the development of each client relationship. Hence her approach when working with the Hong Kong manager involved a very different persona to the one she employed with the Chinese regional manager:

So the country guy for Hong Kong is an English expat, and I also lived in Hong Kong for a while so I could find commonalities outside of work with us. The Chinese managing partner is Chinese born so I struggled a little bit with him, but then I discovered that he likes management textbooks and that kind of stuff, so, I would go and visit him and bring him a book that I had found interesting on something and he would then share a book with me and, you know, you build the relationship.

Another theme in the development of client relationships was the need for the internal consultant to demonstrate relevance and an understanding of the business concerns of operational managers. For instance, one respondent working in an oil company noted how she had spent significant time educating herself about products and processes 'because I want to talk credibly to my clients'. In a similar manner, another interviewee noted that while her expertise placed her outside the culture of her organization, she still sought to develop interpersonal connections with managers and employees through getting involved in client site visits and making it apparent that she was interested in the core business of her firm:

But then I think they appreciate the fact that I try and understand. You know, so I go to the sites. I've got my little steel capped boots, my RM shirt and I'll head out to some of the sites for a couple of days every now and then and visit them and help them do soil samples and all that kind of stuff. So I think they see in me that I'm trying to learn their business and, you know, get a better picture and a feel for them.

However, client relationships often involved a spectrum of interaction, varying from such close friendships at one end to more intermittent, transactional exchanges at the other. Commenting on such client variability, the training manager in the Big Four accounting practice noted:

We actually rate our relationships with various people in the organization, and some we have excellent, what I would rate as ally relationships. Others we have, what I would call, tradesmen relationships, and with others we have no relationship at all.

Other respondents concurred, noting examples of managers who they interacted with infrequently, or who had rejected their advances. Moreover, several interviewees indicated a more marginalized political and interpersonal existence, where they felt little commonality with the prevailing organizational culture or their work colleagues, seeing themselves as 'outcasts' and resulting in a desire to leave the organization and 'move on'.

Discussion

Internal consultants operate in a contradictory space, in that they exist within the boundaries of

the organization as employees, but also exhibit a structural position and expertise which marks them as different from other organizational actors, as 'outsiders within'. This ambiguity in their organizational standing leads internal consultants to engage in a complex process of identity work in which they emphasize themselves ambivalently as both organizational 'insiders' and as 'outsiders'. While ambivalent identities have often been viewed as either temporary or problematic states resulting in uncertainty and confusion (Merton, 1976), the interview data suggest that, at least for some of the respondents to this study, ambivalence as both outsiders *and* insiders can be a positive source of strength and distinctiveness. Hence as Meyerson (2003) has suggested, such 'dual subjectivities' can be helpful for individuals in change agent roles as a way of providing greater insight and, where organizations are willing to entertain such roles, possibly greater status and legitimacy.

In analysing the interview data, respondents were found to construct their work identities around their role and position in the organizational hierarchy (structural boundaries), their expertise and functional activities (knowledge boundaries), their organizational legitimacy and power (political boundaries) and their personal relationships with clients and other stakeholders (interpersonal boundaries). Analysis of the interview data suggests that individuals in internal consulting roles seek to claim a preferred identity of ambivalence which employs combinations of differentiation and inclusion around these four dimensions. As outlined in Table 3, the key imagery employed in such claims involves the promotion of distinctiveness (as an 'outsider') in terms of both the structural and knowledge dimensions of organizational interaction, while at the same time emphasizing inclusionary imagery (as an 'insider') at the political and interpersonal levels.

Structurally, internal consultants operate outside of conventional reporting lines and authority structures, with significant autonomy over their activities. Here the imagery of being a 'change agent' and 'boundary-spanner' expressed this preferred vision of the freedom of being able to cross the divisional, hierarchical and geographic boundaries which constrained normal managers. Similarly, the imagery of 'trusted adviser' emphasized the internal consultant's elite status in the organization and an ability to influence senior and

Table 3. Internal consultants' identity construction

Boundary dimension	Preferred identity	'Spoiled' identity
Structural	Change agent Boundary-spanner Trusted adviser	Administrator 'Fix-it person' 'HR go to'
Knowledge	Esoteric expert Professional	Impractical Service provider
Political	Player Jester/ Conscience	Outsider Functionary
Interpersonal	Colleague Confidant	Loner Outcast

operational managers outside of traditional authority relations. Such 'otherness' was further emphasized in terms of the internal consultants' externally oriented knowledge base, which included not only their technical or specialist expertise in OD and HR management, but also external affiliations and peer networks. Here the imagery of the 'esoteric expert' and 'professional' underpinned a preferred identity of exclusive knowledge and skills beyond the grasp of normal managers.

At the same time, respondents emphasized a contrasting imagery of inclusion. In terms of the political dimensions of their role, respondents stressed a preferred identity which emphasized their access to the centre of organizational power, specifically senior managers, who they could interact with not only as 'trusted advisers' but, in cases where they had developed significant trust, also as the 'jester' or 'organizational conscience', i.e. challenging accepted wisdoms and raising taboos. The preferred identity at this level also stressed imagery of respondents as accepted 'players' within the process of organizational politics; knowing the key people with influence and being able to call in favours. Interpersonally, the preferred identity focused on imagery of 'colleague' and 'confidant'; the internal consultant was someone who enjoyed close relationships with a broad range of organizational 'clients' and through the development of trust and friendship was able to engage in activities that, as one respondent termed it, 'pushed the boundaries' of accepted behaviour.

However, given that 'identity work' is a reciprocal process between the self and others (Bartel and Dutton, 2001), respondents also revealed a contrasting negative or 'spoiled'

identity, which was invoked as a means of distinguishing themselves from a less desired 'other', or where their preferred identity claims were rejected by organizational stakeholders. At the level of the structural dimension, the internal consultant identity reverted to the imagery of the 'administrator', 'fix-it person' or 'HR go to', a bureaucratic functionary and 'insider' with limited autonomy, charged with the oversight of HR practices. In terms of expertise, the 'spoiled' identity focused on the rejection of their 'outsider' knowledge claims in terms of the 'impracticality' of the internal consultant's advice (as one respondent termed it, being seen as 'airy-fairy' or 'emotional') and/or the deterioration of their expert status over time, resulting in the imagery of the 'service provider', at the beck and call of operational managers to solve routine HR problems. In terms of the political and interpersonal dimensions of identity construction, the imagery of being perceived as an organizational 'outsider' or social 'outcast' emphasized the rejection of their 'insider' claims and that bridging an organization's 'inclusionary' boundaries takes both time and skill (Schein, 1971; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). This was particularly pronounced for some respondents who were new recruits and who expressed disillusionment with the prevailing organizational culture.

While many of the respondents in this study appeared to have succeeded in balancing the distinctive and inclusive aspects of their preferred ambivalent identity as internal consultants, others highlighted the tensions in this process and how such claims could be rejected and rebuffed. Moreover, the ambiguity of such management roles suggests the process of identity work is a continually on-going one, and that over time this balance between the 'outsider' and 'insider' aspects of their identity may be difficult to maintain (see also Caldwell, 2003). In particular, those respondents who had spent a number of years in their organizations as internal consultants commented on the problem of maintaining their distinctiveness and not being seen as just 'part of the furniture'. A key issue for these individuals was that their claims to distinctive expertise could decay and that, in operating outside traditional hierarchical structures, they experienced limited options for career progression. These individuals acknowledged that they would soon reach a juncture in their careers

where they had to decide between opting for full induction in a senior managerial position or leaving the organization in search of a similar internal consulting role elsewhere; what one respondent characterized as 'starting again'. Hence, even as a preferred identity, internal consultants are likely to have a limited organizational life-span. While this is an area requiring further research, the propensity to maintain such an identity is likely to be shaped by the strength of the prevailing organizational culture, and the degree to which such atypical organizational roles are tolerated or, indeed, encouraged.

Conclusion

This study highlights how individuals in ambiguous management roles exhibit a complex and nuanced interpretation of their work identity and organizational membership. While the analysis of identity construction amongst individuals with ambiguous organizational memberships has tended to focus on employees in marginal job settings such as volunteers, contractors and other 'atypical' employees, there is significant potential to extend this analysis to a growing range of middle and senior managers in non-traditional, boundary-spanning roles. Reduced job security, technological change, and a popular business discourse that stresses the need for managers to be increasingly change focused, flexible and innovative, suggest that a growing range of managerial employees view organizational membership as an increasingly ambiguous affair. This study of managers in internal consulting roles highlights a group who are at the front-line of this trend, and who actively seek to construct their identities as both organizationally distinctive but also inclusive. While many of our respondents succeeded in creating a preferred identity of ambivalence which increased their self-worth, status and legitimacy, others alluded to the rejection of their identity claims.

While this is a preliminary study of a limited number of respondents, there is potential to apply this framework to a broader sample of managers in internal consulting roles. In particular, it would be revealing to explore whether managers operating as internal consultants in other functional areas, such as information technology, marketing, operational improvement

or business strategy, employ a similar balance of distinctive and inclusionary imagery in constructing their identities. Moreover, there is a need to explore how identity and organizational membership claims change over time. For example, a number of researchers have demonstrated how the process of identity construction alters as individuals change jobs and progress through their careers (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006). In relation to this study, a longer-term perspective would also allow investigation of the concluding proposition that ambivalent identities are likely to be difficult to maintain over time given the decay of distinctive knowledge claims and changes in organizational acceptance of such atypical roles. The use of longitudinal case studies of individuals' career histories might for example reveal to what extent, and under what conditions, such a proposition holds, and how the process of identity construction changes for managerial employees in such ambiguous organizational roles.

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Christopher Wright is Associate Professor in Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney. His research interests include the diffusion of management knowledge, managerial and professional identity, and technological and workplace change. He is the author of *The Management of Labour* (Oxford University Press) and has published extensively on the role and impact of management consultants, the organizational implications of enterprise resource planning technologies, and supply chain rationalization.