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Mixed Up Over Identities

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MIXED UP OVER IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings of a literature-based study that sought to clarify the dimensions of an organization's identity, or what is sometimes known as, "The corporate identity mix". The analysis of the literature revealed that Birkigt and Stadler's (1986) widely cited corporate identity mix is narrowly conceived. Increasingly, scholars and practitioners adopt a broad, and multidisciplinary, perspective. This is reflected in the author's new identity mix comprising strategy, structure, communication and culture. A major finding of this study was the need for a separate corporate identity management mix. The author argues that his new corporate identity *management* mix requires augmentation so as to include three additional elements, namely, environment, stakeholders and reputations. The "finding" of the corporate identity management mix by the author has come at a time when there is growing condemnation of the identity concept by practitioners. Many are disdainful of the over inflated claims made for visual identification (even though many have a background in graphic design.) The failure on the part of graphic designers to embrace other disciplines in addressing identity problems have caused the strategic role of graphic design to be discredited. In contrast, an increasing number of academics from a variety of traditions have embraced the identity concept. By adopting a multidisciplinary perspective, and one that does not assign primary importance to graphic design, they have found it to offer new and powerful lens by which organizations can be better understood and managed.

IDENTITIES LOST**"CORPORATE IDENTITY IS IRRELEVANT?"**

"Corporate identity simply doesn't matter any more." So fulminated Aldersey-Williams (2000) in the journal of one of Britain's oldest institutions: The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce. The article was entitled *"Ten reasons why Corporate Identity is irrelevant."* There are likely to be two broad responses to this polemic. For their part many identity scholars will demur with Aldersey-Williams hypothesis. The same group may feel a sense of despair that such a parlous state of affairs has arisen among graphic-designers. Others are likely to be far more accommodating. This is because, in the vernacular, corporate identity closely aligned with graphic design. Indeed, a closer reading of the article reveals that Aldersey-Williams clearly has graphic designers in his sights. It is, in effect, a diatribe aimed at so called corporate branding, aka, corporate identity consultancies. His disquisition calls in to question the over-inflated claims made of visual identity: the notion that a new logo can not only encapsulate an organization's key attributes or the belief that a new visual identity can serve as a vehicle for addressing deep-seated corporate difficulties. This is not the first occasion that such an opinion has been advanced see Topalian (1984). A not dissimilar perspective is adopted.

For many identity scholars the conceptualisation of corporate identity simply in graphic-design terms may be seen as an alien if not deviant viewpoint. For them corporate identity is seen as a broad, multidisciplinary, albeit complicated, but vital construct. Identity studies have begun to inhabit the mainstream of management thought as recent publications testify: see Whetten and Godfrey (1998), Schultz, Hatch and Larsen (2000) and Albert, Ashforth and Dutton (2000) and Balmer and Greyser (2002). The reason for this heightened interest in identity studies is clear enough. This is because identity studies are seen as providing a new, supplementary, lens by which an organization's quintessential attributes may be revealed, nurtured, managed and altered (Balmer 2001). It is a construct that is central to an appreciation of other concepts indulging corporate brands see Balmer (2001) and King (1991), corporate communications see Van Riel (1995) corporate image see Gray and Balmer (1998) and corporate reputation see Fombrun (1996). On a more operational level Cheeney and Christensen (1999) concluded that identity was a pressing issue for many institutions and that the question of identity, or what the organization is,

or stands for, cuts across and unifies many different organizational goals and concerns. This is particularly the case in the services sector where corporate identity has an elevated role. As Meidan (1996) observed, in relation to financial services, the absence of distinct corporate identities within the Financial Services Sector was a particular problem for individual financial institutions. Indeed, within financial services sector the strongest identities tend to be at the industry (generic identity) rather than at the organizational level (corporate identity) industry-wide, generic see Balmer and Wilkinson (1991).

A particular problem with identity studies is the ambiguity with regard to the elements that constitute a corporate identity. A useful framework for achieving this is to articulate the mix of elements comprising a corporate identity, in other words, "the corporate identity mix."

THE CORPORATE IDENTITY MIX AND THE MARKETING INHERITANCE

Articulating a distinct mix for corporate identity mirrors a venerable tradition within the marketing discipline. Within the marketing discipline the marketing mix not only delineates the marketing domain (articulating the key elements) but is used as a basis in which the area may be operationalised (the orchestration of product, price, place and promotion. The utility of the mix is twofold since it (a) encapsulates the mosaic of elements underpinning the marketing discipline in (b) a form that is both simple and memorable. As such, it has a utility to both managers and academics. As Waterschoot (1995, p 438) noted, "in the development of a new body of thought, such as marketing, throughout the twentieth century, the making of listings and taxonomies is one of the primary tasks". However, the marketing mix should be viewed as a dynamic rather than a sclerotic framework. It has undergone, and is still undergoing, development and refinement. The same has and is likely to occur in relation to the corporate identity mix.

The idea of distinct mixes being applied to corporate entities (rather than for products or services, which is largely the case with marketing) is not a recent phenomenon. For instance, Britt (1971) referred to the corporate imagery mix, which includes elements which would now be felt to fall within the domain of corporate identity e.g. national origin, employees, brand names, etc. More recently, the notion of the mix has begun to be applied to other corporate concerns including corporate communications and corporate marketing.

The above developments have, accentuated rather than mitigated the need for a distinct corporate identity mix since there is wide agreement that corporate identity forms the bedrock of corporate communications (Van Riel 1995), corporate reputation (Fombrum 1996) and corporate branding (King 1991).

To date, the most influential corporate identity mix has been that of Birkigt and Stadler (1986). The component parts of their mix consist comprises corporate personality, behavior, communications and symbolism. It should also be pointed out that many authors have recognised the multidisciplinary or "mixed" nature of corporate identity (Balmer 1995 and Diefenbach 1986, Gray and Balmer 1998, Ind 1992, Moingeon and Ramanantsoa 1997, Olins 1989, Schmidt 1995, Topalian 1984, Van Riel et al 1997. However, it is all too clear from an examination of the extant literature on corporate identity that a chasm has emerged between the recent conceptualization of identity and that articulated by Birkigt and Stadler and, moreover, with perspective adopted by practitioners such as Aldersey-Williams (2000).

THE STUDY

The broad research objective of this literature-based study was, to clarify the nature of the corporate identity mix. Two, subsidiary issues were also addressed by this research, namely:

- a. Currently, is there a consensus with regard to the elements constituting the corporate identity mix?

- b. Currently, is there a difference between practitioners' and academics' conception of the corporate identity mix?

The research, had nine, distinct, phases. Exhibit one outlines the research process in diagrammatic form.

Findings

There are six, broad, findings from this study of the literature namely, that there is:

1. a broad consensus among both practitioners and academics regarding the multifaceted and multidisciplinary, nature of corporate identity.
2. a broad consensus among both practitioners and academics relating to the key elements to be included in a corporate identity mix.
3. a noticeable difference of emphasis between practitioners and academics approaches to the corporate identity mix. (the former seek simplicity whilst the latter celebrate complexity but strive for simplicity in articulation)
4. a discrepancy been the "mix" of elements comprising a corporate identity, as referred to in the literature and the mix of elements which are reflected in many models of corporate identity management, formation and audit.
5. a growing chasm between recent conceptualizations of the component parts of corporate identity and that advocated by Birkigt and Stadler (1986).

EXHIBIT ONE – MIXED UP OVER IDENTITIES? THE RESEARCH PROCESS

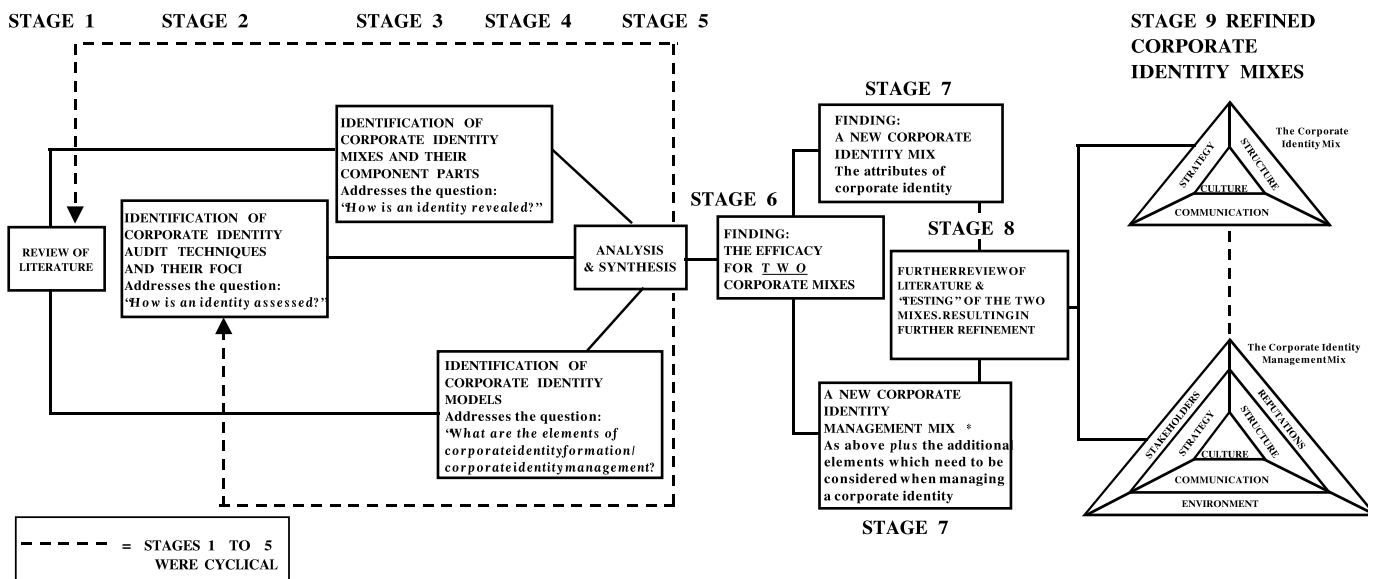


EXHIBIT TWO – EXAMPLES OF THE MULTIFACETED AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY NATURE OF CORPORATE IDENTITY AS CONCEPTUALISED BY ACADEMICS AND PRACTITIONERS

LEGEND* (see below)	STRATEGY	VISION/OR LEADERSHIP	BUSINESS STRUCTURE AND/OR BRANDING	VISUAL IDENTIFICATION	PRODUCTS	INTERNAL COMMUNICATION	EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION	WORD-OF-MOUTH	CULTURE	SUB CULTURES	CORE VALUES	BEHAVIOR OF PERSONNEL	BEHAVIOR OF ORGANISATION	HISTORY	REPUTATION(S) IMAGE(S)	ENVIRONMENT
ABRATT (1989)	A 1 *				*	*	*	*	*		*				*	
BALMER (1998)	A 1 *				*	*	*		*	*					*	*
BALMER & GRAY (1999)	A 1 *			*	*	*	*		*		*	*	*		*	*
BERNSTEIN (1984)	P 2	*														
BIRKIGT & STADLER (1986)	P 3			*		*	*	*				*	*			
BRUN & RASQUINET (1996)	A&P 2	*	*	*	*	*	*		*		*	*	*	*	*	
DOWLING (1986)	A 1 *				*	*	*									
FOMBRUN (1996)	A 2 *	*	*	*	*	*	*		*			*	*	*	*	*
GARBETT (1989)	P 2			*												
IND (1992)	P 2 *	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*		*	*
KENNEDY (1997)	A 1 *					*	*		*		*	*	*	*	*	*
LUX (1986)	A 2 *	*				*	*		*		*	*	*	*	*	*
MARWICK & FILL (1997)	P&A 1	*				*	*	*							*	*
MITSUBISHI MIX (n/d)	P 3 *	*											*			
OLINS (1995)	P 3	*			*	*	*						*			*
REITNER (1979)	A 2 *	*	*		*	*	*		*			*	*	*	*	*
SCHMIDT (1995)	A 3 *	*		*	*	*	*		*			*	*	*	*	*
SMITH (1993)	P 2	*	*	*	*	*	*							*	*	*
STEIDL & EMORY (1997)	P&A 3	*	*								*	*	*		*	*
STUART (1999)	A 1 *		*			*	*		*		*	*	*		*	*
REKOM (1997)	A 2	*							*		*	*	*		*	*

LEGEND*
A = ACADEMIC AUTHOR
P = PRACTITIONER AUTHOR
ELEMENT OF THE MIX DERIVED FROM THE AUTHOR(S)
1 = MODEL
2 = AUDIT PROCESS
3 = ARTICULATION OF THE CORPORATE IDENTITY MIX

6. a lack of distinction is made between the mix of elements comprising a corporate identity and the mix of elements required of its management.

It needs to be pointed out that the practitioners' perspectives refer above is limited to their *published* work rather than to their *commercial* work, which often has a strong, graphic-design, perspective see Aldersey-Williams (2000) and Topalian (1984).

Each finding will be discussed below.

First Finding: A broad consensus exists among practitioners and academics regarding the multifaceted and multidisciplinary nature of corporate identity. Exhibit Two illustrates many of the points articulated below.

Second Finding: There is a consensus among both practitioners and academics with regard to the elements to be included in a corporate identity mix. These elements comprise:

- (a) *an organisation's core values, and*
- (b) *the management vision, and/or or corporate philosophy*

What became apparent, is that there is a growing consensus as to the elements that fuse together to create a corporate identity. Reference to Exhibit Three illustrates that many authors include eight or more variables in their mix and, as such, is indicative of the multifaceted and multidisciplinary nature of the area.

Third Finding: There is a noticeable difference of emphasis between practitioners and academics' conception of the corporate identity mix

The research revealed there to be substantive differences between academic and practitioner approaches to the corporate identity mix. For instance, practitioners tend to focus on the more easily grasped elements of an organisation's identity such as visual identity, and communications. For the main, practitioners adopt a 'process' view of corporate identity programs and regard it as the means by which the corporate vision, or new corporate strategy, can be communicated to key internal and external publics. Typically, graphic design in accorded particular importance.

Many academics, particularly those from a marketing background, tend to adopt a more

formal 'structure' approach to corporate identity and focus on those organisational characteristics that make any organisation distinct. This has resulted in a far wider palette elements being considered than that offered by practitioners. Some academics emphasise certain elements which are not usually mentioned such as the influence of leadership style has been identified as a key variable of an organisation's identity. (Larçon and Reitter 1979).

Fourth Finding: A discrepancy exists between the mix of elements comprising a corporate identity as referred to in the literature and the mix of elements which are reflected in many models of corporate identity management, formation and audit.

Many corporate identity models fail to include some of the dimensions of identity which are frequently referred to in the literature. These include (a) the industry-sector image (Bernstein, 1984) and industry identity (Balmer and Wilkinson, 1991), (b) products, services and financial performance (Olins, 1995, Balmer 1998), (c) leadership style and nature of corporate ownership (Larçon and Reitter, 1979), and (d) corporate behavior (Olins, 1995).

Fifth Finding: a growing chasm between recent conceptualizations of the component parts of corporate identity and that advocated by Birkigt and Stadler (1986).

Whilst Birkigt and Stadler's identity mix remains the most influential and most widely referred to mix to date. What appears to be incontrovertible from both exhibits two and three is that Birkigt and Stadler's mix, although widely referred to in the literature, is, no longer, an apposite vehicle for conceptualizing corporate identity in the context of recent scholarship.

Sixth Finding: a lack of distinction is made between the elements comprising a corporate identity and the mix of elements required of its management

This is the major finding of this study. In effect it demonstrates that a corporate identity mix has, unwittingly, been "lost".

From the writer's analysis it became apparent that there is widespread confusion relating to what is required to *reveal* an organisation's corporate identity and the elements which need to be considered in *managing* a corporate identity. For instance, many authors regard both an organisation's core values and its competitive

environment as part of the corporate identity mix (Olins, 1995; Ind, 1997; Brun and Rasquinet, 1996; Schmidt, 1995). In reality, however, environmental forces, whilst they impinge upon an organisations' identity are not, part of an organization's identity. On the other hand, managing a corporate identity requires far more than revealing, or indeed, understanding the distinct attributes of an organisation. For instance, what would happen if the company's values, philosophy, study are out of line with changing or changed market expectations? In this case environmental forces most certainly are crucial to the management of an organization's identity.

From the above analysis it became apparent that a crucially important dimension of identity studies had been lost and as such there was a need to articulate a corporate identity management mix as well as rethinking Birkigt and Stadler's corporate identity mix. The former may be viewed to mark an advance in operationalizing the area in that it helps to address the question, "How do we manage our identity?" whilst the latter offers further insights relating to the questions, "Who are we?" and "What are we?"

IDENTITIES FOUND: EXPLAINING THE NEW CORPORATE IDENTITY MIXES

A new corporate identity mix.

Reference to Exhibits 4 and 5 reveals the efficacy for the two new identity mixes.

For the sake of clarity, and simplicity, a new corporate identity mix has been designed by the author, that encompasses four, core, dimensions. The four elements of the new corporate identity mix are:

- (a) strategy
- (b) structure
- (c) communication and
- (d) culture

As with McCarthy's (1960) influential marketing mix, "the four ps" the author's new corporate identity mix also has four elements. It also benefits from alliteration.

The four elements of the mix are explained as follows:

- (a) Strategy

This part of the mix refers to the elements of an organisation's corporate identity which are a

product of more-or-less conscious decisions by the CEO and board of management that have been taken in the past and, as such, impact on the organization's current identity. It consists of (a) management vision (including the nature and scope of activities) and corporate philosophy, (b) corporate strategy, (c) the performance of products and services, and corporate performance (i.e. financial performance) and (d) the Corporate brand covenant and corporate architecture (e) the nature of corporate ownership.

- (b) Structure

Organisational structure is a key determinant of an organisation's identity. An identity is substantially affected by the two way and sometimes multiple relationships between the holding or parent company and its subsidiaries and business units as well as alliance or franchise partners.

- (c) Communication

This part of the mix refers to the multi-faceted ways in which organizations' communicate, i.e. total corporate communication (Balmer, 1998, Balmer and Gray 1999). As such, it encompasses primary, secondary and tertiary communication.

Primary communication relates to the communication effects of the organisation's products and services, pricing and distribution policies as well as corporate behaviour e.g. the stance of the organisation on "big issues" such as the environment or recruitment policies. It also includes employee behaviour.

Secondary communication encompasses formal corporate communications and encompasses advertising, PR, graphic design and visual identity systems.

Tertiary communication refers to word-of-mouth communication such as media and competitor communications.

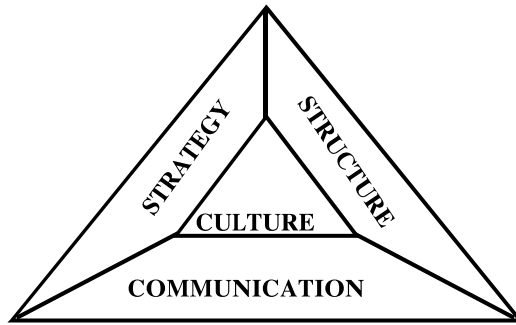
There is a considerable overlap between the above and with other parts of the mix.

- (d) Culture

This part of the mix refers to the "soft", subjective, albeit important, elements which are at the centre of an organisation's corporate identity. These elements are typically difficult to see, explain and to manage. They consist of the mix of sub-cultures present within, but not always emanating from,

the organisation. They are made manifest by the strength of employees' affinities to these sub-cultures. Such sub-cultures may in some instances consist of corporate, national, regional and professional sub-cultures. They may be in the ascendant, descendant or moribund. Such cultures may mirror the philosophy of past, present and future leadership styles and philosophies (cf. Balmer and Wilson 1998).

EXHIBIT 4 – A NEW CORPORATE IDENTITY MIX



A new corporate identity management mix

As with the marketing mix (McCarthy, 1960), the corporate identity management mix details the variables and activities which should be considered by all those who are charged with managing, or with changing, an organisation's identity. Exhibit 5 replicates the new corporate identity management mix which is an augmentation of the identity mix so as to include Environment, Stakeholders and Reputations.

Environment

Political, economic, ethical, social and technological developments, competition, and the threat of potential entrants, form the context in which identities exist and which determine whether they thrive or fail. As such they should be monitored on an on-going basis. In addition to a standard 'strategic analysis' of the environment a corporate identity audit should take cognisance of the impact on the corporate identity of country or origin. As well as other factors such as national and regional culture, etc. The task of all those concerned with the management of a corporate identity will be to monitor the environment and make sure that the corporate identity remains salient for an organization's key stakeholder groups.

Stakeholders

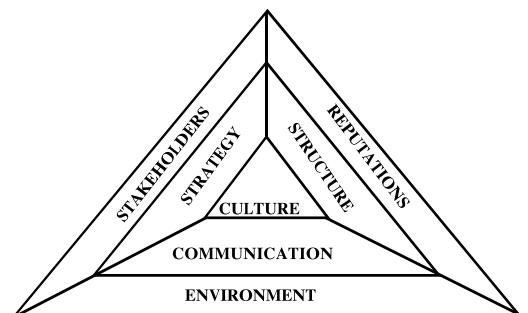
An organisation's stakeholders are varied. Many stakeholders will belong to several stakeholder groups. Many transcend the traditional internal/external corporate boundaries. The number, type and mix of stakeholder groups with

which an entity is concerned with will vary as a comparison between holding companies, subsidiaries and not-for-profits will reveal. Effective corporate identity management implies that these publics are prioritised and that their expectations are understood.

Reputations

There would appear to be a mosaic of reputations which require consideration by any corporate entity. Thus, in addition to tracking the overall corporate reputation, account should also be taken of the reputations of the CEO, key members of the management board, and the industry in which the organisation operates. Where an organization marshal another corporate brand for all or part of its markets (perhaps through franchise arrangement then the reputation of that corporate brand also needs to be considered) . Reputations may act as a control device both internally and externally . Balmer's (1998) D.E.A.R. model (Decisions Evaluated Against Reputation) reflects this perspective. However, a good reputation whilst it may be of inestimable value should not be considered as an end in itself. Of its own it is no guarantee of business survival. The key to the on-going success is whether the organization meets the wants and needs of key stakeholder groups and networks. In other words, there should be a clear strategic fit between reputation, stakeholders and environment.

EXHIBIT 5 – A NEW CORPORATE IDENTITY MANAGEMENT MIX



DISCUSSION

This article has attempted to make an advance in our understanding of corporate identity by revealing its multi dimensional and multi-disciplinary nature. The author has argued that there needs to be two distinct corporate identity mixes: one which articulates the elements constituting an organisation's corporate identity (the corporate identity mix), and another one which describes the elements necessary for the management of corporate identity (the corporate identity management mix). Making this distinction

should alleviate much of the confusion, if not obfuscation, that has enveloped the area to date. It could also provide greater focus when addressing two, key questions namely, "What are the components of our identity?" and "What needs to be considered in relation to identity management?"

The author encourages other scholars to pursue the notion of the mix as a means of furthering an understanding of corporate and organisational identity. Certainly, there is an opportunity to use the approaches advocated in this article to (a) confirm the saliency of the elements contained in the two mixes, (b) refine the elements of the mixes and (c) explore the dynamics of the two identity mixes across varying industry sectors.

CONCLUSION: IDENTITIES LOST AND IDENTITIES FOUND

What becomes clear from this literature-based survey is that there is a growing chasm between those who adopt a narrow, graphic-design, conceptualization of corporate identity and those who adopt a broad and multidisciplinary perspective. The irony is that the second perspective has long been recognised by leading graphic design consultants such as Olins (1995), Chajet et al (1993). The problems associated with the corporate identity concept (its graphic design emphasis and the over inflated claims made of graphic design) are clearly attributable to the graphic design industry. The widespread abhorrence of the identity concept is the enduring legacy of this industry. It was the graphic design industry that gave birth to the concept and then, in effect, became absent parents. As the opening quote by Aldersey-Williams demonstrates the inheritors of this legacy have disowned the deeds of their forebears. A legacy that has lost its way. A bequest that has been, in large part, been repudiated.

There is another perspective regarding identity studies. A perspective that acknowledges its utility and eclectic nature of management. An area pregnant with possibilities as the "finding" of the corporate identity management mix, as described in this article has demonstrated. This alternative approach is one that increasingly characterizes identity scholarship. The concluding quote by Gioia (1998) reflects this perspective and provides an interesting counterpoint, if not retort to those who argue that identity is of no consequence.

"It should come as no surprise to find that the concept of identity, which is so important to conceiving what it means to be human, also is central to the conceptualisation of one of the most complex and fascinating of human creations, the work organization".

Gioia (1998)

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