“The Best and the Brightest”
The role of elite identity in knowledge-intensive companies

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Abstract
The aim of this paper is to investigate the meaning(s), significance, forms, roles and effects of ideas of elitism and elite identity constructions in companies that, to use a slightly elitist label, can be referred to as knowledge-intensive companies. However, we are not interested in this loosely defined category as an elite group even though there may be a case for such an enterprise. Rather, this paper is concerned with how and why constructions of elite identities are made in some firms in this loose grouping. The limitation to and focus on knowledge-intensive companies follows from a want to develop a more robust understanding of this type of firm and to make comparisons possible within a not too scattered organisational field.

Many knowledge intensive firms are in the business of developing innovative, creative solutions to client problems. Often these firms organise around highly autonomous team working, acknowledging the necessary latitude and space employees need to have where creativity and innovation are core work processes. Attempting to manage the creative process using traditional forms of control within this organisational context is futile. An elite social identity and self-categorisation in our cases was found to play a particularly important role in self-disciplining employees to work very hard and perform well in their attempts to perform exceptionally. In two of the case firms creativity was fundamental to the work process. An elite image and reputation also served to attract people to these firms, whether they stayed was another matter. We therefore suggest that constructing and sustaining an elite organisational identity may be particularly important within knowledge intensive and creative settings.

Introduction
In sociological terms “The elite is made up of those who have merited good marks in the competition of life, or who have drawn a winning number in the lottery of “social” existence (Aron, 1976:460). Discussions and empirical studies of elites in organizations often attempt to objectify the subject seeing elitism as a characteristic or property of individuals or certain groups. The elite is seen as the upper class (Hill 1995: Kabanoff & Holt, 1996) and/or those ‘responsible for maintaining the general social structure and shaping new policy initiatives’ (Domhoff & Dye, 1987:9). Perceiving the elite as only those at the apex of an organization may however, ignore important aspects of elitism and its effects in contemporary organizations. Sustaining a position at the top of large bureaucracies is not for example today, the sole platform for influence and prestige. Our interest is, however, not in identifying and investigating elite’s in this sense as an objective category of people, in this paper we are interested in focusing upon the construction, meaning and significance of elitism in particular, within knowledge-intensive and creative settings. Whilst knowledge-intensive is a rather loose categorisation and grouping of firms, it is pertinent to highlight here that knowledge intensive firms are firms where most of the work is of an intellectual nature performed by well-qualified staff (Alvesson, 2000). Thus notions of elitism may be relevant within these particular contexts.

Elites can, be identified and described through more or less objective – very broadly agreed upon criteria that are not generally contested. Elite sportsmen and women for
example, perform far better than the rest. In other contexts however, identifying elite groups is more problematic, but there is little doubt that they have a status and/or access to formal power and other privileges far superior to the great majority (Bourdieu, 1988). The French academy of the 1960’s, CEO’s of today’s Fortune 500 companies and Nobel Prize laureates are useful examples of elite groups. Whilst, elites may therefore be perceived objectively in some contexts, they are fundamentally socially constructed. That is to say that being perceived as elite depends on social context – because it is socially constructed. For example, the Olympic Games and the Fortune 500 index are social inventions and the prestige associated with the Nobel Prize is purely an effect of social processes. These social constructions are more or less robust and stable – there is little debate regarding the elite status of Fortune 500 firms or the Olympic Games. If we move outside these very narrowly defined groups however, there is far less consensus about what constitutes or who belongs to an elite and who does not. Elite status may or may not be constructed by others, or by members of a group or category that define themselves as an elite. Socially constructed notions of elitism are also context specific (e.g. ‘best of breed’ or ‘best within a particular industry’) within a particular environment. Elite is therefore necessarily a relative term – one can not avoid asking for whom and in what context does somebody or some group appear as an elite?

Our interest and inquiry here lies primarily with the specific understandings, cognition and sentiments developed by people in the company and the role this social identity plays whether or not there is consensus. Some consideration obviously needs to be given to various other groups with an interest in the company - actual and potential customers, resources within the labour market, competitors, shareholders, professions, etc. - because these groups crucially affect external perceptions, which are captured in a firm’s corporate image. However, as our focus in this paper is mainly on corporate and organisational member identity issues, less attention will be paid to the perceptions and talk of people ‘outside’ a particular organisation within the broader institutional context. This paper focuses instead, upon the internal construction processes- communications and strategic, symbolic and operational acts that have relevance for the connotations and effects of elitism.

Corporate image (how employees view the firm) not only reflects the social performance of the firm but has also been shown to affect employees’ attitudes, behaviours and actions (Dutton & Durkheim, 1991, Riordan et al., 1997). Thus a corporate image grounded in elitism might be expected to shape member’s cognition and sense of self in particular ways that could affect useful instrumental behaviours such as high standards of performance. Where creativity is the core work activity (as in many KIFs), it is nigh on impossible to manage the process, as it is inherently uncertain and equivocal. Moreover successful outcomes can never be guaranteed. Where other forms of control are problematic, elite social identity may be an effective catalyst for creative invention and its translation into innovation in particular firms. The extent to which this is the case in KIFs is investigated here. In particular we focus on the ways in which social processes of elitism impact ways of working and forms of control in KIFs.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section we consider existing literature on image, reputation self categorisation, self-esteem and the role of social identity in group work performance. There follows a brief description of the methodology employed in this research and the scheme used to describe the cases. The way in which elitism was constructed in each of the four firms and its effects are then explored. The discussion
highlights the numerous ways in which elitism has been constructed in each of the case firms and relying on differing degrees of internal and external legitimation. We conclude by highlighting the significant role played by elitism in terms of its effects as a normative control mechanism in the firms studied.

Corporate image, reputation and consultancy work
The four cases presented in this paper are all consultancy firms. Firms operating in the consultancy sector however, tend to be considered a homogeneous mass and most of the literature on consultancy work often reflects only the operation of the Big '4' consulting firms. Whilst one of our cases is in this category, the other three are small or medium sized firms, two of which offer very specialised, bespoke services to clients. These four cases therefore represent something of the heterogeneity that exists across the sector which to date, has largely been under-represented in the literature. Existing literature on consultancy work often suggests that impression management and corporate image and reputation are fundamental to consultancy work (Clark, 1995, Fincham, 1999). Corporate image is the internal view of the firm held (and to some extent, shared) by employees of the firm and reputation is the external view of the firm held by multiple stakeholders - customers, shareholders etc. The literature on consulting therefore suggests that the management of impressions, enacted within presentations of self and the firm, are crucial for success in the consulting business. Whilst highlighting the importance of reputation and image as perceptual assets with the power to attract loyal clients and retain loyal staff (Fombrun et al, 2000), this literature largely de-emphasises the highly intellectual and creative work conducted in a significant number of consulting firms, and the ways in which this work is itself mediated by socially constructed identities.

We are therefore not proposing here to examine the usefulness of elite constructions in selling consulting projects or selling the firm to potential scarce recruits but, rather, to explore their role in the core work processes occurring within the four case firms. These firms, typical of creative firms more generally, tend to organise highly informally and non conventionally. However KIFs, just like any other type of private sector firm, need to make a profit in order to survive within their particular industry sector. Management, within these firms must therefore develop practices that will:

I. mediate possible tensions between autonomy and control (of creative production)
II. sustain an organisational environment that promotes a degree of loyalty to the firm and therefore retains knowledgeable employees
III. sustain some notion of organisational ‘efficiency’ in the face of self-managed project team working that is focused on creativity and innovation

In the absence of institutionalised repositories of organisational routines and method and clearly demarcated bureaucratic or technocratic structures, it becomes important to have an internalised cognitive structure of what the firm represents and the direction of the firm. A clear sense of organisational identity, we argue, facilitates and promotes co-ordinated, purposeful action and particular instrumental behaviours within such loosely-coupled environments (Albert et al, 2000). However, how organisational identities might be constructed, and their effects on knowledge work, have not on the whole been subject to empirical examination (though see Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) particularly within knowledge intensive and creative settings.
Social identity theory, self categorisation and prototype depersonalisation
Tajfel developed the concept of social identity - "the individual's knowledge that he (sic) belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (1972: 292). Thus social identity theory (SIT) explores the way in which self is conceptualised in intergroup contexts and how a system of social categorisations "creates and defines an individual's own place in society" (1972:293). SIT emphasises that individuals identify with social categories to enhance self-esteem (Tajfel, 1978). Pierce et al (1989) define organizationally based self-esteem as “the degree to which organizational members believe that they can satisfy their needs by participating in roles within the context of an organization” (:625). This conceptualisation is not particularly focussed on the individual’s self-concept or self-worth. Rather it is about satisfying a need. There is the assumption that individuals have a basic need for favourable self-identity, and that the status of groups to which we belong helps us to achieve such positive self-identity. Moreover Tajfel and his associates claim that such positive evaluations are made on a comparative basis - we nourish our self-identities when ‘our’ group out performs another group (Tajfel, 1978, Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986).

In some (but certainly not all) organisational contexts social identity can be equated to organisational identity. "The most developed conceptualisation of organisation identification sees it as a form of social identity whereby a person comes to view him or herself as a member of a particular social entity, the organisation" (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000:557). This happens through cognitive processes of self categorisation, where the individual forms self-categories of organisational membership and similarities with others in the organisation, simultaneously with dissimilarities with others in different organisations. Ashforth and Mael thus define organisational identity as the "perception of oneness with or belongingness to the organisation (1989:21), and Dutton et al regard it as 'the cognitive connection between the definition of an organisation and the definition a person applies to him or herself" (1994:242). The self awareness of belonging to an organisation is therefore one way that a person achieves a social identity (Tajfel, 1978).

The cognitive process of self categorisation simultaneously highlights similarity and difference within a hierarchical classification of increasing levels of abstraction and inclusiveness (Turner, 1987). However, this self-categorisation process does not happen in a vacuum - it is highly context dependent. The salience of a given categorisation depends on the interaction between accessibility and fit. Individuals draw on accessible categories and consider how well they fit the particular social field they inhabit. "Categories can be accessible because they are valued, important, and frequently employed aspects of the self-concept (i.e. chronic accessibility) and/or because they are perceptual salient (i.e. situational accessibility)” (Hogg & Terry, 2000). In an organisational context then, accessible categories will be those that are salient to the individual's sense of self and to the sector in which the firm is operating. For example, in knowledge intensive contexts a self-categorisation of ‘intellectual’ and ‘innovative’ would be highly accessible. Categories also need to have a structural and/or normative fit in a particular social field. In an organisational setting structural fit implies categories that can account for situationally relevant similarities and differences between people and normative fit implies categories that can account for context specific behaviours. When a categorisation is perceived as optimal it forms the basis for highlighting perceived intragroup similarities and intergroup differences, thereby
emphasising the distinctiveness of the group. This social categorization of self thus
depersonalises behaviour and forms the basis of the ingroup prototype - an abstract
image or idealised self (Serino, 1998). Once the prototype has been established by the
group individuals attempt to conform as far as possible to the prototype in terms of
individual and collective norms of behaviour, stereotyping positive ingroup attitudes,
cohesion, cooperation and altruism (Hogg & Terry, 2000). The kinds of norms that
might be expected to have utility in KIFs would be helping out across projects when
problems arise that are not strictly within a particular individual’s remit i.e. citizenship
behaviour, ensuring that efforts are made to adhere to group imposed deadlines at
particular points in projects etc.

Bergami & Bagozzi (2000) explored the effects of two antecedents of social identity in
the organisation – organisation prestige and organisation stereotypes – “members
beliefs about the distinctive, central and enduring attributes of the organization (Dutton
et al, 1994:244). Their research found that both of these antecedents enhanced self-
categorization and increased identification and affective commitment to the firm. They
also studied the relationship between self-esteem, self-categorisation and affective
commitment as components of social identity in organisations, and found that
individual who self-categorised themselves with high self-esteem were more likely to
display affective commitment in terms of altruism and civic virtue in the organisation.
Their findings demonstrated that what individuals feel about their self-categorisation
and how they evaluate it determines what they do vis-a-vis ingroup members. Other
research (Worschel et al, 1998) has also demonstrated that individuals in groups with
strong social identities grounded in high self-esteem will work harder in the group than
when alone. Pilegge & Holz (1997) also established a catalytic effect of identification
with co-workers on high self-esteem persons. Individuals with high self esteem who
strongly identified with their group set higher goals and achieved more than other
groups with high self esteem and weak social identity and low self esteem groups. All
of this work would suggest therefore that high self-esteem and strong social identities
within groups are important mediators of work performance operating as a form of
normative control. The problem with this social psychology literature however, is that
identity is perceived as an individual, cognitive phenomena (albeit perceptual) and the
literature down plays the socially constructed nature of identity.

In a knowledge intensive setting fostering a strong organisational identity which is
perceived as sufficiently attractive as to be used as the basis for self-categorisation may
therefore be particularly useful for facilitating and promoting collaborative group work.
A self-categorisation which provides for feelings of high self-esteem is likely to self-
discipline and motivate employees to work co-operatively and collaboratively with
others in an organisational context where more traditional direct forms of control are
not appropriate. In addition, knowledge workers work in a highly autonomous manner.
Social identity may serve as a form of normative control, shaping and regulating
predictable, responsible behaviours around autonomous work processes.

Other research has demonstrated that increased identification with an organisation more
generally promotes a number of beneficial consequences generally for the firm: enhanced
support and commitment; intergroup cohesion; cooperation and altruism; loyalty and adherence to
group values; and norms and homogeneity (Turner, 1982, 1984; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). It follows therefore that an organisational identity
grounded in elitism would imbue individuals with a significant sense of self-esteem and
distinctiveness. In addition, a corporate identity based on elitism is likely to increase identification with the organization, given the prestige associated with the connotations associated with the term (Dutton et al., 1994). This could be particularly useful within the context of knowledge-intensive companies where there is a general scarcity of expert labour and significant efforts need to be made to attract and retain personnel (Lowendahl, 1997).

Constructing an elite social identity
Generally, we view the construction of self, group or organisational identity for internal purposes as pretty much a matter of the moves made by organisational members themselves. Identity is a construction that should appear credible to the person or group defining her- or itself, it does not have to pass a strict and rigorous reality test (Albert & Whetton, 1985). However, apart from in exceptional cases, in which any sense of reality has surrendered for fantasies of perfection and self-aggrandizement, there has to be some support or chance of modest confirmation from 'significant others' in order for elite status to be an option. Defining oneself as an elite group in splendid isolation will most likely sooner or later create problems in the corporate world. Being an elite thus call for some element of confirmation, although this may well be moderate to weak, incoherent and contested. The idea of being an elite means then a construction of self and the organisation as clearly superior to other companies in vital respects and thus belonging to an exclusive category of corporate units. This construction will necessarily involve beliefs about this elite status being confirmed by significant others. In most cases, there is some confirmation of this status from other groups, being inclined to validate, at least to some extent, the beliefs of the focal group. This does not, of course, prevent the existence of ambiguity and contradictions around these issues.

It is also important to point out here that elite identity differs markedly from any notion of being ‘objectively’ better than others. Viewing oneself as superior to others is very common. Formulations of organisational culture and beliefs about one's abilities frequently include highly positive values and self-praising beliefs (Schein, 1992). The ‘excellence’ movement of the 80’s emphasised the leader’s role in actively encouraging such beliefs (Peters & Waterman, 1982; Deal & Kennedy, 1982). However, these beliefs do not necessarily include a clear notion of being part of, and belonging to, an elite company. For example, blue-collar workers may feel that they are more masculine than managers doing clean and risk-free jobs, and put great value on this masculinity (Collinson, 1992) but this does not imply any claims or beliefs about forming an elite. The notion of being an elite therefore means some references to dimensions broadly shared in society. If not, the elite construction is clearly constrained to a particularly narrow domain, e.g. elite prisoners or elite bus drivers.

Elite identity may be more or less explicitly communicated, internally and externally. The signifier ‘elite’ or ‘the very best’ will tend however; not to be used within the inner circle of organisational members themselves as this would imply pretentiousness, thus contradicting notions of elitism. When elite status is experienced as obvious and taken for granted then there is little point or any need to making it explicit. Instances of elitism thus call for interpretations of self-understandings and symbolism to indicate elite status.

The construction and reinforcement of elite identity may therefore draw upon fairly broadly agreed upon criteria for success and superiority: size, recognition, profit, highly
successful products, expert rankings, etc. Elite identity may however, also develop or
focus on other criteria that are less publicly recognised and frequently less obvious –
although highly esoteric dimensions and values are often not credible. These latter
criteria are of particular interest to explore in the four case studies presented here. The
analysis of elite constructions in each of the four firms demonstrates not only how
elitism has become a central and enduring feature in these firms but also highlights the
utility of this corporate identity for the regulation of behaviour within these firms.

Methodology
Case studies were conducted in each of the four firms presented here. These were
conducted in 1987 in Enator, between 1996 and 1998 in Universal, in 1999 in
Paramount and 2000 – 2001 in Big. These case studies involved extensive interviewing
across a range of employees in each of these firms, together with non participant
observation of work practices, meetings and access to secondary sources of data such as
minutes of meetings, project and client documentation. We have used a specific scheme
to describe and analyse each of our cases in terms of elite identity. Each section is
necessarily brief, as we believe it is useful to develop a broad analysis of this
phenomenon at this initial stage of inquiry. The scheme is outlined below:
- Description of company
- The construction and manifestation of elitism
- Consequences of elite status and identity in work activities

These three themes do overlap to some extent, but it is difficult to find neat categories
and themes that will perfectly incorporate certain empirical phenomena and exclude
others. Together, we believe they provide a loose framework to describe and, to some
extent, begin to analyse elite identity in KIFs.

Case 1 Entrepreneurialism at Universal Consulting
Description of company
Universal Consulting is primarily a scientific consultancy. 85% of the workforce are
highly educated scientists, who developed inventions and innovative solutions for client
companies around the world. One man founded Universal Consulting in 1986 in order
to have the freedom to explore opportunities of inward investment resulting from
technological inventions and innovation developed in-house. He wanted therefore to
create a consultancy environment that would not only develop solutions in response to
client problems but that would stimulate wealth creation more generally.

By the end of the 1990s Universal Consulting had grown from a small entrepreneurial
business to a medium sized enterprise employing approximately 180 people. By this
time the firm had gained an international reputation across many sectors and markets.
As the firm grew it developed from its initial base in engineering and communications
and incorporated new business and scientific disciplines including biotechnology and
applied sciences.

The construction and manifestation of elitism
The majority of consultants had a very high academic education – generally a Ph.D. in
one of the natural sciences, typically in combination with some high-powered
industrial experience. The company had always profiled itself as highly innovative and
entrepreneurial. Within its market niche as a scientific consultancy it was considered to
be somewhere other scientists and technologists aspired to work because of the well-
recognised innovative capacity of the firm and the relaxed, informal approach to
working. Whilst the firm was small, it was highly selective and therefore exclusive. The
company was leading edge being at the forefront of scientific and technological developments across a range of fields and the innovations that the firm had developed over time served as manifestations of this. Only the very best and the brightest candidates from around the world would therefore be recruited. Management and consultants also emphasised the distinctive organisational arrangements characteristic of an operating adhocracy that supported autonomy and entrepreneurial activity (e.g. the creation of spinout firms). In addition, the company also displayed some characteristics of academia in terms of the emphasis placed on collegiality, and egalitarianism both in and outside of project working.

Elitism was expressed in the freedom and resources afforded to consultants in their working environment. Consultants could largely work when they wanted and on what projects they wanted as an acknowledgement of the value of their scarce expertise. Very high rejection rates and a flat organisational structure, combined with a lack of career structure, highlighted the relative equal elite standing of everyone in the firm. The firm had a particular good reputation in the UK and Scandinavia and had worked for a number of years with major firms such as Esselte, British Telecom etc. but it did not have a genuine international reputation. Fundamentally elitism was an internal project promoted by the founder that had become self-reinforcing internally over time. As the HR manager commented “You get a CV and the person has a Ph.D. and they’ve worked for a pretty high powered research agency and that’s brilliant, you’ve got to see them, but you know that there is a pretty strong chance that the moment you meet them you’re going to know that they’re not one of us”. As the firm wished to recruit and more importantly retain the very brightest people there was therefore an emphasis on peer evaluation and rejection during the selection process in order to ensure elite reproduction. Despite the flat structure, consultants were annually ranked in terms of their performance. This tended to promote the idea that there was an elite within the elite although annual rankings did vary significantly. Very generous resources were also made available in terms of time and money for self-development. A lack of career structure was somewhat atypical in a consulting firm but fostered a strong sense of egalitarianism and paradoxically promoted loyalty to the firm - perhaps because of its novelty. In combination, this distinctive approach to managing the workforce appeared to have worked well in that the firm was able to perpetually invent new products and processes for client firms.

**Consequences of elite status and identity in work activities**

Worker identity was a complex mix of the professional (scientist) and the elite. This co-optation of professional ethos into an elitist self-perception promoted by the company meant that the organisational identities that were formed transcended the conventional demarcations between professional and organisational affiliations. This helped to avoid or at least defuse some of the tensions that can be created by such demarcations (Raelin, 1990), thereby allowing a liberalised form of self-regulation to pervade.

Elite professional identity also acted as a catalyst in project work self-disciplining individuals to perform well and rendering project work in relative terms ‘efficient’. Individuals’ own expectations of themselves as elite expert scientists meant that high standards of performance were self-imposed. Thus individuals were constantly striving to develop inventions and innovative solutions which would command respect internally with other consultants. As one consultant stated “Here, you are only as good as your last project” and the founder mentioned that “It is a free market for expertise… In this way we try to maintain a competitive – some would say combative environment, which does create tension but at the same time enhances innovation given by the rate at which new ideas come out of the organisation”. These behaviours facilitated project work and, simultaneously reinforced a self-
categorisation as one of an elite. The context was therefore one of the joint production of innovations and identity - consultants defining themselves through the knowledge they created. This process was somewhat fraught, and normatively regulating because it occurred in a relatively unstructured organisational context, one devoid of all the usual safety-nets – professional status, hierarchical rank etc. – and where informal status was always provisional and to some extent contested, being defined simply by individual performativity. A social and organisational identity grounded in elitism therefore served as a normatively regulating mechanism in the informal, somewhat chaotic environment. The working environment was considered to be very attractive and appeared to have generated high retention rates. Organisational members had problems identifying anywhere better to go to work - other than setting up a spinout company. Thus over time, a relatively stable, loyal workforce had developed which also served to promote and reinforce creative inter-disciplinary project working - the core work activity at Universal.

**Case 2 Managerially orchestrated community at Enator**

*Description of company*

Enator, an IT consultancy company, was founded ten years before the time of the study, by three men. The firm expanded rapidly and at the time of the study 500 people were employed. The organisational members that participated in the first five years of the history of the company expressed almost lyrical tales about the functioning of the top management, i.e. the three founders. However, a closely-knit community and a high level of organisational commitment characterised the company, which prides itself on a special corporate culture and an original, highly people-oriented organisational philosophy and managerial practices.

*The construction and manifestation of elitism*

Organisational members felt strongly that this company was something special, partly because of the ideas governing the work and client relationships and partly because of the way people were treated in the company. The corporate culture was viewed as a key organisational feature here. There was also external interest in the company because of the innovative organisational ideas that had been implemented and the firm was considered to be progressive and successful.

In Enator purely technical qualifications were to some extent downplayed in relation to interpersonal and social ability. Many people within the company emphasised that they were not better, in a technical sense, with computers and software programming than other companies. However, they believed Enator was superior concerning the social aspects, including skills in running projects. *This is our strength, this is what we are good at,”* one consultant stated. As this was considered most important, the company perceived itself as better than others in the particular respect that really mattered in terms of software development. In Enator, there was also a strongly held assumption that the well being of the employees directly influenced the quality of their work. One of the strengths of the company was the ability to make organisational members feel satisfied, motivated and part of a community. The CEO stated that “*If there is anything that we are good at it is this, we are damned good at this*”.

Enator can thus be viewed as a high-powered managerially led community, a ‘people’ company, amongst the very best in dealing with people and human relations. In line with this, structurally, the organisation was perceived as flat. By downplaying hierarchy and bureaucracy, the original and progressive nature of the company was
partly manifest. A reduced number of organisational levels and informal ways of being and interacting with people – “here everybody has the expectation of being able to sit down and have a beer with the CEO” – was believed to indicate the unique and novel approach that the company represented. Climate-enhancing rites – sometimes of a spectacular nature – were also part of the organisational landscape. The vocabulary of motives at Enator downplayed instrumental rewards. As one manager said to a group of newcomers, “I never persuade anybody to start here through offering a high wage or prevent anyone from leaving through it”. This may not have been necessarily valid, but illustrated aspects of the company’s employee policy. Consultants did note a certain discrepancy between charging high fees and paying average salaries – “this is not a high-wage company”. However, employees stated that they were satisfied with less-than-optimal wages because the company offered them so much else. Community feelings and having fun around and in the job provided for significant cohesion, encouraging people to stay with the company. The company also received considerable media coverage and was viewed as an original and interesting organisation. However, any clear or strong external validation of the company’s strengths or uniqueness which would confirm an elite construction was actually difficult to detect.

**Consequences of elite status and identity in work activities**

There were strong feelings in the company of corporate pride. People broadly saw the company as progressive, innovative in its approach to customers and personnel and highly distinct. One manager referred to a client that, after having had experiences with Enator people stated “Enator is not a company, it is a religion”. Thus, this approach seemed to have worked well in that people were motivated to remain loyal to the firm - it becomes a way of life. Externally hired managers however, sometimes felt that there was rather little propensity to learn from experiences from other places. “This is the club for mutual internal admiration”, one of them stated. Within the company people espoused the values of modesty and learning from others, but rather high self-esteem seemed to prevent this from happening.

**Case 3 Professional aristocracy at Paramount Consulting**

**Description of the company**

Paramount Consulting was founded in 1990. The firm provides strategic and organisational development consulting to other professional service firms (PSFs) - primarily law firms. A new consultancy market emerged in the UK at the end of the 1980s as the PSF sectors became more competitive and firms sought strategic advice. Paramount Consulting provides strategic solutions for clients that are based primarily on legal knowledge and qualitative information and knowledge derived from the client and the client’s clients. The firm is located at a highly prestigious address in central London, close to most of the major UK law firms.

The firm has always been small. It grew from 4 to 18 members of staff in its 10-year history. The majority of consultants have a professional legal background and/or were qualified at Masters level across a variety of disciplines including social and political sciences, and marketing. The client base expanded over time to include leading European and US based law firms, and in-house legal departments of large corporations.
The construction and manifestation of elitism

The founder tended to recruit only very senior, highly experienced people from other PSFs – law and consulting. The firm profiled itself as elite in publicity material maintaining that otherwise consultants would not be in a position to advise and consult to other PSF clients. Therefore de facto the firm has to be ‘better’ than other PSFs. In several countries in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region the founder was well respected and trusted throughout the top-tier legal sector. He was known to only recruit the best people to work in this particular niche. This was highly specialised consultancy work that very few consultants could provide. As the founder stated “I decided to grow the business but it was more than any desire just to make more money quite frankly. I could probably make more money just working for myself with one consultant and a secretary but I’m not only interested in making money. I knew the professional service market would grow and I believed that in a larger consultancy trying to develop expertise in this area would get subsumed in politics. It seemed to be more something that highly specialised consultants could do, given the right set of circumstances”. This statement reflects the notion that in conducting this type of consultancy work legal expertise needed to be combined with general strategic expertise and there were very few people that could do this well, hence those that could were the elite. The company organised informally. However, the founder autocratically managed the firm - reigning over a professional aristocracy. One consultant stated “We are a founder-centric type of firm. Ultimately he makes all of the decisions”.

The manifestations of elitism in the day-to-day working environment were primarily tangible; for example, the office location was very prestigious. Lavish hotels were used for weekend strategy meetings. Consultants had the use of a Chauffeur and Mercedes company car when travelling. Even the firm’s bank – Coutts (bank to the British aristocracy and media stars) reflected exclusivity. The client base also reinforced notions of elitism. This was a very small firm dealing with very large, important PSF clients. Consultants however, could never admit to working with particular clients, as this would signal strategic weakness on the client’s part. Thus somewhat paradoxically the firm has a good reputation that was based on hearsay as to which clients the firm had worked with. It was a case of the elite working for the elite. High remuneration packages were provided and there was an emphasis on instrumental rewards. However, there was a very laissez-faire, almost arbitrary approach towards managing people - primarily because the founder made all of the decisions regarding all aspects of firm-wide management. The founder was known to not tolerate under-performance. As one consultant stated “I know that if you don’t perform well and quickly you are out of this firm”.

Consequences of elite status and identity in work activities

In this firm elitism served to promote cohesion and high levels of collaboration across a group of somewhat egocentric individuals. As one consultant stated “I tend to go to X when thinking about internal evaluations and Y for certain other issues. Some people I use as repositories of knowledge and others I go to bounce ideas off and brainstorm ideas with”. Clients were themselves very egotistical and demanding and whilst clients preferred and would only deal with particular individuals, projects necessarily involved significant collaborative effort from a range of consultants and support staff in the back-office. A dominant elite ethos therefore provided the necessary integration and overcame some of the problems around massive egos. It was extremely important for clients to believe that they were dealing with the best – thus elitism provided the necessary internal cohesion and importantly, legitimacy externally. Thus elitism here was just as much an external project, as it is an internal one.
Case 4 Technocratic Excellence at Big Consulting Ltd

Description of company

Big Consulting is an international IT/management consultant company with more than 10000 employees. 500 of these worked at the Swedish office, which is discussed here. The company conducts some high-level strategic work but primarily focused on the development and implementation of administrative and technical (mainly IT based) solutions to organisational problems. A close look at Big revealed a striking dominance of a particular form of reason: instrumental rationality. Arguably, instrumental reason is characterised by great emphasis on predictability, inter-exchangeability, standardised measurements of output, an emphasis on the optimisation of means and calculations, standardised and transparent decision making (Alvesson & Willmott 1996). Big Consulting relied heavily on particular technical expertise, spanning the IT and management fields. According to Big Consulting it only employed highly qualified personnel and this was also broadly acknowledged by clients, competitors and the informed public. Big Consultings’ strongest competitive advantage lie in its capacity to deliver the solution on time (a rare phenomenon, particular among IT consultant companies) and particular work procedures. Organisational members uniformly pointed out Big Consulting’s reliability in keeping to dead lines and delivering the specified solution as a particular strength, to the extent that they talked of a 'culture of delivery'.

Construction and manifestations of elitism

Almost everybody working at Big Consulting had a higher academic education. Consultants were mainly recruited direct from the largest Swedish Universities and degrees in business administration or engineering were mandatory entry qualifications. The company attempted to profile itself in PR material as an elite, demanding but richly rewarding place to work. Judging from polls among Swedish business administration and engineering students, the students seemed to have adopted this message and also decided to approve: Big Consulting consistently ranked high in student polls that ascertain which firms are the most attractive employers in Sweden.

Big Consulting claimed that they recruit the “best people”. In the Swedish context studied they can probably support that claim at least more so than most other companies, including some of their competitors. Big had a good reputation - it was broadly recognised for having talented people who were highly competent and delivery-oriented. In terms of Big’s elite form the company was a highly rationalised, well-structured bureaucracy with systems and procedures for almost everything. It has a well-developed machinery for evaluation, feedback and ‘people improvement’. Promotion was carefully regulated and seen as guarantee of quality. A strong global presence, rapid growth and a well-known, globally marketed brand name express the company’s status. Very ambitious corporate growth goals might also be viewed as a symbol of success and claims to superiority. Extensive rituals said to represent quality checks of rankings and feedback to employees could also be seen as manifestations of the firm’s ability to develop highly competent people.

Consequences of elite status and identity in work activities

Belonging to the company for many was seen as a confirmation of their worth, but individuals felt that they must perform very well in order to fit in with the dominant ethos. People seemed therefore to have internalised a strong performance orientation.
They were known to work hard and frequently experienced very long working hours. Interviewees talked about 60-70 hours per week and sometimes more. “I don’t like to be obliged to explain if I go home at 5” stated one interviewee.

The status of the company as highly successful facilitated marketing as well as recruitment and work motivation. The identification with a company seen as employing among the best also made individuals more inclined to accept work that, at least for younger, recent recruits (this is more than half of the total number of organisational members) – was potentially or actually seen as boring and frustrating. However, the discrepancy between the self-understanding and expectations of the people recruited and the tasks and work conditions offered was also a significant source of tension. The positive effects of elite identity and the self-discipline associated with this could frequently only partly compensate for this discrepancy. The elite status of belonging to the company also seemed however, to trigger expectations regarding high pay. People compared themselves with friends, etc and were sometimes unwilling to accept less than those people they knew with higher salaries in other firms. This led to efforts to raise salaries within the company and also motivated people to consider other firms to work for in order to achieve higher salaries. These two elements led to a fairly high turnover that to some extent could be related to elite constructions of people.

Discussion

Routes to greatness: the use of different resources for elite constructions

The four vignettes presented here illustrate that there are many ways in which an elite social identity, which individuals appeared to ‘willingly’ incorporate into their sense of self can be socially constructed. Whilst management across sectors are often involved in elaborate attempts to promote and encourage member identification with organisations, the possibilities of, and/or the value of, achieving this are better in some firms rather than others. KIFs appear to be an ideal setting for elite social identities to be constructed because of the type of people employed and the nature of much of the work that is conducted in these types of firm.

It is important to recognise that it was not necessary to have an international reputation – ‘a brand name’ to reinforce notions of elitism. In the three smaller firms, elitism was primarily an internal project and this appeared to be sufficient and self-reinforcing over time as relatively loyal workforces developed in each of the firms. We identify below four broad categorisations of the way in which elitism was socially constructed in each of the firms. We then consider why this identity was particularly useful in each of the firms.

The entrepreneurial organization as a resource for elite constructions

The founder at Universal, went to great trouble to construct and promote a fascinating corporate identity that would attract the curiosity of entrepreneurially inclined scientists and technologists from around the world. The image of the firm as highly dynamic and focused upon wealth creation for clients and the firm has become institutionalised over time. The success of spinout companies and the number of patents that had been produced both, to some degree, provided tangible and external legitimisation for claims of elitism and reinforced ideas around the innovative capacity of the firm. This was particularly appealing to the professional identity of the scientists and technologists working in the firm as they recognised the
opportunities afforded by the organisation to explore and exploit innovative ideas they might have. In addition, the highly informal, autonomous working conditions that were offered, embedded in strong shared values centred on egalitarianism made the company a very attractive place to work. Ample resources and very high rejection rates of candidates were all signifiers of the scarce expertise the firm wished to nurture and signalled elite status to the scientists and technologists working in the firm.

**The progressive organisation as a resource for elite constructions**

In the case of Enator, managers engaged in great efforts to construct an appealing corporate identity to support identification with it (Alvesson, 1995, 2000). Efforts include elaborated rhetoric and image management regarding the claimed unique characteristics and excellence of the company. In the absence of an obvious elite status, the founders and managers of Enator worked hard to install the company with special qualities, partly of a more emotional character. They were attempting to develop affective commitment to the firm. Success in affecting the constructions of the company amongst the personnel meant that it became institutionalised: the company represented a value above the specific instrumental outcomes for the employees (Selznick, 1957).

**The aristocratic organization as a resource for elite constructions**

In the case of Paramount Consulting, the distinctive nature of the work that was conducted and the prestige of the client base meant that it was relatively easy for individuals to believe that they had become one of the professional aristocracy. Very senior people from some of the largest professional firms in the UK had chosen to work in the firm demonstrating their belief in the founder and the work conducted by the firm. Consultants did however have to subordinate themselves to the founder whose autocratic style of management was somewhat at odds with elite identities. Paramount Consulting had managed to achieve recognition within the mid-to-top-tier legal sector in the UK. Because of the status of its clients it was attributed an elite reputation almost by proxy, by other firms within the legal sector. Thus despite it’s small size, a corporate image grounded in elitism was relatively unproblematic to develop. Thus elitism here was very much grounded in relative terms. Because of the firm’s small size however, tangible manifestations of elitism were drawn upon frequently, in order to reinforce perceptions of elite identity. Hence great attention was paid to symbolic detail in this firm in order to sustain a somewhat tenuous construction of elitism.

**The ‘Club’ at Big consulting as a resource for elite constructions**

Senior management at Big Consulting could rely on the strong brand name of the company mainly contingent upon its rapid growth and financial performance as a basis for elite constructions. Big Consulting is amongst the large, prestigious knowledge-intensive organisations and the status and identity-strengthening capacity of membership is a major motive for joining and staying in the firm. In this case, the reputation of the firm was such that simply through being an organisational member, individuals felt that they were members of an elite club.

The identification worked via a combination of internal corporate pride and external status of being affiliated through the prestige of the organisation. The more distinctive, well-known and well-respected organisation the more likely is that the
employee define him- or herself through belonging to it (Ashforth & Mael 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). Growth and large size indisputably signal success and wealth. It is, important to consider both being known within the significant sectors one operates within or is eager to attain recognition from, and the larger business and working life context. Scoring high on both most strongly facilitates a credible construction and broad support of one’s elite status. Big Consulting then has clearly the strongest case for a credible elite identity that is broadly and consistently backed up.

The role of elitism in core work activities within KIFs

In Universal, consultants could genuinely choose when and on what project to work. This was not rhetoric and was demonstrated in the long holidays taken by some. It was evident however, that the majority of consultants tended to work very hard indeed - most of the time. Their particularly high self-esteem carefully nurtured by the founder and senior managers and focussed upon creativity and innovation meant that self-imposed, normatively high standards of professional performance were expected in the firm. To be seem as credible within an entrepreneurial environment it was imperative to conform to the creative prototype that had developed. The annual ranking system was a particularly insidious device for ensuring that nobody ever became complacent – everyone aimed to be one of the elite within the elite and recognised that their position could always be contested with the invention of the next new product.

In Enator there were substantive reasons why managers nurtured the view of the company as being highly people oriented. Apart from particular practices and arrangements that employees found appealing, this understanding also facilitated the institutionalisation of the company: as a flat, original, ‘funny’, friendship-oriented and creative organisation. The company was therefore viewed as special and more progressive than most others and thus a source of pride and affective commitment. Employees could therefore again be trusted to self-regulate their behaviour and work hard and perform well in the absence of more direct, traditional forms of control and personnel practices.

In Paramount project working relied upon highly collaborative group working, particularly as the firm was so small. Clients were known to want to work with particular individuals but projects necessarily required expertise which were dispersed across the firm. Therefore a shared social identity grounded in elitism provided the necessary ‘glue’ to promote collaborative work efforts across a group of highly egotistical individuals.

In Big, the notion of belonging to an elite club meant that management did not have to be too sensitive about personnel issues of people below partner level. Many individuals are attracted to large, well-known companies, which is to some extent contingent more upon the name and image than the work conditions offered, In particular, fairly junior people at Big often had little discretion and sometimes were treated as exchangeable parts in a machine bureaucracy. According to another case study of a very large management consulting company, there is "never a shortage of hopefuls eager to join the ranks" so the partners have over the years developed a callous and cavalier attitude to personnel management" (Akehurst 1994: 192).
A relative far reaching rationalisation of work procedures is thus possible. There is a tolerance among employees for being treated as a resource, being exchangeable and being obliged to comply with somewhat impersonal arrangements. In Big Consulting increasing turnover and an expanding market has meant that more recently there are concerns about how to retain personnel. The dominating hierarchy and the pressure to fit into rather narrowly defined work roles are a source of frustration for some employees and are at odds with most notions of elite characteristics. Nevertheless, the elite status of the company prevails and means that there are many applicants for advertised positions. The status and self esteem associated with working for the firm is therefore a rather powerful resource for HRM in this firm. Whilst the work content is sometimes at odds with the expectations that a person who considers themselves to be a member of an elite may have, creating frustrations, elite identity – at least at Big Consulting - means a preparedness to cope with stress and highly pressurised work.

Conclusions

Our empirical material and the subsequent comparisons and analysis lead us to a number of preliminary conclusions about elite constructions in KIFs. These conclusions are necessarily restricted in their grounding within the four case studies presented here. It is evident that the four cases demonstrate that there are many routes to becoming what individuals in the various organizations’ – and to some extent their environments – perceive to be among the best in this field, without recourse to specific rules or referees. Individuals, can, more or less try to invent their version of superiority, but typically broadly recognised social values must be referred to and the credibility problems may be substantial in the long term for other than the very large, well-known firms. The social values that are drawn upon tend to be complementary to the type of people employed by these firms which eases the self-categorisation process with regard to accessibility and fit. For example, the value of wealth creation and entrepreneurialism to scientists and technologists at Universal was, on the basis of their professions, intuitively appealing.

Our cases demonstrated that both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards can be important signifiers of elitism. Earning a lot of money may signal elitism, but also being relaxed about income and giving priority to work content and intrinsic rewards is another route. Climbing to the top of the firm is an alternative. However, belonging to a very progressive, flat company in which career-orientations and many ladders are seen as old fashioned and inferior is equally valid. The highly specialist and unique nature of the work conducted is another route but so too is working on fairly mundane tasks within a highly respected ‘branded’ firm. A lack of career paths in some of these smaller firms, which tended to signify an emphasis primarily on intrinsic rewards, also paradoxically reinforced individual’s perceptions of having already reached the top (in highly relative terms) of their professional careers. The routes that had been taken to get there varied however. The route taken could be by virtue of the expertise one possessed or by virtue of the particular social skills one had acquired.

Financial success and money is important however, in terms of elitism. Pecuniary success is generally seen as a major indication on elitism. It is so both at the organisational and individual level. However a one-dimensional preoccupation with money as the sole criterion for establishing elite status is problematic. In many fields – artistic, scholarly and professional – giving priority to financial reward is perceived as somewhat flawed and demeaning. More broadly intrinsic sources of motivation are
often viewed as morally superior than instrumental motives such as pay, status and promotion. Most people would probably rate a physician that has chosen the profession because of a genuine interest in the job higher than someone whose principle motive for job choice is a genuine interest in maximising income. Employees in Enator and Universal expressed a relaxed attitude to pay, saying that other aspects of work were more significant. The downplaying of instrumental motives signals the quality of the organisation. The founder of Paramount Consulting claimed that he would have earned more as a single consultant, but he preferred to gather and work with other like minded people. Wealth creation generally, as well as for the firm itself, was important signifiers of some of the unique characteristics of Universal. A high degree of financial success, however it might be construed, facilitates elite construction work, and may even be a precondition for credibility, but other values may be drawn upon in order to balance financial criteria for marking elite status.

Size is important, but it tends to work in contradictory ways. Being very large and well known might be considered to be crucial for a credible case about elite status. However, a very small company can claim elite status within significant market sectors by virtue of the specialised work conducted. Elite can signify exclusivity and can be gauged in relation to significant others such as clients as was the case in Paramount. Large size also tends to go hand in hand with some structural features such as bureaucracy (Donaldson, 1985). These are strongly at odds with notions of elite’s. Individuals have to subordinate themselves to an advanced apparatus safeguarding compliance. Adapting to bureaucratic pressures to subordination and conformism is not what most people associate with elite’s. Neither is almost total subordination to clients as was the case in Paramount Consulting. Of course, it can be argued that all people that are seen as successful in one way or another adapt to the rules of the social field in which they are active however, often this is hidden (Bourdieu, 1979). In large companies however, the pressure to and compliance with hierarchical and bureaucratic structures are highly visible. It is actually a part of the organisational logic that this is visible to people that organizational members meet in various work contexts. Size and its adjunct bureaucracy are thus a mixed blessing for elite identity constructions.

Small scale can offer more flexibility for arrangements supporting elite constructions. For example, in the three other case study firms, highly informal ways of organising and managing predominated and primarily reflected trust in organisational members to self-manage in a professional and responsible manner. The high self esteem and strong social identity found in these firms led to individuals ‘naturally’ working hard, collaboratively and performing well in order to sustain their sense of self and organisational identity. The findings from these cases therefore concur with the existing SIT and self categorisation literature but also highlight something of the importance of context and relational processes involved in developing a strongly shared, organisational identity. The relationship between a knowledge-intensive setting and notions of elitism highlights the importance of accessibility and fit for processes of self-categorisation.

The four cases indicate that there are different notions of elite and different organizational forms ‘hosting’ these:

- The club at Big Consulting: there are fairly strong boundaries between those belonging to Big Consulting and others, a feeling of exclusiveness and, superiority
towards others and a basically instrumental attitude to the club. The organizational form can be described as one of technocratic excellence.

The community at Enator: here social belongingness is central, social relations are characterized by a high degree of attachment, people feel special rather than superior. It is organizationally framed through managerial led and corporate culture-driven community arrangements.

The entrepreneur at Universal Consulting: Entrepreneurial activities and behaviour are valued highly within Universal Consulting. To some extent therefore there always exists some tension between individuality and team-based project working. This is reflected in the egalitarianism and collegiality that co-exists across different scientific and technological disciplines. This firm has the feel of a highly respected university where people perceive themselves to be better than ‘others’ working in similar technologically orientated consultancies but who lack the freedom and access to resources available to consultants at Universal.

The aristocracy at Paramount Consulting: here status and prestige is everything. Professionalism in combination with strategic expertise is drawn upon to secure this very tenuous elite identity. Tangible symbols are therefore required to promote and sustain this construction as external reputation is heavily reliant on personal and professional relationships with other PSFs, which are inherently vulnerable.

Elite constructions appear to be particularly important in relation to the labour market in terms of the recruitment and retention of personnel. However, all four cases demonstrated different approaches to the management of employees, at least two of which were at odds with elite constructions. For example, the subordination to hierarchy at Big and the subordination to the autocratic founder at Paramount clearly contradict notions of elitism. Elite constructions may however, be strongly communicated to potential employees and thus facilitate recruitment. This is typically most salient in very large, well known companies. It is also salient in highly specialised labour markets – or segments thereof – either the reputation or the direct perception of potential candidates of people, practices or results of the ‘elite company’ may have significant attraction power. Elite attracts perhaps most strongly at a distance however, as the actual ‘star qualities’ may be less apparent with close proximity and the distinctiveness in relation to more ordinary companies may be less noticeable. The very good reputation of Big consulting for example, to some extent contrasts with the actual work conditions, which are frequently far from glamorous. The image of the company does not seem to work as powerfully in tying the personnel to the company but is does counteract turnover as it has the power to attract large number of applicants. In Enator and Universal Consulting the situation is reversed. Low turnover could to some extent be connected to the active promotion of the special qualities of the company. However, this effect is weaker in terms of attracting candidates, partly due to these companies not being that well known generally, and partly due to the fact that internal organisational arrangements and social climate are not so apparent. Personal networks were important for recruitment at Enator and Paramount Consulting possibly because these firms relied heavily on the social skills of organisational members. This approach to recruitment therefore aimed to ensure a degree of homogeneity across these firms. This approach might also be useful in ensuring that the dominant organisational ethos is not contested.

To conclude it is important to emphasise the pivotal role elite identity performs in normatively regulating behaviour in these four firms. The idea of belonging to an elite and thus behaving and performing accordingly (to the prototype) seems to increase the
willingness to work hard and perform well. This is salient across all of the four cases and may be particularly important in the three smaller firms where the work process is largely autonomous within small project teams. An elite social identity serves to regulate behaviour and self-discipline individuals to work hard in their somewhat futile attempts to sustain and secure this distinctive social identity - as ambivalence between solidarity and competition becomes apparent over time and elites within elites begin to emerge (Courpasson, 2000). Our cases demonstrated that the subjugation of subjectivity within a corporate identity premised on elitism (Willmott, 1993) naturally and intuitively appeals to knowledge workers because it promotes and reinforces a normative identity grounded in access to, and control over, scarce resources. Thus once notions of elitism are established, consultants ‘willingly’ engage and become actively involved in perpetuating an elite corporate identity. Hence, they not only manage themselves but also intensify the management of the meaning given to organisational life. A critical analysis of the construction and management of meaning within the KIFs studied thus illustrates just how far the boundaries of normative control can be extended within creative, knowledge-intensive environments.

References.


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