From 50 Shades of Blue to…What?

Homogenization Through Performance Management

Authors:

Erander, Henrik

Krappe, Erik

Westerlund, Jeremiah

Supervisor:

Spoelstra, Sverre

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Thesis' title: From 50 shades of Blue to... What?: Homogenization Through Performance Management

Seminar date: 3rd of June 2020

Class: FEKH49: Business Administration: Bachelor's degree project in Organization, 15 credits

Authors: Henrik Erander, Erik Krappe & Jeremiah Westerlund

Supervisor: Sverre Spoelstra

Five keywords: Performance Management, Identity Regulation, Identity Work, Middle Managers, Management Consulting

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to gain further insight into the ways by which performance management systems affect the identities of employees by empirically studying a consulting firm that uses a combination of quantitative assessment and qualitative assessment in its making decision-making. We seek to understand the identity effects that result in so-called "avoidable" attrition/turnover amidst knowledge workers.

Methodology: This qualitative study, in the interpretivist tradition, is based on semi-structured interviews with employees, most of them consultants, at a global management consulting firm referred to as "Solutions".

Theoretical perspective: Theoretically, we are interested in the relationships between identity regulation, identity work and self-identity, which are concepts suggested by Alvesson & Willmott (2002). Based on these concepts, we analyze the identity effects of a performance management system which is made manifest, in practical terms, via various performance measurement tools. Our aim is to contribute to the literature on performance management by focusing on its interplay with identity. The mentioned theoretical perspective is applied primarily and viewed from the middle management's point of view.

Empirical foundation: This study focuses on a firm where a performance management system is actively used to homogenize its employees in desired identities. Consequently, employees find themselves at a crossroad where they either start to identify with the values of the firm or leave the company. We highlight the complex role middle managers play in the process i.e. they find themselves in a challenging position, where their qualitative assessments are assessed in terms of their own career opportunities.

Conclusion: Based on our findings, we argue that the literature on performance management overestimates the strengths of quantitative-based performance measurement. Instead, our study shows the importance of the human factor. Specifically, we argue for more attention to the roles that middle managers play in interpreting, communicating, and valuing the performance of employees. Their engagement with identity regulation and identity work is of specific interest here.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

"...Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted"- William Bruce Cameron (1963)

Management consulting firms (MCFs) are faced with a barrage of issues (McGrath, 2019) that continually tests the limits of their durability. With issues like the attraction/development of client relationships, the relevancy of services given in regard to the so-called "time-bound value", an extremely competitive and cutthroat market, all of which emphasizes the need to find and keep talents who provide the innovative ideas that ensure the MCF's long term survival. As such, most firms are implored to find the right type of measurements to measure the right type of things, whatever it may mean (Osak, 2015).

What this suggests is a fundamental concern within organizations regarding managing performance, effectively, in order to attain set goals and retain critical talents within its workforce (Hausknecht et al., 2009; Price,1997). Given that the human-capital factor of management consulting is vital for its success (Schweyer, 2004), and any ineffectiveness in this regard, inherently results in an inability to retain key talent, which in turn has a negative effect on its productivity (Hutchens et al., 1982). As such, it becomes relevant for MCF's to not only measure the performance of its workforce, but also ensure that the appropriate channels are put in place to correctly and effectively identify gaps, communicate strategy/goals and increase the productivity of its human element. An implication that suggests being able to figure what needs to be measured in order to ensure improvements (Alvesson, 2004).

Furthermore, this need to implement appropriate performance measures, gets further complicated by the fact that the typical worker, involved with the type of ambiguous task and contextual work management consulting firms engage in, are mostly educated professionals, aware of their self-worth and most predisposed to higher job mobility than average (Waldman and Arora, 2004). This, in turn, puts further strain on these organizations to find, compete, and develop these talents in a

manner deemed fitting of their statuses and expectations via innovative measures like training, compensation and appraisal (Chee Hong et al., 2012). Additionally, the MCFs must contend with issues arising during their efforts to manage the identities of their workforce in order to guarantee alignment and achievement of organizational goals. A hurdle that has proven challenging for most firms, especially management consulting firms, that constantly have to deal with issues relating to "job hopping" i.e. when employees change jobs frequently (Long, 2016).

A plight that could appear to a layperson, somewhat paradoxical, especially when certain studies demonstrate how the first point of entry for many graduates seems to be MCFs. These firms often rank the number one career path among most graduates (Consultancy.uk, 2017); and several of the consulting firms rank high on the 'top recruiters for graduates' lists (TargetJobs, n.d.); with many citing remuneration and job intricacy as attractive factors. On the other hand, some studies also illustrate how the relatively high turnover rates seem to have taken center-stage within this branch (Zambeasy.com ltd, 2005).

Despite the popularity of consulting within the job market, the industry still experiences annual employee turnover rates of around 15-20% (Batchelor, 2011); with plausible explanations for the relatively high attrition/turnover rate from the consultant's perspective being its:

- inability to allow consultants influence which projects they get assigned to;
- failure, in most cases, to offer better remuneration/compensation than the competition;
- lack of investment in staff training, i.e. commoditization of their services;
- and the inability to offer flexible working hours (Zambeasy.com ltd, 2005).

A situation Allen (2010) refers to as "avoidable turnover" (see figure 1); turnover that is not only preventable but also potentially harmful for the organization (Allen, 2010). This is because such 'avoidable turnovers' have the propensity to be financially draining for companies especially when one also factors in the costs associated with 'involuntary turnover' i.e. recruitment and training costs (Bersin, 2013). As such, organizations are implored, theoretically speaking, to have as low a turnover rate as possible, through the implementation and development of retention strategies for

these top talents in a way that reduces the avoidable turnover rates in knowledge-intensive firms (Lau and Albright 2011).
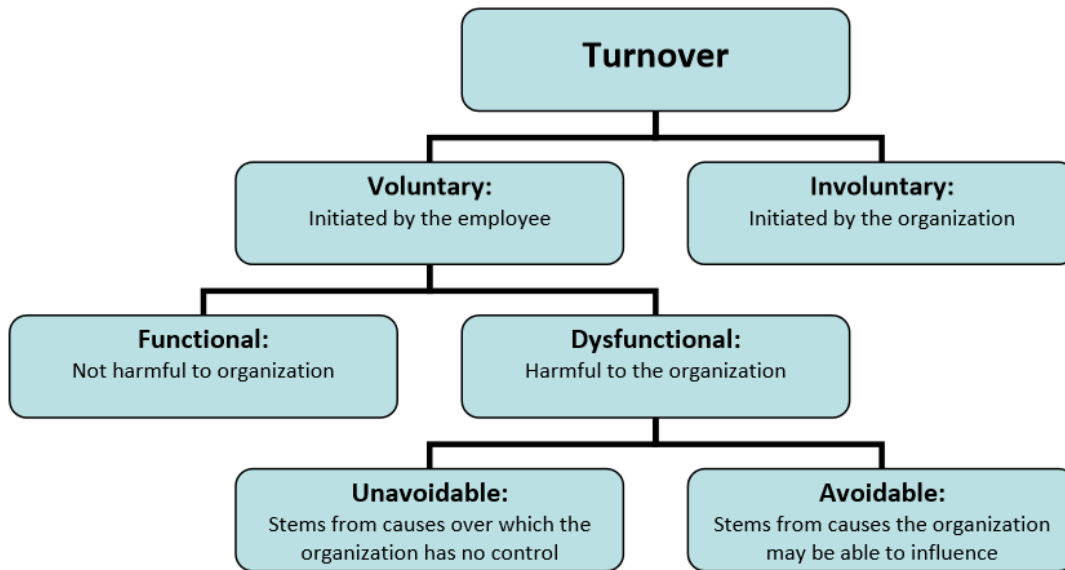
Figure 1: adapted from Allen (2010)

That said, during this study's data collection process, we found that the general impression from our interview subjects regarding the perceived, unusually high turnover-rates, was mostly indifference or in some cases, positive. The predominant view shared amongst the interview subjects indicated a general acceptance or rather normalization of these 15-20% turnover/attrition rates. They argue that it is essential in order to sustain the innovative nature of the firm, e.g. through the shedding of what some might consider excess, unproductive, weight, i.e. those who do not contribute sufficiently to the realization of organizational goals (Batchelor, 2011).

Although, when pressed for further information on the situation, the interviewees as mentioned above seemed to offer, as an explanation for the avoidable staff attrition/turnover, different narratives in regards to the organization's efforts to stimulate commitment, career development and satisfaction through its usage of various performance management (PM) initiatives. Thus, an apparent contradiction, i.e. knowledge worker narratives which appear inconsistent with theoretical findings on the subject matter, has proven appealing to explore. Given that this 'avoidable turnover' is often initiated at the behest of the employee due to the firm's inability to align personal interests and/or identities, with the overall organizational goals; it becomes

paramount to understand, both from the firm and individual perspective, the dynamics that results in this phenomena (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007).

Therefore, this study intends to contribute to the understanding on how MCFs work to align identities through its use of various performance management tools, and the interpretations from its intended targets to optimize retention. Despite the multifaceted nature of performance management (Eriksson-Zetterquist, Müller and Styrhe, 2011), this study has been patterned to focus on two particularly distinctive features concerning management consulting, namely:

1. Organization's point-of-view: A need to keep and develop the right kind of identities, identities deemed suitable for the realization of overall organizational goals.

2. Employee point-of-view: the construction, deconstruction, reshaping of knowledge worker's identities, that acts as a determinant as to whether the person(s) mentioned above stays or goes.

1.2 Problematization

Our main objective with this thesis is not to investigate how the attrition or turnover rates can be reduced, but instead from a theoretical perspective, understand issues relating to implemented performance management measures and the discourses surrounding it. We consider these issues vital to understand from the middle manager's perspective, as these determine the efforts utilized to align the goals of subordinates with those of the organization (Tajfel, 1972 in Hogg, 2001).

Our central premise is based on the assumption that employees are produced by specific human resources practices, rather than discovered by them (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007); and that these practices are intimately connected to norm-making, identity-influencing and organizational culture. This suggests that an individual's occupation constitutes a strong source for their identity creation; specifically, individuals working in knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs).

Hence, the implication being that KIFs utilize various avenues to shape their employees' identities through regulatory measures, i.e. balancing employee empowerment and operational discipline via chosen performance management efforts (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson, 2004; Gulati,

2018). A utilization of regulatory measures that gets further complicated given the fact that knowledge workers, renowned for their inclinations for work-autonomy, e.g. self-managed teams, often resist efforts they experience as stifling to the creative and ambiguous nature of their work (Gulati, 2018).

As such, this study intends to not focus on how identity-regulation is actively used by organizations to exercise extensive control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Instead, our notion is that the performance management (PM) measures employed by Solutions (pseudonym for our investigated firm) are strongly contingent upon employees' interpretations of it. Therefore, we aim to investigate what the practical consequences (in terms of homogenizing processes) are; given the symbiotic, intricate relationship these PM measures appear to have with the various identities and narratives that are used to justify the relationship. Based on this, this study's purpose is formulated as follows below.

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to gain further insight into the ways of which performance management systems affect the identities of employees. Empirically, we study a consulting firm that uses a combination of quantitative assessment and qualitative assessment in making decisions about promotion, development and retention. We seek to understand the identity effects that result in so-called "avoidable" attrition/turnover amidst knowledge workers. Our research question is the following:

- How do measures intended to enhance performance and implemented to achieve organizational objectives impact individual identity creations within a management consulting firm?

1.4 Study object

Our study has been conducted based on ten semi-structured interviews with employees (all assigned various pseudonyms) of a global high-end MCF assigned the pseudonym "Solutions". With more than 100.000 employees worldwide and annual revenues expressed in billions of euros, Solutions is considered a major global actor within management consulting. However, our study

focuses exclusively on Solutions' Nordic operations and the company has, amongst others, several offices in Sweden to provide for their extensive repertoire of clients which ranges from smaller companies to multinational corporate groups. Due to the substantial client focus, project/client based working methods characterize Solutions' day-to-day work. Hence, employees usually spend their whole working week except Fridays at their clients' offices. Since the whole nature of consulting work is founded upon clients, Solutions is dependent on continuously selling their services to new/existing clients. The employees are also expected to do internal work, even though this focus is secondary to client work.

The firm specializes in consulting within information technology and management issues and provides advice/solutions related to the business areas mentioned above to their clients. Combining expertise and technology is part of Solutions' philosophy that is shared among the national offices. All in all, due to the firm's success rate, they have a very positive global reputation.

1.5 Disposition

This thesis is structured into six chapters, namely introduction, theory, methodology, analysis, discussion and lastly, conclusion. In our introduction, we aim to provide the reader with the phenomena that made us interested in the current purpose of the study, namely turnover management within the consulting industry. Subsequently, in our problematization, we will narrow our reasoning down to a more theoretical level and put emphasis on how we are planning to contribute to existing knowledge. Here, we put emphasis on performance management and identity formation.

Since our aim is to elevate the knowledge about the relation between performance management and identity formation, and since our study showed that middle managers play an important role in this process; our main theoretical concepts that will be presented in the theory chapter are performance management, identity formation and middle managers. Bearing in mind that performance management in this study comprises many components, amongst which performance measurement, which is used to increase and improve performance.

Our methodology chapter is designed with the purpose of describing and motivating our methodological choices, such as why we have chosen to perform a qualitative study given the thesis' purpose and what reasoning underlies our selection process.

The analysis constitutes the main body of the thesis and here we aim to provide our empirical findings to the reader. We will begin with a brief introduction to the company followed by a description of their performance management system, the role middle managers play in regards to the system, how the system impacts remuneration and career advancement and lastly, how the consultants relate to the system. We ask the reader to bear in mind that performance measurement is a theoretical sub-category to performance management and when we describe Solution's grading system, we refer to a performance measurement system. Our last section (4.3) plays the most central role in our attempts of fulfilling this thesis' purpose. Here, our empirical interpretations will be related to theory concerning identity formation.

In the discussion chapter, we will discuss which impact identity regulation through performance management has on employees' identity creation and we stress that the identity regulation in many cases has a homogenizing effect on a substantial share of the workforce. Also, we bring up how middle managers are involved in this process and the consequences of the process in terms of employee retention as illustrated chapter 5.3, figure 11. We ask the reader to bear in mind that whilst the intention behind matrixes of this caliber, is to simplify contextual situations, they could also result in an oversimplification of the subject's realities, for example, other factors could explain the noticed phenomena e.g. gender, race, sexual orientations, religious beliefs, cultural contexts etc. However, our aim is simply to give another explanation or gradation to the turnover resulting from the interplay between PM/identity-regulation and middle management's interpretation.

In the conclusion chapter, we argue that existing literature underestimates the impact middle managers have on PM. They are, according to our study, often key players in the identity regulation through their interpretation, communication and valuing of the performance management system.

2. Theory

The theory chapter aims to present research regarding performance management, various aspects of identity and middle managers. Unlike the previous chapter, the research presented in this chapter has its origin solely from academia. Initially, several aspects of performance management will be presented, focusing on the psychological contract, the practicality of performance management i.e. the physical embodiment of the measures in terms of "performance measurement tools" used to communicate and identify gaps, and finally, its potential limitations. In the later parts of the chapter, the concept of identity is presented focusing on identity work and regulation. Lastly, the theory regarding the middle manager's role in the assessment part of performance management will be presented. Throughout the presented theory, an underlying focus towards knowledge workers and knowledge-intensive firms will become apparent, in order to shed light towards our intended purpose.

2.1 Performance management: the art of managing people and/or knowledge?

2.1.1 The Psychological contract: unwritten but equally binding

> *".... A major feature of the psychological contract is the individual's belief that an agreement exists that is mutual; in effect, his or her beliefs in the existence of a common understanding with another binds that party to a particular course of action. Since individuals rely upon their understanding of this agreement in subsequent choices and efforts they take, they anticipate benefits from fulfilled commitments and incur losses if another fails to live up to theirs, whatever the individual interprets another's commitments to be" - (Rousseau, 2005a p.193)*

The psychological contract, insinuated by some to be "elusive and challenging to define" (Guest, 1998a cited in Beardwell, Holden & Claydon, 2004), is a term principally attributed to Argyris (1960 cited in Latham, 2012). It deals with the relationship an employer has to its employees; a relationship embedded within a set of unwritten expectations and promises that over time results in some mental schema between the parties involved, that projects a feeling of stability and durability (Beardwell, Holden & Claydon, 2004).

Simply put, psychological contracts are built upon the concept of mutuality from both parties that determines or governs other dimensions of the relationship not primarily covered by formal contractual obligations binding the actors, e.g. career development, loyalty, commitment, flexibility, employee introductions, fairness, hierarchical advancement and/or freedom from fear of reprisals; all in an effort to justify and clarify the freedoms/rights given in exchange for certain benefits (Latham, 2012; Rousseau, 2001 cited in Beardwell, Holden & Claydon, 2004). With the implications of not fulfilling the promises mentioned above, being a deterioration of not just the reciprocal relationship, but also emotional turmoil within the employee, who feels maltreated by the employer's violation of the unwritten expectations (Latham, 2012).

So, what does this imply for knowledge intensive firms with an educated, mostly independent workforce accustomed to certain work-related expectations? According to Beardwell, Holden and Claydon (2004), a significant issue faced by knowledge-intensive firms is the implementation of a culture or structure that offers, from the onset, a realistic glimpse of the firm's expectations to its new entrants; while recognizing the impact of implemented change on existing employees. It also requires the implementation of measures to mitigate the effects it could have on work-morale (Gilliland, Benson & Scheppers, 1998).

Furthermore, firms often grapple with the execution of an all-encompassing management style that encourages a sense of security amongst its employees while simultaneously emboldening their commitment levels through meanings and values utilization (Beardwell, Holden & Claydon, 2004). What this means is that attention needs to be put on other factors like open-communication and work-life balance on every level (Beardwell, Holden and Claydon, 2004).

Furthermore, it becomes paramount that firms model their performance management measures beyond extrinsic, monetary factors. This is due to the fact that any feeling or sentiments of unfulfilled expectations or promises, often results in unproductive, dysfunctional behaviours that have a lasting effect on both fronts, e.g. total erosion of trust bonds between both parties (Gilliland, Benson & Scheppers, 1998; Gilliland and Chan, 2001 cited in Latham, 2012).

2.1.2 Performance management: a means to an end?

The belief that firms should strive to implement measures that go beyond extrinsic values stems from an initial theoretical assumption which equated workers' job satisfaction levels to their levels of productivity (Molander, 1996). A somewhat mistaken view, given that subsequent empirical findings show that the relationship between job satisfaction and the levels of productivity is in fact, not necessarily correlated. For example, factory line-workers with specific targets may meet the demanded production quotas, but it does not mean that they are satisfied with the monotony of their jobs (Molander, 1996).

As such, a dilemma faced by managers interested in shaping performance has been how to sufficiently inspire workers in a way that increases their productivity and work-satisfaction. That is to say, finding alternative ways to not only keep workers satisfied but also increase productivity levels to the point where organizational goals are achieved (Beardwell, Holden and Claydon, 2004).

Some researchers opine that the best course of action for firms would be to shift focus from trying to satisfy and keep happy the entire workforce to focusing solely on satisfying the best talents (Molander, 1996). Given that their satisfaction, through material incentives or likewise, results in improved productivity (Porter and Lawler 1968 cited in Molander 1996).

Whereas others believe that performance can be shepherded through a specific choice or mix of either concertive (control), remunerative (rewards and benefits) or normative managerial practices (Beardwell, Holden and Claydon 2004). Practices that aim to improve performance (both organizational and individual) through the concentration of knowledge workers, the outcomes of their efforts and the aggregation/measurement of their performance thereof (Schama 1995 cited in Beardwell, Holden and Claydon 2004).

That said, the focus of the notions as mentioned above, seems to be thinly veiled attempts at figuring out ways to motivate knowledge workers. In an effort to understand to what degree this motivation can be utilized to ensure best outcomes, and by what means the performances resulting in these outcomes can be reasonably measured (Latham, 2012). Thus, the advent of a system used

by KIFs to determine which objectives are desirable, which outcomes to measure, and finally, appropriate methods of linking rewards/benefits to outcomes as mentioned earlier, i.e. performance management (Beardwell, Holden and Claydon 2004).

One could argue that performance management is a continuous process that enables firms to adopt the integrated approach towards the creation of motivation, learning and objectives commitment with performance appraisal as a tool amongst others, for achieving longevity and success; whilst allowing for the exploration of different purposes, e.g. strategic, administrative, informational, developmental, organizational maintenance, documental purposes etc. (Aguinis, 2004; VerWeire and Van Den Berghe, 2004 cited in Gruman and Saks, 2010).

It transcends the underlying assumptions of employees' performance being directly correlated to their outputs. However, it is instead explained by the behaviours and actions the employees engage in while performing their duties (Aguinis, 2004). This way, a firm that hopes to successfully integrate performance management as a core of its business practices must understand that "...performance is determined by a combination of declarative knowledge (i.e. information), procedural knowledge (i.e. know-how) and motivation (i.e. willingness to perform). Thus, "Performance = declarative knowledge $\times$ procedural knowledge $\times$ motivation" (Aguinis 2004 p. 89). And this 'performance' is made manifest in the various activities (both contextual and task-specific) undertaken by the worker, in an effort by management, to adequately reinforce and encourage the individual's contributions towards the fulfilment of organizational goals within various given contexts (Aguinis 2004).

Simply put, performance management focuses on the alignment of workers' goals with those of the organization, as a way of ensuring that they perform their duties as mandated and outlined by the firm (Wikström and Martin, 2012). What does this entail from a managerial perspective in practice?

2.1.3 Performance management: a herculean task in practice?

It appears that top management's predominant task is the application of various methods that pays attention to external and internal factors that influences the motivations and performance of its

workers (Wikström & Martin, 2012), all in an effort to cultivate the level of performance that allows for the achievement of organizational goals in a global, highly competitive market (Dessler, 2003). Thus, the main issue becomes which managerial approach amongst another plethora of performance management methods is most suitable to address the dynamism and variating factors that complicate efforts to ensure job-satisfaction and sustained levels of productivity from a human resource management (HRM) perspective.

Storey, Billsberry and Salaman (2005 pp. 321) opine that the best approach towards balancing and aligning the different expectations and goals of the actors would be through the application of what they refer to as "the performance management cycle". A performance management cycle that incorporates certain aspects of 'the goal-setting theory' with elements of 'the expectancy theory' to achieve its organizational goals. Goal-setting theory, in this instance, refers to what employees need to get done and the amount of effort required to accomplish it (Locke, Shaw, Saari & Latham, 1981). Whereas, the expectancy theory, deals with the correlation of individual motivation to expectations for the task performed and the values attached to it (Vroom, 1965; Eriksson-Zetterquist, Müllern & Styhre, 2011).
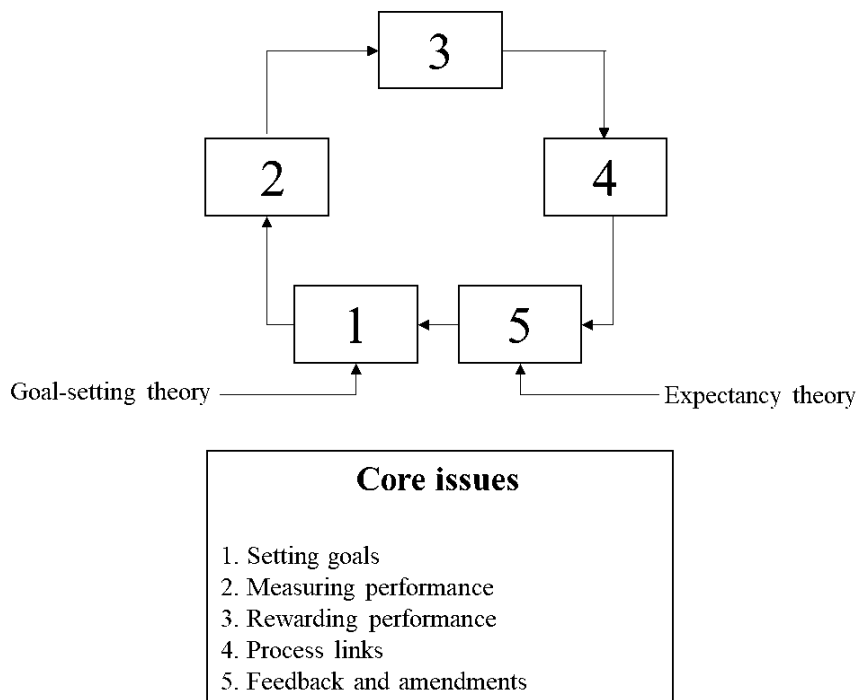
Figure 2: adapted from Storey, Billsberry and Salaman (2005)

As the illustration by Storey, Billsberry and Salaman (2005) shows, this approach towards performance management draws on prominent theoretical models through which managers can address five critical factors relating to the issues faced by most HRM strategies namely:

1. The usefulness of the goals set with regards taken to contextual issues like timing and the stability of the external environment. Factors which could render implemented goals today, useless tomorrow.

2. Through what means the performed knowledge work, often shrouded in ambiguity, should be measured beyond the scope of quantitative measures to include qualitative and other appraisal systems.

3. Which compensatory measures (rewards) the firm could use to mobilize its workforce. This relies on the fact that individual goals vary due to factors like skillset, experience, personality; and that the employee at his/her core, gets motivated by the knowledge that their efforts would be sufficiently compensated to satisfy their needs in equal amounts (Eriksson-Zetterquist, Müllern and Styhre, 2011).

   An assumption that relies on the capabilities of the model to capture the valencies and expectancies attached to the performance undertaken by the employees, and its ability to fulfil promises made (Storey, Billsberry & Salaman, 2005). This, in turn, according to Vroom (1970) would translate, psychologically, into a motivational force that inspires employees to act in ways that foster engagement and productivity, while at the same time, avoiding behaviours that would jeopardize the "enjoyment" attained (Eriksson-Zetterquist, Müllern and Styhre, 2011).

4. Creating process-linkages in the system that allows for in-depth explanations on how the system is intended to work, i.e. clarifications on the "link between effort and measured performance" and the "link between performance and rewards" (Storey, Billsberry & Salaman, 2005 pp. 329-331).

5. And finally, continuous feedback and reviews to encourage commitment.

With the authors believing that any organization that fails to incorporate the following factors into its performance management strategies, risks getting weak alignment of individual and organizational goals which is detrimental to the firm's long-term wellbeing (Storey, Billsberry & Salaman 2005). As such, firms are encouraged to actively inculcate measures that enhance job-satisfaction and reduce dissatisfaction caused by, e.g. unrealistic goals, insufficient rewards systems, conflict, emotional exhaustion, improper management practices, lack of motivation, non-alignment of goals and/or lack of task autonomy within its workforce (Storey, Billsberry & Salaman 2005; Dessler, 2003). The argument is that workers who experience contentment with their work-conditions are those that eventually choose to stay longer irrespective of a competitive job-market favourable to the worker (Jewell & Segall, 1990; Locke, 1976; Chee Hong et al., 2012, Locke & Latham, 1990).

One way of achieving contentment mentioned above is through the utilization of performance measurement. Performance measurement, in its purest form, can be defined as the appraisal of any organizational policy, strategy and/or plan of action to determine its adeptness, capabilities and usefulness in the achievement of organizational objectives (Neely, Gregory & Platts, 1995). The argument being that a firm can only achieve what it observes and supervises and not what it expects, i.e. that performance measurement is the foundation of management as "you can't manage, what you can't measure" (Neely, 2004 pp. 295).

That is to say, that by effectively utilizing performance measurement tools, organizations are afforded the opportunity to "(i) clarify strategy, (ii) communicate strategy, and (iii) challenge strategy" (Neely, 2004 pp. 295); as this enables the firms to concretize their goals and ambitions in quantifiable ways. It also allows firms to concisely and explicitly define their ambitions beyond abstract concepts like, for example, "we want to be the best employer in the world," or "we want to increase engagement, both customer and employee alike" (Behn, 2003; Neely, 2004).

Furthermore, organizations are implored to avail themselves of performance measurement tools that focus on factors that evaluate performance, controls the task/work performed, determines

employee promotions and branding, learning/improvement areas and celebrates outstanding performance (Behn, 2003). These performance measurement tools, according to Neely et al. (2000), are instrumental in the satisfaction and fulfilment of various stakeholders' needs with the help of quantitative indicators that stimulate productive action (it helps align individual & organizational goals). Quantitative indicators that signalize if the firm is on the right path in the achievement of overall strategy/objectives; given that it emphasizes the need to reduce any ambiguity experienced at work with structured processes that grants clarity and allows for constructive feedback to increase overall productivity (Neely, 2004).

Given the intricate and complex nature of the human psyche plus that variating internal and external contexts within which firms operate, one question that needs to be asked, however, is whether it would not be safe to assume that the aforesaid managerial measures are too rational than reality dictates? Could one effectively quantify and manage both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of work to improve performance without any issues arising? To understand this issue better, one needs to examine the limitations firms risk experiencing when they engage in various performance management measures.

2.1.4 Performance management: limitations

Performance management is often faulted for its limited ability to take into consideration the role context plays within the grand scheme of things, i.e. one could say that it is a rather simplistic approach towards the strengthening of employee's performance to align with the overall goals (Latham, 2012). Also, too many measurements, especially in KIFs, may end up diminishing the essence of knowledge work, i.e. ambiguity and autonomy (Aguinis, 2004). Which inherently leads to situations where knowledge-work becomes standardized and demotivating, as a result of monitoring by managers eager to measure efficiency and remove disturbing elements; a situation that becomes quite paradoxical (Sveningsson and Sörgärde, 2020; Aguinis, 2004; Alvesson, 2004).

This gets further complicated in KIFs when one factor in the fact that traditional comparability tools are not necessarily capable of evaluating the tacit knowledge produced by individuals whose skillsets vary in both depth and breadth, without resulting in some dysfunctional effects (Neely,

2004). Dysfunctional effects caused by something Lawler and Rhode (1976 cited in Neely, 2004 pp.326) refer to as "incompleteness in measures".

Secondly, given the intricacies of the work performed by knowledge workers, it is not surprising that the majority of KIFs try to evaluate performance through the aid of multiple information-sources (Alvesson, 2004). Information-sources that leave open the non-tangible performance factors vital for the realization of organizational goals to raters, i.e. individuals who receive the mandate to aggregate performance (Aguinis, 2004). Moreover, they perform merit-ratings which are "...about the relative worth of one individual's performance with another, it is variable over time, and is very much concerned with individual ability and effort" (Molander, 1996 p. 356).

This leads to issues that could derail organizational objectives; for example, most raters are not always privy to all facets of the performance's context and could also be burdened by the "cost/benefit equation" their decision could result in (Aguinis, 2004 pp. 156). That is to say, the cost or gains to be derived from precise ratings, e.g. if an employee's performance is lacking, but s/he has been shown to boost work morale, what consequences could the firm suffer, if s/he gets fired? The answers to this question could make room for the occurrence of both "intentional and unintentional" rating-distortions (Aguinis, 2004).

The assessment is further aggravated by cognitive limitations in summing up and recalling every aspect of the non-tangible efforts which might lead to an overreliance on quantitative goals, decisions shaped by one's experience/reality, contrarious goals (both individual and organizational), subjective assessment influenced by favoritism, interpersonal relationships, counterproductive performance reviews and grandiose HR practices (Aguinis, 2004). This, in turn, risks leading to dissatisfaction and demotivation amongst the affected in the learning work-environment (Wikström and Martin, 2012; Aguinis, 2004).

The dissatisfaction and demotivation, as mentioned above, could often be traced to the disproven belief that performance management, at its best, should be assessment-led instead of development-led (Molander, 1996). Subsequently leading to situations in which managers fail to sufficiently

appraise their firm or subordinates' abilities in order to determine courses of action that would lead to higher work levels, job satisfaction and commitment (Molander, 1996).

This implies that the focus amongst managers (middle or top), even within KIFs, seems to be managerial antics based on forms rather than skills, i.e. that most managers lack "the interpersonal skills necessary to interact purposefully and effectively with their staff" (Molander 1996 p. 356). Interpersonal skills Molander (1996) argues vital in the effort to find that balance between helping to develop and support subordinates' career development, while simultaneously fulfilling HR's need for employee data as a groundwork for appraisals (Molander, 1996).

So one may wonder what this implies for the knowledge worker? Does it mean that performance management strategies or rather result-oriented management and its measurement tools, cannot be effectively utilized without jeopardizing the well-being of its targets, i.e. the employees assigned with attaining the organization's objectives/goals?

2.2 Identity formation: a means of 'becoming'

"...it is because identity is problematic - and yet so crucial to how and what one values, thinks, feels and does in all social domains, including organisations - that the dynamics of identity need to be better understood" - (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000 cited in Alvesson and Willmott, 2002 p. 3)

The question stated in the previous chapter gives the notion, in subtle ways, that the levels of satisfaction and engagement of the knowledge worker could be overseen by management via the utilization of performance management mechanisms. A notion that is not necessarily true in its entirety, given that knowledge-workers, or rather workers in general, are not to be considered passive recipients of organizational measures to dictate, control and influence (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Instead, they are to be considered active participants, many of whom are more than capable of resisting normative control efforts especially if their values, beliefs, shared meanings, ideologies etcetera differ from the organization's (Alvesson, 2004).

To such degree, Deetz (1995 cited in Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) argues that the best organizations could hope for, is to try and influence/manage in a way that dives right into the innermost psyche of its workers, e.g. through their despair, weariness, goals, ambitions and similar. That is because any other attempts that refuse to acknowledge the aforementioned, e.g. via exclusively bureaucratic control-mechanisms, would be sufficiently lacking to tackle the instability and ambiguity of a sector plagued by cutthroat competition (Willmott, 1992).

In reference to the question stated in the previous chapter (on performance management utilization and employee well-being), the implication would be an understanding of the mechanisms, e.g. rewards/benefits systems, competence development etcetera, always at work to help shape the knowledge-worker's sense of self, coherence and purpose, a term commonly referred to as 'Identity-work' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

2.2.1 Self-Identity: the bedrock for expression of self

According to Alvesson (2004), identity is the bedrock with which individuals modify the essence of their being to engage, understand and make sense of the environments or various social contexts they actively participate within. With certain behavioral adjustments being made to their identity to ensure acceptance. Simply put, identity deals with the multilayered, constructed, deconstructed and nuanced views one has concerning one's self, which in turn acts as the base or guidelines for the different 'social interactions' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Furthermore, the concept of identity, which is continuously being modified, both on an individual and organizational level, is opined to be of utmost importance within KIFs because of its ability to "achieve organizational control, create an internal organizational basis for image management, secure loyalty and retention and counteract existential uncertainty and build self-confidence and self-esteem at work" Alvesson (2004 pp.188).

As such, it becomes apparent that for KIFs and its knowledge workers, the value of identities lies on the desire to grant some semblance of autonomy which gives its workers individual creative freedoms within set parameters (Alvesson, 2004). Parameters presumed beyond the control of more traditional, technical and bureaucratic forms of control since it fails to acknowledge the

complexities of workers and their various tasks which are dependent on strong senses of self and social identities (Alvesson, 2004). Social identities, in this instance, deal with how people contextualize themselves in intergroup contexts and that the creation and definition of individuals' place in society is derived from social categorization into groups (Tajfel, 1972 cited in Hogg, 2001).

So, how then does one formulate identities, both in individual and social contexts, in order to survive the ambiguity experienced within KIFs, while constructing an understanding of self that is "coherent, distinct and positively valued" (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008)? The answer to this question could be found in what Alvesson and Willmott (2002) refer to as 'Identity work'.

2.2.2 Identity-work: modification of behaviours & identity to gain acceptance

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) suggest that such explorations, interpretations and constructions of self-identity are used to answer questions like "who am I?" (Alvesson, 2004 p.188) and "how do I react to certain situations?". These questions, essential for the undertaking of the ambiguous nature of knowledge work, can take shape, specifically and interchangeably, in one of the following ways, namely:

1. Central life interest: this refers to recurring inquisitions into one's sense of purpose or existence, as a way of ascertaining guiding values that help shape the decisions one makes within different social interactions. These values, in turn, shape the core of the individual's existence and behaviours and allow the individual to make sense of their identity (or identities), both professional and personal. For example, a tough president whose role in different scenarios can also be that of a mother, leader, loving companion, confidant, follower, counsellor, friend etc.; with each identity having meaning in itself i.e. they can exist simultaneously and/or interchangeably.

2. Coherence: this deals with issues that could lead to demoralization by helping the individual attain a 'grounded-sense of being' built over time and on various experiences; all in an effort to build consistency and recognizability, e.g. people who are deemed to be

consistent and stable as a result of their way of 'being' (both past and present), continuously exuding stability and consistency.

3. Distinctiveness: This pertains to specific character traits that are considered unique, either to the individual or the group they belong to. It addresses issues that arise from prototypicality which is efficient in proving the saliency between the in-groups and out-groups. A typical example being members of Mensa society, whose distinctiveness is their purported high IQs in comparison to others.

4. Direction: deals with the roles presumed identities expect of the individual, e.g. a teacher who is expected to teach, or a doctor who is expected to heal, and gets recognition for performing the duties afforded him/her by their doctor-identity (Mitchel et al. 1986 cited in Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

5. Social values: relates to how "individuals conceive themselves in terms of the values they hold" (Lawler, 1986 p.96), e.g. a pious individual whose reflexive view of self and faith, helps act as a comparative tool in relation to other non-pious individuals.

6. Self-awareness: as the name implies, "is a medium and outcome of how a person feels, as well as how she thinks and ascribes value" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002 p.8).

Nevertheless, for knowledge-workers active within an environment that cannot be necessarily described as stable or routine, it becomes imperative for them to structure, construct, deconstruct, preserve, dissect or elaborate their identities as a coping mechanism in the face of ambiguity. Coping-mechanisms that manifests itself as either self-assertion or identity-preserving actions drawn from an array of sources, e.g. norms, symbols, beliefs, discourses, stories, legacies, institutions etc. within their social settings (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Alvesson, 2004).

The discourses that arise within various social settings play a central role in the way people respond and make sense of their situations (Watson, 1995). Case in point, middle managers who rely on the use of discourse within various contexts, as a way of understanding their unique positions. A

position that places them as curators of organizational control efforts, as well as being its subjects (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Watson, 1995).

As such, Alvesson (2004) urges KIFs to take into consideration that the work-related roles of most knowledge-workers often are reliable sources for their individual and social identities (Alvesson, 2004). With the authors proposing that organizations which acknowledge the fact that their knowledge workers actively engage in identity work can obtain targeted power and control in the shaping of their employees' identifications, a process referred to as 'identity regulation' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Identity regulation aimed at providing positive, shared meanings, internally and externally, about the organization and aid the internalization processes of preferred organizational identity amongst the knowledge workers (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

2.2.3 Identity-regulation: utilization of managerial discourses to align goals

On account of the resources wielded by and available to knowledge workers, such as high education, status, remuneration and stimulating work tasks, Alvesson (2004) argues that it is easier for people employed in KIFs to assume an identity closely related to their organization. Since a larger share of their identity is invested in the organization, the people employed by a KIF also become more vulnerable to adversely deviating organizational events, such as a bad performance grade or a defaulted promotion (Alvesson, 2004). In essence, this suggests that organizations, specifically KIFs, are perfectly able to shape/regulate their employees' identities through the use of invasive, somewhat manipulative management practices (Kornberger and Brown, 2007).

Invasive management practices which Alvesson and Willmott (2002) opines could help the firm in the following ways:

- Explicitly define or vaguely insinuate which identities are deemed appropriate or permissible within the KIFs, thus encouraging the employees to buy into the ideologies (indoctrination);

- Identify which applicable measures should be implemented to keep the knowledge worker in line with the overall organizational goals while maintaining the ambiguous and fragmented nature of the work, e.g. via feedback systems, mentorship programs and similar;

- Reinforcement of the social interactions (in-group saliency) that benefits the firm;

- And this, in turn, encourages alignment between self-identities and the firm's projected image, making indistinct the differences between one's non-work related and work-related identity.

The abovementioned practices imply a concerted attempt by management to downplay the knowledge workers' need to focus solely on their self-development at the detriment of the firms'. Thus, organizations must actively engage in certain identity regulatory activities, e.g. processes of induction, training, corporate education and promotion processes, since employees cannot be reduced to passive recipients of managerially designed identities (Alvesson 2004; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). This gives credence to Alvesson and Willmott (2002) assertion that self-identity, identity work and identity relations are positively correlated and intertwined in attempts at the creation and management of meanings as seen in figure x below:
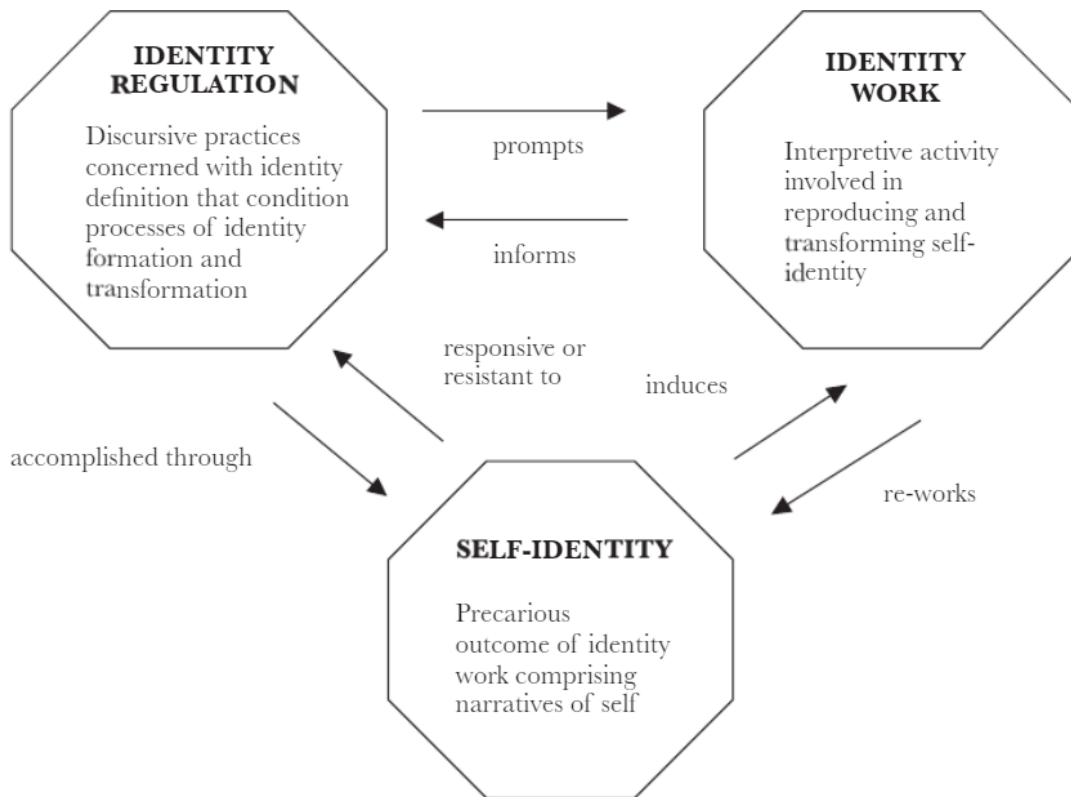
Figure 3: adapted from Alvesson and Willmott (2002)

2.3 The middle manager's role in assessment through performance measures

Since this thesis assumes a strong focus on management consulting firm's (MCF's) identity regulatory attempts and the various interpretations derived from it by recipients, especially in relation to performance management systems; our goal is to outline and delineate, with the aid of existing literature, the potential discourses and methods used to regulate identity and its consequences thereof. This would be accomplished under the assumption that the individual workers' identity is interconnected with the organization's; and subsequently, questioning the organization implies the questioning of one's self-identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

A view that we believe is most applicable to middle managers, many of whom experience an intricate, dual relationship to power within different social interactions (Anicich and Hirsh, 2017) and in regard to the implementation of performance management practices (Alvesson, 2004). Middle managers who are expected to act as conduits useful in the transference of strategic decisions and communication from top management to line employees (McAfee, 2009; Eriksson-Zetterquist et al., 2011).

> *"When interacting with our superiors, we naturally adopt a more deferential low-power behavioral style. When interacting with subordinates, on the other hand, we adopt a more assertive high-power behavioral style. Failure to conform to these role-based expectations can lead to social conflicts and confusion"-(Anicich and Hirsh, 2017)*

Managerial views like the quote stated above could be considered problematic, given that these middle managers are encouraged to embrace their individuality while ensuring that they act as good soldiers (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). Good soldiers whose actions completely aligns with the firm's goals, i.e. an interplay between autonomy (self-determination/independence) and bureaucratic control both towards top-management and their subordinates (Tabrizi, 2014). The duality of the assumed identities resulting in outcomes solely based on how middle managers view

themselves, their accomplishments and their assessments of various situations (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Anicich and Hirsh, 2017; Tabrizi, 2014).

Furthermore, research suggests that middle managers, especially in KIFs, tend to exhibit contradistinctive reactions when placed in situations that result in feelings of infringed psychological contracts, e.g. survival syndrome feelings during downsizing (Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999). Alternatively, they could feel motivated and satisfied as a result of surviving the downsizing measures, since their survival implies that their jobs are essential (Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999).

With these factors in mind, it becomes interesting to explore what happens to middle managers in KIFs who engage actively in identity work and its interplay with the identities proposed by the organization. That is to say, if alignments are achieved; and if not, what theoretical implications this may suggest. The aim is that by looking into this, theoretically-speaking, it would help deepen common understanding about the 'give-and-take' relationship between organization-initiated PM/identity regulatory measures. And this could, in turn, add nuance to middle management's constantly evolving identity work and how it translates to the normalization of the internal views on turnover/attrition in MCFs.

2.3.1 Theoretical recap

In summary, it has been shown from this review the three key aspects impacting the way organizations improve performance and productivity, are: the psychological contract, performance management and identity-work/regulation. The psychological contract stems from the expectations from both parties involved in the relationship, i.e., employer and employee, gets quantified into manageable expectations in terms of performance management. Furthermore, as the evidence reviewed here suggests, these measures are in most cases implemented to get at the more complex nature of work in order to achieve alignment of wills, character and goals through various methods, case in point, performance measurement.

However, one important theme that has emerged from the studies discussed so far is that performance management can only go as far as it can to try and get at the non-tangible factors

within its employees through its use of identity-regulation. Identity-regulation that aims to align interests by harnessing its workers' subjectivities. The hope being that these performance management measures disguised as identity-regulation, would, in turn, trigger the identity-work within its intended targets, to inspire the desired, positive activities that result in improved performance. Nevertheless, there remain several aspects of the phenomena about which relatively remains unclear. The evidence reviewed here seems to suggest that the limitations as listed above (chapter 2.1.4) could be resolved by reducing the influence wielded by those with the mandate of administering these performance management measures (middle managers).

However, we opine that the reduction of the role of these administrators (middle managers) of the performance management tool does not tackle the complexities that comprise their unique roles as subjects and executors of identity-regulation. Complexities that could have adverse effects for the firm actively trying to achieve alignment of goals. As such, this study intends to explore these complexities and how they result in the alignment of goals, i.e. by examining the interplay between performance management and identity-work from middle management's perspective.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, we aim to discuss which methodological choices of path we have taken in order to answer our purpose. We will initially introduce the reader to our scientific premises and move on to a more practical description of our data collection process. Afterwards, we will present our selection process and how we have handled our empirical material. And lastly, we will explain the studies' delimitations and finally make a quality assessment. The chapter serves to guide the reader through the active choices made in conducting this thesis.

3.1 Ontological consideration

By assuming that reality is viewed differently by others, this ontological position helps us bear in mind the various ways through which reality can be defined and interpreted in order to effectively capture the reality that we have set out to examine (Bryman, Bell and Harley, 2019). Thus, we the authors, take on a social-constructivist frame of reference, i.e. that our interview subjects are not acting solely on the premise of infrangible universal laws. A social constructivist reference point that allows us to tackle the issues relating to performance management and the perceptions surrounding it, by taking up the notion that individual meanings attached to various phenomena vary.

The social constructivist reference point affords our interview subjects the opportunity to describe their realities as they view it and in relation to the subject matter. Whilst acknowledging that these differences in meanings, especially as it pertains to performance management (PM) and employee identities, are in a constant state of flux. Moreover, this flux is achieved through interactions between the various social actors involved. Social actors whose values and shared personal experiences are influenced by their personal, cultural and shared experiences (Bryman, Bell & Hayley, 2019).

3.1.1 Epistemological approach

With regards taken to this study's chosen ontological approach, it becomes paramount for us to understand better the experiences of the studied subjects as a way of getting more insight or rather, knowledge into their realities (Bryman, Bell & Hayley, 2019). This philosophical approach aptly called epistemology and underpinned by our social-constructionist ontological position, allows for

an investigation into the concepts as problematized in both the purpose and the research question of this study.

Thus, in our effort to understand what constitutes knowledge, our study moves beyond "cause and effect" hypotheses built upon deductivism, to frame our research by focusing on understanding and interpreting the phenomena, i.e. subjective meanings within their given contexts (Bryman, Bell & Hayley, 2019). At the same time acknowledging how the knowledge deduced from our subsequent findings, may be affected by but not only our interests but also our rational constraints (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020; Gray, 2014; MacIntosh & O'Gorman, 2015). A research philosophy Bryman, Bell and Hayley (2019) refer to as 'interpretivism'.

3.2 Data collection: a qualitative approach

Unlike a considerable part of studies within natural sciences, we do not aim to reduce the complexity of realities through the demonstration of simple relations. Instead, we aim to elucidate the complexities and nuances within our examined phenomena, (i.e. how performance management affects the identities of employees) and gain further insight about it; which in turn, motivates a qualitative approach (Alvehus, 2016).

Considering our adoption of a social-constructionist approach, where reality is viewed as something created through social interplays, and dependent on people's interpretations (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019); we believe that our data collection method must be able to seize people's subjective interpretations in order to fulfil our study's purpose.

Hence, the outcome of this study will not only be based upon our interview subjects' interpretations of their reality, but also our own interpretations of their realities. In accordance with the closely related hermeneutic spiral (Radnitzky, 1970 cited in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008), our predetermined assumptions or possible biases, shaped and impacted by existing literature, will continuously interact with our empirical findings throughout the work process. However, hopefully, it would not limit but rather help us to acquire more in-depth knowledge through contrasts and in the best of worlds, enable us to make a theoretical contribution.

Due to our ambition of adhering to the interpretative tradition framed within a social constructionist perspective, we have chosen to perform semi-structured interviews. That said, our interviews were 40-60 minutes long. They were conducted either via telephone calls or Skype, primarily due to the geographical differences between our interviewees and us; but it was also partly due to the authorities' recommendation of social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We, the authors, also deviate from the common ambition of trying to provide empirically generalizable conclusions, mainly due to the lack of time provided for the study, but also our limited shared experience regarding studies of that magnitude. Had that been our intention, i.e. to provide empirically generalizable conclusions, a greater selection of MCFs and a varied number of interview subjects would probably have been necessary.

However, we believe that there is an important distinction to make between 'making empirically generalizable conclusions' and 'making theoretical contributions''. The latter, we believe, is more suitable for the accomplishment of our research purpose via the study of one management consulting firm (MCF), namely Solutions. Although this conscious decision by no means implies that we do not aim to provide further practically valuable insights for the corporate world; on the contrary, we believe that the theoretical perspective applied, and its subsequent interaction with the empirical material might facilitate the production of practically valuable insights.

That said, our approach can be appropriately described as abductive. An abductive approach Bryman, Bell & Harley (2019) describe as adequate when empirical happenstances arise that cannot be explained by existing theory. Hence, it becomes the researcher's responsibility to interpret the collected data with closely related theory in mind, per the hermeneutic spiral (Radnitzky, 1970 cited in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008). And then, choose the most accurate explanation of the phenomena (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013 cited in Bryman, Bell & Harley 2019).

3.3 Selection process

When it comes to the process of selecting subjects for our empirical study, we had a line of reasoning and an idea of the different areas of interest, not ideas based on hypotheses, but ideas based on an openness to further learning. Our empirical data was gathered through an in-depth

qualitative study of a single organization. Given this, we realized beforehand the importance of selecting those individuals who we believed could contribute to our research.

We made strategic choices based on who we thought could contribute to our research, making the process align with what Alvehus (2013) describes as a strategic selection. Bringing this request to our supervisor at Solutions generated a suggestion of various people and information about their role at the company. We choose to contact individuals based on their current position in the firm. By doing so, we could narrow our focus to those who were in the middle of the organizational hierarchy and choose a few individuals who were either top management, support function, or most junior (see table) so that they could reflect upon what had been earlier expressed, and/or contribute with another perspective on the subject matter.

Position	Number of interviewees
Consultant	1
Senior Consultant	2
Manager	2
Senior Manager	2
Director	1
Company Leader	1
Support function	1

From two of our interviewees, we received recommendations on who to further talk with. This method aligns with the snowball selection described by Alvehus (2013) as getting shortcuts to interesting people that can contribute to the study. We believed that this helped us get exciting perspectives and that we managed to avoid getting stuck interviewing people in the same tight network with aligning views, otherwise a potential problem with the snowball selection.

Gender was not something that we initially had brought up for consideration. However, the outcome resulted in a relatively even representation of the genders, ensuring a more nuanced outcome of the various interviews. The even representation does not give in to the problem stated by Wilson (1995), being that many studies seem to have a majority of male interviewees. This might result in uncertainty when it comes to whether the result is applicable in general or solely

reflect the characteristics of a predominantly male population (Wilson 1995 cited in Bryman and bell 2019).

The selection process itself could be deemed slightly limited since our contact interpreted our wishes and made recommendations based on their interpretation. However, there was transparency to the extent that we could revise freely and proceed with candidates that we thought would be suitable for our study. In doing so, the randomization process was eliminated, since the interviews were conducted with people we had chosen based on their role and experiences. Its knowledge-intensive nature, the competitiveness of the industry and its focus on performance were all critical factors impacting our choice of the management consulting industry. A contact within the upper management made us choose Solutions and allowed us to gain access to relevant candidates for our interviews.

3.4 Analysis methods

We have aimed to look upon our empirical findings through the lens of adjacent research. Accordingly, as per the hermeneutic principle (which relates to the abductive approach), we steadily moved back and forth between our empirical findings and existing literature while authoring our analysis.

We acquiesce that our interpretations of the empirical material started during the interviews. But most importantly, also during the transcription process and subsequent collective interpretations thereof. During this phase of the study, we attempted to maintain a balance between providing the reader with understandable and easy-to-follow quotes.

As such, we had to erase too much colloquial language from the transcripts. While simultaneously not revising the quotes to that degree that they become deviant from the reality, in accordance with the conventions suggested by Bryman, Bell & Harley (2019). This can be construed as a concrete example of how we have worked to secure high credibility, further discussed in our quality assessment (see section 3.6). However, in order to optimize the processing of our collected data, we used the three stages of dealing with empirical material as suggested by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018), namely sorting, reducing and arguing.

3.4.1 Sorting

According to Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018), sorting not only facilitates the contextualization of data, but it also paves the way for the researcher's familiarization of the data. In order to utilize these potential benefits, we tried to categorize the data as autonomously as possible in regard to our theoretical framework.

Naturally, we recognize the assertions made by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) in that a theoretically unbiased categorization is near impossible; while simultaneously adhering to the idea that authors are employing working-methods that provide interaction between empirical findings and theoretical concepts (the hermeneutic spiral), are perfectly able to categorize their material somewhat independently (Radnitzky, 1970 cited in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008). Hence, the study should be somewhat protected from stating what is already common knowledge, i.e. one gets an opportunity to provide new knowledge (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Practically speaking, we chose to divide our data based on content in order not only to identify patterns but more importantly, identify themes that contradict those patterns. These (non)patterns helped us in a later stage to structure our analysis chapter and, following Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) claims, formed the basis for subsequent headlines. In order to facilitate an in-depth understanding and familiarization of our data, all the authors participated, through active discussions, in the sorting and categorization processes. In that sense, one could argue that an ambitious amount of time and effort was spent on sorting the material, in line with the arguments made by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018 pp. 105) that analysts must "hang out" with their material.

3.4.2 Reducing

In order to fulfil the objective of keeping what seems essential to fulfil our intended purpose, we pursued a combination of the 'categorical reduction' and 'illustrative reduction' methods as suggested by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018). In broader terms, this categorical reduction entailed the elimination of specific categories/themes of collected data that was not considered useful by us, in order to fulfil our study's purpose.

Concurrently, we pursued an illustrative reduction approach which allowed us to identify special excerpts considered useful for the study with the sole purpose of illustrating a phenomenon as clearly as possible (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Since the purpose of this study is to gain further insights and hopefully nuance the understanding of our topic, we believe that a wide range of possible answers to our research question would be beneficial. Hence, we considered this combined reducing method adequate.

Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) identifies decontextualization as a potential problem when reducing material. Naturally, a studies' trustworthiness can be questioned when the human factor is involved in choosing what material to elucidate and not elucidate (for a further discussion, see Quality Assessment, section 3.6). However, facilitated by digital tools, we have been able to smoothly return to original quotes which we have taken excerpts from and re-contextualize our analysis rather than the opposite.

3.4.3 Arguing

A central theme in the process of arguing is theorizing (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This simply means creating a theory based on empirical findings (Swedberg, 2012, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). However, Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) argues that simply articulating empirical insights is insufficient when theorizing, and researchers must also explicitly direct their findings towards pre-existing knowledge.

Once again, the hermeneutic spiral (Radnitzky, 1970 cited in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008) appears applicable, suggesting an interaction between empirical findings and established theory. The question remaining is which practical methods should be applied to succeed in this interaction?

We have taken the Excerpt-commentary units (Emerson et al. 1995, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) into consideration when authoring our analysis chapter. The model fundamentally suggests that analysis should contain analytical points consisting of established theory, the empirical excerpts consisting of the data the researchers have accumulated. Furthermore, the analysis should also contain orientations functioning as bridges between the

analytical points and the empirical excerpts. And lastly, analytical comments where the analytical points and the empirical excerpts are merged, and in the best of worlds, a theory is developed (Emerson et al. 1995, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Another, maybe less systematic, approach in the aim of theorizing is the application of analogies (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Here, theorizing is facilitated by transferring insights from one context to another, something the reader might encounter while reading the analysis. This approach could be beneficial for authors intending to broaden the relevance of a theory (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), something we intend to do since the purpose of this study is to add further insights to the understanding of our topic.

3.5 Delimitations

One could argue that the individual experiences expressed by the interviewees could be affected by gender in the sense that, in an MCF with fast progression and promotions on an approximately two-year basis, gender could play a role. For instance, pregnancy and parental leave most probably would affect the work-life balance and the choices an individual would make in their effort to strive for individual goals.

During our research, we did not hold gender as a separate variable. This would lead to flaws in what Bryman, Bell and Harley (2019) describe as internal validity. Hence, it would be doubtful to proclaim causality based on a specific variable's (namely gender) impact on another (example: work-life balance) without going into detail concerning these variables. However, although we acknowledge its influence, we have chosen to leave the gender-related impacts on, for instance, employee retention to future studies.

In our initial contact with the organization, we decided to interview people operating in Solution's Nordic business unit, who all were interviewed outside their office, due to COVID-19. Given this, our study has a geographic delimitation — something we deem necessary due to the time frame and the magnitude of the study. Maybe due to our study object being a global organization, we noticed that throughout our interviews, parallels were drawn to other branches spread around the globe. These insights provided us with insights regarding cultural and legal differences and

differences in how the consultants conduct their daily business. To exemplify further, the interviewees described a global system, an attempt for a worldwide "uniformed culture".

However, interpreting the experiences of the interviewees, more focus was put upon differences rather than unity in cultural matters. While there is not any reason to approach these insights skeptically, we gave in to the notion that we only got one specific perspective, regarding ideas about the domestic business.

3.6 Quality assessment

There does not seem to be a unified answer among researchers regarding what defines a good study. Lincoln & Guba (1985, cited in Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019) suggest trustworthiness as the goal for researchers writing a qualitative study while Hammersley (1992, cited in Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019) suggest relevance. With these suggestions, the authors as mentioned above, call into question the strive for validity and reliability since these concepts assume the possibility of painting one and only one single and absolute picture of the social reality (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019). Therefore, validity and reliability might be considered more adequate evaluation criteria for studies within natural sciences than studies within social sciences relying on, to a more significant degree, and as in our case, the social constructionist perspective.

Hence, in this quality assessment, we will apply the four criteria for trustworthiness suggested by Lincoln & Guba (1985, cited in Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019), namely; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

In terms of credibility, three crucial factors according to Bryman, Bell & Harley (2019) are: complying with established, research-oriented guidelines, reporting the studies' results to those who have been subject to the research (respondent validation) and lastly; triangulation. In this study, we have worked actively to comply with the course-specific guidelines articulated in the curriculum, for instance, by using the Harvard referencing guidelines.

Furthermore, throughout the work, we have had continuous contact with our supervisor at Solutions so that the input provided by the employees have been interpreted correctly. Naturally,

the whole study will also be provided to Solutions before it is submitted. In terms of methodological triangulation, our initial aim was to add an ethnographic angle through observing the employees at Solutions in their natural habitat to fulfil the studies' original purpose. However, due to specifically the crisis related to COVID-19, this methodological approach was ruled out and the purpose revised accordingly.

In many cases, qualitative research is characterized by case studies and a limited selection of research subjects (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019). Therefore, empirically generalizable and hence transferable conclusions might be challenging to come up with. For instance, if one had decided to copy our methodological approach but apply it on another MCF, the conclusions might have differed. Hence, the transferability to other social settings can be questioned. This is a flaw we, and probably a considerable part of other qualitative researchers, must accept and naturally work actively to cope with.

According to Bryman, Bell & Harley (2019), two fundamental measures need to be taken by researchers aiming for high dependability. The researchers must make sure that they explicitly report how the whole study has been performed, methodologically speaking (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019), in other words, provide as much transparency as possible. We have tried to comply with this idea by providing a detailed description of our methodological choices of path, for instance, how we approached our empirical material (see section 3.4). The next step, according to Bryman, Bell & Harley (2019), is to let external stakeholders review the study.

Our study has been reviewed by peers, our academic supervisor and our supervisor at Solution. Naturally, they all have had varying motives in their reviews, but most importantly is the fact that through our respondent validation, we are not the only ones who have had access to our empirical material.

Since complete objectivity is impossible when conducting research within social sciences, authors must try to confirm that they have performed the study in god faith (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019). We believe that the involvement of a plurality of researchers has contributed to guarantee this

studies' confirmability. Hence, it becomes challenging for a single actor to distort the empirical material or make biased interpretations.

4. Analysis

So, how does Solutions' performance management system work? To what degree are the middle managers involved in it? Does it have an identity regulative effect on the employees? And if so, how is this effect manifested? What are the consequences following such an effect? The chapter will start with a brief introduction to our study object so that the reader gets the chance to obtain further company-specific knowledge like ours which, in turn, will facilitate the understanding of the rest of the chapter. In 4.2, we will introduce the reader to how Solutions works with Performance management, with a primary focus on their grading system. Lastly, in 4.3, we interpret how the performance management measures, as mentioned earlier, impact employees' identities. Throughout the entire chapter, we lay emphasis on the role middle managers play in the contextualization of PM-related issues.

4.1 Introduction to Solutions

At Solutions, graduates deemed talented are recruited upon the completion of their master studies, and thus begins their professional careers as Consultants (Solution's most junior position, see figure 4). The most senior personnel besides CEO/Managing Partner, are referred to as 'Company Leaders' (CLs) in this study. Company Leaders of whom there is a plurality of in Solution's Nordic offices.

Figure 4

CLs
Director
Senior Manager
Manager
Senior Consultant
Consultant
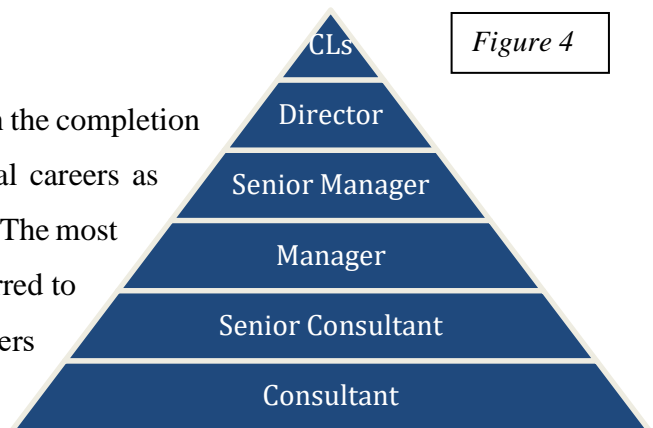
Our findings suggest that the employees at Solutions experience increased autonomy based on the amount of work experience they acquire, experience achieved through their involvement in various projects and through internal training. Moreover, it seems to be the case that the training in Solutions diminishes over time as the employee obtains more formal responsibilities, as exemplified by the sales target employees are assigned when they get promoted to Senior Manager level.

During our interviews, it became apparent that even though Solutions seems to be an organic organization with a decentralized reporting and decision-making structure, the firm, in reality, seems to have embraced basic tenets of what some would describe as a bureaucratic hierarchy. Everyone in the pyramid reports upwards in the hierarchy; and the higher up one gets, the more vital one becomes in terms of transference of orders within the chain of command, i.e. the Company leaders give mandates to Directors, who passes it further to Senior Managers and so on.

4.2 Performance management at Solutions

Initially, the reader will be introduced to Solutions' performance measurement system. Then, we will narrow the section down and describe middle managers' involvement in the performance measures. Subsequently, we will elucidate the consequences that the system generates in terms of remuneration and career advancement. Lastly, we will use the insights provided in the previous section and reflect on how employees relate to the system, as mentioned above.

4.2.1 Solutions' performance measurement system

The general impression derived from our interviews suggests that everyone employed at Solutions, at almost every point of their employment, interacts, in one way or another and continuously, with the company's performance measurement system. It seems inevitable since every employee is informed, before the start of any project longer than two weeks, what is expected of them by the project leader:

> *"And this evaluation model is describing seven different areas to make it more tangible and easier to follow. So, it is divided on your consulting behavior, consulting skills, people relation, client relation, being an ambassador for [Solutions]... These are seven different areas that we want people to perform. And each area there are like a description, in each area, there are several bullets "okay this and that I want you to deliver". (Mike, Senior Manager)*

Subsequently, during and after the completion of the projects mentioned above, consultants are then debriefed on how well they performed in relation to the criteria as described by Mike. Every consultant's counsellor goes over the accumulated assessments from the projects and looks at the consultant's utilization level (i.e. the share of time spent on project work) and the internal work (such as employer branding) s/he has been involved in bi/annually. An informal 360-degree assessment where the counsellor acts as an intermediary that relays the evaluations while granting the employee the opportunity to plead their case or describe other efforts they feel has not been covered, which the counsellor relays upwards. After a round table discussion, i.e. calibrations, the employees receive a grade based on how well s/he has performed accordingly:

> *"So you get, from 1 to 5, you get a grade and these grades from 1 to 5, where 1 is top and 5 is the lowest, so these sums up to a... what is really called EAF, Evaluation Assessment Form. And then you receive, after each project, your own EAF. So depending*

Every consultant from the most junior to the most senior is graded within the range described by Mike. It also appears that the grades are allotted on a normal distribution curve. Hence, one's grade is dependent on how well s/he has performed compared to his/her colleagues. What this implies is that the quantitative aspects of their work, for example, utilization percentage, as mentioned earlier, get calibrated and weighed. A calibration and weighing that is compared to the qualitative, abstract and more difficult to quantify aspects of their duties, for example, brand ambassadorship, team motivator and participation in career fairs at universities.

Furthermore, the criteria that need to be fulfilled varies on the employees' seniority as previously stated. For instance, our findings suggest that the more senior one becomes, the more focus is put on selling projects and developing clientele relationships, with the focus on utilization level gradually decreasing. Therefore, one's grade, at the top levels of the pyramid, becomes more dependent on how successful the consultants are in selling projects. However, this does not account for those who have chosen the so-called expert track, which stimulates in-depth knowledge in specific business areas rather than sales.

4.2.2 Middle managers: as guardians or custodians of performance management measures

It is apparent that the performance management measures at Solutions are intertwined and guide the daily operations of the consultants, with almost every aspect of their work assessed on some level. Three deduced vital elements/factors constitute the core of the implemented performance management system. As aptly described by David, each of the elements has a different impact on the actual evaluation, but affects it nevertheless;

> *"There are three relationships related to this one within our firm. Counsellor and counselee is sort of a mentorship program meaning that everyone that starts the firm up until my level, they have sort of a mentor what we call a counsellor. That person or that relationship should be a bit detached to the… sort of the original pyramid, the reporting structure, the projects etc." (...)". And that's the second part; everyone has of course a boss, a regular manager. In the formal sense, we have our leadership-level which is the*

only one that is really on the paper salary-setting bosses [sic]. Underneath there you have sort of team leads, you can put it that way which I am one of those as I mentioned. So that's sort of the formal boss-level that we have. But the third one which is the, maybe the most active, sort of, relationship level is the within project-hierarchy, meaning that you're going in as a consultant, you work in a project with a project manager and that manager has sort of a, an engagement lead or a selling [Company Leader] that most likely manage the projects." (David, Director)

During our interviews, it became apparent that the common nominator for the three relationships is the middle managers, since they seem to function as either a supervisor, a project leader, a counsellor, and/or a formal boss. Regardless of whichever of the roles above they occupy, these managers all seem to either delegate, recommend or assign the consultants with various tasks or guidelines. Simultaneously, they are entrusted with assisting with grading efforts, i.e. reporting to top management, while overseeing the day to day activities. Our findings suggest that the counsellor/counselee relationship had the most noticeable impact on potential advancement, in the sense that a counsellor would "represent" the counselee when it comes to the evaluation of the tasks performed by the consultants during the fiscal year.

Doubtlessly, the grade stemming from the evaluation possesses the power to change the current status of the consultants, either advancing their career or indirectly "coaching" them into another profession or work, if they are deemed unsuitable for their positions. Their involvement implies that assessments, promotion and rewards/benefits decisions are based solely on precise variables and calibration.

"You have your own counsellor who is representing you and the counsellor's assignment is that listen to people who have been around you, to see what you have done on top of everything else, and that person needs to really represent you in this roundtable, calibration discussion. So, everything that is not seen in the paper, you need to bring up then. So that's why I don't agree that they say "ok...that this is just about calibration and numbers", No! I don't agree on that" (Mike, Senior Manager)

Mike's description aligns with the prevailing view of the other interview subjects, i.e. that the counsellor serves as both a guide/mentor during the work-year and is also the person entrusted

with safeguarding the interests of the mentees in the yearly roundtable calibrations. The middle manager has to gather and present information about their counselees' performances, which then gets quantified into a grade. We got the notion that the counsellor also has the primary responsibility of bringing up non-tangible factors such as can-do attitude, outspokenness, motivation, team-spirit and similar, into quantifiable grades that could affect the mentee's prospects in the calibrations.

After every project, it is the counsellor's responsibility to communicate with the responsible team leader and explain the reasoning behind the assessment to the counselee detailing which improvement areas, flagged by the grading criteria and expressed during the calibrations, that needs to be worked upon.

That is to say, feedback based on data gotten from client-feedback, sales, utilization level, project-leader feedback, co-worker inputs etcetera. What this suggests, is a 360-feedback system of sorts being practiced at Solutions, with the middle managers/counsellors acting as messengers, a sentiment shared by Daniel whilst elaborating on the yearly roundtable calibrations below:

> *"And the round table performance processes is also a thing where the facts of the person's performance versus the story of the person's performances are reviewed. The experience of that person from the people around, the evaluation from members is weighted. You also have sort of formal feedback through the year from the different projects that the person has been on where the project manager with a sign of the engagement [Company Leader] reviews performance against targets. And the counsellor is often not the person who is that... you know, project manager or responsible for the client." (Daniel, Company Leader)*

Given Daniel's statement and the rest of the information we subtracted from the interviews, it came to our understanding that from, at least top management's perspective, the middle managers are viewed as reliable commanders. The latter receive orders from the top and translate it verbatim downwards to their subordinates. It is also safe to assume that, from the perspective of top management, that the roles in the spectra of middle management, is not considered crucial in the grading process, due to the solidity and self-sustaining nature of the grading systems. Case in point, the EAF-form implies that all middle management is required to do is evaluate based on strictly

spelt out guidelines. From the top management's viewpoint, the middle managers' function is to serve as executors of the performance management guidelines required to mold their employees into the type of consultants befitting of Solutions.

4.2.3 Implications of the grading system in terms of career advancement and compensation

So, one might wonder what the practical implications of these different grades are. As touched upon by Mike, a grade has a direct impact on bonuses and promotions, which in turn, affects salary and status derived:

> *"So, a person who, like delivered 2,2 every year and gets at that level can become... eeh... can be fast tracked as we call it. Otherwise, they will discuss that this person has been here for two and a half years normally it's the time to get promoted but the person has not delivered so much, it has been low grade, 3.5, 4 is not a really good grade and that would have an impact on the promotion "okay we maybe have to wait for one more year or six more months to see if we want to promote that person or not".". (Mike, Senior Manager)*

As hinted at by Mike, higher grades on an average, results in the employee being promoted quicker than for those employees with lower grades, a move referred to as "fast-tracking". Junior employees (consultants and senior consultants) as per the norms at Solutions, spend on an average, between two to two and a half years at their specific position before being qualified for a promotion. Although that changes when they reach Senior Manager level, i.e. the promotion pace decelerates and becomes more reliant on the execution of their sales targets translated into grades. Also, the salary and bonus system are dependent on which position the employee possesses, which, in turn, is dependent on their attained grades.

However, since the grades are distributed accordingly with a standard, normal distribution curve, there are always going to be employees who get average or low grades. As described above, a bad grade might jeopardize the possibility for promotion and repeated low grades seemingly results in the employee leaving the company, although the option to leave is not as a result of the employee being fired due to poor grades since employment is strictly regulated by Swedish work and labor-laws; instead, many of these employees choose to leave of their own accord, as stated below;

"I was going to say that if you get consistent low grades, not in Sweden, you would be asked to leave in some consultancies. So if you would work for [competitor x] or [competitor y] and probably even Solutions in the U.S they would ask you to leave. Swedish labor laws doesn't work that way and also it's a softer work culture. So I would say that it's up to the company to help and support you. In reality, if you get a lot of low grades you're probably not suited for consultancy and you will leave on your own." (Lisa, Manager).

As touched upon in 4.2.1, the grading criteria varies with employees' seniority. The position/seniority-dependent performance measurement practices might be Solutions' way of handling the issues regarding how to reward employees based on their diverse skill sets, experiences and personalities. Also, the feedback system, i.e. the counsellor/counselee mentorship program, seems to function as a way of addressing issues relating to performance management:

"Well, usually it's your counsellor that should be working with you and I think this is a little bit how the counsellors interpret it but I would say that that's also a responsibility of the counsellor to support and make sure that it's really clear for you what areas you should be improving in and what you can do." (Lisa, Manager).

So, besides company performance one's grade is also dependent on personal performance and the quote above suggests that a counsellor is responsible for guiding the employee towards fulfilling the criteria included in the overall assessment form. When one acquires a good grade, it not only results in a potential promotion and a subsequent pay increase, but also a better bonus.

4.2.4 The impact of performance management on the employees' interests and inclinations

Based on our findings on the impact of Performance measurement on the employees, we are of the notion that Solutions' aim seems to be to inspire employees to individually and collectively increase their productivity while at the same time, making sure that they are satisfied with their job/working conditions. Our findings show that these attempts are brought about by the fact that their employees are motivated by different factors, and these factors seemingly tend to depend on their life situations;

"They [the more junior employees] are more into wanting to try new projects, try new things and I think that the advancement in grades and in positions motivates them more than myself but as I said before, I'm sort of on a plateau. Hmmm… grade and status motivate them more than myself, pay of course…" (John, Director)

However, a more junior employee chose to explicate more intrinsic elements when asked to describe what keeps her motivated:

"When one experiences that one has responsibility and gets stimulated and has a chance to impact, then I believe… then I believe that it's that that is important, and the grade is less important." (Alicia, Manager)

Our collective understanding after the interviews and, maybe foremost, after "hanging out with our material" as suggested by (Rennstam & Wästerfors 2018 pp. 105), was the idea among more senior employees that the more junior employees seem to be extrinsically stimulated. Although, subsequent interviews with junior consultants indicated an inclination towards factors similar to those mentioned by Alicia in the quote above, i.e. more innate stimulants. Either way, and per the idea suggested by Gilliland, Benson and Scheppers (1998 & Gilliland and Chan, 2001 cited in Latham 2012), i.e. the need for firms to model their performance management measures beyond extrinsic factors, becomes more apparent. One manner Solutions addresses the issue of not just appealing to their employees' extrinsic desires, is through their ceremonies as described below:

"(...) these promotion ceremonies occur in relation to Christmas party and summer party and then everyone that gets promoted gets a motivation and their name called out and are allowed up on a stage." (Jessica, Senior Consultant)

Maybe these ceremonies are the most potent and most concrete symbol for the whole grading system. Even though the idea of being celebrated publicly and having a speech held in one's honour could act as a source for intrinsic motivation, it appears that a promotion by default (due to time spent within a particular position), and the state of being average, grade-wise and in comparison to equally talented colleagues, could also have the opposite effect. Hence resulting in demotivation instead of motivation, as exemplified below:

"(...) but in the end they are just average meaning that they do very, very well in projects, the clients loves them and the project manager love them and so on but when it comes to the yearend grades, you are put up against 50 other people that has done equally well and you might just be average; so it might just be a trigger for them to leave." (John, Director)

Either way, employees' decision to leave does not necessarily have to be something adverse for Solutions. It is implied that the reward system, which is a component of the performance management measures, results in a natural selection of sorts, exemplified below:

"When you hope that you're one of those [being promoted], it sort of separates the personalities a bit. Some people would think like "Damnit that should be me, screw this, I go somewhere else". (...) But then there are those who think like "okay, watch this face, I will prove you wrong" and they will stand up there next year. That's the sort of mentality that prevails." (Daniel, Company Leader)

The reasonings, as mentioned above, suggests two kinds of employees that tend to leave Solutions, namely the overachievers not used to the feeling of being average and the ones with inadequate mindsets. The reasoning as mentioned earlier goes hand in hand with the idea suggested by Porter & Lawler, 1968 (cited in Molander, 1996) that firms should not aim to satisfy the whole workforce, but rather the best performers. Considering the turnover scheme as suggested by Allen (2010), it gets challenging to classify whether this form of turnover is involuntary, i.e. initiated by the organization, or voluntary (and functional), i.e. initiated by the employee.

It has also been implied that Solutions, to some degree, facilitates the exit of certain individual employees, something they refer to as "coaching out". We, however, could not accumulate enough data to confidently ascertain as to what degree Solutions actively engages in activities that escort the so-called 'not-a-best-fit' employees out from the company. Nevertheless, based on the recent quotes, one could speculate that the performance management tools do a considerable part of the work.

Speaking of which, an attrition/turnover rate of around 15-20% appeared ideal among the more senior interviewees, although it seems to fluctuate as exemplified below:

"It applies quite well, we have had 13% one year, which is really, really low... We had a high 25%" (John, Director)

However, the attrition/turnover rate is a compiled average between the positions and, as illustrated in figure 5, the rates vary considerably depending on one's position. Furthermore, the interviewed employees confirmed that Senior Consultants and Managers/Senior Managers were those two groups with the highest rates. So, how can one explain this disparity?

Figure 5
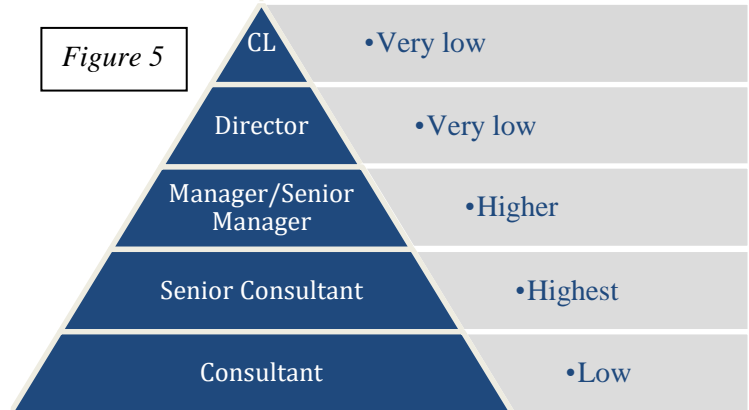
4.3 Identity formation at Solutions

Initially, we will adopt an identity perspective and present how the grading system at Solutions impacts employees' stay/leave decisions and adopt an organizational perspective that focuses on employee retention. Furthermore, we will strengthen the organizational perspective by looking at how the grading system functions as an identity regulator. Which in turn leads to an analysis of the performance measurement system intended to act as a 360-degree feedback tool and almost independent of the explicit bias derived from the human element; at least from top management's view. Subsequently, we intend to nuance this insight by looking closer at the human element, i.e. from middle management's perspective to see if they are as susceptible to bias as purported by top management. And what the implications of these contrasting views could be.

4.3.1 The individuals: why they leave or stay

So, why do people leave? We found some patterns indicating that employees leave the firm due to reasons that could have been discovered and prevented, such as the feeling of being under stimulated, extensive travelling to clients and the feeling of insufficient performance:

> *"when you have a low score, you kind of…ehm...I would assume that the feeling is "yeah, I'm not good enough"; and if you feel "I'm not good enough", then it's absolutely a factor that you consider and of course, effects if you resign or will do something else in the future, no doubt about it." (Philip, Senior Manager)*

Even though 'task flexibility' might be symptomatic for knowledge-workers in general and maybe consultants in particular (Alvesson, 2004), the 'time flexibility' expected appears to be something that causes the employees more displeasure:

"(…) so, it's not just about workload itself, but about uncertainties of planning that frustrates people. I mean it could be easier to know that next week I will be working 60 hours, and it will be easier to digest that than working 40 hours but suddenly, you need to do some 4 hours here and 3 hours there; and it destroys your planning or planned dinner or training or something with family and friends." (Mike, Senior Manager)

Also, a collectively shared notion among the interviewees was that the lifestyle, including the travelling and the expected time flexibility derived from the nature of their profession, was challenging to combine with parenting and family life. This partially explains, according to the interviewed subjects, the relatively high turnover rates among Senior Consultants, Managers and Senior Managers; many of whom are typically between 27 and 40 years old;

"And some that quit… yeah they are maybe in this situation that they want to get a family and children and so on and then obviously one gets a bit limited in certain kind of projects and so on that one can get when one has a family since one can't, you know.. one can't in the same way, one can… one maybe can't be as flexible when it comes to a quotation that should be submitted… ehm… we need to work a bit late tonight...". (Jessica, Senior Manager)

As the quote above suggests, employees who do not wholly acknowledge the expectations as determined by the firm's performance measurement system, i.e. time flexibility, a great deal of travelling, top performance etcetera, experience job dissatisfaction that results in staff turnover. However, the displeasure with their jobs is not entirely surprising, given that a considerable number of young recruits seem to choose this profession based on romanticized ideologies on what constitutes consulting. Alternatively, it could only be the case that some of them are not sure about what they want to do or become career-wise.

"Typically, when you start, you are a graduate, you are like 25 years old or something like that. I mean, many people don't really know what they'd like to do in the future. Many have a nice track record from school etc. but still I think that it's a kind of maturity; you

start work, you start finding yourself and what you'd like to do in the future". (Philip, Senior Manager)

Interpreting this, a contrario, would imply that the more senior employees do not engage as actively in identity work in comparison to their junior peers. In other words, they do not, to the same extent, evaluate, re-evaluate and revise their identity in relations to the identity proposed by the organization (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) unless they are obliged to, case in point, middle managers.

Besides, one could argue that these senior employees have been in the consulting business for so long that their identities have merged with the identity proposed by Solutions which implies acclimatization to the practices, i.e. they become active agents for identity regulation. Either way, it was implied that the low attrition/turnover rate among Company Leaders might be as a result of a so-called lock-in effect:

> *"It's very.. it's not that easy for a [CL] to get a job in a corporate with the same pay, so they get kinda locked in that position. If you don't want to drop down a bit in compensation, there aren't a lot of opportunities to go to in other companies, and all of a sudden (snapped his fingers) you get locked-in instead". (John, Director)*

The quote mentioned above implies that employees leave the firm due to dissatisfaction with the organizational expectations. Although, the case might just as well be that even though the employees are satisfied with what they are doing, they may receive offers that are too tempting to decline; which is a theme that was repeatedly emphasized during our interviews. However, the organizationally proposed identity might also result in people's choice to stay in Solutions:

> *"So I think both career-wise, in terms of what is the next grade [company hierarchy] for me, it's very clear it's Director and I can basically only see that point if I prove that my business platform is solid enough." (Philip, Senior Manager)*

Similarly, a typical pattern behind certain employees' reasons to stay seems to stem from their rather haphazard career paths:

48

"I think I will stay but where others say "well, now I'm going to sell this much and I'm going to be Principal and I'm going to be like that", it's more about me continuing to obtain the possibility to learn those things that I consider interesting...ehm.. so, I don't really have a career plan over how I'm going to climb within Solutions, I don't." (Alicia, Manager)

The quote by Alicia suggests that she does not acknowledge the identity suggested by Solutions through its regulatory efforts; instead, she emphasizes some form of independence from it. This independence indicates that the identity regulative attempts by Solutions do not necessarily affect every consultant, especially those who did not work their way up from the bottom of the pyramid.

## 4.3.2 Shaping the employees at Solutions

Having conducted several interviews, we started to see patterns regarding the usage of organizational identity regulation, both directly and indirectly. Philip (Senior Manager) did enlighten us about the specific types of people drawn to and hired by management consulting firms, resulting in employees with similar interests, goals and ambitions working tightly together over more extended periods.

"Basically all people joining a consulting firm, they are very typical profiles; you have studied economics or you have done industrial engineering or industrial economics similarly and you have very good grades, when I have looked at recruitments, obviously all people that apply to us obviously like the same things. They like to go to the Alps, skiing, they like to play golf, they like to be on the ocean; it fits like you know a profile….so maybe one of the challenges for us to basically think outside the box is to attract other profiles, and in order to do that, we need to kind of adapt and change our way to promote them and develop our people." (Philip, Senior Manager)

What Philip seems to imply regards the fact that the firm might insinuate which identities are deemed appropriate or permissible within the organization. In this case, it seems that the identity regulation starts even before employees are hired; that is to say, Solutions seems to have certain expectations in terms of the type of people who would seek them out for employment, and also, from the recruit's point of view, they also seem to have certain expectations about what the firm could offer. A double validation of sorts from both parties which initiates their relationship. Given

this, the first usage of a more direct approach to identity regulation between Solution and its future employees, takes place during the recruitment process as implied below:

"(...) sometimes, when I talk about it [retention and recruitment], I talk about a little bit of a Venn diagram where you have three intersecting circles. And what we want to get at is we want to get it to the sweet spot where the sort of the strategy and what we can offer as a company matches the individual's capability. Um, and then also what they want to do career wise." (Victoria, Support function) (Please see figure 6 for a visual representation of Victoria's quote)

Figure 6

Individual aspiration

What the company offer

Individual capability
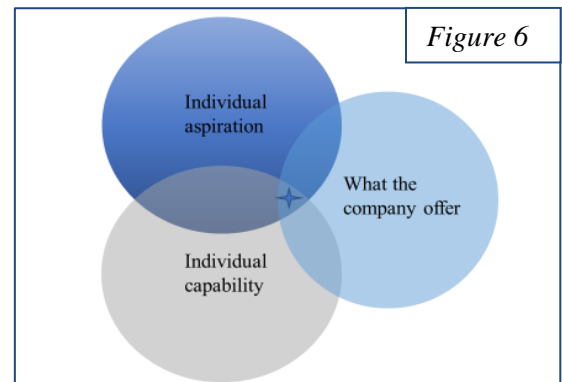
What Victoria is describing might be seen as aligning organizational goals with individual advancement, given our collected data, the alignment comes more from the individual. Kornberger and Brown (2007) made mention of identity regulation as somewhat manipulative management practices, given Victoria's statement it does not imply any canny strategy. Nevertheless, it does not rule out the concept of knowledge intensive firms being able to shape/regulate the identity of that specific employee, whether it is from flawed tactics or not. However, Daniel indicated that Solutions are looking for people who can develop a mindset that prioritizes the challenging tasks of a consultant:

> *"Because you want to find people who don't really see it [dedication to the work] as a sacrifice but see it as worthwhile (inaudible) in life. And there are many avenues to walk in to pursue that and I try to navigate within those avenues to find the right ones for us.....But what I do want is people that have developed these skills and passion to maintain them in order to do good. (Daniel, Company Leader)*

During the interviews, it became apparent that Solutions primarily reward sales activities. However, as described in the previous chapter, there is both a sales track (broadest) and an expert track (more of a niche). Nevertheless, there still seems to be a tremendous focus on sales, something that became obvious when looking at the more precise uses of the performance measurement tools. Philip described this sort of focus regarding specific activities in the following way:

"(...) so yes, it reflects it and it has kind of this logic inbuilt or built in...that really sets the expectations per grade [company hierarchy] so to speak, and really are pushing towards this sales oriented, but once again, that's one of the structural issues that we have, that its really pushing, promoting people with one type of mindset rather than this type of expert mindset." (Philip, Senior Manager)

The statement given by Philip seems to imply that the grading system used at Solutions favours specific characteristics, abilities and activities. Either the consultants appreciated the sales-orientation or had chosen to focus towards being more of experts or seemed to be a bit conflicted about their approach towards sales. Nevertheless, sales appear to be a variable our interview subjects continuously related to. After the completion of several of the interviews, the chain of command became rather apparent; it seems that an individual employed at the firm rarely put themselves in a situation where they turned down tasks and projects suggested by consultants higher up in the hierarchy. Circumstances explained by Lisa:

"I've worked on the IT consultancy and management consultancy so I can also compare that, and in the IT consultancy side, it was outspoken; I could say no. Then again, if I said no too much, and I was underutilized, then it would be a problem. In the MC area, they could force me, but at the same time, they kind of also respect me. I haven't been in such situations up until now at least. And the more junior you are, if you are really junior, you'll just be resourced." (Lisa, Manager)

We also got the notion that there are times when management 'resources' task directly as per the norms, and that the grading system seems to steer and favor certain activities. Nevertheless, identity regulation seems to be a concept that is executed differently depending on one's experiences. Having an identity affected or regulated is viewed as being caused by consultants' choices and as such, management's response to those specific choices, or vice versa; as elaborated on by Sandra regarding consultants actively choosing and prioritizing differently:

"I think that a lot of those who start now think that it is vital with work-life balance and I also think that a lot of those who start now see it like, or at least what I have heard that they view it like: "alright, there is an opportunity to have more work-life balance" but then you might not be up for a promotion that early, but that might be okay, so there is like a choice to be made" (Sandra, Consultant)

51

The statement given by Sandra, supported by the other interviewees, suggests a slight change when it comes to generations. Also highlighting that there is a choice to be made. Having priorities that are not favored by the grading system might lead to a slow-going progression curve, something stressed in the quote above.

4.3.3 Performance management at Solution: a self-sustaining mechanism

The impression derived from our interviews suggests that the grading system used at Solutions is intended to act as a 360-degree tool. A 360-degree tool used to capture both the tangible and intangible factors deemed necessary for the alignment of its goals. With the general understanding being that it captures both the quantitative dimensions via the EAF-forms and other qualitative dimensions via its mentorship program.

Accordingly, the performance measurement tool in this regard serves as a way for employees to differentiate themselves within explicitly stated parameters, with the interview subjects, belonging to top-management, alluding their successes to an identity that is mostly fostered and encouraged by the measures put in place by Solutions. As Daniel put it:

> *"For a Senior Manager who wants to become an expert need to build their name in an industry…. so, they just need to just maintain the hygiene factors on their KPIs [KPI= Key performance indicator] but building a platform for their name in the industry, and then that would bring them up to the next level if they are successful." (Daniel, Company Leader)*

The practical implications being that although it is not explicitly stated, any consultant who intends to ascend to the top of the pyramid is expected to live and abide by the criteria deemed beneficial by the performance management system at Solutions.

Furthermore, one gets the impression that these "KPIs", as referred to by Daniel in the quote above, is considered a kingmaker of sorts, free from bias and applicable to all since it makes explicit what attributes are deemed permissible and attractive in a Solutions consultant. An assumption that indicates no leeway for improvisations, i.e. the identities deemed permissible at the top are identities deemed appropriate by the grading system:

"...the thing is that, on the top-levels, you need to carry your own business, meaning that in order for you to be a [Company Leader], you need to sell….you need to already create as much business as a [Company Leader] does. So if one person goes up to be a [Company Leader], you expand the firm equally as you'd if you appoint a [Company Leader]. You need to carry your own business, that's the thing on the top levels" (John, Director)

To a layperson, this recipe may seem straightforward given that it implies that all one needs to do in order to succeed is to add significantly to the bottom-line and as such should constitute a motivating, uncomplicated factor. Nevertheless, the impression gotten from the group of top-management members is that it gets further complicated in terms of the practical hurdles each aspirant must overcome in order to reach the top. It becomes almost akin to gladiators (Cartwright, 2018) who undergo and overcome transformational character-and-skills-building hurdles that lead to ultimate glory. Unlike the gladiators of Ancient Rome, the hurdles at Solutions are considered, from management's point of view, fair and precise in that it offers clear direction on which behavior results in the achievement of organizational goals, as insinuated by the Support function staff:

"Yes. I mean, the majority of the things that we consider is their project performance. We also consider how, you know, are they out on projects? Have they, you know, did they have the skills that they, you know, are marketable. So, it has to do with their delivery and also their competency development. We also look at internal leadership and what they're doing to build our talent. And it depends on the grade [Company hierarchy], obviously, to build our talent and our brand and our knowledge." (Victoria, Support function)

Furthermore, the assumption from top management at least, is that the grading system at Solutions motivates by deemphasizing the need for some motivators amongst the workers at Solutions while emphasizing factors like being celebrated, status, prestige etcetera. It also signals to the workers, what type or blend of personality leads to success, which inadvertently leads to the homogeneity of character amongst those willing and adaptable to undergoing the process; as described by Daniel when discussing the benefits of ceremonies at Solutions in the following quote:

"...we do sort of acknowledge the performance quite clearly. We sort of celebrate performance in an obvious way. Which also adds to the competitiveness, which adds to and might be the career stress for all the others. So, you can't, yeah, I think if I would compare corporate [jobs] to consultancy, I do think we do have a much higher competitiveness within, in between us, in the workforce and in our company." (Daniel, Company Leader)

As previously stated, ceremonies in this instance is a performance measurement tool used by the firm to go beyond extrinsic rewards like extra monetary benefits, but instead is used to fuel competition amongst its workforce. The assumption being that recognition based on an outstanding performance from the grades achieved motivates intrinsically. As such, the grading system at Solutions is assumed to be a performance measurement tool that works in a 360-degree way to help stimulate and coordinate various organizational tasks; tasks typically relegated to the HR department. However, due to the assumed dynamism of the performance measurement system, it has been allowed to take center-stage in Solutions' core operations.

In terms of recruitment, the performance measurement system helps position the firm, as the go-to option among ambitious recruits, since the general belief is that the system grants these recruits the tools, they need to establish themselves in the management consulting field, as described below:

"...People come in and there's a reason that they choose us out of school and the majority of our, of our talent, uh, comes out of school after they've taken their masters. So usually people, you know, the other thing is people don't want to be hopping around too much early on in their career. They want to get in, they want to establish themselves somewhere" (...) *"And the real, the real question, if you want, it's getting at: "how do you get the right people to stay?" because you want to retain the top performers" (Victoria, Support function)*

Moreover, as the quote above also suggests, it seems like the performance management safeguards Solutions utilizes, does not end at the recruitment only. It, instead, extends itself to areas relating to employee engagement and job satisfaction, as the top-management need to ensure that they are in-tune with the issues their employees deem relevant for their well-beings, as shared below:

"if you look at an engagement as something that's important to retention, you know, we look at overall trends and overall things that are needed. And then we also watch certain high potential populations and if needed we do some specific interventions around people" (...) "we are watching to see that people are engaged and happy at a time. I mean, that's, that's the ideal. You don't want to have people get a wandering eye" (Victoria, Support function)

As Victoria suggests, there is a reliance on the capabilities of the performance measurement system to ascertain the needs of their employees and pattern possible resolutions in a way that helps the firm achieve its objectives. The implications being that the performance measurement tool, i.e. the grading system accordingly, is considered an independent actor granting Solutions the ability to filter out those who are not considered the best fit, those who are assumed to lack the drive needed to survive in the branch.

The result is the presumption that any action by the employee that does not result in grades that reflect, positively, the values bestowed indirectly by the performance measurement tool being frowned upon by top management and the insinuation of staff turnover. Staff turnover, which in this case, is the belief that the performance management measures at Solutions helps the employees decide when to part ways with the firm, or in some cases, a total makeover of their career options. A situation that implies how the identity regulatory aspects of the performance management tool steers the employees at some point in their career into making assessments that affect their future:

"We also know that there's certain times in an employee life cycle when they're likely to be looking" ... "And sometimes we end with a capability and the interest…. or the strategy is there as a company, but personally they don't want to do it. We see is there anything within the company that we can offer them that approximates that? And if not, then it's okay" (Victoria, Support function)

If and when employees do decide to part ways with Solutions, the quote by Victoria suggests that it is not as a result of any inadequacy of the measures themselves. However, it is a sure-tell sign that the system, viewed as an independent, mostly unbiased organism in itself, has facilitated the employees' decisions to leave the firm. Any flaws within this performance measurement system

is attributed to the human element, something top management downplays as manageable or rather insufficient to render the tools inadequate:

> *"As with any situation where humans are making a judgement call there will always be the human element in it and with that bias plays a role, but you can mitigate it, in different ways." (Daniel, Company Leader)*

Mitigation, as the quote implies, can be achieved through identity regulatory mechanisms that have resulted in what some at the firm, consider homogeneity that seems to be prevalent at Solutions, that is to say, many of the employees at Solutions are assumed to be cut from the same cloth i.e. prototypical. When asked if this homogeneity could prove problematic for the firm, i.e. it could hamper creativity which in turn derails the fulfilment of organizational objectives, the impression we got from top-management interviewees indicated the opposite. They suggested that the elimination of homogeneity, in regard to identities, poses the more significant threat, as explained by the interviewed Support function staff below:

> *"...I think I said that the risk was not that I saw people would, would morph into something different. I think the bigger risk is that if you are working to bring in a more differentiated talent pool, but the risk is that they're rejected, or they self-select out of the organization." (Victoria, Support function)*

According to Victoria, the argument behind the adaptation of performance management measures that encourages direct and indirect homogeneity is the assumption that diverging manifestations of identity at Solutions could derail their overall achievement of goals. It could also result in the neutralization of the intended purpose of the performance management measures being utilized. Furthermore, they believe that, although it may seem that the side-effect of the performance management system manifests itself in the creation of prototypical characters, it is still assumed to be a positive, since they do not have to deal with issues arising from saliencies of in vs out-groups.

That said, one may wonder what this implies for middle management, given their precarious situation where they are not only expected to be good soldiers expected to help shape the next generation of Solutions consultants, but also maintain their individuality. An individuality that is assumed to be their most distinguishing fact both internally and externally towards clients. They are also implored, by top management, to act as litmus tests in their position as counsellors, mentors, and managers towards their subordinates, as implied below:

"...in our company we have something called a counsellor" (...) "and so those folks are usually the ones that have the highest touch with the employee. So they should have a good idea of what's going on. And if they see some signs of attrition, hopefully they're reaching out to me or the managers" (Victoria, Support function)

So, what this implies is the belief that these middle managers are considered as insular components in the machinery that is the performance management measures at work at Solutions. It, in turn, re-emphasizes the assumption that middle management's primary role is the gathering and provision of data for further assessment by the almost impartial performance measurement measures. It suggests that middle managers are relegated to the function of raters, or in inexplicit terms, custodians who curate.

4.3.4 Middle managers: the core of Solution's performance management

"As with any situation where humans are making a judgement call there will always be the human element in it and with that bias plays a role, but you can mitigate it, in different ways." (Daniel, Company Leader)

What the quote above seems to also imply is that the human element involved in the management of performance is susceptible to bias. That the human element could in some ways affect the outcome of an otherwise rather precise performance measurement tool and calibrations. However, the assumption from top management is that the chances of this occurring are minuscule enough to warrant any form of concrete, active, corrective measure, i.e. from their point of view, it is not considered a prominent problem.

Nevertheless, the system in place at Solutions for measuring and managing performance seems very dependent on the subjective assessments of its middle managers. And as such, this makes these managers susceptible to factors like favoritism, interpersonal relationship and counterproductive performance review etcetera. Hence, the system cannot be wholly relied upon to evaluate the many facets (tangible and intangible) of the work performed by the consultants. One might argue that the aforementioned factors could have significant effects, especially when

one considers the fact that middle managers' evaluations are intended to act as a complement to Solution's efforts at encouraging their employees towards the fulfilment of organizational goals.

So, contrary to the belief shared by top management, middle management's role seems to go beyond being passive conveyors of information, as some of our interview subjects hinted at. They are assumed to be the sounding-boards with which these consultants (junior and seniors alike) are supposed to share their hopes, dreams and eventual concerns. However, they are also expected to be their advocates and mentors, while they balance it out with objective, unbiased performance evaluations of their charges within their different capacities. A complexity hinted at by Alicia whom, while discussing the challenges involved in grading, opined:

> *" ...So, everyone can't get A's or 1's. Everyone can't get good grades, so you have to assign good grades to some and also you have to assign worse to others. And when you squeeze all the overachievers into a company, it becomes problematic. It becomes a difficult topic to talk about, because you want assessment criteria to say something like this: "okay, these are areas you need to develop; these are your strengths"; you need to use the grades in a way that gives feedback more concrete, that's my opinion." (Alicia, Manager)*

The implied 'difficulty' suggests differences in opinions amongst the middle-managers regarding the appropriateness of, most especially the performance measurement system and its identity regulatory abilities. It seems like they try to make sense of their mandate to provide the relevant data needed for the grading systems (based on its various criteria) to assign company approved grades. In their effort to make sense of the measures, some managers opine that the system in itself can be considered straightforward in terms of evaluating the necessary aspects. Any failure in the performance measurement system to capture non-tangible aspects of performance is relegated to the consultants themselves:

> *"...We have a very clear process. I mean for me it's very clear, we have some colleagues that not always agree with that, but for me because I have been in other consultancies I have seen that you never can create something that is perfect and everybody is happy with it, and is always fair. But I believe this is as fair as you can get." (...) "So, everything that is not seen in the paper, you need to bring up. So that's why I don't agree that they say "ok...that this is just about calibration and numbers", No! I don't agree on that.*

Everything else that is not tangible, not visible, it's your counsellor's assignment to capture, and it's your own assignment to communicate that to your counsellor" (Mike, Senior Manager)

Based on the quote above, it appears that the assumption amongst some employees at Solutions seems to be a belief that the performance management tool, as an independent system, is considered adequate. Furthermore, any shortcomings witnessed is as a result of the human element; a human element which refers to consultants who do not fight enough for their causes in order to get what they want. And as such, the results gotten, would reflect the material it has been fed.

This implies, from middle management's point of view, disassociation from the role they play as "raters" within this system. This, in turn, could be considered as a conscious effort by these groups of middle managers to mitigate any assumption of bias on their part, by positioning the performance measurement measures as fair and relegating any failure to quantify intangible performances to the junior consultants themselves, for failing to make their case.

On the other hand, the middle managers who seem aware of the limitations of the performance measurement system at Solutions, and find it lacking or rather not the best-fit for the complexities experienced within their line of work, assuage to the fact that it complicates their jobs further. In the sense that while they are implored to give fair assessments of their subordinate's skills, they also have to contend with what could be described as 'management of feelings' as a result of the ensuing competition arising from the performance management measures, they implement and actively encourage. That is to say, that the measures encourage people to differentiate themselves in favor of the behaviors deemed desirable at Solutions; as the quote below explains:

"...For junior consultants they are being told that "hey, promote yourself to it, see they know who you are, they want to work with you", so of course that would make it easier having a good relationship with the people who work towards customers as well. Because then you'd get asked for and it is also a culture of.. you are supposed to sell yourself as well and to be someone that people want to work with" (....) "I can see that especially with some of my younger colleagues that they are very aware of it. It's quite competitive and people get really [sad], when they get a low grade" (...) "So when they get an average grade, as honestly most of them should be getting, because it's average, people

59

get really, really disappointed" (...) "it is a competitive environment. Much more competitive than anything else I have worked in.". (Lisa, Manager)

Management of feeling that arises, according to the quote, partly due to the culture that encourages and rewards a particular type of identity; with these managers expressing the disapproval of what they consider a system that promotes certain cookie-cutter characters as implied in the following quote by Philip:

"Yeah, it's a little bit too narrow in some sense because, as I said, historically, you have only promoted one type of people and typically, people that in the end of the day, sell things. But my point is a little bit that we need to be able to promote other individuals as well in order to be successful in the future." (Philip, Senior Manager)

It becomes quite apparent that these middle managers who have expressed dissatisfaction with the performance management system's shortcomings have undertaken different subtle or more direct measures to get around its perceived limitations. They test out various customized managerial ways to shape and regulate identities in a homogenous way via its grading systems and other performance measurement measures.

The middle managers argue that this homogeneity of character is not an attribute, unlike the narrative used to describe it by top-management. These middle managers take advantage of their unique positions to tailor their approaches downwards towards their subordinates in a manner that encourages diversity of personality. One middle manager described how he tries to encourage his subordinates and counselees to stand out amongst their peers and build out their networks, as described in the following quote:

*"**....** like for instance, what are the networks? Who is your network? Who are you friends with? Who likes you? Who doesn't like you? Which are the people you have been exposed to? Ehm…. if you have not been smart, you are maybe exposing yourself to a person who is not really very, very powerful, at the top of the organization; maybe they are not representing you that well. These all have an impact." (Mike, Senior Manager)*

What this suggests is an active effort to outmaneuver the performance measurement system in favor of his counselees and subordinates. By giving them this suggestion, it implies that the system is not as straightforward and unbiased as proposed by top management. Instead, the systems can be maneuvered in a manner that guarantees whatever outcome one desires.

Furthermore, by suggesting to his subordinates the power of networking, this manager implies that the human element (comprising mostly middle managers) in the performance management measures is much more essential than top management's assumption of it being a little cog in the machinery. Another example of middle managers making sense of their mandate in a manner that kind of deviates from its original intentions, as purported performance management measures, can be seen in the quote below. When asked about the performance management measures at work within Solutions and how it deals with issues of work-life balance amongst its workforce, the Manager stated the following:

> *".... During my career, I have tried to be very clear with the fact that I work between 8-5, then when the situation demands it, then I can switch up and accomplish more. But I want that for my own part and for those I work with, we should be able to have our leisure time. We can work hard from 8:00 [a.m.] -5:00 [p.m.] and do that by prioritizing hard and being careful what you focus on, so you often become ready in time." (Alicia, Manager)*

This implies that Alicia actively tries to make sure that her subordinates know that their leisure time is a priority. As such, she has patterned her managerial efforts to encourage them to perform their activities within the "8:00 – 5:00" time frame and only work extra if the need arises.

This seems to contradict the norm at Solutions buoyed by the psychological contract (i.e. common understanding/expectation from management's side that's not explicitly written (Beardwell, Holden & Claydon, 2004)) that at any time needed, being available to work inconvenient working hours. By ensuring that they perform their duties within a relatively shorter period, she and her subordinates had a clear focus on time management, instead of a higher number of hours. If this eventually affects their grades positively or negatively, is not readily deducible from the quote above.

The general implication being that the middle managers all employ different managerial approaches which are dependent on their interpretations of their roles as it pertains to the performance management measures used at Solutions. Hence resulting in situations that inadvertently position them attractively or unattractively to their subordinates, as explained Philip:

> *"So obviously, if you have one project leader, that project leader has one view on what is good or what is bad, and if you ask me, I might have another view on what's good or what's bad. So, it's really difficult to find this really leveling, what is good performance and have a common understanding of that amongst everybody, that really affects, let's say, the results at the end of the year. So, that's tricky, that's really tricky" (Philip, Senior Manager)*

A belief corroborated by a Senior Consultant who acquiesced to the fact that even amongst themselves, there are active efforts to choose mentors that can help fast-track their career or to seek out middle managers known to be quite generous in their assessments as explained below:

> *"...Historically speaking, there has been a small pattern of some leaders who typically award quite high ratings to consultants they are in charge of, and also, leaders who may push quite hard for their grades [in the calibrations] as well. And then maybe some leaders are a little tougher and have a little higher requirement and such" (...) "Whoever happens to end up under which leader or which ones get high grades and which ones get medium and low and so on, doesn't feel well grounded. If you know that this person has generally...ehm... that consultants who are in that person's team generally have quite high ratings and they also can fast track, i.e. get promoted faster and a little bit like that. It becomes clear that there will be a reputation that that is the team to belong to" (Jessica, Senior Consultant)*

And as the quotes above imply, this results in middle managers who use grade generosity to garner favor or to make themselves appear as the most attractive prototype, i.e. a popularity contest of sorts. They could try to use this to garner favor and as such, have access to the most attractive pool of Consultants and Senior Consultants within the various projects that they oversee. This also reaffirms the suggestion made by David, Company Leader, who reiterated the importance of status as one of the motivating factors within the firm.

In conclusion, contrary to the explanations given by the interviewed top managers, it is apparent that Solution's middle managers play a very proactive role in the administration of their performance management measures. Not only are they tasked with providing the quantifiable data in the EAF-form derived from their assessments of their subordinates' work, they are also assigned the responsibility of making non-tangible, ambiguous qualitative aspects of their work tangible. All in an effort to effectively act as advocates for the causes of their charges (subordinates/counsellees) in the yearly calibrations.

Their role seems to transcend the role of raters to managers who not only are mentors in charge of aligning, regulating and encouraging homogeneous identity, but also managers of feelings who help mold the identities of their subordinates. This gets reflected in the various ways they try to tailor and personalize their management styles both in line with the firm's objectives but also with what they deem relevant.

What remains to be ascertained, is if this personalization of approaches stems from a need to circumvent the performance management measures in place, or to help enhance and improve it or maybe a simple case of personalization for self-gain. Nevertheless, what seems apparent, based on the conducted interviews, is the belief that these middle managers comprise the core of the performance management system at Solutions.

4.4 Summary

In summary, these results suggest that Solutions actively engages in different identity-regulatory measures, masked as performance management, with the intention of achieving the homogenization they believe is crucial for the improvement of performance and alignment of goals. What this implies in practice is a combination of methods, i.e. performance measurement tools and other management measures like the mentorship program, EAF, calibrations and similar, that is used to make both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of their work, quantifiable; all in an effort to align individual interests with those of the firm.

However, there seems to be a variance in the narratives used to describe the inner workings of these practices. The assumption from top management seems to imply that the system is mostly

capable of handling the implied complexities, and any shortcomings being as a result of the human element. A situation they seem to try to fix by, for example, reducing the role middle managers play to mere conduits of data or information of performance (they convey information back and forth). The middle managers, however, paint a different picture. They describe scenarios where they actively try to interpret and make sense of their mandates, which in turn translates to the way they manage their subordinates. The implication being that they are involved to a much larger extent than implied by the top management.

5. Discussion

We believe our findings have shown that the grading system at Solutions has an identity regulative effect and that middle managers are doubtlessly involved in generating this effect. The previous chapter has also demonstrated some of the consequences stemming from the performance management measures, maybe specifically in terms of retention. However, we will begin the chapter by describing what we refer to as an identity homogenization process continuously taking place in Solutions founded upon the performance management system. Subsequently, we will investigate middle managers' role in the process and subsequently delve deeper into the consequences derived from the process.

5.1 Performance management that leads to homogenization

From the perspective of the psychological contract, one could argue that Solutions has certain expectations on the types of personalities they seek to employ and therefore a search for their model employee commences right at recruitment.

Taking into consideration the reciprocity embedded within both parties' mental schema, in regards to the psychological contract mentioned earlier, (Latham 2012; Beardwell, Holden and Claydon, 2004), it is safe to state that the talents joining Solutions are all figurative shades of light blue (see figure 7). What this means is that they are a specific type of characters consciously selected by Solutions with the hopes that these recruits would be amenable to the transformational processes that would mold them into the type of consultants befitting the firm. The expectation from Solutions in this regard indicates a desire to recruit personalities that would not be resistant to the identities the firm encourages. By having a clear idea about which identity and which traits are valuable for Solutions through specific recruitment criteria, one could argue that the psychological contract becomes valid even before potential recruits join the firm. These expectations also facilitate the process of filtering out undesired identities, i.e. those that are not blue, metaphorically speaking.

Figure 7

The employees, on the other hand, seem to accept their employment offers on the premise that Solutions would grant them the tools they need to develop themselves and broaden their work-related experience. Even though the recruits initially do not appear to have the precise identity

proposed by the organization, they still appear willing to subjugate themselves to the transformational processes.

A process that involves them fulfilling specific criteria within the parameters set by the grading system in order to become the consultants Solutions expects them to become. In other words, by adopting a focus that continuously strives to fulfil the criteria in the grading system, employees are gradually indoctrinated into the firm's ideologies. Thus, verifying the assertions made by Alvesson & Willmott (2002) regarding how the processes of identity regulation trigger the process of identity conformation (identity work) into an identity that exudes part self, part consultant. As for the metaphor described above, one could argue that the employees, after their recruitment, all came in as different shades of light blue before metamorphosing into metaphorical shades of darker blue, gradually adopting the color (identity) suggested by the firm's performance management measures. How this transformational process occurs, according to our findings, is very dependent on middle management and their efforts to make sense of their mandate. That is to say that middle managers are the backbone of this transformational process that turns the different shades of blue, into one dark shade of "Solutions Consultant" blue as illustrated in figure 8;

Figure 8
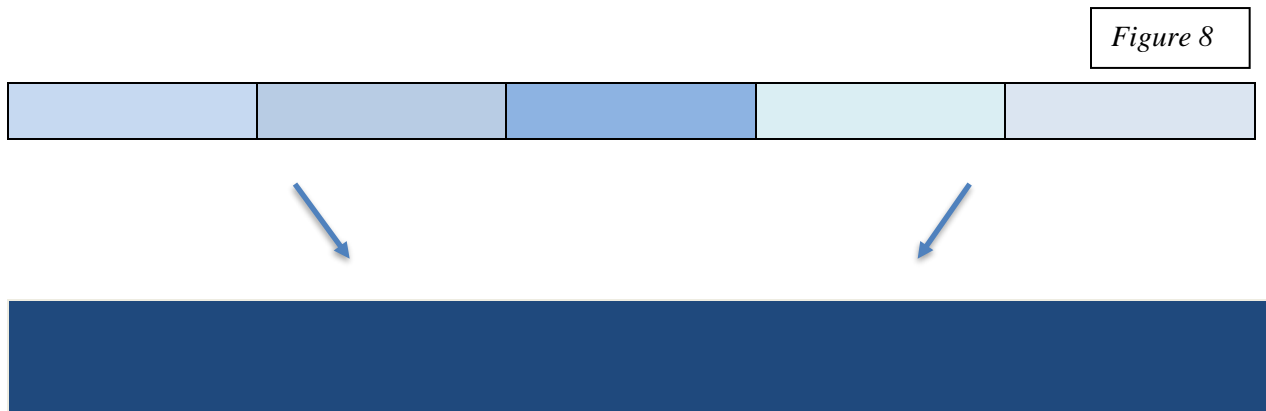
5.2 The role of middle managers in the homogenization process

The homogenization process, as mentioned above, is facilitated by the stable source for identity that the knowledge workers' work environment constitutes (Alvesson, 2004). This calls into question which role middle managers play in the entire process? One could claim that the performance management system at Solutions are comparable to the architect behind the design and construction of a house, whilst the middle managers could be compared to estate agents responsible for convincing the customers (subordinates in the scenario) to buy the property in question. Given that these middle managers have undergone the identity-molding processes, (influenced by Solution's grading system), they become contributors who strengthen its purpose through mentorship of their subordinates.

In other words, middle managers play a significant role in the alignment of individual and organizational goals. Our idea here is that traditional research within performance management typically downplays the role possessed by middle managers in the alignment of the goals as mentioned earlier. For instance, the performance management cycle suggested by Storey, Billsberry and Salaman (2005) implies that alignment of individual and organizational goals will occur as long as the organization optimizes the five critical factors for successful performance management, which in turn leads to the alignment of goals (see figure 9).

Figure 9
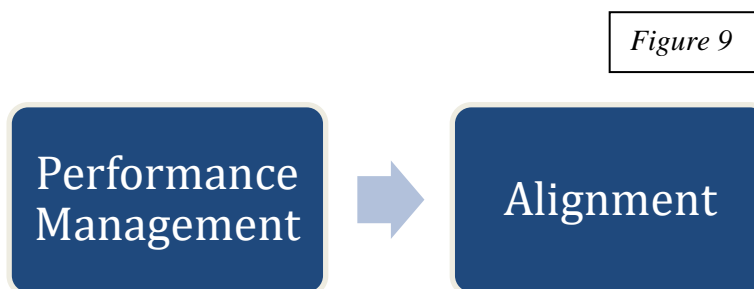
Furthermore, the five critical factors mentioned by Storey, Billsberry and Salaman (2005), seems to imply the creation of a self-sustaining system that is more than capable of dealing with the multiple facets, ambiguities and complexities of human relationships and knowledge work; an autonomous system that is fair, consistent, precise, reliable and almost free from bias.

Accordingly, based on current research on the subject matter, the implementation of performance management systems that focuses on managing factors affecting employee performance and motivation leads to outcomes that effectively ensures a level of satisfaction and productivity that guarantees the firm's longevity (Wikström and Martin 2012; Dessler 2003). Given our results, we find this statement to be accurate; however, some questions still are not entirely answered by the assertion above. Questions pertaining to, for example, whose satisfaction? Is it the satisfaction of the spectra of junior consultants, middle management or top management that should be prioritized during the formation and implementation of the performance management system?

The complexities involved in making such decisions indicates that performance management, as opined by current research, is not as self-sufficient and independent as one would hope. The performance management measures appear to require specific human influences since the human factor seems to be the component capable of handling such complexities and ambiguities faced by the current system. That is to say, that potential talent could be retained, and otherwise, hard statistics could be interpreted through the lens of "human capital" charged with overseeing this. In the case of Solution, the middle managers are the ones entrusted, as previously stated, with this vital role.

Given the statement above, if viewed through the lens of the theoretical concept of identity, we can make the case that top management or rather the firm, influences the middle managers through identity regulatory efforts. This identity regulation translates into ongoing identity work that enables the middle manager to re-evaluate and align their interests with the organization's. This, however, does not mean that the middle managers are solely passive recipients of identity regulatory efforts; they are also actively involved in the molding and creation of their subordinates' identities through their varying interpretations of the mandate bestowed upon them as exemplified in figure 10.

Figure 10

Performance Management → Middle Managers → Alignment

To simplify this reasoning, one could say that middle managers' identity work makes them answer the question "Who am I?" (Alvesson 2004 p.188) and the rationale for this is due to identity regulation from top management. This, in turn, translates into identity-regulation from the middle managers towards their subordinates, guided by the middle managers' perception of "Who are the consultants supposed to be?"

What the case study at Solutions shows, is a confirmation of the gap that was identified in existing theory that did not seem to sufficiently acknowledge the importance of the human element involved in the management of performance. Instead, it is assumed that once a performance management system is implemented, it will magically do all the work, i.e. primarily self-sufficient with the human element reduced to administrators charged with supplying the performance management system with the information it needs to perform its duties. All in an effort to mitigate issues that could result in rating distortions stemming from, e.g. favoritism, interpersonal relationships and counterproductive review (Aguinis, 2004).

Our study, on the contrary, has shown that the human factor, i.e. middle managers, have a substantial influence on almost every single facet mentioned by Storey, Billsberry and Salaman (2005), exemplified below;

- Goal setting: the goals are formulated in the assessment criteria but interpreted and further communicated by the counsellors to their mentees.

- Performance measurement: one or two times a year, a consultant's counsellor reviews his/her subordinate's assessments and represents him/her in the round table discussion.

- Performance reward: As stated by Mike, counselees must make sure that their counsellors represent them well at the round table discussion in order to get a good grade that impacts promotion, salary and bonus.

- Process links: counselees' understanding of the performance management system is dependent on their counsellor's interpretation and explanation of it.

- Feedback and amendments: The counsellors and team leaders are responsible for providing their subordinates/mentees with continuous feedback.

Hence, the performance management tools, i.e. the criteria underlying the grading system, in its entirety, does not align organizational and individual goals. Instead, we opine that it is the middle managers' interpretations of the performance management, and the way they further communicate their interpretations of the criteria to their subordinates that, in the end, aligns individual and organizational goals. We liken it to the "Chinese whispers" game of sorts (Dictionary.com, n.d.), where once these middle managers receive their mandates i.e. instructions from top management, they interpret and initiate the homogenization processes based on their interpretations (identity work) and whisper it along to their subordinates. Subordinates who then must process the identity-regulatory efforts and decide how to relate to them i.e. they have to either conform, resulting in homogenization, or the opposite if deemed completely unsuitable.

That said, the general understanding on the subject matter indicates that middle management, in its role as performance management custodians, still is not expected to reflect the individuality afforded them through their varying worldviews and interpretations of reality due to the existence of the assumed, self-sufficient performance management system. How then does top management ensure that instances of middle managers' characteristics, that may vary from the overall organizational identity, does not reflect itself in the advice given to subordinates? Irrespective of whatever organizational identity-regulatory attempts they have been subjected to?

5.3 The consequences stemming from homogenization

That notwithstanding, the senior employees' identities do not necessarily have to merge with Solutions' organizational identity. They can also be light blue or even another color, i.e. different from the identity advocated by Solutions when they enter the firm and commence their role as a middle manager. What this implies is that unlike their more junior counterparts, fresh out of school, these managers already possess a broad spectrum of niched interests and personal experiences which has helped shape their identities independent of the mechanisms at play within the firm and as such makes them less receptive of the internal regulatory practices.

Hence, they already possess a self-awareness about how distinctive their identity is in comparison to the one suggested by Solutions via its identity regulatory measures, thereby strengthening the proposition made by Alvesson & Willmott (2002) where they bestowed the virtues of identity work that reflects distinctiveness and self-awareness. Whilst bearing in mind the conclusions drawn from Philip's claims in 4.3.1, i.e. that consultants appear to decelerate their identity work the more they get infused with organizational identity, which seems evident within those higher up the career pyramid.

In other words, the consultants gradually become less receptive to the targeted organizational identity-regulation because they either have already inculcated their current firm's shared ideologies or have identities that have already been shaped by previous job experience in other organizations. Furthermore, their role seemingly supersedes the active and passive positions afforded them by existing theory, to becoming solely active agents. They administer these regulatory efforts to ensure the continuance of the performance management measures or in the worst-case scenario if they fail to acknowledge and/or are unreceptive to the identity regulatory efforts, choose to leave instead.

So, what is the implication for an organization with middle managers (active agents) whose identities are not aligned with those of their firm? How do they then manage their subordinates in order to achieve the alignments as proposed by implemented performance management measures? Our findings show that these managers, directly or indirectly, sow their peculiar identity-molding seeds within those they manage, i.e. their subordinates or counselees. These are

exemplified in our case, in the instances where middle managers at Solutions encourage their subordinates to prioritize their work-life balance or position themselves in a manner that makes them more visible at work i.e. active networking.

These instances of customized management, even within the parameters set forth by the performance management systems, inadvertently results in newly recruited employees' identities that are greatly influenced by their middle managers and their interpretation of the assessment criteria. These middle managers end up molding their subordinates within their capacities as counsellors, team-leads, project managers, supervisors etcetera into individuals whose goals may or may not end up aligning with those of the organization.

Hence, the linkages, as suggested by Alvesson & Willmott (2002 pp. 627), implies 'discursive practices (i.e. identity regulatory attempts), triggered by the organization through its use of performance management measures. In our study, this was exemplified by the firm's utilization of the Evaluation Assessment Form (EAF). These performance management measures are often aimed at achieving the continuity of junior employees' "self-constructions in terms of coherence, distinctiveness and commitment" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002 pp. 619). Although the evidence points towards scenarios where these performance management measures are not developed to tackle all work-related complexities and ambiguities; or in some cases, it is not implemented straightforwardly.

This could result in a situation where the targeted employees feel disenfranchised by the firm's performance management practices, and as such, end up not acknowledging the identity regulatory efforts as illustrated in figure 11 below.

Figure 11

Receptive to regulatory efforts (juniors searching for identity)	Performance management leading to indoctrination/alignment of identity → stay	Leave
Unreceptive to regulatory efforts (seniors already infused with organizational identity)	Stay	Leave
	Acknowledge the organizational identity	**Do not acknowledge the organizational identity**

In summary, the matrix above suggests that disenfranchised employees, i.e. those who do not acknowledge the organizational identity, whether they be juniors searching for their identity or recently employed seniors unreceptive to regulatory efforts due to strong identities boosted by previous experiences, leave the firm. However, our claims seemingly align with the assertions made by Victoria in chapter 4.3.3, where she opined that those whose identities are not typical i.e. not homogenized, end up self-selecting out of the organization or generally not fitting in.

Furthermore, these employees subsequently face the option of being filtered-out; a sentiment reinforced by the comments made by John and Daniel in chapters 4.2.4, as an explanation of the consequences of misaligned identities. A possible explanation for the misalignment can be as a result of identities strongly influenced by external factors (i.e. deeply contrasting shades of blue); or maybe due to the influences of identity-regulation from micro-emancipated, middle managers. Micro-emancipated managers whose actions, directly or indirectly, result in "concrete activities, forms, and techniques that offer themselves not only as means of control, but also as objects and facilitators of resistance and thus, as vehicles for liberation" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992 pp. 446 cited in Huault, Perret & Spicer, 2014). In an effort to show how their identities are not in conformance with the firms'.

The filtering effect implies that the wrong identities, i.e. those with an insufficient mindset and/or those who have performed poorly based on the grading criteria, leave Solutions of their own accord. Hence, the turnover scheme suggested by Allen (2010) appears a bit simplistic since it becomes ambiguous whether individual's exits are initiated by the organization or by themselves. However, taking the psychological contract into account, one might argue that individuals leave the firm, not because of identity reasons but rather that they experience that their performance has not been sufficiently rewarded (Latham, 2012) or that they have outgrown the identities suggested by their firm. Thus, leading to scenarios where if talented employees, i.e. the high performers, continuously leave of their own accord, firms inadvertently become compelled to gradually and successfully adapt its practices to accommodate the aforementioned talented employees whims; which legitimizes questions regarding 'who influences who' in terms of the employee/organization-relationship.

5.4 Main take-aways from the discussion

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that middle managers' principal mandate is to try and sell the performance management measures in a way that guarantees their subordinate's active participation in the activities deemed suitable for the achievement of organizational objectives/strategies. However, the results derived from the quantification of these actions could sometimes not work in their favour.

What this implies is that the middle managers are constantly faced with or encouraged to participate in activities that often stand in contrast to their self-interests or identities. As such, they must make active choices between that "will make them 'look good' according to incomplete performance measurements, and other actions which will have less favorable impact on measured performance but will in fact create more value" (Neely, 2004 pp. 340).

So, this invalidates, partially, the assumption that middle management's role can be diminished to passive recipients of identity-regulatory efforts. They are not only instrumental in the management of performance, but their actions could derail even well thought-out and implemented performance management measures if not deemed compatible with their self-interests. A consequence of this

74

being that the firm inadvertently loses talented knowledge workers whose contributions could have added value to the overall objectives.

Thus, the questions that needs to be asked, when one intends to implement performance management measures to align interests, should be:

- Who the best people are and if there are sufficient and adequate tools to determine who they are?

- Is a number based on specific criteria, decided upon by a performance management system with limited or predetermined human influence, a sufficient foundation for determining who the best people are?

- What distortions could arise from disparities in efforts to quantify qualitative factors such as client/customer/collegial relationships, abilities and complex characteristics?

- Furthermore, has consideration been given to the human factors involved in this system? Because those in charge of administering this, cannot be reduced to mere raters or conveyors of information. They are much more proactive in the daily administration of activities similar or on par with those executed by HR; and as such, they should get the credit and attention they deserve in order to effectively manage the contextual complexities they face.

Taking these factors into consideration, the implication would be that the discourses surrounding performance management would be nuanced beyond the prevalent "quantification-centric" views i.e. not viewing performance management measures as a separate organic organism. That is to say that organizations would be able to recognize the symbiosis that exists between the human elements and the performance management measures. As these complex humans, especially middle managers, are the factors that guarantee the system's long-term survival.

6. Conclusions

One of the primary goals we sought to achieve with our study was to delve deeper into the interplay between the top-management initiated performance management measures' and 'identity work' amongst middle managers. By focusing on this particular group inhabiting unique positions within the organization (recipients and administrators of identity-regulation), we sought to understand, with the aid of a social constructionist point-of-view, how they make sense of the ambiguities their jobs entail. That is to say, in what manner their sensemaking attempts shape the identity regulatory efforts (via various performance management measures), that is channeled towards their subordinates.

Based on our empirical findings derived via in-depth qualitative interviews, we argue that performance management in general, through the aid of middle managers, has a very noticeable identity regulative effect. Current research on performance management acquiesces to its ability to assist in the creation and alignment of the individual or group identities to achieve organizational goals; especially within consulting, a conclusion our data also seems to collaborate. However, we find to be somewhat lacking, enough literature that focuses on how at the core of performance management measures, especially within management consulting, are the middle managers who could be considered its backbone. As such, we intend to add nuance to current literature regarding the reciprocity between performance management and identity-work from middle management's perspective, i.e. our theoretical contribution.

Furthermore, the findings also showed that irrespective of roles, position and status, everyone at Solutions related to the performance management system as an independent phenomenon. Moreover, as such, they patterned and modelled their behaviors and actions in an interactive, continuously looped manner towards the performance management system. However, we found that although the performance management system does have an identity regulatory effect on the mindset of the workers, it is the middle managers that are instrumental in helping these employees make sense of the ambiguity their work entails. It became apparent that these managers were the cogwheels in the performance management system in their roles as mentors, counsellors, project leaders, team leaders, evaluators, raters etcetera.

Given the conclusions regarding the active role of the middle manager, our findings show that identity-regulatory actions from top-management triggers identity work within middle managers who in an effort to confirm or disconfirm already existing self-identities, draw from a bank of experiences, either external or internal or both, to make sense of these regulatory efforts. We suggest that the outcome of the identity work within these managers manifests itself in the identity-regulatory exercises they subject their subordinates to.

Additionally, we contend that the outcomes, as mentioned above, are dependent on how receptive the employees are to the targeted PM/identity-regulatory measures. It becomes vital in the case of middle managers whose identities, as previously stated, could either be influenced by the firm's identity regulation or by external factors utterly unrelated to the organization. In the case of the former, the result would be a continuance of the identity-regulatory endeavors, whereas the latter results in a bypassing, detachment or customization of the homogenization processes, i.e. they become less susceptible.

Whatever the outcome of the above mentioned may be, we believe that it would be transferred downwards to the target group, namely subordinates. Subordinates who appear more vulnerable or susceptible to the homogenization processes which in turn determines subsequent identity-related decisions that result in either:

1. attrition/turnover (voluntary & involuntary),

2. alternatively, stay and submit (either actively or passively) to the transformation into the metaphorical "dark shade of blue" i.e. homogenization.

As such, these self-identity decisions, emanating from continuous, managerial identity-regulatory measures camouflaged as performance management, could be instrumental for determining the organization's long-term survival.

6.1 Managerial implications

The implications of our findings could further nuance, theoretically speaking, the discussions surrounding the importance of middle managers in the implementation of performance management measures within knowledge-intensive firms. Given our results, we hope that organizations would recognize these managers as the main cogwheels in the performance management system they are. Furthermore, their roles would, as such, not be relegated or diminished to rather perfunctory roles like raters or mere conveyors of information, but instead, they should be viewed as a valuable resource.

A valuable resource whose function is almost, or rather, on par with the objectives of human resources, i.e. they could be an alternative or complement to human resources. It is our belief that organizations could work with these issues in a practical manner if the highlighted points provided in the end section of 5.4 are raised by the top management. Hopefully, our findings would help organizations to realize the importance of recognizing the power these middle managers wield in the alignment of goals via the performance management tools at their disposal.

Given that, as our study has shown, these middle managers have the power to handle human complexities deemed out of reach for the presumed "self-sufficient" performance management measures, whilst also aiding in making the ambiguous nature of knowledge work manageable for all.

6.2 For further research

Even though our study has (although critically) adopted the notion that organizations can shape their employees' identities through various performance management measures, one should be careful to diminish the power individuals possess in shaping the organizational identity.

For instance, to attract and retain talents deemed best-fit, organizations must provide the individuals with a work environment that is appealing to them. Hence, organizations must adapt their practices to contemporary social trends. It calls into question who exactly is influencing

whom in terms of the employer/employee relationship shaped by both psychological and formal contracts.

Therefore, we encourage students, researchers and/or maybe consultants to investigate further the power balance between individuals and organizations in the creation of identity through identity regulation and identity work. A hypothesis to build upon is that the balance, as mentioned earlier, could probably vary between nations, cultures and industries which could be a focus for such a study.

Reference list

Aguinis, H. (2014). Performance management. 3. ed., Pearson new internat. ed. Harlow: Pearson

Allen, D (2010) Retaining talent. Available online: https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/special-reports-and-expert-views/Documents/Retaining-Talent.pdf [Accessed 3 April 2020]

Alvehus, J. (2016). Skriva uppsats med kvalitativ metod: en handbok, Stockholm: Liber AB

Alvesson, M. Ashcraft, K. L and Thomas, R. 'Identity matters: Reflections on the construction of identity scholarship in organization studies', Organization, 15(1), pp. 5–27. doi: 10.1177/1350508407084426. [Accessed 25 April 2020].

Alvesson, M. (2004). Knowledge Work and Knowledge-Intensive Firms, New York: Oxford University Press Inc

Alvesson, M., and Sköldberg, K. (2008). Tolkning och reflektion: vetenskapsfilosofi och kvalitativ metod, Studentlitteratur, 2008.

Alvesson, M. and Kärreman, D. (2007). 'Unraveling HRM: Identity, Ceremony, and Control in a Management Consulting Firm', *Organization Science*, 18(4), p. 711. doi: 10.1287/orsc.1070.0267. [Accessed 25 May 2020].

Alvesson, M. and Willmott, H. (2002), Identity Regulation as Organizational Control: Producing the Appropriate Individual. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39: 619-644. doi:10.1111/1467-6486.00305 [Accessed 25 May 2020].

Anicich, E. M. and Hirsh, J. B. (2017) 'Why Being a Middle Manager Is So Exhausting', *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*, p. 2. Available online: https://hbr.org/2017/03/why-being-a-middle-manager-is-so-exhausting [Accessed 25 May 2020].

Ashforth, B.E., Kreiner, G.E., and Fugate, M. (2000) 'All in a Day's Work: Boundaries and Micro Role Transitions', *The Academy of Management Review*, 25(3), p. 472. Available online: https://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=4fd22447-9a98-46bb-96a3-4eadd7d432be%40sdc-v-sessmgr03 [Accessed 25 May 2020].

Batchelor, C. (2011). 'Up or out' is part of industry culture, *Financial Times*, 20 April, Available Online: https://www.ft.com/content/d42434b2-6b69-11e0-a53e-00144feab49a [Accessed 10 April 2020]

Behn, R. D. (2003) 'Why Measure Performance? Different Purposes Require Different Measures', *Public Administration Review*, 63(5), pp. 586–606. doi: 10.1111/1540-6210.00322. [Accessed 27 May 2020]

Bell, E., Bryman, A., and Harley, B. (2019). *Business research methods*. 5. edition Oxford: Oxford University Press

Cameron, W.B. (1963). Informal sociology a casual introduction to sociological thinking, New York: Random House

Chee Hong, E., Hao, L., Kumar, R., Ramendran, C., and Kadiresan, V. (2012). An Effectiveness of Human Resource Management Practices on Employee Retention, *International Journal of Business Research and Management (IJBRM)*, Volume (3): Issue (2). Available online: www.cscjournals.org/manuscript/Journals/IJBRM/Volume3/Issue2/IJBRM-81.pdf [Accessed 15 May 2020]

Cheney, G. (1983). On the various and changing meanings of organizational membership: A field study of organizational identification, *Communication Monographs*, vol. 50, no. , pp. 342-362, Available online: http://resolver.ebscohost.com/openurl?sid=google&auinit=G&aulast=Cheney&atitle=On+the+various+and+changing+meanings+of+organizational+membership%3a+A+field+study+of+organizational+identification&id=doi%3a10.1080%2f03637758309390174&title=Communication+Monographs&volume=50&issue=4&date=1983&spage=342&site=ftf-live [Accessed 24 April 2020]

Claydon, T. (red.) (2004). Human resource management: a contemporary approach. 4. ed. Harlow: Financial Times Prentice Hall

Dessler, G. (2003). A framework for human resource management. 3. ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall

Dictionary.com. (n.d.). Chinese whispers, Available online: https://www.dictionary.com/browse/chinese-whispers [Accessed 22 May 2020]

Gilliland, S. W., Benson III, L. and Schepers, D. H. (1998) 'A Rejection Threshold in Justice Evaluations: Effects on Judgment and Decision-Making', *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 76(2), pp. 113–131. doi: 10.1006/obhd.1998.2801. [Accessed 16 April 2020]

Gray, D. E. (2014). Doing research in the real world. 3. ed. Los Angeles, London: SAGE

Gruman, J. A. and Saks, A. M. (2011) 'Performance management and employee engagement', *Human Resource Management Review*, 21(2), pp. 123–136. doi: 10.1016/j.hrmr.2010.09.004. [Accessed 3 April 2020]

Gulati, R. (2018). Structure that's not stifling, *Harvard Business Review*, May-June issue pp. 68-79, Available online: https://hbr.org/2018/05/structure-thats-not-stifling [Accessed 3 April 2020]

Hausknecht, J. P., Rodda, J. and Howard, M. J. (2009). 'Targeted employee retention: Performance-based and job-related differences in reported reasons for staying', *Human Resource Management*, 48(2), pp. 269–288. doi: 10.1002/hrm.20279. Available online: https://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=ed434392-57a1-4b5c-893d-11ed32b12630%40sdc-v-sessmgr03 [Accessed 15 April 2020]

Hogg, M. A. (2001) 'A Social Identity Theory of Leadership', *Personality & Social Psychology Review* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), 5(3), pp. 184–200. doi: 10.1207/S15327957PSPR0503_1. [Accessed 5 May 2020]

Huault, I., Perret, V. and Spicer, A. (2014) 'Beyond macro- and micro- emancipation: Rethinking emancipation in organization studies', *Organization*, 21(1), pp. 22–49. Doi: 10.1177/1350508412461292. [Accessed 5 May 2020]

Hutchens, N., Tischey, N. and Deutsch, A., (1982). 'How Employee Retention Strategies Can Aid Productivity', *Journal of Business Strategy*, 2(4), pp. 106–109. doi: 10.1108/eb038948. Available online: https://www-emerald-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/insight/content/doi/10.1108/eb038948/full/pdf [Accessed 29 April 2020]

Jewell, L. N and Siegall, M (1990). Contemporary industrial/organizational psychology. 2. ed. St. Paul: West Publ. Co.

Kornberger, M. and Brown, A. D. (no date) '"Ethics" as a discursive resource for identity work', *Human Relantions*, 60(3), pp. 497–518. doi: 10.1177/0018726707076692. Available online: https://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=366eaecc-8ac9-47cf-babc-a189e74cf8d8%40pdc-v-sessmgr05&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=000245789700004&db=edswss [Accessed 2 May 2020]

Latham, G. P. (2012). Work motivation: history, theory, research, and practice. 2. ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE

Lau, S., and Albright, L. (2011). Positive Turnover, Disability Awareness, Employee Selection Guidelines, *HR Magazine*, vol. 56, no. 1, Available online: https://eds-a-ebscohost-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=1d490827-9547-40a8-acf9-07ead783f147%40sessionmgr4006 [Accessed 14 April 2020]

Lawler, E. J. (red.) (1986). Advances in group processes: a research annual. Vol.3, 1986. Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press

Locke, E. A. and Latham, G. P. (1990). A theory of goal setting & task performance. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall

Locke, E. A. (1976). The nature and causes of job satisfaction. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology (pp. 1297-1343). Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.

Locke, E. A., Shaw, K. N., Saari, L.M. and Latham, G. P. (1981) 'Goal setting and task performance: 1969–1980', Psychological Bulletin, 90(1), pp. 125–152. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.90.1.125. [Accessed 2 May 2020]

Long, H. (2016). The new normal: 4 job changes by the time you're 32, Available online: https://money.cnn.com/2016/04/12/news/economy/millennials-change-jobs-frequently/index.html [Accessed 25 May 2020].

Malhotra, D. (2009). When Contracts Destroy Trust, *Harvard Business Review*, Available online: https://hbr.org/2009/05/when-contracts-destroy-trust [Accessed 3 April 2020]

McAfee, A. (2009). 'Middle Management: The Importance of Being Michael Scott', *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*, p. 2. Available online at: https://hbr.org/2009/12/the-changing-role-of-middle-ma.html [Accessed 25 May 2020].

McGrath, R.G. (2019). The Trouble With Consulting, Medium, 24 August, Available Online: https://medium.com/swlh/the-trouble-with-consulting-5ca3e2a1eeb1 [Accessed 10 May 2020]

Molander, C. (1996). Human resources at work. Lund: Studentlitteratur

Neely, A. (red.) (2004). Business performance measurement: theory and practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Neely, A., Gregory, M. and Platts, K. (1995) 'Performance measurement system design: A literature review and research agenda', *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, 15(4), pp. 80–116. doi: 10.1108/01443579510083622. [Accessed 27 May 2020]

Neely, A., Mills, J., Platts, K., Richards, H., Gregory, M., Bourne, M., and Kennerley, M. (2000) 'Performance measurement system design: developing and testing a process-based approach', *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, 20(10), pp. 1119–1145. doi: 10.1108/01443570010343708. [Accessed 27 May 2020]

Ogbonna, E. and Wilkinson, B. (2003). 'The false promise of organizational culture change: A case study of middle managers in grocery retailing', *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(5), pp. 1151–1178. doi: 10.1111/1467-6486.00375. [Accessed 4 May 2020]

O'Gorman, D. and MacIntosh, K. (2015). Research methods for business & management: a guide to writing your dissertation. Oxford: Goodfellow Publishers

Osak, M. (2015). How consulting companies remain competitive in changing times, *Financial Post*, 26 November, Available online: https://business.financialpost.com/business/how-consulting-companies-remain-competitive-in-changing-times [Accessed 10 May 2020]

Rennstam, J., and Wästerfors, D. (2018). Analyze! Crafting your data in qualitative research, Lund: Studentlitteratur

Rousseau, D. M. and Wade-Benzoni, K. A. (1994). 'Linking Strategy and Human Resource Practices: How Employee and Customer Contracts Are Created', *Human Resource Management*, 33(3), pp. 463–489. doi: 10.1002/hrm.3930330312. [Accessed 11 May 2020]

Rousseau, D. M. (2005a). Developing psychological contract theory. In Smith, Ken G. & Hitt, Michael A. (red.) (2005). Great minds in management: the process of theory development (pp. 190-214). Oxford: Oxford University Press

Schweyer, A. (2004) Talent Management Systems: Best Practices in Technology Solutions for Recruitment, Retention and Workforce Planning, London: John Wiley & Sons

Smith, K.G., and Hitt, M.A., (2005). Great minds in management: the process of theory development, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2020). Epistemology, Available Online: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/ [Accessed 8 May 2020]

Storey, J., Billsberry, J., and Salaman, G. (red.) (2005). Strategic human resource management: theory and practice. 2. ed. London: Open University in association with SAGE

Sveningsson, S and Alvesson, M. (2003) 'Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle' (2003) *Human Relations*, 56(10), pp. 1163–1193. doi: 10.1177/00187267035610001. [Accessed 28 April 2020]

Sveningsson, S and Sörgärde, N (2020). Managing change in organizations. Los Angeles: SAGE

Tabrizi, B. (2014) 'The Key to Change Is Middle Management', *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*, p. 2. Available online: https://hbr.org/2014/10/the-key-to-change-is-middle-management?referral=03759&cm_vc=rr_item_page.bottom [Accessed 25 May 2020].

TargetJobs. (n.d.) The UK 300: the most popular graduate employers for 2019/20, Available online: https://targetjobs.co.uk/uk300 [Accessed 27 April 2020]

Thomas, R & Dunkerley, D (2002) Careering Downwards? Middle Managers' Experiences in the Downsized Organization, *British Journal of Management,* 10(2):157 Available online: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229738668_Careering_Downwards_Middle_Managers %27_Experiences_in_the_Downsized_Organization [Accessed 27 April 2020]

Vroom, V. H. (1965). Motivation in management. [S. l.]: American Foundation for Management Research

Waldman, J. D. and Arora, S. (2004). 'Measuring Retention Rather than Turnover: A Different and Complementary HR Calculus', *Human Resource Planning*, 27(3), pp. 6–9. Available at: https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=14659748&site=eds-live&scope=site [Accessed: 14 May 2020].

Watson, T. J. (1995) 'Rhetoric, Discourse and Argument in Organizational Sense Making: A Reflexive Tale', *Organization Studies*, 16(5), p. 805. doi: 10.1177/017084069501600503. [Accessed 2 May 2020]

Wikström, C and Martin, H (2012). Talent management i praktiken: attrahera, utveckla och behåll rätt medarbetare. Stockholm: Ekerlid

Willmott, H. (1992) 'Postmodernism and Excellence: The De-differentiation of Economy and Culture', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 5(1), pp. 58–68. doi: 10.1108/09534819210010980. [Accessed 2 May 2020]

Zambeasy.com Ltd. (2005). Retention Strategies: what can you do to keep your best consulting staff? Available online: http://www.top-consultant.com/retention_report.pdf [Accessed 27 April 2020]

Zetterquist-Eriksson, U., Müllern, T., and Styhre, A. (2011). Organization Theory: A practise-based approach, New York: Oxford University Press Inc