Brands at work: the search for meaning in mundane work

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Abstract

Brand scholarship traditionally resides within the marketing literature and focuses on organizations' *external* relationships with customers. However, increasing critical attention in organization studies has focused on the brand in order to understand its impact on the *internal* dynamics of employment relations in contemporary organizations. Drawing on an ethnography of front line service work in an IT consultancy call centre, we explore the brand as an internal organizational resource sustaining process of employee meaning-making activities. Documenting the 'work of the brand', we outline what the brand

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offers *both* employees and employers and, in doing so, we theorize the brand at work as a connecting mechanism between processes of identity formation/re-formation and regulation. While employees are encouraged to internalize particular brand meanings (in this case prestige, success and quality) we found that they often willingly buy into these intended brand meanings as a palliative to 'cope' with mundane work. In this way brand meanings are central to producing a self-disciplining form of employee subjectivity.

Keywords

Brand, Call Centres, Employee Branding, Ethnography, Identity, Organizational Control.

'All I want in life is a little bit of love to take the pain away'.
Spiritualized: *Ladies and Gentlemen we are floating in space*

'In ev'ry job that must be done, there is an element of fun.
You find the fun and snap! The job's a game.
And ev'ry task you undertake becomes a piece of cake. A lark! A spree!
It's very clear to see that a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down'.
Julie Andrews: *Spoonful of Suga*r

Introduction

The service sector dominates economic output and employment in advanced and advancing economies. Routine, front line, customer service work is an important feature of the experience of employment in this sector, while work is increasingly constructed in education and wider society as providing opportunities for learning, self-discovery, travel creativity and personal authenticity. Workplaces are seen as spaces for

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meaningful engagement with others, offering a source of dignity and respect and a place to find a sense of worth and value. Yet, for many employed in the front line of the service sector work seldom meets these aspirations. How can we make sense of employee's engagement with work in these conditions? How do employees continue to work effectively, and largely in pursuit of organizational goals, when work fails to meet their minimum expectations? In this paper we ask these questions as we explore new ways in which employees are managed and manage themselves at work.

The growth of the service sector with its emphasis on emotional, aesthetic and identity work has driven reconfigurations of the ways in which people are managed and manage themselves at work. One example of this re-tooling for the service economy is the growth of 'employee branding' initiatives that focus on encouraging employees to "internalize the desired brand image [by becoming] motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents" (Miles & Mangold, 2005, p. 68). The complexity of employee branding is often collapsed into the phrase 'living the brand' (Ind, 1997), an invitation for employees to develop a deep, authentic, emotional and personal connection between themselves and their organizational brand and for this link to persist beyond the workplace[i].

The growing interest in the brand from an organizational perspective is in part a reaction to the *possibilities* that the idea of the brand has for the theory and practice of managerial control through employee identification. This in part provides new ground for management, in particular when quests to capture and control organizational cultures have failed so catastrophically by becoming a source of organizational toxicity. This paper builds on the nascent employee branding literature to explore what we term 'the work of the brand' noting the ways in which brand meanings may become mobilized internally as resources that help to sustain and cuittle employees' identity work, on the one hand, whilst simultaneously facilitating the pursuit of organizational objectives on the other. Brand scholarship reveals

organizational brands to be both amorphous and diffuse and to provide consumers and employees with a space of belonging and affective investment (Arvidsson, 2006; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). Reconceptualising brands as a configuration of organizational control clearly requires an understanding of the reasons why employees would consent to, and uphold the organizational brand, or whether and how they do subvert or treat it with cynicism. A key task of the paper is thus to offer an empirically grounded theoretical explanation of the dynamics of consent, resistance and identification with the brand.

Drawing upon research within a call centre of a large IT consultancy corporation, we will illustrate how the organizational brand is mobilised internally by employees to sustain a sense of individual aspiration, and concurrently but indirectly, by managers to support organizational performance. This focus leads to view the brand as offering deep symbolic reservoirs for the (self)management and regulation of employees' identity and experiences of work, through the process of *meaning making* inherent in everyday work. At the same time brand meanings are viewed as resources capitalised on by management as a way of aligning workplace effort toward organizational objectives. The main aim of this paper is to investigate and understand what the concept of employee brand offers in terms of symbolic and practical resources in the day-to-day management of workplace activities. This, however, is quickly shown to be knowable only through the posing of the following research questions: a) what is the role of the brand for employees in their everyday working lives? That is how do they relate to, and engage with the brand and b) how is the brand mobilised by managers to support employee regulation processes?

The paper's contribution lies in its attempt to theorise empirical observation of employee branding in practice and thus to address significant gaps in the current management and organization studies literature with respect to our understanding of brands at work. Firstly, in relation to the brand literature, recent work (e.g. Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011) has started to document how the

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brand is implicated in the management of meaning at work. Research, however, has yet to focus on the brand as an internal resource for employees' identity work, despite the sophistication of work that explores how brands are implicated in consumers' identity work. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to the study of the brand as a resource for orchestrating and directing organizational members. Secondly, in relation to the specific site of this research, call centre analysis has traditionally had as its main focus the investigation of labour relations (e.g. Taylor & Bain, 1999; Bain & Taylor, 2000) unionisation (e.g. Bain & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Bain, 2008; Rose, 2002), control (e.g. Taylor & Bain, 1999; Rose & Wright, 2005; Taylor et al., 2002), commitment (Kinnie, Hutchinson & Purcell, 2000) and emotional labour (e.g. Taylor et al., 2002). More recently other scholars, have started to look at ways with which call centres attempt to enhance commitment while maintaining low task discretion and high routine (e.g. Houlihan, 2002[ii]) and through harnessing external motifs associated with fun, leisure and personal discretion (e.g. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011). While these studies have brought attention to processes of colonisation of employee selves, research has yet to explore how the organizational brand, specifically, facilitates the management of call centre employee's disillusionment and alienation, and specifically how employees' use of the brand helps them negotiate their self in relation to their work and their social environment. Our contribution responds directly to Spicer's (2010) call to take the brand, and its consequences for employees, seriously and we distance ourselves from claims that a focus on the brand within an organizational context might easily be seen as just another management fashion (Martin, Gollan & Grigg, 2011).

The Brand as Regulatory 'Promise'

Traditionally read by marketers as an exercise in organizational communication, branding is usually considered as outwardly directed towards consumers and clients. Services marketing literature (e.g.

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Levitt, 1981; Anker, Kappel, Eadie & Sandøe, 2012) has argued that branding communication is heightened by the notion of 'the promise'[iii]. In noting the 'promissory' nature of brands several authors suggest that consumers engage with brands as relationship partners, expecting brands to provide functional, symbolic and experiential benefits (Aggarwal, 2004; Anker et al., 2012). Consumers engage with brands seeking motivation or inspiration for lifestyle changes or improvements (e.g. Evans et al., 2008), or use brands to obtain symbolic benefits such as construction and expression of one's self (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Furthermore brands (and brand communities in particular) can offer emotional and moral support as well as a sense of social belonging (Leigh, Peters & Shelton, 2006; McAlexander, Kim & Roberts, 2002; Mathwick, Wiertz, & De Ruyter, 2008; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Yet, while most brand research focuses on its relationship with consumers, we argue that the corporate brand simultaneously addresses both an external and internal audience and careful analysis reveals that the brand is heavily implicated in the 'management of meaning' within organizations (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008).

The importance of the organizational brand lies in its positioning of the company in the marketplace and also in crafting the internal infrastructure (such as organizational strategy, culture, structure and design) that supports the brand meaning (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Hatch and Schultz (2003, p. 1042) argue that the brand combines the vision and culture of the organization in an explicit attempt to provide a 'unique selling proposition', or, as illustrated by Knox et al. (2000, p. 138), a 'unique organization value proposition'. Following these scholars' arguments, the brand may be read as a potentially powerful tool for attracting and communicating to prospective and current organizational members, *as well as* externally to other stakeholders, what the company is and what it stands for. In this sense the corporate brand is markedly different from organizational culture and works as a linking mechanism between internal cultures and external brand communities (Kornberger, 2010), embedded in relational processes

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that fold organizational culture into the company image and its strategic vision (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Internally, thus, the brand supports the patterning of workplace activities, offering employees a key to interpret and understand organizational action.

As employees are key to building relationships with stakeholders and expressing to others who they think they are as a company (Hatch & Schultz, 2003), processes of employee identification are central to animating the meaning of the brand (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Thus, as channels of organizational communication of brand meaning and brand promise to the external environment (Heilbrunn, 2006), organizational members are invited to embrace these meanings in their everyday working practice. While research has emphasised that both external and internal audiences are recipients of the brand message, scarce empirical scrutiny has examined how organizational actors relate to and engage with the brand in their daily self-management activities. Furthermore, the impact that the brand as a promise might have on how employees relate to their work activities and their occupational self lacks investigation.

Scholars and practitioners attempting to understand how, specifically, organizational activities contribute to the brand have focused on the construction of organizational and corporate brands (Hatch & Schultz, 2000, 2009) but only marginally on how the brand affects processes of organizational identification (e.g. Dukerich, Golden & Shortell, 2002) and the construction and expression of employees' selves (e.g. Land and Taylor, 2010, 2011). Conversely, while studies offer versions of how the lives and identities of front-line service workers are affected by organizational processes (e.g. Houlihan 2002; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Bergström, Hasselbladh & Karreman, 2009), there remains the need to empirically focus on the effects that the brand has on those service workers whom are often detached from any input into the strategic design and development of the brand itself. In particular, light needs to be shed on the influence

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that the brand, as a system of meaning and promissory regime, might have on service workers. We thus argue that the specific relationship between the brand as a regulatory and promissory mechanism, the exercise of power within the organization, and the response of employees demands more careful empirical investigation.

The Brand and Identity

While there is a vast literature, which explores issues of employee identity and identification in organizations, we think that introducing the brand into this equation can bring insights in three key areas. Firstly, in relation to the construction and maintenance of an individual meaning making at work, secondly in relation to collective processes of organizational identification and finally in relation to deliberate attempts by managers to regulate and manage employee identity in pursuit of organizational objectives.

In exploring the area of individual identity and meaning making processes, scholars have acknowledged that self-identity is based on the individual's attempt to construct a narrative of the self, enabling a sense of security and a source of meaning (Giddens, 1984; Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008). The proliferating literature on identity and identity construction in the workplace (e.g. Ibarra, 1999; Collinson, 2003; Alvesson et al., 2008; Ybema et al., 2009; Brown & Lewis, 2011) has drawn attention to some of the activities which support people's acquisition of the meanings and symbolic resources to secure a sense of self and meaning at work, but the specific role that the brand might play in contributing to employees' identity work and meaning-making activities is still unclear. In fact, the narrative qualities of the brand are relatively well understood in relation to consumers' sense of self (Fournier, 1998) but this perspective has received scant attention in organization studies. Missing then is an exploration of how

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brands might contribute to the continuing self-narrative of employees. Specifically, in our case study we are interested to explore how the brand works to entice engagement of front line employees who might be experiencing a rupture or discontinuation in their ideal and desired sense of self (as professional workers). As Thompson and Findlay, argue "[workers are] capable of drawing on symbolic resources in their relations of contestation and co-operation for a variety of reasons, in so doing they assert their identities when contesting resources and power in order to legitimate their actions, to survive and to be satisfied within the particular conditions of work" (1999, p. 176).

Existing at the level of the symbolic and relying on a collective level of social construction, brands have significant relevance for processes of organizational identification and belonging. As Lievens, Van Hoye & Anseel, 2007) observe, employee identity and self-esteem become partially determined by their membership of the organization they work for. Organizational identity, defined as members' collective understanding of that which is central, enduring and distinctive to an organization's character[iv] (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia, Schultz & Corely, 2000), provides a collective vision of the self and a potentially important resource in the formation of employees' personal identities[v]. In their interactions with the social context, workers are likely to seek opportunities and relations that reinforce their sense of self, rather than those which contravene these notions (see Taylor & Bain, 2004, as an example of how employees defend their sense of self). The organization's brand can represent a significant and fundamental constituent of organizational identity (Balmer, 2001) and has the potential to facilitate the self-positioning of employees (and potential employees) within corporate narratives, supporting individuals' identification processes.

Pettinger (2004) observes that the specifics of the brand, often partially formed and lacking in full codification, work to promote ideas of idealized types of workers that, internally as well as externally, convey an image of 'the sorts of workers who work here', and, clearly, this can be extended to the 'sorts

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of work done here and the way that work is done here'. Identification through organizational brands is therefore reliant upon employees 'buying in' to the brand, yet given the ambiguous and social quality of the brand, this process is never simple nor complete. Whilst this may render the deployment of branding for employee identification and control problematic from a managerial perspective we argue that managers in pursuit of organizational objectives also leverage this same ambiguity. Whilst several studies show that potential employees are selected on the basis of their likely ability and willingness to internalize and reflect brand meanings (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002; Van Den Broek, 2004) to date there is little or no consideration of the ways in which after joining the organization the brand might continue to be leveraged by managers to both shape employees' responses and sustain their commitment in practices of induction, training and promotion.

In summary, while scholars have argued that the brand has an important role in the regulation of employees' identity and sense of self (e.g. Land & Taylor, 2010, 2011; Alvesson, 2013), seldom has its influence been explored empirically, in the day-to day experiences of workers. It is here, in the daily practices of front line service work, that the work of the brand can be viewed in its most obvious form and it is here that we argue the contribution of the paper lies. Specifically, in understanding the experiences of the brand by service workers through bringing together brand scholarship with organization studies work on employee regulation, we theorise on the possible effects that the brand has on meaning making activities at work. Focusing on a service setting characterised by low task discretion and high routine work allows us to explore the impact of the brand on disillusioned workers' processes of meaning making. The prevalence of brands in contemporary workplaces means that this sort of analysis is likely to become more rather than less important. The analysis that follows explores how call centre workers identify with specific brand meanings in order to cope with their experiences of mundane and low skilled work. While our focus is on employees' brand meaning-making activities, our discussion of

the Cygnus organizational brand proposition, below, reveals significant overlap between employee brand meanings and those proposed by the organization.

Cygnus and its brand proposition

Cygnus[vi] is a multinational corporation with specialisms in IT, consultancy and outsourcing. Founded in France in the late 1960s as a company for the management and processing of information, the organization initially grew organically but within 10 years switched to a strategy of international acquisition of rivals in Europe and America. Acquisitions allowed Cygnus to gain expertise in outsourced IT provision and helped it to establish a significant presence in technological provision, application management and service delivery across the world. By the mid-1990s this strategy was further buttressed by the acquisition of several large consultancy firms that strengthened Cygnus' market position in Europe and the US and allowed it to focus on emerging markets in Asia. At this time the Cygnus' brand as a prestigious management consultancy firm was established through its work with leading organizations in most industries in both public and private sectors.

Cygnus' expertise in restructuring allowed it to advise its clients on the value and wisdom of outsourced IT provision whilst also providing a seemingly bespoke solution for that provision. The public face of the organization presented to the clients and the media, and served up as part of its recruitment strategy, highlights the glamour and excitement of the international management consultancy arm of its business. As the company website proclaims under a heading of 'Join a global technology leader':

> "*At Cygnus, exciting careers and a stimulating workplace come with a great sense of belonging. We invest in creating an environment where the most talented, qualified people want to be – and*

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stay. With more than 300 offices in 40 countries around the globe, we are one of the world's

largest providers of Consulting, Outsourcing and Technology Services."

Despite these claims, a significant proportion of the 120,000 global workforce experience work at the front-line of outsourced IT provision, which largely consists of highly scripted routinized work and intensive monitoring set within a target driven environment. This includes the offshoring of its own provision with 35,000 employees based in Cygnus' India operations which services Western companies' outsourced functions.

Cygnus has operated successful call centres for over 15 years in the UK, and the site where this research was conducted had experienced rapid expansion, growing from 150 employees to 450 Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) at the time of fieldwork. In understanding the call centre, the role of the Cygnus' brand as global technology and consultancy leader is vitally important; maintained through more than 40 years of trading as a leading IT and consultancy firm, the brand endures and permeates the mundane and monotonous life of the call centre. The brand allowed Cygnus to trade on its reputation as a global firm that is internationally known, with the majority of call centre employees 'brand aware' prior to employment. This was identified by the company as a distinct advantage in terms of starting the recruitment process *before* the application stage and allowed Cygnus to portray itself though its website and company material, as ultra-professional and focused on collaboration with its clients, offering potential employees achievement through participation, socialization and fun, innovation and stimulating and meaningful work. At the time of the research the company espoused the values of honesty, boldness, trust, freedom, team spirit, modesty and fun, and co-workers were encouraged to "*live these values both inside our company and in all our dealings with our customers*" (Cygnus Values Statement); moreover one of the stated aspirations of the organization was "*to have only one class of Cygnus employee, whether*

they join through outsourcing contracts or recruitment". In this sense Cygnus presents itself as an alternative model of call centre work which fits with the image of 'high-end, knowledge-intensive firm', (Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski & Shire, 1998) focused on its high quality consultancy service, while still characterised by a normative pattern of low discretion work design (Houlihan, 2002).

The organization's main UK call centres are located in Birmingham, Bristol, South London and the Highlands of Scotland. The call centre where the research was conducted provides outsourced functions to client organizations, offering a form of 'first-line support', where client-users telephone the organization to report faults and IT problems. CSRs are then required to log details and attempt to resolve issues where possible, while more difficult calls are referred to more technical 'second-line' support within the company and beyond. Referred to as 'log and refer', the work offers limited scope for utilization of employee discretion or creativity. The work is both routine and mundane but the organization was reliant on call centre workers to present an image of the business that was in keeping with the organization's brand proposition. Herein lies the critical contextual focus of this paper: the organization relied upon low-paid, front-line, service workers to act *as if* they were highly paid management consultants to maintain the outward appearance of brand identity.

Rapid expansion and relatively high rates of employee turnover required Cygnus' Human Resource Management team to recruit CSRs on an on-going basis. The degree of turnover evident in the call centre (approximately 12 per cent per annum) seem prima facie evidence of a failing employee branding strategy, however it became clear during our research that the organization was keen to operate a differential approach to retention with respect to the way in which call centre employees were segmented. Using the metaphor of a 'life cycle', management were at pains to stress that little was done to aid employees' transition into work, therefore high rates of turnover for new starters were accepted, if not

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encouraged, and high turnover of staff who had worked in the call centre for more than 18-months was also encouraged.

Cygnus advertised vacancies in regional newspapers and employed a number of temporary agencies to 'sift' initial applications and provide basic employee screening. Agencies would then recommend candidates to Cygnus' Human Resource Manager, who would decide whether to invite the candidate for an interview. In exceptionally busy periods the agencies would be bypassed and applicants would be required to apply directly to Cygnus. The call centre has traditionally employed many recent graduates, often on temporary contracts, who at the time of the research were paid an hourly wage of £5.50 (€5.70), with £3.60 being the National Minimum Wage. For these employees there was no sick pay, pension right or statutory entitlement to leave. It became clear during the fieldwork that many of the CSRs were graduates who considered themselves over-qualified for their jobs and believed that their temporary role within the call centre represented a 'foot-in-the-door' to better paid and more highly skilled IT work with other parts of the organization. Around 60% of CSRs were on temporary contracts, with some CSRs claiming that this proportion had on occasion reached 70%. Permanent staff were somewhat better paid: new staff could expect around £12,500 (€14,000) a year with rises being linked to twice-annual appraisals and a yearly pay review. In the absence of any union representation, wage negotiations were carried out between the individual employee, HR Manager and Team Leader.

Research Methodology

The fieldwork on which this research is based was conducted over a period of 13 months and involved the first author working full time as a CSR within the organization. The initial research was conceived as a general ethnographic study into call centre working environments with specific reference to employee

resistance and dissatisfaction, which at the time of the fieldwork were the key theoretical and empirical concerns within the nascent call centre literature. The value of ethnography here lies in drawing from a well of shared 'lived' experience in the construction of the analysis in light of the researcher's position as a full participant in the call centre working environment. The account given in the empirical analysis seeks to convey a sense of the pressures and routines of 'working the phones' and to explore the frustrations and resentments that arise when the promise of work fails to deliver. The participatory approach is supplemented by in-depth rich data from interviews conducted post fieldwork which provide further insights to nuance that produced by the researcher's fieldnotes on the experience of 'life on the line'.

Cygnus was known locally and nationally for recruiting large numbers of recent graduates and the recruitment of the author coincided with the author's enrolment on a PhD program, which facilitated theoretical exploration of the issues that he experienced as an employee. Once recruited into the call centre, authorization to conduct the research was gained from the call centre manager, team leader and individuals within the team to which the researcher was assigned. Data collection was initially and primarily conducted through observational research. Being a 'new starter' within the organization gave the researcher the opportunity to experience organizational processes that are seldom accessible via survey or interview techniques. Notes about everyday events were made 'on the job' on the researcher's computer terminal during less busy times and in a small notebook at break times, in toilet cubicles on-site, in the staff canteen, on the company bus, as well as after work, whether at home or socializing with work colleagues. Given the importance of spoken interactions within the call centre, special attention was given to verbal interactions and accurate notes (as accurate as possible) were taken as things were said, in an attempt to capture a sense of the call centre as a 'sensuous experience'. Without the benefit of audio recording this is, of course, a selective and partial process, which is necessarily interpretative. Therefore

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claims are not made here in terms of completeness of the data presented, rather its importance rests upon its evocation of the experience of work within the call centre environment and more specifically what respondents said about how they made sense of their work.

The extensive duration of the fieldwork meant that a significant amount of data was assembled in relation to the experience of employees at Cygnus. The primary focus was at the level of the researcher's team and this was reflected in the level of detail collected about the working lives of team members and informs the argument presented here as it pertains *directly* to the experience of the brand by the team of call centre workers and *indirectly* to the brand as a managerial control strategy. Data from observations was read against data that emerged from conversations with members of other teams, line managers, clients and former employees as an attempt to scrutinize the analysis more fully.

A form of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2005) was used to interpret the data in order to uncover and investigate narratives and discourses, which are concealed in the conventionalized practices of the speakers. The analysis was primarily conducted by re-reading observations recorded in notebooks with a view to form emerging narratives and produce thematic categories and new lines of enquiry, which could then be discussed with participants while still in the field in order to further understanding and validate interpretations. These secondary notes where then integrated into the analysis to refine the thematic categories.

In a second phase of the research, Cygnus facilitated the conduct of follow-up interviews, which took place approximately 6 months after the first author's withdrawal from the field. In total 12 formal interviews were conducted with team members, team leaders, the HR manager and the call centre manager and these were used as a way of exploring initial findings and cross-checking understanding

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with research participants.

In the final phase of the analysis the co-authors worked independently to provide detached interpretations of the data, as an emergent story of the field began to unfold. We focused upon the role of the brand as formally communicated by the organization in terms of its external presentation and juxtaposed this against the notes from the field work as an internal measure of how CSRs perceived the organization and its brand. The interview transcripts were analysed systematically by hand for emerging themes and these were then reconnected to the analysis of the fieldnotes. The fieldnotes were coded for material relating to entry to the organization, brand, individual-company fit, and any material relating to the frustrations of day-to-day life in the call centre. In order to explore CSRs' interpretations of the brand's rhetoric, the paper now turns to consider employees experiences of the brand at work.

An Ethnography of the 'Brand at Work': Searching for Meaning in the Mundane

"*It is a truth universally acknowledged*', began Stephen as he and the researcher walked from the canteen to his desk in the frantic day that was the researcher's first in the call centre, "*that working in a call centre is shite, but this is not just any call centre*". Initially chuckling at this statement, the researcher began to wonder what lay behind Stephen's comment and in the days that followed wondered why so many people would continue to work in an industry they appeared to have so little passion for, which they felt little connection with and where they were subjected to work routines which they found (at least in part) demeaning. Stephen's comment also raised the issue of distinction and on what basis one call centre could claim to be superior to another. This puzzled the researcher for a while and prompted him to explore the issue further. The analysis below explores the discourses that support the view that this is 'more' than other call centres and investigates whether and how it is the organizational brand that

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provides the symbolic narrative justifying such assertions. Below the processes of meaning-making are examined in relation to the ways in which brand meanings are mobilized by employees to help them cope with the mundane and frustrating aspects of call centre work.

Negotiating the 'Expectation' of Professional Skilled Work with Mundane Tasks

'*Working here is fun*' asserted Julia the team leader, '*we all like a laugh, and it's really sociable, you'll make lots of friends but when the phone goes*' she moved her hand across her face and her expression changed from smile to stern '*we're professional and we're right back at it!*'. Throughout the induction process, as well as in the daily formal and informal communications by managers, significant emphasis is placed on the professionalism associated with the Cygnus brand; CSRs are urged to demonstrate this professionalism on the phone with client organizations. Whilst this is a strategy adopted in many organizations CSRs in conversation often reproduced the 'importance of being professional'. Being professional encompassed a range of activity, for Simon it involved wearing the right clothes "*I like to dress smart for the office, I think if you look right, you'll sound right on the phone and then you'll act right. I don't like it when people come into the office looking scruffy, it brings the place down*". Simon was challenged by asking if he'd ever met any of its clients' "*no, but that's not really the point, we're representing Cygnus and that's all about the image, it's not the right image if I'm not smart. Look at him* (points out a colleague wearing casual trousers), *that's just not the right image*, you *wouldn't go to a client meeting dressed like that, so why dress like that on the phones?*" This comment reveals the depth of what professionalism meant for many CSRs at Cygnus. This cannot simply be explained as a common sense notion of professionalism (as associated to the skills of a professional) but is more closely associated with the perceived style and behaviour appropriate in other areas of the business (e.g. provision of consultancy services), largely the ones for which Cygnus is renowned. For other CSRs this

variant of professionalism involved a specific style of customer engagement, working quickly, effectively and accurately or imagining the provision of a service beyond that which they [could] actually provide.

As a regulating device at the interface between employees and consumers (Lury, 2004), it is not surprising that professionalism (and by implication high quality customer service) is one of the key meanings attached to the Cygnus brand. Demonstrating behaviours that are part of the Cygnus brand (such as professionalism, collaboration and fun among others) is part of everyday life for CSRs as well as being strongly emphasized by managers during daily communications and regular staff appraisals. The discourse of 'excellent customer service', which management claimed characterizes the Cygnus brand, is used in an attempt to motivate and assess employee performance and is constructed as a "*fulfilling element*" of the job. As Karen, a HR manager puts it '*we pick people who delight in pleasing the customer, that's really important. It's got to come naturally, if you have to work at it then it might become a chore and the chances are the mask will slip. We want people not that 'do' customer service but people who 'are' customer service. The vast majority of other call centre staff just wouldn't make that grade*." The slightly higher rates of pay on offer at Cygnus for permanent employees were, to some CSRs, a reflection of the organization's prestige, and many CSRs said that they considered themselves fortunate to work there. This was carefully nurtured by some managers and team leaders and emphasised by the portrayal of the call centre as an essential constituent of Cygnus, the large multinational consultancy firm whose corporate identity is constructed around the tenets of 'ultra-professional, honest, bold, trustworthy and a fun place to work'. The extracts below, which emerged from a range of conversations with several CSRs, illustrate the efficacy of the brand in appealing to employee's idealised identity as 'professional and skilled worker'.

Researcher: … *How does working here compare to working at other call centres?*

Mark: … *well there's no comparison really, this is a service centre, so it's like much more skilled than just working in a call centre taking calls, I mean I feel like I really solve problems.*

(Conversation recorded in the fieldwork journal)

The symbolic meaning of skilled customer service is so pervasive and morally laden (i.e. care for the customer) that it is almost entirely inescapable by employees. To resist would mean to be both 'unskilled' and 'uncaring'. Yet, embracing it, ironically creates the conditions for self-control. Whilst a clear counter-narrative of professional skilled work appeared to flourish, especially in the context of other locally available employment opportunities, many CSRs reported the work to be both repetitive and mundane (see exchange below between a CSR and the team leader)

Mark: … *If I have to read through this script one more time I'm going to kill someone. I could do this in my sleep. Julia, can't we at least try and fix some of the stuff that comes to us?*
Julia: … *if you can give 'um a quick fix then fine, anything technical pass on. I don't want you on the call for too long, we've got calls to answer, just get the details and pass them on.*

In a one to one discussion about working at the call centre Mark spoke about employment locally and why he continues to work for Cygnus, the well-known, prestigious company, despite of the lack of challenging tasks.

Mark: … *there is other grad-level work out there but I'd rather stick with Cygnus, as for other call centres no way, at least Cygnus sounds better, I mean, people really like Cygnus, we've got a name, it means something to people, it's a technology company, we do technical work!*

Alvesson (2013: ix) claims that "in today's society, a strong emphasis on 'it must look good'… is vital to the success of individual, occupational groups and organizations. … The brand is often more crucial than the actual product, and the CV is more important than expertise and ability. The focus is on the surface. The ambition is to put a gilt edge on life by applying attractive indicators that often have no or little substance." As evidenced by Mark's words, above, the seductive power (albeit fragile) of the discourse of the 'professional skilled worker' is founded on the organization's brand, rather than on the material experience of work, and it is within the brand that both managers and workers find the resources in their efforts to regulate and negotiate their identities as workers. In this specific context the mundane elements of working in a call centre are partially offset by the aura of 'professionalism' provided by the brand, which appears to fill (at least partially) the lack of meaningful content of the work task. At Cygnus work was routinely constructed by managers and employees alike as "*skilled service work*", a notion that transcends the everyday experience of taking up to 150 calls per shift in a highly scripted and monitored environment. The pseudo-professionalization of Cygnus' work routines are further legitimised by wider assumptions that skill levels are directly related to employees' use of technologies. In fact, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines 'administrative' and 'managerial' personnel as 'highly-skilled', while agricultural, manufacturing, and clerical workers are viewed as 'lower-skilled' (1998 p. 4). Within the limits of such classifications, CSRs' work was thus constructed here as in-between the clerical and administrative job in that it requires "*more than just answering calls*".

As the meaning of professional is emptied of its skill content to be replaced by emphasis on appearance (e.g. dressing smart as a professional while answering calls all day), the meaning of skilled work is equally emptied of its specific skills element to be filled with the more intangible promise of the brand. CSRs appeared to 'invest' in the notion of being skilled workers (and in its associated discursive practices) in order to sustain their identity as highly educated individuals working for a prestigious brand..

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The narrative framing of relatively mundane tasks as 'skilled' service, reproduced by managers in the call centre and beyond, helps to construct the CSR's identity as different (thus skilled) from any call centre operator in other companies (unskilled).

Call centres, in fact, embody an archetypal work environment that is profoundly different from traditional forms of service work, such as retail or hospitality. Although research draws attention to the diverse nature of the call centre industry (see for example Batt & Moynihan, 2002, Bain, Watson, Mulvey, Taylor & Gall, 2002; Houlihan, 2002), the image of the passive worker succumbing to the routinization and computerization of the work is locked in people's mind (see Taylor and Bain, 1999 'assembly line in the head'; Fernie & Metcalfe, 1998 'electronic sweatshop'), and it is this image and perception that both managers and workers at Cygnus attempt to evade through the symbolic resources provided by the brand. The brand, as a summarising symbol of prestige and status, provides a temporary fill in the void between 'the idealised self [skilled] and the realised self [unskilled][vii]' (Brown, 2000 p. 64).

> <u>Researcher</u>: … *So have you worked at other call centres?*
>
> <u>Venkat</u>: … *no, but I know what they're like, and I'm really glad I'm here, I don't really think of it like a call centre… know what I mean?*
>
> <u>Researcher</u>: … *erm, no not really, can you explain a bit more?*
>
> <u>Venkat</u>: … *well you know, it's not like you're just taking incoming all day* (reference to taking incoming calls)*, part of the job is that you have to be able to service the customer, y'know like sort their problems out and stuff, that's the difference…*
>
> <u>Researcher</u>: … *You're glad you work here then?*
>
> <u>Venkat</u>: … *deffo, I mean I'd never tell anyone I work in a call centre, I always say I work for Cygnus!*

Researcher: … *the name is important then?*

Venkat: … *Yeah it is, but it's like the prestige, you know, people think it's a good job.*

(Conversation recorded in the fieldwork journal)

The above quote resonates with Casey's (1996) findings in relation to corporate culture identification, Venkat, in fact, shows how 'official' corporate beliefs and values are manifested in employees' language forms, their interpersonal interactions with co-workers and customers and their sentiments towards the organization and its product. The general recognition of the organization as a prestigious workplace reinforces the conviction that 'if you work for Cygnus you must be *somebody*' (see Casey, 1996; Wilmott, 1993; Alvesson, 2013), thus contributing to enhance identification and commitment. As Kärreman and Alvesson (2004, p. 117) observe in their study of a consulting firm "whereas the brand does not seem to be crucial to the content i.e. the social construction of 'who we are', of organizational identity, it may be critical to its strength, i.e. the attractiveness of belonging to the firm as well as how others (outsiders) react to people belonging to the firm (insiders)." Embracing brand meanings of prestige and success allows these young graduates to inhabit a liminal space between their identity as students and their yet-to-be realised identity as young professionals. The identification with the brand, thus, presents the idealisation of a future self (Costas & Grey, 2014), gives employees something to strive towards and helps them, in some way, to cope with the day-to-day monotony of work. While Venkat's comments, above, underscore the way in which employees as well as managers mobilize the Cygnus brand in prestige terms, the language exposes the vulnerability of the brand as a mechanism for 'skilling' unskilled work (see also the exchange between Mark and Julia presented above). The construction of call centre work as higher level service work, involving the ability to solve problems as well as offering reputable customer service, offers the possibility to embed meaning and construct a more fulfilling/idealised identity.

However, the binary 'skilled/unskilled' can shift accordingly to the specific experience or the moment. The identity of workers, in fact, appears split and discontinuous, such that many, during frustrating moments question the content of their work as requiring any level of technical skill. In this specific instance it is the work of the brand that generates this 'dual character' of call centre work, supporting the negotiation of employee identities as shifting between the skilled worker and the unskilled operator. The frailty and contradictory ambivalence of the identity negotiation process is evident in how co-workers seem to covet their association with the Cygnus brand, whilst simultaneously appearing to disdain the work that they actually do.

"*I'm a phone monkey*", commented Connor, taking his headset off and holding it in his hands as he sighed heavily in a moment of frustration. "*I didn't drag my ass though three years of University to take 140 calls a day and get grief from people who don't know the difference between 'off' and 'standby'*". Around 65 per cent of CSRs within Cygnus were, like the researcher, recent graduates, as Cygnus made attempts to recruit graduates in the months that followed graduation ceremonies. Connor's comment reveals an important element of the work experience for those with degrees working as CRSs at Cygnus; the CSR role, with its scripted interaction and restricted autonomy, was seen as dramatically below the level of a 'graduate job'. In fact a degree was certainly not required for the role but, as evidenced by the number of graduates employed and the level of recruitment activity, Cygnus liked to employ graduates for the CSR role whenever possible. The attraction that front line service work at Cygnus has for graduates draws heavily upon the Cygnus brand and was hinted at by Stephen in day one of the research, this being "*not just any call centre*". Furthermore it also rests on the mirage of a chance of better work at the 'end of the line'.

The 'Consultant-in-waiting' Identity

An initial assumption that many in the call centre were there because they had little other viable option was quickly dispelled through interaction with co-workers. "*I got options*", Jenny said assertively, "*I've worked in banking and insurance; the Herald* (the regional evening newspaper) *is full of jobs at the moment*". The economic outlook at the time of the research was positive for the regional conurbation, and there was almost a tangible sense of optimism and positivity both within the call centre and in the local economy more generally. Yet despite the seeming availability of alternatives, we wonder why graduates remain at Cygnus even after the illusion of the 'service centre' had dissipated. Lin and Laura, below, give an insight into this:

<u>Lin</u>: … *I knew when I took this job it was going to be a good opportunity for me, I mean there are other things I could do, and I didn't really want to work in a call centre.*

<u>Researcher</u>: *So you would see this job as being different from working in a typical call centre?*

<u>Lin</u>: … *ha I know what you're getting at, you think that this is like a call centre and we all think it's not, don't you?*

<u>Researcher</u>: … *erm it's difficult, I mean some people insist that you call it a service centre... so the distinction must be important…* (Interrupted)

<u>Lin</u>: … *really, who've you spoken to? I don't think many of us (referring to CSRs) really think that, it is a call centre, everyone knows that, it is only management that think it's a service centre!*

<u>Researcher</u>: … *But you said you didn't want to work in a call centre?*

<u>Lin</u>: … *Yeah but you've got to look at the bigger picture, I want to work for Cygnus, just not in the Call Centre and I think this is a good way… you know… like a foot in the door.*

(Conversation recorded in the fieldwork journal)

Laura "… *working for Cygnus looks good on my CV, I don't need to tell people I simply take calls all day, I can dress it up how I like, it's just the name that's important, oh and the other things that they do. And everyone knows the call centre is like the backdoor in, they* (Cygnus) *are really cutting back on graduate recruitment so the only way in at the moment may be through the call centre*."

(Interview with CSR)

In the absence of significant graduate experience and graduate opportunities with a prestigious organization, Laura invests heavily in the company's name in the hope that the association with a prestigious name can help her to build her career. While Laura and Lin see the potential in being 'brand insiders', hoping that it will facilitate their move into more glamorous, higher status areas of the firm, observations show that such a view is sustained by the consistent message from managers and the company literature. Bi-annual appraisals, for example, are heavily focused on career development and progression. CSRs are encouraged to cast their skills and experience on the call centre floor as being an audition for global consulting or professional services. Appraisal also requires the identification of staff's career aspirations and training and development needs, even though little was offered by the company in employee development beyond the functional requirements of effective call handling. Furthermore, the company magazine also appeared to promote the possibility of career progression by celebrating staff that had moved to more prestigious roles, although curiously they never seemed to be anyone known directly to call centre colleagues. The disciplinary influence of the future possibilities within the firm is codified by the performance appraisal and the company magazine. Such tools not only serve to monitor and enhance performance but they also become instruments that nurture the idealised self of workers as

'future consultants'. In this sense they support graduate CSRs in preserving an identity of self-worth that fits with their level of education and social expectations. The hope of career progression, fuelled by managers' pep talks and other HR tools represents a site of displacement where workers' anxiety can be deferred, frustration relieved and self-worth preserved, at least temporarily.

> <u>Andy</u>: … *I thought working here would be a good career move ... they* (referring to the company in general*) were keen to tell me how fast I could progress with the company, but it's not really like that though is it?*
>
> <u>Researcher</u>: … *Is it not? What do you mean exactly?*
>
> <u>Andy</u>: … *I think they really like to tell people that they can move into consulting or something like that – no one ever really does though – it just makes people keep trying to do well in their appraisals, it's still a good company to work for though – I mean it sounds good when I tell people who I work for.*
>
> (Interviews with CSR)

Andy's and Laura's comments both emphasize the importance of the Cygnus brand in creating an 'idealised' identity which reflects the social canons of success. The Cygnus brand appears imperative to employees' sense of achievement and is crucial to call centre work in different ways. Belonging to Cygnus "*sounds good*", and the prestige of the firm's brand reflects on all its employees, regardless of their role. Andy considers Cygnus a good company to work for, despite his realization that the company does not meet its promises in terms of career development. In this sense the brand is used by both the organization and its call centre workers to direct attention away from the actual substance of call centre work and create the illusion that consultancy work is not far from reach. Whilst the organizational brand strategy works to exert control over the level and quality of employee performance, it also nourishes the

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meanings employees attach to work, further contributing to sustain the brand and perpetuate its attractiveness to others. While the organization attempts to shape brand meanings in order to attract and retain workers as well as to affect their performance, individual employees clearly internalize some of these meanings in their identity work, observing that their association with Cygnus signals success and impresses other people and future employers. The brand functions in this case as a proxy for higher level work experience on one's curriculum vitae. The fact that co-workers seemed keen to articulate Cygnus' careerist ethos, by highlighting the possibilities for employees to move beyond the call centre into other areas of the business, was also echoed during the author's experiences of the recruitment process. During both formal and less formal events, recruiters were keen to offer discussions about the careers that lay behind the confines of the call centre and encouraged the researcher to move out of the call centre at the first possible opportunity, implying that this was both possible and feasible.

> Trish: "*I was really sucked in by the glossy brochures and the smooth talk of the recruiters, I really felt that I was going to be working for an important company, a company that does important work and I wanted to be a part of that. When I'm on the phones and it's awful, or I get wound up, or bored, I remember what the company is all about and it makes me feel proud, like I know there is more to the company than answering phones, just not for me, not yet*!"

Trish appears to mobilize brand meanings of prestige and success as a way to embed meaning into the reality of her work. It is her idealised future self, supported by the brand, that provides her with a palliative to the mundanity of CSR work. It is the work of the brand that alleviates the dullness of her work and presents her with the mirage of an alternative future self. Within the high routine and low discretion job of the CSR, brand meanings are manipulated by managers to offer 'credible hopes' to employees through the possibilities that working for a multi-national and highly prestigious brand may

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bring. This leveraging of brand meanings insidiously holds employees in a high commitment relationship with the organization in which their hopes and aspirations are never quite met. The images of prestige, success, glamour and international travel associated with consulting are transferred onto the organizational brand and are drawn on by managers and the organization more generally, both to recruit employees and to secure their continuing commitment with an (empty) promise of development and progression.

The development of the organizational brand as a means of identification (Hatch & Schultz, 2009; Dukerich et al. 2002) is seen, within a post bureaucratic ideology, as a re-shaping practice of employee regulation. As argued by Courpasson (2011, p. 8) post bureaucracies are reshaping principles and practices of control and coercion and, crucially, are also reshaping new means of escaping, at least partially, from this coercion. The specific identity work engaged in here, referring to an idealised self and a self in-waiting, represents a means of escapism, an expression of discontent and, to an extent, a form of resistance to power structures that does not challenge the status quo but alleviate, as an illusion, the mundanity of daily work. The specificity of the call centre context, thus, is crucial here because it is the triviality of the work executed by over-qualified workers that renders the brand the power to act as an identity regulatory mechanism.

Rather than openly highlight the dissonance between brand and reality, co-workers appear to readily internalize the rhetoric of the Cygnus brand. "*You know us, we're Cygnus! You're not dealing with a nasty little call centre now, you know*". Catching this conversation as John spoke on the phone, the researcher thought he was reassuring the customer of the integrity and professionalism of the call centre service offering. He continued: "*the world knows Cygnus, we've got a name to uphold, we are Cygnus people in here and I give you my absolute word this will be sorted within four hours*". John mobilizes

some elements of the brand meanings promoted by the organization as a means of customer relationship management (Miles & Mangold, 2005). The display of a professional and reliable identity is expected in the context of professional service firms and it was a key management strategy at Cygnus to encourage a strong belief in the company's reputation and image. 'Trading in image work' is as important as the service provided, 'selling the image of the company occurs simultaneously with the selling of their products' (Casey, 1996, p. 324).

> <u>Rachel</u>: … *Sometimes I really feel like it's a battle working here, you're always on show, everything you do is watched really closely, so it's always important to make sure you put on a good show. It's really draining, even thinking about it now, day in day out, making sure you do a really good job, it takes so much effort. But I think it is worth it! I have to think it's worth something! I work really hard but I know that it gets noticed by them* (gesturing to the call centre manager's desk which, rather ironically, was vacant)*, and I know that if I keep going I'll be rewarded. So, in answering to your question, if I left I would feel like all the hard work was for nothing, that's why I choose to stay.*

Despite clear acts of dissonance from the corporate will, the question remains as to why CSRs appear so willing to maintain the illusion and co-opt the strategy adopted by management, exploiting the company's brand to serve the construction of an idealised self which is so distant from the current self, entrenched in the monotony of taking up to 150 trivial calls a day. This concern questions the ways in which power and processes of subordination of labour are structured, implemented and maintained within the workplace. The specific experiences of work reported here highlight how managerial tools of employee regulation are sustained by the corporate brand and are used by employees not only in embedding meaning within a

mundane and unexciting job but also as tools to construct a future idealised self and to rationalize and justify one's emotional investment in work that appears to offer little intrinsic content.

Discussion

This paper has explored a specific example of the 'work of the brand' in an organizational setting that might be seen as atypical. Beyond the specifics of the case it addresses some important neglected issues surrounding how employees relate to, and engage with, organizational brands in their meaning-making activities at work. The analysis highlights how employees embrace the 'brand narrative as promise', weaving it into their own personal story about the self. In particular it identifies the important future oriented concept of the brand promise as both re-shaping alienation in the present and giving them a goal to strive for in the future. It also shows how the brand implicit promise is used by managers to regulate and pattern workplace activities, specifically in sustaining the construction of a brighter career future. Both of these perspectives rely heavily on a 'future career self' which is modelled largely on consulting work in the organization, generating as such an uneven internal brand topography. By bringing these two strands together, this section will draw out the effects of brand engagement on the exercise of power and discuss the dialectical process between consent and (passive) resistance that shapes the identities of frontline service workers in organizations.

Given their future orientation, brand meanings function as 'promise' for employees. As reported earlier, the literature on brand promise introduces the idea that brands deliver promises through 'interactive social process' which incite consumers to use brands as means to articulate desired self-images and social positions (Anker et al. 2012). The present study has extended this insight by shedding light on how the disciplinary power of the brand as promise acts, internally, on how front line service employees engage

with the brand and highlights two key issues relevant to employees: for brand promises to have any effect employees must be willing to engage with them as a discursive resource for identity work, but also to reproduce their effects in their everyday working practices.

Consonant with previous theorising (e.g. Beech, 2008; Brown & Humphreys, 2006) our empirical analysis shows that workers' identities emerge through the interplay of significant organizational and social regulatory references and that employees can take up or resist these available discourses in constructing their sense of self. However, through focusing on 'the organizational brand' as a discourse and a symbolic meaning-making resource, our analysis adds to current understanding of the iterative development of employees identity work, by showing in practice how front line service workers specifically use the brand to construct an idealised future self that allows them to carry on with mundane work. The work of the brand in this sense also provides explanation for the lack of overt resistance often found among service workers (see Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Mueller, Carter & Ross-Smith, 2011).

The brand appears to sustain employees' identity work in their desire to represent both their 'social self' (professional skilled worker) and their 'ideal self' (a prestigious role within the organization), in an attempt to embed meaning into their work and to manage the inconsistency and tensions emerging from external identity demands (e.g. their social environment outside of work), internal identity demands (e.g. professional customer service) and the reality of the job. Equally, as an indexical referent for managers, the organization's brand acts as a promissory regime, regulating and sustaining performance management. The power of the brand is thus comprehended through reflection on the organizational narrative, the specific content of work within the call centre, the societal pressures and expectations placed upon graduates' position within the job market, and the values society places on work status.

The power of the brand in providing an important motivator to carry on with unfulfilling work springs from its promise of a possible prestigious future career and functions significantly in the identity work of employees in a symbolic sense. The brand represents a resource in the stories employees tell themselves and others about their role as professional workers. The brand promise frames (Lury, 2004, p. 7, citing Manovich, 2001, p. 80) individual interactions in the future, helping employees to organize their present experiences into a coherent narrative, framing the present as the stepping stone for a much more compelling 'future career'. Here brand meanings are a pivotal resource in imaginings of the sort of professional future selves CSRs want to be. These professional future selves are not based on the acquisition of a particular set of skills linked to a profession or a disposition (Fournier, 1999; Grey, 1998). It is the figure of the consultant, more specifically 'the Cygnus consultant', with his/her associated dress, professional manners and glamorous lifestyle that has a powerful symbolic presence in imaginings of CSRs' professional future self.

The power of the idealised future self supports the lack of overt resistance in bridging the disjuncture between the symbol of a high profile consultancy firm (the brand) and the low discretion, routinized, intensively monitored job of the CSR. While it has been argued (e.g. Houlihan, 2002) that the very nature of call centre work, with its emphasis on call efficiency (in terms of quality and quantity), is bound to create tensions with the implementation of high commitment practices such as employee branding, our study shows that this is not always the case and that the promise of a future self allows CSRs to adjust their identity work to balance the contradictions between the demands of the brand and the monotony of the job. In so doing the brand also acts to temporarily re-interpret experiences of alienation in the workplace. The quality of the brand allows employees at moments of boredom and frustration to escape into an imagined future career of consulting.

It is clear that the graduate employees in this study have accepted a job in Cygnus call centre as a compromise, as a temporary stop-gap due to their failure to gain graduate schemes in other large prestigious companies. It is likely that such disappointment has produced disillusion with working life after university, creating a dissonance between a self-narrative (a professional self) biographically developed through parenting, school and higher education, and the reality of their current situation. As 'a person's identity is … found in … the capacity to keep a particular narrative going' (Giddens, 1991, p. 54) the brand is used by CSRs as a useful resource in organizing everyday experiences in the workplace and sorting them into 'the "ongoing" [idealised] story about the self' (Giddens, 1991, p. 54). While the brand may operate to frame the aspirational future self, it is perhaps just as potent in mitigating against an undesired and feared future self (Costas & Grey, 2014; Ybema, 2010), one who is still working in a call centre five years down the line. Undoubtedly experiences of disillusionment and dissonance render employees more vulnerable to the brand promise of a brighter future career. Thus, embracing the promise also serves as a form of self-protection, acting as a buffer between their sense of self and an increasingly alienating workplace. As Giddens observes (1991, p. 54) the construction of one's identity involves the establishment of a "protective cocoon which 'filters out', in the practical conduct of day-to-day life, many of the dangers which in principle threaten the integrity of the self". Here the brand might shore up a fragile and threatened sense of self in the face of failure to achieve a possible 'professional' career.

At Cygnus the 'real' experiences of everyday working life can be contrasted unfavourably with the 'ideal' qualities of the brand. While scholars (e.g. Brown, 2000, p. 64) have observed that the difference between the 'idealised self and the realised self' also results in deep seated feelings of alienation, our study shows that embracing brand meanings has also the potential to become counter-productive. Particularly when, as it was the case with CSRs at Cygnus, employees seek change once they realise the emptiness of the brand promise of a future career. Furthermore, in contrast with other studies on consultants in professional

service firms the present research shows how CSRs' engagement with the brand appears to be relatively superficial, as mobilisation of the brand is mainly located on a discursive level rather than on the organizational identification level. In this sense the brand is utilised in image work (providing CV points) or talk with those outside the organizations ('sounds good when I mention I work for Cygnus') rather than as an internalised value.

With specific reference to front line service workers, the study also shows that within this context, the power of the brand promise appears to have a short shelf life. The longer employees work for Cygnus the weaker the allure of the brand seems to become. Ultimately employees face up to the fact that the brand promise of a sparkling future career in consulting is empty, at which point they leave the organization. Indeed the high staff turnover in the call centre among workers who had been employed for more than eighteen months was an accepted part of working life at Cygnus, both for employees and managers. Whilst one might question why Cygnus would employ graduate, rather than less qualified people who may accept the mundane job for what it is, one may also speculate that such a recruitment strategy could follow a person-brand fit model. Representing Cygnus on the phone with client organizations may require a specific demeanour, more common among a 'middle class' graduate (see also Hurrell & Scolarios, 2011).

Management's deployment of the Brand

Going back to our initial research questions, the discussion above provided a theorisation of employee's engagement with the brand and specifically with the promise of a more successful self that the Cygnus prestigious brand portrays. However the study has also sought to shed some lights on the important ways in which managers leverage brand meanings ultimately in order to generate control of the labour process.

The study reported that managerial communication and HR tools deliberately play on employees' apprehensions and expectations of the future. Management uses the prestigious and appealing brand to (implicitly) 'promise' employees a future career on the consulting site of the business; they encourage graduate employees during recruitment to seek a move and continue to do so during appraisals and newletters. The emphasis placed on striving for better performance and thus for an improved future self involves the individual in 'an endless journey of "becoming"' (Costas & Grey, 2014, p. 910) and, as such, has a significant disciplinary dimension. It is the concept of the 'promise' (which is never explicit) and the dimension of the future that is depicted in the promise that provide an interesting dimension to the research findings. In fact, the depiction of an 'idealised future self' is an expression of current concerns and pressures that these graduates experience.

On a collective level management uses the same brand meanings and image as an aspirational device with two different workforces (consultants and call centre operators) providing an organizing mechanism that attempts to create coherence in the pluralism emerging in call centre workers' narratives, while acting as a disciplinary mechanism. In applying the brand as a 'platform for the patterning of activity' (Arvidsson, 2006), brand meanings take on an isomorphic quality operating as a 'smoothing mechanism' creating efficiencies across the organization. Cygnus managers attempt to communicate a distinct set of brand meanings (prestige, collaboration, honesty etc.) which cut across all of the different internal functions of the organization. Whilst brand meanings of prestige and professionalism stem from the glamorous images of consulting work and are strongly anchored in skilled service work, they are interpreted by call centre workers in relation to a future (rather than a present) self. For call centre workers the brand has a distant quality placed in the future. It thus appears that, in temporal terms, the brand takes on a *synchronic* dimension for employees who are already consultants and a *diachronic* dimension with CSRs. CSRs are constantly journeying towards a future (and idealised) destination of consultancy, whereas consultants

have already arrived. This is of course ultimately an illusion perpetuated largely through managerial discourse. In fact as shown by studies focusing on professional service consultants (e.g. Costas and Grey, 2014), the discourse of continuous self-improvement and self-becoming remains central to these careers as well.

The discussion of engagement with the quality of the brand raises questions associated with the role of power and control in service organizations. The imagined quality of the brand makes it a potentially sinister force, also deriving from the fact that the brand can never be fully owned, as it is continually in process, performed in interactions between employees and between employees and customers. This imagined, ambiguous and intersubjective nature of the brand means that efforts to control brand meanings are difficult. However it is this very ambiguity and the implicit promise it makes that invites employees to identify with it through their own free will. Brand meanings are central in producing a self-disciplining form of employee subjectivity as its power is, to an extent, manifested in employees' autonomous acceptance of these brand meanings as their own (Kay & Lagerge, 2002, p. 26). In this way self-realisation is ultimately oriented towards market success. The mobilisation of future selves adds to the disciplinary power of the brand since the future is yet to come but also never reached, therefore employees remain in an enduring 'disciplinary state of becoming' (Costas & Grey, 2014, p. 916).

While on the one hand the study appears to highlight a case of employee consent, providing evidence that employees do engage with the brand, questions remain as to the level of this engagement. Employees, in fact, show a sense of scepticism in relation to the career promise and engage with the brand as a form of discursive resource, which is as much about self-protection and preservation as it is a realistic future career plan. The symbolic dimension of the brand, associated with the temporal dimension of the promise of a 'better' future self, serves to enforce the disciplinary power of the brand but at the same time works

to subvert it, in inciting identity change following the realisation that the idealised self will not be realised within Cygnus (the empty promise). It is the sceptical accounts of a career as a consultant at Cygnus that might open up possibilities for resistance, in contrast to a cynically distanced self, which can involve the shutting down of possibilities. While in this case, resistance is never overt or particularly effective in subverting the promissory regime of the brand, it still allows them space for change, albeit outside of Cygnus.

Conclusions

The paper sought to theorise the role that the organizational brand plays within processes of meaning-making, identity work and regulation of front-line service workers. From our analysis of the specific workplace context we observe significant dimensions of the brand that serve to render it powerful in mobilizing employees and capturing their commitment. Kärreman and Rylander (2004), have recognized that the potency of the brand lies within its symbolic and meaningful dimensions and our analysis found that brand meanings of prestige, professionalism and success were central in boosting employees' sense of organizational identification and self-esteem (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). In the case study organization we found that brand meanings operate in two key senses: in terms of identity work (i.e. employees feeling better about their future selves) but also as disciplinary tools. Brand meanings seem to act as a distraction from the often mundane realities of day-to-day call centre work and allow its reframing as 'future' skilled service work. The organizational brand is the key to understanding the enigma at the heart of Cygnus.

Graduates socialized into seeking careers in high profile multi-national corporations willingly accept work in the Cygnus call centre. The character of the work and the terms and conditions under which

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CSRs work are far from most employees' aspirations, yet the brand provides a diversion away from the material character of the direct employment and allows CSRs to draw on the symbolic capital immured within the Cygnus brand. Employees, often keen to point out that they were fulfilling customer needs, reframed their work as offering a '*customer service*' as opposed to '*taking calls*'. These meanings were therefore mobilized by employees in their identity work, buoying up their identity and sense of self as skilled subjects. Employees typically acknowledged that working in a call centre was not fulfilling, neither did it utilize their (graduate) skills in any meaningful way. However, the promise of a career with the prestigious 'Cygnus Consulting' appeared to secure their commitment (at least in the short term) and this acted as the 'spoonful of sugar' that sweetened the medicine of the mundane reality of call centre life. Managers were also keen to mobilize symbolic brand meanings of Cygnus as 'prestigious', especially as they were very aware that employees were typically over-qualified for their roles. Here the perpetual promise of a move to other areas of Cygnus' business was used as a particularly potent mode of control through the management of employee aspirations and expectations. The promotion of the idea of a move away from the call centre suggests to CSRs their value to the company beyond the confines of the call centre, the idea provides them with a 'little bit of love' to take away the pain of working within the call centre environment; a palliative for a plaintive existence of life on the line.

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[i] Employee Branding is distinct from, and should not be confused with, the notion of Employer Branding, which relates to the organization's image and reputation as an employer and refers to the particular constellations of HR practices for attracting and retaining talent that characterize a specific firm and distinguish it from its competitors (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

ii The issue of high commitment management practices within a context of 'low discretion job design' and high behavioural management (call centres) has been explored by Houlihan (2002) who has developed a typology of four managerial strategies aimed at attending in practice to the tensions between commitment and control; showing the different degrees and the range of forms within which organizations manage to integrate low task discretion with high commitment. Two of such practices apply to the specific context of our work, as characterised by an emphasis on high commitment orientation: alleviation and involvement. We view the role of the brand as crucial in intertwining coercive approaches to work tasks (control) with identity regulation and negotiation processes (enabling) while providing 'alleviation' and 'involvement' through symbolic meanings of 'skilled knowledge work'. This issue will be considered in more detail in the discussion.

iii A promise is a relational action entailing the communication of intentions to bring about a future state of affairs beneficial to the one to whom the promise is made (Anker et al., 2012, p. 268).

iv While organizational identity may provide some reassuring continuity for members it is not a fixed or stable concept, but instead it is fluid and allows for flexible interpretations, representations and translations into action. Thus, even though the core appears stable, it is effectively in flux (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) and its complexity allows a repertoire of values to fit many instances (see Reger et al., 1994).

v Individual identity refers to subjective meaning and experiences and to the on-going effort to address the questions of 'who I am?' and 'how should I act?' (Alvesson et al., 2008, p.6)

vi A pseudonym

vii Content in [ ] is our addition.