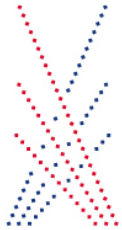

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Internal change agents: boundaries spanned and the implications for change agency

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Abstract

Academic focus on change events has often featured the work of external consultants and comments have sometimes been less than favourable on their operations and the outcomes for the organizations concerned. More recently the work of the internal change agent has been mentioned as a more focused approach to the management of change. We have sought to place our research in the context of the work of boundary spanners. In this paper we have researched the accounts of eighteen internal change agents in organizations both in the UK and Australia. Our findings suggest that the varied previous experience of internal change agents gives them credibility with the people they work with; it requires careful political management; draws on personal and professional confidence and is time-limited. We also contribute to the debate about change agents' influence on organizational effectiveness and individual development.

Key words

Internal change agents; boundary spanners; change agency; individual development; organizational effectiveness

Introduction

Researchers investigating the work of management consultants have often focused on the roles that they play during change interventions and the perceptions that others have of their work. Hislop (2002: 658) reflects this in listing some of the descriptors used to describe consultants:

witchdoctors (Clark and Salaman, 1996a; Micklethwait and Woolridge, 1996); story tellers (Clark and Salaman, 1996b); performers (Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1995); magicians (Schuyt and Schuijt, 1998); seducers (Sturdy, 1998); and religious leaders (Huczynski, 1993). It may be that this sceptical view about external consultants is influenced by research into the outcomes of change programmes 70% of which, it is suggested (Grint, 2005), failed to meet their objectives. However, it does not often explore the perceptions of the consultants, who may feel that they had to embark on 'mission impossible'. We agree with Sturdy's point that 'we still don't have a clear idea of what consultants and clients do jointly' (2009: 641).

We have attempted in this paper to address the increasing interest in the work of internal change agents whose role is outlined in Sturdy et al (2016). The internal change agent role is not a new role and has been used to describe different change functions in the organization. Such work was often closely associated with the traditional role of the training manager in HR (Hartley, Bennington and Binns, 1997; Meyerson and Scully, 1995) However, the current interest in the internal change agent role often appears focused on change strategies which involve a mix of staff from different levels and departments. Wylie and Sturdy (2018) point out, such change agents may include managers themselves; or HR practitioners involved in training and development; and even sometimes managers who have come in with previous external consultancy experience. The authors describe the roles ICAs play as 'non-hierarchical interaction' and 'relationship management'. As such their activities are a useful base to explore the extended work that they do in an organization; the interventions they make; and the evaluative effect this has on organizational outcomes and the development of individuals they work with, in a way that may not be possible with external change agents, whose tenure in the organization is necessarily more time-constrained.

One concept that has interested researchers has been the different roles that internal change agents play (Friedman and Podolny, 1992; Hartley et al, 1997; Hirst and Humphries, 2015). These may be leadership (Higgs and Rowland, 2011; Derks et al, 2011; Jones and Van de Ven, 2016; Stilwell et al, 2016), management (Smith et al, 2010; Patriotta et al, 2012; Sharma and Good, 2013), team leader (Cronin, 2007; Hong, 2010; Cramton, 2014). Caldwell (2003) sees these roles developing historically with different trends of change intervention favouring different roles in response to client demand. Our focus on the work of the internal change agent also resonates with the growing interest in boundary spanners in global organizations where agents broker change through overcoming boundaries between groups and individuals in their cross-border working. (Schotter, Mudambi, Doz and Gaur, 2017). We suggest that similar boundaries are spanned in the work of change agents within contemporary complex organizations. We have therefore chosen to examine our empirical data under the lens of boundaries and boundary spanners. We did this because we believe that how change agents perceive resistance to change influences their approach to their work.

Boundary spanners

Boundary spanning has traditionally featured the work of multi-national companies who rely on ex-pats (parent country nationals) moving abroad to manage both home-country and third-country nationals and this has been the main focus of research in boundaries spanned across global organizations (Birkinshaw, Ambos and Bouquet, 2017; Klueter and Monteiro, 2017). This in itself identifies roles played, interventions made, and boundaries spanned. So, there are parent-country nationals (PCNs) who cross cultures (Brannen et al, 2010; Butler et al, 2012); who broker deals and lead projects (Fleming and Waguespack, 2007) and who work in collaborative teams (Hsaio et al. 2012). Some boundary spanners specialise in their own

sector such as healthcare (Meyer and Jepperson, 2000; Kislov, Hyde and McDonald, 2017); and there are those who return after taking part in cross-cultural working and put their new-found skills to use in the organization back at their home base (Tippmann, Scott and Parker, 2017; Kane and Levina, 2017).

Increasingly, a variety of skills is required to answer the challenges of change in organizations (Richter et al, 2006). Most companies are now composed of a multi-cultural workforce in which those with requisite skills are drawn from different backgrounds and are brought together to collaborate more effectively (Williams, 2002; Schotter and Beamish, 2011; Schotter and Abdelzaher, 2012; Zhao and Anand, 2013). In response to change, the effective change agent will need to reformulate job profiles (Walk and Handy, 2018); foster a creative environment (Auger and Woodman, 2016); take account of employees' reaction to change (Straatman et al, 2016); exercise change leader behaviour (Stilwell et al, 2016); take account of the change context (Shimoni, 2018); be innovative in HR management (Brown, 2018); and offer a scaffolding around which new procedures can reassemble effectiveness for teams undergoing change (Roberts and Beamish, 2017).

This is a demanding profile of knowledge and skill, but one which an internal change agent may be in a stronger position to exercise than an expert temporarily seconded to the organization and subject to the reservations so clearly outlined in previous research into external consultants and change agents. It can also give rise to ambiguity and ambivalence for those who undertake this change role with staff who are colleagues, sometimes raising questions about social identity – 'am I still one of them?' (Kane and Levina, 2017).

Boundaries to be spanned by internal change agents

So, what are the boundaries frequently referred to? Wright (2006) suggests that during change uncertainty can arise for all involved and that this leads internal change agents to 'engage in a complex process of identity work in which they identify themselves ambivalently as both organizational 'insiders' and 'outsiders' leading to challenge around four dimensions:

- Role and position in the hierarchy (structural boundaries) – What role is the ICA playing?
- Expertise and functional activities (knowledge boundaries) – Does the ICA have the requisite expertise acknowledged by the group she is seeking to influence?
- Organizational legitimacy and power (political boundaries) – To whom is the ICA accountable in the organization?
- Personal relationships with the clients (interpersonal boundaries) – Is the ICA still a colleague and friend to those undergoing the change programme?

Ideally, the internal change agent is 'someone who enjoyed close relationships with a broad range of organizational managers… able to engage in activities that push the boundaries of accepted behaviour' (Wright, 2006: 319). These boundaries may be held by individuals subjected to imposed change for whom any change agent is an implied challenge or threat. Such resistance is most likely to occur for those belonging to a bounded community, such as doctors and nurses, for example, whose skill and knowledge boundaries are perceived by their holders as being at risk of being challenged during change (Nicolini, 2008). The change agent needs to overcome these initial fears and satisfy members of the group that the purpose of change is not to threaten but to facilitate intervention to enable the group to come to terms with change proactively and successfully.

For Orlikowski (2002: 249), boundaries are a 'routine part of their everyday activity… part of the ongoing of flow of action – their own and others – and the social and physical contexts in which their activities are constituted'. For her there are seven boundaries which are regularly encountered: temporal; geographic; social; cultural; historical; technical; political. This alerts us to the different ways in which researchers categorise the boundaries, which they perceive that individuals encounter. It also alerts us to the danger of assuming that groups and individual perceptions can be simply encompassed by preset categories without probing further how individual and group perceptions affect the way in which boundaries are perceived and dealt with.

For the internal change agent there is the added problem of ambivalence across the boundaries that Wright enumerates, and the range of skills required to address them. These may include sense-giving as a fundamental leadership activity (Smith et al, 2010: 222) – making sure that people understand that the purpose of the change is to enhance the competence to face external challenge; sensemaking as a process of sense construction (Maitlis, 2005; Rouleau, 2005). This debate resonates with earlier researchers who warn that perception leads to interpretation and that in turn can affect how individuals and groups respond to change (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991).As an insider the ICA may be more readily aware of 'meanings recipients form regarding the impact change initiatives have and their degree of participation or involvement' (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph and DePalma, 2006) and this in turn may affect the response to participative change.

In their interventions, change agents need to address the strategic objectives (Brannen et al, 2010). This may be addressed by setting out the case for change; implementing a programme for change; and sustaining change outcomes for the organization and for the individuals involved. Higgs and Rowland (2011) summarize the steps ICAs need to set this up effectively listing the following steps:

1. Creating the case for change – engaging others in the business need for change
2. Creating structural change
3. Engaging others and gaining commitment
4. Implementing and sustaining change
5. Facilitating and developing capability

(Higgs and Rowland, 2011: 310)

This sequence of interventions suggests that the work of the internal change agent depends both on educational and instructional techniques, together with negotiational and facilitative skills (Carlile, 2004; Mutch, 2007). ICAs need to respond to the change context which they inherit; the tools they have available; and the constraints of the change initiative itself – including the politics of the organization. Not all change initiatives are congenial to those destined to undergo the change. And there are some who suggest that ICAs are boundary-shakers (Balogun, 2005), though it must be said that they are not specific about what boundary-shaking involves. All of this raises questions about whether boundaries are perceived as immoveable or more likely to yield (Bouckenooghe, 2010) to the right pressure applied in the right way by the right person (Warner Burke, 2011). It is the purpose of this paper to examine these issues drawing on the experience of the internal change agents whose data is featured here. Furthermore, according to Higgs and Rowland (2011), ICAs need to shape behaviour; frame change; and create capacity for change as the context of their work and this we will attempt to explore in detail.

Internal change agency in practice

The work of Caldwell (2003), which we noted earlier, has been developed by Wylie and Sturdy (2018: 314) who focus on the overall context within which the ICA operates. They have identified 'four different types of internal change agency units: transformers, enforcers, specialists and independents (TESI)'. They describe these as the different roles which change agents play in the organisations during change agency work, giving examples of where these approaches have been successful. They also examine where ICAs are likely to face challenges. They thereby contribute to the debate about the nature of change agency and provide internal practitioners, especially in HR, project management and the strategic change roles of employee representatives, with examples of organising the management of change using internally appointed staff. However, as the authors admit, that still leaves us with the need to explore how ICAs embark on their work in the organization(s) they work in; the interventions they have implemented; and the impact this may have had for the organization and individuals engaged in the change initiative. It is these questions that this paper will seek to address.

Methodology

Schwarz and Stensaker (2014) suggest that theory has become a straitjacket for which phenomenon-driven research can be a correction. Their suggestion is to facilitate knowledge 'to identify, capture, document and conceptualise a phenomenon which helps challenge established beliefs and develop new knowledge'(2014: 486). One approach to this is constructed grounded theory which 'aims to establish patterns that are not only insightful but also demonstrate analytical precision and establish abstract theoretical relationships' (Charmaz, 2014: 213). Change agents are usually experienced and perceptive operators who have been challenged by those they work with, but also know that they need to gain support and commitment to have any chance of success in contributing to organizational and individual development. Corley, Gioia and Hamilton suggest that 'people constructing their organizational realities know… what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions and actions' (2013: 17). As ICAs, our research subjects certainly satisfy those conditions. This approach enables researchers to acknowledge the substantive theory supporting their research, allowing for their empirical data to emerge and support formal theoretical findings (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). As Charmaz describes it, constructive grounded theory 'aims for interpretive understanding of historically situated data; specifies the range of variation; and aims to create theory that has credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness' (Charmaz, 2014: 236).

Site of the research

Our research subjects were drawn from contacts who we already knew or had worked with in the past and came from organizations in the UK and Australia. We did so aware that this newly emerging role can be difficult to identify, and we needed to be sure that our research subjects represented a range of experience in different sectors, offering varied aspects of this emerging role. In all we each contacted six prospective subjects and circulated the details of our research aims, inviting them to take part. As will be seen in Table 1 we were able to include both private and public sector organizations, all of which had been involved in significant change brokered by our research subjects. We explained that we were interested both in their experiences as internal change agents and in identifying outcomes for both the

organizations and individuals arising from their work. This would involve a follow-up email requesting answers to questions arising as a result of the analysis of the transcriptions. All eighteen subjects agreed to our research approach.

Our primary data collection method was one-to-one semi-structured interviews. All of these took place face-to-face. The interviews lasted for between 60 and 120 minutes and the interview instrument and an overview page was available for all participants to see and refer to during the interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and the transcripts shared and reviewed by the research team before the emailed request for follow-up details was sent out. Our research subjects and details of their profiles are listed below.

Table 1 Research participants

Subject	Sector(s)	Role	Change specialism(s)	Current job
S1	Finance	Talent manager	Recruitment & development	External consultant
S2	Health & Oil	Internal change agent	Team work and development	Internal HR consultant
S3	Health & Public sector	Internal change agent	Team development	External consultant
S4	Health & independent	Internal change agent	Consultant psychologist	External consultant
S5	Legal sector	Solicitor	HR law	Independent consultant
S6	Army/ Health	Drug prevention co-ordinator	Monitoring and innovation development	Internal change agent
S7	Insurance	Sales promotion	International ICA	Same
S8	Public sector	Trainer & developer	Group and team work	Same
S9	Public sector	Trainer and coach	Group and team work	Same
S10	Computer sector	Strategic management coach	Team building at senior level	Same
S11	Various	Internal change agent	Strategic implementation	Same
S12	Insurance	Team building	Business development	Same
S13	Academic	Team developer	Business development	Same
S14	Army/ Public sector	Change agent	Team development	Same
S15	Self-employed	MD	Coaching and development	Same
S16	Union organizer	Change agent	Government official	Same

S17	Family business	Change agent	Business development	Same
S18	Sales director	Business development		Same

The sequence of the interview questions started with the accounts of initial employment experiences; the move into change agency work; the context of the work; the people they worked with; the interventions they made and its content; the evaluation of the change programme; their reflections on the qualities required of the effective internal change agent; and the final question: advice they would give to anyone thinking about embarking on such a role.

Data analysis

Initial transcripts were circulated among the research group and a table was drawn up which identified the individual subject; their prior experience in organizations; key statements identified from their narrative; the emerging concepts; any resonance with the relevant literature. We held discussions among the group as we reiterated our readings from the transcripts and then recontacted our subjects with specific questions for further details about organizational and individual outcomes of their change agency work. We also kept the memos that we had made during our interviews capturing the impressions that we formed at the time of the responses we noted and their perceived significance.

After that, we drew up initial tables to include the initial subcategories and their representative quotations to support our findings. At that point we were able to draw up a data structure table outlining first-order codes; theoretical categories; and aggregate theoretical dimensions. In this way we were able to assess whether we had 'established strong theoretical links between categories and their properties; increased understanding of the studied phenomenon; identify with which theoretical, substantive or practical problems our analysis was most closely aligned' (Charmaz, 2014: 291). The implications for our data analysis were 'to acknowledge subjectivities throughout our data analysis; view co-constructed data as beginning the analytical direction; engage in reflexivity throughout the research process; seek and represent participants' views and voices as integral to the analysis'. (Charmaz, 2014: 236).

Findings

Starting out

As we explained, our research subjects have been known to us for their work as ICAs in organizations over several years. As we examined the backgrounds they came from and the careers that they have followed since, it became apparent that there were different career paths that ICAs might follow.

Of the eighteen subjects we interviewed, five came from the public sector (three of those in the Health Service; six were employed in private sector organizations; two were previously in the armed services; the other five were employed in small organizations. Of the five in the public sector, four of them had remained working in their original organization. By comparison of those working in the private sector, three remined in their original company while the other three had moved on to working in an ICA role elsewhere. For example, both ex-army officers were engaged as change coordinators working in the public sector. Three ICAs had come up through a small business and one came from an academic business research role in an organization and stayed on in an ICA role.

One thing they all had in common: no one had set out to become an internal change agent before they embarked on the role. What we can say of the present group is that their backgrounds included previous roles in training others; or previous success in business development/sales roles asked to develop others in the new way of doing things; or previous experience in co-ordinating interdisciplinary groups.

Previous experience leading to the ICA role

Table 2. Previous experience

Sub-category	Representative quotations
1. Starting out as an ICA	'So … there was a real gap in the talent pipeline, within operations, so that is why it was … so I thought … I had had an operations background and so I understood what operations needed. So, I decided to make it an operations apprenticeship' (Finance sector ICA) 'As things then progressed and A (the company) started to recruit internal consultants, I then joined the central team and then moved …' (Insurance sector ICA) 'So … I went from … women's assertiveness to women's leadership, and assertiveness was a big part of the programme.' (Local Authority ICA) 'They did spend a fortune, controversially, working with PwC. Because of that I got exposed to things like implementing new performance management processes.' (Oil sector ICA) 'I lead a department of about 120 people, an innovation role and all the principles, methodologies and systems thinking and then 18 months ago I got the call that Italy really want to go for it in terms of systems thinking and that was August last year to now I have been leading systems thinking in Italy' (Insurance sector ICA)

Looking in more detail at the initial responses to our questions about how our subjects started out in the role of internal change agent, the context for our public sector ICAs was predominantly a background in training, which led to involvement in co-ordinating change programmes. This often involved Local Authorities responding to budget cuts imposed by central government by slimming down staffing levels or amalgamating departments. In contrast, for those in the private sector the context was more likely to be a proactive business development strategy requiring staff to become more focused on business effectiveness. These included techniques such as project management; scenario planning; strategic thinking, in which our subjects were experienced and therefore ideal at coaching others in the new ways of doing things. For two subjects, their previous army experience had led them into roles co-ordinating others to achieve common objectives. Their roles included co-ordinating interdisciplinary groups like drug agencies to collaborate and achieve common targets, providing effective support for those seeking help. For all our subjects the role of helping others achieve success in the context of imposed change was their commonly expressed aim as an ICA.

Initial interventions

As they describe it below, most of the initial interventions were imposed change programmes, and teams and staff struggled with that in the public sector as the spectre of cut-backs impacted on their day-to-day work. So, initial meetings attempted to engage those involved in the change with the ICA offering a mediating role – thus attempting to bridge the gap between previous practice, present change demands, and future working prospects (Orlikowski, 2002). In contrast, for those in the private sector there was a more instrumental role of implementing senior management objectives to adopt or adapt to new ways of doing things in a business, requiring performance-focused change (Patriotta, 2012). Sometimes there was an underlying system or technique to be mastered with the implication that the response to this initiative could affect future career prospects (Kane, 2018). This presented a dilemma for the ICA of wanting to gain commitment, whilst dealing with the issue of what happens to staff who are unable to adopt or adapt to new ways of working.

Table 3 Implementing the change programme

Sub-category	Representative quotations
2. Initial interventions	'it was about change, but at the time I never saw that. I thought it was very transactional, but it wasn't. It was interpreting the findings of the Cullen enquiry.' (ICA moving from Healthcare to oil sector) 'And of course, a big part of it for the NHS was the fact that we had run pretty much as a professional bureaucracy, so the physios were physios, the nurses were nurses, the doctors were doctors, and what this general manager was doing was trying to get integration across the groups' (Healthcare ICA - hospital) 'what V (company initiative) before us used to do, is facilitate getting their eyes to the right things at the right time so they started to think for themselves and realise that actually there is probably a different way we need to be working' (Insurance sector ICA)
3. Individual self-learning goals for the ICA	'I had kind of done my CPD, and I have trained as a coach and qualified as a coach in NLP, and did lots of qualifications throughout my working career so far … which is just complemented my degree and added to it, which is great' (Finance sector ICA) 'I think the four years I had an immense amount of learning and development given the constraints of the budgets they had. These courses gave you techniques, they gave you things you could use on a day to day basis. ' (Healthcare ICA) 'But there was a handful of consultants I worked with over the years at B (oil company) who I think were exceptionally good, exceptionally talented. You could see why they enjoyed doing what they did and so you picked up stuff.' (Oil sector ICA)

Developing others also meant the ICAs developing their own self-learning goals and for those in the public sector their developmental path was often addressed by the organization following requests by the change agents themselves. So, too those who had previously been training managers or in an HR role, the need to address their own development was an important priority for them (Kilduff et al, 2011). For those in the private sector the role they had was more time-consuming – not only training and development but also day-to-day support of monitoring and evaluating staff in the field following training interventions. Any development that increased their promotion chances was welcomed but was more likely to come through experience than formal courses (Whittle et al, 2010).

Boundaries and boundary spanning

The purpose of our research was to allow our subjects to relate their experience as ICAs. What were the boundaries they encountered and how did they overcome these? How far were boundaries found to be immutable and how far could these be circumvented and who could assist in this?

Table 4 Meeting and overcoming resistance

Sub-categories	Representative quotations
4. Boundaries encountered	'I mean the worst thing that ever happened to me was a very old-guard senior doctor who when I went to a meeting in their speciality said to me at some point in the meeting, 'what we need here is an expert not an ex physiotherapist' and em … I … if I was there now, I would deal with it, but at that point I just said, 'well I am sorry I think I will just leave' and got on to the fire escape and I think I probably cried. I was just young, and he was a bully' (Healthcare sector ICA – hospital) 'But you know the West of Scotland here has a different mentality, it is very aggressive, assertive and that … those … that ideology was fine when you were making things. But in the service business the change agent skills there have changed, they need to. You could not exist like that.' (Computer sector ICA) 'And it was a very simple fix, but it couldn't have come from us at all, it could have only come from the interviewers who were there, making these calls in the call centre every single day, realising that this particular aspect of the process is not working for them' (Insurance sector ICA working with call centre workers)
5. Spanning the boundaries	'I just ignored the bullies and worked with the people who … em, who were keen and interested and tried to work towards getting towards a tipping point or a critical mass or something like that. So … but I had a huge amount of autonomy. It was a wonderful time.' (Local authority ICA) 'Yes, if GPs wanted me involved, wanted anyone to be involved. They at that time anyway, were clinging strongly to their independence and that has weakened now as younger GPs are less keen on taking on the partnership' (Healthcare sector ICA) 'it was always about negotiation, seeing what the final outcome was and it was easy in a way because we knew the company was struggling.' (Computer sector ICA)

The boundaries of professional communities emerged in all the scripts we reviewed, particularly in the Health Sector. So, finding a level with those facing challenge from change was the first boundary to be spanned (Covin and Kilman, 1990). In some cases that could be publicly confrontational and needed to be carefully handled. For those moving across cultural boundaries the language barrier would be significant though not insurmountable. 'Is she one

of us?' would be the implied or direct question ICAs encountered in the opening meetings with such groups . Developing credibility and trust in members of the group was the principal aim of the ICA. So, negotiation and avoiding confrontation where possible was a priority in their approach (Iedema et al, 2010).

Political boundary spanning

As far as spanning boundaries was concerned, the question of political sponsorship was remarked on by all our research subjects. In this regard the senior management sponsor of the change was critical– and indeed a change or loss of such a sponsor would usually place a question mark over the initiative's continuance, even if a like-minded successor was appointed to carry it forward (Wright, 2009). Similarly, dealing with obstructive behaviour or game-playing behind the scenes was a barrier which needed to be confronted promptly. As the computer sector ICA related:

> 'That is when I had the big bust up with the chap, who is a lovely guy, was older than me, when I discovered that he was working behind the scenes to try and destroy what I was doing. So, we had it out man to man, and that set the … we had the … that was probably the storm that needed to happen and then we got a new set of ground rules, because the next time he was going to do that it would have been escalated. So, I sort of committed to I wouldn't turn him in.'

Reporting public challenge to their sponsor(s) was not embarked on, though it was evident that such encounters made their way back up the hierarchy and alternative action was taken to ensure that those responsible knew that this behaviour had been noted. In one instance a senior medical consultant who had confronted the ICA and refused to be interviewed for his job (as all the other consultants had done) was invited to 'have a conversation' with the Board in which his next two years' objectives were agreed for review at the end of the period by the Board (Kikyri,et al, 2010; Kislov, Hyde and McDonald, 2017).

Foreseeing the end of the change programme

Indications of the end of the project was one significant point that Sturdy raised (2016). The question focused on how long an ICA can retain the credibility of the group and when they became aware that the time had come to move on and seek another challenge. This was something that all of our subjects had considered or been faced with, some several times. There was no surprise expressed at the prospect of the end of the programme in sight (Richter, 2006).

Table 5 Indicators of the end of the change programme

Sub-categories	Representative quotations
6. Indicators of end of project	'So, when I my boss retired, they replaced him with a director of strategy, and we were put internally into HR and the first thing the HR director did was cut all supervision. And I thought, this is it … I have to go. (Local Authority ICA) 'But I think … I am in my mid 50s now and I think when you get to that age, you stop seeing the organisation in such a positive light, you stop hearing the messages the same. So, I imagine in the next couple of years, I will be wanting to do something that is a bit less part of an organisation and more about what I can do individually' (Local authority ICA) 'So, that worked quite well. Until then I was thinking, oh god, if the shutters come down on this place overnight, what am I going to do? But I am less freaked out about that these days. I get more excited thinking … it could open up other opportunities to do different work.' (Finance sector ICA)

For some ICAs further work in the organization was forthcoming. For three of our subjects self-employed status as an external consultant beckoned with one of them being called back to do consultancy work by his old organization.

Sustaining change and developing capability

Our research included questions about evaluation following the change programme and how far our ICAs became involved in that work. We focused on the organizational outputs such as impacts on the business outcomes and then development of individuals in the group, such as continuing professional development.

Table 6 Outcomes for individuals and the organization

Sub-categories	Representative quotations
7. Outcomes for individuals	'The SVQ was extra cause that was the UCAS points. That gave them the opportunity to go forward to university if they wanted to.' (Finance sector ICA) This was the same with the apprentices and the grads. And you would sit down with that individual and fill in an evaluation. And the evaluations were then merged together for … an annual review. (Finance sector ICA) These guys were telling us that they wanted to move. They wanted to do a rotation outside of the city. So, in their second year, that gave them a year of comfort and in the second year they could move out of A (place) office, and again they were fully supported (Insurance sector ICA)
8. Outcomes for the organization	'Research showed that if you had an apprenticeship pool, you were going to get longevity out of those individuals. And so far, that programme started in 2012 and 99%, 98% of the apprentices are still in the organisation.' (Finance sector ICA) 'Where you have got early careerists coming into the business, you can foster, they will foster the culture for you. They are the ones that grow with the business.' (Insurance sector ICA) 'And I thought about it and thought, ok it is an interesting question and I thought … well when the managers stop coming to the change agents and asking what they need to do is when we know we need to stop doing it. In other words when they are leading it themselves.' (Healthcare sector ICA)

As far as outcomes for individuals and outputs for the organization were concerned the empirical evidence was less apparent (Boyatzis and Khawaja, 2014). Staff retention and

career development were mentioned by some ICAs and business outcomes, wherever they were central to a training programme. Some ICAs reflected on the impact they had on individuals, in two cases introducing qualification training leading to Lead Body and continuing professional development accreditation. However, indicators of effectiveness of the programme for the wider organization was less apparent in our research subjects' responses (Barends et al, 2014).

The desirable qualities of the ICA

Our final questions focused on the reflectiveness of the subjects. What did they feel about the qualities needed to be successful and what advice would they give to those contemplating a career as an ICA?

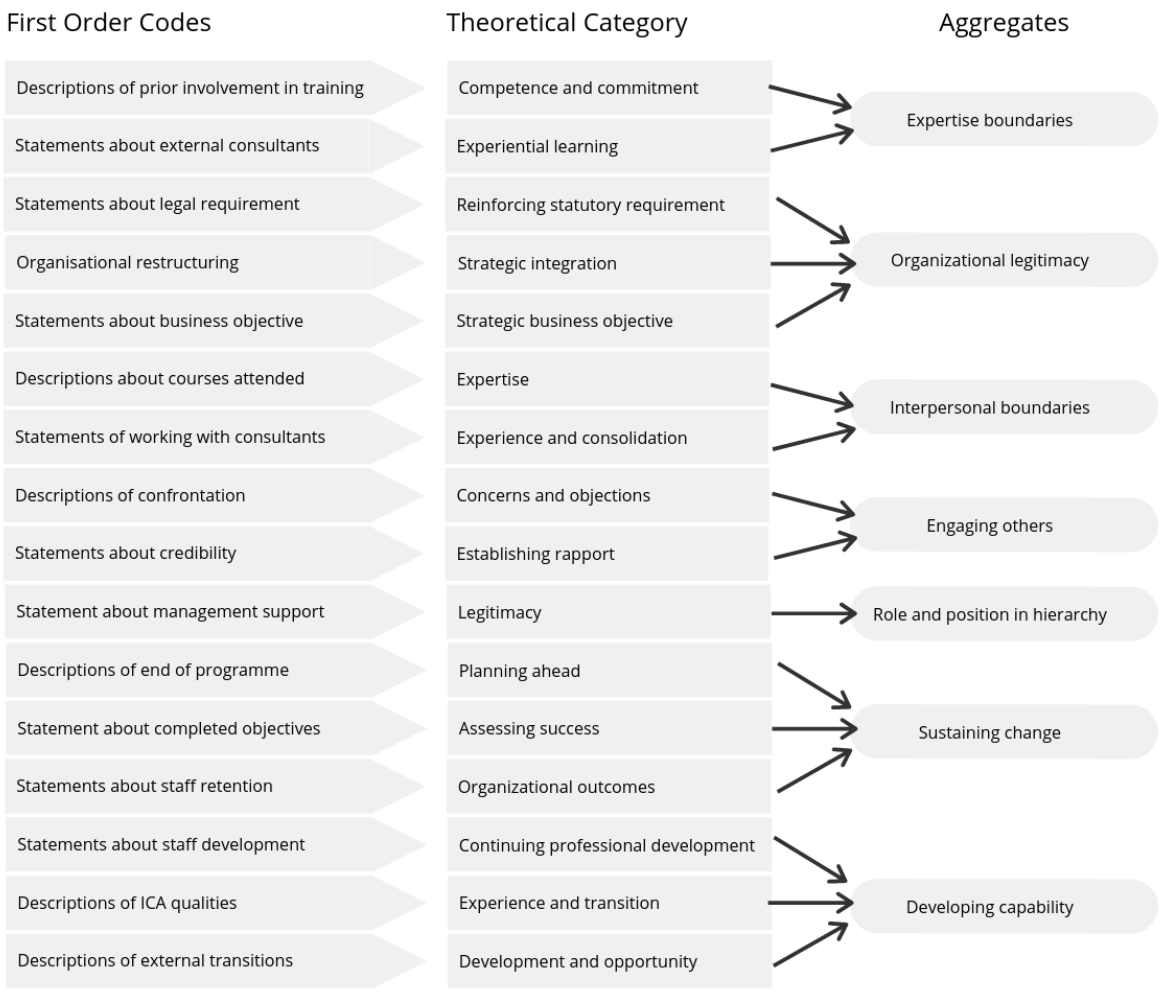
Table 7 The qualities required by an ICA

Subcategory	Representative quotations
9. Qualities of the ICA	'They are used to change. That is vital. If you can get your early careerists used to change, and how to adapt to change, in future … because we are in this world, everything is so volatile, they are going to be fully equipped for it.' (Finance sector ICA) 'I always wanted the managers to take the credit for the changes we were doing. I had no need to do that. I just wanted to make sure they were enabled to do it.' (Healthcare sector ICA) 'I am not somebody that takes prisoners, but I have seen other people do that. So, they strike at people's weaknesses. So, I do feel the qualities, you have got to understand the impact you have, because change is difficult even for people like me … (Computer sector ICA)
10. Advice to prospective ICAs	'You need a huge amount of resilience. A huge amount of resilience and I would say that in order to develop and maintain that resilience there is a lovely model of resilience that the health and safety executive use. Things like having a problem-solving attitude; so, a willingness to actually tackle something and seeing it through; having a strong social network; having a strong sense of yourself and a belief in … well a belief in what you are trying to do, and I think separately a belief in your ability to do it.' (Healthcare sector ICA) 'I would say don't worry about the job right now. Just do what you enjoy, what you want to do. Where you want to make a difference. So, I would say experiment, try a bit of everything, as early as you can … (Finance sector ICA) 'So, I think it is probably one of the most difficult jobs a person can do, to be a change agent, and em, you have got to pick and choose your battles, and if you don't read the signals about that, if you don't have that awareness to know which battles to take on, how to work around it, then you are going to flounder' (Insurance sector ICA)

In their self-reflective comments the internal change agents we researched indicated clearly-defined personal qualities and abilities. ICAs see themselves as resilient problem solvers

interested in engaging with colleagues facing imposed change at work. They are committed to continuing professional development in themselves and others. They acknowledge the challenge of spanning the different boundaries that exist and are realistic in searching for solutions knowing that with success comes their own demise as an ICA and the need to move on in their career (Abelnour, Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, (2017).

Figure 1. Overview of data structure



Discussion

Through our interviews with eighteen internal change agents working in the UK and Australia we have investigated the stories and narratives that recount the ICAs at work. In the introduction we presented a critique of a literature on external consultants, which over the years has been less than flattering about how external consultants implement organizational change. In contrast, the work of our subjects offers an insight into an approach to change agency which acknowledges the barriers to change-implementation and explores the experience and responses of the change participants. In this section we discuss the theoretical implications of our findings and conclude with an outline of practical implications, limitations, and future research directions.

We have chosen to examine our empirical data under the lens of boundaries and boundary spanning. We did this because we believe that how change agents perceive resistance to change influences their approach to their work. Wright's (2009) four boundaries are important here: role and position in the hierarchy; expertise and functional activities; organizational legitimacy and power; personal relationships with clients. Negotiating these issues will be crucial for the ICA's success in facilitating change. However, there are likely to be boundaries specific to each organization which require to be addressed, too.

In this regard, our findings here indicate that ICAs ensure that the expertise boundary is spanned by demonstrating relevant experience and so gaining credibility, particularly in Healthcare sector (Kislov, Hyde and McDonald, 2017). But in a sense, although at a personal level the ICA needs to establish appropriate expertise and experience with the group, the reality is that where the change is part of the organization's future strategy, individuals know that resisting will very likely be futile and what matters is that they achieve the organization's required objectives. So, the ICA's legitimacy and power are still significant and the overriding factor for them is resolving resistance (Earsley, 2010).

For ICAs working in the private sector the change programme is often expertise-led and directly business related (Cameron et al, 2011). If the company is demonstrably facing challenge in the market and radical change is required to counter that, then change becomes much harder for its subjects to resist, and indeed they may welcome the opportunity to reinforce and develop their competencies to ensure that they are still employable in the newly-emerging business environment (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011).

We would say that the role and position in the hierarchy is not necessarily a boundary in the sense that the ICA is usually familiar to everyone within the company. However, the other boundary that comes into play is the personal: so personal influence will depend on how far the ICA is regarded as a friend rather than an instrument of managerial power. Or as one resisting doctor said to the ICA, 'You see, E (name), it's not about you – it's about them (newly imposed senior managers)' (Kane and Levina, 2017).

How ICAs broker change often remains unexpressed in their accounts. There may be a pre-set programme, or it could be more like a focus group. But what underlies it will include the steps that Higgs and Rowland (2011) list. Making the case for change and engaging others and gaining their commitment is well attested by our ICAs, so too, continued engagement with individuals in the group.

However, the last two points Higgs and Rowland raise (2011: 310) are less often evident in our accounts. There remains a question-mark over the ICA implementing and monitoring successful change over the longer term. Similarly, facilitating and developing capability for individuals, while sometimes part of the change programme, is not often consolidated in, for example, formal learning agreements. These aspects of evaluating change ought to be more feasible to ICAs than they are to external consultants. However, on the present evidence, moving on or moving out is the more likely outcome for our ICAs, once the change programme is complete.

On the question of time-limits on ICAs raised by Sturdy et al (2016), our subjects were always aware of the temporary nature of their work. For those instructing groups in such techniques as project management, scenario planning or strategic integration for example, there is always a limit imposed on the programme. More significant is the demise of senior management support for the programme or the move of the company's sponsor or the ICA's direct line manager. This always signals the probable curtailment of the programme and for the ICA the likelihood of needing to move on.

Finally, the self-reflective aspect of our research indicated that ICAs are committed to continue in their role even if it means moving project or company to get another opportunity to facilitate change. This may be because many of our subjects come from a training background and therefore would be less confident about falling back into a line management role. Those ICAs most confident in making a move to another company usually had a specialism or skill, which they believed other organizations might need, and they were more relaxed about a temporary and peripatetic role (Rynes, Bartunek and Daft, 2001).

As to the role of the ICA and the qualities required to undertake it successfully, our subjects see it as an amalgam of skills acquired through a willingness to extend themselves across knowledge and skill boundaries early in their working lives and a willingness to engage in the work of facilitating change. Resilience and self-confidence were most often mentioned as the qualities required and this remained consistent for those who moved from company employment to self-employed external change agents (Warner Burke, 2011).

Practical implication, Limitations, and Future Research

In many companies, small scale, localised change can be and is managed by/originates from staff in the area, e.g. Kaizen activities (Oakland, 1989). This is participative change. However, where issues/problems/opportunities are cross-departmental or cross-unit, these cannot be dealt with by one department or unit, indeed there may not even be commonly-held recognition that there is an issue to be dealt with. In these situations, senior managers usually identify that a change must to be made. This is why top-down change is still prevalent despite scepticism about the success of imposed change. ICAs come into their own when top-down, cross-boundary change is required, and to achieve this, they themselves exercise cross-boundary spanning knowledge, skills and experience acknowledged by those involved in the change. ICAs could just as easily be called cross-boundary change agents.

The exploration of boundary spanning in the work of the internal change agent remains a significant field for research. Internal change agents themselves are interesting examples of change agent effectiveness, embedded as they are in the culture of the organization and the people who are involved in its support. The dynamics of how ICAs approach the work of integrating themselves into a programme of change; involve themselves in the working lives

of their colleagues; and sustain and develop the role in their continuing career will continue to be an important field of research. So, too will the search for evidence of long-term effectiveness of change for the organization and its individual staff members.

Future research could usefully include the participants in the change events, which would complement the accounts of ICAs tasked with implementing a change programme. This would allow us to examine the interactive work of change agency in more detail and its outcomes for organizational and individual development would be more open to detailed scrutiny. The world of work and the dynamic of change will continue to dominate research and the accounts that different approaches contribute to its success can redress the balance of perceptions of the work of change agents. As Woodman said,

'We have not done nearly enough to link theory and research on organizational change with theory and research on creativity'
(Woodman, 2014: 474.).

It is the belief of the current writers that the topic of internal change agents and boundary spanning will in the future help to close that gap.

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