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Strategy Absence: A professional firm's response to managerialism

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Summary

This paper is a critical-hermeneutic enquiry into the absence of strategy at a professional services firm. Building on the initial conceptualization of strategy absence by Inkpen & Choudhury (1995), the paper extends this concept in that far from strategy absence being a 'failure of management', it may instead provide the basis for understanding and enquiry into such absence. In the instant research, a preoccupation with the loss of professional identity prevented the formulation and articulation of strategy in the organization studied; it instead followed a *minimal* strategy, presenting as strategy-less. The loss of professional identity arose from the use of managerialist practices by their clients, to which the absence of strategy is argued to be a response.

Track 2: Critical Management Studies

Introduction

A paper was written several years ago (McAuley et al., 2000) that considered professionals' perspective on management, being managed and strategy. The authors had solicited a group of professionals' reflections on how they viewed management and strategy in the course of their work. A broad, although fair, view from that study was that that group of professionals had no objection to being managed so long as the objective of management was to facilitate and support them in an appropriate 'holding environment' (McAuley et al., 2014) in the context of allowing them to achieve their professional goals, in their case, the production of science which benefits society.

What they, it appears, objected to was managerialism (Pollitt, 1990) and its pervasive creep into their day to day practice. Managerialism, according to Pollitt (1990), is about attempting to maximise the efficiency of resources through the ubiquity of performance indicators, a neo-Taylorism, a philosophy or ideology that legitimates the role of management in how an organization is run (Lawler & Hearn, 1995; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011).

Recently, this research project considered whether another group of professionals' contemplations of strategy were affected by managerialist practices in the private sector. In this study, the senior management team of a professional services firm were asked about the challenges confronting their organization and their potential responses to them.

In the research, evidence was found of strategy absence (Inkpen & Choudhury, 1995) and this paper reflects, following the participants' responses, on why this might be the case. In this endeavour, it is argued, first, that strategy absence is a much-nuanced concept, requiring its existing scope to expand to encompass the experience of professional organizations. Secondly, that rather than such absence be construed as a pejorative failure of management, strategy absence may arise precisely because of the challenges the professionals concerned perceive within their environment and to their identity as professionals.

This paper proceeds in the following manner. It starts with a brief orientation of an understanding of 'strategy' and is followed with a review of the literature concerning strategy absence, culminating in a consideration of the literature relating to the loss of professional identity. Then an overview is provided of the research methodology. This is then followed by the presentation of a selection of the findings from the research, concluding thereafter with what are considered to be the implications for the theory of strategy absence and professional organizations.

What is Strategy?

To address the reader's expectation that there is an answer to the question of 'what is strategy?', regrettably this paper must, of course, disappoint. What the paper *will* do is draw out the definitions in the literature that surface from time to time in order to settle the concept about what is being written, from the perspective of the author. That said, the writing, thinking and talking in this research is informed to some extent by Mantere's (2013) argument that 'linguistic experts' attempt to define fields or domains of knowledge so that they can attract

resources, thereby resulting in the reification of concepts such as 'strategy'. To this is added that strategy as a practice, discourse and indeed, industry exists, and this cannot be discounted, but what is put forward is "the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p.108). For the purpose of orientation, however, below is set out *an* understanding of what strategy is.

For Mintzberg (1978) a strategy exists when, over time, there is both a pattern and consistency to the decisions taken by the firm's management team. Farjoun (2002) offers a similar definition where it is "the planned or actual coordination of the firm's major goals and actions, in time and space, that continuously co-align the firm with its environment" (pp.570-571). For Yarger (2008), strategy is not about the diagnosis and solution of a particular problem but rather seeks to "anticipate a future and shape an environment in which fewer problems arise and those that do can be resolved" (p.45), while for Porter (1985) it is the "route to competitive advantage" (p.25). The purpose of strategy is to provide a basis and guidance for decisions that affect the organization (Grant, 2010).

In the understanding of the concept in this paper, strategy is about the decisions, whether construed retroactively or as intention, affecting the medium to longer term performance of the firm as it seeks to achieve its goals, whether these are implicit or explicitly stated. As this is positioned in relation to this study, while the original goal of the examined firm was to provide high-quality professional services, as it sought to survive in the medium term, its actions, such as downsizing, were de-coupled from this goal. Arguably there was an implicit re-evaluation of its goals, but the question arises as to how this occurred and what implication this has had for the organization in its development of strategy, i.e., the co-ordination of goals and actions.

Strategy Absence

In this section of the paper, the field of 'strategy absence' is marked out and an attempt is made to provide some boundaries around the concept. Inkpen & Choudhury (1995) first raised the concept of strategy absence as a phenomenon worthy of study. They said that "Rather than assuming that all firms must have a strategy, it may be necessary to ask: Why is there no strategy here? What are the characteristics of a strategy-less organization?" (p.313). Reflecting on the domain of strategic management research, they compared it to other domains of research, such as natural science, and commented that "Absence is often used as a cue for investigation and as a subject of study..." (ibid., p.314), but that in their area of research the field had become dominated by work that sought to identify, label and categorize strategy. In other words, primed to seek strategy patterns, researchers expected to find them, classifying them on this basis, rather than being prepared to notice what is not there. Similarly, Catusus (2008) has argued that "Studies of organizations are habitually concerned with creating, attending and making sense of presence" (p.1004).

For Inkpen & Choudhury (1995), the absence of strategy in organizations can be explained or brought about by one of three states: absence as a failure of management, absence as transition and absence as a virtue. Each of these concepts bears some explanation.

The first is the absence of strategy arising due to the failure of management to set one: Referring to previous literature in the area, while such literature had not used the term 'strategy absence', Inkpen & Choudhury (1995), said it had been seen as a "transient state between either

firm success or failure” (p.316) and that as most research at that point involved firms that are ‘nonfailures’ it ought not to have been surprising that it was difficult to find references to strategy absence. Inkpen & Choudhury (1995), while positioning absence as a category which could be seen within others’ work, did not develop the concept of failure of management significantly beyond this, a point which is returned to later.

The second state is where absence is a transitional state in which “a bad strategy may also force a firm to reevaluate its strategic direction” (Inkpen & Choudhury, pp.316-317). In this period, the firm may, in an effort to re-make its strategy, make decisions which lack consistency with previous goals. In Bauerschmidt’s (1996) words this state is “where strategy is anticipated but not immediately present in its final form” (p.665).

The final state relates to absence as being a virtue: The firm decides to engage in behaviour that allows for external feedback and alterations in its approach to its environment. This is an experimental type of behaviour where it “may be appropriate to admit ambivalence honestly in the face of uncertainty” (Inkpen & Choudhury, 1995, p.318) thereby stimulating the organization to react innovatively.

The area of interest in this research relates to strategy absence arising due to the failure of management, as an absence in this regard “reflects untoward actions that thwart its presence” (Bauerschmidt, 1996, p.666). As has been said, the original theory of strategy absence is not well developed in this respect. In their own paper, Inkpen & Choudhury (1995) referenced others’ work where they believed strategy absence could be discerned. They looked at Miles & Snow’s (1978) typology of organizational types and identified ‘reactors’ as being ‘strategic failures’ and the Chrisman et al. (1988) work which focused on Porter’s (1980) ‘stuck-in-the-middle’ organization as being one that is strategy-less. Rodwell & Shadur (2007) in their paper concerning the configuration of firms’ activities, extended the concept of strategy absence. Drawing on Miles & Snow’s (1978) categorisation of Reactors as being organizations who are aware of their environment but are unable to deal effectively with it, they developed the distinction of these firms as being those that “do not *have* a strategy and they do not focus their efforts in any one area or range of areas” (p.53, their emphasis); They categorized these as ‘drifters’, evoking the work of Johnson et al. (2008) and their concept of ‘strategic drift’.

In the review of the literature for this project, Inkpen & Choudhury’s (1995) concept of absence is both cited and commented upon by scholars, but not developed. The references to strategy absence *inter alia* consist of Farjoun’s (2002) consideration of strategy as being something more than a static position, Salavou & Halikias’ (2009) observation that the phenomenon is under-researched, through to Andrews et al.’s. (2009) comment that “strategy absence is a legitimate choice by an organization, but it is not a choice that will produce higher levels of organizational performance” (p.14). In the frame of this study, one can only but intuit why strategy absence has received relatively little attention throughout the years. It may be because, on the one hand, strategy is, after Inkpen & Choudhury (1995) a “presence-oriented paradigm” (p.314) imbued with Porter’s (1980) observation that “every firm competing in an industry has a strategy, whether explicit or implicit” (p.xiii), and on the other hand, it might be the case that absence is a peculiarly difficult phenomenon to investigate. Moreover, as one looks at a firm that *prima facie* lacks a strategy, one might cohere patterns of decisions, however random, that might force one to conclude that there is, in fact a strategy, no matter how incongruent or incoherent. One might therefore be expecting to find, because the organization continues to

exist, a strategy. This is akin to Bauerschmidt's (1996) contention that to "remain an organization it must take on the property of strategy, even if it is the property of an absent strategy" (p.667). This accords with a particular philosophical assumption concerning the ontology of strategy: To call it forth, whether absent or present, is to bring into existence an organization's strategy.

For the present purpose, it is helpful to consider, instead of a contemplation of the void of absence, the concept of a minimal strategy. This avoids a discussion of the temporal dimension of the subject period in which to consider a strategy of a given firm: If a pattern can be cohered over a number of months in the decisions of a firm, and this is followed by a transition until the next pattern can be discerned, for however short or long, we need to ask whether this is a strategy. It is argued that this concept allows us to consider the organization's contemplation of the strategic issues facing it, and their possible response to them, that is, their strategy, during periods where any strategy is absent.

That is the case in the subject organization that was studied. That organization, Senatus¹, entered a period from the late 2000s through to the time in which the research was conducted, in mid-2017, during which the firm had no explicit strategy, and an implicit strategy which is categorised as 'minimal'. The strategy was minimal because it had no discernible pattern to overcome the many changes in their industry over a sustained period of time, approximately seven years, in which they downsized and reduced costs; minimal strategies as they were a response to the adverse environment but did not create conditions for growth and development.

It is argued, following a consideration of the findings below, that while one could not discern a pattern of decisions that could cohere into anything other than a minimal strategy, a pattern in the responses in the research emerged which allowed something of an explanation for why the protagonists at Senatus, its board of directors, failed to engage in taking decisions which would allow it to overcome its adversities. If strategy is a 'means-ends' relationship (Bakir & Todorovic, 2010) and goal-oriented, Senatus' minimal strategy was to stay in existence amid the tumult of their environment. Threading this back to the earlier point concerning the decoupling of medium-term actions from goals, this is arguably a transient phase in the organization's history, notwithstanding that one cannot construe this as a particular conceptualization, as the 'next phase', as such, has not come into being (one might expect it to, but again this would be researcher bias for strategy presence-seeking). The argument, however, is that absent the transitory phase ending - and here again we have the temporal dimension of the discussion - the subject organization, in engaging in a *minimal* strategy presents as *strategy absence*. On this basis, the outcome of the research is seeking to extend the significance of the original concept of strategy absence to encompass and extend one's understanding of the experience of a firm which has a minimal or absent strategy, and to provide a basis for understanding why this might be the case.

In the latter respect, the psychoanalytic tradition regards the apparent absence of something to be 'uncanny' but more precisely a coded message or 'symptom' (Zizek, 2006) concerning human desire, but which message is not addressed to any 'one' in particular. Viewed in this

¹ 'Senatus' is a pseudonym for the subject organization

manner, the absence of strategy is a cue for questioning and investigation. A possible reason for this absence appeared, from the research, to concern the loss of professional identity or purpose. Part of the issue here for Senatus was that there had been a change in the organization's activities from a solely professional service basis of relationship with their clients, to one where the nature of the work became more routinized, partly as the result of outsourcing decisions taken by their clients. This seems to have taken place without active reflection by the firm's senior team on the meaning and implication of this unasked-for re-designation. In this sense, there is commonality between Senatus' position and that which has taken place in respect of other professions, for instance, medicine, to the extent that Evetts (2003) argues that there has been a blurring of boundaries between professional and non-professional work. Nowhere has this boundary been diminished more than in journalism, as described by Splichal & Dahlgren (2016) who argue that the trend has been developing for considerable time, arising from "*technicalisation* of journalistic work in the late 19th century, when not only commercial considerations of the marketplace demanded technical rather than intellectual skills" (p.8), suggesting that it has been the development of all kinds of technologies which has facilitated this process.

There has, however, been a more recent 'trend' towards de-professionalization, rooted principally in managerialism (Randle & Brady, 1997; Thomas & Hewitt, 2011). Derber (1983) argues that this has resulted in an 'ideological proletarianisation', defined as "... the appropriation of control by management over the goals and social purposes to which the work is put. Elements of ideological proletarianisation include powerlessness to define the final product of one's work, its disposition in the market and its uses in the larger society" (Derber, 1983, p. 313). This is an apt commentary upon the strategic position that Senatus found themselves in, as the parameters and prescription of how the work is to be performed has taken a more structural basis in the form of detailed service agreements. Their previous services, consisting of professional advice and expertise in a particular subject area have been deprivileged by their clients, who are imbued with managerialist tendencies in favour of more marketized and commoditized services, an experience which has had an altering effect on Senatus' purpose and members' identity which has yet to be redefined, presenting as an absence of strategy.

Research Methodology

The approach to this research was principally a phenomenological understanding of an aspect of the social world, namely, reflections on strategy at Senatus, mediated in the research material through language. In this regard, the senior management actors at Senatus, in their ostensive reflections on the strategic issues facing their organization were *strategizing*: By this, it is meant that the level of analysis at which the research was carried out was a part of the process by which strategy formulation takes place. This is 'temporal work' (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013) within which the participants "come to settle on particular strategic accounts that link interpretations of the past, present, and future in ways that appear coherent, plausible, and acceptable" (p.965) and part of the practice perspective in strategy, locating (strategic) human agency not in the strategists themselves but in their practices (Schatzki, 2005). The research was interested in how people involved in strategizing understand their strategic context, the issues and challenges, and so asked firstly for their reflections on what they believed to be the strategic issues facing their organization and secondly what they believed to be the appropriate response(s) to these (i.e., their strategy).

Recognising and accepting that which Johnson & Duberley (2000) argue when they say that “epistemological commitments are a key feature of our pre-understandings which influence how we make things intelligible” (p.1), the research is situated in an interpretivist tradition and is underpinned by a critical hermeneutic philosophy and methodology. It is argued that research is about “interpretation rather than representation” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p.11) of a given reality and that “before we interpret language, language itself is an interpretation” (Uggla, 2010, p.4). This will become clearer as the findings and implications are presented later, but it might suffice at this point to say that the study follows the tradition of Ricoeur and one of the three hermeneutics of suspicion, namely, psychoanalysis (Scott-Baumann, 2009). For this paper, the psychoanalytic perspective in organizational psychology (Arnold et al., 2016) is taken to be one where an individual’s internal psychic reality is their actual reality and is constituted and re-made, particularly in the early part of our lives, through our intimate interactions with care-givers whom we are dependent on for our well-being. These emotionally charged interactions are templates for our acting in the world. As a development of this perspective, psychodynamics, emergent from the psychoanalytic tradition, is “much less involved in making *interpretations* of hidden meaning referring to the past, than in sharing, comparing and finding out our *sense-making process*” (Vansina & Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008, p.110, original emphasis) and therefore, in this respect, the research methodology was aimed at stimulating questions and thoughts at a puzzling situation, namely the absence of a strategy to cope with profound change in the organization’s environment.

Senatus are an SME and eight members of their senior management team were interviewed, and each interview lasted around one hour. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Each interview then became a ‘text’ to be analysed and interpreted, in accordance with the hermeneutic tradition.

Hermeneutics *is* interpretation; for Ricoeur (1974) hermeneutics was about “a thinking where the plurality of interpretations and understanding may collide and bring inspiration” (p.91) suggesting that there is no ‘final’ truth to be learned about what a subject ‘thinks’ from an external position of knowing, but that there might be a ‘truth’ for the subject. In this regard, there might be a linguistic ‘event’ that may give rise to pause in textual analysis. The textuality engaged in was to view the interview transcripts as texts to be interpreted using a hermeneutic cycle of analysis, based on the hermeneutic circle (McAuley, 1985; McAuley, 2004; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Insofar as the act of interpretation is the performance of hermeneutics it is simultaneously a struggle over meaning conducted within the hermeneutic circle, a “generative recursion between the whole and the part” (Moules et al., 2015, p.122) so that there is movement along its contours; the researcher moves inside the material, comes outside it, reflects and moves into it again. This tradition of interpretive research “dissolves the polarity between subject and object into a more primordial, original situation of understanding, characterized by a disclosive structure” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p.95) and seeks to create a new plane of understanding. It is argued to be a “separate cognitive realm regulated by the rationality of *verstehen*” (Uggla, 2010, p.33) “manifested by the key concept of fusion of horizons (*horizonversmeltzung*)” (ibid., p.38).

Interpretation along and between the circle’s contours involves questioning the text. Questioning a text is important and as Gonzalez (2006) remarks, for both Gadamer and Heidegger, questions had priorities over answers in the so-called Socratic tradition. In the analysis of the texts produced by the research inquiry, questions were asked, based upon ‘pre-

understanding' of strategy and the researched organization. Arguably, such pre-understanding can be viewed as 'prejudice' or 'bias' preceding the researcher's coming to the texts. The notion of prejudice is linked to bias: "biases are not to be understood as solely negative or as necessarily closing off understanding. They provide us with a vantage point from which to gain access to a certain subject that we seek to understand" (Metselaar et al., 2016, p.34). For Gadamer (1960/ 1994), "prejudices are our biases of our openness to the world. They are simply the conditions whereby we experience something" (p.9) so they are something that the hermeneutic researcher should bring to mind, not eliminate or 'bracket' in the Husserlian tradition. Rather, it is through 'dialogue' that this precondition to understanding will alter. McAuley (2004) approaches the question of pre-understanding, prejudice or bias in two ways as it relates to the practice of hermeneutic interpretation. He argues that "there are two ways in which there is a legitimation of the hermeneutic approach as a mode of reaching truth. One of these lies in the professionalization of the hermeneutic researcher; the other in the methodic processes through which hermeneutic work is conducted" (p.196). The participants' interview texts were all approached using the same methodical cycles of analysis.

Derivation of Themes

From the analysis of the research material, a number of themes were derived for further analysis. It is appreciated that the eliciting of themes and thematic analysis can be problematic. On the one hand, the research project subscribes to the idea of the multi-form presentation of reality and the human wish to make sense of and in life. To reduce rich, sensory, evocative and powerful raw research material to a number of themes appears to contradict this position. For instance, Braun & Clarke (2006) indicate that "a 'theoretical' thematic analysis would tend to be driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area" (p.84), while Saldana (2016) advocates first and second cycle coding methods prior to producing themes. To an extent, both approaches seemed to strain against the onto-epistemological background of the project and a respect for the simultaneous individuality of the texts and their consonant intertextuality. Nevertheless, themes are heuristically useful and paradoxically serve to reduce complexity yet at the same time to open up the texts concerned. To this end and taking into account Braun & Clarke's (2006) recommendation, the research aim was to have a theoretical interest of strategy absence in mind all the while through working with the texts. Five separate themes were derived or generated. The focus of this paper is the theme of Identity, or the loss of professional identity and purpose.

Identity

Previous authors have written of the link between strategy and subjectivity, or identity; for instance, Laine & Vaara (2007) have said that they are 'intertwined', while Chia & Holt (2006) have written, using Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, that "identity and strategy are inextricably linked; my actions shape my identity and my identity, in turn, orients me towards particular strategic preferences" (p.645). Knights and Morgan (1991) spoke of individuals transformed into subjects who obtain a "sense of purpose and reality" (p.252) from strategizing. This paper supports the insight and conclusions delivered by these scholars. In this study, nevertheless, something different and slightly more nuanced was found than what has been said before. It was found that the individual participants, when speaking of the organization's strategic issues or position, spoke principally about *their* identity *qua* professional identity through the

kaleidoscope of loss and their inability to recuperate that loss. Their respective identities were threaded to their professional identity; insofar as subjectivity may be created by strategizing, after Knights & Morgan (1991), in this subject instance, subjectivity was generated from an identification with a professionalism which the participants variously described as having been lost, or now being empty. Adding to this, while there was a strong identification with a professional subjectivity, believing that an 'identity' was lost prevented the members of the management team articulating a strategy for the business. In this sense, there was a stated regret that an identity was lost, but also a strong wish to identify with it. In psychoanalytic terms, one might say that this was a mourning for a lost object, and a wish to return to a state that paradoxically may never have existed in the first place. That is, the idealized professional identity summoned up by the participants may have been an evocation of a past that never was, but it nonetheless in the present acted as a psychological defence against the pressure of external demands made by the organization's clients. Žizek (2006) interestingly speaks of nationalism in this way; political nationalism appeals to an identity – political, cultural, linguistic and so on – putatively rooted in the past, but which may never have existed in the first instance, in order to provide a coherence and defence against modern ills, such as globalisation. In the case of Senatus, one doesn't know necessarily whether they originally had a professional identity which has now been lost to the exigencies of the modern exchange economy measured on ubiquitous performance indicators, but it is sufficient to know that those running, and importantly, organizing Senatus perceive such a loss of identity.

Professional purpose and identity for one participant demonstrated a belief that the work that the organization performs is not properly understood, while at the same time he struggles to articulate its value proposition. Harry² opined that there was an invisibility to the work that the organization does, one that is that:

'invisible [piece] again that's not measured, not recognised, not paid for, not penalised when it's not done'.

Such invisibility is interesting in that there is, for Harry, a softer aspect to the work that defies measurement. In this regard, a pined for professional identity, and the work carried out by a professional, is not fully capable of measurement according to this participant. Certain aspects of the work, i.e., what it takes to accomplish professional work, is neither 'measured' nor 'paid for'. It is 'invisible'. If the professional ceased to carry on certain work which is unencumbered by the stricture of measurement, the respondent seems to argue that this would not be penalised, yet this belies the logic of the argument that is being made: Professional work is more than that which can be measured. It is almost as though the client organizations, by measuring the professional service firm's work through performance indicators, has taken something away from Senatus: If Senatus cease to do it, it won't be noticed, and so, in this scenario, it is the client's measurement techniques which are giving value and legitimacy to the service firm, not the value of the professional work in itself being undertaken by Senatus. It is therefore small wonder that its managers believe that their identity has been lost (or taken).

² The names of the participants are also pseudonyms

Another participant, Larry, echoed this when speaking of Senatus' clients he said:

'I don't think they really understand what we do to any great extent or the value that we bring'.

As a commercial organization, Senatus have remained in business through some very difficult times, as have other firms, and not without cost in terms of jobs. That being the case, one presumes that they have done and are doing, proverbially, 'something right'. For their clients, this means meeting at least the standards of the measurements that are being set by them. For Senatus, they have restructured their business to meet these bases of measurement, but not without the perceived loss of identity and the resulting 'failure' of management to set anything more than a minimal strategy, i.e., aligning with the objectives established by their clients. This under-scores the argument of this paper; that mourning the loss of their professional identity prevented the management team from establishing their business strategy, resulting in strategy absence. Or, the articulation of mourning occluded the articulation of strategy.

There is a remembrance of what once was. As Patrick says:

'yes, ... [it]³ was a profession, we were say, when ... I started years ago, particularly working in [client organization at the start of his career], [it] isn't, people, people don't think like that anymore, there's no...[clients] don't...'

and then trails off. He finds what he needs to say difficult to express. The expression of loss is beyond articulation, no words have been found for it. The loss of professional identity is not part of the articulatory practice (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) of the organization, and this is a point worth dwelling on. Whilst the loss of professionalism and professional identity is a strong theme which arose from the research material, it is not an avowed loss, or an avowed discourse at Senatus. In other words, it is not spoken about. Patrick struggles to put the experience into words or a smooth discourse. Patrick here has failed to symbolize the full expression of his experience of loss of professional identity. It is instead something inchoate and vague. In psychoanalytic terms, the inability to articulate clearly the expression of loss is evidence of unconscious material which has not been worked through.

In these three excerpts, the 'value' that Senatus bring, as a professional service firm, to their client organizations, is questioned by the participants, likely because it is believed that it is not 'recognised' by their clients; a key aspect of their ability to enact their identity has been lost. What is interesting about this is that there appears to be a belief that the recognition or non-recognition of professional status rests with the other, the client, and not with Senatus themselves. There is an awareness of this change when Patrick later said:

'you know, we were once professionals'

Struggling to come to terms with considerable environmental change, the senior management team have 'acknowledged' or ceded to their clients, unconsciously, the right to confer legitimacy as a professional organization, and value. This, the management team express, in

³ The precise profession under discussion has also been concealed, so as to protect the privacy of the participant organization

alternate ways, as an identity that is lost. To grieve for the 'once were' is to simultaneously verbalise a loss and a nobility; what characterises the speech of the participants is not so much a settlement with an acceptance of a lost professional identity, but instead a grievance with what has been taken, or what is no longer 'recognised'. Strategy scholars will be familiar with the oft-quoted trope and truism that strategy is what 'you don't do', but in the instance of Senatus the management team are irreconciled with the situation that they find themselves in. If they were able to accept and articulate their loss, they might seek to recover it, whereas instead they have accepted the coordinates of engagement established by their clients. The torpor of the loss of identity has prevented the development of strategy.

Discussion

At the outset, a paper by McAuley et al. (2000) was referenced which arose out of research concerning professionals in the public sector who were grappling with the effects of managerialism in their organization. In Senatus' case, managerialism also appears to be a concern; Senatus, hitherto a professional services organization is struggling to fix its identity, its relationship with its clients, and its environment. This is an absence of a coherent response to changed environmental demands, or an absence of strategy. Professional services work of the kind carried out by Senatus was previously evaluated along a number of opaque and perhaps intangible criteria, but nonetheless ones which were clear when the work was done correctly (i.e., the client 'knew' when the work was carried out effectively), and it was usually closely linked to relationships with clients' personnel. In terms of the work performed by Senatus, there are elements which are 'not recognized' now but which once were recognized and valued, and, importantly, cannot be measured using performance indicators. This is the creep of managerialism, the ideological belief that enterprises and society will function and perform better if measured along defined criteria. Its effect, however, has been to render Senatus a professional services firm without an identity or meaningful strategy. The consequences of failing to *fix* an identity, or to effectively establish hegemony, after Laclau & Mouffe (1985), is to fail to find an appropriate place in a changed environment; this serves as a possible explanation for the manifestation of a minimal, or reactive, strategy rather than a positive setting of organizational goals and objectives. There is, however, a fundamental impossibility to the project of fixing of identity: Driver (2009) writes of the tension between the imaginary, projected identity of the human subject which fundamentally fails in the face of organizational change. For each time an idealized identity is unconsciously conceived through normal discourse, it is bound to falter when challenged. The failure of such an illusion provides an opportunity for pause, and indeed creativity. The absence of strategy that Senatus have experienced is the symptom to be interpreted, which has led to a reading that would suggest a problem for the senior team connected to their perceived loss of professional purpose and identity.

Returning to Inkpen & Choudhury's (1995) categorisation, one could assert that this absence arises due to the 'failure of management' to set a strategy. In light of the very real concerns and challenges which face Senatus that would seem both pejorative and unhelpful. Accordingly, as the research material would suggest, they are experiencing the loss of professional identity and have followed a *minimal* strategy, which has affected the fortune of the organization.

To those who would argue that such a minimal strategy is evidence of strategy, they are asked to consider whether, in the light of what has been presented, this is a strategy consciously taken to enable the growth and development of the firm, or even to respond to the demands from their environment. Instead, it is argued that such a minimal strategy is evidence of strategy absence. The research project engagement with Senatus generated confusion at the absence of strategy to confront the many changes, and indeed managerialism faced by them; as Mantere (2013) has noted, confusion in researchers provides a fertile basis for motivation to seek answers. On the one hand, one might just as easily aver that a common-sense argument as to why Senatus had no strategy, or a minimal one, is that, like other professional service organizations, it has not been necessary. Yet, now, clearly it is necessary for Senatus to have a clear purpose and plan, otherwise they are subject to the 'vicissitudes of fate' (Darwin et al., 2002), or, in other words, the strategy of no-strategy does not suffice. Moreover, as the research material uncovered, Senatus' management team variously surfaced the loss of their professional identity as a concern, suggesting that there was something more at issue than being caught unawares in changed circumstances.

From the perspective of the senior management team at Senatus, the deployment of managerialism by their clients has resulted in the displacement or unfixing of certainties. The activities which are measured are those which are valued by the client; the ubiquity of similar performance indicators across all of Senatus' clients signalled both the diffusion of managerialist practices and, perhaps, an unforeseen convergence of outcomes for those same clients. What is lost, because it is not measured, is the freedom of the professional to approach an individual situation and to devise a novel and creative resolution to a dilemma. This is still the important work that needs to be done, but it was somehow seen as lost by Senatus: This is a question for their senior team – if it is not valued by their clients, should it still be done? And this is a core question of Strategy: to know and prosecute the mission of the firm.

Conclusion

Rather than being a 'failure of management', strategy absence is instead a cause to seek answers. This research project was about exploring the possible reasons for the absence of strategy in a professional services organization. The absence of strategy, despite the inhospitable and hostile environmental circumstances being endured by the firm, was confusing. The management team were/ are a professionally educated and experienced group of individuals, some of whom have had formal management training, and where others have participated on management development-executive education programmes. Accordingly, existing management frameworks and theories were apparent and available to them. The intellectual argument for the necessity of a strategy was not lost on them, yet none was apparent. As the research material shows, preoccupations, which were barely acknowledged, of loss prevented first, the articulation of identity, and second, the development of a strategy to mitigate the effects of managerialism instituted by their clients. While other authors have focused on the enactment of identity through strategy (e.g., Oliver, 2015), in the subject instance the fixing or recuperation of identity is required before strategy can be formulated. The perception of loss and its mourning need to be overcome, and in the language of psychoanalysis, 'worked through', prior to the contemplation of strategy work.

This paper started by re-introducing Inkpen & Choudhury's (1995) concept of strategy absence which, save for some later mentions and recapitulations in the literature, has remained largely

neglected. The reason why this is so was not the focus of this research, although that would in itself be a valuable question to ask. Psychoanalysis teaches us that absence itself portends the presence of *something*: This is a mode of thinking people are not conventionally used to. Absence does not usually provoke a probing. For researchers inflected with a psychoanalytic theoretic, absence stimulates a curiosity about what might be silenced. In the case of Senatus, the silence generated by a minimal or no-strategy presented an effusion of meaning. One of those meanings was a preoccupation with loss.

Strategy absence as a phenomenon is argued to be an area warranting further investigation, one that is fruitful and meaningful. It is not, however, a 'failure of management' to set one, and in this respect, this paper is intended as a more sympathetic reading of strategy absence and a re-orienting of Inkpen & Choudhury's (1995) finding.

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