

## **Alter-identity performances in a global professional services firm: Exploring emerging ways of working beyond the job description**

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### **Abstract**

Our research explores a work identity and organization phenomenon of professionals who are passionately, and of their own volition, engaging in alternative work activities that fall well outside of, and sit alongside their formal work requirements of their organization. We refer to this activity as “alter-identity” performance, whereby professionals perform certain (knowledge) work outside of their formal work assignments, often during regular office hours, and reaching audiences within and outside of their organization. Utilizing a reflexive research approach, we explore 1) the ways through which professionals develop and maintain alter-identities and 2) implications vis-à-vis individual and organizational expectations. We contribute a new theoretical framework based on these emerging work activities in knowledge work contexts and theorize the development of alter-identity performance as a way for organizations to innovate work models in a bottom-up, employee-driven way, fostering organizational responsiveness in rapidly changing environments.

### **Introduction: The surprising observation**

This research was motivated by surprising observations made by the primary author during time as an embedded researcher within an international professional services firm, here called Kappa. He noticed an unusual practice from a number of employees; they were helping the firm to respond, adapt and evolve by performing what appeared to be knowledge activities that went above and beyond their formal role in the organization. Their extracurricular activities often fell, sometimes far, outside of their formal job requirements. Importantly these activities were not expected of these individuals by the organization, and seemed to be driven by a desire by these individuals to help Kappa to explore and respond to business opportunities, to adapt their products and services, and evolve into new directions. The performance of these knowledge activities appeared to be motivated from their own sense of purpose and the meaning derived from these activities, rather than what might be reasonably expected from their formal position at Kappa. Some individuals appeared to have established a clear reputation, both inside the firm and outside, for this particular area of expertise or focus. For our research, we take our surprising observation and use it as a way to generate new interesting research directions and questions for the research into evolving work practices (Alvesson & Sandberg 2011).

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These individuals appeared to be passionately building professional identities around specific subject matter expertise or professional skills that were not expected or required of them by the organization. Furthermore, these individuals dedicated significant time to maintaining these identities. In many cases, the work associated with this “other” identity appeared to have a degree of relevance to the organization, but it was often unclear to what extent the organization was aware of and what stance it took on such activities, particularly when the activity occurred during work hours. In this paper we refer to this activity as “alter-identity” performance, whereby professionals perform certain (knowledge) work outside of their formal work assignments, often during regular office hours, and reaching audiences within and outside of their organization.

We became curious about why these employees are so passionate about spending so much time doing additional work outside of their primary work role and job description, what the implications would be for how they perform their primary role, and how they are subsequently perceived more generally. Accordingly, we ask: How do professionals engage in such alternative work, and thus form alter-identities? What are the pathways through which they form? What are the benefits or costs to the organization? How does an employee’s manager or colleagues respond to them engaging in this work?

### **Problematizing engagement: Is this engaged work or dis-engagement?**

Here, we follow Alvesson and Sandberg’s problematization approach (2011) to suggest that our surprising observations challenges existing conceptualisations of work engagement, and how it leads to questioning what counts as engaged work, and more importantly, who gets to decide on behalf of the individual. Problematisation specifically draws on the tension and breakdowns between the established wisdom and the unexpected phenomenon as a useful jumping point towards interesting research directions, and to develop alternative and novel theory to that which currently exists (Alvesson & Sandberg 2013). Further to this, Alvesson and Kärreman suggest that breakdowns between observations and empirical material provide us with an opportunity for reconceptualization of existing constructs, encouraging reflexivity between theoretical and empirical materials, and redevelopment, understanding and solving of the initial mystery (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007) .

Engagement has typically been understood as the extent to which individuals apply cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects of themselves to the tasks, roles and jobs as determined by the organization, leading to their preferred outcomes (Saks 2006). Further to this, employees who demonstrate high discretionary effort (Frank et al 2004), vigour (Schaufeli & Bakker 2010), passion (Gallup Consulting 2013), initiative and effort (Macey & Schneider 2008), and generally high involvement and enthusiasm (Harter et al. 2002) might also be considered to be highly engaged in their work activities.

Kahn (1990) suggests that engagement comes from the individual’s integration of their “preferred self” with the work context. In a professional setting, organizations have expectations of certain behaviours from their employees, which are derived from business imperatives and the existing organizational culture which influences what practices are expected from “being an employee”. According to Kahn, individuals shape themselves to be able to perform to these expectations, and the overlap or difference between these expectations and the individual’s sense of “who they are”,

results in either personal engagement or disengagement in work. Kahn suggests personal engagement in work comes from “harnessing” the “personal self” in the work context, whereas disengagement comes of a “decoupling” of this personal self (1990). In this way, the employee has agency in their identity construction, rather than being a recipient of identity/role with which they need to align and comply.

Kahn’s research draws on this notion of a performative view of self set out by Goffman (1959), who proposes that our identity is defined by how one relates to the social world, as produced or constructed through social interactions with others (Goffman 1959). In the workplace, the roles we take on are performed in the social context of the organization, acted out on the “workplace stage”. Goffman suggested that a human’s attachment and detachment to their life roles varied depending on a person’s interactions during fleeting, face-to-face encounters (Goffman 1961). Kahn takes this as his starting point for his theory of work engagement, to describe the experiences of attachment or detachment in role performances by individuals that influence engagement (Kahn 1990). The more attached we are to our work role, the more we embrace the work, and the “fuller” and more “alive” the work role performance (Kahn 1990). The push and pull between the personal self and professional role performances, and the extent to which there is overlap and “self-in-role” is the dynamic of engagement and disengagement that Kahn lays out.

Based on established definitions of engagement, if the activities of the individuals that we witnessed at Kappa were expected of them by the organization, that is, a part of their formal work requirements, these individuals would be considered as highly engaged in their work and workplace by the organization. However, these efforts were not technically in line with what the organization’s expectations, and therefore might not “count” in what the organization sees as a “productive” employee, in that these activities are not expected or part of their job description. In that way, these activities and behaviours might be considered “unproductive” by the organization, despite the engagement with these other activities.

Further to this, many of the individuals we observed were highly engaged in the performance of the alter-identity, rather than, and sometimes to the detriment of, their formal work role. These individuals appeared to be highly engaged with the organization in terms of putting significant effort into trying to benefit and improve the organization with their endeavours. However, these activities often lead to less effort and time given to their formal work activities, which as a consequence may lead to the perception that they are disengaged in their formal work role.

There also appeared to be some variation between the individuals we observed with respect to their engagement with their formal work role. For some individuals, they appeared to engage “just enough” with their formal role to enable sufficient or acceptable performance for the organization’s requirements. By comparison, some individuals appeared to be quite disengaged with their formal work role, as their time and energy was drawn more to the alter-identity activities and away from their prescribed activities. Their formal role seemed to be almost a “necessary evil” which enabled them access to the organization’s resources and to engage in the activities they really wanted to do. In either case, the individuals we observed could be considered both not highly engaged (in their formal work) and highly engaged (in their alternative knowledge activities).

In terms of our observations at Kappa of people performing knowledge activities beyond formal role expectations, we suggest that these existing conceptualizations of engagement are problematized by our observations, in that these

individuals could be considered both engaged and disengaged, further motivating our research to explore the ways in which individuals perform work beyond their formal role, challenges the taken-for-granted notions of what counts as work.

### **Method: Establishing our empirical materials**

This research is concerned with establishing a novel phenomenon, and we take an exploratory, qualitative research approach following a phenomenological methodology (Schutz 1967), to understand the essence of the lived experience of how individuals use social media to form and maintain alter-identities. We sampled a variety of participants to be able to discriminate several different ways in which alter-identities were performed in the organization, and variety in the relationships between the alter-identity and their alignment with the organization.

Our place of research was Kappa, an international professional services firm with more than 5,000 employees in numerous offices around Australia. We identified a number of potential research participants who appeared to be building “visible” alter-identities that were not in line with their formal work requirements. These potential participants were “known” by other employees at Kappa for their passion and activity around their specific alternative knowledge areas. As such, we used a passive snowballing approach to identify participants through referrals from initial contacts and participants at Kappa. Over the course of our research, a small number of the participants left the employment of Kappa for reasons which appeared to be related to their alter-identity performance. This helped us to further understand the conflicts that arise for individuals between their alter-identity performance and the organization’s expectations.

Our data was collected primarily via one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out with 11 individuals who we had identified as performing alter-identities at Kappa. The initial interview protocol was based on the two proposed research questions, was intentionally kept flexible to allow individuals to tell their experiences in detail. These interviews allowed us to generate thick descriptions of individuals (Geertz 1973) rather than seeking to generalize across cases.

We followed a reflexive approach to the discovery of alter-identities performed by the individuals, in line with guidelines by Alvesson and colleagues who propose to iteratively go back and forth between empirical material and the literature in understanding a phenomenon (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2009). Consequently, we worked equally with empirical data and literature to determine the shared features and apparent boundaries of this phenomenon, and establish a framework to understand the phenomenon in detail, capturing the diverse ways that alter-identities might be performed (Dubois & Gadde 2002). This framework then allows for a reformulating of the initial mystery and surprising observation, supports a critical reflection on the current notions of work engagement, and opens up new lines of enquiry for future work practices research.

## **Findings: Uncovering alter-identities at Kappa**

### ***Establishing alter-identities via boundary spanning activities***

We found variety in the extent to which individuals had established their alter-identity at Kappa (see Table 1.) All of the professionals we sampled were either actively contributing to new and emerging knowledge areas related to their specific interest areas at Kappa, or beginning to establish themselves in new areas around their extra-curricular activities. We were able to identify a number of different pathways through which these individuals pursued the alter-identity activities, which led to their “establishment” at Kappa by individuals. For example, several alter-identities appeared to be performed through hosting internal or external knowledge meet-up groups, regularly participating in various innovation events and workshops, or through initiating discussions through online conversations both within Kappa’s digital forums and on public social media. Other activities we found included mentoring or participation in the local startup scene outside of Kappa, utilizing formal secondment opportunities to explore other interests outside of their formal role at Kappa, or actively connecting people across and beyond the firm, acting as “switchboards” for knowledge to flow between people from different teams. Digital technology was also an apparent enabler of this “boundary spanning” in several cases. Individuals with less “pronounced” alter-identities appeared to utilize these activities significantly less, suggesting the alter-identities were still in formation by individuals.

Our findings also confirmed that alter-identities often complemented and extended the professional’s main work identity when there is alignment in the knowledge work practices of the alter-identity and formal work. However, as we expected to find, several cases experienced significant conflict or tensions between these identities. We were then interested in the ways in which individuals go about establishing, reconciling or managing the relationship between alter-identity and (conflicting) demands by the organization.

For example, the Senior Partner performing the alter-identity of *thought leader* was regularly brought into broad organizational conversations by colleagues seeking their input related to their alter-identity area of interest around diversity and leadership, which they had become known for through a range of online and offline activities. On the one hand, they lived a formal work identity with senior leader responsibilities and duties. On the other hand, they performed their alter-identity, which transcends their official ‘place’ within the organizational structure. Accordingly, they have become well-known within Kappa to two different, albeit overlapping, stakeholder groups.

As another example, another tax auditor professional who was performing the *transcendentalist* alter-identity appeared to play more of an active ‘connector’ role for individuals and their knowledge across Kappa via social media, making introductions between individuals from different parts of the organization. This type of activity was clearly outside of their formal role as a tax advisory consultant.

Of the individuals we observed that fit our “alter-identity” concept, we noted that these individuals may not have been able to engage in these activities if it weren’t for the scope and reach available from access to networks enabled by their various boundary-spanning activities. Moreover, what makes these cases so interesting or surprising is how these alter-identities have become such an important part of each individual’s professional life, in particular when compared

Participant		Alter-identity	Description	Archetype
Facilitator/Director	Established alter-identities	The experience shifter	Helping the organization to navigate ambiguity around the future	Steward
Tax Auditor (departed Kappa)		The transcendentalist	Supporting radical technological advancements to the human condition	Questor
Researcher (departed Kappa)		The philosopher	Engaging in philosophical lines of inquiry around notions of time and work	Questor
Designer		The provocateur	Championing system thinking design processes for inclusive futures	Questor
Senior Partner		The thought leader	Advocating for diversity in senior leadership of organizations	Pioneer
Researcher		The liminal thinker	Applying anthropological methods and challenging worldviews to support greater societal impact	Steward
Software Engineer	Emerging alter-identities	The product maker	Exploring the strategic deployment of new digital technologies	Enabler
Director		The business transformer	Mediating and translating the potential of technologies for applicability on behalf of the organization.	Enabler
Developer		The pattern explorer	Exploring the application of AI with human factors	Orienteer
Manager (departed Kappa)		The first follower	Organizational training in design thinking and innovation	Enabler
Technical Manager		The task hacker	Championing for automating processes to innovate around expertise in the organization	Enabler

Table 1. Alter-identities of research participants at Kappa

to the importance each contributes to their formal job role. This motivates engaging with our second question concerning the relationship with expectations by the organization regarding alter-identity activities.

### ***Impact of Alter-identities for individuals at Kappa***

We were surprised to discover how these alter-identities had become such an important part of each individual’s professional life, in particular when compared to the importance each contributes to their formal job role. We found two key areas that appeared to be common across all cases of alter-identity performance at Kappa.

Firstly, in many of our participants, we found a very strong sense of purpose and intention in their alter-identity activities, and that they felt they were playing a larger “role” in helping the organization to have a greater societal and business impact. They felt that they needed to “become” something other than their formal role in order to work towards this change. Their alter-identity became the avenue through which they felt they could achieve this.

*“If I change the machine that changes machines I have achieved on my purpose in life. That’s why I choose to stay at a place like this instead of you know, start a plan, [join] founder land, make an app, start a consultancy.” - Designer / the provocateur*

Several individuals saw their alter-identity activities as helping Kappa to face an uncertain future, building positive long-term visions on behalf of Kappa, and felt a sense of custodianship and self-responsibility to bring about this change. We feel that this is a promising contribution of our research to the fields of organizational culture and change practices. Some of the areas that participants explicitly identified that they were actively trying to create change at Kappa included helping leaders to navigate ambiguity and bring in empathy to decision making (*the experience shifter* and *the liminal thinker*), actively challenging organizational assumptions (*the provocateur*), curating knowledge and

relationships within and beyond Kappa (*the transcendentalist* and *the philosopher*), and building relationships with senior stakeholders (*the thought leaders*). This a sense of custodianship for the organization, led us to consider how alter-identities may extend seminal work on role innovation by Schein and Van Maanen (Van Maanen & Schein 1977; Schein 1971), reflecting some of the “norm-rejecting” orientation that comes with it. However, individuals performing alter-identities appeared to be going beyond just innovating “the role” (we uncovered some instances where this was done in order to make space for the alter-identity activities), but more so appeared to be about innovating through forms of knowledge work around and beyond their formal role.

For emerging alter-identities, we found that their activities were more in line with pathways of discovery and learning, such as connecting with new practitioner communities, or undertaking formal education such as Masters or PhD programs, or informal learning through massive open online courses (MOOCs). Schein (1971) suggests that formal education has a “role” in supporting and preparing individuals for role innovation. We witnessed individuals having some involvement in innovation training at Kappa, and self-initiated learning beyond their formal professional training which appeared relevant to their new “work” directions, but this appeared to be more organic and spontaneous, rather than a formal and intentional part of their professional training. This is a point of difference which highlights some difference between role innovation and our phenomenon.

Secondly, we found many individuals struggled to reconcile their alter-identity work with demands of their formal role. While Kappa embraced some of their outputs, reactions from colleagues revealed tensions and unfavorable assessments of the alter-identity activities. A number of participants had hence left or were considering leaving Kappa to pursue work that revolves more closely around their ‘alternative’ interests.

*“I think [my alter-identity] gave me an avenue for expression because I had to mould my expression a lot in the corporate world. I had to chameleon in that way... the alter ego was an avenue for my psyche to voice itself that the [Kappa] sort of culture wasn't - you know I couldn't talk wacky, but by accident he became this like emergent communication experimental vessel that continues to take a life of his own.” – Researcher / the philosopher*

Further to this, we found that several individuals felt a strong sense of not fitting or belonging in the firm, and an awareness of being outliers on the “fringes” of the organizational norms. Some were ok with this, but many experienced inner struggles and sometimes conflict with their colleagues and managers. However, we found several cases where individuals tended to find each other to give the support, encouragement and sense of belonging to keep on with their alter-identity endeavors.

*I'm like purposefully the ultimate outcast, because that's my - that's like - just is the brand that I've created... These outliers, like myself, who are doing super-interesting things and don't really care about that structure, who are like wow, let's just use this as our jungle gym. But, for the most part you are fighting the majority who is about much money they're bringing into the business. Am I going to get a promotion? Am I going for partner? – Facilitator / the experience shifter*

This identifying with being an outlier was brought up by several participants, who appeared to be both motivated and energized by this and the opportunity to drive change and have impact in their alter-identity endeavors, but also recognizing the struggle with “fighting” against the status quo, and the conflict and tensions in trying to “show up” in the organization in ways outside of the expected work performance.

Further to this, we uncovered various informal relationships that had formed between participants during their time at Kappa, we uncovered a “fringe network” between nearly all participants. Some of these relationships were through shared extra-curricular activities around their alter-identity performance, or mediated by senior management (partners) who appeared to play a supporting or mentoring role for several individuals. We draw on this facilitating role in one of the alter-identity archetypes that we establish later.

This “fringe network” appeared to provide a way for individuals to have a sense of identifying and belonging with others in a unique social context (Kahn 1990) around being an outlier, helping the individual to balance the experience of conflict between their alter-identity performance, and the formal aspects of their formal role and being an organizational member. Furthermore, this network also appeared to play an important role for many participants in providing a safe space to discuss and share frustrations and progress in their endeavors, offering a “back stage” (Goffman 1959) away from the “front stage” performances of both formal roles and alter-identities away from the organizational audience.

#### ***Relationship between alter-identities and the organization***

We uncovered different relationships between alter-identities and the organization, suggesting there is variation not only in how alter-identities are performed, but also in how they are perceived and appreciated. In some cases, Kappa appeared to have recognised the value of the alter-identity interests, which had led to new formal work roles or assignments being created for them.

For example, by being a high performer in their formal role, the technical manager professional performing the *task-hacker* alter-identity was left to his own devices by management, able to invest considerable time into other areas of interest. We found evidence that Kappa had recognised the value of his interests, which recently led to a new formal work role for him. In this case, what started out as alter-identity activities has now become a formal assignment.

In contrast, the researcher professional performing the *philosopher* alter-identity had struggled to reconcile their alter-identity work with demands of their formal role. And while Kappa embraced some of their outputs, reactions from colleagues revealed tensions and an unfavorable assessment of the alter-identity activities. Subsequently, this has led to the professional leaving Kappa for a new role at another organization that revolves more closely around their ‘alternative’ interests.

The different relationships between alter-identities and the organization suggest that there is variation not only in how alter-identities are performed, but also in how they are perceived and appreciated. We also uncovered the pathways through which each individual came to establish their alter-identity at Kappa, allowing us to establish developmental pathways alongside our framework for alter-identity performance in organizations.

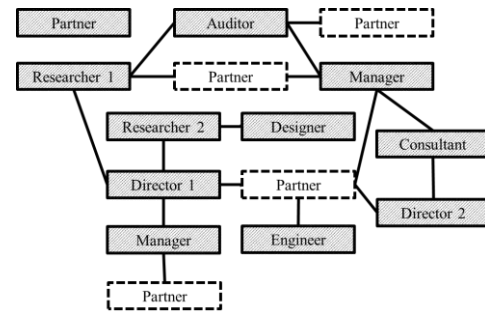


Figure 1. The “fringe” network indicating relationship between the alter-identity performances of participants at Kappa.



**Framework: Establishing alter-identity archetypes**

In line with taking an iterative approach (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2009), we continued to oscillate between these empirical observations and engagement with the literature in order to identify common elements that would help us establish a framework to differentiate between alter-identities and their relationship to the organization, and to suggest pathways through which alter-identities become established in the organization.

We identified two key dimensions that formed our framework through which we can understand differences in alter-identity performance; the extent of exploration in work and working at Kappa by the professional beyond their formal role, and their apparent commitment to the organization and its success. By placing our participants according to these dimensions, five archetypes became apparent to us. Furthermore, their journey towards uncovering and establishing their alter-identity at Kappa suggest various pathways through which alter-identities can emerge and evolve through the organization, and the likelihood that they will either become embedded in the organization, or the individual is likely to exit. See Figure 2.

We briefly expound on each archetype here. Also see Table 1 for which archetype each participant could be classified at the time of interview.

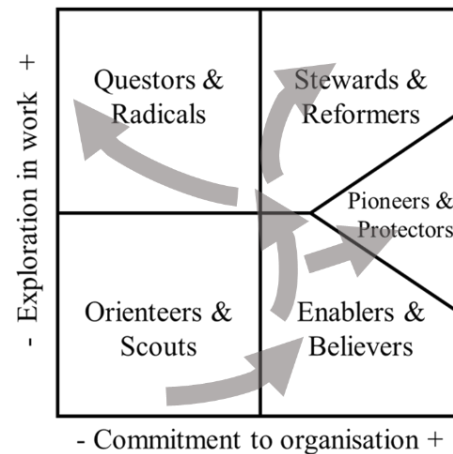


Figure 2. *Categorization of alter-identity performance*

***Orienteers & Scouts***

*Orienteers* and *Scouts* are at the beginning of forming their alter-identity in their workplace. They tend to have lower commitment to exploration in alternative work activities, as their formal work takes most of their focus. The particular areas of interest outside of this formal work is starting to emerge, and they are beginning to explore how they may use it to contribute more to the organization, beyond their role. Relative to other archetypes, they have a lower commitment to the organization, but this doesn't mean they are uncommitted. The *orienteer* label refers to their activities whereby they are starting to head in new unknown directions to find things that may be relevant to the organization, to bring back. The *scout* label refers to how they may try to solve organizational challenges in unique ways with resources on hand. Furthermore, the lighter exploration in knowledge work activities of the alter-identities in this archetype suggest that the identities appear more tentative and hidden than others, indicating this as an earlier phase of alter-identity establishment. This was supported by a number of participants who we classified as *Enablers* and *Believers* who indicated some of these kinds of activities that helped them to establish their new directions.

***Enablers & Believers***

*Enablers* and *Believers* showed a growing commitment to changing directions for the organization, and appeared to support that by participating and strengthening new systems around new directions. Primarily, we found that individuals did this by engaging in activities that were part of building up a process that has already been started, such

as formal innovation programs and events, or “joining forces” with other employees who had embarked on side projects. We found several instances where individuals in this archetype had built close relationships with more senior managers or partners, either as informal mentoring relationships or temporary secondment employment, where the individual was able to further explore alternative work activities to their formal role, and perhaps go on to craft a more distinct alter-identity around their own interests and passions. Importantly, individuals of this archetype are not demonstrating the levels of exploration outside of their formal role as others who have more established alter-identity activities. The *Enabler* label refers to the facilitative role that some individuals had in supporting new and emerging projects and processes at Kappa under the guidance of some other employee, whilst the *Believer* label refers to building commitment to new directions for their organization, and the confidence some had in the vision of more senior partners who were supporting them; some of whom we refer to as *Protectors*.

### ***Pioneers & Protectors***

*Pioneers* and *Protectors* are senior organizational leaders in their organization who are highly committed to its success and ushering in new directions and innovations over the long term, but less so in terms of exploratory work activities that might deviate too far from the organizational norms, which they tend to balance their efforts against. They are considered thought leaders in a particular domain of expertise, where they tend to keep their efforts focused. They also recognize their role in supporting other employees to explore in their own alter-identity activities, and as such are known by other archetypes as mentors and in creating “a safe space” for others to practice their alter-identities that may or may not align with their own interests and direction. In this way, *Pioneers* and *Protectors* could be considered more senior *Enablers*. The label *Pioneer* refers to the finding that the more senior partners we observed tended to be “going out alone” in their particular knowledge domain, rather than necessarily attempting to hold a more holistic new direction for the organization, such as with *Stewards* and *Reformers*. The label *Protector* came primarily from our observations that a number of our participants indicated that they were connected and supported by a handful of senior individuals in the “fringe network” (see Figure 1.) who they identified as helping to “pave the way” for their alter-identity activities and formation.

### ***Stewards & Reformers***

*Stewards* and *Reformers* are individuals who were high in their commitment to shaping new directions for Kappa, and appeared to have high exploration in their alter-identity activities. They are defined by a very strong sense of purpose, and conviction in the role that they can play in shaping this new direction for the organization, and belief that they are the person to do that. As such, *Stewards* and *Reformers* are characterized by a strong sense of personal responsibility for bringing about this change through the performance of their alter-identity. Given the higher exploration in their alter-identity activities, they also appear to carry a higher personal risk for their careers, and often push boundaries with their colleagues, that can threaten their career progression in the organization. The label *Steward* refers to the fact that these individuals hold a greater vision and purpose on behalf of the organization, and appear personally invested in protecting and enacting this future direction. They also feel that this is not done sufficiently by existing senior leaders, who would typically hold this role. The label *Reformers* refers to their activities that are around making

the systemic institutional changes to bring about their vision for the organization, and efforts to understand and impact both the organization, and have a greater societal impact too.

### ***Questors & Radicals***

*Questors* and *Radicals* were high in exploration in their alter-identity activities, yet are characterized by comparatively lower commitment to the organization and its success. They have a strongly developed alter-identity that is highly active and established in networks and communities outside of the organization, which is less of a vehicle for their pursuits compared to *Stewards* and *Reformers*. Further to this, the organization that they are employed in does not appear to be important to them. As such they are more open to leaving and taking their various initiatives to other, often competitor, organizations. *Questors* and *Radicals* tend to have a strong, almost fanatical, belief in their directions and pursuits, that can be off-putting to their contemporaries and colleagues, which leads to some isolation in the workplace. It also highlights some unwillingness to adapt their causes to bring others (and managers) along with them, leading to a higher experience of conflict and employment termination. The label *Questor* refers to the intrepid future directions that these individuals believe society, and the organization, if willing, should go towards, and if not, a willingness to go alone. The label *Radical* builds upon this to refer to this polarization between the current organizational state and their vision, and the confrontation that they experience and create through their bold actions.

### ***Pathways of alter-identity performance***

By tracing the development of individual's alter-identity activities over time, we uncovered evidence of a number of pathways through which alter-identities emerge and are established at Kappa. These are indicated by the grey arrows in Figure 2, which shows a general progression through the main quadrants from *Orienteers* and *Scouts*, to *Enablers* and *Believers*, *Stewards* and *Reformers*, and to *Questors* and *Radicals*. After some tentative exploration, individuals tended to build commitment to supporting new directions in the organization by engaging with existing innovative organizational activities and following the lead of others, before going on to champion their own activities through greater exploration of, and establishing, their distinct alter-identity. Where their ambitions and visions of change began to supersede what they felt was possible with the organization, many began to prepare to exit. The exception to this process appeared for *Pioneers* and *Protectors*, who either moved from enabling to establishing particular change processes or innovative efforts for which they protected, or following a phase of stewardship, then tempering their efforts to ensure acceptance by the organization. Either way, they reduce their exploration in their alter-identity activities in order to serve the organization where it is today. Whilst this research has uncovered what are interesting pathways of alter-identity "becoming", we suggest these are promising areas for future research.

### ***Sensemaking self and organization***

Finally, we offer an interpretation of the roles these alter-identity archetypes may play in shaping organizations through the theoretical lens of organizational sensemaking (Weick 1995). Our participants all appeared to be engaging in forms of knowledge work in "making sense" of new possible directions and future areas of work on behalf of the organization in different ways. The emergence and establishment of alter-identities could therefore be constituted by the shifting form of the organization (Weick 1995). *Orienteers* and *Scouts* could be considered as *sense-finding* for

the organization; finding potential new areas that could be brought in to inform existing work practices and established business offerings. With their commitment to support and build new business processes and initiatives, *Enablers* and *Believers* could be seen as *sense-giving*; helping to establish and embed these processes through their facilitation and efforts as “first followers”. As they aren’t exploring as much as some, *Pioneers* and *Protectors* might be thought of as *sense-shaping*; helping to translate new directions to fit the organization for the long term, and creating space for others to do work. *Stewards* and *Reformers* may be considered as *sense-holding*, as they hold a greater purpose on behalf of the organization, and holding sense that may have already been created through their creative process. Finally, *Questors* and *Radicals* could be considered as *sense-breaking*, offering a disruptive pathway and vision for the organization that many might be unwilling to entertain, let alone follow, but that could offer some insight into possible or probable future directions. Alter-identities may therefore be sensemaking practices through which not only individuals encounter their own individual transformations, but also that the organization may navigate uncertainty and ambiguity (Weick 1995), supporting new organizational forms.

### **Concluding remarks**

Alter-identities appear to be a promising vehicle for organizations to evolve their work practices, particularly during periods of rapid change. We suggest that individuals, and thus the organization as a whole, might be better equipped for sensing new opportunities, pursued first in the form of alter-identities, than a traditional top-down, management-driven model would be, the latter being advantageous for pursuing efficiency in times of stability. In that way, nurturing alter-identities of employees can be productive in evolving future work practices in organizations in a bottom-up way. Helping organizations to recognize, manage, or discourage alter-identities might thus become a way of evolving work practices in dynamic, responsive, business environments. Becoming aware of the phenomenon and recognizing alter-identity activities might become a way of evolving work practices in dynamic, responsive, business environments, and for organizations to tap into the wisdom of the crowd (Surowiecki 2004) and surface new and valuable expertise that otherwise would go unharnessed.

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