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Shareholder Capitalism, Normative Smokescreens and the Angry, Insecure Knowledge Worker

A dissertation submitted to the Department of Sociology at Trinity College, University of Dublin, in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy

April 2010

Jean Cushen

University of Dublin

Trinity College

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other University and that it is entirely my own work.

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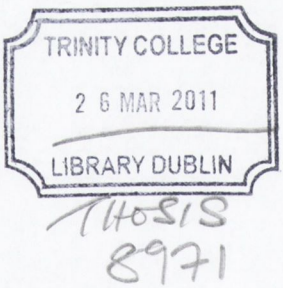

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Summary

This thesis is rooted within the discipline of industrial sociology. It makes connections between workplace structures and subjectivities within a contemporary, stock market listed, high technology and knowledge intensive organisation. This thesis arose from the largely incompatible conclusions offered in the literatures that claim to define the employment experience in such workplaces.

This thesis is based on a six month, mixed methods, critical realist, ethnography. It was undertaken within an Irish based subsidiary of a multi-national corporation. I secured full-time access to this organisation from June 2007 to November 2007 inclusive. During this time I analysed a wide range of documentation, conducted seventy five interviews and attended twenty five meetings. Critical realism is particularly suitable for this study as it focuses on the interplay between structures and subjectivities. Critical realism is also suitable for ethnographic research as the realist ontology involves contextually situating micro-level occurrences within a broader plurality of structures.

The primary focus of this thesis is to explore and connect the structures that shape a successful, market listed, knowledge intensive organisation. In doing so, this thesis demonstrates the value of undertaking a holistic analysis of the myriad of structures shaping the work environment. Within the case study organisation, subjective orientations were informed by both the content within structures and the contradictions between them.

The secondary focus is to explore the connection between these structures and the subjective orientation of different groups of actors. In doing so this thesis demonstrates the continued analytical richness of actor categories such as 'capital', 'management' and 'labour'. Within the case study organisation, these specific categories were well recognised by all level of stakeholders and had real implications.

More specifically, this thesis brings together a range of literature from political economy, sociology and management scholars and tests these literatures against the structures and subjectivities that existed in one organisation. It traces the role and impact of three forces shaping the workplace namely the financial goals, the prescribed normative practices and how work was managed. It explores how these forces were enacted by a range of structures and how they were interpreted by various stakeholders including top management, line management and employees. In doing so, this study provides a story of how the financial structures dominate, normative structures alienate and knowledge work is not that special after all.

The data presented illustrates how the macro level financial pressures of shareholder capitalism can reach down to permeate all aspects organisation life and play a key role in shaping the subjective orientations of a range of actors. In fact, the force of financial pressures demonstrates how many contemporary reified notions of work and subjectivity, as something distinct from the capitalist context in which they are situated, are largely inappropriate for understanding the employment experience in shareholder driven organisations.

Instead, this thesis re-affirms the richness and relevance of traditional analytical concepts such as hierarchy, bureaucracy, pluralism, command and control, and capital-labour conflict. It also adds to these concepts by identifying a range of contemporary phenomena associated with shareholder capitalism, normative control and knowledge work.

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'His boss turned his back, at the same time saying four words, take care of yourself, that was what he said in a tone that was at once deferential and imperative, only the best bosses can combine contrary feelings in such a harmonious way'

'All the Names', A novel by Jose Saramago

Chapter One: Introduction

1.0: INTRODUCING THIS THESIS

This thesis makes connections between workplace structures and subjectivities within a contemporary, stock market listed, and knowledge intensive organisation. The thesis arose from the largely incompatible conclusions offered in the literatures that claim to define the employment experience in such workplaces.

Political economy and macro level writings provide the reader with a somewhat alarming picture of how the pursuit of shareholder value rides roughshod over employee interests, threatening employment and even existential security. However, the reader might feel better after reviewing the 'knowledge work' literature. This literature claims knowledge intensive firms are 'knowledge based', meaning they exist to ensure that the valuable knowledge worker can network among communities of professional peers to learn and create knowledge; the production of which takes care of the side business of making a profit. The 'darker-side' emerges again in sociological accounts of how knowledge workers are normatively controlled through coercive forces of identity manipulation, which colonise employees' sense of self and orient it towards the achievement of organisation goals. However, comfort is available in the management literature which claims that employees can get a sense of fulfilment from being committed to the organisation's goals. Furthermore, human resource management practices can apparently ensure employees feel empowered, rewarded and developed in the workplace. The 'end of work' prophets pull the rug from under everyone's feet by claiming that all of the above is largely irrelevant as individuals are no longer affected by what happens at work; what matters is what they can purchase. In fact, the various strands of literature commenting on knowledge work in liberal market economies are so incompatible that the only option for the reader is to delve into the image of work they like best, and ignore the rest. Of course, this is not the most satisfying outcome.

In order to get a more holistic understanding of a contemporary knowledge workplace and the knowledge work experience, I undertook a six month ethnography within the Irish subsidiary of a high-technology, knowledge intensive organisation. The organisation studied is one of the largest, most financially successful organisations in the world, and the subsidiary studied was one of the most profitable companies in

Ireland. It consistently ranks highly within global business publications listing the worlds 'most innovative', 'best known brands' and 'best places to work'. It is often held up as an example of an organisation that 'gets it right'; that has structures and an 'employee experience' that others should emulate.

The primary focus of this thesis is to explore and connect the structures that shaped this successful, market listed, knowledge intensive organisation. In doing so, this thesis demonstrates the value of undertaking a holistic analysis of the myriad of structures shaping the work environment. The secondary focus is to explore the connection between these structures and the subjective orientation of different groups of actors. It explores how these structures were implemented by top management and how this shaped the subjective orientation and behaviours of those interacting with the structures. More specifically, this thesis re-affirms the richness and relevance of traditional analytical concepts such as hierarchy, bureaucracy, pluralism, command and control, and capital-labour conflict. It also adds to these concepts by identifying a range of contemporary phenomena associated with shareholder capitalism, normative control and knowledge work.

What this thesis ultimately provides is a story of how the financial pressures dominate, normative structures alienate and knowledge work is not that special after all.

This introductory chapter conceptually orients the reader by providing an overview of the debate on structure and subjectivity at work. This is followed by a discussion of the contradictions and blind spots within the literature that this study seeks to address.

1.1: STRUCTURES AND SUBJECTIVITY AT WORK

The relationship between structure and subjectivity has been a central sociological concern since the inception of social theory and has been afforded numerous labels; materialism and idealism (Marx, 1947 and Hegel, 1812 respectively); social facts and social actors (Durkheim, 1895); structure and action (Parsons, 1937); object and subject (Giddens, 1979:4). The corollary structure and subjectivity debate at the level of the workplace has largely been explored by scholars applying and criticising labour process

theory.[1] The debate is fuelled by the dichotomous epistemological orientations of researchers, as it is often assumed that either structure or subjectivity ends up being afforded undue prominence to the detriment of the other. However there are considerable methodological difficulties in affording structure and subjectivity equal billing as the research has to start somewhere. Consequently any account will be understood by some to be shackled by a methodological bias and ontological limitations.

The research for this thesis did not start off with any intellectual endeavour to conceptually or methodologically reconcile structure and subjectivity. Upon entering the case study site, my first act was to try and understand what the organisation was *supposed* to be about, and that required a review of what I came to understand as being structures. At the early stages of the research three distinct workplace structures emerged as real and independent. They were the financial structure, the normative structure and the work structure. These three structures varied in terms of their role and impact. They had intended and unintended consequences on subjectivity and behaviours; all of which will be explored in this thesis.

1.1.1: Structures at Work

There are considerable contradictions in the literatures that seek to describe the structures shaping knowledge work. Therefore, the primary focus of this thesis is to 'unpack' and trace the structures that existed in the case study organisation. Organisational structures are *'descriptions of and templates for ongoing patterns of action'* (Barley and Kunda, 2001:76). They are the rules, processes and initiatives that exist outside of the people at work, in other words they are *'independent of the particular people who come to work, of the particular agents of production'* (Buroway, 1985:39). Structures can also be understood as formalised patterns for behaviour and action insofar as '*the rules governing behaviour are precisely and explicitly formulated and to the extent that role and role relations are prescribed independently of the*

[1] For a discussion of these arguments see the October 2009 Sociology journal special issue Volume 43, No. 5. Particularly the contributions of Thompson and Smith, and O' Doherty and Willmott.

personal attributes of individuals occupying positions in the structure' (Scott, 1992:31-32).

The labour process tradition has arguably been the dominant critical sociological paradigm seeking to explore structures in the workplace.[2] Specifically, labour process theory emphasises the importance of understanding how macro-economic, capitalist social relations dictate workplace structures and subsequent behaviours. In other words, what people do at work every day cannot be understood as simply a consequence of local workplace factors (Braverman, 1974). Instead capitalist driven pressures play a definitive role in shaping workplace structures and management and employee subjectivities (Braverman, 1974; Buroway, 1979; Edwards, 1979; Friedman, 1977; Thompson, 2003). The data presented in this thesis demonstrates the importance of making such macro to micro structural connections.

This thesis explores, in detail, three structures that are typically considered separately by distinct sets of literatures. Most existing works focus on one structure, arguably to the detriment of understanding the interplay with others. This often results in the impact of one structure being overstated and offered as the explanatory factor for a variety of phenomena. This has resulted in widely contrasting views about the role and consequences of different workplace structures. Some of the literature and the gaps pertaining to the three dominant workplace structures are introduced below and further explored in chapter two.

i. <u>The financial structures:</u> This relates to the organisational structures and processes that stem from shareholder capitalism. Organisations participating in this model of capitalism face distinct competitive pressures as they must accumulate capital from distant, mobile investors and provide ongoing shareholder value through dividends and share price (Hall and Soskice, 2001). In addition to the competitive pressures, international financial regulations exist that shape the financial budgeting and expenditure practices of market listed firms. Both the competitive pressures and legally mandated financial regulations structure the relationship between key organisational stakeholders namely capital, top management and labour. Although all organisations participating in shareholder capitalism in liberal market economies

[2] See Thompson, (1989); Smith and Thompson (1998) for an overview of Labour Process Theory.

face these financial pressures and regulations, organisation level scholars have attracted criticism for failing to qualitatively trace the impact at the level of workplace and *'A critical examination of shareholder value creation is largely absent from the literatures on the (re)structuring of work and use of accounting measures'* (Ezzamel et al, 2008:108). These macro-economic structures have instead been explored primarily by political economists and corporate governance theorists. Many such authors have lamented the dearth of organisation level accounts exploring how such structures shape the workplace, for example Gospel and Pendleton (2003:557) argue *'the role of finance has been relatively neglected in industrial relations and human resource management'*. What this thesis contributes is an in-depth, qualitative tracing of how, in the case study organisation, financial pressures spawned a range of organisation level structures and initiatives. Furthermore, international financial regulations provide top management with an explicit process for ensuring financial goals reach down and permeate all levels of the organisation. The thesis also explores how macro-economic forces were interpreted by various stakeholders including top management, line management and employees. The meanings the various actors ascribed to the structures shaped their behaviours and subjective perceptions of their role and interests within the organisation.

ii. <u>The normative structures:</u> This relates to the organisations officially sanctioned, prescribed normative ideology and the human resource practices in place to achieve it. These can be considered a structure insofar as they offer a template or standalone guidelines for behaviour at work and how individuals should feel about their employment experience. Those heralding the importance of such structures *'see the organization as a locus of shared values and moral involvement in which control rests on shaping workers' identities, emotions, attitudes and beliefs'* (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005:201). This thesis posits normative structures as being what the organisation prescribes as normal, not what is actually happening, which will also be explored. Literature treating normative issues as a distinct structure or template for action come largely from the management space. These works claim that an organisation's normative, ideological structure should be disseminated through a prescribed corporate culture or employer brand and underpinned by the range of management practices collectively known as human resource management (HRM), high commitment management (HCM) or high performance work systems (HPWS),

(Appelbaum et al, 2000; Huselid, 1995; Huselid and Becker, 1998; Wood, 1996). They are the practices designed to overtly regulate the employment experience and shape the subjectivity of employees. This structural view represents one side of the debate that emerged in the 1980's on how to best conceptualise normative control.

The structural view is not commonplace amongst the sociological literature. It may even be seen as a contradiction in terms by those who view normative issues, not as what is prescribed, but the actions and perceptions of individuals that are so commonplace they are deemed to be normal. This has been termed the 'root metaphor' perspective (Gregory, 1983; Smircich, 1983; Whipp et al, 1989). Of the three structures, normative issues appear to have attracted the most attention in recent decades from those conducting critical, sociological, workplace analyses. However, some of the best known qualitative, sociological accounts of normative issues at work tend not to treat it as a standalone objective structure. Instead they adopt the 'root metaphor' approach which conflates normative issues with individual subjectivities and behaviours (Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992). This thesis seeks to provide a detailed breakdown of the case study organisation's prescribed normative structures. This includes an exploration of the content and role of their 'best practice' HR processes; accompanied by an analysis of how they were implemented and perceived by HR managers, management and employees. It also addresses a question often raised in the literature, namely how the employment insecurity created by prioritising the short-term financial interests of shareholders functions alongside management claims that it values and is committed to employees (Hodson, 2001; Keep and Rainbird, 2000; Legge, 2005; Marchington and Grugulis, 2000; Sisson, 1993; Thompson, 2003).

iii. The work structures: This relates to the structures in place to manage the day to day work. Such structures incorporate the processes used to organise and co-ordinate work activities and can be hierarchical, bureaucratic, networked, marketised or technical (Adler and Borys, 1996; Adler, 2001; Ouchi, 1980; Powell, 1990; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). There is a widely acknowledged lack of in-depth, empirical explorations of the structures in place to manage knowledge work, and the actual activities involved in knowledge work (Barley and Kunda, 2001). Instead, such a variety of metaphorical adjectives have emerged to describe knowledge work that a

review of literature on technical knowledge work concluded that *'sociology's tendency to place theory before description has left us with anaemic images of technical work'* (Barley, 2005:379). This dearth can be understood as a consequence of how knowledge work is conceptualised. Since its' labelling in the late 1950's, the valuable element of 'knowledge work' is typically understood as being the tacit, ambiguous and embodied element, which emanates from within an individual, who works autonomously to apply their expertise, cognitive and social skills as they see fit (Bell, 1973; Howell, 1996; Spender, 1996). This understanding contributed to a popularisation of the idea that knowledge work is difficult to prescribe and measure, and therefore cannot be managed via hierarchy and bureaucracy (Alvesson, 1990; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Causer and Jones, 1996; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). Consequently it is assumed that normative forces play the dominant role in co-ordinating flat, empowered networks of knowledge workers and, as argued by Courpasson (2000:142), *'Most organization scholars assume that soft controls, soft managerial practices and policies have supplanted hierarchical and bureaucratic control'.*

When I started this research, it was my intention to explore two organisation level structures, namely the financial structure of shareholder capitalism and the normative structures disseminated by the human resource department, as the contradictions between these two literatures were so stark. However, when discussing these structures, interviewees, at all levels, explained their perspective in terms of their work; i.e. what transpired at the point of production. It became apparent early in the research that viewpoints and experiences of the financial and normative structures could not be disentangled from what is arguably the most tangible aspect of being in employment, namely what one has to do every day. The idea that work is important is hardly a revelation, and would come of little surprise to those who herald the centrality of work, particularly scholars interested in the labour process, industrial sociology and industrial relations. Nevertheless, the issue of 'work' has been somewhat neglected in recent years (Barley and Kunda, 2001:77; Barley, 2005; Strangleman, 2005; Thompson, 2005). A contribution this thesis seeks to provide is an overview of different categories of knowledge work in the case study organisation, what was expected of the different categories and the structures in place for managing them.

1.1.2: Subjectivity at Work

The aforementioned structures do nothing by themselves and they require people to enact them. The role of actors is important as '*organizational structures never operate on their own, according to a mechanical logic. They are put in operation and produce effects through the meanings, orientations and actions of participants*' (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004:159-160). To put it more simply, *'structures do not "do anything" in and of themselves but rather are reliant on human agency for their reproduction'* (Newton, 1999:414). Therefore a secondary goal of this thesis is to explore the dominant subjective orientations that emerged in the workplace and how this informed the actors' navigation of that indeterminate space between structure and subjectivity. Within the current literature, two main approaches to exploring subjectivity exist.

The most common approach is to explore the interests of and interaction between three categories of actors, namely capital, management and labour. The relevance of such categories has been contested in recent decades. They are recognised as distinct and real in a wide range of literatures including political economy, corporate governance, finance, law, labour process analysis, industrial relations and management.

However, in recent decades, particularly within sociological circles, there has been a turn away from these categories by those who consider them to be a flawed homogenisation of subjectivity as something wholly dictated by socio-economic structures. Such claims are underpinned by a belief that the 'knowledge economy' and 'knowledge work' have brought an end to these categories and the conflict between them (Beck, 2000; Brown, 1992; Gorz, 1999). These works also claim that the increasing individualisation of employment relations means that any approach that apportions fixed collective interests is unable to handle the individualised subjective complexities of contemporary employment. Some go as far as to claim that these three stakeholder categories were invented for researchers' convenience and result in false attributions of homogenous interests (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001; 2009). The same scholars also claim that attributing interests to different groups render the researcher unable to cope with what they claim is the 'real' variability and complexity of subjectivity (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001; 2009).

Notable post-structural challenges to the primacy of structure at work have emerged (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994; Knights and Willmott, 1989, 1999; Lash and Urry, 1994; O' Doherty and Willmott, 2001; Parker, 1999; Townley, 1993; Willmott, 1993; 1997; 2005). Collectively, these works call for a broader conceptualisation of subjectivity as something distinct from workplace structures so that research can capture the non-structural, subjective indeterminacy the authors claim exists (O' Doherty and Willmott, 2009). Dispelling the notion of fixed interests, post-structuralists work with an array of non-structural, root metaphor, conceptual tools. In such accounts subjectivity is something that emerges within the individual, is ever changing depending on different influences, and is not fixed by socio-economic structures. Arguably the concept that has been most widely embraced in critical workplace analyses is that of 'identity' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Alvesson et al, 2008; Deetz, 1992; Sakolsky, 1992; Townley, 1993). It is claimed that *'one's personal identity implies certain forms of subjectivity and thereby entwines feelings, values and behaviour and points them in particular (sometimes contradictory) directions'* (Alvesson et al, 2008:6). Poststructuralists have forged their own path creating additional analytical tools and concepts and do not isolate specific managerial structures to subjectively control employees. The dominance of the post-structural approach in recent decades has been cited as an explanation for the demise in critical sociological works tracing the relationship between macro-economic structures and workplace subjectivities (Alvesson et al, 2008).

As the complexity of subjectivity in the workplace became more widely appreciated, a range of works emerged that attempted to demonstrate the value of reconciling structure and subjectivity (Adler and Borys, 1993; Aguilera and Jackson, 2003; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004, Newtown, 1999; Smith, 2006). For a while, within the critical tradition at least, the structure and subjectivity debate was considered to be so central to organisational life that it was *'at the heart of the contest for explanatory power between competing organizational research streams'* (Adler and Borys 1993:659). The accounts varied depending on the authors' structural or post-structural starting point. A 'third way' has yet to be fully embraced as *'the literature on "structure" and "design" remains largely de-coupled from studies of culture and symbolism'* (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:620).

1.1.3: Structure, Subjectivity and this Thesis

This thesis supports the work of scholars who herald the importance and dominance of structure and therefore it is unlikely to be accepted as a 'third way'. However if I was to downplay the role of structure in this particular case study organisation I would be doing a considerable disservice to the individuals I interviewed and observed who largely understood and explained their role, employment experience and behaviours explicitly in terms of the three structures. Furthermore I agree that since '*subjectivity implies subjection'* (Abercrombie et al, 2006:384), it is important that accounts of subjectivity delineate the detail of exactly what it is individuals are subjectively interacting with as '*The objective characteristics of the organizational form will account for the central tendency in employees attitudinal responses'* (Adler and Borys, 1996:85). There is little point talking about subjectivity if we do not understand the context that informs it. However I also accept that subjectivity and structure interact and Giddens' notion of the reflective nature of the self offers something of a middle ground that does not attempt to reify interests but offers a starting point for conceiving of subjectivity as an interactive process. Giddens states that *'human agents never passively accept external conditions of action, but more or less continuously reflect upon them and reconstitute them in the light of their particular circumstances'* (1991:175).

What this thesis demonstrates is the importance of taking a holistic approach to exploring structure and subjectivity at work. For example, a key finding of this thesis is that employees' subjective orientation was not informed by one structure alone. Instead, employees reflected on how the structures operated in tandem and it was the relationship and contradictions between the structures, as much as the content within them, which shaped subjective orientations and subsequent behaviours. I also argue that within the organisation, distinct categories of actors emerged who had similar perspectives on the three structures; namely top management, human resources, line management and employees. The shared perspectives were largely due to the manner in which the structures shaped the working lives of these categories of actors in similar ways. In other words, subjectivity was situated, as the interaction individuals had with the structures was shaped by their position on the organisation's hierarchy. It is worthwhile stating that this thesis does not explore the actors' lives outside of work.

Instead it seeks to explain solely how the workplace structures shaped different actors subjective perceptions of their work.

1.2: CONTRADICTIONS AND BLINDSPOTS

Reflecting on the development of the literature relating to the three organisation structures and associated subjectivities reveals a number of incompatible conclusions. These are summarised below in order to clarify the focus of this thesis and are further explored in chapter two.

First, much of the literature on the consequences of the financial structure of shareholder capitalism is incompatible with accounts of normative and knowledge work structures. This body of work claims that the financial pressures inherent in neo-liberal financial markets create a need to centralise and concentrate control in the hands of the highest levels of management. Top management require decision making autonomy to drive the change and initiatives required to deliver shareholder value. The perceived dominance of market driven hierarchy has led commentators to claim that *'Ironically amidst all the talk of empowerment, partnership, knowledge work and the like, we are currently seeing a centralisation of power along traditional hierarchical lines to a degree not matched in decades'* (Mintzberg et al, 2002:71). Such literature claims the needs of capital providers are prioritised to the extent that top management can have, at best, minimal concern for employee needs (Thompson, 2003). In fact, there are increasingly loud rumblings that within the context of fast changing, liberal financial markets, organisations are placing so much emphasis on adhering to the market rational principles of shareholder capitalism that normative structures are becoming irrelevant (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005; Mintzberg et al, 2002; Peters, 1999; 2003; Ross, 2003; Thompson, 2005). Shareholder capitalism, it is argued, sets the rules so thoroughly that it *'apparently does not have time for culture and is more interested in reducing than transforming the workforce'* (Thompson, 2005:168). According to this literature, financially driven hierarchical structures are to the front and centre of organisational life running roughshod over ideas of the post-industrial, knowledge based, flat, empowering firm and rendering normative structures obsolete. In terms of what this means for employee subjectivity, the literature claims shareholder capitalism

heralds significant losses for employees. Shareholder capitalism is understood to create job insecurity, work intensification and reduced financial security. Consequently, knowledge workers in such organisations are understood to be insecure and aware of their powerless, disposable, commoditised status within the organisation.

Secondly, much of the literature on normative forces at work is incompatible with the literature on shareholder capitalism and structure in general. Most works undertaking critical analyses of normative forces adopt the 'root metaphor' view and there is little in the way of empirical critical accounts of normative issues as a standalone, formal structure of prescriptive behaviours.[3] Consequently interpretations of workplace discourses, routines, rituals and symbols began to replace independent structure as the focus of critical sociological analysis (Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Dutton et al., 1994; Fournier, 1998; Grant et al., 1998; Keenoy, 1990, 1992a). Post-structural accounts tended to focus so much on the role of interpretation that they are claimed to represent *'a shift from understanding organizational activity in material and substantive ways to constructing organizational activity as increasingly occurring in the imaginary realm'* (Karreman and Alvesson, 2004:150). In contrast to the literature on financial structures, hierarchy is understood to be less necessary as normative control ensures individuals will align themselves with the organisation's goals, removing the potential for conflict of interests. These non-structural, normatively aligned accounts of workplaces were made all the more palatable by the characterisations of post-industrial knowledge work. The seemingly complex, ambiguous knowledge work process has largely been considered to be incompatible with traditional industrial structures of hierarchy and bureaucracy (Causer and Jones, 1996). This belief contributed to the popularisation of the idea that normative forces dominate in knowledge intensive firms (Alvesson, 1990; 1993b; 2001; Alvesson, and Wilmott, 2002; Courpasson, 2000; Drucker, 1993). In such writings, cognitive interpretations, driven by ever changing subjective identities are taken to account for just about everything.

There is little in the way of in-depth critical, sociological explorations on employee perceptions of prescribed normative structures even though these authors also position

[3] Townley's 1993 article provides a post-structuralist analysis of specific HRM practices. However it was largely an epistemological argument insofar as it made a case for understanding HRM from a post-structural perspective. No actual empirical data was presented.

normative forces as all powerful.[4] The literature exploring standalone normative structures largely emerge from the management space (Meyerson and Martin, 1987; Schein, 1985). These works largely herald normative structures as being all powerful and capable of creating a positive employee subjective orientation regardless of the consequences of any other structures. What the critical and management works have in common is that they both posit normative forces as being capable of appropriating employee subjectivity. What emerges is an image of a knowledge worker who positively identifies with the goals of the organisation and who works hard as they feel valued, with a sense of belonging and commitment to the organisation and their peers.

Thirdly, the literature on work structures is largely incompatible with accounts of financial, and to some extent, normative structures. Those interested in work structures have focused on characterising the 'post-industrial' organisation (Bell, 1973). Throughout the second half of the twentieth century technology developed rapidly, consumer markets in developed economies became more specialised and changeable, and economies became more service based (Ritzer, 2007). These shifts were held to mean that to be successful, organisations had to lead, or at least cope with, constant change. The large, hierarchical, vertically integrated, 'industrial' firm was portrayed as being at a structural disadvantage, as hierarchy can apparently not handle change (Piore and Sabel, 1984). The flatter, decentralised, empowering firm, it was argued, was less constrained by formal rules and boundaries and therefore could be more enterprising, empowering and responsive in ever-changing, high-technology, knowledge intensive times. Operating from an assumption of the end of hierarchy, organisation theorists ushered in an array of characterisations to herald the arrival of the post-industrial, post-fordist, enterprising, flat, decentralised, lean, flexible, boundary-less, networked, virtual organisation (Alvesson, 1993a; 1993b; 1995; 2001; Castells, 1996; Friar and Horwitch, 1985; Hergert and Morris, 2002; Mariti and Smiley, 1983; Powell, 1990). A key premise in the writings about post-industrial work is that specialised knowledge is replacing capital as the basis of social status and power (Bell, 1973). This perspective also facilitated the demise of hierarchy as knowledge based views of the firm emerged which position the creation and coordination of knowledge as the central purpose of the

[4] There are a range of works that explore and criticise the 'effectiveness' of such practices. However these works largely come from the management space and do not seek to challenge the unitary underpinnings of such arrangements.

firm without any specific reference to financial goals (Argote et al, 2003; Cole, 1998; Grant, 1996; Kogut and Zander, 1996; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Penrose, 1959; Spender, 1996; Teece, 1998; Tsoukas, 1996). According to this literature firms are about networks of knowledge creation. This means hierarchy is out, profit takes care of itself, and flat, decentralised, networked, empowering, knowledge-based structures are in. The emphasis placed on the value of knowledge, shapes understandings of the knowledge worker. Knowledge workers apparently understand themselves as holders of tacit valuable skills and are autonomous, mobile, privileged and secure. Furthermore they are apparently less committed to the firm, and more committed to continuously enhancing their marketable portfolio of skills.

1.3: CONTENT OF THIS THESIS

These contradictory perspectives on organisation structures and subjectivity appear to have been facilitated by a dearth of holistic in-depth, qualitative, empirical explorations of knowledge intensive firms. The lack of such accounts has led to some pertinent calls for '*Images of organizations that depict working realities in the new economic order*' (Barley and Kunda, 2001:77); more empirical accounts of structures and less conceptual virtuosity (Salaman and Storey, 2008); analysis of '*who is being managed, how and why?*' (Thompson, 2005:170); '*Careful empirical tracings of complex, everyday interactions of people, objects, spaces and meanings*' (Fenwick, 2008). This thesis endeavours to provide one such holistic overview by tracing first, the dominant structures shaping this market listed, knowledge intensive organisation, and secondly the subjective orientation of key categories of actors. Set out below is an overview of the thesis layout.

- Chapter Two: This chapter delves deeper into the literature to further explore the writings depicting structures and subjectivities in a liberal economy, knowledge intensive organisation with 'best practice' normative structures. This chapter also further situates the contribution of this thesis within the literature and the blind-spots it aims to address.

- Chapter Three: This methodology chapter introduces the organisation studied for this thesis and demonstrates its relevance as a source of empirical data. The

epistemological philosophy of critical realism is introduced along with a discussion of the ethnographic method. It sets out the data gathering activities undertaken and some ethnographic reflections on my experience of being in the field.

- Chapter Four: This first analysis chapter explores the financial structures of shareholder capitalism. It provides an in-depth account of how the financial pressures of shareholder capitalism can be transmitted throughout the multi-national organisation via centrally driven, legally mandated budgeting processes which firmly position control in the hands of top management. This chapter also explores the perspective and behaviours of the actors charged with achieving financial goals particularly the organisation directors.

- Chapter Five: This chapter analyses the normative structures enacted by the case study organisation to create an affective commitment and positive subjective orientation amongst employees. The organisation studied ticked all the 'best practice' boxes in terms of HRM/HPWS design; yet their employee survey reported low levels of employee 'engagement'. This chapter sets out the prescribed organisation ideology, followed by a detailed breakdown of the range of HRM/HPWS practices implemented. This chapter also provides an insight into the HR and senior management perspectives on the role and impact of normative structures in the workplace.

- Chapter Six: This third analysis chapter deals with how work was structured in the case study organisation. It outlines two overarching categories of knowledge work and explains how they emerged in response to the centrally driven and hierarchically controlled financial objectives. Chapter six also reveals how a variety of structures can merge to manage the knowledge work process including hierarchy, bureaucracy, networks and teams and the behavioural consequences of these structures.

- Chapter Seven: The preceding three chapters set out the three dominant structures that were implemented in the case study organisation. This last analysis chapter sets out the employee understanding of their employment experience and their subsequent subjective orientation. What this chapter reveals is how connected the three structures were in shaping the employee experience. It was both the content

within the structures and the contradictions between them that informed employees' subjective understanding of their working life and subsequent behaviours.

- Chapter Eight: This conclusion chapter summarises the contribution this thesis makes to the literature. The key findings are re-presented demonstrating the value of holistic, in-depth, qualitative tracings of workplace structures and subjectivities. Indeed, the force of structure in the case study organisation highlights how subjectivity is situated and contextual; and the context is shaped by the structures. Reified notions of work and subjectivity as something distinct from the capitalist context in which it is situated only serves to render invisible the forces that shape, and often undermine, an individual's sense of who they are at work.

The next chapter moves deeper into the literature.

Chapter Two: The Literature

2.0: INTRODUCTION TO THIS CHAPTER

This chapter delves deeper into the literature to further untangle the varied accounts of structure and subjectivity within market listed, knowledge intensive firms. What this chapter demonstrates is how the writings that claim to offer definitive accounts of workplace structures and subjectivities lead the reader to largely incompatible conclusions. Furthermore, in-depth, qualitative accounts of knowledge workplaces are in short supply. It seems that an eagerness to conceptualise, combined with a lack of data, has resulted in numerous contradictory conclusions on the same 'type' of workplace.

This thesis uses the notion of structure to bring together different practices that were oriented towards the achievement of common goals. Within the case study organisation three overarching structures emerged. First, there was the financial structure made up of the processes and initiatives for achieving the financial goals. Secondly, there was the normative structure made up of the official social attributes of the organisation and the processes for managing people. Thirdly, there was the work structure made up of the processes for organising the daily business of getting work done. Furthermore these structures overlapped and it was how these three structures operated in tandem that shaped the employees subjective orientation to the organisation.

However, as will be demonstrated in this chapter, the dominant approach in the current literature is to explore these structures in isolation and this leads to contradictory conclusions on the role and impact of each structure and the subjective orientation of the contemporary knowledge worker. There is a lack of empirical accounts tracing the myriad of structures shaping the workplace and how this in turn shapes the perceptions and behaviours of those who experience these structures in tandem.

In this chapter, each of the three structures and the associated subjectivities are presented. This is followed by a discussion of what is missing within each structure and subjectivity debate. The chapter concludes with an overview of the contradictions in the literature and how this thesis fits in.

2.1: THE FINANCIAL STRUCTURE OF SHAREHOLDER CAPITALISM

2.1.1: Political Economy and Corporate Governance

This thesis explores how the macro-economic financial structure, that the case study organisation operated within, impacted on the workplace. When analysing structures of capitalism commentators typically present two archetypes (Hall and Soskice, 2001). On the one hand there are the Anglo-American / liberal market / shareholder / outsider economies of which the US and UK are the pioneers. On the other hand, there are the coordinated market / insider economies of which Germany and Japan are identified as dominant cases. There is a substantial body of literature, particularly in the political economy space, that explores the relationship between macro-economic structures and organisation level structures.[5] In one of the best known accounts '*Varieties of Capitalism*' (Hall and Soskice, 2001), five aspects of firm behaviour that are dependent on the model of capitalism are identified.[6] Of particular relevance for this thesis is the variable of corporate governance, which can be defined as follows:

> Corporate governance is about the relationship between three sets of actors or stakeholders – capital, management and labour. It is concerned with who owns and controls the firm, in whose interest the firm is governed, and the various ways (direct and indirect) whereby control is exercised (Gospel & Pendleton, 2005:3).[7]

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[5] Other disciplines also analyse the consequences of the structures around which capitalism is organised Work in comparative law has looked at the distribution of legal protection provided to the actors within the institutions of political economy (La Porta, et al, 1997). Financial economists have analysed how a nations capital structures can impact on the nature of employment, wages and representation (Bronars & Deere, 1991; Perotti & Spier 1993). Work coming from comparative political economy explores the relationship between national institutions and the likelihood that economies will converge to one model or retain their distinctiveness (Albert, 1993; Crouch et al, 2005; Guillen, 2000; Hall & Soskice, 2001; Hollingsworth and Boyer, 1997; O' Sullivan, 2003; Whitley, 1999).

[6] Firms must co-ordinate these variables to maximise the competencies and opportunities available to them. The other four are industrial relations, vocational training and education, inter-firm relations and co-ordination of employees. This model has been criticised for not incorporating sufficient variety of institutional arrangements, for being overly deterministic, and for underestimating the role of the state (Becker, 2009; Howell, 2003; Kang, 2006; Weiss, 1998). Given that this thesis focuses on firm level activity it is a useful starting frame of reference.

[7] Perhaps the typical accepted working definition of corporate governance is the one which explores the relationship between providers of capital and top-level management and adopts a legalistic view of the organisation as a 'nexus of contracts'. The relationship between capital and top management is explored through principal-agent and game theory where the principal, in this case the provider of capital, seeks to minimise their agency costs and risks i.e. the costs and risks of entrusting managers to manage their capital. The focus in such work is on how an organisation structures itself at the management level to best deliver the needs of institutional investors (Goyer, 2001:138). Whilst elements of this relationship will be explored it is not the sole focus of this thesis. This is because the dynamic of corporate governance is not only felt by providers of capital and top management. Hence the broader stakeholder definition used typically in political economy is more suitable.

Corporate governance is concerned primarily with how the terms under which capital is acquired generates competitive and resource allocation pressures that structure the relationship between capital, management and labour (Aoki, 2000; Aguilera and Jackson, 2003; De Jong, 1997; Gospel & Pendleton, 2003; 2005; Hall & Soskice, 2001; O' Sullivan, 2003). These categories are not offered as definitive subjective orientations, but instead apportion structurally driven rights and responsibilities to each stakeholder, vis a vis a firm's capital structures.

The organisation studied for this thesis operates within the liberal market/shareholder capitalism model. Ultimately, this model is defined by the prominence afforded to the interests of capital, i.e. shareholders, over any other stakeholder.[8] In such organisations the primary competitive, and indeed legal, concern is to provide financial return to shareholders as *'The law is very clear that shareholders are the owners of the firm and managers have a fiduciary duty to act in their interests, and most of the academic literature on governance has taken this perspective'* (Allen, et al, 2008:1). Mintzberg et al claim that in such organisations *'The customer may be "king" and the employee may be the corporations "greatest asset" but the shareholder is the bottom line'* (2002:69).

The prominence of shareholders is attributed to the structurally driven characteristics of shareholder capitalism where capital is anonymous, removed, dispersed, short-term, mobile, insecure, more financially motivated and more liquid (De Jong, 1997; Gospel and Pendleton; 2003; Hall and Soskice, 2001; Harrison, 1997; Mintzberg et al. 2002; O' Sullivan, 2003; Zorn et al, 2005). A distant shareholder can invest or withdraw their capital at any moment and makes these decisions primarily on financial results. Consequently, top management are driven to focus primarily on providing continuous financial returns to shareholders. Successful firms, in this model, are those that best create shareholder value; which refers to the value of the organisation to shareholders as reflected in the share price (Rappaport, 1986; Stewart, 1991; Welch, 1981). The premise of such arguments is that this is the optimum model of firm efficiency.

Economic sociologists refute the efficiency argument so central to rational economics by claiming *'the lion's share of economic behaviour can be explained by society itself-*

[8] The alternative model, namely the coordinated economy, is characterised in terms of long term debt financing and concentrated ownership by large block-holders of capital. The small group of large owners typically has a closer relationship with management of the organisation as their capital is typically strategic, long-term and committed (Hall and Soskice, 2001).

by context' rather than classical, ontological efficiency (Dobbin, 2005:26).[9] Zorn et al (2005) provide a sociological account of the development of shareholder capitalism. They explain how, from the late 1970's onwards, institutional investors and analysts had difficulty placing a value on the large diversified conglomerate that was commonplace at the time. Subsequent firm under-valuations, combined with a relaxation of takeover legislation in liberal market economies, contributed to the emergence of the core-competence, shareholder focused, model of firm efficiency. The shareholder value efficiency argument was promulgated by three groups; institutional investors, securities analysts and takeover firms. Economic sociologists claim the shift to this model represents a significant adjustment of the macro-economic factors that influence firm behaviour and is an example of how:

> Extra-organizational networks can successfully promote new management models. The power of those networks to discipline executives plays an important role...[...]... the key networks constructing and diffusing this new ideal were exogenous to the firm – they were major financial market networks' (Zorn et al, 2005:270-271).[10]

Preda (2005) provides an account of how external investors have emerged as the main motor driving economic life replacing figures such as Adam Smith's manufacturer, (1776), and Schumpeter's entrepreneur (1934). Of course investors have existed since the late seventeenth century, but in shareholder capitalism their legitimacy is greatly enhanced. This is because shareholder capitalism made credible the notion of the 'investor-scientist' who, through information and analysis, can apparently project a 'real' firm value (Preda, 2005:141). The role of the investor scientist championing firm efficiency was further cemented by legislation such as the Sarbanes Oxley Act.[11]

Ultimately, delivering shareholder return has emerged as both the ideological and legal model of efficiency. The investors who supply the capital, and the analysts who advise

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[9] The general the focus of economic sociology is the institutions of the economy (Burt, 1992; Carruthers and Uzzi, 2000; Granovetter, 1985; Podolny, 2001; White, 1981). An emerging body of work on the sociology of financial markets is emerging; see Knorr Cetina and Preda, 2005.

[10] Prior to the emergence of the shareholder model, works of Perrow (1992) and Roy (1997) show how the development of the American economy and the large firm from the early 1800's to early 1900's was influenced more by property rights and antitrust law respectively rather than the rational pursuit of economic efficiency. Fligstein (1990) shows how the diversified conglomerate firm, so dominant between 1950 and 1975, emerged as a result of 'portfolio theory' promoted by accountants that sought to wrestle corporate control away from production and marketing departments.

[11] This is the 'Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act of 2002'; commonly referred to as Sarbanes-Oxley or SOX.

them, have played an important role in shaping the need for top management autonomy as managers require freedom to implement unpopular decisions to maintain, not just profit, but also the share price. An organisation's share price moves based on analysts' quarterly buy and sell recommendations. These recommendations are benchmarked against analysts' perception of what financial results the firm should be achieving. So financial success now depends on the dual task of managing and meeting external expectations. The importance of managing expectations is understood to be a distinct feature of shareholder capitalism as share prices '*used to rise and fall on the strength of the profits per se, now it rose and fell on the strength of profits vis-a-vis analysts forecasts...[...]...meeting the profit targets of stock analysts thus became a preoccupation among corporate executives* (Zorn et al, 2005: 276-277). In fact, by the year 2000 some 50% of listed firms reported engaging in ongoing communications with investors to shape expectations (Zorn et al, 2005). So shareholder capitalism is not just about making a profit. Top management need to engage in extensive financial forecasting, they must actively canvass analysts to secure positive ratings based on these forecasts and then they must ensure they meet these forecasts.

Ultimately, scholars exploring the workings of shareholder capitalism typically describe how top management must orient themselves towards meeting the short-term needs of external, distant and financially motivated investors. This is understood to have considerable implications for how workplaces are managed.

2.1.2: Shareholder Capitalism and the Workplace

In-depth qualitative, workplace level accounts tracing the relationship between financial markets and the knowledge intensive organisation are in short supply. This is surprising considering the body of work highlighting how capital markets play such a forceful role in shaping workplace dynamics (Beynon, 2002; Blair and Roe, 1999; Blair and Kochan, 2000; Burchell, et al 1999; 2002; Capelli et al, 1997; Capelli ,1999; Ezzamel et al, 2008; Gallie et al, 1998; Thompson, 2003). In such works the dominant story is about how the structural prominence of capital marginalises and results in losses for labour as a stakeholder. This has led to calls for the impact of shareholder capitalism to be incorporated into workplace level analysis. For example Thompson (2003:366) states:

> Emphasis solely on the workplace is likely to neglect the underlying machinery of markets. This is not, by and large, a question of mendacious exploiters and obstructive middle management, but the structural characteristics of shareholder-driven, de-regulated and globalising markets on the one hand, and the extended hierarchies that constitute forms of co-ordination within and between firms on the other.

Gospel and Pendleton describe six aspects of top management behaviour that is shaped by shareholder capitalism (2003:565-567). Five of these headings will be used to summarise the literature connecting shareholder capitalism and workplace level phenomena.[12]

i. **Balance of interests:** It is claimed that the pursuit of shareholder value becomes the dominant objective for top management in market listed firms (De Jong, 1997; Hart, 1995; Lazonick and O' Sullivan, 2000; Mintzberg et al 2002; OECD, 2004; Porter, 1997; Rappaport, 1986; Shleifer and Vishny, 1997; Thompson, 2003; Williams, 2000; Zorn et al, 2005). Top management are legally obliged and financially incentivised to act as agents of capital and are focused primarily on delivering short-term financial results (Gomez-Mejia, 1992;1994). It is argued that this has created a new managerial focus whereby top managers have become *'more strident in their insistence that other stakeholders cannot interfere with these decisions or else aggregate profits will decline'* (Leicht and Fennell, 2001:101). This has created an elite top management group, distinct from line managers, who position themselves as shareholder agents. They spend more time promoting the organisation and its financial strengths to investors rather than managing operational issues. This has been described as a movement towards *'heroic'* as opposed to *'engaging'* leadership and which creates *'...a wedge of disconnection that sees leadership as something apart'* (Mintzberg et al., 2002:71). The balance is firmly tipped in favour of shareholders This is understood to have negative consequences for lower levels of management and employees including job loss, job insecurity, reduced remuneration, loss of voice and task discretion and work intensification (Barsky, Hussein, and Jablonsky, 1991; Blair & Kochan 2000; Bronars & Deere, 1991; Cappelli 1999; Dickens et al, 2001; Froud et al, 2000a; Gallie, et al, 2004;

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[12] The sixth, '*degree of co-operation with other firms*' describes how in liberal market model the constant fluctuation of the stock market and the precarious nature of organisational competitiveness creates a low trust environment where organisations co-operate with each other less than in co-ordinated market economies. This will not be explored as inter-firm behaviour is not of central concern for this thesis.

Hall and Soskice, 2001; Harrison, 1997; Hutton, 1996; Jackson, 2005; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005; Lazonick, 2006; Lazonick and O' Sullivan, 2000: 29; Millward et al, 2000; Perotti & Spier, 1993; Pfeffer, 1998; Zorn et al, 2005).[13] Comparative law literature has found that few countries appear to have strong legal rights for both shareholders and employees (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Jackson, 2005). Weaker legislative labour regimes in liberal market economies facilitate many of the aforementioned phenomena.

ii. **Internal use of financial measures of performance:** External investors rely heavily on publicly available financial data regarding firm performance to make investment decisions. The importance of maintaining positive financial results promotes the use of financial measures of performance at all levels of the workplace. In fact, Carr and Tomkins found that British and American organisations place three times as much emphasis on financial issues in decision-making than German and Japanese organisations (1998:224).[14] Gospel and Pendleton (2003) claim this has two key effects.

   a. Top management isolate themselves from the consequences of their decisions on lower levels as they are primarily concerned about achieving financial targets, *'Business missionary becomes financial mercenary'* (Thrift, 2001:422). This isolation is understood to have a detrimental impact on the employee voice. Top managers seek to maximise their autonomy and not be constrained by employees calling for their, often competing, interests to be considered. Engaging employees in any kind of consultation is futile as decisions are based on financial concerns decided above the level of the workplace. The employee perception of decisions is of little or no interest. Hodson (2001) claims the apparent single-minded obsession with financial performance translate into management practices and decisions that disregard human dignity at work.

   b. The use of financial measures of performance is said to create a misleading sense of objectivity in decision making when in fact, shareholders needs are

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[13] For example, analysis of twenty-two OECD countries revealed that ownership dispersion is associated with shorter employee tenures whereas less marketised economies coincides with more stable employment (Jackson, 2005:285). Barsky, Hussein, and Jablonsky (1991) link shareholder value and downsizing.

[14] Referenced in Gospel and Pendleton 2005:566

being starkly prioritised. This trend towards structurally embedding financialised measures at all levels of the workplace (Copeland, et al, 1990; Erturk, et al 2008; Froud et al 2000b; Williams, 2000) is claimed to fulfil a *'demand for extreme kinds of financial discipline'* (Thrift, 2001:5). Ezzamel et al interpret this financialisation of work as *'a hegemonic move which is central to the reassertion of capital, a development that, we contend, is symptomatic of a shift towards a more "despotic" mode of capitalist reproduction'* (2008:110). A body of work, typically referred to as 'critical accounting', refutes the asserted objectivity of accounting practices and seeks to arrive contextual, power driven understanding of accounting rules (Laughlin, 1999:73).[15] Critical accounting highlights the distributive and hegemonic impact of accounting procedures and how it naturalises and universalises certain actions to assist in the appropriation of surplus value (Cooper, 1980; Cooper & Sherer, 1984; Tinker, 1980, 1985). As mentioned in chapter one, there are a range of legally mandated budgetary and expenditure structures. This thesis explores some of these specifically the 2001 International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) and the 2002 Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act, commonly referred to as Sarbanes-Oxley or SOX.[16] The IFRS structures the financial exchange relationship between a parent and subsidiary, and SOX regulates internal financial control systems. There is a lack of accounts exploring how financial legislation translates into practices that shape the contemporary employment experience in market listed knowledge intensive firms (Ezzamel et al, 2008).[17]

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[15] Critical accounting works from the theoretical and methodological level tend to either draw from the ideas of Karl Marx, e.g.Tinker, 2002, or post-modernist perspectives e.g. Armstrong, 1994. At the societal level the debates and concerns lie in three major areas, *'first, the role of accounting in important societal configurations (such as gender, poverty, race, ethnicity, corruption) over historical timeframes; second, the role and functioning of the accounting profession; and third, the role of accounting thinking in the formation of regulatory processes (such as the economy, government, politics and law)'*, (Laughlin, 1999:73-74)

[16] IFRS: The International Financial Regulation Standards, previously known as the International Accounting Standards. As of 1 January 2005, publicly traded companies must prepare their consolidated financial statements in accordance with the IFRS. SOX: Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act of 2002; commonly referred to as Sarbanes-Oxley or SOX

[17] Of course, there are numerous commentaries on Sarbanes-Oxley and the IFRS. However these tend to stem from either the 'realist' space which discusses perceptions of effectiveness of SOX and IFRS provisions (Romano, 2005; Cunningham, 2003; Seligman, 2002) or non realist accounts which tend to deconstruct the provisions of the regulation. See for example Burrowes et al, 2004; Riotto, 2005. Micro, organisational level accounts on the impact of specific financial practices are primarily explored by those interested in the accounting discipline. Works on accounting typically come from a realist, modernist

iii. **Time frame of managerial decision-making:** Shareholder capital is highly mobile and can be easily withdrawn. This firm level vulnerability is claimed to encourage a short-term view of firm performance and decision making (Fligstein, 1990:1; Pfeffer, 1999:136; Porter, 1992). Within financial markets, organisations shares can be positioned within larger 'funds' of shares which are managed by fund managers within financial institutions, e.g. pension and investment fund managers. These fund managers are assessed on short-term fund performance and therefore seek to maximise the short-term returns of their funds (Gospel and Pendleton, 2003:566 and 2005:6, Lazonick and O' Sullivan, 2000). The emergence of these institutional investors means greater pressure on short-term financial results (Davis and Robbins, 2005). Listed firms provide quarterly results on firm performance to satisfy external fund managers and shareholders. Any rigidity or obstacle to continuously maintaining short-term shareholder value is viewed as a constraint to the organisation's competitive functioning and organisations can be relied upon to find ways to avoid or work around such constraints (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Harrison, 1997; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005; Ladipo & Wilkinson, 2002:18; Thompson, 2003). Zorn et al (2005:277) quote Justin Fox in 'Fortune' magazine:

> This is what the chief executives and chief financial officers dream of: quarter after quarter after blessed quarter of not disappointing Wall Street. Sure they dream about other things too – megamergers, blockbuster new products, global domination. But the simplest, most visible, most merciless measure of corporate success in the 1990's has become this one: Did you make your earnings last quarter? (Fox, 1997:76)

Ultimately the ability of organisations to meet short-term goals is dependent on the capacity of the workforce to continuously adapt and to change to achieve short-term goals. Generating these financial results is partly associated with responsiveness to the customer and organisations must be capable of continuous strategic change (Harrison, 1997; Piore and Sabel, 1984). Such firms look to their labour force to absorb change and competitive pressures such as accepting increased functional and numerical flexibility, increased responsibility and an acceleration of the pace and flow of work (Burchell et al 2002; Gallie et al, 1998; Green and MacIntosh, 2001; Millward et al, 2000).

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perspective which treats accounting as '*the knowledge of the individual and aggregate effects of alternative standardized business measurement and reporting structures*' (Kinney, 2001:278).

iv. **Approach to securing managerial and employee commitment:** In liberal markets organisations share owners are diversified and dispersed across the globe and their primary motivation for holding shares is short-term financial return. An organisation securing capital from shareholders can have a multitude of distant institutional and private shareholders whom top management rarely, if ever, meet but whose short-term financial needs they must prioritise. This prevents formation of a relationship between owners of capital and employees as the agenda is dictated above the level of the workplace (Danford et al, 2003; Gospel and Pendleton, 2003; Thompson, 2003). Shareholders do not engage with the organisation beyond reviewing financial performance and they can exit at any time. The absence of a close 'trust' relationship between the shareholders and the organisation means firm level co-ordination must be obtained by other forces (Adler, 2001). Therefore in an attempt to align behaviours organisations operating within shareholder capitalism often make use of market mechanisms to secure commitment, particularly from top management, via financially indexed incentives and stock options (OECD, 1999; Jensen and Murphy, 1990; Pendleton, 2001; 2006). In terms of approaches to securing employee commitment, formal consultation is unworkable and hierarchy is considered the primary and most effective mechanism for co-ordinating employees. Much of the literature argues that the employee voice is constrained in such organisations as business leaders seek to maximise their autonomy and not be obstructed by having to address any negative implications of decisions for employees (Beynon et al. 2002: 299; Danford et al 2003:10; De Jong, 1997:7; Gospel and Pendleton, 2003; Thompson, 2003). Ownership dispersion combined with short-term financial goals and strategies of constant change and innovation requires high levels of management decision making autonomy on the one hand and labour compliance on the other (Ezzamel et al, 2008; Harrison, 1997; Jackson, 2005; Thompson, 2003). Centralised, hierarchical, top down control is seen as critical to ensuring top management ability to enforce market requirements. In fact, few countries with liberal market regimes have relational, consultative employment institutions and the absence of considerable pressure from capital markets is considered, by some, to be a necessary condition for secure and participative employment (Jackson, 2005:290).

v. **Nature of business strategies:** Gospel and Pendleton, (2003) citing work from Owen, (1999) and Teece (2000), highlight how mobile, liquid, capital markets are more facilitative of business strategies oriented towards radical product innovation and short-term cost cutting (Gospel and Pendleton, 2005; Hall and Soskice, 2001; Owen, 1999; Teece, 2000; Thrift, 2001). In addition to delivering financial results, maintaining a positive profile within financial markets requires organisations to continuously develop high quality and frequent product adaptations that convince shareholders of future profits (Ezzamel et al, 2008; Zorn et al, 2005). The ever present possibility of radical change within organisations impacts on employment arrangements most notably investments in workforce training and development (De Jong, 1997; Jackson, 2005; O' Sullivan, 2003:60; Porter, 1992, 1997).[18] Furthermore, strategies of shareholder value, permanent product/service innovation and ceaseless change is said to contribute to work intensification as it '*creates pressure to modify one or all of: the task content of jobs, the intensity of work, the number of hours worked and the timing of these hours*' (Burchell, 2002:10). Commenting on the business strategies associated with shareholder capitalism Thompson states '*Taken together, the outcome is that virtually every growth strategy for firms involves a bias against continuity and employment stability*' (2003:367). The work intensification created by such strategies has not gone unnoticed by commentators in the private sector. Mintzberg et al (2002:72) draw our attention to comments from Morgan Stanley economist Dean Witter who states, *'the "dirty little secret" of the productivity miracle of the last decade, suggests that there may be more perspiration than inspiration'* (author's emphasis).

Ultimately the literature looking at the nature of employment under shareholder capitalism heralds significant losses for labour. Shareholder capitalism, it claims, creates firm level structures and practices that prioritises the interests of capital, insulates top management, isolates lower levels, financialises work, demands hierarchical control and stimulates short-termism and constant change. For labour, this is claimed to result in job insecurity, work intensification, less secure remuneration, erosion of benefits and suppression of employee voice.

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[18] Analysis of data from the European Patent Office shows that the nature of technological development being pursued by American firms is practically the opposite of that being pursued by German based firms (Hall and Soskice, 2001:41). Porter, (1997) found that US industry spends less on training than Germany and Japan (1997:7).

Much of this literature offers accounts of organisational and management behaviour that are contingent on the competitive pressures created by macro-economic structures. There are few accounts tracing how these macroeconomic structures translate to organisation level structures and how they are understood and experienced by the range of organisational level actors. Chapter four of this thesis seeks to offer one account of such structures. This thesis also seeks to analyse the relationship between these structures and the formation of subjective orientations at work; an issue that has not been addressed to any significant extent in existing literatures.

2.1.3: Shareholder Capitalism and Subjectivity

As previously stated, the macro-economic level literature presents a largely structurally deterministic, contingent view, portraying behaviours as right and responsibilities defined by the categories of capital, management or labour. There are few accounts that actually trace how these broader competitive pressures informs an individual's subjective understanding of their working life amidst such structures. Arguably the most notable works exploring the relationship between macro-economic structures and individuals are works on 'risk society' and 'reflexive modernity' from Giddens (1991; 1994; 1998) and Beck (1992; 1994; 1999)[19] and character corrosion from Sennett (1998).[20] The main difference in the accounts offered by these authors, is their interpretation of how liberal institutions shape an individual's sense of self. Beck and Giddens claim that a new type of institutional order, based on risk, change and uncertainty, has replaced the stability associated with industrial modernity. The continuously changing nature of contemporary institutions invokes *'self confrontation with the effects of risk society that cannot be dealt with and assimilated in the system of industrial society'* (Beck, 1994:6). In other words, the *'organised irresponsibility'* (Beck, 1998; 2008) characterising contemporary institutional structures prompts individuals to become increasingly self reliant and avoid placing expectations in external institutions to provide stability. So in contrast to homogenous fixed, class

[19] Beck and Giddens works deal with a wide array of societal structures and do not focus specifically on economic institutions. However their works offer concepts to establish the relationship between characteristics of contemporary institutions and individual subjectivity.

[20] In their 2004 article Martin and Wajcman label Beck and Giddens' work the 'Reflexive modernization model' and Sennett's work the 'corrosion of character model' (244-245).

based subjectivities tied to stable industrial structures, the 'reflexive self' is always adjusting, caught up in the changing, instable nature of post-industrialism. Reflexive identity is *'inseparable from contemporary notions of flexibility and fluidity...Reflexive individuals, institutions and corporations retain a level of liquidity, plasticity or flexibility that allows them to manage and respond to risk and uncertainty'* (Ekberg, 2007:354). There is an acknowledged 'dark-side' to this 'de-traditionalisation' as it can result in a fragmentation, disorientation and disintegration of identity causing isolation and discontent (Ekberg, 2007:346). However, Giddens claims that this reflexive subjectivity ultimately has more potential to empower as individuals are presented with more options and less constraints in their pursuit of the *'project of the self'*. So the lack of institutionally driven life prescriptions is claimed to have a stimulating 'seize the day' effect through prompting the individual to actively manage their own life narrative *'Achieving control over change, in respect to lifestyle, demands an engagement with the outer social world rather than a retreat from it'* (Giddens, 1991:184).

Another sociologist exploring the relationship between macro-economic structures, and how the individual understands their life within them, is Richard Sennett. In his 1998 book, *'The Corrosion of Character'*, Sennett offers a wholly destructive account of the relationship between structurally driven change and the individual. Sennett claims that only the privileged few benefit from the structural ambiguity. For the majority, the insecurity and continuous change abound in contemporary shareholder capitalism, prevents individuals from developing a cohesive narrative of the self. They are unsure about who they are and what their life means. Individuals are therefore condemned to living amidst a permanent sense of existential angst. Sennett claims *'being continually exposed to risk can thus eat away at your sense of character... you are always "always starting over"* (Sennett:1998:84). Sennett goes on to say

> "Who needs me?" is a question of character which suffers a radical challenge in modern capitalism. The system radiates indifference. It does so in terms of the outcomes of human striving, as in winner-take-all markets, where there is little connection between risk and reward. It radiates indifference in the organization of absence of trust, where there is no reason to be needed. And it does so through re-engineering of institutions in which people are treated as disposable. Such practices obviously and brutally diminish the sense of mattering as a person, of being necessary to others'. (Sennett,1998:146).

Sennett claims, these new structures do not come with empowerment potential as individuals now have less power and control over their working lives. The new work identity is characterised by Sennett as so short-term in focus that it is fragmented, insecure, disposable and disloyal. All of which are, for the author, corrosive to the formation of a meaningful and quality sense of character and self. Sennett's account is more structurally situated than Giddens as Sennett claims that there is an inequality of power related to where one is positioned within capitalist structures. The elite few do well whilst the remainder live in a state of existential insecurity.

Fundamental to both perspectives is that changing, ambiguous and insecure structures mean individuals feel forced to rely on themselves to define their position within the structures.[21] However the main difference between the 'reflexive' versus the 'corrosive' account is ideological. Giddens paints a largely optimistic scenario whereby individuals have greater freedom of choice which empowers them to create a 'self-identity' that is meaningful to them. However Sennett portrays a fragmented, insecure disempowered self, unable to find a stable life narrative in contemporary changing, insecure, irresponsible and ambiguous neo-liberal economic institutions.

2.1.4: Financial structures and Subjectivity– What is missing?

Writers discussing the impact of shareholder capitalism on the workplace, base their claims largely on quantitative analysis of macro-economic developments and changing trends in employment, for example there are the works of Burchell et al, (2002) and Capelli (1995). A key theme is that liberal market competitive pressures heralds losses for employees as a stakeholder. This literature makes compelling arguments about the force of shareholder capitalism. However, there is a lack of qualitative analysis exploring how workplace level actors, particularly knowledge workers, interpret these forces and how they shape their subjective understanding of their working life within them. On the one hand, there is data demonstrating how such forces shape the aspects of employment that are understood to be of collective interest to employees. On the other hand, there is a lack of in-depth research exploring how this shapes employees

[21] Explorations of different perspectives have been conducted by Martin and Wajcman, (2004) and Webb (2004). These explorations found evidence of both arguments. They also claimed that managers and skilled employees were more likely to fare better in terms of self managing of careers.

understanding of their day to day working life.[22] Instead, qualitative accounts of workplace level subjectivities and behaviours, particularly of knowledge workplaces, have been undertaken largely from a post-structural and/or highly localised perspective, which downplay and even ignore the role of broader structures. This combination of the macro level contingent accounts of subjectivity and micro level interpretive accounts has led to what Dobbin referred to as the *'balkanisation of the social sciences'* whereby:

> Economists and recently political scientists, organize their arguments about instrumentality around mathematical formulas that are thought to capture the asocial, acultural essence of universal economic laws, while anthropologists and sociologists organize their arguments about culture around empirical evidence that is thought to capture the non-rational, historical essence of localized social practices. (1994:119).

What this thesis seeks to provide, particularly chapters four and seven, is an in-depth account of how the competitive pressures of shareholder capitalism were interpreted, translated and mediated at the level of the workplace. This thesis traces the structures, initiatives, social relations and subjective orientations that were a consequence of operating within the financial model of shareholder capitalism.

The literature on the financial structures of shareholder capitalism paints a gloomy picture of the negative consequences of this structure for employees. Therefore the next body of literature to be explored deals with the structure that is oft claimed to override the perceived impact of all other structures to dominate employees' subjective perception of the workplace.

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[22] The moral imperative to understand the consequences of this financial structure is arguably compounded when one considers the growth in the number of employees working for organisations whose shares are auctioned daily on the world's stock exchanges (Ladipo & Wilkinson, 2002:18; Sassen, 2005). Figures released by the World Bank show a two-folded increase in the size and liquidity of the British stock market between 1990 and 1997. During the same period, the US witnessed a three-fold increase in the size of its stock market and a four-fold increase in its market liquidity. The average length of time stocks have been held on the British and American exchanges has dropped in the last fifteen years. Within the European Union (EU) member states have faced increasing pressure to liberalise their financial markets and observers have acknowledged the increasing prominence of the stock market in many developed economies (O' Sullivan, 2003; Jackson, 2005:291). Sassen, (2005) discusses the consolidation of an upper stratum of financial centres which acts as a top layer of 30-40 cities that the global financial markets operate in. Furthermore this top stratum has seen a weakening of national level attachments for the elites and firms within them.

2.2: NORMATIVE STRUCTURES

This section of the literature review explores the organisation level structures enacted to create a normative shared understanding of the employment experience for the purposes of encouraging employees to develop a positive orientation to the organisation. Normative prescriptions can be understood as an objective structure insofar as it communicates standalone guidelines relating to the optimum employee identity and behaviours. A normative structure is made up of the prescribed ideology and practices designed to regulate an individual's subjective orientation to the organisation. Such structures are typically the domain of the Human Resources (HR) department. Normative structures are a tool for eradicating plurality of interests, or *'goal incongruence'* in the workplace (Ouchi, 1980). They exist to create an ideology of unitary interests within an organisation by disseminating the message that what is good for the business is good for employees. Those writing about normative structures of commitment claim they are so endemic in knowledge intensive firms that they are replacing hierarchy as the primary and most effective mode of controlling employee behaviours. This notion has gathered so much credence that it is claimed that the hierarchical, iron cage stereotype is being replaced by another cliché namely *'that organizations are becoming increasingly network based, organic, and flexible, and mainly knit together through bonds in the imaginary realm: values, ideas, mutual adjustment, community feelings or identity'* (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004:163). This section of the literature review will explore the development of normative structures. It will also detail the consequences such practices are perceived to have on individual subjectivity.

2.2.1: The Development of Normative Structures

At the start of the 20th century management practices were strongly shaped by the principles of rational scientific management. Also known as Taylorism, the emphasis was on enhancing employee productivity through close supervision, standardising work practices and prescribing the precise time and manner in which work should be carried out (Kanigel, 1997). A tight definition of roles, and responsibilities, facilitated the formation of collective interests and solidarity; particularly amongst employees. A

pluralism of interests and conflict was expected and systems of collective bargaining were enacted to manage this conflict (Barley and Kunda, 1992). The rigidity of such work systems, combined with the de-motivational consequences of low trust and heavy supervision facilitated the emergence of the Human Relations perspective in the 1930's (Edwards, 1979). Human relations theorists argued that the workplace should be managed as 'human system' rather than 'mechanical operation' (Bruce, 2006). Beginning with Elton Mayo, they claimed that people have a deep psychological need to believe their employer values them (Mayo, 1933). A key premise of human relations theory was that the underlying challenge to achieving workplace cooperation stemmed from individuals possessing personal goals that were at odds with organisation goals. Consequently managerially prescribed socialisation was required to shape employees' subjective orientation. This, it was argued, would ensure employees internalised and committed to the goals of the organisation, and conflict would be eliminated (Barnard, 1968; Mayo, 1933). If organisations managed the social dynamic through certain normative structures, such as communication, teamwork and promotion of trust, employees would be more likely to develop a moral connection to the organisation. Employees would feel more committed, valued, and fulfilled; and all this would cause them to be more productive (Barnard, 1968; Mayo, 1933). These early theorists never claimed normative structures should wholly replace more rational structures. Instead they argued that implementing normative structures would ensure employees would encounter fewer problems with the rational structures. The rational and normative were positioned as complementary:

> An organization can secure the efforts necessary to its existence, then, either by the objective inducement it provides or by changing states of mind. It seems to be improbable that an organization can exist as a practical matter which does not employ both methods in combination (Barnard, 1968:141 quoted in Ouchi, 1980:131).

In the early 1980's the idea began to gather mainstream credence in managerial space (Alvesson, 1990).[23] Academics also began to take notice, however, it seems that the

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[23] Human relations, and its later ally Organisational Development (OD) which came into vogue in the 1960's, garnered some attention but personnel management with its pluralistic emphasis continued to dominate in practice. It wasn't until western economies faced considerable pressure from post-war Japan that the relationship between employees' subjective orientation and productivity gathered mainstream credibility. When analysing the factors behind the growth of the Japanese economy, 'culture' was seen as enabling a range of efficient and flexible production, logistics and distribution practices (Ouchi, 1981; Pascale and Athos, 1981). In the eyes of western senior managers, the Japanese story repositioned

more academics became convinced of the power of normative structures, the more they turned away from exploring how they interact with other workplace structures. It began to be accepted that normative structures could shape subjectivity and extract the desired level of commitment, no matter what else was going on in the organisation.

2.2.2: Normative Frameworks: From Corporate Cultures to Employer Brands

The importance of creating a normative ideology through a prescribed corporate culture seemed to gather 'holy grail' status (Purcell, 2003) following a number of influential works promising a link between culture and firm performance (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Kilmann et al, 1985; Ouchi and Price, 1978; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1985). At this time corporate culture was defined as:

> A pattern of basic assumptions - invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 1985:9).

As stated in chapter one, perceptions that work itself was changing also stimulated managerial appetite for a new structure for managing employees. Corporate culture was packaged as important tool for aligning employees to the ever changing needs of the post-fordist, lean, knowledge intensive firm in which knowledge work was so tacit and ambiguous it could not be regulated by hierarchy and bureaucracy (Alvesson, 1990). Normative structures, and the associated promise of creating an affective attachment between the employee and the organisation goals, fitted in nicely. It promised that employees' affective attachment to the organisation meant they would always endeavour do the 'right' thing, even when removed from the watchful eye of management.

Corporate culture has since gathered significant optimistic and critical attention in the literature (Ogbonna and Harris, 2002).[24] A sentiment common to both the optimistic

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normative structures from being a 'nice idea' to being a source of competitive advantage that could yield significant financial benefits (Coopey and Hartley, 1991).

[24] Perhaps the best known of the optimistic works is Peters and Waterman's 1982 book. At the other end of the spectrum Willmott's 1993 article is a forceful condemnation of the intrusive and colonising intentions he claims are inherent in normative control.

and critical viewpoints is that normative structures are capable of appropriating employees' subjective sense of self into a prescribed normative structure of unitary interests. The defining divide is largely ideological. Optimists present this appropriation as a positive move towards empowering employees and helping them to self-actualise and reach their full potential. For example Pascale states *'Organisations that socialise effectively manage a lot of internal ambiguity. This tends to free up time and energy...Strong culture firms empower employees helping them build this social currency by providing continuity and clarity'* (Pascale, 1985:34-35). Pessimists, such as Willmott (1993), vehemently reject this claiming normative structures are damaging and invasive and that:

> In the name of expanded practical autonomy, it aspires to extend management control by colonizing the affective domain. It does this by promoting employee commitment to a monolithic structure of feeling and thought, a development that is seen to be incipiently totalitarian (Willmott, 1993:517).

In recent years the promises of corporate culture have been repackaged as 'employer branding' which has been described as *'marketing for your corporate culture'*.[25] An employer brand can be defined as *'The identity of the firm as an employer. It encompasses the firm's value system, policies and behaviours toward the objectives of attracting, motivating, and retaining the firm's current and potential employees'* (Ainspan and Dell, 2001:3). Employer branding appears to be emerging as the normative evolution 'de jour' promoted by respected HRM 'think-tanks' such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)[26] in the UK and numerous management consultants. It also has been the subject of academic commentary (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Cushen, 2009; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Frook, 2001; Martin, et al, 2005). The cited potential of employer branding is remarkably similar to what was claimed for corporate culture. An employer brand apparently creates a unitary framework by making explicit the binding social attributes common and unique to the organisation. The unitary ideal can be further promulgated through claiming mutuality of interests, i.e. that living the branded social attributes is the route to achievement of both organisation goals and individual fulfilment. Appropriating the external brand to create an internal normative behavioural framework

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[25] http://renegadehr.net/employer-branding-through-social-media-introduction
[26] http://www.cipd.co.uk/research/_empbranding.htm

also supports a key business objective, namely ensuring the ongoing sanctity of the brand.

The asserted potential of normative structures, that conflict can be eradicated, is enticing. It infers that employees require less management as they will be intrinsically committed to offer up their discretionary effort. The practical application of normative structures typically occurs through the range of practices collectively known as human resource management (HRM), or more recently as High Performance Work Systems (HPWS), (Huselid, 1995; Huselid and Becker, 1998).

2.2.3: Human Resource Management

HRM itself is an expression of an organisational culture (Legge, 2005:209) and can be defined as:

> A distinctive approach to employment management which seeks to achieve competitive advantage through strategic deployment of a highly committed and capable workforce using an array of cultural, structural and personal techniques (Storey, 2001:6).

This understanding of HRM deliberately sets it apart from a tendency to apply the label of HRM to all management practices. The definitive distinction between HRM and its predecessor, personnel management, is the emphasis HRM places on claiming unitary interests and denying pluralism. Walton, for example, argues:

> The new HRM model is composed of policies that promote mutuality - promote goals, mutual influence, mutual respect, mutual rewards, mutual responsibility. The theory is that policies of mutuality will elicit commitment which in turn will yield both better economic performance and greater human development (Walton, 1985 quoted in Legge, 2005:103).

The 'soft' or 'high-road' model of HRM, is thought to be the most appropriate normative structure for managing knowledge workers (Flood et al, 2001; Legge, 2005:11; Newell et al; 2002). The soft model is characterised by the use of culture management techniques and rhetoric of mutual commitment. This model claims that, on the one hand, the organisation should invest in employees by providing, relatively, secure employment, secure remuneration and training and development. On the other hand, employees should respond by being highly committed and ensure the achievement

of organisation goals. Under this model, employee expenditure is considered an investment in a strategic asset (Beer et al, 1984). It is deemed to be particularly appropriate for the knowledge worker who is often positioned as a productive asset (Reed, 1996). Organisations need knowledge workers who are committed to applying their discretionary, tacit knowledge in the pursuit of organisations goals.

A key premise of the soft HRM model is that organisations will see a financial return from investing in employees. Consequently, much of the management research on HRM adopts a universalistic, performance focus and seeks to uncover a causal relationship between HRM and organisational performance outcomes (Huselid, 1995; Huselid and Becker, 1998; Horgan and Muhlau, 2003; 2006; Pfeffer, 1994; Richard and Johnson, 2001; Rosenthal et al, 1997; Snell and Dean, 1992). Such research seeks to decipher the extent to which HRM achieves its cited potential of improving the financial results. The lack of consistency amongst the approaches adopted to establish this link means that strong, lasting and translatable causal relationships have not been identified (Gerhart et al, 2000; Marchington and Grugulis, 2000). Nonetheless it is largely believed that the collective outcome of such works indicates there is an association between HRM and organisation performance even if *'the studies may be showing only that managing people in a coherent and disciplined way is more effective (in some sense) than not doing so'* (Edwards and Wright, 2001:570-authors emphasis). This performance approach does not seek to challenge unitary underpinnings of HRM or the message that individuals can self actualise through contributing to organisation goals. Instead, the focus is on whether or not HRM is 'effective'.[27]

Those adopting a more critical approach typically condemn HRM claims of unitarism and look often to the rhetoric, imagery, ideals and values of HRM rather than the effectiveness of specific HRM practices. Similar to the management literature, such works assume that HRM is capable of getting employees to believe in the claims of unitary interests. This has sparked a debate about the ethical legitimacy of HRM with numerous authors claiming it is unethical to deny the existence of opposing interests between employers and employees (Drake and Drake, 1998; Legge, 1998; Winstainley and Woodall, 2000; Woodall, 1996). Many writers claim that pluralism persists and that advocates of HRM have placed an undue emphasis on unitarism, autonomy and

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[27] See Legge, (2005:337-341) and Bosalie et al, (2005) for an overview of some work in this area.

humanitarian values such as self actualisation and individualism. Such works largely claim that the power of HRM stems from the role it plays in providing unitary myths that heighten managerial legitimacy and paint a positive gloss over the pluralist reality of the damaging, less palatable consequences of neo liberal shareholder capitalism (Drake and Drake, 1998; Keenoy and Anthony, 1992; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Marsden, 1993; Townley, 1993; Willmott, 1993, and Woodall, 1996).

In the sociological space, HRM has largely been explored from a post-structural perspective. This stems from a belief that the power of HRM stems not from the material practices but from the rhetoric, imagery and discourse that accompanies the practices (Legge, 2005:316-355). It has been claimed that, the primary focus of HRM is the re-invention of individuals (Mabey et al, 1998), and that the cultural techniques associated with soft HRM regulate employee identity:

> Identity regulation encompasses the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction. Notably, induction, training and promotion procedures are developed in ways that have implications for the shaping and direction of identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:621-625).

Specific HR practices such as induction programmes, training and development, performance appraisal, performance related pay, competency frameworks and corporate events are apparently mediums for re-inventing employees by communicating desired behavioural expectations (Cannell and Wood, 1992; Kessler and Purcell, 1992; Mansfield, 1996). According to such authors, research on HRM should focus on the use of rhetoric, imagery and symbols as these all play a key role in shaping a message that shapes employee subjectivity. However this has led to a move away from exploring the perceptions of those interacting with these structures as it is assumed they are, to put it simply, brainwashed into believing the rhetoric. For example Keenoy and Anthony claim that undertaking research to explore the gap between soft HR rhetoric and an employees' perception of their 'reality' is pointless as HRM is:

> Concerned with the management of beliefs, with the manufacture of acquiescence in corporate values, with the production of images...consequently, it is no good carping on about the differences between image and reality if it is the business of HRM to shift perceptions of reality (1992:238-239).

Ultimately, much of the management and critical accounts of normative structures are underpinned by the assumption that HRM is to some degree effective at appropriating employee subjectivity. Employee subjectivity is understood as being up for grabs.

2.2.4: Normative Structures and Subjectivity

The management literature on normative structures grapples with notions of effectiveness and the link between normative structures and business performance. The premise of this literature is that normative structures can mould employee subjectivity to ensure that employees are committed to achieving organisation goals. The optimum subjective orientation, cited in the management literature, is an employee who is 'committed' and who derives a level of personal and financial fulfilment upon the achievement of organisation goals. However, there is a lack of strong empirical evidence demonstrating a causal relationship between organisational commitment and employee performance.[28] Nevertheless, creating employee commitment remains a key objective of the normative structures and associated HRM practices.

Critical accounts on the impact of normative forces on employee subjectivity have come largely from the sociological space. Much of the sociological literature explores subjectivity from a post-structural, root metaphor perspective as something that emerges, not something that is prescribed. Empirical, qualitative accounts of organisational life highlight the complexity of subjectivity and the tensions an individual can experience when interacting with strong normative cultures (Casey, 1995; Ezzy, 2001; Fleming and Sewell, 2002; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Kunda, 1992; Kunda and Van Maanen, 1999; Ogbonna and Harris, 2002). Ethnographic explorations of normative forces in knowledge intensive workplaces discuss how these forces colonise employees' subjective sense of who they are and how they feel about their work. Employees absorb and appropriate the character of the ideal employee as prescribed by the organisation. This has damaging consequences as it causes employees to suppress or deny contrasting feelings that arise both within themselves and amongst co-workers. Such works have produced images of normative control as

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[28] See Legge, (2005: 214-218) and Meyer,(1984; 1991; 1997; 2001), for an overview of research into organisational commitment.

being capable of blurring knowledge workers' sense of who they are. For example we have Casey's 'designer self' (1995) and Kunda's 'engineered self' (Kunda, 1992). However it is worth stating that these works do not contrast the normative structures with other structures shaping the workplace.

In recent years the concept of 'identity' has emerged as the primary concept to critically explore normative structures (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson et al, 2008; du Gay, 1996; Townley, 1993). For post structuralists identity is a more appropriate concept as structures are not 'real' they are words and practices, collectively known as a 'discourse', that individuals ascribe meaning to. In such accounts, an employee is not someone onto whom a range of top down structures are projected, they are bottom up subjective interpreters of discourses that come from a variety of sources. Positioned as a bottom up, interpretive catch all, identity slots neatly into the academic agenda of critical post-structuralists who seek to blow holes in the idea of a fixed employee interests. Instead they claim subjectivity is complex, changing, shifting and fluid (Alvesson et al, 2008; Collinson, 2003; Knights and Willmott, 1999; Kondo, 1990; Kuhn and Nelson, 2000; Pratt, 2000; Scott et al., 1998). Much of the literature exploring normative structures at work claim effective identity management is of paramount importance for organisations operating within shareholder capitalism:

> As cultural mechanisms are introduced or refined in an effort to gain or sustain employee commitment, involvement and loyalty in conditions of diminishing job security and employment durability, the management of identity work becomes more salient and critical to the employment relationship (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:624).

Despite post-structural claims that identity and subjectivity are ever changing only one dominant subjective identity has been identified. DuGay's 1996 concept of 'the '*enterprising self*' is arguably the most accepted subjective identity associated with the contemporary knowledge worker who is managed by a discursive range of HRM practices. DuGay claims that the dominant managerially prescribed discourse that emerged in the 1980's and 1990's was that of the free enterprise and excellence. The enterprising employee is depicted as a conscious manifestation of specific management discourse disseminated through rhetoric and technical HRM practices such as competency frameworks and training courses. This is considered to represent a

'disciplinary regime founded on the internalization of self-regulation, calculation and control in which externally imposed authority and discipline becomes much less significant' (Grant et al, 1998:202). 'Enterprising' employees are purported to have a subjective orientation to the workplace can be characterised as self regulating, self reliant, self choosing, risk taking and boldness (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; du Gay, 1996; Keat and Abercrombie, 1991; Rose, 1999). According to duGay, enterprising employees apparently are *'productive individuals whose sense of self-worth is inextricably linked to the "excellent" performance of their work and, thus, to the success of the company employing them'* (du Gay, 1996:119-authors emphasis). Fashioned by management discourse, the enterprising employee derives meaning and fulfilment from being successful in their work and being committed to the organisation. In addition, the enterprising self copes with the constant change occurring in contemporary workplaces by taking an entrepreneurial view of their career. They see themselves as having an employability value and career biography that they work to protect. The enterprising knowledge worker has come to represent the sociological subjective zeitgeist associated with the post-industrial knowledge worker. Once again the literature ends up in a similar space whereby the employee gets a sense of personal fulfilment from contributing and being committed to the achievement of organisation goals. (Du Gay, 1996; Kunda and Van Maanen, 1999; Lair et al, 2005; Peters, 1999, 2003; Ross 2003; Webb, 2004).

Interestingly, works on identity and the enterprising self have attracted criticism for falling into a similar trap as earlier theoretical accounts of corporate culture. The concept of identity itself has become something of a conceptual 'tool of our time' and has been used to account for such a wide range of workplace dynamics that it *'can be (and perhaps has been) applied to almost any phenomenon, much as the organizational culture craze co-opted and replaced similar yet worn out constructs'* (Alvesson et al, 2008:7). Works on identity have been criticised for positioning discourse as all powerful and for assuming that identities are simply created and changed in reaction to management communiqués and practices (Salaman and Storey, 2008). It seems that the identity and enterprise literatures are mirroring the flaws of corporate culture literatures by being over-deterministic and failing to comprehend other structures shaping the employment experience and subjectivity (Alvesson et al, 2008:7; Fournier and Grey, 1999).

Whilst normative structures get continuously re-packaged, and academics adapt the conceptual tools to analyse them, the underlying message does not dramatically change. The common optimistic theme underpinning normative structures over the decades is the possibility of unitary interests and self actualisation through work. However as macroeconomic forces change the description of the ideal employee also evolves. The normative ideal has shifted from *'organization man'* with secure, fulfilling, lifelong employment (Mills, 1959; Whyte, 1956), to the *'enterprising self'* who is committed to achieving organisation goals but also takes responsibility for their own career biographies (Du Gay, 1996; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005; Lair et al, 2005; Martin and Wajcman , 2004; Peters, 2003; Ross 2003; Webb, 2004). Ultimately management get to prescribe the desired subjective orientation and this evolves based on external macroeconomic factors *'the key change the new capitalism engenders is a shift in the kind of culture that organizations supply and that employees use to generate their work identities, and this change is driven by organizations' needs and interests'* (Martin and Wajcman, 2004:243-244).

The dominant perspective, in the management and the critical literature, is that normative structures or discourses play a fundamental role in managing knowledge workers and securing their subjective commitment to the organisation goals. However another body of literature is challenging this notion.

2.2.5: The End of Normative Structures?

There are increasingly loud rumblings that within the context of fast changing, liberal, shareholder driven, financial markets that organisations are placing so much emphasis on adhering to the principles of 'market rationalism' that monolithic normative structures promoting commitment and fixed beliefs are becoming irrelevant (Fleming and Sturdy, 2008; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005; Mintzberg et al., 2002; Peters, 1999, 2003; Ross, 2004; Thompson, 2003, 2005). This 'market rational' viewpoint claims the rules of liberal market financial structures are so all encompassing that *'organisations should so thoroughly internalise the new dictates of the market, so completely tune into its demands, so smoothly flow along its current, that they should literally assume its form'* (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005:202). In an environment of high change and

financial short-termism, strong normative structures are portrayed as neither feasible nor desirable as they constrain the flexibility required to survive. An organisation with a strong corporate culture has been described as *'an inward looking, conformist, complacent organisation, sunk into a morass of groupthink, rigid rather than flexible in its outlook'* (Legge, 2005:237). Furthermore, adhering to market rationalism can lead to negative consequences for employees prompting them to dis-identify from the organisation. As Kunda and Ailon-Souday argue:

> Organizational disloyalty fuels employee self-loyalty. It drives employees to think more like members of traditional occupations and professions whose ultimate allegiance is to their skills and careers and who have little reason to identify with their current, but probably temporary employer (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005:213).

Indeed, numerous authors have queried how the employment insecurity created by prioritising the short-term financial interests of shareholders functions alongside HRM claims that it values and is committed to employees (Hodson, 2001; Keep and Rainbird, 2000; Legge, 2005; Marchington and Grugulis, 2000; Sisson, 1993; Thompson, 2003).

The market rational viewpoint demonstrates how considering normative structures alongside others in the workplace yields different insights into the role and impact of normative structures. However, the argument that normative structures are becoming irrelevant requires more testing.

2.2.6: Normative Structures and Subjectivities – What is missing?

It appears that accounts of normative structures and subjectivity at work are becoming increasingly disjointed. On the one hand the management and critical literatures heralding the power of normative structures largely ignore the role of other structures. This is because normative structures are perceived to play the definitive role in shaping employee subjectivity over and above anything else going on in the organisation. This represents a significant departure from the earliest works on normative structures, coming from human relations theorists e.g. Barnard, 1968 quoted earlier, who claimed that normative and more rational structures must co-exist. Today, normative structures are portrayed as creating a level of self-management amongst employees so strong that there is less need for more rational structures such as hierarchy and bureaucracy.

Apparently, organisations themselves have gone post-structural. Those that do take other structures into account, such as market rationalists, end up with strongly contrasting conclusions and claims normative structures as becoming outdated and irrelevant.

Ultimately what is missing are in-depth accounts of the role and impact of normative structures tracing how they fit in with, and are affected by, other workplace structures (Korczynski, 2002; Edwards and Wright, 2001). Furthermore the impact on subjectivity needs to be explored, not by reading management rhetoric, but by gathering perspectives from those affected by such structures namely the individuals who experience the normative structures through their everyday participation in the range of associated practices as:

> We cannot understand the nature of HRM unless we understand the nature of the work, the social relations and the dynamic of the economy in which it is embedded'...further, the submerged voice of those who experience HRM initiatives (See Guest, 1999; Knights and McCabe, 2000) need to be given more prominence, not only for ethical reasons, but to counteract the managerialist agendas that are implicit in much HRM and performance research (Legge, 2005:41).

What this thesis contributes, particularly chapters five and seven, is an in-depth account of the role and impact of the case study organisation's 'best practice' set of HRM practices. This includes an overview of how these practices were disseminated and the perceptions of those charged with disseminating them namely top management and HR. This is contrasted with an exploration of how such practices were perceived by employees.

However it is not just the financial structures that need to be considered alongside normative structures. As indicated, the perceived importance of normative structures goes hand in hand with notions of the post-industrial knowledge work. Consequently it is important to consider how work is organised in knowledge intensive firms.

2.3: WORK STRUCTURES

The third structure explored for this thesis is how work was organised. This thesis focuses on a knowledge intensive firm (KIF) where *'most of the work is said to be of an intellectual nature and where well-educated, qualified employees form the major part of the work force'* (Alvesson, 2001:863).[29] Generally speaking, knowledge work is understood as *'professional or expert labour who have access to formal bodies of abstract knowledge'* (McKinlay, 2005:243). Consequently, for knowledge workers *'knowledge is simultaneously an input, medium, and output of their work'* (Newell et al., 2002:xii).

This section will explore the literature that deals with the range of practices associated with managing knowledge work in a knowledge intensive firm. Work practices can be defined as *'The aspects of work organization that are designed to control work behaviour, i.e. how specific jobs are being structured and steered'* (Alvesson and Thompson, 2005:491). The overview of practices will be followed by discussion of what knowledge work is, how it is managed and the relationship between knowledge work and employee subjectivity.

2.3.1: The 'Knowledge Economy' and the 'Knowledge Workplace': The End of Hierarchical Bureaucracies?

A key theme in the knowledge work literature is that new and distinct work structures have emerged to co-ordinate knowledge work. This change is deemed to be a consequence of a shift in a range of socio-economic structures the collective effect of which is commonly referred to as *'post industrialism'* (Bell, 1973), the *'knowledge economy'* (Blackler et al, 1993; Drucker, 1993; Stewart, 1997), *'information society'* and *'Network Society'* (Castells, 1996) the *'e-economy'* (OECD, 1999) *'wired society'* (Martin, 1978), and *'21st century capitalism'* (Reich, 1991). This shift to post industrialism is largely understood as a consequence of the manner in which technology developed rapidly, economies became more service based and consumer markets in developed economies became more specialised and changeable (Ritzer, 2007). It is

[29] No blue collar 'manual' or 'production' work was undertaken in the organisation studied.

important to point out that those writing about this shift do not focus on capital markets, but understand post-industrialism largely in terms of changing technology and consumer markets. The increasing speed of technological change means organisations can no longer compete on the basis of selling fixed products to stable mass markets. Successful organisations are those able to lead, or at least cope with, constant change. Apparently organisational flexibility can only be achieved by dismantling work structures associated with the fixed industrial, mass market economy.

Since the second half of the 20th century, the command and control structure of centralised, hierarchical bureaucracies have attracted primarily negative reviews from those writing about knowledge work structures. Many have claimed them to be downright ineffective in a post-industrial world. The claims of dysfunction centre on arguments that hierarchy and bureaucracy are unable to facilitate change and innovation. Hierarchical bureaucracies are overly mechanical, rigid, procedural, inflexible and unable to facilitate the information exchange and creative collaboration required for innovation and the generation of new customer service based, high technology knowledge (Abernathy, 1978; Adler, 2001; Bennis and Slater, 1964; Blau, 1955; Burns and Stalker, 1961; Child and Mc Grath, 2001; Crozier, 1964; Daft, 1998; Dyer et al., 1987; Gouldner, 1954; Hannan and Freeman, 1984; Hecksher and Donnellon, 1994; Mintzberg, 1979; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Piore and Sabel, 1984; Powell, 1990; Scott, 1992). Furthermore, hierarchical bureaucracies came to be portrayed as being unable to facilitate the level of employee involvement and communication deemed necessary for successful innovation and change. It was also claimed that hierarchical bureaucracies had detrimental effects on employee motivation levels and job satisfaction (Berger and Cummings, 1979; Hackman and Oldham; 1980; Porter and Lawler, 1965).

Ultimately, the large, command and control industrial firm is portrayed as being at a structural disadvantage. They are apparanet unable to compete with flatter, horizontally dispersed firms with normative prescribed cultures of commitment and autonomy. Many commentators heralded the demise of the hierarchical bureaucratic form of organisation (Hecksher and Donnellon, 1994; Piore and Sabel, 1984). The flatter, decentralised firm, it was argued, was less constrained by formal rules and boundaries and therefore could be more flexible, enterprising, and empowering in changing high

technology times. Contributions from the poststructuralist space also contributed to perceptions of hierarchy's demise. Such works downplayed the force of top down structures by denying the possibility that control can be located or belong to a particular group.

Reviewing the literature, it appears that in a 'post-industrial' world, hierarchies were deemed undeserving of novel interpretive academic endeavours beyond accounting for their demise. The later decades of the 21st century saw a rush literature that sought to define a 'new' workplace that was *'networked'* (Powell, 1990), *'lean'* (Womack et al. 1990), *'virtual'* (Davidow and Malone, 1992; Hale and Whitlam, 1997), *'post bureaucratic'* (Hecksher and Donnellan, 1994), *'boundaryless'* (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) *'enterprising'* (duGay, 1996) *'organic'* (Reed, 1996) and *'enclaved'* (Riain, 2000).

However, there is an emerging perception that more energy has been in invested in conceptualising the knowledge intensive firm rather than gathering robust evidence of change (Adler and Borys, 1993; Alvesson and Thompson, 2005; Barley and Kunda, 2001; Courpasson, 2000; Fournier and Grey, 1999; Mc Kinlay, 2005).[30] This can also be understood as a consequence of contemporary conceptions of knowledge work.

2.3.2: Conceptualising Knowledge Work: Tacit and explicit knowledge

Scene setting writings on the concept of knowledge work emerged midway through the last century, (Bell, 1973; Drucker, 1959; Polyani, 1958;1967), and the term entered mainstream organisational vernacular after a flood of works in the 1990's (Castells, 1996; Drucker, 1993; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Senge, 1990; Stewart, 1997 and Wenger, 1999). The nature of work in post-industrial societies is thought to have changed as organisations shift from trading on products to trading knowledge (Blackler et al, 1993; Drucker, 1993; Reed, 1996; Reich,

[30] This shift in understanding of organisation structures also drove a change in the particular aspects of the employment relationship that received attention and much of the literature, particularly from the 1980's onwards, moved away from analysing control to analysing flexibility (Proctor, 2005). In keeping with the structural zeitgeist of the day, commentators instead focused largely on how employees were being segmented into categories of manpower subject to different strategies of flexible resource allocation (Atkinson, 1984).

1991; Starbuck, 1992). In fast changing, high-technology markets, organisational ability to innovate, make decisions, respond to consumer demands and effectively navigate the unknown is perceived to come about through deployment of knowledge. Knowledge is increasingly viewed as a force of work production (Adler, 2001; Reed, 1996; Teece, 1998, 2000). Consequently *'knowledge based'* views of the firm emerged which position the creation and coordination of knowledge as the central purpose of the firm without any specific reference to financial goals (Argote et al, 2003; Cole, 1998; Grant, 1996; Kogut and Zander, 1996; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Penrose, 1959; Spender, 1996; Teece, 1998; Tsoukas, 1996). Lam states *'At the heart of this theory is the idea that the primary role of the firm, and the essence of organizational capability are the integration and creation of knowledge'* (Lam, 2000:488).

Interestingly that other organisational goal, the pursuit of profit, is not dealt with in any detail in writings about the knowledge based firm. Instead, it is assumed that knowledge creation in itself is a source of competitive advantage from which profits will flow (Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Davenport et al, 2003; Doz et al, 2001; Earl and Scott, 1998; Kogut and Zander, 1992). Despite the high status attached to knowledge work there are few qualitative accounts exploring how it is actually managed and what knowledge workers are required to do. In fact, there is still much ambiguity in the literature about what knowledge work actually is.

Considering its relatively recent foray into managerial consciousness many discussions on knowledge work seek to untangle how knowledge manifests itself in organisations and the epistemological complexities associated with exploring it. Those writing about knowledge work highlight the difficulty in arriving at an operational understanding of it and definitions tend to be conceptual at best (Alvesson, 2001; Scarborough & Burrell, 1996). Ultimately the one thing most authors agree on is that as a concept knowledge is *'complex'* (Blacker, 1995) *'ambiguous'* (Alvesson, 2001) *'elusive and slippery'* (Scarborough and Burrell, 1996) and *'fluid'* (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). This complexity is further evidenced in the variety of knowledge typologies produced which typically build on the interwoven categories offered by Polyani in 1967, namely *'tacit'*

and *'explicit'* and knowledge.[31] Following from Polyani's work, tacit knowledge involves both the conscious act of knowing and the subconscious subsidiary awareness that is learned through experience. Tacit knowledge is understood as something that resides within the individual and is difficult, if not impossible, to verbalise or transfer. The example often used is that of language, i.e. we learn to speak without being able to explain the rules of grammar, which are typically learned afterwards (Nonaka, 2005:377). The tacit dimension of knowledge is neatly conveyed in Polyani's oft quoted line *'We know more than we can tell'* (Polyani, 1967:4). Or as Alavi and Leidner put it *'Tacit knowledge forms the background necessary for assigning the structure to develop and interpret knowledge'* (2001:112). Explicit knowledge is articulated, codified, formal knowledge and relates to knowledge that 'stands alone', and is not connected to a particular individual. Examples include knowledge transferred into rules or manuals and routine workplace standard operating procedures (Alavi and Leidner, 2001). There are different perspectives regarding the extent to which tacit knowledge can be made explicit.[32] For the purposes of this thesis Polyani's founding depiction of tacit knowledge as something difficult, if not impossible, to make explicit, is adopted.

Numerous typologies have been created to understand how tacit and explicit knowledge manifests and merges within organisations. Given that this thesis is concerned with how knowledge work is structured, the typology adopted is that of Alice Lam. Lam's model is a suitable point of departure as it connects types of knowledge to four contrasting organisational structures in what Lam refers to as the *'interactive relationship between dominant knowledge types and organizational forms'* (Lam, 2000:493). In other words, Lam claims that different types of organisation structures facilitate different modes of knowledge creation. Lam's model is set out in table 2a

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[31] These 'explicit' and 'tacit' categories have been further broken down and labeled 'embrained, embodied, encultured, encoded, embedded and encoded (Collins, 1993); 'A state of mind, an object, a process, a condition of having access to information or a capability (Alavi and Leidner, 2001:109); 'Mediated, situated, provisional, pragmatic and contested' (Blackler, 1995), 'World One, Two or Three' (Popper, 1972). Organisations are also said to use knowledge in different ways and can be 'expert dependent, knowledge-routinized, symbolic-analyst dependent or communication intensive' (Blackler, 1995).

[32] Polanyi's original conception of tacit knowledge depicts it as largely untranslatable. However under the knowledge management thesis, authors such as Nonaka (1991) and Drucker (1959) claim that it is possible. In fact they claim that an organizations ability to achieve this translation gives it its' competitive advantage (Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Doz et al., 2001; Earl and Scott, 1998; Kogut and Zander, 1992). Some argue that Nonaka's work which describes tacit knowledge as both cognitive and technical, and therefore 'convertable', has undermined the conceptual merits of Polyani's work (Ray, 2009; Tsoukas, 2003).

below and will be referred to again in chapter six of this thesis which looks at how different categories of knowledge work in Avatar were structured. According to this model, knowledge within organisations can be individual, namely embrained or embodied, or collective, namely encoded and embedded.

Table 2a: Lam's model of organisational structure and knowledge

Professional Bureaucracy	**Machine Bureaucracy**
Embrained *Individual-explicit*	**Encoded** *Collective-explicit*
Embodied *Individual-tacit*	**Embedded** *Collective-tacit*

Adapted from Lam (2000:506)[33]

For Lam, individual knowledge is the knowledge that exists within people and it is therefore owned by the individual who autonomously decides to apply it as they see fit in different situations. It can be embrained or embodied as outlined below:

- Individual knowledge can be 'embrained'. This is explicit knowledge which is *'dependent on the individual's conceptual skills and cognitive abilities. It is formal, abstract or theoretical knowledge'* (Lam, 2000:492). Organisations relying primarily on such knowledge are *'professional bureaucracies'* where work is typically co-ordinated bureaucratically in conjunction with professional standards established outside of the organisation. The archetypes offered by Lam are accounting and architectural firms. Professional bureaucracies tend to be structured along functional specialisms whereby individuals have autonomy and sharing of knowledge across functions is limited.

- Individual knowledge can also be 'embodied' and tacit. Such knowledge is *'action oriented'* (Lam, 2000:492), insofar as the knowledge is created in the act of doing

[33] Lam's model offers three interlocking levels namely the two presented in this chapter and a third 'labour market' level which is not of central concern for this thesis and therefore is not discussed. Lam's knowledge types builds on earlier papers from Collins (1993) and Blacker (1995). The organizational types are informed by Mintzberg's (1979) organizational forms and work on the 'Japanese Model' from Aoki (1988) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995).

something and Lam quotes Barley who states that it emerges in practice *'in the light of the problem at hand'* (Barley, 1996:425). It is considered to arise spontaneously and does not need to be elicited via overt work and decision making processes. Organisations which rely on such knowledge are labelled '*Operating Adhocracies.* This is an organic organisation with little standardisation of knowledge and work procedures. The structure of such firms is typically *'Individualistic, but collaborative'.* Operating adhocracies can also experience difficulty in retaining tacit knowledge as the organisation is so fast moving and re-structured so often. It is the most innovative and least stable.

In contrast to individual knowledge, there is also collective knowledge that resides outside the individual. This is the knowledge that is shared among members of the organisation (Lam, 2000:491).

- Collective knowledge can be 'embedded' meaning it is collective, tacit and is located in organisational rituals, routines, relationships and a shared strong corporate culture. It is found in the *'J-form'* organisation which merges bureaucracy, flexibility and teamwork as *'It allows an organic, non-hierarchical team structure to operate in parallel with its formal hierarchical managerial structure.* In this model work is organisation via '*horizontal coordination'* and *'mutual adjustment'* (Lam, 2000:498). In J-form organisations knowledge is located primarily in problem solving and learning activities of the semi-autonomous cross-functional project team, not the managerial hierarchy. However knowledge can be retained beyond the team level as employees move around but always return from project work to their teams.

- Collective knowledge can also be 'encoded' and understood as 'information' that is explicit, codified and available to all in rules and procedures in order to '*generate a unified and predictable pattern of behaviour and output'* (Lam, 2000:492). Such knowledge is most dominant in '*machine bureaucracies'* where work is organised via the tight control of routine tasks that were individual autonomy is minimised. (Lam, 2000:495).

The different types of knowledge within firms have led to different explorations of the structures and processes for managing knowledge.

2.3.3: Managing Knowledge Workers:

Knowledge management is about '*identifying and leveraging the collective knowledge in an organization to help the organization compete*' (Alavi and Leidner, 2001:113). The literature discussing the management of knowledge work varies according to the type of knowledge. On the one hand there is the literature that focuses on how to extract tacit knowledge within the knowledge work process. On the other hand there are the systems for storing and disseminating the explicit knowledge that knowledge workers interact with. This section will explore each in turn.

The literature exploring how the knowledge work process should be managed focuses on identifying the optimum methods for extracting the embodied and embedded tacit element of knowledge; as it is understood as being a source of competitive advantage (Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Doz et al., 2001; Earl and Scott, 1998; Kogut and Zander, 1992). Those seeking to manage knowledge workers are interested in, as Thompson states, '*identifying, converting, codifying and disseminating the tacit knowledge of expert labour*' (2005:171). The idea that organisations need to 'identify' knowledge indicates how tacit knowledge is not wholly knowable to management. Tacit knowledge emanates from within the individual, making it variable, ambiguous and ultimately difficult to define and regulate. Therefore the optimum knowledge work process is often described as one that empowers and motivates knowledge workers to offer up their tacit knowledge. The knowledge work process in KIF's is further complicated by an understanding that it needs to be flexible enough to cope with continuous change. It must facilitate knowledge workers innovatively applying their tacit expertise in novel situations. Ultimately, work and standards are not predictable, or at least not as predictable as in industrial work. A common conclusion is that management cannot tell knowledge workers exactly what to do and this renders defunct command and control modes of management through hierarchy and bureaucracy (Adler, 2001; Causer and Jones, 1996; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Hamel and Prahalad, 1993; Ouchi, 1980; Sharma, 1997; Spender, 1996). Even more dramatically some claim that knowledge work is inherently unmanageable (Swan and Scarborough, 2001). In fact Alvesson argues that knowledge work goes largely unmanaged *'...professional work is also very difficult to evaluate. In practice, such expert evaluations rarely take place. In*

much professional work, the criteria for evaluating work are unreliable or entirely absent' (2001:863).

Consequently, in much of the literature, knowledge workers are assumed to hold a privileged position within the organisation as they have the ability to withhold their 'black box' of tacit skills (Abbott, 1988; Baer, 1987). It is understood that knowledge workers need to be intrinsically motivated to adapt to continuous change and offer up their tacit skills. The central focus amongst many academic and management publications is on how organisations can create the empowering and stimulating conditions that will coax this tacit knowledge from employees. The most accepted argument, across the literature, is that that flat, networked cultures of trust, commitment, reciprocity and self management are the most effective methods for co-ordinating work in knowledge intensive firms (Alvesson, 1990; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Casey, 1995; Causer and Jones 1996; Goldthorpe, 1984; Kunda, 1992; Mc Kinlay, 2005; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Powell, 1990; Seely Brown and Duguid, 2000). In such accounts authors claim that, because knowledge workers have so much autonomy in how they apply their skills, organisations must increasingly focus on enacting effective normative structure to shape employees' subjective identity and orient it towards the achievement of organisation goals. For example Alvesson argues:

> When hierarchical and technical means cannot prescribe behaviour in detail due to the complexity and organic nature of the work tasks, the self-image and social group(s) through which the worker defines him/herself becomes of great significance. Construction and activation processes of identities are therefore a theme of great relevance for understanding the management and working life of knowledge-intensive companies...There are many specific circumstances for knowledge intensive companies in relation to other organizations in how work is managed and organized, including a heavy reliance on self-determination, downplaying of a single, one-dimensional hierarchy, the need for extensive communication for coordination and problem-solving (Alvesson, 2001:1102).

The knowledge based view of the firm and the belief that knowledge and knowledge workers are a productive asset means that the literature often assumes there is no contradiction between the work and financial structures. This notion of knowledge work, as something almost distinct from the capitalist context in which it is situated, has facilitated a reified notion of knowledge work; similar to the reified notions of commitment that emerged in the literature on normative structures. Furthermore, like writings on human relations and corporate culture before it, much of the business

writings position managers as being on some unitary emancipation endeavour working to unleash employees inner potential that, if done right, produces a nirvana of personal fulfilment and organisations success (Desouza, 2003; Drucker et al, 1998; Seely Brown and Duguid, 2000; Wenger and Snyder, 2000). However, perceptions of knowledge management take a turn in the literatures that detail how explicit knowledge should be managed.

2.3.4: Knowledge Management Systems:

There is a body of knowledge management literature that explores organisational attempts to make knowledge work explicit and knowable through use of IT based 'Knowledge Management Systems' (KMS). KMS are:

> A class of information systems applied to managing organizational knowledge. That is, they are IT based systems developed to support and enhance the organizational processes of knowledge creation, storage/retrieval, transfer and application…Reviewing the literature discussing applications of IT to organizational knowledge management reveals three common applications: 1) the coding and sharing of best practices, 2) the creation of corporate knowledge directories, and 3) the creation of knowledge networks (Alavi and Leidner, 2001:114).

KMS incorporates a range of technologies and systems. For example, there are numerous knowledge repositories and document management systems which facilitate document storage and sharing to manage work processing amongst dispersed teams (Ruggles, 1998). There are also work tracking systems that issue '*work tickets*' which controls the flow of work and stores contain background information about work in order to establish knowledge directories. Knowledge workers interact with these systems and this throws into doubt the primacy of flat, empowered, normative structures in the co-ordination of knowledge work. The KMS approach to codifying and storing knowledge incorporates elements of both hierarchy and bureaucracy. In fact, research undertaken in the UK indicates a strong correlation between organisations that use KMS and also operate highly centralised, bureaucratic decision making structures (Bennett and Gabriel, 1999:217). Addressing this specific issue Ouchi argues that if...

> A bureaucratic organization operates fundamentally according to a system of hierarchical surveillance, evaluation, and direction than KMS are bureaucratic and hierarchical as in such a system each superior must have a set of standards to

> which he can compare behaviour or output in order to provide control. (Ouchi, 1980:134)

Reports of the widespread use of IT based KMS (Nerney, 1997; Scarborough, 2003), undermine the claim that 'knowledge' is fundamentally incompatible with hierarchy and bureaucracy. In fact, the use of KMS has led to claims that Knowledge Intensive Firms can also be '*High Surveillance Firms*' (Ackroyd, 2002; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992).

Accounts of KMS have been important in reining back notions of knowledge as being so esoteric and unpredictable that it cannot be managed. However accounts of KMS can also be criticised for being somewhat myopic. The KMS literature tends to focus solely on understanding KMS in terms of their functionality and perceived effectiveness without considering the relationship with other organisation structures and practices (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). Ultimately they rarely serve to inform wider debates on organisation structures and contribute to the mass of incompatible conclusions about knowledge work.

These alternative takes on how knowledge is managed in organisations have led to varied images of the subjectivity associated with the contemporary knowledge worker.

2.3.5: Work Structures and Subjectivity

The emphasis the literature places on the importance of the individual tacit contribution has led to an assumption that knowledge workers possess considerable privileges in terms of autonomy, market value, status, job security, pay and self identity (Abbott, 1988; Alvesson, 2001; Atkinson's, 1984; Baer, 1987; Reed, 1996). In fact they are sometimes portrayed as being so autonomous in how they apply their skills and so assured of their financial worth they are devoid of material concerns. For example, a leading management theorist argues:

> We know that knowledge people have to be managed as if they were volunteers. They have expectations, self-confidence, and, above all, a network. And that gives them mobility, which is probably the greatest change in the human condition. So accept the fact that we have to treat almost anybody as a volunteer. They carry their tools in their heads and can go anywhere. (Drucker, 1996:17).

Thus the idea of the high status *'portfolio worker'* (Handy, 1994) with their secure, embodied, marketable and mobile brand of knowledge (Peters, 1999) took hold. The literature exploring the subjectivity of knowledge workers have largely accepted the emergence of this portfolio driven, enterprising knowledge employee. Knowledge workers apparently embrace the flat, empowering, networked structures. The flat organisation structure, the ambiguity and change, the non linear careers apparently all create opportunities and work experience that knowledge workers welcome as devices to enhance their career options and personal brand of '*employability*' (Bridges, 1994). In other words, the lack of structural permanency supposedly brings a welcome increase in opportunities. Knowledge workers are portrayed as being so bought into a view of themselves as rational, free agents that they use their autonomy to achieve high levels of performance in order to maximise their ongoing career potential. They work hard as they are committed, not to the organisation, but to enhancing their skills and personal marketability (Handy, 1994). In sum, the literature that focuses on the knowledge worker as a carrier of valuable tacit knowledge portrays them as so priveleged, mobile and rational that they decide how and where they apply their skills.

It is also important to consider subjectivity in terms of the other structure co-ordinating knowledge work namely knowledge management systems (KMS). Writings that herald the primacy of KMS point to its bureaucratic qualities. As indicated earlier in this chapter there is a large body of literature that condemns bureaucratic structures and claim it negatively impacts on job satisfaction, well being, commitment and performance. Furthermore, bureaucratic structures are understood to be an obstacle to effecting employee commitment as they apparently make subjective identification with work more difficult. However this is too simplistic a portrayal of both bureaucratic structures and knowledge workers. Adler and Borys also differentiate between 'coercive' and 'enabling' bureaucratic processes (Adler and Borys, 1996). Enabling bureaucracies can provide clarity and fairness in organisations through reducing the scope for discretionary power and the potentially negative consequences of opportunism and particularism. Working life within a bureaucratic framework can also be more transparent as performance and assessment are regulated and more objective. Bureaucratic, hierarchical structures can also provide a greater sense of stability, fairness and career direction as evidenced by some works relating to organisation structures and gender (Wickham et al, 2008). Numerous works exist highlighting how

'Formalization reduces role conflict and ambiguity, thereby increasing work satisfaction and reducing feelings of alienation and stress' (Adler and Borys, 1996:64). Bureaucratic structures can work *'partly as a means to provide meaning and identification – a vehicle for creating and maintaining shared understanding and shared identities'* (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004:171). In this literature, the ability of bureaucracy to eradicate ambiguity provides a welcome source of security to employees.

Once again there are many contradictions in the literature on the subjective orientation of knowledge workers. This is because, first, there is a dearth of data on the structures in place to manage knowledge workers and secondly, reified concepts of knowledge as something distinct from other workplace structures have become commonplace.

2.3.6: Work Structures - What is missing?

There is a shared perspective that little is known about the knowledge work process (Alvesson, 2001; Barley, 2005; Barley and Kunda, 2001; McKinlay 2005; Scarborough and Burrell, 1996; Thompson, 2005). Despite the eagerness to conceptualise the 'new' workplace it is argued that empirically unsound conceptualisations of knowledge work have created an esoteric, conceptual dead-end that says little about what knowledge workers do every day.

Arguably, the rush to conceptualise knowledge work was fuelled by assumptions of the end of hierarchy and bureaucracy. This assumption had spawned attempts to identify a new and equally powerful co-ordinating structure that fits with understandings of a post-industrial world. However, the extent of structural change has also come under increased scrutiny in recent years. It is argued that claims of change are largely unsubstantiated and much of the evidence cited has been taken from optimistic management writing rather than robust empirical explorations (Alvesson and Thompson, 2005; Fournier and Grey, 1999; Gleadle et al; 2008; Salaman and Storey, 2008; Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, many works rely on the power of the metaphor rather than empirical insights and most attempts *'fall short of offering either a nuanced description of the attributes of post bureaucratic organizing or a full account of why new forms of organizing have emerged'* (Barley and Kunda, 2001:77). Just like

knowledge work itself, more work has been done to theoretically, rather than empirically, to bring the contemporary knowledge worker to life. Such is the dearth in awareness of knowledge management regimes that '*Knowledge management awaits the arrival of its F.W. Taylor'* (McKinlay, 2005:259). In fact some claim that those interested in the study of work *'face the same challenge that confronted the field's founders: the need to develop images of organizations that are congruent with the realities of work in a new economic order'* (Barley and Kunda, 2001:77).

As with the other structures there are numerous blindspots in the literature on knowledge work and knowledge workers. Many commentators, including academics, continue to be bewildered by how organisations structure knowledge work. Furthermore, the image of the autonomous, empowered, mobile, knowledge worker has become commonplace with very little data to back this up. As Salaman and Story state:

> We know a great deal about what proponents are recommending, but far less about how senior managers are making sense of, and applying, these recommendations...[...]... The role and contribution of management itself as a key decision making role has been largely neglected (Salaman and Storey, 2008:319).

Consequently there is a lack of consensus regarding the characteristics of knowledge work structures and a lot to learn about knowledge work and knowledge workers. Chapter six of this thesis seeks to make one such contribution by exploring different categories of knowledge work and how they were managed in the case study organisation.

2.4: REFLECTING ON THE LITERATURE

Taken together, the myriad of structural and subjective extremities present numerous contradictory conclusions on what it is like to undertake knowledge work within a liberal market, high technology, knowledge intensive firm. The preceding account of the literature highlights the varied perspectives and gaps. This section concludes the review by noting the contradictions between the literatures dealing with each structure and subjectivity, and what this thesis aims to contribute.

- Financial Structures: The literature pertaining to liberal market economies claim top management are structurally compelled to prioritise the needs of distant mobile

shareholders; to the detriment of employees. These writings depict an organisation that operates primarily on hierarchical terms to drive the initiatives and change required to deliver short-term financial targets. Employees are largely positioned as a homogenous, powerless, voiceless group that can only silently suffer the negative consequences of shareholder capitalism. Sociological accounts which explore the subjectivity of individuals operating amidst these insecure changing structures offer differing conclusions. On the one hand awareness of structural change and insecurity is portrayed as empowering as it encourages individuals to avoid being defined by structures and equips them with the ability to reflect, adapt and even find personal freedom to fashion their own lives and identity. On the other hand, structural insecurity has been claimed to induce a condition akin to an existential crisis as the instability inherent in everyday working life prevent employees from creating a cohesive sense of self that used to be available through employment. These conclusions stem from reflections on macro socio-economic structures and not a robust exploration of structures, practices and subjectivities at the workplace.

- Normative structures: Normative structures are portrayed by both the optimistic and critical literature as being all powerful and colonising and capable of creating enterprising employees that are committed to the achievement of organisation goals. In this literature knowledge workers are enterprising and want to work for a successful organisation. They also want to take responsibility for their own high performance to create and protect their career biography. Furthermore despite the claim that work and career is central to this contemporary subjective orientation, the actual work that people do is largely ignored in the literature on normative structures. This literature largely assumes both the end of hierarchy and that employees are unable to comprehend the negative consequences of shareholder capitalism, or indeed anything else that might be occurring in the organisation. The main disparities in the literature are the interpretations over whether this is empowering or destructive. Contrasting this, some writers are beginning to question how optimistic normative structures function alongside the financial structures of shareholder capitalism or indeed any other structure at work. An emerging 'market rational' perspective answer this question by claiming that shareholder capitalism is rendering normative structures irrelevant as top management have to prioritise

shareholder needs so blatantly that it is pointless for them to even pretend to care about employees.

- Work Structures: Writings that seek to characterise the post-industrial firm, claim there has been a shift to flat, boundaryless, ever changing, networked organisation structures. Pyramid command and control structures are purported to have been obliterated as hierarchy and bureaucracy are apparently neither effective nor desirable. However, claims of extensive and radical change have not been empirically validated. Furthermore, such works largely ignore the role of financial structures. Knowledge based views of the firm assume profit follows knowledge creation and therefore an organisations priority is to enact structures that best facilitate knowledge creation. In fact, knowledge based accounts of the relationship between knowledge work and the wider economy tend to focus solely on consumer markets and disregard the role of financial structures. Consequently the conclusions' directly contradict the literature which claims that KIF's operating in liberal market economies require hierarchical structures and high levels of management autonomy in order to drive harsh change. Knowledge management literature heralds the dominance of self management and the demise of hierarchy and bureaucracy also run counter to the body of work on 'Knowledge Management Systems' which are understood to be both hierarchical and bureaucratic forms of management. Perceptions of subjectivity amongst knowledge workers largely mirror the conceptual dichotomy. The bulk of the literature emphasises the tacit and seemingly esoteric element of knowledge work and claims that knowledge workers are powerful and mobile. Unlike the normative literature, knowledge work literature portrays knowledge workers as being so autonomous that they are not committed to their employing organisation. They are committed to constantly developing their body of knowledge and, if they are not to leave the organisation, they must be provided with the freedom and structures to develop empowering networks of knowledge creating peers. Consequently bureaucracy and hierarchy are portrayed as detrimental to their interests. This is contrasted by the literature which highlights how some forms of bureaucracy can provide a sense of security, transparency and fairness in decision making that employees appreciate. Despite the works that seek to conceptualise the structures of KIF's, it is widely accepted that little is known about how knowledge workers are managed.

As mentioned at the introduction to this chapter a central position of this thesis is that the gaps and contradictions in the literature are a result of major shortcoming, namely the failure to connect the structures that play a dominant role shaping the employment experience of knowledge workers. This has permitted the development of contradictory conceptual extremities such as extreme levels of hierarchy, management autonomy and powerless employees on the one hand and the shift to a post-bureaucratic, flat firm with empowered employees on the other. The confusion has been exacerbated by the post-structural accounts of subjectivities that fail to acknowledge structures at all, and often ignores the reason organisations exist in the first place, namely to make a profit. The variety of literatures seeking to explore KIF's are rife with conceptual extremities and arguably do a disservice to the study of everyday working life. This thesis seeks to shed some light on these blind spots and contradictions by offering an ethnographic account of how these three structures were enacted and interpreted within one knowledge intensive firm.

The data presented is from a six month ethnography undertaken within a subsidiary of a listed, high-technology, knowledge intensive firm, which undertakes knowledge work and operates within the economic model of liberal market shareholder capitalism. The methodology employed is further discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: The Methodology

3.0: INTRODUCTION TO THIS CHAPTER

This thesis is based on a six month, critical realist, ethnographic analysis of a stock market listed, high-technology, knowledge intensive, multi-national corporation (MNC). I secured full-time access for six months to an Irish based subsidiary of a global MNC that employs approximately 850 full-time permanent employees in Ireland. The research was conducted from June 2007 to November 2007 inclusive. During this time I analysed a wide range of documentation, conducted seventy five interviews and attended twenty five meetings. This chapter highlights the value and applicability of the critical realist ethnographic method for this research. This is followed by a description of the case study organisation, the data gathering tools utilised and an overview of the experience of researching in the field for a six month period.

3.1: CRITICAL REALISM AND ETHNOGPRAHIES

3.1.1: Critical Realism

As a general epistemological philosophy, critical realism is understood as an alternative to, or middle ground between, positivism, constructivism and relativism (Thompson and Hugh, 2002). Critical realists posit that there is an external 'reality' that is knowable and independent of individual perceptions. Furthermore, this reality affects and is affected by perceptions and subjective interpretations (Bhaskar, 1975; Collier, 1994; Fairclough, 2005; Reed, 2005). Critical realism is particularly suitable for this thesis as it focuses on the interplay between structures and subjectivities. Within critical realism independent structures have a real and measureable relationship with individuals as critical realism is concerned with:

> The relationship between pre-constructed social structures, practices, identities, orders of discourse and organisations on the one hand, and processes, actions, events on the other. People with their capacities for agency are seen as socially produced, contingent and subject to change, yet real, and possessing real causal powers which, in their tension with the causal powers of social structures and practices, are a focus of analysis (Fairclough, 2005:923).

This thesis is concerned with exploring three pre-constructed organisational structures and how they shape, and are shaped by, the individuals interacting with them. Another factor that makes the critical realist approach suitable for this research is the importance it attaches to the context in which the organisation is embedded. Critical realism is concerned with identifying the contextual causal mechanisms in both structures and actors' capabilities (Elger, 2010). The external and internal context in which actors or agents are situated, are understood to have real consequences. The external context relates to the macro institutional setting in which an organisation is embedded. The internal context relates to the configuration of social relations and processes that exist within the organisation (deVaus, 2001). This approach is suitable for this thesis which seeks, in part, to connect the external structure of liberal market shareholder capitalism and the internal structures and subjectivities within the workplace.

Critical realism also accepts that structures are maintained or transformed by those subjectively interacting with them (Bhaskar, 1975). Criticism realism has been criticised by some who claim its dualist structure-agency approach cannot fully account for the emerging and changing nature of subjectivity (Contu and Willmott, 2005; Willmott, 2005; Willmott and O'Doherty, 2009). It is the indeterminacy between structure and subjective interpretivism that such writers feel critical realism cannot account for. However I argue that in order to understand where structures are not reaching it is important to delineate where they seek to reach in the first instance. How can research claim to identify the indeterminate aspects of an individual's subjective orientation, identity or behaviours without having a sense of which aspects *have* been determined?

Ultimately critical realism provides a methodological starting point for embarking on a contextual, embedded, iterative and reflexive analysis of objective structures and subjectivities.

3.1.2: Critical Realism and the Ethnographic Method

The ethnographic method involves spending time in the field of study observing, and to an extent, living the life of those being researched (Abercrombie et al, 2006). The method originated in classical anthropology and was appropriated into contemporary sociology by the scholars of the 'Chicago School'. Researchers from this school heralded the value of exploring a social group by positioning oneself *'in the company of the members [and] to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject'* (Goffman, 1961:ix-x-authors emphasis). The ethnographic method also has a strong tradition within the sociology of work and labour process theory.[34] A premise of the ethnographic method is that the object of analysis is best explored in the fullest possible context (Ember and Ember, 2006; Richardson, 2000). In addition to spending time in 'the field' ethnographies typically incorporate mixed methods of data gathering such as observations, interviewing and document analysis (McCall and Simmons, 1969:1).

The ethnographer learns through witnessing and experiencing, as much as possible, the phenomenon being researched in order to *'identify the rules that govern behaviour in the setting and discern patterns in members' behaviour'* (Fielding, 2001:149). This closeness has led ethnographic proponents to claim that *'as a means of gaining a first insight into a culture or social process, as a source of hypothesis for detailed investigation using other methods, it is unparalleled'* (Fielding, 2001:146). Critical realism is particularly suitable for ethnographic research as the realist ontology involves contextually situating micro-level perceptions and events within a broader plurality of structures (Reed, 2005). This facilitates an analysis of the wider applicability and relevance of the data gathered. The ethnographic approach involves close and ongoing proximity between the researcher and those being researched. Arguably a critical realist, ethnographic analysis, is the most effective way of identifying the relationship between a plurality of structures and micro-level perceptions.

Another reason ethnographies operate well within the critical realist tradition is that it facilitates the *'self-reflexivity'* required to identify the role of the researcher in data gathering (Casey, 1995:199). Critical realism permits claims of 'accuracy' from

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[34] See the work of Batstone et al, 1977; Beynon, 1973; Braverman, 1974; Buroway, 1979; Cavendish, 1982; Finlay, 1988; Juravich, 1985; McCabe, 2009; Nichols and Beynon, 1977; Roy, 1958; Vallas, 1993; Westwood, 1984. See also Vicki Smith, (2001) for an overview of ethnographies at work.

scholars who seek to depict the external world. However it also requires such positivism to be tempered by an acknowledgment of the limits of the research as *'there cannot be an exact correspondence between reality and our representations of it, but good research aims to grasp the real with as much accuracy and complexity as is feasible'* (Thompson and Hugh 2002:359). Reflexivity is important in the ethnographic method as although the ethnographer gets close to the insider view they are never actually an insider (Fine, 1993). An ethnographer can never claim to be a wholly impartial outsider who approaches the field with conceptual blankness (Clifford and Marcus, 1986:6). In terms of this research, I understand my role as that of a witness to some of the organisation's dominant structures, practices and behaviours whilst also serving as a channel for agent interpretations and narratives. Throughout this thesis I will comment on my role in the research and my experiences where it either adds to the understanding of the case study or it is relevant to the conclusions reached. However I will not couch my conclusions in reflexive caveats as I feel my analysis has produced valid conclusions regarding the structures and subjectivities within the organisation and its' members. The critical realist ethnography facilitates the reflexivity necessary to identify the role of the researcher, whilst ensuring the data doesn't get stuck in the inconclusive '*swamp of reflexivity'* (Finlay, 2002).

Ultimately, my epistemological goal is to understand the insider view, as much as possible, and interpret this as an outsider in order to thematise and theorise about the case structures and subjectivities. Ultimately '*the resulting description is expected to be deeper and fuller than that of the ordinary outsider, and broader and less culture-bound than that of the ordinary insider*' (Wilcox, 1982:462). As indicated in chapter two, such in-depth accounts of working life in liberal market, KIF's, are in short supply.

3.1.3: Ethnographies, Multinational Corporations and New Workplaces

Ireland reflects the characteristics of a liberal market economy (Hall and Soskice, 2001).[35] Ireland is one of the largest per capita recipients of foreign direct investment (FDI) from market listed MNC's and has been referred to as the most globalised

[35] Ireland's social partnership model, which was active at the time of the ethnography, reflects some characteristics associated with a co-ordinated market economy. However within the case study organisation social partnership did not dominate the approach to people management.

economy in the world (Kearney, 2002 in Collings et al, 2008). Attracting FDI has been a central aim of Irish economic policy and the country was the largest net recipient of FDI within the OECD between 1993-2003. Given the prominence of MNC's in Ireland, numerous strands of literature have emerged exploring their impact on labour. Perhaps the most substantial body of literature is that which explores people management practices in Irish based MNC's (Collings et al, 2008; Geary, 1999; Flood, 2005; Geary and Roche, 2001; Gunnigle, 1995; 1998; Gunnigle and Collings, 2005; Gunnigle, 2006; Monks et al, 2001; Turner et al, 2001). Much of this research is quantitative, crosses sectors and contributes primarily to literatures exploring the 'host' versus 'home' country effects on people management practices. In general there is a consensus that MNC's have spurred an increase in the adoption of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices in Ireland (Gunnigle et al, 2003:8).[36] However it has been acknowledged that there is a lack of qualitative research on working life in Irish based MNC's (Collings et al, 2008b; Gunnigle et al, 2003).[37] So this thesis makes a contribution to understanding the type of multi-national, workplace structures that have been a cornerstone of Irish industrial policy, and significant influencers of management practices in general.

This thesis deals specifically with a high-technology, knowledge intensive, multi-national. A handful of ethnographies exist which recount tales of life in 'new economy' organisations e.g. in the US there are the works of Casey, (1995); Kunda, (1992) and Ross, (2003), in Ireland there is the work of Riain, (2000). These accounts, particularly the US based ones, provide important insights into how knowledge workers in high-technology, new economy workplaces understand themselves and the social processes that facilitate the work. However there are still numerous blind spots in the literature about the structures and processes shaping knowledge work and what knowledge workers do every day (Barley and Kunda, 2001). This thesis aims to add to the ethnographic literature of such workplaces. However the difference with this research is that it breaks down in detail the mechanics of three dominant workplace structures

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[36] Other themes have also emerged for example the relationships between the MNC and skills, training and qualifications (McGovern, 1996; Wickham and Murray, 1983; Wickham, 1992). There is also a body of literature profiling the role of women in MNC's (Barry and Brunt, 2002; Breathnach, 1993; Wickham and Murray1982; 1987).

[37] Some notable exceptions are Collings, et al, 2008; 2008b; Dundon et al, 2003; 2004; Mc Govern, 1996).

and explores how these structures interacted to inform and be informed by subjectivities.

Ultimately there remains a need for in-depth analysis of the everyday structural processes and practices that make up the job of being a knowledge worker. To paraphrase Marx, work remains hidden behind the factory gates, or, in this case, behind the large glass doors of an elaborate atrium office complex.

3.2: IN THE FIELD

3.2.1: The Case

This ethnography represents a 'holistic single-case' (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2004:157) insofar as it explores a range of structures and subjectivities of a social grouping in their overall context. Avatar Group (pseudonym)[38] is a household name and global, market leading provider of a range of high-technology products and services in more than sixty countries. They supply high-technology, personal portable devices and build the wireless networked technologies and infrastructure to support them. Avatar Group is one of the largest, most financially successful organisations in the world.[39] It consistently ranks highly within business publications listing the worlds 'most innovative', 'best known brands' and 'great places to work'.[40]

Avatar Group (Group) can be understood as an archetype of a firm operating within the financial pressures of neo-liberal shareholder capitalism. The headquarters were located in one of the world's largest liberal market economies. Categories of Group shares were listed on some of the world's major stock exchanges and were classified as 'high-technology' shares. Group pursued a high dividend payout ratio which meant that a

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[38] Avatar is the pseudonym selected for the case study organisation. In the computing world an Avatar is a constructed identity or image created to facilitate interaction with others. All who come into contact with an Avatar are aware that the projected image is not a true reflection of the user.

[39] For example it is listed in the UNCTAD ranking of largest transnational organizations. http://www.unctad.org/templates/Page.asp?intItemID=2443&lang=1

[40] The position within these lists cannot be referenced for confidentiality purposes however the rankings referred to are:

- Most innovative: www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_17/b3981401.htm
- Best known brand: www.millwardbrown.com/Sites/Optimor/Content/KnowledgeCenter/BrandzRanking.aspx
- Great place to work: www.greatplacetowork.com/

higher proportion of earnings was paid to shareholders in dividends than was retained and reinvested in the organisation. The shareholder relationship was managed by Group with the Group CEO positioned externally as the face of the organisation. Remuneration for Group and subsidiary executives was weighted on growing earnings per share in order to ensure shareholder return.[41]

3.2.2: Avatar Ireland

This research was undertaken within Avatar Ireland (Avatar) which has been operating in Ireland for several years as a distinct profit and loss subsidiary of Group. At the time of the ethnography, Avatar Ireland employed approximately 850 primarily white-collar, highly skilled professionals who worked with knowledge in different ways; which will be explored in chapter six. Financially, it is one of the most profitable organisations in Ireland. Strategically they aimed to be the market leader and a key objective for Avatar Ireland (Avatar), as stated in a strategy document, was to be considered a *'by-word for innovation'*. As a distinct profit and loss (P&L) unit, the ultimate purpose of Avatar was to meet financial targets set with Group and to deliver a range of products and services to the Irish consumer market. The financial exchanges between Group and Avatar Ireland were co-ordinated around the budget processes which will be further explored in chapter four. The functional strategic exchanges were undertaken between functional counterparts. For example, Irish marketing plans were shaped by and had to be reconciled with the Group marketing strategy, HR with Group HR and so on.

During the period of the six month ethnography Avatar Ireland restructured the organisation three times. This restructuring and the consequences will be discussed in later chapters. For the purposes of this thesis I will describe the structure that existed for the longest period during the ethnography. Avatar comprised of six departments namely, technology, sales and channel management, marketing, finance, strategy and human resources (HR). Set out in the following graph is an overview of this structure with the job titles slightly anonymised and an approximate headcount in each function.

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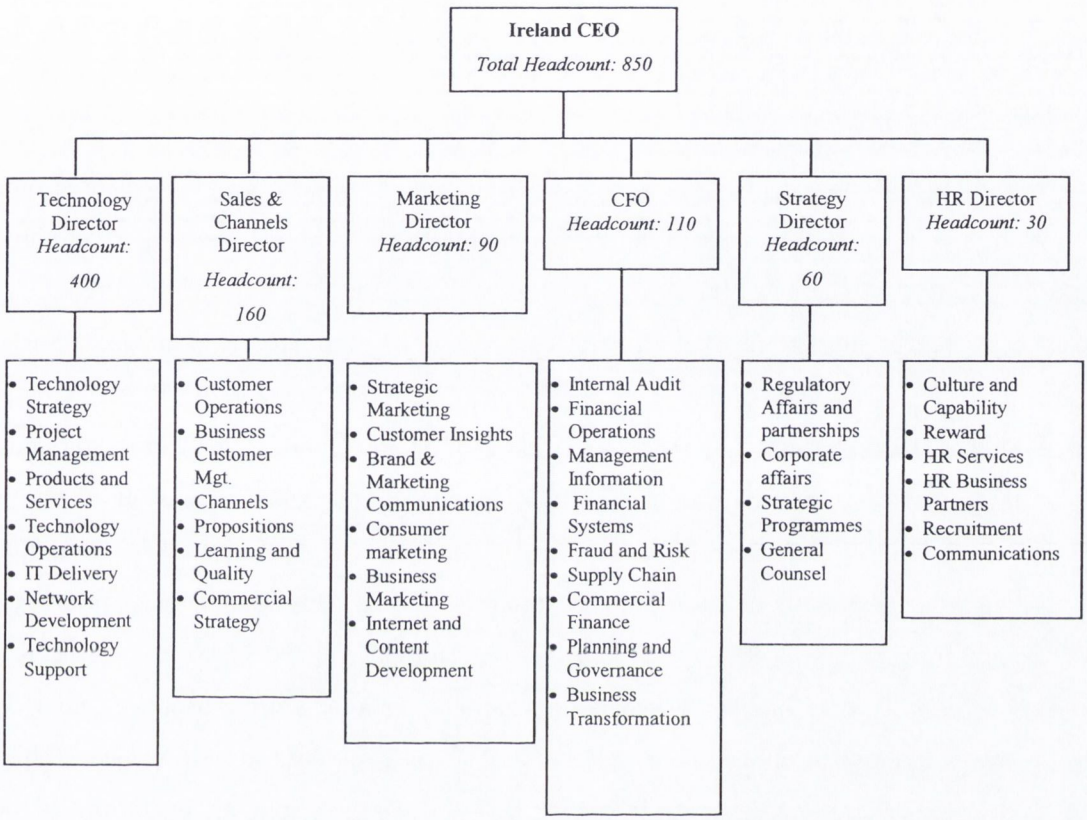
[41] The force of shareholder power was demonstrated during the period of the ethnography when Avatar was involved in a highly publicised incident of what the financial media termed 'shareholder activism'. For confidentiality purposes I will not discuss the specifics of the incident. However what was interesting was the extent to which it was known and discussed at all levels of the organisation.

Figure 3a: Avatar Ireland Organisation Chart



As it was a distinct business unit executing this variety of functions Avatar Ireland possessed a large number of distinct specialised roles. The most common role was that of engineer; however this thesis looks at knowledge workers doing different jobs in all departments, in as representative a manner as possible. This was done in order to gather an understanding of the universal role and impact of the structures that shaped working life throughout the organisation.

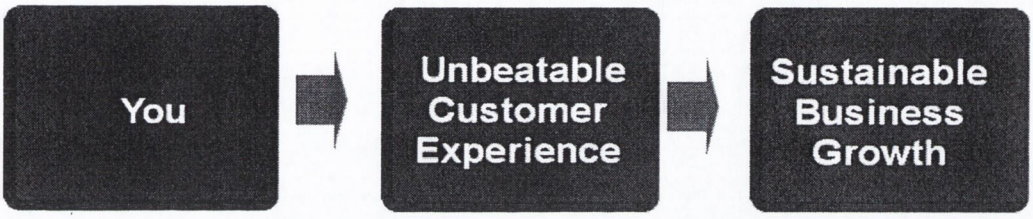
3.2.3: The Avatar Brand

Comprehending Avatar requires an appreciation of the centrality of the Avatar corporate brand. HR had responsibility for disseminating the social attributes of the brand internally and it was part of the normative structures which will be dealt with in chapter five. However it is worthwhile introducing it at this point as the brand is one of the first things an individual encounters when entering the Avatar workplace. It was central to the feel of the organisation and was strongly reflected in the physical environment. Even as I write this, when I think of Avatar, I think firstly of their logo and corporate colours. Avatar was the global market leader in their sector and the strength of the brand was considered to be a primary source of competitive advantage. Much was invested in promoting the brand externally. Some of the world's most recognisable celebrities were used in Avatar advertising campaigns and Avatar were main sponsors of high profile sporting events around the world. Avatar traded largely on the brand and not just on, for example, their technical competence or pricing model. Consequently ensuring the sanctity of the brand was one of the few top management priorities that was consistently backed up and practiced throughout the organisation. The core tenet of the brand was that Avatar was not just about providing certain products and services, instead Avatar products and services were about providing an experience. This was referred to as the Avatar 'Brand Essence' and a brand training DVD and corporate documentation stated *'Every strong brand has its own unique personality. The characteristics that set it apart from the rest...[...]...Our Brand Essence is who we are; it's how we behave and how we make people feel'.* Avatar Ireland directors were featured in this DVD and heralded the importance of each individual in creating the desired customer experience: '*Each one of us plays an important part in making [The Brand] live and creating an evermore unique and inspiring experience for our customers – so we inspire them to make the most of their time'.*

The importance of delivering the 'Avatar Experience' permeated the organisation and it was the premise for much decision making. Proposals for new products, services and even internal initiatives, in addition to being assessed on financial grounds, were often measured against specified criteria to demonstrate they were 'on brand'. To be labelled 'off brand' was a death knell for a proposal or initiative. The relationship between the individual providing the brand experience and organisation success was heavily

impressed upon employees and was graphically displayed in employee communications by the image below.

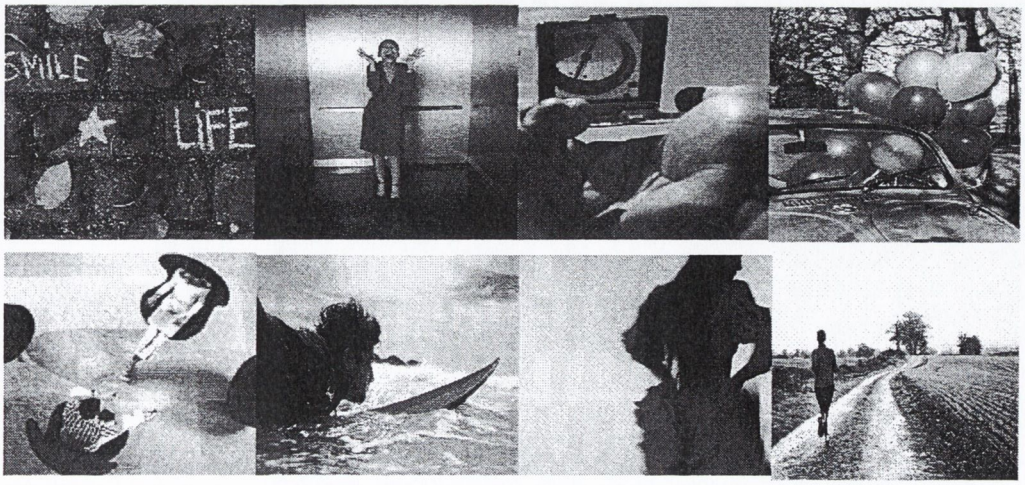
Figure 3b: Individual, Brand Performance Link



Numerous ideal social attributes were associated with the brand experience. These were widely promoted throughout the organisation and individuals were explicitly called upon to be passionate, reliable and innovative. These three ideals were further broken down into a broad range of normative attributes which incorporated terms such as warmth, humanity, empathy, integrity, life's journey, best in class, challenging, inspiring, creativity and optimism. This will be further discussed in chapter five.

Within Avatar there was extensive use of imagery and symbolism to convey the brand, or what was referred to by Avatar HR as the 'corporate personality'. The main message was that every moment, both inside and outside of Avatar, is an experience, an opportunity to live life to the fullest. Below are some examples of the types of images that featured repeatedly throughout the workplace and on corporate communications.

Figure 3c: Sample Avatar Corporate Imagery



3.2.4: The Physical Setting

Each day I took the employee bus from the city centre to Avatar and the contradiction between the bus and the experience of the journey became a metaphor for Avatar itself. In keeping with the Avatar Brand, the outside of the bus contained bright, close up, vivid imagery of young people having fun and statements describing how exciting, action packed and high energy the bus journey should be. For example there was a large statement which read '*This is not a bus, it's a venue*'. However inside the bus, the commuters were typically sleepy and quiet and the journey tedious and boring. The bus stopped at the business park in which Avatar was located.

The headquarters of Avatar Ireland were compelling and described in Avatar documentation as a '*state of the art corporate village*'. The internal decor was aimed at ensuring that the brand experience started at the entrance. The primary colour inside the building was pale beige and the main injection of colour came from the dramatic wall hangings describing the brand through vivid imagery and text. The atrium style building was bright, comfortable and minimalist.[42] Arguably, the defining feature of the building was the brightness and openness brought about by the extensive use of ceiling to floor glass walls and partitions. In fact, those working at the reception desk sometimes wore sunglasses to protect themselves from the sun coming in through the vast six story glass panels at the entrance. Meeting rooms were created through the use of glass partitioning and it was possible to see into most meeting rooms at any time. Etched into the glass doors and partitioning around the building were numerous first person claims of being in a largely positive, high energy emotional state such as:

> 'I'm convinced, I'm thinking, I'm inspired, I'm doodling, I'm pointing, I'm presenting, I'm drawing, I'm talking too, I'm prepared, I'm surprised, I'm excited, I'm suggesting, I'm listening, I'm concentrating, I'm being creative, I'm next, I'm waving my arms, I'm hopeful, I'm impressed, I'm relaxed, I'm confused, I'm taking a few notes, I'm lost, I'm arguing, I'm thinking laterally'.

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[42] '*An atrium building structure is disclosed which comprises a central core with a plurality of habitable areas extending radially outwardly therefrom in the manner of spokes of a wheel. Glassed-in walls extend between the spokes to provide a plurality of climate-controlled atria. Facades on the sides of the spokes adjoining the atria also have glassed-in walls providing a view of both the atria and the outdoors from within the habitable areas*'. http://www.freepatentsonline.com/4429501.html

On the ground floor of the atrium was a coffee shop, a convenience store, couches and flat screen televisions. Throughout the building there were, what were called, 'break-out' areas where individuals could go to play games and there was an on-site gym. A variety of eating facilities were available, there was a large canteen, a smaller sandwich bar and the coffee shop. There were also kitchenettes on each floor which had couches and facilities to make tea and coffee or heat up food from home. There was not much need to leave the building during the day, and not many places to go if you did as it was located in an industrial park.

The offices were open plan and it was possible to see everyone at a glance on any floor. Desks were set up in a 'terrace style' with low partitions separating opposite desks but none to separate adjacent neighbours. Individuals moved desk space frequently and personalising desk space, through photographs or posters for example, was not that common. The only purposeful indicator of status was reserved for directors who had large detached desks typically at a window with a couch next to their desk. They typically sat facing the rest of the department.[43] Only the CEO had an office. This was a large glass panelled room with a desk, couches, flat screen television and a conference table, which you could see into at all times.

Individuals primarily used mobile working devices such as laptops and mobile phones instead of personal computers and landlines. It was common to see individuals walking around with laptops under their arms, or laptops open at the coffee shop. Working hours were somewhat flexible and individuals could organise the detail of their own schedule. Individuals drifted in at different times, with some arriving as early as 7am, however most were at their desks by 9.00am. The first point of action was typically to turn on the computer, log on to the network, open up various software packages and then head to the canteen or coffee shop.

The official dress code was 'business casual' however the directors, sales and senior managers often erred more on the side of business than casual. There was a decidedly glamorous element to much of the female attire and during the period of the ethnography a number of female employees were profiled in mainstream Irish media,

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[43] See Felstead et al, 2005 for a discussion on the development and impact of the physical work setting on individuals.

including the front page of national newspapers, offering advice on how to incorporate 'style' into the professional female wardrobe.

Ultimately the physical setting was a combination of spacious, minimalist, branded decor populated by smartly dressed, mainly young, individuals carrying high-tech accessories. Entering the building for the first couple of times was compelling, as there was a sense of entering an intoxicating microcosm of glamour, success, creative high energy, youthfulness.

3.2.5: Access and Gatekeepers

Access to Avatar was gained through the HR department as they wished to explore perceptions of the range of HR practices. This interest was spawned by HR's disappointment with the results of their 'employee engagement' survey. Avatar engaged a consulting firm to conduct two 'employee engagement' surveys each year to *'explore employees' levels of job satisfaction and to understand their perceptions of and attitudes to the organisation'*. The directors and HR managers felt the results, for a number of years, were consistently below expectations. The results were significantly lower than the Irish 'average', as measured by the consulting firm. The HR managers were unsure as to how they could improve the 'engagement' ratings as they considered the engagement results to be a direct reflection of the HR practices and they considered their HR practices to be 'best practice'. For example, Avatar participated in the national 'Great Place to Work' competition and their HR practices ranked in the top 5% of Irish companies. This dichotomy between 'best practice' and low levels of employee 'engagement' posed a dilemma for the directors and HR who claimed they could not do any more for employees. Also, there was a sense of urgency around employee engagement as Group HR had recently announced global employee engagement targets that subsidiaries were to achieve, and the Irish results fell below this. Consequently the directors in Avatar Ireland were open to research that explored the gap between the HR practices and employee perceptions of the employment experience. I gave a presentation to the HR director, who in turn got approval from the directors. Access to Avatar was 'conditional' (Lee, 1993) insofar as it was granted on the basis that I would provide an anonymised summary of my findings before leaving the field. I also signed

a confidentiality agreement to assure them I would not identify them, outside of academic circles, for a three year period. There were no obvious restrictions on the methodology used as long as my suggestions were in keeping with the theme of the research. For the duration of the research I was given a desk and laptop within the HR department. I was put into the category of 'contractor' and provided with an ID and swipe cards that gave me access to most of the building. I was provided with an Avatar email account and was set up on the Avatar internal network with access to the intranet, common shared drive and the HR shared drive of folders and documents. Ultimately I was provided with all the resources necessary to make contact with individuals, schedule interviews, access employee communications and HR related information.

3.3: DATA GATHERING

Throughout the six months of this ethnography data was gathered through: informal interviewing, observation and document analysis; I also kept field notes. I typically conducted two interviews a day and spent the rest of the time reviewing documentation, attending meetings and writing notes.

3.3.1: Informal, Non-Standardised Interviews

Seventy-five one-one semi-structured interviews were conducted.[44] These interviews centred around a list of broad discussion topics but were primarily conversational. Interviewees were allowed to expand on topics as much as they felt was relevant. The interview discussion topics are provided in appendix one. In addition to eliciting accounts of structures and processes, the interviewees also provided their own subjective interpretations of the structures and their interaction with them. Interviewees were prompted to provide examples and anecdotes in order to help me understand their 'real life' experiences informing their perceptions. This non-standardised format

[44] Seventy two of these interviews were with individuals directly employed by Avatar. Three interviews were with individuals who were not employed by Avatar. Two of these were external advisors. The other was an ex employee of Avatar Ireland who played a role in setting up some of the structures being researched. This individual did not wish to be identified. The data gathered from the ex employee was useful in providing information relating to the context and emergence of the structures however they were not viewed as key a data source as current employees.

permitted the gathering of detailed and unanticipated data in order to understand *'what kinds of things are happening rather than to determine the frequency of predetermined kinds of things that the researcher already believes can happen'* (Lofland, 1971:76). Indeed, unanticipated data emerged during the course of this research. For example, as stated in chapter one the original aim was to explore only two structures namely the financial and normative structures. However the structure of work organisation entered into the picture very early in the research.

There are epistemological arguments that all scholarly claims of truth and knowledge are based on the *'systemic and contestable exclusions, elevating and silencing of different voices'* (Clifford & Marcus 1986:6). In order to avoid this as much as possible, and to gather a representative range of perspectives, interviewees were identified based on the overall composition of the organisation. Organisation charts were reviewed and four interview categories identified, namely, HR, directors, managers and employees. Directors and HR managers were positioned as a key source of information pertaining to the official, desired objective structures of the organisation.[45] Consequently the directors and HR managers were interviewed first. Line management and employee interviewees were then identified based on the overall composition of the organisation. This broad representation was desirable as the aim of the research is to understand, as much as possible, the universal role and impact of the organisation structures that all individuals participated in across all departments. However, it was not possible to be wholly formulaic as constant restructuring meant that interviewees' roles, or teams within the organisation sometimes changed in between the time the interview was scheduled to the time the interview was held, a week or so later.[46]

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[45] These interviewees also provided subjective interpretations of such structures but they were in a unique position to explain the official organisational perspective.

[46]Attempts were made to be as formulaic as possible and to end up in a situation whereby the total composition of interviewees was an exact reflection of the overall organisation structure. For example, the technology department accounted for approximately 47% of the entire organisation so attempts were made to ensure that 47% of line management and employee interviewees came from this department. However Avatar underwent three 're-organisations' during the course of the ethnography and it was not uncommon for an interviewee's department, team or job title to change from the time the interview was scheduled to when it was conducted This breakdown was also applied to the gender of those interviewed. However it is worth pointing out that the data is not broken down by gender. In fact many female interviewees requested that any issues that would identify their gender, such as concerns regarding work life balance and promotion opportunities, would be off the record. Attempts were also made to secure interviewees from different teams. Ultimately it was not possible to achieve an absolute precise

The first two weeks of the ethnography were spent reviewing documents relating to the business strategy and human resource practices. I also had numerous informal conversations with members of the HR team. The formal interviews commenced in the third week of the ethnography. It was not possible to conduct pilot interviews as HR were keen for me to get started. Furthermore, I got the impression that doing pilot interviews would be interpreted as sign of incompetence rather than a step to enhance the scientific rigour of the process. It is worth pointing out that the response rate from the randomly selected line managers and employees was high, approximately 90% for line managers and 80% for employees. It was very rare for the interview invitation to be ignored, if an interviewee could not attend they normally offered an explanation, e.g. they were leaving, they were going on holidays, or simply had no time. There was only one instance of an interviewee failing to show. Approximately half of the interviewees were aware of my research. However this was very much related to position in the hierarchy and the more senior the interviewee the more likely they were to have had prior knowledge of my presence. Many employees had heard nothing.

Given that all the meeting rooms were glass structures, prior to the interviews I identified where the particular interviewee was located within the building and scheduled the interview in a different area of the building so that they could not be observed by their immediate peers. I scheduled each meeting for two hours but ensured I was available for three hours should they wish to talk longer or bring me to their workstation afterwards. The interview durations varied and only one interviewee scheduled additional time. Some emailed me materials after the interview to further explain a process they had referred to in the interview. The first interviews were with the directors and Table 3a provides details of these.[47]

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representative sample however the breakdown is broadly indicative of the overall organisation composition.

[47] At no time during the ethnography were there eleven directors. The composition of the team of directors changed six times during the research. I interviewed all the directors soon after they joined or were promoted into the position

Table 3a: Director Interviews

No.	Job Title	Interview Duration
1	Human Resources Director	1hr 29min
2	Customer and Channel Management Director	1hr 21min
3	Interim Marketing Director	1hr 9min
4	Chief Financial Officer (CFO)	1hr 4min
5	Strategy Director	1hr 4min
6	Technology Director	1hr 2min
7	Chief Executive Officer	43min
8	Chief Financial Officer (2)*	41min
9	Customer Experience Director	57min
10	Enterprise Director	50min
11	Consumer Director	37min
Total Duration of Director Interviews		**10hrs 57min**

* The CFO changed during the course of the research.

The second population interviewed were the HR managers and some members of the HR department. Table 3b provides details of these interviews.

Table 3b: Human Resources Interviews

No.	Job Title	Interview Duration
1	Culture and Capability Manager	1hr 12min
2	HR Business Partnering Manager	2hr 35min
3	Reward and HR Services Manager	1hr 8min
4	Employee Relations Manager	1hr 54min
5	Communications Manager	1hr 16min
6	Culture and Capability team member	1hr 12min
7	Learning and Development team member	42min
Total Duration of HR Interviews		**9hrs 59min**

The third population interviewed were the line managers and Table 3c provides details of these interviews. The job titles have been anonymised slightly in order to safeguard interviewee identity.

Table 3c: Line Management Interviews

	Job Title	Department	Duration
1	Operations Services	Technology	1hr 39min
2	Data Services	Technology	1hr 27min
3	Engineering Services	Technology	1hr 13min
4	Configuration Services	Technology	1hr 23min
5	Network Services	Technology	1hr 18min
6	Platform Services	Technology	1hr 22min
7	Testing Services	Technology	1hr 17min
8	Propositions and Processes	Marketing	1hr 13min
9	Business Marketing	Marketing	1hr 22min
10	New Products Strategy	Marketing	1hr 17min
11	Customer Delivery	Customer & Channel Mgt.	1hr 10min
12	Operations Manager	Customer & Channel Mgt.	55min
13	Financial Accounting	Finance	1hr 29min
14	Commercial Finance	Finance	1hr 16min
15	Financial Systems	Finance	1hr 18min
16	Strategic Alliances	Strategy	1hr 34min
17	Legal	Strategy	1hr 08min
Total Duration of Line Management Interviews			**22hrs 21min**

The fourth population to be interviewed were employees and Table 3d provides details of these interviews. These are grouped together by department for ease of review.

Table 3d: Employee Interviews

Department	No. of Employees Interviewed
Technology	15
Marketing	7
Customer & Channel Mgt.	7
Finance	5
Strategy	3
Total number of employees interviewed	**37**
Total duration of employee interviews	**45hrs 15mins**

3.3.2: Observations

In the ethnographic method the field is '*a site of knowing*' (Conquergood, 1991:180) and spending time in the field is what differentiates an ethnography from a case study. Formal observations were undertaken through attending meetings throughout the

organisation. In total twenty-five meetings were attended, an overview of these is provided in Table 3e.

Table 3e: Meetings/Events Attended

Meeting Title	Description
Commercial Governance	- Management committee for allocating the budget relating to capital expenditure.
Technology Meetings	- Weekly meeting of the Technology senior management team which lasted a couple of hours. - All day off-site meeting attended by all managers. - Project management meeting.
HR Meetings	- Four HR management meetings. - Two HR team meetings.
Finance Meeting	- All department meeting.
Marketing	- Marketing team meeting.
Away Days	- HR team away day. - An organisation wide management away day attended by all managers.
All employee communication	- All employee communication sessions which were typically led by the CEO or a director.
Brand induction/training	- Session on how to 'live the organisation brand'.

Informative informal observations were also gathered simply by being in the building and amongst organisation members. Interviews were held in meeting rooms all around the building. Walking to and from the interviews yielded interesting observations of work, interactions and the physical surroundings. Occasionally I was left waiting for interviewees and got to sit around different parts of the building. Also after interviews some interviewees brought me to their workspace and explained how work was organised, what people did and what certain equipment was used for. Field notes were taken to record observations and reflections throughout the process. These field notes were incorporated into a diary in which I recorded observations and reflections on the interviews and events I participated in. For example I noted the interactions I observed amongst the HR department and other personnel; I observed what was occurring

amongst the other teams on the floor. I noted the various greetings and comments made to me each day about my research. I also used the diary to note the key themes emerging in the research and for noting the myriad of telling contradictions between what the structures prescribed and what was actually transpiring.

3.3.3: Document Analysis

During my time in Avatar, documents were reviewed primarily to understand the prescribed, official workings of the financial, normative and work structures. In relation to the financial structures, I reviewed numerous documents detailing and communicating the business strategy and organisation performance targets. Some of these documents were for the senior management population only. I also had access to the HR shared drive which allowed me to review documents relating to the normative HR structures. Such documents described the workings of the HR processes and their desired impact. A wide range of documents relating to both the financial and normative structures were also available on the organisation intranet. In terms of work structures I was provided with numerous documents relating to the organisation command structure and work processes. Occasionally I requested information on work structures from HR but they often did not have any knowledge of how work was organised. Documents were also sourced at meetings, 'pre-reads' were emailed before some meetings and handouts were often distributed to attendees during meetings.

Documents are socially produced texts (Macdonald, 2001:196) and it was interesting to see trends emerging within Avatar documents. Most of the documents drifted between describing both existing and future desired states and in this sense they were both descriptive and aspirational. The common theme in the documents was the optimistic tone and the manner in which they were heavily branded with the Avatar logo and imagery. The brand imagery and strikingly positive, high energy tone was strongly reflected in the corporate documentation and communications. This will be further explored throughout this thesis.

3.3.4: Data Analysis

I used the qualitative coding software, NVivo 8, to analyse the interview transcripts. [48] The software was used to segment the interviewees into groups of 'cases' and also to assign analytical codes to sections of the transcripts. A theoretically informed coding schema was used to establish four title nodes. The open coding took place within these four title nodes. Thirty sub-nodes were created, approximately 40% of which were the result of open coding, i.e. they were based on the themes emerging within the data and not pre-determined by the theory or interview topics. To ensure thorough engagement with the data all sections of the transcripts were coded and approximately 50% of the transcripts were coded under more than one sub-node. Numerous queries were then run under each of the sub-nodes and cases and the resulting reports were analysed. The dual coding meant that half of the transcripts were presented back in different ways, in different reports, forcing repeated reflection on the most appropriate interpretation and relevance of the data. The coding nodes are listed in alphabetical order in table 3f below.

Table 3f: NVivo Coding Schema

Title Nodes	Sub-nodes
Normative Structures	- Brand essence - Communications - Employee survey - HR perceptions of line management - Managing upwards - Pay process - Perceptions of HR - Performance dialogue - Profiling - Training and development
Financial Structures	- Change and reorganisations - Cost-cutting - Group - Redundancies - Work intensification
Work Structures	- Bureaucracy - Generative work - Hierarchy - Meetings

[48] NVivo was not used to code documents as many were accessed on hard copy.

	- Operational work - Release management - Teamwork
Employee Themes	- Career - Family - Flexibility - Impact - Money - Social environment - Stability/Security - Work

3.4: NOTE ON CONFIDENTIALITY AND ETHICS

Before the interviews commenced, interviewees were assured that their participation was confidential. They were informed that no-one employed by the case study organisation would have access to the voice recordings but that I might secure support from a third party to assist in the transcription of the interviews. Third party transcription support was obtained who had no ties to anyone within the case study organisation. They also signed a confidentiality agreement indicating they would not reveal any of the content of the interviews or the identity of those interviewed.

Once the transcripts were completed all names and personal identifying material was removed. The original transcripts are each password protected and stored on one private computer that is accessible only by me only. Pseudonyms were created and an Excel file was set up which contains the actual identity of those interviewed. This Excel file is password protected and is stored on one private computer that is accessible by me only. The anonymised transcripts were uploaded onto NVivo and are password protected and accessible only by me. Throughout this thesis interviewee quotes are accompanied by a letter and number to give an indication of the breadth of quotes. The letter indicates the group the interviewee belongs to i.e. D for directors, M for managers, H for HR and E for employees. The number is the individual identifier.

3.5: REFLECTIONS ON THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PROCESS

It is interesting that something as seemingly intangible as 'the feeling' of being in the field can be so helpful to understanding the field. A key finding from being in Avatar everyday was that it did not feel like an organic environment emerging from the collection of personalities within it. Instead the world of Avatar felt like an independent construction in its own right; a distinct manufactured representation of an entity that individuals operated within. In other words it felt like a world of branded structure. Of course it was the minutiae of individual actions that continuously reproduced this entity but, as will be demonstrated, they did so within a defined endgame that was centrally prescribed by group and hierarchically driven by local management. In other words Avatar Group invested considerable resources in prescribing precisely how they wanted Avatar subsidiaries to function. Enacting these prescriptions was a top priority for management at subsidiary level who rolled them down the organisation. For an organisation like Avatar, that places an emphasis on prescribing structures and ensuring managers are well versed in these structures, getting under the surface takes time and the depth of access that is available with the ethnographic method. However, it is worth acknowledging that being situated within the ethnographic process as a known outsider with insider access created tensions both for me as a researcher and for those being researched.

The first tension became apparent after some employee interviews were conducted. During interviews I reassured interviewees that their participation was confidential and that if they saw me afterwards they should feel free to ignore me. Most management interviewees acknowledged me and asked how things were going. Approximately half of the employees interviewed said hello freely, others gave a more subtle nod. However a small number, whose interviews had gone fine by my account, seemed uncomfortable and blatantly avoided eye contact. Occasionally interaction was unavoidable, for example some interviewees turned up to make presentations at meetings where I was in attendance and they appeared slightly unnerved to see me. I regretted that those who had provided me with their views and time ended up feeling uncomfortable about their participation. This tension highlighted how the mixed methods associated with the ethnographic process can be problematic for participants, particularly when they involve a blurring of the insider/outsider boundary. Some participants understood me solely as

an outsider during the interviews and when they encountered me in more insider type situations, such as attendance at a senior management meeting, they were uncomfortable. However, understanding the variations between what an individual says in the intimacy of a one-one interview, and how they behave in the wider social setting is one of the key benefits of the ethnographic method.[49]

Another key benefit of the ethnographic method comes from experiencing or participating in the phenomenon being researched. However this caused a second tension namely some 'role blurring' as spending so much time in the organisation meant I began to be viewed more like an insider by some. After approximately three months I felt I became subjected to some similar pressures as other insiders; I started to be treated more like an employee. The primary manifestation of this was the sense that my being present for more than a couple of months without making some kind of contribution was unacceptable. At meetings I began to be asked directly for my thoughts and even for recommendations. The main questions tended to be about my findings or whether I had any insights into how people were reacting to certain initiatives and communications. Silence at meetings was difficult to maintain. After approximately four months the HR managers hinted that my findings would be considered irrelevant by the directors if I didn't produce a report soon. Waiting six months for an output was considered to be an unacceptably lengthy duration.[50]

The third tension that arose from being treated as an insider emerged when I submitted my final report to the HR department. I produced a report, a MS Word document approximately forty pages in length, and submitted it to the HR director who passed it on to the five HR managers. I was acutely aware that it broke Avatar communication conventions. The report was in a detailed word document that required reading from start to finish whereas communications in Avatar were typically conducted through heavily branded PowerPoint presentations containing lots of, what were referred to in Avatar as. 'headlines' or 'sound bites'. The other, and more significant convention

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[49] However it should be pointed out that this was a concern for only some employees, for example some employees had no discomfort with greeting me and informing whomever they were with that they participated in the research.

[50] Other more random occurrences took place over the course of the ethnography. As people became more aware of my presence I began to be asked to help anyone that was undertaking studies in HR and during my time in Avatar I assisted individuals from HR and other departments to draft proposals for undergrad and masters theses.

breach, was the pluralistic, non optimistic tone of the report. As previously stated, the results of Avatar Ireland's 'employee engagement' surveys were considered to be consistently disappointing in light of the fact that HR complied with what was considered to be HR 'best practice'. Given the survey results, HR were not shocked that employees expressed dissatisfaction. What surprised them were the reasons I offered for their dissatisfaction which were more systemic and arguably difficult to deal with then tweaking one or two HR practices. I will avoid going into any detail about my findings at present as these will be discussed in later chapters.

After submitting the report I spoke with some HR managers. One said they had to read the report three times before they could '*not be hurt*'. Another said that after reading it they '*felt like going down to the main entrance and putting a big sign across the door saying "no-one is forcing you to work here"*. A third said they could see where I was coming from. A fourth said it was interesting to get an outsiders perspective. I learnt that the report was used by the HR management team in an annual planning session whereby each manager had to pick out three 'action points' to reflect on. I personally regretted that, after they had been so supportive of my research, I could not produce a report that was more agreeable to HR.[51]

So although the tensions created by the blurring of the insider-outsider boundaries placed some strain on interpersonal relationships, they were extremely informative. Only through this 'inbetweeness' can the researcher observe, gather data and experience the complexities of the structural and subjective pressures facing those being researched. The most pervasive of these structures, namely the financial structures of shareholder capitalism, will be the focus of the next chapter.

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[51] Nonetheless I stand by the data and I remain on good terms with the HR management team and occasionally meet them, and other HR employees, socially. These subsequent meetings did not shape the findings of this thesis.

Chapter Four: The Financial Structure

4.0: INTRODUCTION TO THIS CHAPTER

The primary financial concern of organisations operating within the financial structure of shareholder capitalism is to provide ongoing financial return to shareholders. There are few in-depth, qualitative, critical accounts of how the pressures created by this model of capitalism translate into workplace structures and subjective orientations. This chapter adds to the literature by tracing the structural and subjective processes by which Avatar's financial pressures were transferred and resulted in a range of initiatives that shaped the workplace.

The Avatar case tells a tale of the financialisation of organisation structures and how the competitive pressures of shareholder capitalism reached down into the subsidiary organisation via legally mandated budgeting processes. The budgeting processes facilitated the Avatar group-subsidiary financial exchanges. Group controlled these financial exchanges and used the budgeting processes as a structure to pass down a range of financial targets, and strategic initiatives to achieve these targets. The budgeting process was the primary structure used by Group to monitor subsidiary performance, reward 'performance' and punish 'failures'.

This chapter also explores the subjective orientation and behaviours of the actors responsible for managing the relationship between Group and the subsidiary, namely the Avatar Ireland directors. The Avatar directors firmly aligned themselves with Group. Group ensured this alignment by taking charge of appointing Group personnel to the key director positions at subsidiary level. This chapter provides a critical analysis of how this informed the subjective orientation of the directors as a group, and how it shaped attitudes towards lower levels. The Avatar case tells a story of how directors ensured the achievement of financial targets through isolating themselves from lower levels and ensuring a rigid, hierarchal, command and control structure. Hierarchy, it seems, is wholly conducive to constant change and innovation.

The data presented in this chapter comes from organisational documents, interviews and observations. Some results from the Avatar employee engagement survey are also presented. The data strongly supports the work of political economists and other

commentators who argue that shareholder capitalism requires the stark prioritisation of financial concerns. It adds to the literature by tracing the structures and subjectivities that facilitate this prioritisation.

4.1: GROUP AND AVATAR IRELAND: STRUCTURAL CONNECTIONS

Financial investors and multi-national organisations have existed since the late 17th century.[52] A defining belief of contemporary shareholder capitalism is the notion that an 'efficient' firm is one that provides immediate and lasting shareholder return. This means financial markets are understood to play a more dominant role over organisations than in other models of capitalism. It is also claimed that multi-nationals' dependence on financial markets is exacerbated by their need for external capital to grow the organisation and participate in mergers and acquisitions around the globe (Morgan, 2005:558; Morgan and Kristensen, 2006:1482). Multi-nationals participating in shareholder capitalism are particularly orientated towards meeting the needs of shareholders.

4.1.1: Avatar Group: The market rational technocracy

Group was governed by an executive committee. This committee was chaired by the Group CEO and comprised of regional CEOs and Group 'functional' directors. Corporate documentation stated that the executive committee was responsible for '*the overall financial performance of the Group in fulfillment of strategy, plans and budgets and Group capital structure and funding*'. The executive committee set targets and monitored Group performance using financial and non-financial metrics.[53] Group was a centralised 'think-tank' that directed subsidiaries around the globe to deliver shareholder needs, they did not have any responsibility for a specific consumer market.

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[52] See Wilkins, 2001 for an historical overview of the multi-national firm, see Held et al, 1999 for an overview of mutli-nationals that existed prior to 1915, see Schama, 1997 for a description of early financial markets.

[53] The financial metrics at Group level were: 1) Revenue and related organic growth 2) Adjusted operating profit and related organic growth 3) Free cash flow 4) Capitalised fixed asset additions and 5) Adjusted earnings per share. It is worth pointing out that the range of non-financial metrics were deemed to be enablers of financial growth.

As a market listed organisation Avatar Group adhered to numerous legally regulated, accounting standards.[54] Interestingly, many of the definitive aspects of the organisational structure and work processes were explicitly dictated by these accounting standards. For example, paragraph 27:4 of the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) sets out the relationship between a parent and subsidiary. Under these regulations a subsidiary is '*An entity that is controlled by another entity (known as the parent).* The regulation defines control as *'The power [of the parent] to govern the financial and operating policies of an enterprise [subsidiary] so as to obtain benefits from its activities'.* This definition served as the Avatar Group-subsidiary structural backbone and a subsidiary was defined in Group's annual reports as *'An entity controlled by the Company. Control is achieved where the Company has the power to govern the financial and operating policies of an entity so as to obtain benefits from its activities'.* The Avatar organisation structure reflected this 'financial' and 'operating' split. Financial performance was the primary responsibility of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). The operating policies were the remit of functional directors who developed and oversaw the implementation of functional strategies and practices in their particular specialism. This structure of CEOs working with functional strategists formed the basis for a centralised market-rational technocracy that permeated through to subsidiaries. Subsidiary CEOs reported into regional CEOs. Functional directors at subsidiary level reported into the subsidiary CEO but also had '*dotted line'* accountability to the relevant Group functional team. The organisation structure and reporting lines are summarised in the following chart:

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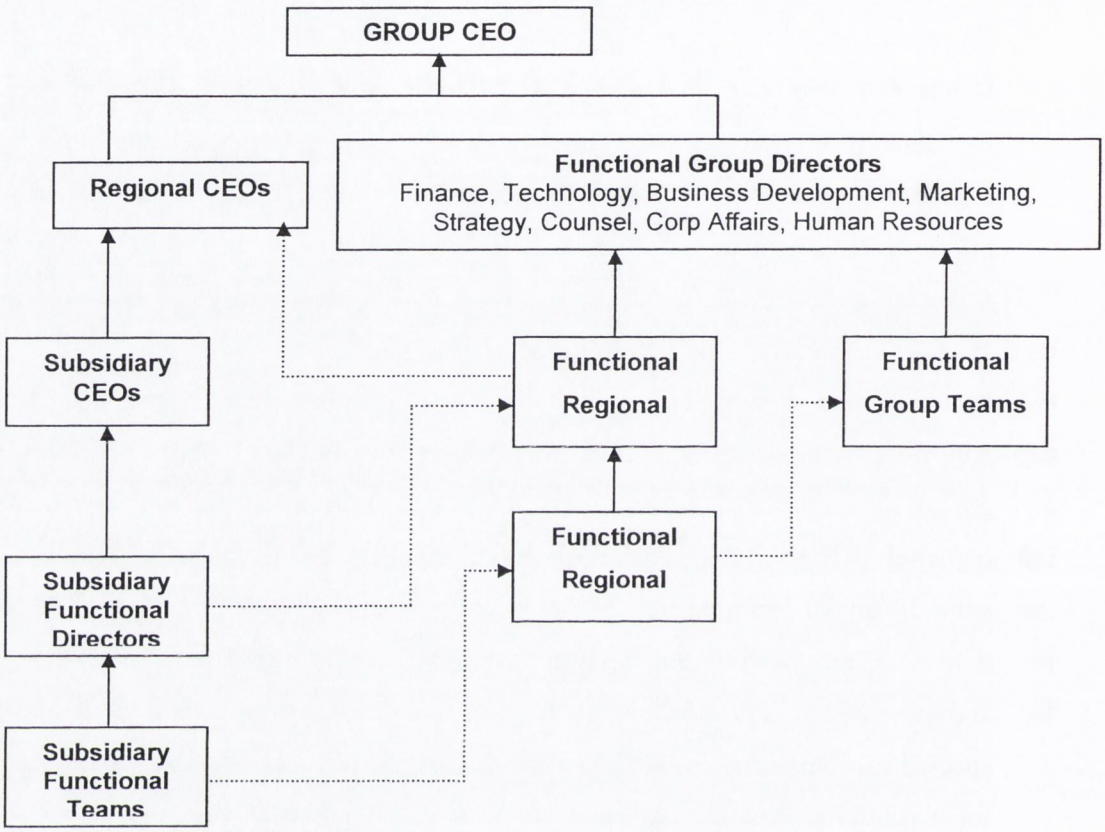
[54] Group and Avatar subsidiaries adhered to:

- IFRS: The International Financial Regulation Standards, previously known as the International Accounting Standards. As of 1 January 2005, publicly traded companies must prepare their consolidated financial statements in accordance with the IFRS.
- SOX: Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act of 2002; commonly referred to as Sarbanes-Oxley or SOX
- GAAP: Generally Accepted Accounting Principles.
- Combined Code: Financial Reporting Council Combined Code on Corporate Governance.

Figure 4a: Avatar Group Organisation Chart



Source: Annual report and internal organisation charts.

Group adopted a hierarchical, structurally detached position as 'thinkers' as opposed to 'doers'. The complexity of implementation and consequences for lower levels was not their concern. This allowed Group to establish financial targets, design strategy and make decisions about subsidiaries in a technocratic, consequence free vacuum. The manner in which the centralised strategy makers structurally detached themselves from the 'constraints' of implementation reflects the classical notion of strategy development as something removed from implementation (Chandler 1962; Whittington, 1993).[55] The implementation or 'doing' occurred at subsidiary level.

[55] This is not to say that Group engaged in no discussions with subsidiaries. Group functional teams were in continuous communications with their subsidiary equivalents to discuss their ideas, gather data and assess project progress. However the backdrop of these exchanges was that final decision making authority rested with Group.

4.1.2: Avatar Ireland: The boyscout subsidiary

The structural interactions between multi-national parents and subsidiaries are explored by institutional theorists. Looking at firm level activities, Morgan and Kristensen (2006) highlight the importance of the institutional setting in which subsidiaries are embedded. Avatar Group and Avatar Ireland were located in liberal market economies. Consequently there was little of what Kostova and Roth (2002) refer to as, 'institutional difference' complicating the parent-subsidiary relationship. The minimal institutional difference facilitated the development of the 'hegemonic' (Hu, 1992) relationship that existed between Avatar Group and Avatar Ireland whereby Group dictated the key parameters for the compliant Irish 'boyscout' (Delaney, 1998), subsidiary.[56]

Morgan and Kristensen (2006) also highlight the role of 'transfers' within the multi-national organisational framework. They identify mechanisms by which a parent transfers resources to subsidiaries covering financial, knowledge and reputational capital. As a small subsidiary Avatar Ireland leveraged a range of benefits from Group resources. Group invested in researching and developing the organisation's strategic direction and the technologies to realise it; they developed strategic alliances and partnerships with other global high technology firms; they facilitated the sharing of ideas and information across subsidiaries; they developed responses to international regulation; they developed the brand and invested in high profile advertising and sponsorship deals with celebrities and sporting events around the world. There is also the transfer of processes including *'practices, policies, processes and work systems sometimes associated with benchmarking'* (2006:1474). The transfer that was most dominant in shaping the Group-subsidiary relationship, in a direct and frequent manner, was the financial transfer.

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[56] Perhaps larger Avatar subsidiaries operating in coordinated market economies reflected the 'hybrid' (Liker, Fruin and Adler, 1999) or 'transnational' model (Ferner and Edwards, 1995; Kristensen and Zeitlin, 2001; Whitley, 2001). However what is important to note is that where it was possible, Avatar Group opted for the hegemonic model. A discussion of the three models is presented in Morgan, 2005.

4.1.3: Financial Targets, Market Storytelling and Subsidiary Change

Avatar Ireland was part of the European region which Group targeted with the aim of achieving two goals namely revenue generation and cost cutting. The contrast between these dual goals was highlighted by director (D1) in Avatar Ireland who stated:

> The only way you can compete in a competitive world is by having the lowest cost base because if you don't, you're just not going to be competitive. So that's the message to the organisation, you have to reduce costs, have to be more lean, have to be more efficient, have to be more process oriented, have to be more boring, because reducing costs is boring. At the same time as that's happening, what's also driving us is a need to make the new world happen and to make sure that Avatar is playing a key part in these new business models that will be the business models of the future. Which requires innovation, which requires [Technology X], which requires [Technology Y], which requires all sorts of things. So I think the cost saving together with the innovation is sending two messages to people at the same time.

Maintaining share value requires top management to convince financial markets and shareholders of future dividends. The two financial goals provided Group with a framework for engaging in what I term *'market storytelling'*. Market storytelling can be understood as the top management practice of crafting optimistic stories to convince financial markets of the organisations ability to yield ongoing shareholder value. Group announced the projected financial benefits of revenue generating and cost cutting initiatives to financial markets before implementation had begun at subsidiary level. Group would later report on the achievement of targets in annual results and financial communiqués. These stories were intended to boost, or at least maintain, share price. Market storytelling played a key role in driving the need for Group autonomy and the achievement of targets at subsidiary level. Announcing strategic plans and projected returns could yield a share boost and the only delay in achieving the next boost, by announcing to markets that these targets had been achieved, was the time it took for implementation at subsidiary level. Group launched a range of projects and change initiatives to ensure the achievement of these two goals at subsidiary level. However, Group took a global perspective when designing such initiatives and had little concern for local consequences. For example, Group often mandated that certain products and services be offered globally. Often such products and services would not generate revenue in the Irish market but the share boost received from telling financial markets

that these products and services were available globally were worth more than the losses incurred by a small subsidiary.

Group continuously made announcements to financial markets and during my time in Avatar Ireland I noted a continual sense of urgency, as if the organisation was in a perpetual state of upheaval caught between various stages of Group led projects. The top-down direction and pace of strategic change combined with Ireland's minor influence on Group direction meant that Avatar Ireland was continuously vulnerable to shifts in Group direction. The public commitments Group made through market storytelling meant subsidiaries operated in a constant state of *'catch-up'* as Group awaited subsidiary implementation so that they could announce that the financial targets had been achieved.

Group ultimately served as a centralised, hierarchical, think tank that steered the organisation in order to achieve desired financial returns. The overarching framework that Group used to ensure that cost cutting and revenue generation targets and initiatives were passed down to Avatar Ireland was the parent-subsidiary budgeting process.

4.1.4: The Budgeting Processes

The role of budgets as a proactive device for centralising management control, communication and co-ordination is well documented within critical (Burns and Scapens, 2000; Yazdifar et al, 2008) and the management 'how to' accounting literature (Dominiak and Louderback, 1988; Glautier and Underdown, 1998). The manner in which multi-national parents use budgets, in conjunction with expatriate directors to monitor subsidiary performance is also gathering attention (Collings et al, 2008). However, and as indicated in chapter two, the role of budgets has not been explored to any great extent by those interested in organisation structures and behaviours.

In addition to defining the parent-subsidiary control relationship, accounting regulations provided the legal backdrop for parent-subsidiary financial exchanges. Specifically accounting standards require the preparation of two annual subsidiary budgets relating to *capital expenditure* (CAPEX) and *operational expenditure* (OPEX). CAPEX incorporates expenditure on the development of a future asset of the organisation. For

example, the purchase of new equipment or the costs associated with developing a new product, service or process were funded by CAPEX. Empirical investigations demonstrate that market storytelling about capital investments generate significant abnormal positive returns to shareholders, both in the UK (Akbar et al, 2008) and the US (McConnell and Muscarella, 1985; Vafeas and Shenoy, 2005). It is argued that this leads managers to make myopic, short term investment decisions and forsake strategic long term investments (Stein, 1989). OPEX relates to the ongoing cost of running the business and funded 'business as usual'. For example, employee related costs such as payroll, benefits and training were categorised as OPEX. Levels of operational expenditure are a standard accounting indicator of efficiency; i.e. the higher the OPEX the less efficient the organisation. Within Avatar, these budgets provided the administrative basis for Group control via the budgeting process which worked as follows. The Irish team of directors worked with finance to propose annual CAPEX/OPEX expenditure targets to Group who reportedly applied pressure to achieve more with less. Ireland had to provide Group with quarterly returns of expenditure against budgets, explain any variances and make any revisions required by Group. Group also held quarterly review meetings whereby the regional CEO and/or a senior member of their regional team visited subsidiaries to review progress.

Communications with Group regarding financial targets often generated anecdotes around the organisation that demonstrated Group's focus on financial targets. One such anecdote involved the regional CEO telling the team of directors at a conference call that Group would not hesitate to replace them all if the figures did not improve by the next quarter. Another was about how the Avatar Ireland Chief Financial Officer (CFO) got a phone call from the regional CEO on Christmas day about the financial results. Interestingly anecdotes about top management in high-technology firms used to be about their technical and innovative skills (Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992), whereas in Avatar they were about how top management aggressively focused on the financials. For example, during the ethnography the Group CEO visited Avatar. I attended his main communication session which was held in a theatre. The Group CEO's spoke primarily about financial targets. He spoke about his worldwide trips meeting investors and how he was confident Avatar Ireland could achieve their financial targets. He also joked about how he was closely watching the recently appointed Avatar CEO, who had previously worked in Group. The Group CEO joked that since this person had left

Group the share price had gone up and Group were all interested to see what effect the new CEO had on the Irish financial results. He also chose to tell everyone that the new CEO and Irish directors had asked for more time in submitting their strategic plan to Group. He commented that he hoped it would be worth the wait as he was very keen to see the Irish version of Group's strategy. This incident was replayed to me a couple of times in interviews and also in general chat and it was interpreted as further evidence that '*you don't piss off Group*'.

Ultimately, the budget interactions required significant amounts of financial reporting and analyses from Ireland which were rigorously scrutinised by Group. Within Avatar Ireland managers worked on a monthly basis with finance to track their expenditures against budget. These processes were understood as being Group led, as described by line manager (M1) who stated:

> The financial control process is where [Group] get the chance to implement what they've set out as the strategy. So they say to us, "What's your three year plan?". We say "Ok it's this". They say "You're spending too much money there, you're not spending enough money there, and chop, chop, chop, chop the rest of it out". So that's where they get to really put their control.

This legally driven OPEX/CAPEX split played a critical role in facilitating cash flow exchange between Group and Avatar Ireland.[57] The higher the subsidiary OPEX the less Group received and the less cash Group had to secure interest, invest and/or return to shareholders. Consequently OPEX was the key target for cost cutting initiatives. However Group also controlled CAPEX. Subsidiaries had to get Group approval for CAPEX expenditure each year through the budgeting process by describing in detail their product and service development plans.[58]

This structure of centralised thinking and control through budgetary exchanges had considerable consequences for how the goals of revenue generation and cost cutting were achieved at subsidiary level.

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[57] There were a range of other processes and mechanisms facilitating financial exchanges between Group and Avatar Ireland, however this appeared to be the overarching structure.

[58] The role of multi-national headquarters as something of a 'bank' that offers capital investment to 'efficient' subsidiaries has been identified in the literature (Birkinshaw, 2001). However this exchange is typically explored in terms of the parent and subsidiary relationship and there is little in the way of accounts detailing the initiatives this generated at subsidiary level.

4.1.5: CAPEX and Generating New Revenue

Group set the strategic and functional parameters which subsidiaries had to work within. The pace of change amongst financial markets, customer markets, competitors and technology meant that Group was required to continuously rethink the Avatar business model and range of products and services. These were unchartered waters, not just for Avatar but for technology and the consumer market in general. Consequently there could be no certainty regarding what was likely to be most successful or, more materially, what Avatar employees would be working on in a couple of year's time. This was described by Director (D2) Ireland who stated:

> Avatar has the highest probability of being the successful winner in all of the changes in the market evolution because we're in a very strong position...[...]...We've better technology, we've better customers there is absolutely no reason why we shouldn't win out totally in this market, we're best positioned. Now having said that for most people working in the organisation it is a much more unclear future in terms of Technology X and Product Y. There's Competitor X coming up, there's New Market Entrant Y doing strange things, there's Regulation X coming, there's Competitor Z breaking up into 2 or 3 different parts, there's a new Minister [in government]. God it's never been so confusing.

Whilst the strategies for generating revenue were certain the outcome was not. However this did not mean Group was slow to promote their broad ambitions. Plans to develop new products and services were announced to the financial markets before they were developed by subsidiaries. A line manager (M2) spoke specifically about the role of market storytelling:

> What [Group] would say is "Well this [new product or service] isn't just about [Ireland's] numbers; this is about something that Avatar can proclaim". Because they want the Avatar [customer] experience to be the same no matter what country you're in so that we can make this announcement that this applies to everybody. There would [also] be things like the Outsourcing; that was promised to the [financial] market. So we understand those. They promised all the synergies and every year we'd all have to do up figures and claim "OK, we made this much" and "Does that equal what we told the market?" Because obviously the worst thing the market can be told is that you didn't achieve your target. So certain things do impact the market...[...]...The stock price went through a rather difficult time last year and we could have been up for a hostile takeover because the company was completely under-valued. Then [Group] had announcements around our technology strategy and how we're moving into the [new product and service market]. So sometimes [Group] do come out with announcements in order to re-engage the analysts, and get them to rate you higher and stuff like that.

Avatar was required to implement Group strategy, products and services within the desired timeframes and within budget. It was important for a subsidiary to be seen as a '*doer*'.[59] Being considered poor at implementation could have detrimental effects on Avatar's ability to secure CAPEX to develop the organisation and generate revenue. During the period of the ethnographic analysis Avatar Ireland adhered to a number of processes to ensure they were aligned with Group priorities:

- Work plan alignment: All departments were required to ensure their work plans reflected Group/region strategy. Formal strategic alignment reviews were typically conducted annually and reviewed quarterly. Within some departments, particularly finance, marketing, and technology it was an ongoing, daily activity.[60] The backdrop of these exchanges was that final decision making authority rested with Group. Ultimately all areas had some interaction with Group to ensure their activities were *'on plan'*.

- Group mandated products and services: Group launched what they termed *'mandated'* projects, products and services. This meant there was little or no discussion with Group regarding the benefits of such products and services to the Irish market. Avatar simply had to implement them within Group mandated timelines. Avatar was one of the smaller subsidiaries and Group strategy was typically geared towards the larger markets. So in some cases the mandated products, services or technologies were downright unsuitable for the Irish market and would not yield financial return. Nonetheless Avatar Ireland had to divert resources away from products and services that could directly contribute to the achievement of revenue targets. Furthermore Group did not always provide additional CAPEX to compensate for diverting CAPEX funds that had been already allocated during the budgeting process. Instead, Avatar had to reach the same revenue goals with less CAPEX.

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[59] This reflects the findings of Belanger et al, 1999 whose case study of ABB highlighted how failure to achieve results was interpreted by headquarters as 'poor excuses'.

[60] Some Irish teams would have to continuously check with their functional counterparts in Group to understand options, secure approvals and ensure certain projects and expenditures were what was termed '*on plan*'. In such cases Group functional teams were in continuous communications with their subsidiary counterparts to discuss ideas, gather data and assess project progress. For example Group marketing would create a portfolio of product options for different customer segments. These were then reviewed by marketing teams in Ireland who explored which of these options could be best developed and launched in the Irish market. Marketing would then go back to Group for approval of their plan.

- Internal CAPEX Allocations: Subsidiaries also utilised CAPEX to fund locally developed ideas. Avatar had to adhere to financial regulations which detail the criteria for good governance relating to internal capital allocation and expenditure. Avatar operated what they termed a *'corporate governance'* process. Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX) and the IFRS outline a range of acceptable financial analyses that capital expenditure decisions can be based on.[61] The guidelines from the SOX established quasi-public agency, the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board (PCAOB), state that organisations should implement top-down, internal controls for allocating capital expenditure. In other words, internal capital investment decisions must be a hierarchical, financially driven process. The prevalence of hierarchal capital allocation practices in large organisations has been quantitatively evidenced (Alkaraan and Northcott 2007).[62] This process, which connected to the work structures, will be further discussed in chapter six.

- Re-organisations: In order to align themselves with shifts in strategy and to deliver new products and services, Avatar engaged in *'re-orgs'* a couple of times a year during which a part of the organisation would be taken apart and changed. Teams and roles would cease to exist and new ones created. The affected individuals had to do one or more of the following: apply for a new role; work within a newly formed team; work for a new manager; relocate to a different part of the building. During the course of the ethnography three re-orgs were conducted that significantly altered the organisation structure. It is worth pointing out the re-orgs in Avatar did not appear to be not a conscious strategy to preserve individualisation such as those described by Felstead et al (2005). They were done to demonstrate that the organisation was best structured to deliver the ever changing strategy. Research indicates that firms operating in LMEs are increasingly engaging in frequent restructuring (Whittington and Mayer, 2002 quoted in Morgan and Kristensen, 2006). Re-organisations have been tied to market storytelling as restructuring *'creates a promise of better things for the future'* (Glenn and Kristensen,

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[61] Specifically sections 302 and 404 of SOX details regulations for financial reporting and documentation of CAPEX internal control procedures. Generally, some acceptable analyses are: Investment ($/€), Net present value (NPV) ($/€), ROI (%), Acquisition profit and sales growth (%), Assets and fixed assets ($/€), Breakeven and payback months (#), Capital employed change ($/€ and %), Internal rate of return (IRR) (%).

[62] In fact in Alkaraan and Northcott's (2007) analysis of capital investment decisions in 320 large UK companies only 15.7% stated that lower level managers were involved in strategic investment decisions.

2006:1483). They were done to create good news stories for capital markets and to yield transitory benefits, a practice which has been documented (Froud et al, 2000).

4.1.6: OPEX and Cost Cutting

It is important to restate that Group and Avatar made significant profits; in fact at the time of the ethnography Avatar Ireland was one of the most profitable organisations in Ireland. In order to protect this profit position Group worked to ensure Avatar minimised how much it cost them to deliver their products and services. During the period of the ethnographic analysis the following cost controlling activities were ongoing in Avatar:

- Cost Centre Accounting: The role of cost allocation centres as a form of parent-subsidiary control is well documented (Armstrong et al, 1994; 1996; 1998). Avatar was divided into cost centres and each manager had a code(s) which tracked their expenditure against cost centres. All expenditure was tracked and approved using SAP software.

- Business Partnering: Each function had finance 'business partners' who managed the functions accounts. The finance business partners typically attended the management meetings to provide an overview of costs and budgets against targets. The manner in which Avatar executed their business partner model was publicly celebrated by the Chartered Institute of Management Accountant (CIMA).[63]

- Cost Benchmarking: Group used cost benchmarking consultants to continuously assess headcount and operating cost structures within their subsidiaries. The stated aim of this was to measure the 'efficiency' of each subsidiary. Avatar line managers had to provide a range of information to participate in the process. The methodology involved breaking work and individuals down to units and comparing the units and associated costs against the consulting firm's database of other organisations around the world of a similar size and sector. The role of cost

[63] It was heralded as being a 'best practice' example of how an organisation's accountants can take an active role in leading all areas of the business. CIMA claimed that best practice was for business partners to serve as sparring partners constantly questioning and providing financial information to lead decision making.

benchmarking in centralising control and playing multi-nationals subsidiaries off each other has been discussed (Furey, 1987; Rugman and D'Cruz, 2000:58). However the benchmarking was not always as formulaic. During the aforementioned Group CEO visit, the Group CEO commented how they had observed how Avatar Ireland was particularly effective at executing a particular process. He said he then told the regional CEOs declaring that Ireland had set a new benchmark which now must be achieved by other subsidiaries. In a moment's notice the targets and working life of certain teams in other countries had shifted.

During the period of the ethnography the following cost reduction initiatives were ongoing or had been recently completed in Avatar Ireland (Avatar):

- Redundancies: According to the benchmarking consultants Avatar had too many employees. This assessment was made on the basis of projected future work i.e. if work in certain areas declined; Avatar would have too many employees. This reduction was justified on the basis of the organisations future strategy which had been announced to financial markets. A study of layoff announcements in the 1990's demonstrated that the stock market has a positive reaction to layoff initiatives (Farber and Hallock, 1999). A voluntary redundancy program was launched and eighty individuals left the organisation.

- Outsourcing: Group launched a European wide initiative to outsource part of their technology activities. Similar initiatives were being undertaken by competitors. The decision and projected cost savings were announced to financial markets, before it happened, and it was portrayed as being a key move to reducing costs and making the organisation more 'efficient'.

- Centralisation: There were a number of projects underway to create shared services centres whereby one subsidiary would administer a service for the entire region or Group. Avatar Ireland made unsuccessful bids to host some of these services; and apparently lost on cost factors. A number of Avatar employees were aware that their role fell within the scope of centralisation projects and that their job would no longer exist in a couple of years. Many of these 'in scope' employees were

involved in implementing the project through providing information and assisting in the development of processes to create the new centralised centre.

- Ongoing OPEX reduction: In Avatar Ireland, the physical work environment was often a target for cost cutting measures such as switching to cheaper office supplies, shutting off the air conditioning system at 5pm, reducing the beverages at coffee stations throughout the building and reducing canteen menu options.

4.1.7: Financialisation of Organisation Structures

The data presented thusfar supports the numerous literatures proclaiming the hierarchical, centralised nature of decision making in multi-national, shareholder driven organisations. However what the Avatar case adds is an account of the centrality of international accounting regulations in co-ordinating these hierarchical structures and targets. These accounting regulations were not simply one of many externally imposed legal regulations that had to be complied with.[64] This, what I term, *'financialisation of organisation structures'* can be understood as the process whereby top management leverage accounting regulations as a seemingly objective legal basis for structuring the organisation as a system of financial flows. In fact accounting regulations specifically call for organisations to position expenditure decision making responsibility in the hands of high level management. The consequences of this on lower levels will be explored in later chapters.

The budgeting processes provided independent structures through which financial pressures were transferred. The Group role in shaping the subjectivity of subsidiary level directors further cemented Group control.

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[64] The importance of IFRS compliance as a symbolic act has been explored by those studying the adoption of IFRS in developing countries where business leaders are keen to demonstrate their legitimacy as a global financial player (Kholeif, 2008; Mir and Rahaman, 2005).

4.2: DIRECTING AVATAR

As both Group and Avatar Ireland operated in a liberal market economy there was little, of what Kostova and Roth (2002) refer to as, '*institutional duality*' complicating the transfer of targets via the budgeting process. However institutional theorists claim that no matter the level of institutional similarity, subsidiary management are *'confronted with two distinct sets of isomorphic pressures and a need to maintain legitimacy within both the host country and the MNC'* (Kostova and Roth, 2002:216). This highlights the indeterminacy between the parent's transfers and the diffusion of these at subsidiary level. This also opens up space for what Morgan and Kristensen refer to as '*micro-politics'* whereby '*the drive from the MNC headquarters towards isomorphism is undermined by the capability of local actors to pursue different interests'* (2006:1471). In other words the subjective orientation of subsidiary top management plays a role in how such structures are implemented at subsidiary level. Group managed this indeterminacy in Avatar Ireland through the creation of a multi-national community of directors.

4.2.1: Orienting Director Allegiance to Group

A multi-national management community is made up of expatriate managers with strong ties to the parent (Morgan, 1999:23).[65] Group adopted an 'ethnocentric' approach to developing a multi-national management community meaning they filled key subsidiary positions with individuals from the parent's country of origin (Perlmutter, 1969). Four of the seven members of the Avatar Ireland executive team were appointed to Ireland from Group. After a number of years in Avatar, Group appointees typically went on to larger roles either within Group or other subsidiaries. Group's role in director level appointments was most pronounced for the roles of CEO and CFO. All CEO and CFO vacancies in Avatar, since inception, were filled by individuals

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[65] The prominence of multi-national organisations in Ireland means it has provided scope for some insightful analysis on the role of expatriates in MNCs (Collings et al, 2007; 2008). The use of expatriates as a control mechanism is also attracting attention (Harzing, 2001). However accounts of multi-national management communities tend to focus on the experiences of that level of management only and there is little in the way of qualitative accounts exploring how multi-national communities affect top management attitudes towards lower levels.

appointed from Group. Group's active role in positioning directors within subsidiaries was understood in Avatar as an explicit Group strategy to create a board of directors who would align themselves foremost with the needs of the Group. The role and impact of an ex-Avatar Ireland CEO, who went on to become a regional CEO, was described by a director (D3):

> He obviously wanted to run a good business but he always wanted to do things the Group way. Not attributing bad motives to him or anything. I'm just saying he reported into Group and he had to give an account of himself and the business in Ireland...[...]...For him it was always very important that we [agreed with Group] even though commercially it sometimes didn't seem to make any sense because you'd invest massive amounts into a product that sometimes didn't work very well and there would be a lot of people at the [directors] table saying "This is a heap of crap we're never going to make any money on this". But it would still be "Look you know we have to do this". So we'd do it and we wouldn't make any money and it would be "we told you so" but we had to be good corporate citizens and I think there would have been more resistance if you didn't have someone like him there because he was not going to start being exceptionally defiant...[...]...It is tempting I suppose for a company that wants to get the next CEO for Germany or something to say "Well here is some intermediate spot we can try them in first"...[...]...Somebody [Group] knew, and trusted that if that person told them something about the business they could absolutely 100% believe it.

At the start of the ethnography, Avatar Ireland were awaiting the arrival of a newly appointed CEO, a man who had worked in Group for a number of years. Shortly after his commencement in Avatar I attended one of his all employee communication sessions where he spoke about his experience in Group. He mentioned his relationship with the Group CEO and how they had travelled the world together. He also spoke about all the exciting things Group were working on. He also mentioned he intended on returning to Group. There was an obvious underlying implication, which I noticed and which was discussed by others afterwards, that the new CEO intended to keep Group happy. A common perception of how such directors affected Avatar Ireland was summed up by another long serving Irish director (D4) who stated:

> We're getting a new CFO right now who's coming from Group; the last two come from Group. The CEOs come [from Group] and [Ireland] is perceived as a training ground. That's actually quite tough on the organisation so we continually are using our senior roles as training for people who are perceived to have an opportunity to go on...[...]...I've had this conversation with my people, it's obvious to the people within the organisation that the people on the [Irish] directors team in general are more worried about how they look to Group than how they are managing people, because that's where their future lies.

If the Group appointed directors raised this issue it was only to state firmly that their relationship with Group made no difference to their decision making, as Group made the right decisions anyway.

During the course of the interviews all the directors professed to support the Group strategy and the financial reasoning behind Group decision making. However a definitive difference emerged between the directors' awareness and interest in the impact of Group led initiatives at lower levels. On the one hand the Irish based directors demonstrated significantly greater awareness and interest in what was occurring at lower levels. They acknowledged, to an extent, the tension and conflicts of interest that existed first between Group and Ireland, and secondly between the financial goals and the employment experience. For example a director (D4) stated:

> I think [employees] feel Avatar makes money, and they don't feel there's much more than that. I don't feel there's much more than that. I don't think there's a feeling of "We're on a grand mission". Any grand mission is Group saying "We've to reduce costs and Group says we've to go into [technology X]". That's not visionary.

On the other hand the Group appointed, internationally mobile directors, tended to speak about employee issues in vague, optimistic, normative terms. They were also quite likely to get irritated when asked whether the employment experience was anything unlike how it was officially described in HR documents, or whether financial targets had negative consequences for the Irish subsidiary. Instead of answering the question they would recite the financial rationale behind such decisions. For example, the director (D5) spoke in concrete terms about how anyone who negatively interpreted the cost cutting initiatives was misguided: *'Right now we have an absolute world of possibilities sitting in front of us and I think a lot of people mistake what's gone on in the last 12 to 18 months. Actually if you're someone who likes a challenge it's a challenging business'.*

I got the sense they were pained by being questioned about the impact of financial targets on lower levels as if considering the employee issues was not the point; some treated me as if I just didn't 'get it'. Early in the research I encountered an attitude amongst some directors that you were either with them, which meant wholly supporting their decisions, or against them. They had little interest in reflecting substantively on the negative consequences of the financial goals.

However, none of the directors of Avatar Ireland appeared to be concerned to any great extent about whether achievement of financial targets had any adverse impact on those working at lower levels. Whilst the Irish directors at least paused to acknowledge the consequences, they were either unable to or unwilling to translate this awareness into active loyalty. The team of directors changed six times during the course of the ethnography. It is likely that directors were more interested in securing their position within a constantly changing team of directors by managing their status amidst their Group appointed peers.

Interestingly, many directors insisted that they had the ability to shape Group decisions. However, when probed it appeared their interaction was more about deciding on the best way to achieve targets. Below is one example of 'resistance' offered by a Group appointed director (D7) who stated:

> If we take the [outsourcing project] as an example. Group wanted to do outsourcing, I personally believe it was the right decision anyway for Ireland so therefore I'm quite happy to engage. We looked at preferred suppliers; Europe was basically split between the north and the south. The north was going to be outsourced to Company X and we said "There isn't a Company X provider in Ireland so it clearly doesn't make sense". So it was our responsibility to go back and influence and say "Yes ok we'll do a deal but let's not do it with Company X, let's do it with Company Y because they do have presence in Ireland".

Ultimately the composition of the Avatar team of directors meant Group's interests were consistently prioritised, particularly as two of the most powerful positions, namely the CEO and CFO, always came from Group. This orienting of allegiance towards the parent has been identified in the literature as a key organisational rationale for creating a multi-national community of senior managers (Harzing, 2001). What became apparent was that directors adopted the same directive hierarchical command with lower levels that existed between Group and subsidiaries. This willingness of directors to isolate themselves from lower levels came from Group's firm hand over their career and subsequent financial rewards. Directors sought to ensure decision making autonomy so that they could obey Group dictums and this shaped their approach to implementing the financial targets.

4.2.2: Directing the Generation of New Revenue

Once revenue targets were established directors were responsible for ensuring that products and services were developed and revenues achieved within the desired timeframe. Directors approved and monitored CAPEX expenditures, they announced new projects and monitored achievement against budget and timelines. These new products and services were either Group mandates, variations of ideas offered by Group or locally developed initiatives. Generally speaking the larger and more strategic the project the more likely it was to come from Group. Such mandates were not always welcome, but directors accepted this as a way of multi-national life. As director (D10) described:

> The reality is, to support the level of products we have, with the customer base we have, with the revenues we have, we always struggle against [for example] Germany. It will cost Germany the same money to put in a new [software system] as it will cost us, pretty much. But scale wise they'll have all their millions of customers to turn it on and we have [for example] two. That is always going to be a challenge and Group is a company that likes new products, new propositions.

Although the strategies and plans were clear, there were plenty of examples of new products and services not generating the anticipated revenues. There were also a number of incidents of Group mandated products and re-engineering projects being cancelled after millions had been invested. This was because CAPEX initiatives typically involved doing something new for which there was no precedence around the world. Consequently much of the business cases were speculative. However if Group approved a business case and mandated a project Avatar had to go ahead and invest the CAPEX and labour to complete the project. However the Group mandates, combined with the potential for failure meant projects designed to support the generation of revenue posed distinct communication difficulties for directors. Directors attempted to focus on the positive message of growth, development and opportunity. However this message was compromised by Group's constant shift in strategic direction and the failure of ideas that were heralded as the next big thing. Director (D1) expanded on the difficulties associated with the constant rallying of employees and frequent changes in direction:

> In the past we have embarked on certain journeys and routes because Group wanted us to go, we agreed on a Group level to go down it and we backed that up locally, we sold it and we explained "If we get on this route this is where we will

> end up and this is why we have to do it". And, we'd go through the basic steps of change; you have to create an awareness of why we need to change and if we change where it will lead us etc. But then what happens is Avatar Group is a big company, Avatar Ireland is a small part of a big company, so for various reasons, on a Group level they decide that "No actually, this isn't the right way". We change direction, and have undermined the trust locally because from one day to another you could find yourself in a situation standing in front of everybody saying "Yeah this is definitely what we will do, this is so important" and then the next week you have to communicate "No actually we're not going to do this so what I said last week, forget about it".

Director (D2) stated:

> It's probably like when the Catholic Church said "Well, you know you don't really need to go to confession every week and actually you don't need to go to mass every week either, and by the way you remember limbo? We abolished that." It was very confusing for people who kind of had their religion 'off pat'.

Ultimately, the only negative consequence stemming from the stream of Group led initiatives and financial targets that directors bemoaned, was one they experienced in their own position. They regretted how it was hard to communicate the harsher financial decisions and it was hard to communicate a clear strategic vision when Group had a short-term fragmented approach to developing the direction of the organisation. This was indicative of the extent to which they understood their interaction with lower levels as being about persuading them that all decisions and initiatives were a positive development. They understood their obligations to lower levels primarily in communication terms. In fact, I never encountered a revenue generating initiative being considered in terms of its impact on employees. Furthermore, the employee engagement survey revealed that Avatar employees felt they had a strong awareness of the organisation's strategic direction with 75% responding favourably to the statement *'I have a good understanding of [Avatar Ireland's] strategic goals and priorities'*

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4.2.3: Directing Cost Cutting

Once cost cutting targets were established, directors were responsible for their achievement within the specified timeframe. They played a prominent role in planning cost cutting initiatives and developing communication plans. They tightly monitored implementation by requesting ongoing progress reports from those who reported into them. In fact there was no evidence of a cost cutting target not being achieved, as the

steps required to cut costs were more knowable. The statement in the employee survey that had the second highest percentage of employees in agreement, namely 84%, was '*I understand why cost effectiveness is a key strategic objective for Avatar Ireland*'.

During my time in Avatar I interviewed the CEO and ten directors, I attended a number of meetings and reviewed communication materials which outlined cost cutting initiatives. In all situations directors focused on the financial justification for the cost cutting. Cost cutting was portrayed as being so fundamental a step that not doing so would put the entire organisation in jeopardy. This argument was then flipped on its head with the final message being that cost cutting was a great achievement as it ensured the financial success and future viability of the organisation.

An interesting theme in the communications was the conflation of cost cutting and process efficiency. Directors continuously made generalised optimistic claims that cutting costs was a step towards greater efficiency and the achievement of what they termed '*best in class execution*'. However there was no detail provided as to whether the organisation was more process efficient or just less costly. Directors clung so tightly to this 'efficiency' argument that they often contradicted themselves when using it. For example when discussing the centralisation projects a director (D7) spoke about how it was likely to both be less and more time consuming:

> Typically when you go into any large scale common way of doing things what you lose is flexibility because by nature it has to be more prescribed there has to be more process. So it could end up being more efficient in that it's a common practice, you're not wasting time. But the thing that could be compromised is speed of turn around.

The consequences of cost cutting on lower levels were spoken about primarily in terms of '*the message*' being signalled. There was a sense that directors did not really care about the post-implementation consequences. For example, during a management meeting the director (D7) asked me what I was hearing in the interviews. In an attempt to give a generic but honest answer I responded that some areas seemed unsettled after the outsourcing. I didn't get any reaction or solicited for further information. I was subsequently told by a manager that they raised the issue with the director and asked whether they needed to do anything about it. The director (D7) responded *'No, that project is over'*. In the director's eyes this project had been implemented and therefore was off their agenda. The fact that lower levels were still experiencing negative

consequences was not of any import as the directors' focus had moved on to the pre-implementation demands of another raft of targets and initiatives. The day-to-day practical consequences of cost-cutting were considered *'post-implementation'* issues which they deemed to be the responsibility of lower level management.

4.2.4: Director Absolution through 'Interpretive Choice'

Corporate communications in Avatar were largely future focused and centred on projected future benefits of initiatives. No matter what the material consequences there was an optimistic tone in all communications. For example the official name of the redundancy program was *'Shaping our Future'* and was about *'shaping our organisation to meet our challenges and maximise our opportunities'*. Most directors spoke about the redundancy program with a level of pride, for example one director (D8) spoke about how the redundancies were implemented in an 'on brand' manner:

> Restructures and redundancies and things like that, you know it's a big big deal for people... It was funny because we did talk about when we were doing it that we would do it in a Brand Essence way and the funny thing about it is I think, no matter what [people] say, they [HR] did an incredible job of this because it could have been a hell of a lot worse than it was but I think the actual process from beginning up to actually going through with it and migrating to the new structure was really, really good, really people-centric...So actually, funnily enough it was probably one of the best kind of expressions of Brand Essence.

During an all employee communication session and at a HR team away day the HR director spoke about how completing the redundancy program was a key achievement and something everyone should be proud of. At one point, approximately two months into the ethnography, I was having coffee with an employee from HR who started around the same time I did. She asked me if I knew that 'Shaping our Future' was a redundancy program, when I said yes she laughed and said that as they had heard nothing but good things about it from the HR director they were shocked to discover it was actually the redundancy program. A HR (H1) manager claimed the need to create a positive message, no matter what the decision, was a construct of the normative structure:

> I think the culture likes good news. Probably everybody does. I think to a degree [Avatar] finds bad news, or not good news, difficult. So we find it hard to say that

> things are not going as well as we thought they would. You know, whereas we love saying things are going well, we find that easy to do and happy to do it and its great. But we find it more difficult I think when things are not going well...[...]...We try and put a gloss on it. We'd say "Well actually this is good news, you know, that we're going to outsource the IT department".

The need for gloss was reflective of the inability of directors to take into account the interests of lower levels. In order to maintain the legitimacy of the hierarchical structure it was important for those at the top to claim they were doing the right thing. Interestingly, the directors appeared to convince themselves that once the positive perspective was offered they had provided lower levels with an actual choice as to how they interpreted the decision. If an individual chose to interpret a decision in a more negative manner than what was communicated, that was the choice of the individual and therefore any subsequent dissatisfaction was also their choice. This, what I term, *'interpretive choice'* can be understood as the management practice of communicating decisions in positive terms only so that any adverse employee reaction can be attributed to a negative attitude thus absolving directors of the material consequences of decisions.

For example, director (D1) whose function was affected by outsourcing claimed that individuals could take the viewpoint that '*[Outsourcing] is actually a golden opportunity because it means that IT people will work for a company that are really focused on IT and that probably gives them more development opportunities in the future and is probably a good thing for them'.*

Directors commonly referred to dissatisfaction as a state of mind. For example, director (D6) commented *'I guess it's human nature sometimes if something doesn't go perfectly well to look to see if there is someone else who can be attributed to be responsible. My belief honestly is that you should never look to somebody else you should look to yourself'.* Director (D4) stated *'I kind of feel that some people, for reasons that I don't think are related to empowerment, get a victim mentality'.* Director (7) explained how if an employee didn't like something all they had to do was put forward an alternative business case '[Employees] *have got the power to consider it and help effect the change or say "No that wouldn't work and these are the reasons".* Similar sentiments were offered throughout the interviews and at communications I attended.

Directors put responsibility on the individual to manage themselves through any adverse impact which they referred to as *'challenges'.* Difficult decisions were posited as

challenges which were in turn put forward as opportunities for personal growth. This sentiment was summed up by director (D7):

> Come to Avatar if you want to be in a very exciting industry and in a leading organisation within that industry. So if you're up to being in a fast-moving dynamic [organisation] where there's a lot of change but a lot of personal opportunity and you're prepared to back yourself and go for it. There are a lot of challenges but potential for a lot of satisfaction. There's plenty of opportunities to develop personally and be rewarded. If you really like a lot of certainty, stability, a lot of predictability and if you want to be super super wealthy then don't go for it. Probably if you're highly entrepreneurial or highly conservative either ends of the spectrum it probably isn't for you.

Director (D6) commented *'If you're interested in a routine role that is not demanding and challenging if you don't like change if you lack perhaps a little intuition then I would say it's not right for you'.* Negative consequences were ignored and instead labelled 'challenges' which were wholly positive developmental opportunities.

Conversing with directors and observing them at meetings created the perception that what they wanted from lower levels was what I term *'flexibedience'*. Flexibedience can be understood as the requirement to be flexible enough to adapt to change and new targets at a moment's notice whilst being obedient enough to not question the change or targets no matter the consequences. In other words, lower levels were to do what they were told and what they were told to do changed often. The prominence of market storytelling, the focus of the financial targets and the constant change meant flexibedience from lower levels was paramount. What was offered in return was the personal growth and learning they would apparently get from continuing to work to achieve targets despite any negative consequences such as job insecurity or work intensification. Anything else, directors claimed, was indicative of a bad attitude.

The fact that top management oriented themselves towards the achievement of financial goals and that this translated into a need for firm hierarchical control and isolation from lower levels is not that novel a finding. However what the Avatar case demonstrates is how hierarchy combined with falsely optimistic communications cemented the isolation of top management. Directors' inability to take employee interests into account resulted in falsely positive, optimistic future oriented communications. Directors then began to believe their own press and used these falsely positive communications to absolve themselves from the negative consequences of their own decisions. The implementation

was achieved via what I term, the '*command hierarchy*'. The command hierarchy requires this distinct label as it was not the official Avatar organisation structure.[66]

4.3: STRUCTURING HIERARCHY

4.3.1: The Avatar Command Hierarchy

As stated in chapter two, the literature on shareholder capitalism heralds the dominance of hierarchy as an organisational structure whereas the literature on normative and knowledge work structures claim hierarchy is ineffective and unnecessary in innovative, knowledge intensive firms with strong corporate cultures. Interestingly, amongst directors in Avatar, hierarchy was not undesirable, instead it was viewed as fundamental to ensuring the centrally derived organisation goals were prioritised throughout the subsidiary. Use of the term hierarchy was not particularly common but neither was it unspoken. In addition to the word hierarchy, terms such as 'alignment', 'strong leadership', 'vision' and 'clarity of message' were used interchangeably. Such terms tended to be used in any instance where an interviewee was claiming that hierarchy played a positive and important role. So hierarchy was not an outdated, pejorative or contentious concept but it is worthwhile noting its' alternative guises. This was demonstrated by director (D5) who appeared to be getting to grips with his leadership rhetoric and stated:

> People do actually, I believe, react well to a hierarchy, if it's correctly put forward. I think you need to show strong leadership...[...]...It is about simple straight forward execution based on simple straight-forward messages that you get everybody behind so you're all marching in the same direction. It's the classic thing. I'm not good enough on my parallels or analogies; armies and various things. It's people who've succeeded because suddenly you've got everybody who's literally marching in step in the same direction versus people who are kind of weaving, ducking, diving with some people off to the left or right. It's just going to drive success in a business if you create that. So it's all about alignment.

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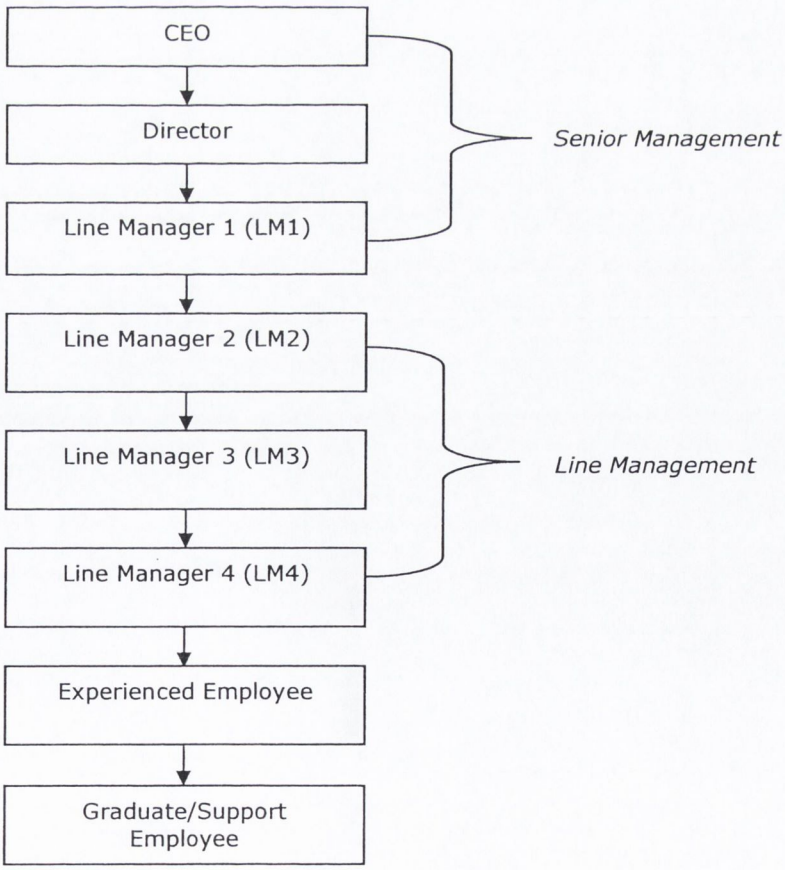
[66] The official structure will be discussed in chapter five.

The importance and effectiveness of hierarchical, vertical alignment was commonly voiced amongst the directors. Another director (D4) stated:

> We [directors] are the ones who create the environment for the people who work for us and they'll react to that and will create that for their people. There's a reason why management is hierarchal, there's a reason for these things and it's completely up to us...[...]...I've seen in situations where we as a team [of directors] are aligned and working well, I've seen the impact it has on everybody and I've seen the impact when it hasn't. The people that report to us, in general they 100% respond to us...[...]...We on the directors team choose the people who will run the next layer. We're the ones that tell them whether they've done a good job, we choose them, we rate them.

This 'alignment' was achieved through the command hierarchy. The existence of the command hierarchy was revealed in meetings and interviews when individuals spoke about how work was organised in their area. The command hierarchy manifested itself through reporting structures which were captured in organisation charts. Up to nine reporting levels existed in Avatar Ireland as outlined in figure 4b.

Figure 4b: The Avatar Ireland Command Hierarchy



Source: Avatar Ireland Organisation Charts

An LM3 (M3) manager described the structure stating:

> It's quite a layered structure and from top to bottom, from the Chief Executive down to the minion, the person that comes in off the street. There's lots and lots of layers and management structures and, it does tend to be the thing people talk about as well. We talk about 'grandfather managers' here, you report to someone who reports to someone who reports to someone who reports....

The most common arrangement was for an employee to answer into a LM3 or LM4 manager.[67] The command hierarchy was highly consequential in daily working life as it was the framework for what was referred to in Avatar as the work and communications '*cascade*'. The cascade process was initiated by the CEO and directors who held a half day director team meeting each Monday. The directors then held management meetings with the LM1s at which they cascaded information. LM1s then held meetings with those who reported directly into them and so on until it got to employee level. Directors and managers also held weekly one-one's with those who reported directly into them. So managers and employees typically attended some form of weekly team meeting and one-one meeting with their manager.

The command structure was the meaningful indicator of status within Avatar as it dictated decision making authority, access to resources and timing of communications received. An individual's status was defined by who they answered to. For example, during the ethnography it was decided that one of the HR teams needed an additional layer and an LM2 level was created. One of the people on this team called me for a coffee as they were quite distressed that an additional layer had been introduced even though they liked and respected the person who had got the job and no changes had been made to their own role. They were upset because they would no longer answer into an LM1. Also during an interview, when discussing a colleagues promotion to director level, an LM1(M4) claimed that the managers below this new director had received a de facto promotion as they were now LM1s, *'Himself and myself would have been at the same level, and now he's a director...[...]...So his team have all moved up with him. They'd all have been my team's counterparts. So my team are seeing that as a*

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[67] The command hierarchy was not consistent throughout the organisation. Employees in different departments answered into different levels of management. The level of management an employee answered into was dependent on the size of the department and team. For example in smaller departments it was possible for an employee to answer into a LM1. Likewise, only in the larger departments did all levels exist.

win for them and a loss for us'. This particular example introduces one of the most critical relationships in Avatar Ireland, that of directors and LM1s.

4.3.2: Directors and LM1s: See no evil speak no evil

One of the most compelling and consistent observations over the course of the ethnography was how subservient LM1s were to directors. This subservience was critical as it was the level at which general financial and strategic goals got translated into specific projects and responsibilities for lower levels. The director-LM1 weekly meetings were referred to as functional management meetings. The first item at these management meetings was the '*director cascade'*. The director would communicate the relevant information from the directors meeting including implications and priorities for the function. Each LM1 would comment on actions necessary to realise an objective. Once the director cascade was finished they would go to discuss specific agenda items and LM1s would provide accounts of how their teams were progressing with various projects.

At these meetings LM1s appeared keen to give a positive account of their area's progress. They were affable towards each other and rarely passed judgement on each other. They rarely spoke in overtly negative terms but instead would speak of challenges and support requirements. However this did not mean they actually felt positive about whatever was going on. For example during a management meeting I attended a director was speaking about a Group related project. The managers all looked somewhat distressed but instead of saying anything they stayed silent with some looking down at the table. The director stood up to point to figures on a slide that were being projected and while their back was turned the LM1s made eye contact with each other, shook their heads and rolled their eyes. However no-one made any objection, there was an occasional exhale but no comment. The director asked if everyone understood the target and the managers just nodded. Perhaps sensing the lack of enthusiasm the director went on to elaborate the importance of the target in a 'don't get any ideas about messing this up' type of manner. This was met by a few quiet nods; the director then moved on to the next agenda item. In interviews LM1s commonly reported far higher levels of grievance with Group, directors, Avatar targets, and their

peers than they displayed when carrying out their roles. In fact, in public LM1s were probably the most agreeable and friendly constantly saying hello and conversing with people they encountered as they walked around the building.

To be an LM1 was a high-status position, it meant having the ear of a director, securing information early, securing resources and being involved in high profile projects. It also meant being well paid and LM1s informally told me about incentive schemes they participated in that were not available to lower levels, and were not well known. Throughout the ethnography, LM1s consistently demonstrated a reluctance to oppose directors. Instead LM1s sought to appease directors as this was necessary to maintain their status within the continuously changing structure. Many LM1s agreed that their instinctive response to directors was to 'just say yes'. As one LM1 (M5) from the Technology department stated:

> [LM1s] don't say no, they just say 'Yes we'll do a feasibility and we'll do a scope on this'. I think it's probably gone worse in the last six months than it was before. We don't say no because as an organisation in general we're afraid to say no. I think we're too obliging. Particularly amongst ourselves [LM1s]. We say yes too often without challenging that person and saying 'Is this really a good idea?"...[...]...We're all too busy to actually think about what we are actually doing. And as you know things are hectic, they really are...[...]...People are just afraid to say no. It is probably down to the fact that people are very busy and they're saying "Ah, yeah sure I'll do that job", instead of debating it and taking the time. People are too busy. As a culture I think that's crept in that people are afraid to say no.

This idea that saying 'No' often created more work than taking on the work itself was often mentioned and was indicative of how difficult it was to say no to a request. Questioning a decision was referred to as *'push back'* which directors would only accept if the LM1 had a business case to counter the directors' or Group's business case. So financial arguments were the primary acceptable grounds for push back but even so, LM1's reported that pushing back was largely ineffective as M6 stated: *'It's a reporting thing and it's a career thing people don't like to say no because if you do say no the pressure will be put on from another direction. It doesn't necessarily mean they'll say "Oh OK so".* Saying no was considered foolish, they would end up saying yes and in the meantime they would have attracted negative attention.

The director-LM1 relationship also played a key role in isolating directors from lower levels. Director communications were primarily with LM1s, organisation wide

announcements started with directors talking to LM1s. At social events, communication sessions, in the canteen and coffee dock it was rare to see directors with anyone other than LM1s. Directors satisfied their information needs primarily by asking LM1s about what was going on at lower levels. This meant that LM1s largely decided what directors got to hear and most LM1s claimed that directors did not like hearing anything other than good news. An LM1 (7) spoke about how a newly appointed director dissuaded them from bringing bad news to them:

> At one stage [the director] wasn't here that long. They were here just a couple of months and they said "Jeepers, you're just not upbeat about anything". What have I to be upbeat about? This is what I'm doing every day. I'm having this conversation with this person about their job going, I'm having this conversation with X about this change program which is going to result in 25 jobs less. So by the time I had gone through everything, there wasn't a single good news message in anything I was handling. Now, personally, I've learned to be very thick skinned. But it was only then when I did that [the director] kind of realised why I'm saying "Well what have I actually got to be jumping up and down cheery about? There is nothing of good news. I'm not telling anybody 'well done you've been promoted'. Instead I'm saying 'well actually we're taking your job from you". It's coming because of the competition, it's coming because of the financial pressures.

However the LM1 in this interview claimed there was little point in continuing to inform their director of the tougher part of what they were doing. In fact in interviews LM1s demonstrated detailed awareness of perceptions at lower levels and the negative consequences of top management decision making. LM1s could clearly articulate the clash between directors' needs and the consequences for lower levels. However they spoke about having to wear their '*corporate hat*' and how they didn't do anything about it as they did not want to be seen as negative or a 'blocker', they felt dissuaded from bringing the employee perspective to directors. This did not mean LM1s had a positive perception of directors' decisions. It just meant they avoided objecting. LM1s also understood the force of Group behind much decision making. The pace of change put LM1s in a constant state of catch-up as Group functional teams continuously disseminated new strategies for subsidiaries. A typical example was provided by an LM1 (M7) who stated:

> We're not in total control. We're part of a global entity so we can't call all the shots. So all of a sudden we have to implement change that we don't want to implement. And the thing that gets me the most is, Group don't actually have anywhere to implement it, the implementation is in the subsidiary. So [Group] are

> all big in the planning of it and all the rest and we have some input in the planning and things like that, and then they've the whole planning done and everybody knows what's going to happen and then Group go, "Great, now, okay, let's think about what we do next, now that we decided this is what we're doing in IT, let's see what we'll do in networks". And we're going "hang on a minute! We haven't implemented the IT one yet!". And Group are going, "Oh, I suppose we haven't". Because they don't have to implement it their focus has already changed....[...]...The funniest was we had this guy from Group who was looking after this whole suite of change programs that was called "One Avatar" and was all part of becoming a global entity. And he came over to us and said to myself and a program manager, "Now Phase 1 is over we have to think about Phase 2". We looked at him and we said, "Sorry, what do you mean by Phase 1 is over? Not one of the things has been implemented in any subsidiary yet. So while your job has been to decide what is actually happening, how do you know it's been successful because it hasn't even been put into a single subsidiary yet, so how can you tell us phase 1 is over?" He was already thinking about Phase 2.

LM1s also spoke about how the act of market storytelling caused them difficulties as lower levels rarely believed the initiatives were as beneficial as top management claimed. For example, another LM1 (M2) talking about market storytelling and outsourcing stated:

> [Employees] understand the logic of [outsourcing] but they don't believe it. Because outsourcing is about Avatar sitting down and going "OK, over the next 10 years this is what we think our development costs are going to be" and they show a graph like that [going up]. Then the outsourcing company go "Well if you're going to do all of that, we can do it for this [less]". So your outsourcing savings is the gap in between. But you haven't actually done anything, do you know what I mean? And you will only make those savings if you were going to spend that money, but in actual fact you're probably never going to spend that money because you probably would have had the CAPEX constraint anyway. I'll say my team are fairly bright and so they're kind of seeing through this thing. I understand that this is something [Global] have to do for the market because everybody's doing it. So, my staff would be very cynical, they know why we're doing it, they understand you're not going to make those savings because we would have never spent it, you know?...[...]...Who knows what you'd be spending in 5 years time.

Trying to navigate both sides of the story was not without consequence. Many LM1s appeared to be extremely busy and in some cases highly stressed and anxious and many felt the pressure they were under effected how they managed their own teams. As one LM1 (M5) reported:

> Before [redundancies, outsourcing, centralisation etc] my management style would have been very much, you know, democratic and coaching. This year it was pace-setting. It was just pace setting. But that's indicative of what happened last year in terms of the pressure we were under. I put pressure on people to get

> things done, so it was "Come on! Come on! We need to get things done!". That would have put a lot of pressure onto people. If we keep doing that we'll be in an early grave. It was the type of year. I don't think I can ever live through another one like that. Because it's just not worth it.

LM1s were more likely to be in early and stay late and they were the most likely to reschedule interviews. They chose to align themselves with directors, essentially to keep their status.

So LM1s played a crucial role in ensuring initiatives were pushed down the organisation through developing project plans for their teams and for allocating team and individual responsibilities and for assuring directors all was going according to plan. The role of LM1s in decision making will be further evidenced in chapters five and six. At this point it is suffice to say that the Avatar case demonstrates the continued dominance of both structural and socialised hierarchy. It also demonstrates the functional role of false positivity in senior management communications.

4.4 CONCLUSION: THE CENTRALISATION OF THINKING

The Avatar case demonstrates how the financial pressures of shareholder capitalism can be passed down from a hegemonic, multi-national parent to a small, boyscout subsidiary. The financial pressures were solidified into a centralised, hierarchical, decision-making structure. This structure was legitimated by legally mandated international financial regulations and enacted by a multi-national community of directors. Much of the literature on shareholder capitalism explains the need for hierarchy in terms of providing top management with the autonomy to pursue initiatives that might result in losses for labour. This was certainly the case in Avatar. Ultimately the market storytelling, the negative consequences of financial decisions, the constant change, the short-term strategic focus and the need to demonstrate good governance meant top management in market listed multi-national organisations are prompted, at every turn, to ensure and safeguard centralised, hierarchical, financialised decision-making autonomy. What the Avatar case reveals is how effective the combination of hierarchy and optimistic communications is at driving constant change and innovation.

The data presented in this chapter largely confirms much of the political economy writings discussed in chapter two. In order to set out what the Avatar data adds to the existing literature it is worthwhile reflecting on the data in terms of the five headings offered by Gospel and Pendleton (2003) that were introduced in chapter two:

i. Balance of interests: Top management in Avatar were oriented towards the achievement of financial goals which were a reflection of Group goals. The multi-national community of directors isolated themselves from lower levels both structurally and attitudinally. What they sought from lower levels was simple *'flexibedience'*. The Avatar case also demonstrates the persistence and effectiveness of hierarchy. This directly contradicts the knowledge economy literature discussed in chapter two heralding hierarchies demise. The role of the command hierarchy in Avatar Ireland will be further discussed throughout this thesis.

ii. Internal use of financial measures of performance: In Avatar, the budgeting, the benchmarking and the corporate governance process meant financial measures of performance were widespread. It also shows how the multi-national parent structured the organisation as a system of financial flows creating a *'financialisation of organisation structures'*. The budgeting processes ensured the dictates of shareholder capitalism were translated into a raft of initiatives that reached down into all levels of the organisation. The use of financial measures also served to isolate directors who avoided considering other measures in their decision-making.

iii. Timeframe of managerial decision-making: Avatar Ireland was very much oriented towards the achievement of quarterly financial targets. The short-term focus was exacerbated by the *'market storytelling'* that Group engaged in. Group were always working ahead of subsidiaries and calling for subsidiary management to implement initiatives within as short a timeframe as possible. This meant the organisation was in a constant state not just of change but of upheaval and *'catch up'*.

iv. Approach to securing managerial and employee commitment: The specific strategies to achieving this will be discussed in later chapters. However for the

moment it is important to highlight how directors in Avatar Ireland hierarchically directed the achievement of financial targets through focusing on implementation and largely ignoring adverse consequences on lower levels. They reconciled this in their own minds by delivering overly optimistic communications and understanding employee reaction to all decisions as an *'interpretive choice'*.

v. Nature of business strategies: Avatar was involved in continuous innovation and cost cutting that largely emanated from the *'market storytelling'* that Group engaged in with capital markets. What the Avatar case reveals is the manner in which Group understood the business strategy as fodder for the financial markets which meant business strategies were designed towards the achievement of short-term financial returns.

The picture painted in this chapter is one where employees are of little concern to top management in decision making. At this point it is worthwhile turning to the structure that was supposed to override all the negative consequences of shareholder capitalism and appropriate employees' subjective orientation in order to drive positive commitment and stimulate motivation and high performance. The focus of the next chapter is the normative structures.

Chapter Five: The Normative Structure

5.0: INTRODUCTION TO THIS CHAPTER

This chapter sets out what the Avatar employment experience was *supposed* to be like, in other words what top management and HR prescribed as the 'normal' employment experience. This chapter aims to add to the literature by showing first, how normative structure can incorporate soft rhetoric and hard mechanics and secondly, how best practice HR can fail to yield the desired results, in terms of employee commitment, yet be perpetuated as the existence of a HR department facilitates top management abdication of people management responsibility. A normative ideology prescribes two aspects of organisational life namely *'an elaborate depiction of the social attributes of the company and a specification of the member role'* (Kunda, 1992:89). Normative aspirations are operationalised through the practices associated with the normative structure of human resource management (HRM) as:

> It is through an integrated and internally consistent set of HR policies in relation to recruitment, selection, training, development, rewarding and communications, that the organization's core values can be best conveyed, according to the normative HRM models (Legge, 2005:114).

The Avatar case tells a tale of an elaborate, 'best practice' normative structure on the one hand, and low employee 'engagement on the other. Avatar sought to create a strategic, cohesive, commitment generating, normative structure of HR practices. In fact, the Avatar HR practices ranked in the top 5% in the Irish 'Great Place to Work' competition. The HR department disseminated a centrally prescribed corporate ideology, full with branded imagery and rhetoric which served as the overarching normative framework. This was further broken down into a cohesive range of HR processes. Taken together, these practices clearly defined first, what Avatar claimed to offer those who worked there and secondly, the behaviours individuals should demonstrate to have a 'successful' employment experience. Each of these practices will be described in detail in order to demonstrate the extent to which Avatar HR adhered to HR 'best practice' and also to delineate the hard and soft elements of each practice.

Reviewing the Avatar normative structures against the management and HR literature indicates that Avatar got the normative structure 'right'. Furthermore, according to the

management, and even critical literature, these practices should create amongst employees a positive subjective orientation to the organisation. However this was not the case with Avatar. Data from the Avatar 'employee engagement' survey will be presented to show how these 'best practice' normative structures ultimately failed. However, the employee perspective and the rationale for the low engagement scores are discussed in chapter seven. For the purposes of this chapter, the survey responses reveal that employees did not have a positive view of Avatar or the normative practices. Nonetheless the organisation persisted with the practices as they were a source of significant convenience for top management.

The account of the normative structure will be followed by an analysis of the subjective perspectives of those charged with implementing it namely HR and the directors. The perspectives of line managers will also be mentioned.

5.1: NORMATIVE STRUCTURES AND THE HR PROMISE

The importance of linking the business and HR strategy is often cited in the HR literature. Avatar offered high quality, knowledge intensive products and services based on quality distinction with a price premium. Such organisations are claimed to be in a position to derive competitive benefits from adopting a 'high road', 'soft', commitment based HR model (Cooke, 2000; Flood et al, 2001; Wall and Wood, 2005). The managerial strategy of purposefully implementing a cohesive suite of HR practices has been afforded numerous labels including high performance works systems (HPWS) (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Huselid, 1995), high commitment management (Arthur, 1992; Walton, 1985; Wood, 1996; Wood and DeMenzes, 1998), high involvement practices (Guthrie, 2001, Lawler, 1992; Wood, 2003) and sophisticated work practices (Delaney et al, 1989; Koch & McGrath, 1996). Different studies present slightly varying lists of the HR practices that constitute this approach to management. However

> All have in common the idea that a bundle of human resources practices such as, training programmes, incentive systems, selectivity practices, sharing arrangements and practices, that enhance communication and integration, improve employee and company performance' (Horgan and Muhlau, 2003:27).

I will refer to this performance link as the 'HR promise' as '*human resource management (HRM) has been invigorated by the promise that there is a best-practice, high-involvement management (HIM) that can guarantee superior organizational performance*' (Wood, 2003:367).

There are a range of empirical studies which seek to make this performance link and apparently validate the HR promise (Huselid, 1995; Huselid and Becker, 1998; Pfeffer, 1994; Richard and Johnson, 2001; Rosenthal et al, 1997; Snell and Dean, 1992. Studies conducted in Ireland have produced similar conclusions (Flood, 2005; Horgan and Muhlau, 2003). Studies also show that it is rare to find this full range of complementary practices operating cohesively in one organisation (Horgan and Muhlau, 2003; 2006; Storey, 1992). However Avatar Ireland actually succeeded in achieving this 'holy grail' of HRM cohesiveness. This was largely achieved via Group HR who played a prominent role in shaping subsidiary normative structures.[68] To ensure that the HR practices met business needs and 'best practice' standards, Group HR commissioned a number of leading HR consulting firms to advise them on their HR processes. HR departments within subsidiaries also worked with the local offices of these consulting firms. HR in Avatar Ireland welcomed what they described as the '*thought excellence*' role of Group HR. A HR LM1 (H2) claimed *'From a HR perspective, Group has resulted in us getting absolutely top notch, high quality, cutting edge [HR] material'.*

HR in Group and Avatar Ireland subscribed to the 'universal' understanding of the HR promise whereby the more they subscribed to 'best practice' the more likely they were to realise the promise of high employee and company performance.[69] The actors responsible for driving such practices, HR and top management, cited this HR promise as the rationale behind their commitment to 'best practice' HR. As one HR LM1 (H3) stated *'We believe in this famous continuum of, "if you've happier people you've happier customers so therefore you've a better business"...[...]...if you don't look after your people you're not going to get the financial results.* The CEO stated more simply

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[68] Group played a prominent role in developing the specific technical processes such as the organisation structure, the induction programme, the performance management system, elements of the training, development and elements of the compensation and benefits arrangements, the competency model, the changed management program and the employee engagement survey. Some more specific practices were shaped by local factors such as the need to be competitive in the local labour market. For example rates of pay reflected the local labour market.

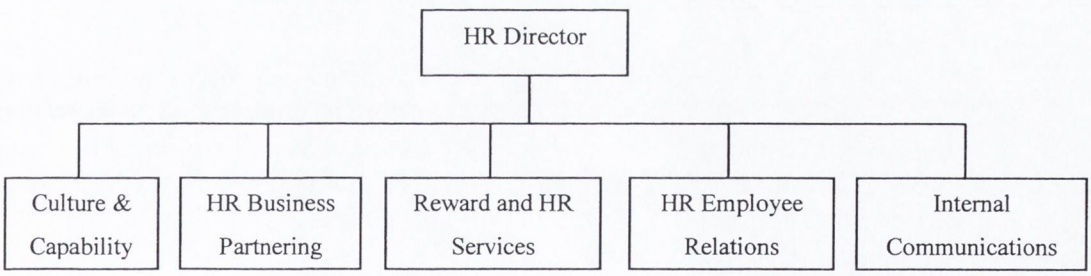
[69] This is in contrast to the 'contingent' or 'best fit' model whereby local environmental factors play the dominant role in designing HR practices (Bamberger and Phillips, 1991).

'if they [employees] do enjoy working here they're probably going to perform better'. A director (D4) claimed if they failed to achieve employee commitment to the organisation goals that the consequences would be severe:

> We will fail miserably in the new [technology]. Because to do what we need to do in the future you need people prepared to go the extra mile, to think outside the box, to work with each other and to care. If you don't have that what we'll have will be 'plausible failures' so people can say "I did my best, if that hadn't gone wrong over there we'd have done it". Unless you've got people energised and really committed and working together we won't break through these barriers in the way that we need to do. We won't break through those barriers we'll just complain about the barriers. So I think it [commitment] is vital, absolutely vital or all we'll do is fail miserably.

One of the earliest indicators of Avatar's commitment to HRM that I encountered was the size of the HR department. A benchmarking exercise conducted prior to the ethnography revealed that Avatar Ireland's HR department was larger than what was typical for an organisation of their size and sector. Furthermore HR were the only department that escaped headcount reduction in the redundancy program. Top management felt that HR resources would be required to minimise any negative fallout from the various cost-cutting initiatives being implemented. In other words, directors and HR seemed to believe that the normative structure and practices could override the negative consequences of shareholder capitalism.

Figure 5a: Avatar Ireland HR Department



Source: HR documentation

This HR team worked to disseminate the normative ideology and the mechanics of the specific HR practices.

5.2: NORMATIVE IDEOLOGY: BRANDING THE EMPLOYMENT DEAL

5.2.1: The Avatar Employer Brand

It was widely accepted in Group and Avatar that the brand was a key source of competitive advantage in the external market. The importance of the brand meant the notion of having an internal 'employer brand', that reflected the external brand, was attractive to Group top management and HR. An initiative was undertaken to identify the positive and valuable social attributes of the external brand. Three attributes were identified labelled the Avatar 'Brand Essence' which served as the broad normative ideology. For the purposes of confidentiality the exact language will not be used, but the behavioural characteristics called for employees to be 'passionate', 'reliable' and 'innovative'.[70] These three ideals were further broken down into a broad range of normative attributes which incorporated terms such as warmth, humanity, empathy, integrity, life's journey, best in class, challenging, inspiring, creativity and optimism. The top management message focused on how the organisation could best ensure the ongoing sanctity of the brand externally by *'living the brand'* internally as described by director (D5):

> You need an organisation that is fully aligned with what you're trying to do so that people have a common purpose, and you need to have embedded the brand value and culture into the organisation such that what [Avatar] is giving the customer is very seamless and consistent experience.

The rationale was described by director (D7) who stated:

> The whole concept was saying in order to be an ongoing successful company we had to differentiate ourselves in the eyes of our customer and in order to deliver that 'wow' customer experience we needed to be a certain way ourselves, to live the brand from the inside out and the way we're going to describe that brand or that customer experience from an internal perspective is that we want to be passionate, reliable and innovative.

Branding logic of extracting additional value through positive association was applied internally to regulate employee subjectivity and behaviours. Employees completed Brand Essence workshops that involved sitting on beanbags, instead of chairs and they and were provided with reading materials and DVDs outlining how to behave and

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[70] It is worth pointing out that Brand Essence was not a competency model. It was a broader cultural statement of behaviours that were supposedly central and indispensable to Avatar. Avatar also possessed a detailed competency framework which performed a different function than Brand Essence.

communicate in a way that was consistent with Brand Essence. Specific detailed guidelines were provided relating to writing, talking and managing one's body language to communicate in an 'on brand' manner. During the ethnography I attended a workshop delivered by visiting personnel from Group HR entitled '*Tone of Voice*' which described the normative optimum style for communicating and interacting. There was no subtlety regarding the need to self regulate in order to be 'on brand'.

Group disseminated elaborate, glossy booklets containing stories from Avatar subsidiaries around the world about individuals who apparently lived Brand Essence in their working lives. These booklets could be seen scattered on desks and in meeting rooms throughout the building. An excerpt from this booklet follows:

> George is Head of X Department in Ireland and he's passionate about the Avatar Brand. "I [George] live and breathe it, and try to bring it to life in everything I do. And once you've got everyone else around you doing it, and it's an innate part of your organization, it can be an amazingly powerful thing". George spends a lot of time helping our people and customers deal with problems and issues. And according to him, if we're going to live our goal of being creative, and improving things for customers and ourselves, we've got to be prepared to find the right solution...[...]...And if you work with George, expect the unexpected. "I had to do a presentation, which looked like a job for the routine PowerPoint. But instead I got together with some people and we did it as a little skit. It's different and why not? It's all about being passionate, enquiring and creative in what you do. You just have to believe it and make it part of you – the rest will follow".

The brand was the dominant normative paradigm prescribing the official social attributes of Avatar and employees and the underlying unitary message was that living Brand Essence was the route to organisational and individual success.

However another rationale, not discussed in the literature emerged, namely the importance that financial markets attach to normative structures. Brand Essence featured in market storytelling and was discussed in financial communiqués and annual reports. The dissemination of Brand Essence around the world was portrayed as being a key achievement in annual reports. It was presented as an indication that top management were taking action to ensure the global organisation was aligned and

committed to delivering the organisation goals. For example, a HR LM1(H3) described the importance of including 'innovation' in Brand Essence:

> I think externally we get pressure that [our external Brand] is what the culture is like in here because that's what our external brand says. It does come down from the corporate literature and from the top. You'd have the Group CEO having to talk to the [financial markets] about us being very innovative because otherwise we'd be seen as being a [non-high tech] stock and, that would just kill us if we were seen as a [non-high tech] stock, so it comes right from the top.

Avatar top management sought to demonstrate to investors that the organisation's social attributes best positioned it to deliver the business strategy and shareholder return. Acknowledging a more pluralistic, complex and harsher truth was simply unbecoming of a market leading firm. The normative ideology of Brand Essence was further broken down into specific HR practices which were referred to as the Avatar employment deal.

5.2.2: The Avatar Employment Deal: Unitarism, individuality and meritocracy

The dominant themes observable within Avatar's HR practices were ones of unitarism (Fox, 1966), meritocracy (Hyter, 2004) and individualism (Purcell and Gray, 1986). Such ideals are not novel as they are what separate strategic HRM from other more pluralistic, paternalistic, collectivist approaches associated with personnel management (Guest, 1987:507; Storey, 1992:35). Within Avatar the notion of the knowledge worker as being an autonomous, career minded individual in control of their career destiny was front and centre. It was claimed that hard working, committed individuals led to corporate success and the HR processes would ensure commensurate individualised reward in both monetary and career development terms. Consequently, career success and, by default, failure, were to be interpreted solely in terms of an individual's actions. Imagery played a central role in the communication of normative structures and in order to demonstrate what employees were presented with, some of this imagery will be displayed alongside the content of the specific practices.

Figure 5b: The Avatar Employment Deal



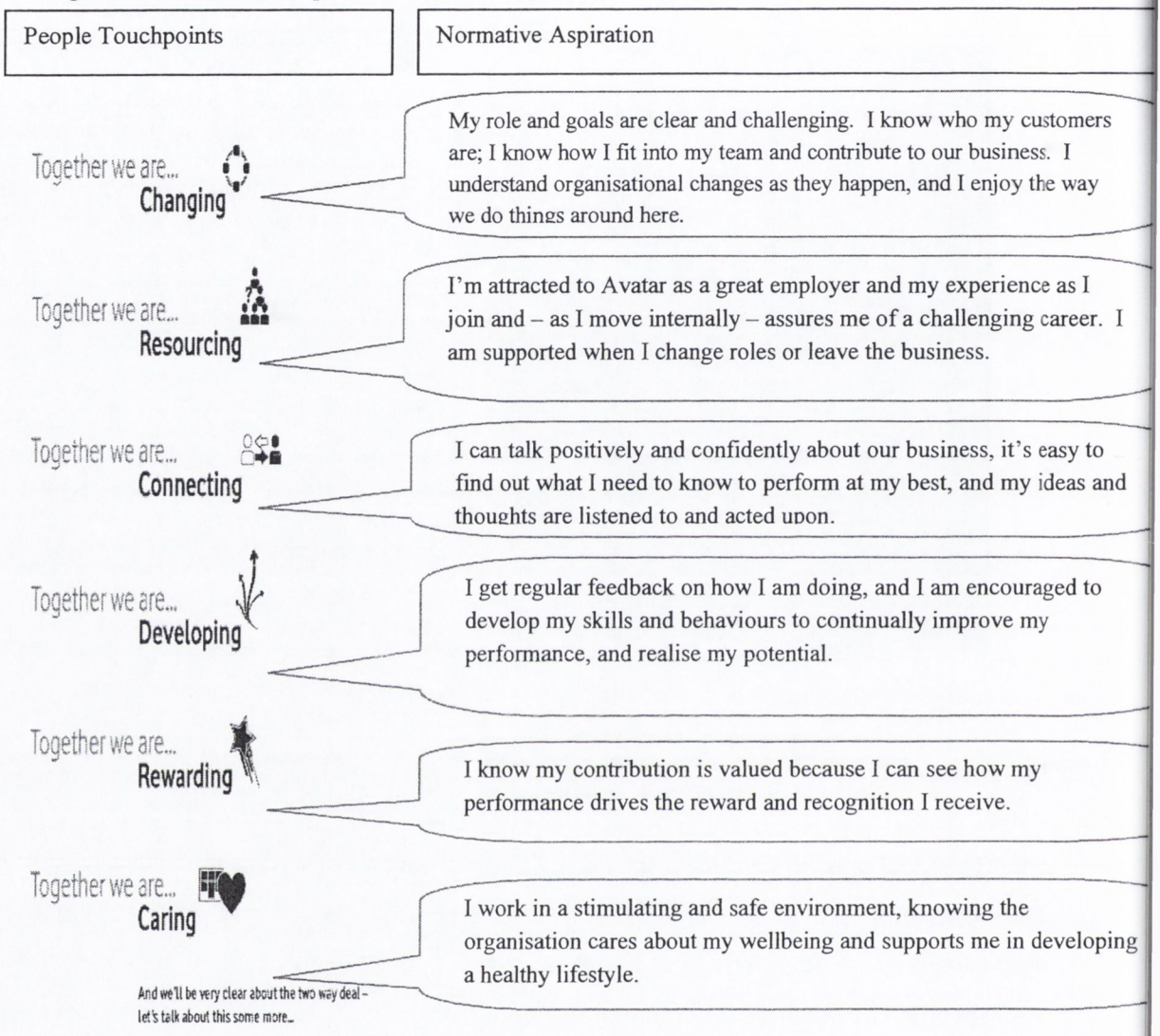
THE DEAL:
TOGETHER WE ARE ...AVATAR

'We need you to deliver a [Brand Essence] experience at every interaction with your customers whether internal or external. To help both you and Avatar to do what we need to do we have created the Avatar people strategy – Together we are...Avatar. Together we are...Avatar clearly states what the deal is...the deal we as Avatar make when we ask you to join the company and the deal that you make when you say yes! It's the deal that ensures we are [reliable, passionate and innovative], and it's not just a deal for recruiting, it's a deal that goes on as long as we're both part of the relationship'.

Source: Avatar 'People Strategy Storyboard'.

This deal was broken down into six categories which further outlined how individuals were supposed to feel about the specific aspects of their employment. These six categories were referred to as 'People Touchpoints', was further sub-divided into specific HR practices. A common feature was the manner in which the communications relating to HR processes focused on describing the optimum outcome. The normative employment deal aspirations for each Touchpoint are summarised in the figure 5c.

Figure 5c: Avatar 'People Strategy Touchpoints'



Source: Avatar People Strategy Documentation

The deal and the touchpoints provided the rhetoric and the underlying HR processes were positioned as being the mechanisms by which the unitary, meritocratic, individualist ideals were achieved. HR in Avatar sought to devolve HR responsibility to line managers which is in keeping with 'best practice' (Legge, 2005:113; Pfeffer, 1999; Storey, 1992; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003). HR emphasised to line managers that the HR processes were the key people management tools at their disposal for generating the commitment and behaviours necessary to achieve business results.[71]

[71] There was an abundance of HR material that line managers were required to access including people management training programmes, video demonstrations and HR documentation. HR also held workshops with line managers throughout the year relating to the HR processes most prominent at that

In fact, HR had minimal interaction with employees. Employees could contact the 'HR Services Team' to get information about any administrative aspect of their employment or if they required information about a specific policy. However, HR ultimately worked through line managers to achieve their strategic objectives and to implement the 'employment deal'.

Before exploring the HR processes, it is necessary to describe the official Avatar hierarchy, which was distinct from the command hierarchy. I term this the 'career hierarchy' as it served as a backdrop for management decision making in many HR processes.

5.2.3: The 'Broad Band' Career Hierarchy

The Avatar command hierarchy, made up of nine levels, was introduced in chapter four. However the official organisation structure was a flat 'broad band' hierarchy of five levels. Broad banding is a job evaluation system which places a large number of broadly comparable roles into a handful of bands. Broad banding is portrayed in HR literature as being a best practice approach to creating a flat, flexible, knowledge sharing organisation (Risher, 2000; Werner, 2000). Broad banding came from Group and the documentation stated that '*There are no "sub-bands" or "levels" within bands*'. The broad band structure served as the framework for implementing numerous HR practices, for example, pay and benefit programs including bonus, car allowance, pension, healthcare, holidays were all tied to band positioning. The official purpose of the broad bands is further described in figure 5d:

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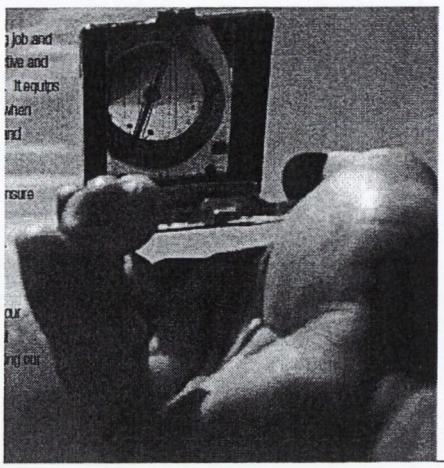
time, such as performance management, salary reviews and change management. Each function had a HR business partner who also attended the weekly director and LM1meetings in each function to remind managers of the HR processes due for implementation at that time.

Figure5d: Avatar Broad Banding

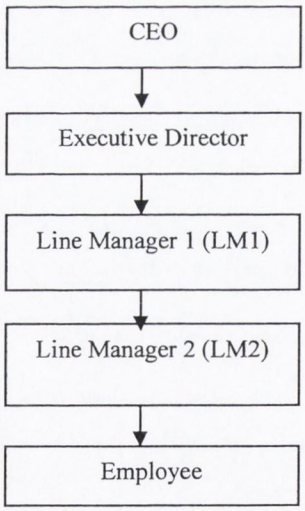


'Avatar's Broad Bands have been designed to create a framework for classifying job and organisation levels across the Avatar Group. The Framework provides an objective and transparent way to assess and compare the relative size of roles across Avatar...[...]...Broad Bands are designed to ensure that our organisation remains agile, flexible and responsive to our customers. They are the foundation for continuing to create more effective people management processes, demonstrating our Passion for Our People and ensuring that Avatar builds a more integrated and unified organisation that is capable of executing our business strategy'.

Source: HR Broad Band documentation

The levels within the broad band framework are set out in figure 5e. Whereas within the command hierarchy there were seven levels below the directors, in the career hierarchy there were only three.

Figure 5e: Avatar Ireland 'Broad Band' Hierarchy



Source: HR documentation.

The only categories that had the same population as the command hierarchy were the directors and LM1s. The broad band career structure meant an individual's role could change significantly without triggering a justification for an official promotion. For example an administrator or entry level graduate engineer sat in the same band as a highly skilled knowledge worker with ten plus year's experience or project management responsibility. In fact there were numerous roles such as, team leader, project manager, product manager, that were positioned in the employee band. This facilitated a high level of functional flexibility as an employee's responsibilities could be significantly extended without any knock on promotional consequences such as increasing some elements of compensation and benefits or managing peer speculations around fairness and equity that more official promotions can prompt.

The attributes of the Avatar career hierarchy reflects much of the literature on the flat flexible organisation. However, what this case shows is how flat career structures can operate alongside more hierarchical command structures giving organisations a 'best of both worlds' approach that provides a high level of both functional flexibility and hierarchical control. An organisation can operate dual policies on organisation structure to meet different needs. In Avatar the lack of formal career steps combined with the command hierarchy provided a structure loose enough that employees could be expected to significantly develop and take on an ever changing range of work tasks without getting formally promoted; all the while ensuring forceful hierarchical control was exerted via the command hierarchy.

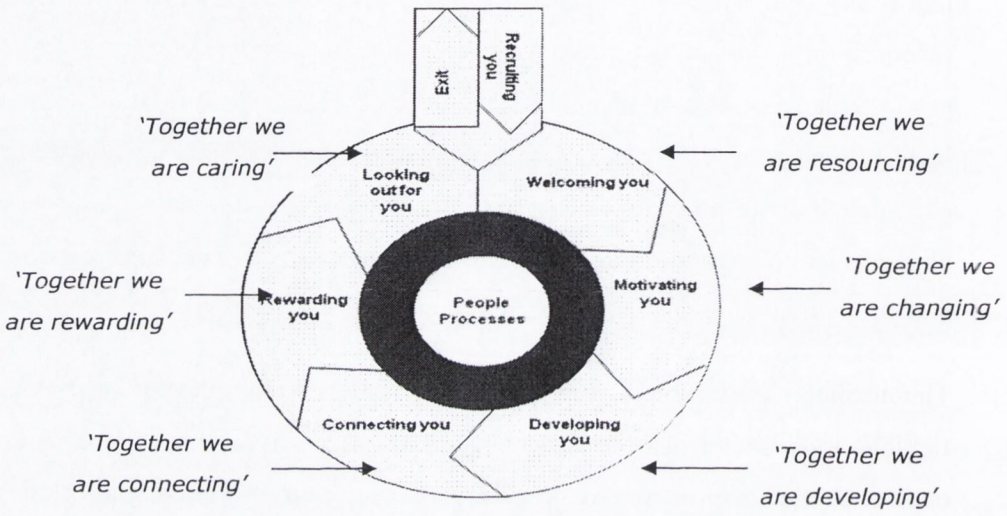
Interestingly, flat career structures are assumed to go hand in hand with the demise of hierarchy; however in Avatar flat careers and hierarchical command went hand in hand.

5.3: THE AVATAR HR PROCESSES

The specific HR processes were supposed to deliver the employment deal during all phases of the employment cycle as outlined in the graph below. These processes were

centrally managed via an e-HR system SAP HR.[72] E-HR is claimed to enhance HR decision making and employee interaction (Mayfield et al, 2003).

Figure 5f: The Avatar Employment Deal Cycle



Source: Induction Training Presentation Materials (connecting arrows inserted by author)

This 'deal' provided a framework in which the normative rhetoric of Brand Essence and the people strategy were broken down into practice specific rhetoric and mechanics of each HR process. The details of these are set out in the following pages.

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[72] *E-HR is about using the internet and web-enabled technologies to create an organization network of HR data and information as well as the development of new practices to HR activities such as e-recruitment, e-learning and e-reward'* (Bratton and Gold, 2007: 213). An overview of SAP HR functionality can be found at http://www.sap.com/solutions/business-suite/erp/hcm/index.epx

5.3.1: 'Together we are Resourcing': The Recruitment Deal and Process

AVATAR

- 'We identify the right people, reflective of Avatar's customer base, to resource the business.
- We create a positive candidate experience, by being clear about Avatar's culture during the recruitment process, ensuring that selection decisions are transparent and fair, and providing candidates with clear feedback.
- We support and enable you to manage your career and move within Avatar proactively and, when people leave the business, we treat them with honesty, dignity and respect.'

ME

- 'I know what I've signed up for, and I want to be a part of Avatar.
- I quickly seek out information and feedback that helps me understand what is required of me.
- I understand my skills and capabilities, and the opportunities that exist in Avatar, so I can manage my career, realistically'.

Once candidates for a vacancy were identified the recruitment process consisted of competency based interviewing and psychometric testing which complies with notions of best practice recruitment (Bertua et al, 2005; Holbeche, 1999; Kristof, 1996).[73] HR worked with line managers to identify the competency level required for the vacancy and interview questions were designed to measure the competencies to identify the candidates 'behavioural fit'.[74]

Although clear recruitment procedures existed, the opportunities for formal promotion through the broad career bands were sparse.[75] Such promotional opportunities were market or demand driven. In other words, a vacancy became available only when it was deemed that a new role was needed to enhance the organisations ability to deliver products and services. Taken together, the structural constraints, in the shape of the

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[73] Avatar practiced 'Ability' psychometric tests, which are understood to be a good indicator of performance success (Bertua et al, 2005:403). Competency based interviewing is understood to be critical for ensuring candidates are the right behavioural 'fit' for the organisation (Kristof, 1996).

[74] There was one induction course for all new recruits. This course was three days long and the content appeared to fall into two main categories. The first category dealt with the notion of the customer experience and inductees were brought to view product displays and demonstrations in the Avatar 'Customer Experience Room'. The second topic was the Brand Essence and HR processes. The induction course was a highly branded course with an abundance of normative imagery and rhetoric.

[75] Promotion through the bands only came about if an individual's role changed to the extent they warranted a different classification under the job evaluation 'accountabilities' namely 1) impact on business, suppliers/customers/third parties 2) leadership and teamwork,3) innovation and change 4) knowledge and experience 5) communication.

broad band structure, and demand constraints, in the shape of market requirements, meant formal promotion through the bands was not automatic or common.

In terms of the literature, it is worthwhile revisiting the literature on the career minded, enterprising, portfolio knowledge worker, discussed in chapter two, who is driven by the opportunities for a 'boundaryless' career constantly seeking to derive financial rewards from enhancing their portfolio of skills. It raises the question of how such behaviours can be motivated by career and rewards when no such career path or rewards are available in flat career structures. The problem of 'career plateau' in flat organisations and job insecurity created by lack of promotional opportunities has been documented (Appelbaum and Santiago, 1997; Burchell et al, 1999). The lack of promotional opportunities was noted in the employee survey which revealed that only 25% of employees had a favourable perception of their opportunity for promotion in Avatar. I raised this issue in the interviews with directors and HR.

Directors and HR freely acknowledged the importance of allowing market forces to dictate promotion opportunities. In fact some HR LM1s, and all directors, expressed irritation at the idea that they might bear any responsibility for providing career development opportunities beyond those created by market forces. One director was genuinely perplexed at the notion they had any responsibility for career development *'Why would I own anyone else's career plan? I own my own and that's enough to be managing to be honest'*. A LM1 in HR (H3) stated:

> People sometimes think we're what I call a career charity. I sometimes say, "Look we've a business to run...[...]...We don't need five senior engineers on the team to get the work done, we need one. We don't need five. So while you're next career step might be to be a senior engineer, we don't need another senior engineer".

Despite acknowledging these constraints directors and HR were very enthusiastic about career development within Avatar, with many citing the constant strategic change and organisation restructuring as facilitating career development opportunities. A common sentiment was summed up by director (D8) who stated:

> Your career is your own, it's absolutely for you to kind of drive and you know there are very few things you can't change, you just need to make your mind up and make decisions and things like that so I think there's huge opportunity, there isn't much that a company like Avatar can't offer you...[...]...it's a brilliant industry, it's really fast moving and it's really exciting, you know it could be

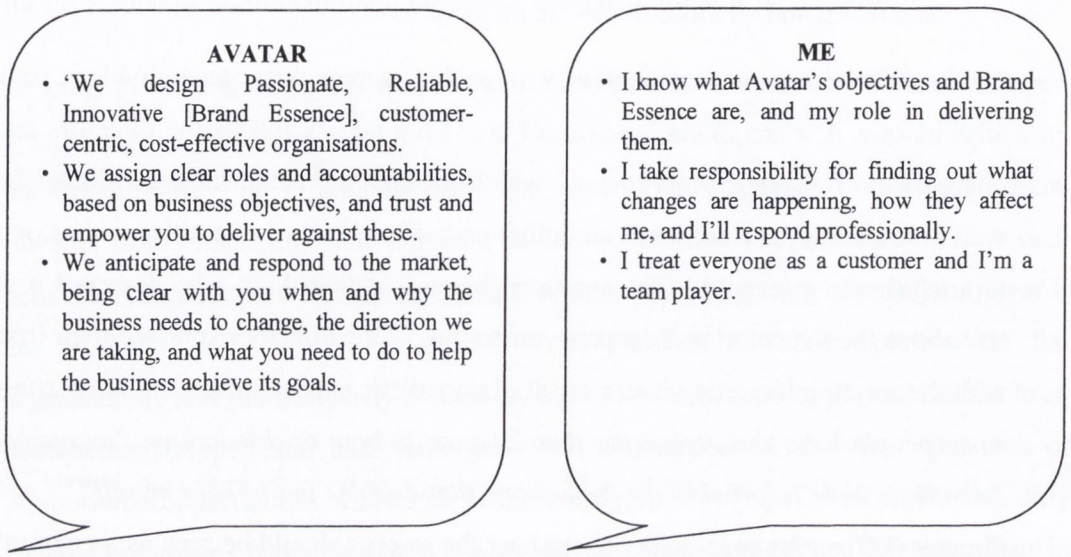
> better but it's got a really kind of dynamic feel to it, it's young, it's an amazing facility, the training and stuff is great. The kind of opportunities for promotion and travel and all those things are massive.

So the official top management view was that, career wise, an individual could go anywhere in Avatar. When questioned about the survey results the directors and HR clung to the rhetoric of meritocracy which meant they could attribute dissatisfaction with promotion opportunities to an individual's flawed sense of entitlement, as opposed to a legitimate grievance. The common theme was that those who deserved it would rise above the structural and demand constraints. One director expressed their irritation with the result, interpreting it as a result of unrealistic expectations: *'It's interesting how some people have the perception that "Avatar is here to develop me "as opposed to "Avatar is here to provide the framework that enables me to help myself"'*. Another director (D9) spoke specifically about how the re-orgs should be seen as an opportunity for career development:

> That's probably one of the greatest challenges in the business, to bring people along that and to [make them] realise that it's not the company's responsibility to make them different, they have to become different themselves and they have to think "Well how can I, in these new interesting times, how do I progress through this?"

Whilst there were real structural and demand constraints to career development the meritocratic rhetoric provided HR and directors with a means to put the onus back on the individual. This shift from structured stable internal labour markets to self development has been labelled the *'pendulum of ownership of career development'* (Hirsch and Jackson, 1997:9) However what was interesting was how quickly directors and HR switched from describing the career development opportunities in glowing rhetorical terms to expressing irritation at those who claimed these opportunities were not so readily available.

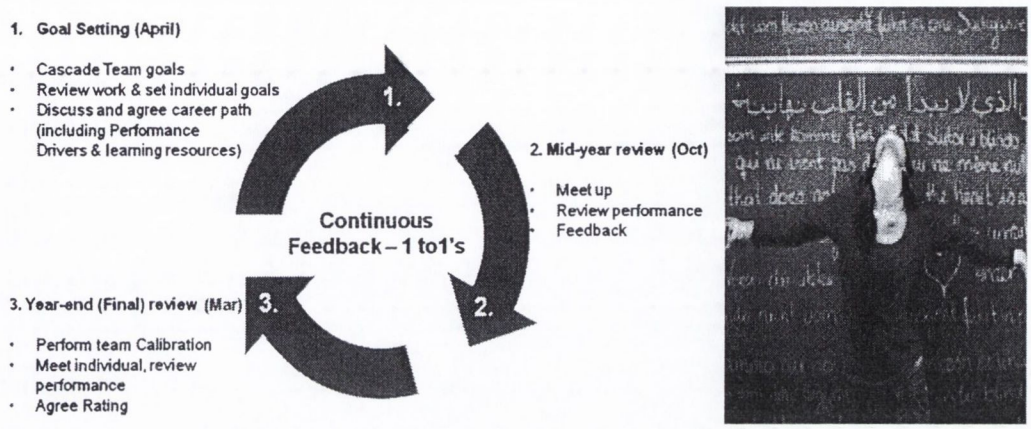
5.3.2: 'Together we are Changing': The Performance Deal



Performance management is understood in the literature to be *'the nub of the strategic link between HRM and organizational performance'* (Bratton and Gold, 2007:275).[76] In fact it is seen to be so crucial to stimulating high performance and accountability that it is becoming a more prominent tool in public sector organizations (Pollitt, 2000). In Ireland it is estimated that 58% of employees in Ireland with a 3rd level qualification participate in a performance review process (O'Connell et al, 2004). The Avatar performance management process came from Group and was referred to as 'performance dialogue' to denote that it was supposed to be an ongoing two way horizontal process. It was positioned as an ongoing dialogue between a manager and employee to *'set goals and create a development plan for the coming year, discuss past and current performance and agree performance ratings'* (HR documentation). The process is outlined in figure 5g:

[76] There is a wide array of literature proclaiming the importance and benefits of performance management systems. See Bratton and Gold, 2007 chapter eight for an overview.

Figure 5g: The Avatar Performance Dialogue Process.



Source: Avatar Induction Material

Performance goals were supposed to be reviewed informally at weekly one-ones and formally at a mid and end of year review as described by a member of the HR (H4) team:

> I think that for employees it's a very valuable tool, in order for them to realise how they're doing throughout the year; to gauge with their manager if they are happy or need support on how they are dealing with their objectives. Probably the most frightening thing is if you come to the end of the year and your manager goes "you didn't do this and this and this and this". And they [employees] go "but I never I had a clue that's what I was meant to do"...[...]...So I think that both parties find it very useful.

In other words performance dialogue, or what was referred to as PD, was supposed to be the foundation for all manager-employee work related discussions throughout the year so that when it came to assigning the performance rating at the end of the year there would be complete agreement as to what performance rating the individual achieved.

The PD process also involved competency assessment, i.e. a measurement of how individuals were behaving. The setting of performance and behavioural targets, or what Avatar described as 'what' someone has to do and 'how' they should go about doing it, is understood to be a commonplace best practice approach to achieving high performance (Strebler et al, 1997; Ulrich et al, 2008). The Avatar competencies were referred to as 'performance drivers' and defined as the '*behavioural management and leadership skills that underpin high performance rather than acceptable performance,*

in any role or function' (HR Documentation).[77] Individual performance against objectives and competencies were weighted 60:40 in favour of performance objectives.

An on-line software program on Avatar's global intranet was used to manage the performance dialogue process. A key step was the 'calibration' process for approving the performance ratings throughout Avatar. This was where financial structural constraints entered the process as the overall distribution of ratings had to be calibrated to ensure the subsequent bonus payout was within budget.[78] At the end of each performance year line managers submitted preliminary performance ratings for their employees to LM1s. Each director met with their LM1s to review the preliminary ratings and ratings were often challenged and changed. Such senior management calibration of performance ratings is widely discussed in HR literature as a fundamental element of 'best practice' performance management designed to ensure consistent and transparent allocation (Bohlander and Snell, 2010; Grote, 2002; 2005; Lawler, 2003).

However, even though Avatar implemented a 'best practice' on-line performance management system, and directors and HR promoted PD as the primary tool to getting work completed and that PD training and communications was widely available, the employee survey results revealed that only 62% felt they had clear and regular performance dialogues. In interviews, directors and HR claimed this was because line managers did not make optimum use of the process. HR claimed they had to chase managers to get them to go through each stage of the process and that managers and employees treated it as an administrative exercise and thereby failing to harness its power. This was described by director (D1):

> It's very good that we have performance dialogue; it's very good that we have that target setting process. It's very good the way we do the calibration meetings around targets and outcomes and so on. I think that's really good. But I think we miss the point there as well. We miss some of the benefits we could have got out

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[77] The model was quite detailed containing six 'skill areas' broken into twenty two performance drivers, i.e. each skill area had 3-4 performance drivers. Each skill area could be measured at three different levels of competence. Line managers were supposed to decide, in conjunction with employees, the level of competence for each skill area that was required for the role. During the review discussions employees had to provide examples of actions they took to display the required competency level. This has been labelled the 'multiple job' approach and is positioned in the literature as a best practice approach to using competencies (Mansfield, 1996).

[78] Up until the year prior to the ethnography Avatar operated a forced distribution system whereby managers had to ensure that performance ratings fit within a pre-defined 'normal' distribution curve. This had been lifted but the rating distribution did not deviate significantly from the previous 'normal distribution' curve as managers still had to operate within a budget.

> of it. Really what it is, it's a tool for the line managers to drive behaviour and performance. And it's an extremely powerful tool. But I don't think that they understand how powerful it is and I don't think they fully utilise it. I think they're under pressure to get it done and get it filled in before a certain date.

This did not mean that employees were under any ambiguity about what was expected of them. In fact the highest positive response in the employee survey related to the statement *'I know the results expected of me in my job'* to which 85% indicated that they more than agreed with that statement. Nor did directors and HR feel there was a performance problem in Avatar. Despite the acceptance that high performance was being achieved without 'proper' use of the PD system, directors and HR continued to highlight the importance of the tool and refused to consider that there was anything amiss with their 'best practice' performance management system. Instead, the under-performance of the performance management system was attributed to the unwillingness or inability of line managers to harness its power.

5.3.3 'Together we are Developing': The Learning and Development Deal

AVATAR

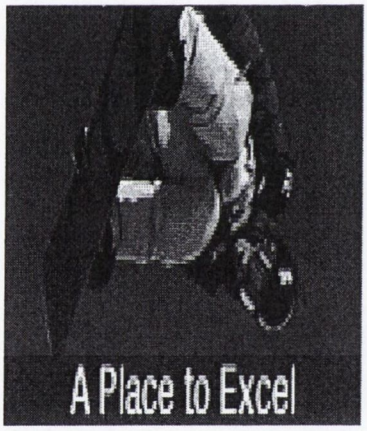
- 'We work with you to create a personal development plan which builds a portfolio of skills that meet your needs and the needs of the business, with choices around how you learn, and how you embed this learning in your role.
- We are clear about personal goals and what we expect from our leaders and people. We hold them accountable for delivering results.
- We ensure that leaders provide regular feedback and coaching to develop individuals and teams'.

ME

- 'I understand my goals and what is expected of me in terms of performance and behaviour, and I deliver on it.
- I seek out and act upon regular coaching and feedback to improve my performance, and I know what help is available to support me.
- I am clear about my personal development needs and aspirations, and act upon them'.

Much is cited in the literature about the important role learning and development practices play in creating high performance and commitment amongst employees, particularly knowledge workers (Ashton and Felstead, 1995; Bratton et al, 2004; Garavan et al, 1999; Garvey and Williamson, 2002; ILO, 2000; Newell et al, 2002). Avatar HR had dedicated L&D personnel who engaged in strategic organisation wide 'capability reviews' to identify and deliver the organisation skill requirements. They also implemented a range of Learning and Development (L&D) processes which are illustrated in figure 5h.

Figure 5h: The Avatar L&D System



HR Learning and Development Tools
- On-line e-learning
- Classroom learning
- Continuing Education
- Avatar Library
- Transfers / Secondment

Source: Avatar Intranet

HR organised the company-wide L&D activities that were related to general skills development, as opposed to job specific training. Each function had a separate L&D budget to organise job or function specific training. The Avatar approach to L&D reflected the demand L&D model (Chiu et al, 1999) insofar as the activities were led by the needs of the organisation. The PD process required individuals to identify and undertake a certain number of development activities each year. An individual could also explore their L&D options at any time through the on-line e-learning system.

The on-line e-learning system was the primary L&D interface between HR and individuals and was positioned as a '*one stop shop for all your training needs*' (HR

Documentation).[79] Individuals could access the e-learning system to register for a variety of L&D activities. It was also linked to the performance dialogue (PD) system, for example if an individual felt they needed to develop a competency they could click on it within the PD system and they would be taken to the e-learning system where they would have access to a range of resources that would support them in developing these skills. The e-learning system itself included the following functionalities; links to approximately 270 on-line courses; classroom training options,[80] presentations, virtual classrooms and blended learning programmes. Individuals had to get line manager approval for courses that had costs attached to them. Other courses could be undertaken in the employees own time with or without line management approval. However, it is worth pointing out that whilst the HR led L&D activities reflected many attributes of best practice delivery in terms of the e-learning system and blended learning programmes, these operated outside of the actual work individuals did every day.[81]

The employee survey revealed that only 42% of employees had a favourable perception of their opportunity for development, other than promotion. In addition, only 42% of employees had a favourable perception of the training they received for their role. Nonetheless directors and HR were pleased with the e-learning system and the L&D opportunities they provided. When discussing the survey results in the interviews, with directors and HR, the themes of individual responsibility and managing expectations emerged continuously. As stated by director (D10):

> I believe [L&D] is absolutely owned by the person and it's my job to put enablers in place or to give them the support they need to drive it forward. It's my job to take away the barriers, to sign off on the training and to help them with their development but it's up to them to own some of those decisions that have to be made. I think we probably enabled our own flaw, there's a little bit of "What are you going to do for me?". "Well actually I'm not going to do anything for you until you've decided what you want to do and when I agree with that then I can

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[79]The benefits of e-leaning systems have been demonstrated (CIPD, 2005; Pollard and Hillage, 2001).

[80] The classroom courses available covered topics such as Excel, Essential Communication Skills, Delivering Powerful & Charismatic Presentations, Influencing Skills, Advanced Negotiation Skills, Decision Making, Problem Solving and Resolving Conflict, Business Simulation, Time Management, Fundamentals of Project Management, Advanced Project Management. However some of these were delivered by external training consultants and delays were often associated with such courses as an individual's participation and the expenditure had to be approved by their line manager.

[81] This meant the HR L&D activities were unable to, by themselves, cultivate what is referred to in the literature as a 'culture of learning' or a true 'learning organisation' whereby learning happens in the 'doing' at the local level (Yanow, 2000; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The learnings that occurred in the work process are discussed in chapters six and seven.

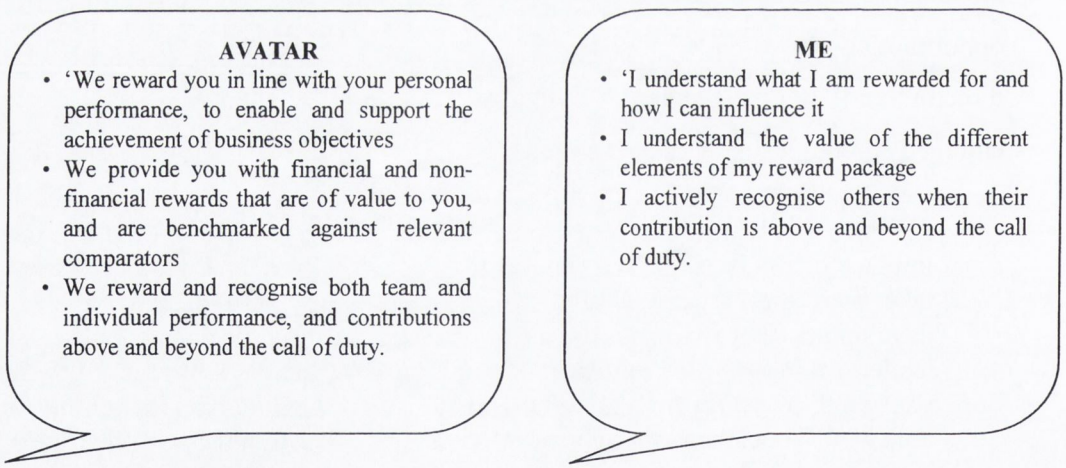
help you but I'm not going to tell you what your next step is, you need to think about what your next step is".

Director (D4) emphasised:

> [L&D] is not about creating expectations it's just trying to up-skill people so they could do these things as well. If you don't say somebody "To be honest you will never go to the next level unless you improve your analytical skill, or your company /industry knowledge", whatever the hell it might be, if you don't give them that opportunity you know what chance has that person of ever going on?

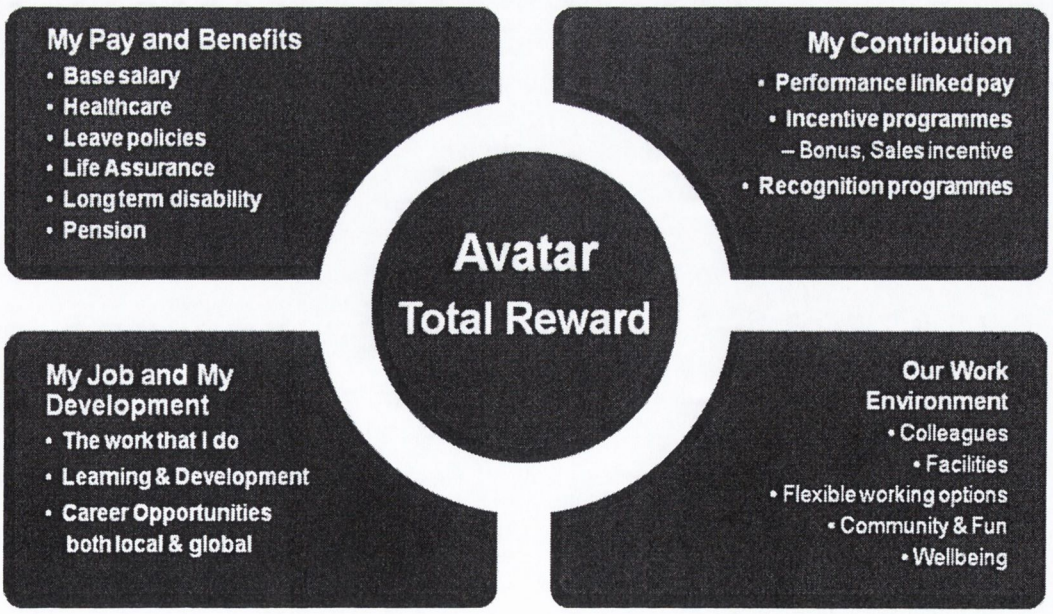
However there was not usually a 'next level' to get to as there was no connection to the development activities and career development. Again unrealistic employee expectations and line managers emerged as the explanatory factor for the poor perception of non promotional development. Nonetheless, Avatar directors and HR felt they had a state of the art L&D centre that could address any developmental need that an individual identified would help them in the performance of their day to day tasks.

5.3.4 'Together we are Rewarding': The Reward and Recognition Deal



Reward is understood to be crucial to maintaining a positive 'psychological contract' between the organisation and employee (Rousseau and Ho, 2000). Avatar practiced a 'Total Reward' approach which meant they interpreted and communicated the range of rewards associated with working in Avatar as going beyond compensation and benefits. Managerial literature positions 'total rewards' as best practice reward management which yields numerous benefits. A 'total rewards' approach supposedly enhances employee awareness and appreciation of the range of tangible and intangible rewards they can derive from working in the organisation. It is supposed to enhance the psychological contract by ensuring all rewards are developed in a cohesive manner, making a clear statement about the organisation culture and ensuring employees are extrinsically and intrinsically motivated to align themselves with the organisation goals (Armstrong and Murlis, 2007; CIPD, 2008; O'Neill,1995). It seems HR professionals have bought into these claims and there has been a shift towards this total reward approach in recent years (Chen and Hsieh, 2006; CIPD, 2008). The closer this alignment between reward and organisation strategy the more effective the organisation is claimed to be (Gomez-Mejia and Balkin, 1992; Pfeffer, 1999). Figure 5i presents the Avatar total reward deal as it was illustrated to employees:

Figure 5i: The Avatar Total Reward Deal



Source: Employee Induction and Communications

The specific pay related elements operated as follows:

- Base Salary: Base salaries were 'market benchmarked' using consultant run compensation surveys which measured salaries in the Irish Hi-Technology sector. Avatar also connected base salaries to individual performance. Each year roles were benchmarked and salary increases were related to market position and the performance rating achieved. A salary increase matrix was provided to line managers by HR. Avatar's target market position for base salary was market median, with high performers getting slightly above market. High performers were identified via the performance dialogue process which reflected a normal distribution curve. Median was felt to be sufficient as there were apparently so many other advantages to working there that only median was necessary to attract and retain employees. Interestingly when it came to the largest employer, employee financial exchange, Avatar did not adopt a high rewards model. Instead the Avatar base pay model reflected the neo-classical economic, hedonic theory of pay whereby the more desirable the job the less remuneration is required. Each year the Avatar compensation committee approved a percentage payroll increase based on cost of living, market practice and internal budget. Each line manger could then increase the value of their teams' payroll by this percentage amount but individual increases were varied based on performance and market position. A guideline matrix was provided to managers, a sample one is set out below where the overall payroll increase budget was 5% and a normal distribution of ratings assumed.

Table 5a: Sample salary increase matrix

Individual Performance Rating	Individual Market Positioning		
	<85% Market Median	Between 85% to 115% Market Median	>115% Market Median
1 (Top)	11%	9%	7%
2	9%	7%	5%
3	7%	5%	2%
4	2%	0%	0%
5 (Bottom)	0%	0%	0%

- Variable Pay: All in Avatar were eligible for an annual bonus depending on their band position. Employees were eligible for 10% of annual base salary, LM2s for

15%, LM1s 20%, Directors, 30% and CEO 50%.[82] A bonus pool budget remained in place and the performance ratings continued to reflect a normal distribution.

- Recognition Schemes: Avatar operated a quarterly recognition scheme where individuals or teams could be nominated as Stars, Heroes or Legends. Each quarter the atrium was set up theatre style and an awards ceremony was held. Each function also had a recognition budget, which managers could use to award individuals with vouchers on a discretionary basis.
- Benefits: Avatar provided all employees with private health insurance Avatar operated a defined contribution pension plan with numerous online facilities for employees to make additional voluntary contributions and to monitor and adjust their investment fund choices. Death, disability, long term sick leave and a range of leave policies. The maternity leave arrangements were slightly above market practice. All individuals in the LM2 band upwards received a car allowance. Position in the Band also shaped benefit coverage and holidays
- Total Reward Statements: Each year all individuals in Avatar received a 'total rewards statement' (TRS). The aim of these statements was to encourage individuals to understand their reward not just in cash terms, but for them to appreciate how much Avatar spent on their behalf. On each individuals' TRS an annual cash value for the following items were listed, base salary, annual bonus, pension contributions, healthcare contributions, death and disability insurance contributions, annual leave, car allowance (if eligible), and share arrangements. The average cost per individual, in relation to the cost of providing certain facilities was also included such the cost per head of subsidising the canteen food, running an on-site gym, providing buses to and from Avatar and phone usage.

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[82] For employees and managers, an overall bonus pool was calculated based on four Avatar performance measures listed here in order of weighting; total revenue, operating profit, free cash flow and customer satisfaction. If Avatar achieved the targets relating to these four areas the bonus pool was 100%, if they over or underachieved it was adjusted accordingly. An individual's performance rating was then used to calculate how much of a bonus they should be awarded. For example, employee X was on a salary of €50,000 and therefore their 'on target' annual bonus of €5,000. However Avatar underperformed and the bonus pool was downgraded to 95%. Therefore employee X's potential bonus was adjusted downwards by 5% to €4,750. Employee X received an average performance rating of 3 therefore they were on target and were awarded a bonus of €4,750. Should employee X have under or over performed the €4,750 would have been adjusted accordingly.

Results from the employee engagement survey indicated that only 36% of employees felt their total reward package was fair compared to people in other organisations doing a similar role in Ireland. Furthermore, only 43% felt they were fairly rewarded for the work that they do which is considerably lower than results from a comprehensive nationwide survey in which 70% claimed they were satisfied with their earnings (O' Connell et al, 2004). When discussing the poor perception of the total reward package directors again raised the theme of employees having unrealistic expectations. Director (8) summed up this sentiment stating:

> I think people always have very high expectations in here because we do things very professionally and we issue total reward statements and we tell them what our remuneration policies are and we have benchmarking and all these different things which you don't get in a lot of other companies. There's more information out there. I think the combination of that and the size of the company, people just have this expectation, so what they do is often have a kind of unreal expectation and I think that leads to problems.

Another director (D2) stated:

> I guess instinctively they feel "I work for a very successful, one of the most successful companies in the country. I should be paid more than X because X is working for a small company or Y because Y isn't working for a successful company".

A second explanation was also offered namely that line mangers did not handle conversations around reward, particularly salary reviews, adequately and that this led to the lack of appreciation for the 'total reward' provided within Avatar. The importance of getting the reward 'message' right was highlighted by director (1) who claimed that even if Avatar paid significantly above market it would not be appreciated *'You can run whatever programs, you can set whatever salary. You can increase everybody's salary well above the market range but it's about how you do it. It's about how you deliver the message'*. So directors clung onto the idea, introduced in chapter four, that the 'message' could override the materiality of what was actually happening. The importance top management placed on the message was further demonstrated in the range of Avatar communication practices.

5.3.5 'Together we are Connecting': The Communications Deal

AVATAR

- We communicate with you honestly encourage open feedback, and respond to what you tell us
- We encourage, recognise and act upon good ideas and new ways of working
- We equip Line Managers with the tools and skills needed to engage and motivate people'.

ME

- I speak honestly about how things are going and make suggestions for improvements.
- I work in a way that supports Avatar's values and goals and take responsibility for building engagement in my team
- I promote Avatar's brand and values with our customers, suppliers and my professional community'.

Communications is one of the core tenets of the human relations theory and numerous people management commentators herald the importance of communications for generating alignment and trust (Pfeffer, 1998:93). Within Avatar, communications were considered to be fundamental to creating a cohesive vision throughout the organisation as stated by director (D5):

> I'm huge believer that if you don't actually have that clarity of message and vision then people aren't going to be able to get behind it and if you don't get behind it then you turn your head left and right...[...]...It's just the classic human behaviour.

Group won numerous external HR awards for their employee communications materials which were described by these external award judging panels as *'stunning'* and *'inspiring'*. Within Avatar Ireland there was an internal HR communications team who were responsible for a range of communication channels. The importance of having a range of media to achieve the desired clarity of vision was highlighted by a HR LM1 (H5) who stated:

> For any of us in life, anything we're doing, we usually have to see it or hear it in a few different ways for it to really penetrate and for it to strike a chord with us. So that's part of the communications, you're putting it across channels, in multiple ways, over a period of time to get the [population] to where you want them to go.

However the hierarchical structure and the prominence attached to 'the message' meant that most communications were 'downward' and did not provide an avenue for employee voice. The Avatar communication channels and the official rationale for them are set out below:

- Monthly Employee Communications: This was a monthly update on business performance. As stated by HR in their communications policies: *'In this monthly brief we share stories about how we're winning the competitive battle, the hearts and minds of our customers and engaging our own hearts and minds'.*
- Quarterly, Half-Time Score and Annual Kick Off Events: These were *'Large scale events to drive awareness of business goals'.* For example, the 2007 annual kick off was held in a *'road show'* style whereby the executive team held employee communication sessions in cinemas, and a large spiegeltent. The meritocratic theme for this event was *'It's in our hands'.* It was also described as *'a forum for employees to see the top leadership team in action working together. The style of the event is highly interactive, energetic and fun whilst not detracting from the importance of the underlying business messages'.* At the 2007 event finale each executive had a drum which they beat to communicate the unitary principle of *'we're drumming to the same beat'.*
- Ad Hoc Events: Numerous elaborate events were held to communicate a change or a new product or service. For example, when Avatar decided they needed to emphasise the casual element of the dress code as the trend was becoming increasingly formal. A fashion show was held in the atrium and the models were employees, managers and executives. As described by a HR manager the fashion show was *'hosted by two drag queens, Trinni and Suzanne, who made everyone feel at ease and really brought the fun element'.* On another occasion a new technology was being introduced and an event was held during which CEO spoke about the new technology in the atrium. After the CEO spoke a dance troupe appeared. The dance troupe were split in two groups with one wearing the Avatar corporate colours and the other wearing the colours of a leading competitor. Each group abseiled down the six storey walls of the atrium and then danced a fight scene whereby the Avatar troupe overcame the competitor.
- Team Building Days Out: Each function was allocated a budget for team activities each quarter. Team 'away days' were common and typically focused on the teams strategic priorities. I attended three such days during the ethnography including a manager away day. The manager away day ended with two musicians coming in and leading an Avatar song which we all had to sing along to.
- Ask the CEO: This was a monthly hour long session. The CEO would start off by talking about some business topic and it would be followed by a Q&A. Internal

communications attended and noted all the questions asked. I went to these during the ethnography and noticed that they were not that well attended. Typically thirty to forty, out of hundreds, and as many managers attended as employees. The CEO typically started by discussing an aspect of the business strategy and the questions were largely vague and those who spoke appeared keen to demonstrate their support for the strategy.

- Intranet: All employees had access to the intranet which held a vast array of corporate information.[83]
- Avatar News: This was a weekly online newsletter or *'e-zine'* that communicated the news from around the organisation including financial news, customer offers, products and services HR initiatives, competitions.
- Internal Communications Mailbox: Individuals could post comments and queries to the internal communications team who would direct them as appropriate.
- Posters and Deskdrops: New posters were often put up to create awareness when announcing new projects and initiatives for employees. 'Deskdrops' were common also whereby something such as leaflets, or food, were placed on each individual's desk.
- Coffee Mornings: Once a month, coffee mornings were held on each floor were everyone would go to the kitchenette area for pastries and tea/coffee.
- Text Messages: Internal communications organised messages to be sent to phones which could be about a range of items such as latest financial or product news.
- CEO's Corner: Every month all employees received an email from the Global CEO with updates on events in Global and other operating companies. He also spoke about his meetings with shareholders around the world. This mail always ended with the words *'Go Avatar!'*.
- Avatar TV: Avatar TV was managed by the Global communications team. It consisted largely of video clips with top executives being interviewed by leading media personalities, such as presenters from the Sky News broadcasting channel. There were also videos from Avatar personnel around the world sharing success stories.

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[83] It posted latest news, financial information, summaries of recent communication events, an overview of HR and HR practices, an overview of various departments, links to wider Avatar Global information, links to people management tools such as the performance dialogue or L&D system.

- Avatar Life: This was the global corporate magazine containing accounts of Avatar activities and news from around the world. This came out three times a year.
- Talk About: Each year a member of the Avatar Group executive team visited each subsidiary for a couple of days and held a 'talk-about' session which consisted of a number of presentations related to the business strategy followed by a Q&A. I attended a *'Talk About'* with the Group CEO which was held in a theatre.
- Webcasts: These sessions involved Group personnel presenting on various topics that affected Avatar as a whole, such as an aspect of their technical strategy. They were held in a meeting room and a member of the HR team acted as a facilitator. Subsidiaries from around the world could log in to view the webcasts which started off with presentations from Group personnel and were followed by a Q&A whereby questions could be submitted via the facilitator in each subsidiary. I attended some of these and again they were not that well attended, and individuals rarely asked questions.
- Employee Surveys: Avatar conducted two 'employee engagement' surveys each year to, as the HR policy document stated, *'explore employees' levels of job satisfaction and to understand their perceptions of and attitudes to the organisation. Action plans are put in place at organisational and functional level to address employee concerns and facilitate an improvement in employee satisfaction'.*
- Change Communications: HR produced communication materials for large change initiatives. However, the employee survey revealed that only 38% of employees felt change was well managed in Avatar.

In all these mechanisms there was only one channel for the collective employee voice to be made known to top management, namely the employee survey. Interestingly results of the survey revealed that only 37% of employees felt the information from previous surveys was being used constructively. Despite the extensive, glamorous and glossy communication materials, communications in Avatar were a top down cascade. All practices, with the exception of the survey, were about getting the business and normative message down to lower levels.

It was understood that top management and HR provided the message which line managers were to continuously reinforce at the team level. Line managers were expected to diffuse any local level concerns and employee engagement scores were

interpreted primarily as a reflection on line managers' ability to manage the message as opposed to wider concern. For example, one director randomly claimed the survey results were 75% attributable to line management. However, a line manager who communicated employee issues up the hierarchy ran the risk of being viewed as incompetent, or annoying or *'a plague'*, a trend I observed on numerous occasions. For example, prior to the Group CEO visit, the internal communications team gathered employee questions that might be asked to the Group CEO. HR grimaced at any negative questions and were irritated that employees raised certain issues. A question about the lack of car parking facilities came from one function. Whilst the Group CEO was unlikely to have answers to this question, what was telling was the manner in which the recently appointed director of this function was ridiculed for allowing this question to be asked at all. HR claimed it was *'alarming'* that the employee had asked this question. They also commented that, as a result of this question, they feared for this new director's future.

Ultimately, whilst there were numerous, heavily branded and stylised downward communications, top management largely isolated themselves from the employee voice; this communications paradox has been discussed by other writers (Clayton, 2000; Stohl and Cheney, 2001).

5.3.6: 'Together we are Caring': The Health and Wellbeing deal

AVATAR

- 'We equip managers to measure and manage health, safety and wellbeing.
- We help people understand and attain a healthy lifestyle.
- We support your wellbeing at work, and the achievement of a work/life balance that works for you and the business'.

ME

- 'I ensure the safety, health and wellbeing of myself and others at work.
- I use the tools available and develop my skills to ensure I can look after the safety, health and wellbeing of myself and others.
- I alert Avatar when something looks wrong, and about accidents if they occur.

Health and wellbeing initiatives are implemented by organisations to enhance the overall wellbeing and 'change readiness' of the workforce (Haunschild, 2003; Madsen, 2003; Schafer, 1996) through a range of voluntary diagnostic and

educational health programmes. Avatar operated a range of programs related to employee health and wellbeing. These included:

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP): Avatar operated an EAP which was a confidential, externally provided, counselling service. There was a health centre in Avatar were individuals could avail of a range of subsidised treatments including massages, acupuncture and herbal medicine, reflexology, shiatsu treatments and beauty treatments.
- Well checkpoint and fairs: There was an on-line 'wellness checkpoint' which was a confidential online self-assessment tool providing health appraisals and advise. Approximately half of Avatar employees used this tool in the year before the ethnography. Wellbeing fairs were held in the atrium where various vendors and service providers set out stalls presenting their health related offerings and conducted checks on blood pressure and back posture.
- Community and Fun: This was Avatar's 'Sports and Social' club which subsidised a range of sporting and entertainment activities throughout the year. Representatives from each function made up the 'community and fun' panel.
- Flexible Working: A flexible working scheme operated, Avatar's core hours were 10pm – 4pm and individuals could alter their start and finish times around these hours to suit their personal circumstances. However there was very little take up of this arrangement.
- Leave: A range of leave arrangements were available to individuals who required time from work for personal circumstances.
- Training: There were a number of courses on the e-learning system that deal with health and safety and wellbeing at work.

5.3.7: Reflecting on the Avatar Normative Structure

Avatar's people management practices operated on the strategic principles typically associated with HRM, namely they embraced the idea that an organisation required a strategic approach to HR that was aligned with the business strategy. Furthermore the mechanics of the specific Avatar processes correlate to the most accepted definitions of HRM or HPWS insofar as they were based on high commitment, individualism, unitarism and meritocracy (Guest, 1987). Perhaps what was unusual about Avatar HR

was that they actually succeeded in creating the suite of complementary HR processes so often heralded in management literature as being the Holy Grail to unlocking inner potential and extra functional effort.

Avatar implemented an elaborate high road (Cooke, 2000) soft rhetoric claiming that individuals in Avatar were valued, empowered and developed to realise their career and reward potential. However, there were hard, structural limitations on the opportunities for promotion and reward progression. Ongoing people related costs were kept to the minimum of what was necessary to compete in the market. This functioning of soft, high road rhetoric alongside a more a more market driven reality created a rhetoric reality gap, a trend that has been documented in the critical HR literature (Keenoy, 1990; 1999; Keenoy and Anthony, 1992; Sisson, 1994; Watson, 2004).

Despite these structural constraints and the consistently poor results from the employee survey the normatively prescribed total employment deal was understood to be nothing short of exemplary as described by a HR LM1 (H2):

> I think you know already from the work that we've done with Best Place to Work, the practices and procedures and policies put us in the top 5% of companies. When I look at the 'Best Place to Work', the magazine that comes out every year, and I look at everything the companies are saying they offer employees it's always "tick, tick, tick, tick, we do that, we do that". So from an employee experience it's great.

As described in chapter two, the management literature claims that such elaborate normative structures should result in heightened employee commitment and positive employee orientation towards the organisation. Even the critical literature reaches a similar conclusion claiming that such normative structures increase employee commitment through colonising subjectivities. However, in Avatar Ireland the employee survey revealed that the HR practices were not creating a positive subjective orientation towards the organisation. For example, only 46% of employees indicated that they rated Avatar favourably as a place to work in comparison to other organisations they knew about; 50% of respondents said that they were satisfied with working in Avatar Ireland. Only 34% saw their future there. The Avatar score was significantly lower than a national survey in which over 90% either agreed or strongly agreed that 'in general' they were satisfied with their job (O' Connell et al, 2004). In the face of this feedback, and other negative feedback on the specific HR practices, HR

and directors continued to profess belief in the HR promise and claimed that the poor results were down to line managers failing to manage employee expectations. Despite the fact that the HR practices 'failed', Avatar HR had top management support which is one of the critical contextual factors that supposedly 'cements' HR within an organisation (Guest, 1989). However it appeared that this support was somewhat convenient for top management.

5.4: HR AS A TOP MANAGEMENT VANITY PROJECT

The employee perspective on the HR practices will be outlined in detail in chapter seven. In the meantime it is worthwhile exploring the perceptions of the actors that had responsibility for delivering the HR practices, namely HR, the directors and line managers.

5.4.1: Line expectation managers

Within Avatar, the HR managers and the directors chose to believe that employees' subjective orientation towards the organisation could be wholly managed by HR. Following this logic, there could only be one explanation for the failure of their 'best practice' HR processes to yield the expected results, and that was poor implementation. It is worth pointing out that HR and directors agreed that all HR practices were being completed; they felt they just were not being implemented effectively. This what I term the '*implementarian*' perspective can be characterised as a belief that it is possible to achieve any desirable end result as long as the right means are utilised.[84] For the HR and directors in Avatar, employee engagement was the 'end' result and the HR processes were the right, or only, 'means'. The dominant top management and HR perception as to why the HR processes did not achieve the desired results in terms of engagement was summed up by director (D4) who stated:

> I think we are, to be blunt, a company that has fantastic [HR] policies fantastic... fantastic. We know we do everything by the text book to a large extent. There is

[84] This focus on implementation is common adopting a technocratic approach in the policy space (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984)

> a question mark about why that doesn't come through to the bottom line [employee engagement], it has to be down to management and leadership because it can't be down to anything else.

So line managers became the culprits, offered as the primary explanatory factor for the underperformance of the HR processes. As stated, one director claimed that 'line managers' were 75% responsible for employee engagement and only 25% was attributable to wider organisation issues. HR even had a term to describe their perception that line managers were not implementing HR practices effectively; this was described by a HR LM1 (H2):

> We communicate to our people managers and the expectation is then that they would cascade it further. But because of the dilemma we have that not all of our people managers understand their responsibilities and affect their accountabilities, you have what one of our team called the 'Permafrost effect'. So all the information goes to the permafrost layer of the people managers and it doesn't get below

Another HR LM1 (H3) spoke more about this 'permafrost':

> When we get the feedback directly that HR are only interested in line managers, our stock response is "Well the reason we have the size of HR team we have is precisely to work with the line managers so they are able to have the employee experiences as we want to have it, i.e. the deal that's coming through in the people strategy". That would be the stock response. However we do recognise, what we call, this famous layer of permafrost. There is a layer of permafrost at manager level and because we have not managed to do what we need to do with that layer of managers, the employee experience is not as we would want it.

Far from being perceived as an invaluable tool to generate commitment and high performance HR claimed line managers had an aversion to effectively implementing the HR practices. A HR LM1 (H3) summed up this perceptive:

> [Line managers] could live without people management full stop. They hate it...[...]...just people management in general. And I'll tell you why I'm saying that. Because they do...genuinely.

This quote implies that managers simply opted out of HR processes. However the quote continued in a slightly different vein which indicated that it was the market driven constraints within the processes that were problematic. (H3) went on to say what they felt line mangers would like to say to HR:

> "In fact, actually HR, if you just disappear and let me offer that person the money I want to offer them then life would be wonderful. Instead of you telling me,

> 'well actually, salary market range is x-y'," you know, they'd obviously love that as well.

However these market driven constraints were largely underplayed by HR and instead were portrayed as providing accurate meritocratic yardsticks which line managers should use to manage employee expectations. In other words, it was claimed that those who deserved reward and development were successful in getting it. This notion of managing employee expectations was highly consequential as, when taken alongside the idea that Avatar was a meritocracy, it meant that an individual deserved no worse or better than their current situation. So line managers were put in something of a 'Catch 22' situation whereby they were expected to manage expectations that were often created by the HR rhetoric. For example it was up to line managers to make employees believe that within Avatar any career was possible and above market reward was available to high performers. They were to do this alongside the fact that there were real structural, market driven budgetary constraints to offering career development and financial reward. In the event that the individual failed to achieve their desired career or financial rewards, the line manger was supposed to make them believe and accept that they did not deserve what they desired. However, HR and most of the directors downplayed the force of these constraints and instead labelled any line manager that failed to mange expectations to be ineffective. In fact HR expressed extreme irritation when line managers questioned the constraints within the processes. (H3) described an incident at a HR workshop on the pay process where line managers asked to see the compensation surveys, which were not disclosed, and questioned whether Avatar salaries were even at the market median:

> We just don't know what to do. So for instance they [line managers] were saying, "You might say you're at market median but we don't believe you, we want to see proof". Personally I think the way the person said that is completely unacceptable. We don't turn around and say "I want proof" to the CEO.

Line managers' were simply to cascade the normative message without question.

5.4.2: Line Managers: Between a soft rhetoric and a hard reality.

In Avatar all managers interviewed understood the role of HR was to support the achievement of business objectives and to work with line managers. They also accepted

that it was their role to pass on the normative message. However, they lamented the extent to which the normative structures were imposed on both themselves and employees and how lower levels were frozen out of their design beyond participating in the occasional consultant led focus group, as described by an LM1 (M4):

> I think what we tend to do here is we put a load of money into an event and it's a great event but it's a one off...[...]...I think there's too much done to people...[...]...people are not victims here that are sitting waiting for employee [engagement] to be done to them. I think they have to be part of the solution and then to come up with the solutions and implement the solutions.

An LM2 (M8) speaking about the emphasis on best practice HR design claimed *'The human side to [HR] is as a little in-human. Definitely if you ask anybody in Avatar, HR would seem to be looking after Group's interests. From a day to day perspective, they wouldn't seem to be looking after employees' wellbeing'.* Numerous managers complained about the extent to which HR and directors refused to acknowledge the employment experience was anything unlike what was normatively prescribed. They claimed the optimistic normative rhetoric did indeed create expectation problems that were difficult to deal with. An LM1 (M9), talking about the contradiction between the soft rhetoric and recent decisions taken to achieve the financial goals stated:

> At the end of the day we have got a business to run so you need to do what's going to deliver the results. But we do go on so much about passion for people and that. I personally think if we didn't speak about caring for people so much, the expectation would be so much lower than what it is. But we've actually created a really high expectation...[...]...We've over promised so much to our staff. By doing things like Brand Essence you just create expectations.

Most suggested that the main problem was the rhetoric-reality gap, which came about largely through the need to adhere to market rational principles. In this case, normative control, far from providing a gloss on a harsher reality, only served to focus attention on contradictions. For example an LM1 (M5) whose area had been impacted by redundancies and outsourcing claimed Brand Essence was:

> One of the craziest things that was brought in. I understand and I agree with the sentiments of it, but I think the way it's being rammed down our throats is crazy...[...]... given everything else that was going on in the company; it was the last straw for people...throwing in something like that when they were after doing [redundancies].

Another LM2 (M10) claimed:

> If you're not together as a company, putting out a poster saying "we're all together as a company" is bad rather than good. It's not seeming to address the issues that are over there. And people would say "Well, you know, we can see the problems, we know the problems are there. Why doesn't the company do something about addressing them instead of putting out posters?"

Managers often claimed it meant they were charged with implementing the harder elements of business decisions and HR practices, an LM1 (M6) described a common sentiment saying *'Throughout the organisation, good news comes from the top and bad news comes from close to the bottom'*. HR and directors owned the optimistic soft rhetoric while line managers were charged with implementing the harder market driven constraints. Managers spoke most often about the problems created by the cap on salaries and lack of career development opportunities. Those below the LM1 level expressed frustration that they were frozen out of decision making regarding their teams performance ratings and subsequent salary increases. Furthermore, the rhetoric was not capable of overriding the materiality of the practices as described by an LM2 (M11):

> [HR] have given us a few things over the years like a couple extra days holidays and they re-benchmarked the salaries and healthcare and stuff like that. Which have been very welcomed and have been looked at very positively. So it's probably more initiatives like that that get appreciated more than these throw away slogans which you're supposed to live your life, your work life by. So I suppose at the end of the day it's what kind of tangible benefits people can actually see or get at the end of it that they appreciate more than these almost marketing approaches to HR initiatives.

Line managers also claimed that despite directors heralding the importance of the HR practices, directors paid little heed to the employee consequences of their day to day decisions. In other words, line managers understood that meeting targets was directors primary focus. High performance, it seemed, did not go hand in hand with HR practices. Instead meeting performance targets took priority and the normative rhetoric and processes were something of an 'add-on' to the day to day business of getting work done. An LM1 (M6) stated:

> The key people within the organisation end up with too much on their plate. One of the fallouts from that is you end up with less time to spend on people issues because you know it's the easy thing to drop. I'm not saying it's the right thing, it's absolutely not the right thing, but it is the easy thing to drop because if I've got a month, if I've got four weeks here and I know I should be doing one to ones with my people but I've got a whole lot of things to deliver, which one are you

> going to put on the long finger. That's widespread I fundamentally believe around the organisation, part of the reason, sorry that is the main reason why we don't have enough time, or spend enough time on people issues or people development is because we do too much.

I also observed similar occurrences within the HR department and in other areas. For example whilst sitting waiting for an interviewee I saw a line manager walk passed a team member. Both stopped in the middle of the open plan office carrying their laptops. The employee asked their manger if they could reschedule their performance review to the following week as they had too much to do that week. The manager said fine, they chatted informally for a minute and then kept on walking.

Interestingly, no manager claimed the HR processes were key to stimulating high performance. Instead they were an additional task, not a prerequisite to achieving performance targets. This is not to say that HR and the directors were right in saying processes were not being implemented. Ultimately, all HR processes were implemented as they were mandated by Group and subsidiary directors and they were necessary to ensure individuals got recruited, paid etc. Line managers accepted their role was to recite the normative rhetoric and to implement the practices. However, HRM was an add-on line managers considered was unaligned with the day to day business of getting things done.

5.4.3: The HR Promise as Top Management Absolution

Structurally speaking the directors and HR were the furthest removed from the employment experience. Yet they insisted on claiming that the employment experience could be what the normative structures promised and that this could yield high performance. Interestingly, just like many academics, directors had HR avoided contrasting the financial and normative structures in the workplace.

Within the Avatar HR department there appeared to be a genuine conviction in the power of the HR promise.[85] Throughout my time in Avatar the HR department

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[85] Many members of the department had HR qualifications and were therefore schooled in the HR promise. Also the LM1's managers worked closely with HR consultants who also had a vested interest in demonstrating this link (Alvesson, 1990). In fact, HR LM1s frequently quoted consultant studies that supported the HR promise.

appeared to be genuinely perplexed at the employee engagement results. They were so removed from the actual employment experience that they were actually unaware of what employees were actually experiencing every day and how their experience were unlike the normative descriptions of working life. The isolation of HR will be further evidenced in chapters six and seven. For the moment it is suffice to say that the HR department demonstrated a genuine conviction in the HR promise and this was facilitated by their structural isolation within the organisation.

However, believing the HR promise appeared to be a source of significant convenience to the directors. The manner in which HRM provides a soft rhetoric to mask the more financially driven, less palatable, rational corporate agenda has been highlighted (Kamoche, 1995; Keenoy and Anthony 1992; Keenoy, 1999; Sisson, 1994; Watson, 2004). However, much of this literature makes this claim on the assumption that the rhetoric, to an extent, works in shaping employee subjectivity by distracting them from the harsher financial reality. However, in Avatar employees' subjectivity was not successfully colonised by the rhetoric heavy HR practices.

However, it was in directors' interest to herald the power the HR promise as attributing employee engagement to the effective implementation of best practice HR meant employee engagement was not a result of the directors' actions. This left directors free to focus on the business goals. The logic of what I term 'HR absolution' worked as follows, if employee engagement was all about designing best practice normative structure then employee issues were best left to the design specialists, namely HR. It was HRs' role to design 'best practice' processes, it was the directors' role to sanction the normative view of Avatar, and it was line managers' role to get employees to believe the rhetoric. Therefore, investing in best practice HR facilitated a wholesale top management abdication of responsibility of employee related issues. This left them free to pursue the financial goals by assuming any negative fallout could be mopped up by HR and line managers.

So investing in 'best practice' HR allowed directors to offload responsibility for people management to the HR department. Directors' reluctance to get involved in the detail of people management was evidenced throughout the ethnography and people issues were rarely mentioned at meetings. Even at events dealing with employee engagement the directors avoided detailed discussions of employee issues and focused on

proclaiming Avatar was a great place to work. For example, during the ethnography I attended an offsite functional managers meeting whereby all line mangers from that function were taken to a hotel for the day to discuss how to improve employee engagement. The first half of the day was spent doing various exercises to highlight that line managers needed to take responsibility for engagement. It was not until the end of the day that managers got a chance to list the issues they felt were adversely effecting employee engagement. The HR related issues raised were related to the market led constraints within the HR processes and the fallout from the cost cutting initiatives; i.e. the insecurity generated by the redundancies, outsourcing and ongoing centralisation. When responding to the issues the director simply claimed it was line managers' responsibility to manage expectations via the HR processes and explain the importance of the cost cutting. Not one of the specific issues was taken on board as a point for further action. Approximately one hour of the entire day was spent on the detail of employee grievances and these were ultimately ignored. The day concluded with a couple of hours of games and skits. However as far as the function director was concerned, they had done their bit to improve employee engagement. The director (D1) commented to me during a coffee break, '*this day will make them realise they [line managers] have to change*'. Whereas all that had happened was that managers were told to manage expectations.

I also attended another off-site organisation wide 'people manager' away day which was held by the CEO and directors to highlight the need to improve employee engagement. On this day all line mangers across the organisation were taken to a hotel and the CEO and directors made presentations about the importance of employee engagement and the Avatar employment deal. The content of these presentations were prepared by HR. Again the message was that line managers needed to improve how they delivered the normative messages. In between the CEO and director presentations to all the line managers, line managers broke into groups and visited different conference rooms around the hotel. In each room a director spoke about the meaning behind the wording of each 'Employee Deal Touchpoint' which was elaborately presented on posters and brochures. These presentations were accompanied by games or some kind of skit. For example, in one room, there were hired actors who acted out a 'good' and 'bad' performance dialogue meeting.

The potential validity of employee grievances was not raised throughout the day. In fact the only employee grievance raised by a director (D7) was the fallout out of an earlier cost cutting initiative in the canteen which meant full hot breakfasts were no longer available every day. Many employees had complained about this and the (D7) claimed it was an example of how an employee grievance had got out of hand as managers had failed to deal with it. Director (D7) referred to the incident as 'Sausagegate' which generated much laughter. Whilst indeed the humour was obvious, implying that 'Sausagegate' was a typical or most serious employee concern only served to discredit the legitimacy of employee grievances in general. In fact this was the only employee issue that was mentioned during the whole day devoted to improving employee engagement. The day ended with us all singing an 'Avatar song' made up by hired musicians. The main outcome was that managers were told to simply do a better job of convincing employees of the normative message and manage any expectations that arose. The following day I encountered an LM1 (M6) in the coffee dock, who commented to me that he simply came back with more work to do after having been out of the office for a day *'And for what...to stand and look at posters all day'*. He joked that he was not allowed to say things like that to HR as he was already in danger of being labelled a cynic.

Ultimately, the HR processes enabled directors to feel good about themselves; that they were playing a part in ensuring the employment experience was as glorious as the normative structures claimed. However, communicating the normative message was as far as directors were willing to go in dealing with employee related issues. Directors did not interact with employees to address specific concerns and they avoided discussions about the people consequences of decisions, neither mentioning it at meetings nor talking about it with line management at one-ones. In this way the normative structures were something of an absolving, vanity project for directors. HR provided directors with a sanitised, optimistic, unitary rhetoric which directors evangelised to give the appearance they were championing people issues all the while they avoided getting involved in the dirtier, more pluralistic reality that was occurring at lower levels.

5.5: CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE MYTH OF BEST PRACTICE

In terms of the quantitative approaches to exploring the HR promise, the Avatar case highlights the potential problem with single respondent studies that attempt to measure the relationship between HR practices and organisational performance. Avatar HR and directors were well versed in the rhetoric of normative structures and gave a falsely optimistic impression of the value of these practices. In reality, the Avatar HR practices, so celebrated amongst HR 'think-tanks', actually failed to generate a positive subjective orientation amongst employees.

The Avatar case also demonstrates the weakness of the best practice HR literature which claims that certain HR practices stimulate high organisational performance. In Avatar's case a somewhat reverse logic applied. Avatar top management retained high levels of decision making autonomy and hierarchical control in order to drive the financial goals. Consequently the organisation was financially successful which meant they had the funds available to invest in developing 'high-road', soft, HR rhetoric. This rhetoric was then used to perpetuate top management autonomy and isolation. All the while the harder mechanics, implemented by line managers, ensured that primary employee costs, such as salary, bonus, benefits and training were kept to a minimum of what was required to compete in the market. In Avatar, 'best practice' HR supported the achievement of financial goals not by motivating employees but by freeing up top management to pursue financial targets whilst delegating concern for employee issues to HR. In other words, the HR practices were a product, not prerequisite, of financial success. This viewpoint was compounded by line managers who viewed HR processes as something they had to enact in addition, as opposed to an aide, to getting work done.

As indicated in chapter two, there has been numerous 'post-modern' analysis of HRM which seek to 'de-construct' the positivist, managerial writings (Legge, 2005b:316-355). Such writings focus on the role of imagery, rhetoric and discourse, claiming the basis of HR's power is not the materiality of the practices, but the role imagery, rhetoric and discourse play in shaping the meaning employees attribute to these practices. The main message in such writings is that HR practices shift employee perceptions, distracting them from any negative consequences of management decisions and leading them to create a positive subjective orientation to the organisation.

Avatar certainly reflected many definitive attributes of a 'post-modern', discourse heavy organisation as there was a compelling branded, rhetorical and symbolic organisation identity that existed independent of what actually occurred every day. Furthermore, top management communication was consistently encased in this cohesive, branded imagery and rhetoric. However, the Avatar case highlights how top management and HR were the only actors convinced of the value of such practices. Beyond HR and top management the rhetoric and imagery ran out of steam and did not distract employees from the harsher, pluralistic, mundane realities of the employment experience. The rhetoric and imagery was quickly nullified in the face of the harder, more material mechanics, as will be further discussed in chapter seven. However, as decision making authority was situated with top management and HR the rhetoric and imagery was perpetuated. It was not perpetuated because it worked. Instead the falsely optimistic rhetoric of 'best practice', individualised, meritocratic, unitarism was convenient for top management. Citing a belief in the normative rhetoric gave directors a 'get out of jail' pass which they used to deflect blame for employees negative perception of the organisation.

Interestingly, although the HR practices failed to create the desired subjective orientation neither top management, HR, nor line management highlighted employee performance or work ethic as being problematic. As indicated, the highest positive response in the employee survey related to the statement *'I know the results expected of me in my job'* to which 85% indicated that they more than agreed with that statement. Given that the normative structures did not deliver the desired commitment, the structures that actually managed what employees did every day, namely the work structures, will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: The Work Structure

6.0: INTRODUCTION TO THIS CHAPTER

The two preceding empirical chapters detailed Avatar's financial priorities and the organisation wide initiatives and people management practices enacted to achieve them. In interviews, line managers and employees, explained their perspectives of the financial and normative structures, primarily in terms of the relationship between these structures and their daily work. The nature of work in Avatar is explored in this chapter, meaning the analysis now moves further down the organisation hierarchy. An exploration of the work structures and some perceptions of line managers and employees are provided. Data is also presented from observations made and documents analysed.

As indicated in chapter two, much of the literature on organisation structures and knowledge work heralds the arrival of the post-industrial, post-fordist, enterprising, flat, decentralised, lean, flexible, boundary-less, networked, virtual organisation. Within this literature knowledge creation is afforded such prominence that the creation and coordination of knowledge is positioned as the central purpose of the firm, typically without any specific reference to financial goals (Argote et al, 2003; Cole, 1998; Grant, 1996; Kogut and Zander, 1996; Lam, 2000; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Penrose, 1959; Spender, 1996; Teece, 1998; Tsoukas, 1996). Furthermore images have emerged of knowledge workers who possess considerable privileges in terms of autonomy, market value, status, job security, pay and self identity (Abbott, 1988; Alvesson, 2001; Atkinsons, 1984; Baer, 1987; Drucker, 1996; Reed, 1996). Knowledge workers are assumed to be so autonomous that the role of managers has been neglected in much of the commentaries on knowledge work and there are even claims it goes largely unmanaged (Alvesson, 2001; Salaman and Storey, 2008:319). In presenting the Avatar knowledge work process this chapter supports those who argue that claims of structural change are largely unsubstantiated (Alvesson and Thompson, 2005; Fenwick, 2008; Fournier and Grey, 1999; Gleadle et al, 2008; Harrison, 1997; Salaman and Storey, 2008). This account also directly challenges the assumptions about the primacy of knowledge in KIF's, and the assumptions that flat, empowering peer networks characterise the knowledge work process.

Instead the Avatar case demonstrates how a variety of structures including hierarchy, bureaucracy, networks and teams can merge to manage different elements of the knowledge work process and provide management with high levels of overt control on the one hand whilst facilitating innovation and tacit knowledge on the other. However, the primary mode of co-ordination was hierarchy. The centrally driven, legally mandated budgeting processes firmly positioned decision making control in the hands of senior management, allowing the financial pressures of shareholder capitalism to permeate the organisation and shape the nature of daily working life. The chapter outlines two broad categories of knowledge work that existed in Avatar and explains how they emerged in response to the centrally driven and hierarchically controlled financial objectives. The differences between the two categories demonstrate the dominance of hierarchically driven financial goals over the creation and application of knowledge in the workplace. This chapter also adds to the literature by presenting a detailed overview of the knowledge work process; accounts of which, as indicated in chapter two, are understood to be lacking at present.

6.1: KNOWLEDEGE WORK AS A CONTRIBUTION

It is worth stating that a different analytical approach is taken in this chapter. In the preceding analytical chapters, the structures were discussed similar to how they were presented within Avatar. However the range of work processes and tasks in Avatar were so varied, it was necessary to develop new constructs to present and analyse the work structures. These constructs are introduced in this section and explored throughout this chapter.

6.1.1: The Analytical Value of Contribution

Avatar was a knowledge intensive firm (KIF) insofar as *'Most of the work is said to be of an intellectual nature and where well-educated, qualified employees form the major*

part of the work force' (Alvesson, 2001:863). Within Avatar a typical recruitment requirement to most posts was a degree level qualification relevant to the role.[86]

As stated in chapter four, Avatar's the overriding goals were to stimulate revenue and reduce costs. Avatar constantly sought to foster technological innovation to launch new products and services whilst reducing the costs of delivering these products and services. As described in chapter three, Avatar was made up of six functions: technology, sales and customer management, marketing, finance, strategy and HR. As it was a distinct business unit executing this variety of functions Avatar possessed a large number of distinct roles. However, all work undertaken appeared to contribute primarily to one of the strategic goals. In other words, two types of what I term *'contribution'* underpinning knowledge work existed. Contribution can be understood as the manner in which knowledge work contributes to defined organisational targets. These *'contribution categories'* were not used within Avatar, but became apparent during the interviews, at meetings and whilst observing different work processes. As the nature of contribution was so central in shaping knowledge work in Avatar, it is worthwhile further unpacking 'contribution' as an analytical construct.

It is argued that such a variety of adjectives have emerged to describe knowledge work that the notion itself is claimed to be suffering from *'terminological ambiguity'* (Hildreth and Kimble, 2002:1). The data presented in this chapter demonstrates that analysing knowledge work as a 'contribution' can help to clear the fog slightly. Contribution can be understood as the extent to which a piece of work contributes to the achievement of a strategic objective. Identifying a lasting strategic rationale underpinning knowledge work provides a more stable lens to explore and situate what can otherwise seem like a whirlwind of ever-changing, footloose, knowledge related tasks and interactions.

In work process terms, the notion that employees make a 'contribution' at work can be understood as a development of Behrend's 1957 industrialised employee who provided

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[86] Most interviewees had at least one 3rd level qualification relevant to their role; only four, at employee level, did not but they had a number of years experience and some technical training to compensate for their lack of third level qualification. Many individuals also had additional post graduate qualifications and professional qualifications related to their area, for example those working in law and accounting. Avatar also demonstrated other characteristics associated with knowledge intensive firms, for example they undertook numerous activities to capture knowledge including benchmarking, audits, surveys, data stores and intranets.

'effort'. The concept of the effort bargain may be appropriate for industrialised, Taylorist 'time and motion' work processes in which there is a correlation between effort and productivity, or input and output. However, with knowledge work, effort does not automatically produce the required knowledge. The deemed quality of knowledge is variable. 'Contribution' is output focused and variable and orients the researcher to the end result, making it a more appropriate construct to study a work process where the end result is thought to be unknowable.

The construct of contribution also turns the reified notion of the privileged, autonomous knowledge worker on its head. For example, taking a contribution perspective, when a knowledge worker joins an organisation they are not secure, valuable, privileged and autonomous by virtue of the knowledge they profess to possess; instead they are nothing more than a promise. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, knowledge workers must continuously prove themselves to create a portfolio of, not simply skills, but contribution. The contribution perspective also highlights how the knowledge based view of the firm, which focuses on the input of knowledge creation alone, largely misses the point. From a contribution perspective knowledge exists to be leveraged in order to contribute to a pre-determined strategic goal. This was starkly evidenced in Avatar where there were two contribution categories driven by the financial goals and budgeting processes. Most roles involved elements of both categories but were weighted more in favour of one.

6.1.2: Contribution Categories in Avatar

The first contribution category I term '*generative*' knowledge work. Generative work was funded from the capital expenditure (CAPEX) budget. It was change and future oriented and involved contributing to the creation of something new. Employees undertaking generative work were required to use their knowledge to provide ideas, proposals, business cases, project plans, and undertake project work-steps, project updates and analysis. After new projects were developed and launched the work processes focused on the ongoing execution of the new product, service or process. This represents the second category which I term '*operational*' knowledge work. Operational work was funded from Avatar's operational expenditure (OPEX) budget.

Operational work was oriented in the present and involved implementing the ongoing work processes and activities that contributed to the day to day operation of the organisation. Employees undertaking operational work were required to use their knowledge to complete defined work processes and achieve defined performance standards whilst adapting to change and resolving complexities that arose along the way. Within Avatar the split between generative and operational work appeared to be approximately 60:40 in favour of generative work.

Creating contribution categories connects knowledge work with the wider organisation goals. Knowledge, in Avatar, was a means to a strategic financial end, not an end in itself. This chapter demonstrates how this connection can be made explicit through six knowledge work variables I identified in Avatar. These variables were dependent on the type of strategic contribution underpinning the work and were:

i. Strategic contribution and budgetary source
ii. Work process
iii. Networks/teams
iv. Desired behavioural traits
v. Application of knowledge
vi. Control structures

The two contribution categories can be differentiated along these six variables to demonstrate how the values of shareholder capitalism can reach right down into an organisation via legally mandated budgeting systems to mould knowledge work and extract a specific type of contribution from knowledge workers. The variables of each contribution category are explored throughout this chapter. It is worth pointing out that the individuals I observed and interviewed all had different roles, so it is not particularly relevant to give a detailed account of one individual's work. Instead, what will hopefully prove to be informative, is an overview of how these variables shaped knowledge work in Avatar.

6.2: GENERATIVE WORK

Generative work was about creating something new. The typical generative tasks associated with each function are outlined below.

- Technology: Planning, designing and developing the technical infrastructure to deliver new products and services. Identifying opportunities for process improvement. Working with other functions to create business cases and project plans for same.
- Finance: Researching, analysing and developing business cases to invest or divest in different parts of the organisation or different products and services and change initiatives.
- Marketing: Researching and developing new products and services to generate revenue. Working with other functions to create business cases and project plans for same.
- Sales: Developing new methods of bringing products and services to customers and channels. Developing customer analysis and management systems that contribute to the achievement of sales and customer satisfaction targets. Working with other functions to create business cases and project plans for same.
- HR: Researching and designing new people management initiatives. Working with other functions to create business cases and project plans for same. Overseeing the people management aspects of change initiatives and re-organisations such as communications, management training and support, new functional structures and role profiles.
- Strategy: Researching, developing and overseeing recommendations about the market place and the general strategy of the organisation in terms of competitors, strategic alliances, partnerships and regulation. Working with other functions to create business cases and project plans for same.

6.2.1: Strategic Contribution and Budgetary Source

The generative work process was supposed to facilitate the creativity and forward thinking that would contribute to the future success of the organisation. Generative work involved developing new projects and change. However it was not an innovative, knowledge creation free for all. There were defined parameters within which generative work could be undertaken. All generative ideas had to contribute to and be aligned with the pre-defined strategy as was clearly articulated by director (D5):

> Innovation for innovation sake is, of course, not a useful thing it has to be relevant innovation, that's the key point. And relevant innovation is relevant to something i.e. the strategy. So you start by saying "Have we a clear strategy? Do we know? Is everyone very clear where we're going?" That's the context within which we'd like innovation to occur.

Within Avatar, generative work qualified, in accounting terms, as contributing to the creation of a future organisational asset. The International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) require such work to be funded by the budget for capital expenditure (CAPEX). This was important as there are numerous legal regulations that guide how an organisation should make decisions regarding investing in a new asset. For example the IFRS and the Sarbanes Oxley Act (SOX) outline a range of acceptable financial analyses that capital expenditure decisions can be based on.[87] Furthermore, and as stated in chapter four, SOX guidelines require market listed companies to demonstrate they have a hierarchical structure for making capital investment decisions. Ultimately, financial regulations require hierarchical, financially oriented decision making structures, providing top management with a legal basis to embed financialised measures at all levels of the workplace; a trend that has been noted in the literature (Copeland et al, 1990; Erturk et al, 2008; Froud et al, 2000b; Williams, 2000). Within Avatar this translated into a requirement to create 'return on investment' business cases to accompany generative work, the implications of which will be further discussed throughout this chapter.

In addition to ensuring there was a financial justification for investing CAPEX, top management also sought to ensure that all new projects, product or services contributed to ongoing sanctity of the Avatar band. The brand, was viewed a means of securing financial return. Generative work had to be 'on brand' and this also prompted a need for hierarchical control as described by director (D2):

> Once the Avatar name and reputation is attached to something, it's hard to do other than what we currently do [the generative work process] because as the market leader, as the big guy out there, the journalist and the columnists are always looking for some chink to say "Ah ha did you see what Avatar did last week"...[...]...The margin for error, the tolerance for error and the tolerance for

[87] Specifically sections 302 and 404 of SOX detail regulations for financial reporting and documentation of CAPEX internal control procedures. Generally, some acceptable analyses are: Investment ($/€), Net present value (NPV) ($/€), ROI (%), Acquisition profit and sales growth (%), Assets and fixed assets ($/€), Breakeven and payback months (#), Capital employed change ($/€ and %), Internal rate of return (IRR) (%).

> glitches in a company like Avatar from the [financial] market from the customer, from the regulator and from the shareholders is very very small. Therefore loose kind of "Gung ho! Let's get it out there and see what happens" behaviour isn't very acceptable...[...]...We can charge a premium for the fact that it's seen [by consumers] as "Avatar always do things really well".

Within Avatar, hierarchy ensured consumer market competitiveness through ensuring the quality required for a premium pricing model, something which raises questions about the claims that hierarchy signals a death knell for competitiveness in 'post-industrial' consumer markets that demand constant change and innovation. (Abernathy, 1978; Bennis and Slater, 1964; Burns and Stalker, 1961; Child and Mc Grath, 2001; Daft, 1998; Dyer et al, 1987; Hannan and Freeman, 1984; Hecksher and Donnellon, 1994; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Piore and Sabel, 1984; Powell, 1990; Scott, 1992).

What the Avatar case demonstrates is that being a large market listed firm with a prominent brand creates a requirement, from the outset, for hierarchical control structures. The need for financially oriented hierarchical decision making and control over generative work translated into the generative work process.

6.2.2: The Generative Work Process

Generative work emerged either from projects that were mandated by Group, a local adaption of an idea from Group, or a wholly locally generated idea. It was understood to be complex and requiring high expertise. Generative employees were required to use their own experience and judgement to identify how to develop and launch new products, services and processes, as described by director (D9):

> The how is complicated by the fact that a lot of what we do is very much in the IT world. It's very complex product delivery, it's complex customer engagement, it's a complex and competitive environment. I can't figure out the how because you need to bring the how into many different parts and different [functions] to work through and figure out how to actually do it and join it up.

A key characteristic of the generative work process was that it involved cross functional working in order to identify the organisation wide activities, resources and timelines involved in a project. As generative work was about creating new projects there were no formal IT based systems that could be used to predict return on investment in a failsafe manner. Neither could an IT system predict, and thereby dictate, the steps that

generative workers went through to complete their projects. So no IT based knowledge management system was in place to wholly control generative work. However amidst the murky strategic waters there was a need to, as one director put it, '*institutionalise innovation*' and the generative work process was managed by two key processes.

The first was a project approvals process referred to as the *governance* process. Approved projects were then delivered through a project management process known as *release management*. The stages contained within the two processes are listed below:

- Proposition
- Concept
- Feasibility
- Approval

} Governance

- Design
- Build
- Customer Experience Testing
- Deploy
- Closure

} Release Management

6.2.2.1: The Governance Process

The governance process was in place to facilitate director and LM1 decision-making on CAPEX investment. The process was tightly connected to the command hierarchy and worked as follows:

- Proposition: The primary responsibility for coming up with products and services to generate new revenue lay with marketing and, to a lesser extent, the sales function. However any function could put forward what were called 'propositions' for new ideas or work processes. This involved completing an 'idea specification document', approximately thirty pages in length, to present a range of analysis including the projected financial return and predictions on how it would impact the 'customer experience' and brand. It also required the identification of the cross functional activities needed to deliver the proposition such as the technology, marketing, sales and customer support requirements. If the line manager felt the proposition had promise they discussed it with their own manager and this continued up the command hierarchy until it was approved by an LM1 who would secure a time to present the idea at the function's weekly management meeting between the director

and the LM1s. At these meetings employees, lower level line managers and LM1s presented ideas for generative work and were typically subjected to a rigorous series of questions. If approved, the proposition was progressed to the next stage.

- Concept & Feasibility: Those responsible for the proposition brought the idea specification document to a business analyst within the technology function. The proposition was reviewed in terms of the technical work involved, the costs and the resources required, the timelines and the consequences of making the suggested changes to Avatar's technical infrastructure. The latter was important as the manner in which technology evolved meant that Avatar's technical infrastructure was constantly changing and it was essential that systems remained stable. The analyst then gave an indication of project feasiblity. The results of this were presented back to the functional management meetings where it was decided which projects were to be progressed and considered for CAPEX investment.
- Approval: Each director had a CAPEX budget for their function. However as generative projects had cross-functional implications, a cross functional structure was in place to approve CAPEX investment. The team of directors collectively approved any project which cost more than one million euro, and anything less was sent to a governance committee.[88] The governance committee met for 2.5 hours every two weeks and was made up of two LM1s from finance and one LM1 from each of the other functions. Those presenting to the directors or governance committee prepared pre-reads for attendees that were distributed a couple of days prior to the meeting. Employees and line managers got timeslots to present their proposition and outline the detail of the business case, costs, work steps and any other benefits or implications. They typically presented a range of options, associated impacts and outlined the key decisions that needed to be made. Presenters were subjected to a rigorous series of questions and often propositions and business cases were revised and re-presented several times before CAPEX applications were granted. The prominence, albeit speculative, nature of the financials in business cases was described by a member of the governance committee (M7) who stated:

> Unless we can see what the return on investment is, the governance won't agree to that particular capital expenditure. That's how we manage locally because it comes down from very stringent budget discussions with Group as to how much

[88] Prior to setting up the governance committee all initiatives went to the team of directors, but it was believed that their meeting agenda was too full and meant decision making often got delayed.

> CAPEX we can have and what is our operating expenditure. It all comes down. A huge amount of it comes down to finances because, at the end of the day, it's our shareholders that have to be happy...[...]...We did have to become a lot more controlled because we have external shareholders. Then there is all the various SOX Compliance and all the rest we have to do now and it means our governance has tightened up considerably.

It was accepted by all that the business cases were somewhat speculative as in some cases there was no precedence for the product, service or process worldwide. During the course of the ethnography I attended governance committee meetings. The meetings were conducted in a large, spacious boardroom, which held a big circular table, large leather swivel chairs and a projection screen onto which presentations were displayed. There was always a trolley with an array of beverages and snacks for the committee. There was a strong hierarchical and authoritative feel to these meetings. They resembled something of a 'hearing' whereby those holding the scarce 'capital' were appealed to by those seeking the resources to undertake their 'labour' so that they could make a contribution. Presenters waited outside the boardroom until they were called in for their timeslot. It was not uncommon for individuals to be left waiting. Presentations were either done in groups or individually. The committee sat on one side and the presenters on the other.

The primary most striking feature of the interaction between the presenter and the committee was the level of detailed knowledge a presenter was expected to have. Individuals were under considerable scrutiny from the LM1s as they presented ideas, scenarios or project progress. Presenters had to be able to discuss their project plans in cross-functional terms and convince the committee of the projected contribution. In other words the governance committee asked the questions on their terms, and if the presenters could not translate their knowledge accordingly to demonstrate a satisfactory contribution they had to re-apply and return with the information until governance was satisfied. The dominant emphasis within this hierarchical format was financial concerns, as described by an LM2 (M12):

> I kept getting rejected until eventually then I proved [the business case], but we lost six months to the [consumer] market. So it's an example of how finance things can hold things up, wanting more information. It's just more information, more information. So you could go in with "here's my proposal, here's my business case, here's what the competitors are doing." Then they'd maybe look to dive into a different part of the business case in more detail, so "Come back with that bit in more detail or a different scenario" things like that. Obviously you

need to make sure the business cases are robust. But the item in question was an add-on product, an add-on to an existing product that was extremely successful. It was absolutely obvious that if we opened it up to these other set of customers it was going to be successful as well.

Interestingly an issue that never arose in any governance discussion was the impact of propositions on employees. In fact when discussing the role of the HR LM1 in the governance process a member of committee (M7) stated *'HR has significantly more leeway than the other [functions] would have as to whether they're actually physically present at the meeting or not. There would be a major problem if marketing wasn't there or if finance wasn't there or if technology wasn't there'*. People issues were considered after decision making at a lower team level and only in terms of work allocation.

So a typical day for someone going through the governance process involved analysing and compiling data related to a proposition, and contacting and meeting people across the organisation to secure information and continually refine the proposition. It was wholly output or contribution focused. In fact all the work involved putting together the business case would go to waste if CAPEX was not eventually secured. The directors made the final call on the appropriate bundle of governance approved propositions that would get developed via the project management system *'release management'*.

6.2.2.2: Release Management

If a project got into a release it meant that it was Group mandated or that it got through local governance Thereafter directors just wanted projects to be delivered on time and to budget via 'release management'. Release management is a software development process popular amongst large, high technology multi-nationals.[89] It incorporates the development, testing, deployment and support of software and is broadly defined as *'the process through which software is made available to, and obtained by, its users'* (Van der Hoek et al, 1997). The Avatar release management process was designed by world leading process engineering consultants. A strength of release management cited in the

[89] For example, the 2008 IBM Rational Software Development Conference contained a track on Change and Release Management. Google Tech Talks host presentations on release management. The Intel Technology Journal, Q4, 2000, describes how release management is used in Intel. Hewlett Packard design and sell release management process solutions.

literature, and one of the key reasons it was used in Avatar, is that it facilitates the cross functional bundling and collective movement of projects throughout an organisation.

Successful propositions were grouped into what was termed *'a release'* so each proposition was developed alongside another. This provided directors and LM1s with clear cross functional visibility of project progress. From a technical perspective, if a range of propositions required adjustment to, for example, the billing, customer care or firewall systems, then all the adjustments to that system and codes were worked on at the same time. This enabled the technology function to minimise any unforeseen negative consequences of technical changes. From a marketing perspective, it facilitated the release of complementary campaigns, products and services to consumers, from a sales and customer management perspective they could go to the market at the same time with a range of products and services for different customers. Avatar aimed to undertake three releases a year which meant that all Group mandates and governance projects had to slot into one of these releases.

Release project teams were made up of individuals from functions across the organisation whose contribution was necessary to ensure delivery of the proposition. Teams were co-ordinated via a project management structure consisting of a release manager, who oversaw the entire release, a programme manager, who oversaw a number of projects within a release, and a project manager who oversaw one project within a release. Although the project management function had overall project co-ordinating responsibility, line managers were responsible for their teams contribution into a release. If an individual continuously failed to contribute, the project manager could contact the individual's manager and to get issues resolved. Project teams met at least weekly to discuss progress, budgets, timelines, plans and decisions, and each individual was required to give an account of their progress. Additional meetings were frequently called to discuss more specific issues. Walking around the building it was common to see those working on releases sitting in meeting rooms, often with one person standing talking to attendees and a PowerPoint presentation projected onto a wall. In fact it was rare to observe a meeting where PowerPoint was not used.

Project teams used a Lotus Notes on-line software program known as 'Teamroom' to track their interactions and provided release teams with an on-line 'warehouse' for project related data. Teamroom functionality is designed to facilitate on-line,

collaborative, networked forms of working (Yates and Orilikowski, 2002). Team members posted progress updates to a project teamroom that could be accessed by team members. It facilitated document management, action and progress tracking, meeting management, collaborative writing, sharing of ideas, decision making, and storing/archiving of project history (Yates and Orilikowski, 2002).

In order to progress through a release, project teams had to ensure their project met the needs of what were called release *'tollgates'*. Each tollgate had a checklist of requirements that a project had to meet before it could move to the next phase. Proving a project had met these requirements involved completing a considerable amount of documentation, in addition to undertaking the actual work, and posting this work to the teamroom to demonstrate to the project management hierarchy that work had been completed. The specific project steps were:

- Design: Technical architects worked to identify the technical infrastructure and code required to deliver the proposition. At this point a 'user case document' was initiated which mapped the flows between the user of the system and the technical infrastructure. This document was continuously refined until all parties were satisfied that the optimum technical design had been reached.
- Build: Once the final technical specifications were established it was handed over to developers who created the new technical infrastructure and software codes required to build and integrate the proposition. Other departments also worked to develop the supporting processes such as marketing, PR, sales, legal and customer support processes.
- Customer Experience Testing: The proposition got tested to ensure its functionality and that all supporting systems, such as billing and aftercare, were in place.
- Deployment: The new product, service or work process was released onto the market or within the organisation.
- Closure: This was known as the warranty period whereby the organisation waited to assess if there were any unforeseen negative implications from a new product or service. Once it was felt that any unforeseen issues had been addressed the project and its budget was closed and the proposition became business as usual or 'operational work'

A typical day on a release involved figuring out the best way to deliver the part of the project you were working on at that time, completing these tasks, filling out forms to show that you had completed tasks and attending meetings to explain your work and to understand the next steps. There was a high level of management oversight and bureaucracy and paperwork were endemic in the release process as described by an employee (E1):

> I think there is probably, maybe too much management in Avatar and too many layers of management. With the release process, you've got your line manager and you've probably got a project manager, then there's a programme manager and then there's the release manager and they probably all have certain functions but sometimes you end up reporting to all these different people and you're thinking "why do I have to report to all these people, can I not just report to one person?". So it wastes a lot of your time...[...]...There's time tracking where you've got to fill out how many hours you worked on each project, then if you're working on other projects you might have to update another manager, do a project report on other projects, that's three reports. There might be other things as well, you've got to update other people on how things are going so it's a lot of overhead and trying to get stuff done. I don't think it goes anywhere, I don't think it's even looked at half the time so people feel they're just doing something for the sake of it. It doesn't really go anywhere, so that's what I'm saying, there's a lot of red tape and a lot of that kind of stuff. It can be frustrating at times. When you come to the toll gates then you have different documentation to complete so that's totally separate. The amount of administration involved in terms of actually getting things done in here, I mean it's really process heavy. I think there's a happy medium, I think the release [process] works in terms of prioritising work practices and what's important and all that kind of stuff but Oh My God it just seems to be never ending filling out of pieces of paper.

Generative had to provide a range of paperwork to satisfy the cross-functional hierarchy that co-coordinated the release management process. An LM3 (M3) manager interpreted the volumes of documentation as being a feature of working on high-technology projects in a large company:

> [People] always think of Avatar as being a kind of cool company. It's new technology and it's exciting and it's fast paced and it's new ideas. But the reality of working in a big company? Maybe you're idealistic to come in and think "This is going to be really exciting". Actually when you get down to the day to day nuts and bolts of what you do it's attending meetings and making decisions and filling out form A and waiting for responses before you can fill out Form B...[...]...I think the perception of Avatar and reality are different.

The generative work process reveals how hierarchically driven, financial concerns can define decision making structures and take precedence over innovation and knowledge creation in a KIF. Knowledge in Avatar served as, what authors have called, a force of

work production (Adler, 2001; Teece, 1998; 2000), and the different types of knowledge will be discussed later in this chapter. The data presented thusfar refutes the *'knowledge based'* views of the firm which position the creation and coordination of knowledge as the central purpose of the firm without any specific reference to financial goals (Argote et al, 2003; Cole, 1998; Grant, 1996; Kogut and Zander, 1996; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Penrose, 1959; Spender, 1996; Teece, 1998; Tsoukas, 1996). The generative work process existed to ensure knowledge was leveraged to contribute to a pre-defined financial contribution. Furthermore, employees were required to verbally and bureaucratically account for their contribution in managerial terms. The command and release management hierarchy came together to oversee the contribution being made and generative employees worked largely in networks to make this contribution happen.

6.2.3: Networks in Generative Work:

6.2.3.1: Soft Neworks in the Governance Process

Much of the knowledge created at governance stages was *'contextualised information'* insofar as it was a message purposely intended to impact the recipients' perspective in a pre-determined manner (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). However the unpredictability inherent in doing something new meant that no generative business case was failsafe and there was an element of indeterminacy within the goverance process. Individuals sought to fill the indeterminacy by creating what Weick (1995) calls *'illusions of accuracy'* namely presenting an uncontradicted, optimistic array of data to give the business case a sense of omniscience. This need to convince others was highlighted by a director (D11) who stated:

> We don't have that [obvious strategic] picture. And it's almost, in the absence of the picture everybody, to get something done they have to convince everybody how important it is. Whereas if the dialogue was different and we were just saying, "Well I want to launch this new proposition and that's part of our differentiation strategy because we're going to differentiate on that, remember we all agreed that?, yes that makes sense, now is this a good way to make that differentiation happen or not?...It's a good way, off you go". I don't have to be more important than the next project; I just have to make sense.

This is not to say that the business cases were baseless. Instead creating an illusion of accuracy required individuals to minimise the extent to which their business case was challenged by others. This created an additional workstep, the development of a cross functional *'soft network'* which was informal, subtle and without explicit role definition (Davenport and Prusak, 1998).

Individuals would talk not only about their work tasks, but the actions they were taking to *'canvass'* support , to *'sell'* it or get *'buy in'* from others. One emplyee was told by their manager they needed to raise the optimism in their document and to put 'jazz hands' on it. It was common to observe generative employees using the coffee dock to have informal meetings where they would discuss their ideas with others, usually with their laptops open. It was also common for those presenting to the governance committee to have pre-meetings with members of the committee to discuss potential concerns prior to the presentation.

The generative soft networks in Avatar operated on the rational game theory notion of reciprocity whereby both positive and negative exchanges were returned in kind and running through the relationships was a fear of informal retribution (Axelrod, 1984). Refusing support or discrediting an idea meant an individual might not be able to secure support for their own work at a future date. For example, whilst having a coffee in the coffee dock I was sitting near two indivduals talking about a proposition. When they got up to leave one remarked *'Thanks for that support, it's great to have your input'.* The other person laughed and said *'Don't worry, I know where you sit'.* In other words the second indivudal would recall the favour. In addition to securing support for specific projects, individuals undertook considerable commmunications to avoid weakening soft networks. For example emailed meeting invitations often contained a significant number of invitees and a lengthy 'copy list', notifying individuals who were being notified about the meeting even if they did not have to be there. Many individuals reported in interviews that they scheduled and attended meetings that were not all that necessary for their actual work but were important to maintaining their network. An LM3 (M3) whom I regularly encountered in the coffee shop having meetings stated in interview that these meetings were:

> Sometimes for good reason, but many times, often not, just because it's the way we do things. There are some cases where we tend to do things just to not piss

> people off. Like you might want to do something but you have to tell person A because you don't want person A to find out from their boss, or you don't want to undermine them, or you don't want them to think you're stabbing them in the back. So you end up bringing all these people to a meeting and talking about something that most people don't really care about but they want to get the heads up or they want to [be seen]. It's political stuff and I would say it's a pretty intense political organisation.

Soft networks were crucial to creating the optimistic stories of contribution necessary to satisfy the hierarchical governance process and secure director support. However the generative soft networks created a blurred line in decision making between the more 'objective' cost-benefit analysis and subjective allegiances. The newness of the work, combined with these of subjective factors in decision making meant it was not uncommon for generative projects to fail to achieve their desired result, and conversely for some ideas to far exceed expectations. As Weick states *'Illusions of accuracy are shortlived, and they fall apart without warning'* (Weick, 2001:450). However there was a more sinister side to these illusions of accuracy as it facilitated dishonesty, most notably at management level, about project feasibility, costs and benefits. Project problems typically emerged in the release management processes when networks became more solidified.

6.2.3.2: Hard Networks and Release Management:

The release management project team served as a 'hard network' insofar as it was formal and visible and there were clear roles and accountabilities (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). The unpredictability inherent in doing something new meant that project plans were continually refined and the actual liklihood of success became more known throughout the project. This meant that there was also an indeterminacy within the release management process and, similar to the soft networks, the most effective behaviour for navigating the indeterminacy within the hierarchically driven hard networks was optimism. During an interview, LM3 project manager discussed one of the major services being developed claimed 'everyone' on the project thought it would never work. I mentioned I had been at meetings were it was only discussed favourably and the LM3 stated:

> The culture in Avatar is no one really gets a slap on the back or clap on the back if they say no to something. So if your boss comes to you and says "Can you do this

> project?" if you turn around and say "No, I don't think it's a good idea and here's the reasons why I don't think it's a good idea" I don't think you get the kudos for that. I think more often than not if you go and deliver that project and it goes live and goes to the market, that's when you get your congratulations. So I don't think there's a good culture of actually challenging things back. Maybe it's too hierarchical that you have to be seen to be doing a good job, so your boss can be seen to be doing a good job. Whereas actually if you were doing a really good job you'd be saying "That's not good, that's not good and that's not good".

Project managers claimed in interviews, and demonstrated in meetings, that their role was to deliver the project. The prominence of the hierarchy meant project meetings became a forum for project members to make their contribution known. If an individual had a difficulty it would be taken *'off-line'* so as not to contaminate the project team. Negativity was expressed outside of the project networks in weekly local team meetings. This was more a venting exercise as the team manager was not directly responsible for the project and therefore was typically not held accountable for the difficulties. Expressing discontent in team meetings was acceptable as it was directed at no-one in particular. It was understood that after the meeting each team member would return to their desks and continue to undertake their tasks and highlight their contribution at the project meetings. Negative feedback or questioning was not a feature as employee (E2) stated

> 'You nearly can't say no unless the thing is just really, really badly run full stop, you can prove it won't work. Other than that what's the point anyway?... It's not my problem, once I suppose my parts of it work I don't really care if it is a great success or it falls flat on it's face'

This sentiment, first expressed by LM1s, that it was easier to 'just say yes' than to challenge the hierarchy, permeated through to employee level. For an employee, fake optimism was the quickest route to an easy life. As one LM1 (M4) stated *'It's very hard to give negative feedback to a positive person'.* This reluctance to criticise the hierarchical decisions did not mean that cross functional project relations ran smoothly. The unpredictability, the optimistic nature of some business cases, and reluctance to highlight concerns meant potential problems went ignored until the last minute and releases often went over budget and over time. In fact during one governance meeting there was a discussion about how there was no way of telling what the current release was going to end up costing and the committee speculated on how they would handle reporting this in the budget communications with Group. Lower line managers and employees often claimed that the reluctance of directors and LM1's to listen to the

potentially valid concerns of lower levels facilitated the passage of poor ideas. So although release projects were about cross-functional working, the newness of the work and unforeseen problems meant that not all work steps were adequately planned. This meant managers often resorted to applying hierarchical pressure to get projects completed. An LM1 (M13) spoke at length about how tensions often emerged in the later stages of a release and were often felt by his team who played a role in final project sign off:

> Quite frankly I'm stunned that [certain behaviours] actually go on in a corporate [environment]. Outright blatant lying, everything from that to bullying, aggression, getting in your face when you're talking to someone. You know well there's a message there, it wouldn't faze me, but it certainly fazes other people [at lower levels]. I've had incidents where people have come to me on projects and they've said "Has [your team] signed off on this?" and it's the first I've heard of the project. But they have been told by various other people that it has been signed off just to get things done and to get things pushed through the system and they know well what our reaction will be to some of these things. They're always trying to push the boundaries...[...]...They take it in their own hands and they think, "I'm running the show, I'm fucked if I'm going to be stopped by [team X]" and they go ahead...[...]...They don't want any bumps in the road so they don't go looking for bumps in the road, typically [my team] would be a bump in the road I think. [Product X] was an absolute cracker of an example, they launched that product, the first [my team] ever heard of it was when a couple of [advertisements] came to us and that was four weeks before launch of a product that had been built and generated for four months. So we look at these ads and then we go, "Shit, what's this a part of", and we start asking a few questions, and all of a sudden you figure out that it's part of this big product launch and no advice has been taken on it...[...]...So here we are, forced, four weeks before launch to basically give it the tick, and we didn't, because there were major problems with it. And then we get strong armed and chucked around saying "Jesus you're holding the show up, there's mega bucks on the line here" and my response to that is "Well where the fuck were you two months ago? Here you are throwing this at us four weeks till launch, you're putting all the pressure on you, on us and it needn't have happened that way".

Numerous incidents of projects going wrong occured during the course of the ethnography. For example, a new product was released and due to a technical flaw and poor consumer communications many customers received bills considerably higher than they might reasonably expect. On a another service, a technical problem was uncovered after launch which meant that customers with the technical know-how could use the service in a certain way to avoid incurring charges. Prior to launch, this problem was reportedly raised in project team meetings but an LM1 decided to tell directors it was not a cause for concern.

These problems became known thoughout the organisation and an informal grapevine blame game ensued. I typically only heard about this blame game over coffees and in interviews with lower level managers and employees. I did not see any evidence of problems being explored at more senior level meetings. Official senior management communications about generative projects offered an optimistic version of events only and this was resented by lower level line managers and employees. For example two projects were launched in Avatar. Project A reportedly cost approximately two million to create and was heralded by directors as a key future revenue generator, the launch was widely publicised both in the consumer market and inside Avatar. Project B cost significantly less, was worked on by a small team, received minimal internal attention and had a relatively 'quiet' media campaign. Project B greatly surpassed expectations whilst Project A was considered a disaster and quietly withdrawn within weeks of its launch. Later, when the CEO visited at the previously described theatre event, project B was presented by an LM1 as a key achievement and the result of Avatar's cross functional collaboration, keen insight and planning around the needs of Irish customers when in fact it was a low status project whose success was a suprise to many. Project A, of course, was not mentioned. A third project was also presented, again in glowingly optimisitc terms, although there had been significant problems at the launch which resulted in a loss of millions of euro revenue. The manner in which it was presented as a resounding success spread amongst employees. Talking about the problem on this project an employee (E9) stated:

> It's absolutely huge and for us to just talk positively about sales and not turn round and say "There's a fucking disaster in X area". For us to turn round and not to say "There are issues and we're getting over them, this is something that we didn't think we'd encounter". I think [Group CEO] needs to know that, otherwise he thinks we're all like fairies going around here, gnomes and elves building things that make people happier and I think that's wrong.

Reflecting on the nature of networks in Avatar reveals how hierarhchy, bureaucracy and networks can go hand in hand. The soft and hard networks in Avatar facilitated many of the characteristics of networked forms of work organisation (Powell, 1990; Powell et al, 1996) and some elements of the fashionable managerial notion of 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1999; 2000a; 2000b; 2002). The Avatar networks facilitated a devolution of autonomy which allowed employees to develop collaborative relationships to share knowledge, identify ideas, work plans, problems and solutions.

However the goal of the network was not simply to create knowledge but to continually satisfy the hierarchy that the 'right' kind of strategically aligned knowledge contribution was being made. The governance process, project management hierarchy, and bureaucratic tollgates meant management retained approval and transparency over work progress. Employees in networks only had what I term *'workstep autonomy'* which can be understood as the autonomy afforded to an employee to identify the optimum steps required to achieve a managerially defined goal. Workstep autonomy should not be construed with empowerment as it did not strengthen employee voice. Neither did workstep autonomy impinge on top management's ability to make decisions and enforce decisions that had negative consequences for employees such as redundancies/or work intensification. The supression of the employee voice occasionally created project complications. Nonethless, hierarchy was maintained to preserve mangererial autonomy.

The need for those undertaking generative work to satisfy the hierhacy and to navigate networks through optimisim resulted in two bheavioural traits that were specific to generative work.

6.2.4: Desired Behavioural Traits: Managing upwards and profiling

There were two terms widely used amongst employees and line managers to denote the optimism and behaviours required to navigate the hierarchy soft and hard networks in the generative work process namely *'managing upwards'* and *'profiling'*.

The first behaviour, *'managing upwards'* can be understood as the action an individual undertakes to deliberately prioritise and express their work in a way that demonstrates their contribution to management objectives; all in order to secure positive recognition from the management community. Most generative employees and managers spoke about a need to manage upwards whilst maintaining peer relationships. There were also numerous accounts of individuals who primarily managed up and were unresponsive to peers and lower levels. This often created resentment between individuals, for example during an interview an employee (E3) described how:

> There was one chap that came in and basically got everyone else to do all the running around for him so he got them to do all the work and then he went and he presented it as his own work and then used nice buzz words and all the rest. He's now reporting into a director, one year later. We used to call him the presentation monkey because all he ever seemed to do was fucking presentations even though we were the ones putting all the information into those. And he was always 'hanging out'. I mean any time, let's say at any of the functions we'd have downstairs [in the atrium], doing his best to try to get in with the directors and start chatting to them or hanging onto his LM1 who would be chatting to a director.

Managing upwards also shaped how work was expressed; it involved translating and communicating their worksteps so the strategic contribution was knowable to management. Notions of managerial favouritism at work are not new (Cunnison, 1966; Salin, 2003). However managing upwards had to be enacted in addition to completing work, it was a workstep in itself, as described by a generative employee (E23):

> You get yourself out there, you get yourself known [amongst management]. You get whatever you're given delivered but you make sure everybody knows about it, even in areas that they don't need to know, but you make your name is known. If you're delivering and you've made your name, you will step up that ladder. You have to be very strong personality wise as well. You need to show that you can actually deliver and you can talk what [managers] want; if you're able to express what [managers] want to hear, then they'll think you're great. Anybody who is constantly challenging stuff, they're not seen in a great light, you'd want to be seen to be going with the flow to be honest. If you're constantly challenging, constantly saying why [X] doesn't work they'll see you as somebody who's obstructing at all turns rather than trying to just be up there and be at management level.

For example during the governance committee, individuals presented not only their ideas but followed it up with clear statements about how they were contributing to broader strategic financial goals. It was up to the individual to convincingly make this translation, not managers. For generative employees who actively sought to manage upwards, working on projects that were important to directors and the CEO was something of a 'holy grail' as it meant top management were aware of your contribution. It was common to see generative teams making presentations to the CEO in the CEO's glass office and to the executive team. On one occasion I was having a coffee with an employee whose LM1 had brought them along to a meeting with the CEO. She mentioned how after the meeting others had noticed her and made comments such as *'I can't believe you got time with the CEO'* and another asked *'Do you know*

know many people would kill to have ten minutes with him?'. Generative employees needed to court the favour of managers to secure CAPEX, to get certain roles on certain projects and ultimately to do their job. As one generative employee commented on the governance process *'There's a lot [of people] up there competing for the same cash from the same pool'*. Just like subsidiaries had to be seen as effective 'doers' to secure CAPEX and work from Group, employees had to convince managers they would deliver return on the resources provided to them.

The second behaviour of 'profiling' can be understood as the action an individual consciously undertakes to canvass and promote their contribution throughout the organisation. Profiling and managing upwards were two sides of the same coin. However, whereas managing upwards shaped how work was prioritised and expressed, profiling was about being 'loud'. Profiling can be understood as the actions an individual undertakes to make their contribution known, at all levels of the organisation, to heighten the perceived value of their contribution, and ability to leverage soft networks. Interestingly, one of the reasons it was important to have a profile, particularly at employee level was because managing upwards was so endemic. The pace of work and change in Avatar meant that employees had to prioritise work and the more senior the person requesting work or the higher profile the project, the sooner it was responded to. Having a profile meant that others assumed your work was of value and this made them more willing to help. Developing a profile was also about being responsive and supportive of others so that you could later call in favours. It also made employees unwilling to escalate problems to managers as they would draw attention to their inability to create a soft network and escalating problems was also detrimental to maintaining soft networks. This was described by a generative employee (E4) who was trying to get input from other functions to bring a proposition to governance:

> You're kind of nearly looking for favours to get everything done in certain areas. If you're dealing with technology, with any kind of technology and you haven't got a background in it, you're kind of looking into an abyss if you like, so you're at their mercy. So I suppose you have to do a lot of favours in terms of 'here's a coffee' and be really nice to get anything done.

Managing upwards and profiling involved being visible and making noise about your work so that managers and employees would place a high value on your contribution. This is not to say that networks functioned separate to the hierarchy, on the contrary,

networks were required so that work could be completed and the hierarchy satisfied. It meant you got CAPEX, you got interesting work on high profile projects and people supported your work. Managing upwards and profiling were a direct reflection of the force of hierarchy. In fact failure to get support from managers and peers could leave a generative employee with nothing to do as described by a generative employee (E5):

> I have two things that I presume I will be working on, two projects that I would like to see come to fruition. I know I can get the money for it. I'm pretty confident I can because it seems like there's a good business case behind them. But whether or not I can canvass the internal support to get them into a release [project], or the next available release will remain to be seen.

These behaviours had to be enacted in addition to undertaking the actual work, through communications, for example presenting, calling meetings, having coffees and sending emails. One employee (E1) succinctly summarised the communications necessary for successful profiling and managing upwards:

> It's presenting, it's a lot of presenting. We do Power Point like you've never seen in Avatar. It's getting in front of people, it's talking, it's sending emails to people, it's driving the project forward, it's keeping the right people informed of the progress on the project. Generally you would do that through presentations into the marketing management team, into the sales and customer management department, or if needs be into technology or then into the directors or into the relevant governance body, whatever. Then you're seen to be kind of driving things forward, delivering them.

Whilst attending meetings in Avatar I was struck by the extent to which PowerPoint presentations were used to exchange information. At meetings, almost all agenda items commenced with someone presenting on the status of the item. Convincing presentations skills were critical for generative employees. At management and governance meetings, if a presenter was not confident and optimistic, attendees often started talking amongst themselves and the presenter was more likely to be challenged. The value of strong presentation skills, became most apparent when bad news was being delivered. For example, an LM1 came to a governance meeting to inform the committee that the cost savings anticipated from the outsourcing project were unlikely to materialise and that negotiations with the vendor were at a deadlock. Given their LM1 status, the presenter already had a profile which meant they were less likely to be challenged. In addition they were extremely confident, they walked around the room whilst presenting, diffused questions with witty responses and when answering questions they often walked over to the person asking in order to make the interaction

conversational. In short, it was a fun presentation. After the presenter left, the other LM1s on the governance committee expressed regret about the presentation content, but also spoke about how it was a good and enjoyable presentation, an interactive style that others should be told to emulate. Their ability to claim it was an exemplary, enjoyable presentation despite the content was indicative of the high value placed on confidence

It is important to reiterate that managing upwards and profiling were not a substitute to getting work done, they were undertaken in addition to the work, they were part of the work process itself. An LM1 (M4) who joined as a junior line manager, spoke about her career trajectory stating:

> It's absolutely part of the job specification to make sure that you are seen. Throughout my career I've got very negative feedback on not promoting myself enough. And as I've promoted myself the leaps have been exponential. As they [directors] have got to know me, I've got on so much better. And it's a vicious circle, it's a confidence thing, I didn't have the confidence at the start. As I was forced into that situation, I got good feedback, from then, the confidence soared, as did my career...[...]...It's a vicious circle because as I did that [profiling] then I got more responsibility, and I was in the [directors meeting presenting] more often. I was in meetings with them more often, so then I got promoted, and then I was with them all the time. I had to turn up to all meetings. It worked very well for me. But it took quite a lot of effort at the start because I would have been quite a nervous presenter.

Failure to profile was so detrimental to an individuals' work and career that there was a term in Avatar for those who suffered, not because they were incompetent, but because they did not manage upwards and profile. These people were more likely to get *'shafted'*. The constant structural change created winners and losers and most interviewees, with the exception of the directors and HR, offered stories whereby they or someone they knew got 'shafted' in the re-organisations. Despite the variance in the stories told, the common theme in such stories was a perceived lack of fairness and the emotional or physical stress it had caused. Ultimately, if managers didn't know who you were or didn't value your contribution your role was insecure. Given the pace of change and re-organisations, being insecure and vulnerable had significant consequences as LM1 (M5) went on to sum up a common sentiment expressed at management and employee level:

> What [Employees] definitely, definitely need to get on is the ability to promote yourself and manage up. There is no doubt about that, because this is such a big organisation and there's so many people here that you have to make yourself

> known and you have to make yourself heard for people, and you have to involve yourself because a lot of people get walked over and a lot of people get pushed aside or taken for granted or advantage of.

Throughout the ethnography I experienced a mild form of fallout from not managing upwards and profiling. When my research commenced, directors informed LM1s that they should participate if contacted and at the early stages and it seemed that amongst the management community, I was an 'in project'. Some approached me and volunteered to be interviewed, there was also a bit of flattery and comments about how what I was doing was so important.[90] However interest dissipated commensurate with my reluctance to talk about what I was doing. I didn't say I was there to make the organisation more 'effective'. I didn't provide any information they could pass on, nor did I indicate that I agreed with anything they said and I remained silent at meetings. I didn't build up a soft network and I became invisible, irrelevant and ignored by managers very quickly.[91] In fact, the friends I made in Avatar often joked about how I did nothing for their profile and they hoped I appreciated that they were sacrificing their career prospects by spending time with a student.

The importance of managing upwards and profiling raises the issue of the role of 'image' in knowledge work. Assumptions that knowledge work is difficult to manage has led commentators to afford image a prominent role, claiming *'The management and manipulation of social relations and belonging to the right association or informal network of knowledge-intensive players are vital elements in demonstrating ones' capacity in the absence of clear-cut and solid proof'* (Alvesson, 2001:875). In Avatar, image and rhetoric certainly played a role as individuals needed to create an image for themselves as someone who made a worthy contribution. However managing upwards and profiling did not exist because employees had difficulty conveying what they were doing. Employees could clearly state their work tasks and these were tracked via the 'idea specification' documents, project plans, team meetings, teamrooms and tollgates. However such inputs were not of primary concern to management. Managing upwards and profiling existed to create a sense of certainty about the subsequent contribution of the work tasks. It was not a substitute for proof of work; it had to be done in addition to

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[90] In terms of methodology I never accepted offers to be involved and I only interviewed one person that approached me in this manner as their name came up at random when I scrolled through the lists of names provided.

[91] Of course I had a social network with whom I chatted and went for lunch and coffee with but this was distinct from a soft network underpinned by reciprocity.

the work as it involved translating work steps and communicating them in strategic terms to convince the hierarchy of the likely value of contribution.

The behaviour of a generative profiler who manages and relies on themselves to come up with their own work ideas, create their own network, get interesting work on quality projects, develop their own profile of contribution and derive subsequent reward is very similar to the characteristics of the 'enterprising self' discussed in chapter two. The enterprising self is self-regulating, self-reliant, self choosing, risk taking and individualistic (duGay and Salaman, 1992; duGay, 1996; Keat and Abercrombie, 1991; Rose, 1990). Those heralding the emergence of this form of workplace behaviour claim it is a consequence of loosely structured, flat, empowering, organisation structure combined with management practices that manipulate employee's identity to orient them towards notions of free market individualism and excellence (duGay, 1996; duGay and Salaman, 1992a; 1992b). However these behaviours were not officially sanctioned or even mentioned by the directors or HR. The Avatar case supports Fournier and Grey's claim that there is a *'flawed dualism'* between enterprise and more traditional workplace structures such as hierarchy and bureaucracy (Fournier and Grey; 1999:107). In Avatar, these *'enterprising'* behaviours emerged as a direct consequence of centrally driven, hierarchical and bureaucratic structures of control, and not because of a flat loose structure, or any managerially sanctioned, normative, identity colonising initiative. These behaviours manifested not in spite of the hierarchy and bureaucracy, but because of them. The consequences of this on employees will be further discussed in chapter seven.

6.2.5: Application of Knowledge: Merging the explicit and tacit

The explicit, individual, embrained elements of generative work in Avatar comprised of learned skills and experience. The explicit collective elements were made up of the team meetings, the governance process, governance documentation, the release management project teams, tollgates and on-line teamrooms. However generative work was not just about applying an explicit body of knowledge within explicit parameters. Individuals had to create new knowledge to achieve targets and convince the hierarchy and cross functional networks that their contribution was valuable. In Avatar it was the

act of navigating these hierarchical structures and networks that shaped the requirement for tacit knowledge. Employees had to take their explicit knowledge, merge it with management objectives, develop an idea and express this idea in a way that would convince, the command and governance hierarchy and networks and project teams. In Avatar the key tacit skills required were managing upwards and profiling.

The varying ability of individuals to manage upwards was evidenced in management's oft cited claim that some people just didn't *'get it'*. It appears that what these employees didn't get was that they were supposed to translate their explicit knowledge into convincing, optimistic, strategic and financial stories which, in turn, contributed to management's ability to create their own convincing stories; all the while achieving defined targets and forsaking contrary interests. Profiling was also tacit, as the ability to develop soft networks and make compelling presentations was a skill that not everyone had and was not easily verbalised or learned. It is difficult to make explicit the knowledge required for rmanging upwards and profiling. It is not easy to codify charisma, define the steps necessary for successful relationship building, train someone how to strategically and spontaneously communicate their work in management terms or instruct someone how to be convincing, enagaging and witty in presentations.

To some, managing upwards and profiling was an innate ability and they were well known, popular and deemed to be genuinely engaging as well as competent. For others it was more difficult as E1 described:

> I think it comes back to personalities, people kind of push themselves out there and others might have a quieter personality. There might be some very, very, really capable people but they're not as vocal...[...]... I think first of all you need to be good at your job ...[...]...and work hard at what you're working on. But I do think, in any corporate environment, I don't think that it's just Avatar, I think you need to be political. You need to talk to the right people, that's part of getting your job done, you know, forming the right relationships with the right people, networking and anybody who's successful in any big organisation is political and they manage up, that's how you get on.

Another employee (E6) stated: *'I don't think the people who get promoted or who get on are particularly poor[performers], but they just happen to have the gift of getting*

along with the right people'. However, not everyone could or even wanted to manage upwards and profile.[92]

The value placed on these behaviours undermined director and HR claims that the organisation was wholly meritocratic. Directors and HR, who were interviewed first, did not mention these behaviours in interviews whereas they were a dominant theme raised by all lower levels. In fact, I was informed by a HR LM1 that the HR director was sceptical that these behaviours existed at all when I wrote about them in my final report. Another director (D11), who I interviewed late in the research and was questioned about these behaviours and he expressed surprise that I'd picked up on them. He conceded that they existed, to an extent, but largely avoided talking about them beyond mentioning their tacit nature stating: *'That comes naturally to some people and they do it very effectively, it doesn't come naturally to others but it creates an interesting behaviour'*.

In terms of Lam's typologies of how explicit and tacit knowledge merges in organisations, discussed in chapter two, generative work in Avatar most closely reflected the features of a 'J-Form' organisation. Avatar employees were required to apply their explicit knowledge amidst the organisations embedded, collective, tacit knowledge. The need to access collective, contextual knowledge to complete work is a typical attribute of a large organisation (Batt and Doellgast, 2005: 143; Tam et al, 2002:780). Indeed many writers discuss the importance of merging theoretical and contextual knowledge (Frenkel et al, 1999; Gibbons et al, 1994; May et al, 2002).[93] This merging has been labelled '*Mode 2'* knowledge creation (Gibbons, 1994), or *'the creation of knowledge within the context of the application'* (May et al, 2002:780), or *'isolated tasks in a sea of social exchanges*' (McKinlay, 2005:246). However, as with

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[92] For those whom it did not come naturally there appeared to be one of three options. Some attempted to 'fake it' and were labelled manipulative *'gameplayers'*. For example one LM1 was mentioned in a couple of interviews as being an archtype 'gameplayer' and appeared to particularly irk those at lower levels. I observed this person in three meetings and they unashamedly used well-known business cliches, for example asking about '*What kept the Group CEO up at night'*, I judged them to be disingenious before I realised they were the individual spoken about in interviews. Others, the *'disilluioned'* went through the motions of having meetings and making presentations but did not seek to be overly persuasive and instead presented their information in a take it or leave it fashion. Some '*introverts'* avoided profiling and managing upwards as much as possible and claimed that this threatened their job security and levels of remuneration.

[93] The importance of interpersonal skills, mobilising social networks amongst software engineers, for example, been documented in other accounts (Barrett, 2005; Marschall, 2002; Woodfield, 2000; Sonnetag, 1995).

any ideal type, generative work in Avatar did not reflect all of the characteristics of a J-Form organisation. The most significant deviation was in relation to the strong, positive corporate cultures that are associated with J-Form types. An organisation's ability to leverage collective, embedded, tacit knowledge is typically understood to be dependent on employees sharing a strong positive normative orientation to the organisation. However in Avatar this positive orientation did not exist. Routines and rituals existed in the form of the governance process, and within the hard and soft networks there was a certain 'way of doing things' in terms of profiling and managing upwards and just saying yes. However, as indicated in chapter five and as will be further discussed in chapter seven, these did not emerge because of shared commitment to organisation goals. They were largely driven by hierarchy and bureaucracy. This leads to the second deviation from the J-Form type, namely that hierarchy was also prominent in team structures in order to direct knowledge creation to ensure alignment with organisational goals.

Ultimately, generative work brought together explicit encoded knowledge and tacit contextual knowledge to create new products and services. Knowledge was transformed into financial business cases and bureaucratic paperwork to satisfy hierarchies and networks. Individuals had to merge their explicit expertise and experience and use their tacit knowledge to make their contribution knowable within the broader organisation structural and strategic parameters. The manifestation and merging of explicit and tacit knowledge in Avatar were a direct consequence of how generative work was controlled.

6.2.6: Controlling Generative Work

Within generative work, hierarchy, bureaucracy and networks all met to harness innovation and workstep autonomy to create something new amidst continuous strategic, technical and organisational change. The importance of this fusion was described by a director (D5):

> We've got to keep an entrepreneurial structure which continues to challenge the way we've been doing business and finding new avenues and be successful in rolling out new products and services and at the same time we are a large business

> so we have the attributes of a large business. So I think if you don't like process and are just a free thinker, you're going to struggle in Avatar.

Generative work was not wholly knowable and as a director stated in an earlier quote, management expected employees to figure out *'the how'*. Chapter four contained a quote from a different director who spoke about the threat of *'plausible failures'* in generative work. This notion of 'plausible failures' was arguably the most formidable employee related risk management had to control for. Interestingly, when talking about what it would take to overcome this, directors claimed they needed employees who were committed, energised and caring, which are typically understood to emanate from normative structures. However the dominant structures controlling generative work in Avatar were hierarchy, bureaucratic documentation and networks.

Although the outcome of generative work was not wholly knowable it was wholly compatible with the notion that hierarchy and bureaucracy. Generative knowledge had to progress up the command hierarchy to satisfy the governance process. The hierarchy ensured that generative work was based on the financial principles of return on investment. The manner in which generative knowledge workers had to verbally account for themselves amidst considerable scrutiny from a senior panel of managers, who could refuse them the capital for their labour, meant the destiny of generative knowledge workers was dependent on their ability to promote their work to the hierarchy in financial and strategic contribution terms. Within the release management process, the project hierarchy co-ordinated work via hard networks and bureaucracy. Employees were required to account for their contribution at project team meetings, within the on-line teamroom and through the extensive documentation required to demonstrate completion of work at each tollgate. The project hierarchy interacted with the command hierarchy to ensure any individual problems were escalated to more senior management who would apply pressure downwards to ensure its resolution. Furthermore the project structure facilitated progress whilst nullifying dissent as release progress was regularly reported to directors, to the governance committee and cascaded down the organisation at team meetings. So the quality and timeliness of work were controlled and rendered transparent through frequent project meetings and dense hierarchical and bureaucratic reporting systems. Given the organisation wide visibility no individual or team wanted to be pinpointed as being responsible for a project delay.

Saying yes was the simplest way to an easy life and problems were vented not in project meetings but in team meetings at no-one in particular.

The generative work process also incorporated networked forms of organisation and a level of 'workstep autonomy' was devolved to employees to allow them share knowledge, problem solve and identify ideas and solutions to pre-defined managerial objectives. Individuals quickly learned that they should promote their own contribution to a project and avoid judging anything that did not relate to their immediate work tasks. Management retained approval of all decisions and had transparency over the generative work process. The Avatar case directly undermines the assumption that networks must operate on a genuine level of empowerment and trust, as is often claimed in the literature on networks or communities of practice (Lepak and Snell, 1999; Newell and Swan, 2000; Piore and Sabel, 1984; Powell, 1990; Rubery et al, 2002; Wenger et al, 2002). It also undermines the notion that a high level of subjective commitment is required in the apparently unmanageable knowledge work process. (Alvesson, 1990; Kärreman, and Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Causer and Jones 1996; Goldthorpe, 1984; Kunda, 1992; Powell, 1990). Indications of organisational trust, commitment or identification with Avatar's broader strategy were practically non-existent, particularly at employee and junior management level. Instead, in meetings and interviews individuals spoke about immediate deadlines and the hierarchical repercussions of not delivering on time. This should not be understood as organisation commitment; instead what was taking place in Avatar was simple compliance. As one employee (E2), who achieved consistently high performance ratings stated:

> Motivation isn't really the key thing here because we have the launch dates for the releases and that kind of thing. So that's what we have to work to. But me getting excited about a project is not in existence. And if anybody tries to make me get excited about it...they'll just come off worse.

In fact there was far more evidence of a negative subjective orientation to the organisation. The lack of any affective commitment to Avatar will be discussed in the next chapter but for the moment it is important to state that employee behaviours and activities were overtly regulated by hierarchy, bureaucracy and game based networked reciprocity, not any level of normative, subjective domination.

The Avatar case demonstrates how hierarchy and bureaucracy were fundamental to maintaining control in an environment of continuous change, strategic uncertainty and

high-technology innovation; which goes against much management writings (Abernathy, 1978; Bennis and Slater, 1964; Blau, 1955; Burns and Stalker, 1961; Child and Mc Grath, 2001; Crozier, 1964; Daft, 1998; Dyer et al, 1987; Gouldner, 1954; Hannan and Freeman, 1984; Hecksher and Donnellon, 1994; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Piore and Sabel, 1984; Powell, 1990; Scott, 1992). The force of hierarchy, and associated behaviours of managing upwards and profiling, may have introduced a subjective element into management decision making and resulted in poor projects being funded. However on balance hierarchy and bureaucracy paid off as it controlled generative work and provided management with the authority to enforce unpopular decisions such as cost cutting re-organisations and Group mandates. Avatar was one of the most profitable organisations in Ireland. Directors expressed little interest in acknowledging any problems that could be apportioned to the hierarchical decision making processes and thus undermine their continuing authority. Instead they worked through LM1s to address problems. This meant the LM1s who had close relationships with the directors were in a position to influence directors' perceptions of what had gone wrong; further reinforcing the strength of the command hierarchy since they could deflect blame.

In addition to reinforcing the importance of hierarchy and bureaucracy in a KIF, the Avatar case provides insights into how managerial tactics of control have evolved to harness the ambiguity inherent in generative knowledge work. Since the emergence of scientific management, control of the work process has been associated with managerial attempts to understand and subsequently dictate the most efficient steps required to produce a product or deliver a service. The ambiguities associated with the creation of new knowledge amidst constantly changing environments means it is not possible, or desirable, for management to wholly prescribe the minutiae of specific worksteps involved in executing a task and it is often claimed that there is an inherent tension between autonomy and innovation on the one hand and control on the other (Alvesson, 2001; Hildreth and Kimble, 2002; McKinlay, 2005). However the Avatar case suggests that senior management are not prepared to relinquish control whilst waiting for a wholly prescriptive, scientific approach to extracting the knowledge contribution. Through the generative work process Avatar management turned the problem of not being able to tell people exactly what to do on its head. Avatar management simply put the problem of ambiguity into the hands of generative employees by putting the onus on

them to continuously demonstrate that they were doing a worthwhile contribution. Thus the message to Avatar employees was not *'Management will tell employees exactly what to do'*, it was *'Employees will tell management what they are doing and management will decide if this contribution is worthwhile'*.

This form of control, where employees had to convince mangement of their contribution, reflected the relationship between Avatar and Group and Group and the broader financial markets. Avatar Group worked to convince the external financial markets about the future financial value of their business plans to secure financial investment. Subsidiaries then had to convince Group of their CAPEX need to secure the capital investment from Group to execute these plans. Within subsidiaries those working through the generative process had to convince the local governance hierarchy of the financial value of their ideas to secure the capital for them to labour. Upon completion of a project, successes were widely publicised in order to focus attention on ability to generate a return on investment. In this way generative work at subsidiary level mirrored the Group activity of market storytelling.

The generative work process ensured individual knowledge was extracted and leveraged to achieve a defined strategic contribution, namely the navigation of the unknown for financial gain. The strategic rationale behind the work had a considerable influence on the work process and the application of explicit and tacit knowledge. This is further evidenced by the stark differences between generative work and that second category of knowledge work in Avatar; operational work.

6.3: OPERATIONAL WORK

Much of the writings on knowledge work focus solely on project work with some going as far as to claim that knowledge intensive firms are equivalent to projects, and transient occupational communities are equivalent to functions (Barley and Kunda, 2004:310). This was true, to an extent, of generative work in Avatar. However there was also another type of knowledge work that was not organisation around projects, but focused on the day to day operations of keeping the organisation going.

Once a project completed the final stage of release management the ongoing delivery and maintenance of the new product, service or processes became the responsibility of operational knowledge workers. The primary concern of operational work was the effective ongoing operation of the organisation. It typically involved executing a range of defined processes and meeting defined performance standards. Operational work existed in all functions.[94]

6.3.1: Strategic Contribution and Budgetary Source

Operational work was funded by the OPEX budget. Consequently the Group led strategic priority guiding operational work to reduce operational costs whilst achieving operational performance targets. OPEX reduction targets were largely informed by the annual benchmarking process and each benchmarking exercise highlighted specific operational costs for reduction. This resulted in the numerous initiatives highlighted in chapter four; redundancies, outsourcing, centralisation, and ongoing cost cutting initiatives. In the year preceding the ethnography annual operating costs had been reduced by approximately ten million and were being continuously reduced. The primary work related impact of such initiatives was a reduction in resources most notably manpower and training. In addition to informing cost reduction targets, the international benchmarking process also facilitated the creation of a range of operational performance targets. Operational teams were required to adhere to the terms of pre-established service level agreements (SLA's) which set the work quality and timeline completion targets for operational teams.

The typical operational tasks associated with each function were:

- Technology: Monitoring and maintaining the IT infrastructure, networks and systems that delivered Avatar's products and services. Ensuring ongoing availability of Avatar's products and services and the effective operation of all internal and external systems and processes, for example billing and customer support.
- Finance: Ongoing production of financial accounts and ensuring the effectiveness of finance related processes, such as auditing, fraud, supply chain, reporting, credit management, taxation, financial control and financial IT systems.
- Marketing: Analysis and reporting of customer and sales data. Contributing to the ongoing delivery of existing products and services. Ensuring the availability of marketing materials for all sales channels.
- Sales and customer management: Implementing the ongoing sales and service processes, monitoring and analysis of customer and sales data.
- HR: Managing employee records and systems, implementing and tracking the numerous HR processes and transactions. Maintaining records, dealing with queries, conducting analysis and reports. Ensuring the implementation of all HR processes from induction through to end of employment.
- Strategy: Implementing the processes required to maintain strategic partnership agreements and adhering to legal and regulatory requirements.

Whereas there was an uncertainty with generative work regarding what projects would actually generate new revenue, the steps required to achieve operational targets were deemed to be more knowable. There was greater predictability and therefore standardisation, of what it took to keep the organisation going. Consequently, top management did not get involved in operational work beyond establishing and monitoring the OPEX budgets and performance targets. Those undertaking operational work reported that their main interaction with other parts of the organisation was rarely about their work and more about how much it cost them to do it. Operational line management in Avatar, were required to give a detailed account of their expenditure to finance on a monthly basis as described by an operational LM2 (M10):

> Nobody tells us on a day to day basis that "We have to do that". There are significant areas that are just standing jobs that we do. We don't necessarily need to communicate with the rest of the company. The communication with the rest of the company tends to be around the budgets. Every month we talk with finance about whether we're over-budget or under-budget.

Generally speaking the operational labour process was more localised than generative work. It tended to be executed within one team and involved less cross-functional interaction. It was more common to see operational employees and their managers sitting at each others' desks with both looking at the employees' computer screen trying to decide how to deal with an issue rather than see them in meeting rooms. In some areas, operational managers appeared to spend a considerable amount of time sitting at employees' desks.

It is worth stating that all ongoing labour costs, including generative labour costs, such as payroll, training etc were funded by OPEX. However the difference was that additional capital investment was available to fund generative work. Capital investment was expected and was desirable and management sought to show return on investment (Akbar et al, 2008; McConnell and Muscarella, 1985; Vafeas and Shenoy, 2005). Operational work was OPEX funded only, which meant top management sought to demonstrate they could execute operational processes with less OPEX. Capital expenditure and even wastage was accepted, whereas operational expenditure was as an unrecoverable loss. A stark example of how the budget categories impacted on willingness to spend was demonstrated by the reluctance to invest in training. Avatar continually introduced new technologies, equipment and had evolving technical

interfaces with technical vendors. However training, particularly vendor training, was expensive and could cost thousands of euro per person for a short course. OPEX was targeted for reduction and consequently operational line managers and employees reported that they were not getting sufficient training on the new systems. The consequences of this will be discussed later but it is worth pointing out that it was accounting requirements which required training to be classified as an operational cost and created the unwillingness to train operational employees. This was described by an LM1 (M5):

> Our finance colleagues say you can't buy training out of the capital budget [CAPEX]. But that's a new one, because for new equipment we always bought training out of the capital budget, because it was new, it was part of a new asset. We needed to be trained up on the new asset so you could operate it afterwards. But now the finance rules have changed so now it's all in OPEX, and of course there's a big squeeze on OPEX. You just can't buy all the training that we need. [The rule] is coming from Group. Generally the finance rules are pretty strict when it comes to things like that because of SOX. So you do have to be very careful. And, if the auditors come in and see that you're using capital [CAPEX] on training they'll go mad, so I can understand.

At one of the governance meetings an LM1 spoke about how they had not spent their CAPEX for that year as they did not have the resources to deliver new projects before year end. There was a discussion about how they could spend it as they were reluctant to return it to Group for fear of having subsequent CAPEX budgets reduced. It was loosely agreed that they would buy some equipment that they did not seem to urgently need. I later asked an LM1 why it could not be used for training and the answer was budgetary classification.

Operational work was defined by the strategic contribution top management required it to make; i.e. it was to keep the organisation going amidst ever depleting resources. This resulted in a distinct operational knowledge work process.

6.3.2: The Operational Knowledge Work Process

Avatar's range of products, services and working processes constantly evolved and operational targets had to be achieved amidst ongoing operational change. Nonetheless, as operational worksteps were deemed to be 'knowable' it was conducive to being

organised by de-personalised, IT systems. A range of IT systems were in place in Avatar to manage different types of operational work such as 'Lotus Notes', 'SAP' and some bespoke process specific systems. These can be classified as Knowledge Management Systems (KMS) as they were used to *'support and enhance the organizational processes of knowledge creation, storage/retrieval, transfer and application'* (Alavi and Leidner, 2001:114). The KMS in Avatar appeared to co-ordinate work in two ways. They either organised the flow of work or they facilitated adherence to an operational process.

6.3.2.1: Workflow Management Systems

These systems primarily managed the order and flow of work. They were used to initiate and track the status of what were commonly referred to as 'work tickets'. The main system used in Avatar was a Lotus notes system called 'Business as Usual' (BAU).[95] There were also a number of team specific systems that performed a similar function. Such systems were a key feature in organising work in the Technology function but were also used in some operational teams of other functions. For example, in Finance, Strategy and Sales the BAU system was used to request analyses and reports. Workflow management systems organised work as follows:

- An individual could initiate operational work by going into one of the systems and creating a 'work ticket' for an operational team which included a brief description of the desired output and completion date. For example, Marketing could request an analysis of product revenues from Finance. Tickets were also generated automatically, for example when a network or system weakness was identified. In some parts of the Technology function, operating teams sat surrounded by large screens which displayed a range of data about the performance of Avatar's technical infrastructure at that moment in time. Any faults identified were inputted into a workflow system as tickets.

[95] A handful of studies on the use of such systems have been conducted, for example Orlikowskis (2000) study on the use of Lotus Notes demonstrates the importance of organisational setting in understanding the impact of such technology.

- Individuals on operational teams had varied levels of competence, and were allocated work tickets based on their skills and experience. For example, in the Technology function if a manager felt an incoming ticket was beyond their teams' capabilities they could escalate it to a more skilled operational team.
- Upon accepting a ticket, an individual or team worked to complete the tasks necessary to resolve it. This could involve gathering information, undertaking analysis and reporting and undertaking the work to complete it. For example to fix a technology related ticket an employee might have to review reports to identify the problem, write the software code to resolve the ticket, and store this code for later retrieval should a similar issue ever arise. Throughout the process the workflow system was used to communicate the status of the ticket, i.e. queued, in progress, parked or closed and SLA targets outlined how long it should take to resolve tickets.

An operational LM2 (M8) manager responsible for a skilled team of technical engineers using a workflow management system described how work was organised on their team stating:

> There's only one way that you can put work into my team and that is through [work ticketing software]. I won't accept work in any other way and everybody in the company knows about it. The only time that I would accept work into the group without going through [the workflow system] would be in an emergency situation. I mean that would be quickly escalated to myself whether it be through a phone call or through e-mail. Because there is only one controlled way of inputting work into the [team] I just have to meet maybe once or twice a week with certain project managers to ensure they are with how their work is being prioritised...[...]...If there are no urgent jobs it's a case of whichever job is the oldest or the longest in the queue gets looked at.

So in theory tickets were to be addressed on a first come first served basis. However the cost cutting resulted in a lack of resources and this meant that a key step in operational work was the prioritising of tickets. High priority tickets were *'flagged'* and addressed first. If a ticket was urgent the individual requesting it typically got in touch with the relevant operational manager. In fact it was common to observe individuals calling to and hanging around the desks of operational teams to emphasise the importance of their request or check the status of a ticket. If someone was unhappy with progress they could simply escalate it up the command hierarchy. Line managers had to use their judgement or communicate with their own managers to understand what to prioritise. In fact operational line managers, in addition to allocating work, acted as a pressure buffer

between their team and the rest of the organisation. It was common to hear operational managers talking either face to face or on the phone explaining the status of a work item or why it could or could not be given priority. Prioritising and permitting a backlog of work was a typical feature of operational work. An operational engineer speaking about the lack of resources stated *'I just have to park [low priority technical faults]. I can't do anything about them. I can only do the high priority ones so the faults are building up and building up and building up'.* This also meant that operational work was not linear and employees were often required to stop and re-start. LM2 (M8) went on to say:

> It's just the consistent and constant workload that we're under. And there is no let-up, there is no respite. It's just constantly flat-out, flat-out I mean constantly re-prioritizing work. And I suppose you've got to think of it from an engineer's perspective. Engineers when they start something they like to see it through right to the end. It's just an engineer's mentality. It's a logical process for them; they start, there's a middle and then there's an end. But when you say to an engineer "Ok, there's a start; Ok, well, I'll tell you what, put that into park. I want you to then re-prioritize this". So they start to work on that [then it's] "Now put that on hold, I need you to do this". If you constantly keep chopping and changing them they can get a little sort of frustrated because at the end of the day they want to see something finished, from start to finish. It can get to them.

Ultimately, workflow management systems were used to communicate the flow of work and to track progress against SLAs. Those working with such systems had to undertake a range of what I term *'behind the system',* actions to complete tickets. However working amidst constantly depleting resources meant that a key 'behind the system' activity was the effective prioritisation of work.

6.3.2.2: Process Management Systems:

Whereas workflow management systems coordinated the flow of work, process management systems facilitated the storing and sharing of operational information to demonstrate work had been completed. Process management systems were used to store the results of the 'behind the system' actions undertaken. The work process was typically organised as follows:

- This type of operational work was about executing known processes. It was initiated either through a routine schedule, e.g. the monthly financial processes in finance,

coordination of the quarterly performance reviews or annual salary reviews in HR, or it commenced in response to an action e.g. established processes would be enacted in HR if there was a new recruit or if someone had a grievance. So the process management systems were not used to communicate new work but to facilitate and store information relating to an established process.

- Employees completed the work steps associated with the process and uploaded the results onto the process management systems. For example within HR, a SAP system was used to manage employee records and run reports. In order to input data a range of behind the system actions would have to be undertaken. For example prior to commencing employment the salary for a new hire had to be established via market benchmarking, the role had to be sized and positioned into a band, and throughout the course of working life certain activities had to be overseen by HR such as performance and salary reviews, training and development, grievance incidents etc. The system provided transparency as to whether the process had been implemented.
- Once work was completed process management systems facilitated the sharing of information and dependencies amongst operational teams. Operational employees used the system to post and extract information required to do their job. For example process management systems managed numerous finance related operations. An accountant could load documents and the results of their financial analysis to display completion of work. Someone else might need this information and once it was available they would use it to complete their own work. SLA's for such work were typically about ensuring the completion of the processes within the desired timeframes e.g. month end in finance. These systems contained extensive reporting functionalities which facilitated management understanding of work progress. An operational LM2 (M14) in finance working with a process management system described the tracking of their team's work against pre-defined standards:

> It's quite easy in [the team] because monitoring the performance would be [for example] that we don't go into bank overdraft. So that's really, really simple. Either you're in overdraft or you're not…[…]…You're either compliant, or you're not compliant. You either meet your cash flow or you don't. You either meet your reporting requirements or you don't. It's not like Marketing or other [more generative] disciplines. You either do your payment proposals on time, pay your vendors on time within the credit terms or you don't. We have a grade of key performance indicators at the start of the year. We report on those on working day three of every month, so we either meet our key performance indicators by paying

vendors within the credit terms, by processing invoices within five days or we don't. So it's quite easy to monitor that.

As with generative work, the operational work process was output or contribution focused. Avatar senior managers largely ignored the day to day inputs into operational work not because, as much of the knowledge management literature claims, of a high level of trust or because it was so complex that it required devolution of autonomy. Instead the IT systems facilitated management transparency and individual accountability over the output of the work. Adopting an output focus was convenient for top management as it meant they could ignore the pressures that the financial goal of cost cutting brought to bear on the work process. The financial contribution was more important than the work itself.

6.3.2.3: Cost Cutting and the Operational Work Process:

The operational work process was significantly affected by the numerous cost reduction initiatives, most notably redundancies, training restrictions, centralisation and outsourcing.

The redundancy program was introduced on the basis that work in certain areas would reduce but it was acknowledged at all levels that this reduction never actually materialised. Furthermore with the continuous introduction of new products, services and work processes, the operational work required keeping the organisation going got increasingly complex. The most immediate impact of the redundancies was work intensification; as one LM1 commented *'They take away the people but they don't take away the work'.* LM2 (M8) stated *'The fact of the matter is, this business really doesn't accept best effort. I mean you've got to be consistently meeting your targets and that becomes very very difficult when you're under-resourced'.* Operational teams had to deliver the required contribution in the face of depleting resources.

In terms of training, the downward pressures on OPEX meant that only the bare minimum received formal training on new systems technology. What resulted, in work process terms, was that teams began to have specialists rather than generalists. This also contributed to the work backlog as work got delayed when trained employees were not available. It also meant that in some areas work tended to get referred up the command

hierarchy more quickly as insufficient resources had been invested in training more junior employees. This was described by an operational employee (E7) in the Technology function.

> There's been issues there; people would not know where to look or where to find the problem so then it would be escalated to first line or second line and the vendor then. In the meantime there could be a lot of man hours lost waiting for the thing to be fixed. Whereas if the people had the knowledge and training they would be able to maybe make the job easier for second line and vendor, but the problem up there too is now because we're so inundated with so much work that you don't have the time. You're kind of picking work that is important first and then leaving the rest later...[..]...There was a time when you'd be on a handover you'd have something like maybe twenty or thirty tickets now you could have up to two hundred tickets.

In terms of centralisation, Group frequently centralised purchasing decisions with key suppliers without subsidiary consultation. An LM2 (LM15) described this saying:

> On the equipment side of things, [Group are] stepping into it saying "We have to start using this equipment". Now I'm caught with the situation where staff aren't trained on it, we've never seen this equipment, never used it but by next quarter any new [work] orders have to be from this equipment. Because obviously, Group are getting a great price on this specific product and if they supply it to all of Europe they get an even better discount. It makes it hard because I'm now going to have to train staff on a whole new system, a whole new product that's not even launched...[...]...but Big Brother says you do and you do.

There were also continuous complaints about how centralisation created considerable process confusion and inefficiency as described by an operational employee (E8):

> We used to work very efficiently here when all of our systems were maintained locally, all of our IT systems were maintained locally. All we'd have to do was come down to someone who knew the systems and ask for the device to be set up or send a list of devices that needed to be set up and all local interfaces and you know walk up and down a couple of flights of stairs and hey presto the job's done, get on with the work, get the devices out to market as quickly as possible. But since we've had the global IT centralisation an awful lot of those systems have gone to Global and now they're Globally maintained. The processes are endless and the systems we have to use to get our devices set up, I mean it adds weeks of waiting, where it used to be just, go down and talk to someone...[...]...There was no smooth transition from when we were doing things locally to when it was centralised to Group, there was no smooth transition, no one knew what they were doing for months and it just seemed to be adding layers upon layers upon layers. Every other month there's another layer you have to go through to request a [ticket], and all our priorities are lowered because we're a small subsidiary compared to some of the bigger ones so, from a technical perspective, really Global are just there to trip us up.

The outsourcing of work that occurred during the ethnography also created considerable work process confusion. The outsourced teams were employed by another high technology global multi-national but continued to sit in the Avatar building and do Avatar work. However, at the employee and line manager level this introduced additional worksteps and bureaucracy as the outsourced employees were instructed to do only the specific tasks covered by the outsourcing agreement. Any additional time or work had to be quoted for and approved by Avatar management and a purchase order number secured from finance, all of which could take weeks and ultimately meant outsourced employees could not be contacted with ad-hoc queries or requests. In other words employees no longer had access to a team that they previously could just pick up the phone to. Avatar employees had to consider how to plan their work accordingly and how to get answers to queries or work through the ambiguities. An employee (E9) remarked:

> I find it ten times worse and I can't even talk to some of the people that I used to talk to in billing. I mailed somebody who I used to work with and said out of pure frustration, I said "Can you please just let us know what I've to do here, do I talk to this person first, this person first or this person first because it's ridiculous" and I didn't get a note back from them, I got a note back from one of their subordinates saying "Please be advised that the person you've to talk to is this". So the person I used to talk to, who I had a very good relationship with, great relationship with, now isn't even answering mails.

Analysis of the operational work process undermines the directors' claims that cost reduction created *'best in class'* process efficiency; cost efficiency should not be conflated with work efficiency. Cost reduction initiatives added worksteps, bureaucracy and time on the one hand, and diminished resources on the other.

In fact the anaemic resources available to undertake operational work meant that in many areas operational work reflected the basic 'Just-in-Time' (JIT) principles of resource minimisation and economies of time (Turnbull, 1998). The 'Kanban'[96] or trigger in operational work was the priority status of a particular ticket or work item. However Avatar's *'Just in Time Operations'* turned the work of keeping the organisation going into a process of urgency. The most common sentiment expressed by operational employees in interviews and informally was that the organisation was just about ticking over, as if it was at constant boiling point always on the verge of

[96] In a JIT system the Kanban are the signal(s) that prompt action (Ohno, 1998)

boiling over. Many employees and managers reported feeling overburdened and compromised by the lack of resources available to undertake work.[97] The bureaucracy, process inefficiency and lack of resources directly shaped the behind the system actions undertaken to complete the operational work process.

6.3.2.4: Operational Work and Behind the System Actions

The 'how' in generative work was shaped by the strategic contribution of creating something new. The 'how' in operational work was shaped by the strategic contribution of achieving targets within deadlines, with ever diminishing resources and amidst ever changing scenarios. Operational employees were required to apply subject matter expertise to find a solution that dealt with the intricacies of each situation. Some work was more straightforward than others and implementing a process could be quite complex. For example in the legal department a case taken against the organisation might be straightforward or complicated, in HR a job size might be obvious or unclear. What appeared to vary in terms of the 'behind the system' actions was the, what I term, *'durability'* of the work undertaken. I often heard people refer to *'sticky plaster'* operational solutions or make assertions that someone was building a *'house of cards'* to indicate they were patching up a problem without fixing the underlying more systemic issue or even creating a whole new set of problems. The extent to which a durable solution was implemented depended on the inclination of the individual, the resources available and the extent to which the relevant manager guided and checked the work. There were numerous incidents of individuals or teams opting for more or less durability. It is difficult to provide examples without identifying the individuals concerned, however a HR related example can be provided. When attempting to fill a vacancy a potential new recruit requested a higher salary than what HR had benchmarked as being the market median and it was also higher than those already working on the team. HR and line management were not sure if the benchmarking was accurate. Three options were available, first do not raise the offer and risk losing the recruit, second raise the offer and risk other team members discovering the level of salary inequity and third, the most durable solution, raise the offer and re-benchmark the

[97] This over burdening resembles the JIT problem of *'Muri'* uncovered in an account of JIT in Toyota (Oliver and Wilkinson, 1992:26).

salary levels of the entire team. The second option was selected as the third option was considered time consuming and costly. Resource constraints were typically cited as being the main obstacle to creating durable solutions. Line managers were required to judge which issues were to receive a quick fix that could potentially come back to haunt them, and which required more in-depth attention and analysis.

This certainly frustrated Avatar's operational employees and lower level management who felt senior management understood operational work solely in terms of short-term budgets and SLA's. Many employees claimed management placed no value on the actual work involved, or longer term integrity of operational processes and even the technical infrastructure. In fact some employees spoke about how they felt line managers were keen to show they were meeting short-term targets and so they hid the long-term consequences of continuous reduction in resources. There was indeterminacy between the systems and the information they provided and, once again, this was often filled by painting a falsely optimistic scenario. One employee (E10) described this:

> What I'm saying is it's a big cover up; the statistics are there to show what you want them to show. Because the statistics are taken from the trouble ticketing system right. But you can put in any criteria you like, you know it's the same technology. You can put in a certain list of rules. "This is what I want from these statistics and all I want is such and such, say only priority A faults". You'd pick out the best ones and they're the ones you use. Like we would clear high priority faults within a couple of hours whereas all the normal ones would takes weeks and weeks and they wouldn't show up on any end of year results anyway, they wouldn't show. It's all a game, seriously, and we [employees] are not really part of it.

Another employee (E11) also spoke about how their line manager provided ambiguous statistics to directors:

> [The SLA] was all about service levels so we would look at service levels twenty-four seven so from 12 midnight to 12 midnight. That's what we'd look at and that's a fair representation of our service level to the customer. But when the service level was sent off to the director it was from like 8am to 6pm. But they were sent off not saying "These are the service levels from 8am to 6pm". [It was] "These are the service levels" and "Good job". That kind of stuff...[...]...It was to keep everyone happy and you know it kind of worked for us as well but then it wasn't kind of getting the job done as individuals. It was "Here's a picture", but the real picture is behind that picture.

Numerous examples of this were provided and this type of behaviours was perceived to come straight from the top as described by an employee (E6) who prepared reports for the directors:

> I've put reports together for the board and you get some of the directors coming back and saying "Actually can you not talk about that bit of the numbers but can we talk about this bit because this is really quite good; and not this bit". An example, I think to some extent it's still going on, reporting on the brand preference results, our brand preference [results] were fairly high, it had come on a little bit since the previous quarter. But instead of saying we have the highest figure, I said that [competitors] have closed the gap quite dramatically. It's about spin you know, "No, no we don't want to say that they've closed the gap quite dramatically, we want to say that we have the highest figure and it is the highest ever". To me, that's not the important thing about these figures, it's that the gap has gone from there to there, rather than that we've gone from there to just slightly higher. I feel that it's "let's accentuate the positive and cover up the negative". I don't think that that's stood us in very good stead and I think that some things have sort of got brushed under the carpet and are now sort of waiting to bite us because we haven't really decided to grasp particular nettles.

The constant downward cost pressure, the continuous operational backlog of work and the use of quick fixes were reported by employees and lower level management to have negative consequences on the long-term viability of Avatar's processes and technical infrastructure. However top management appeared to have little concern with the detail and long-term viability of operational work and instead monitored the achievement of short-term budgets and SLA's. The longer term quality of operational work and the knowledge involved appeared to be valued only by employees and lower level line management; the reasons for which will be discussed in chapter seven. Analysis of the operational work process undermines, arguably more than generative work, much of the optimistic reified knowledge management literature.

6.3.3: Teams in Operational Work:

The interpersonal element of operational work occurred primarily within operational teams as opposed to networks.[98] In Avatar it appeared that the more permanent

[98] In the sense that the teams were more structurally permanent, less based on reciprocity and incorporated hierarchical and bureaucratic structures. Furthermore the team structure, as opposed to a network, provided greater role clarity and accountability than a more fleeting network or community of practice characterised by flexible roles and responsibilities. Generative workers all had their own teams but did not work with each other as much as operational workers as they so often worked cross

operational team structure characterised by clearer role definition and lasting relationships facilitated a greater level of peer commitment than was evident amongst generative networks and project teams.[99] Also in interviews operational employees often expressed a strong commitment to their team, for example employee (E8) remarked:

> It's really in our own best interests to do our jobs properly. If we're slacking off and if we're really not doing enough, I think what would happen is, more than anything else, the rest of the people on the team would be kind of disappointed in you, and that would be the major [thing]. I mean that's the only thing I would care about personally, that my colleagues who I work directly with, that they would think I was a layabout. I would hate that, but that's a personal thing you know, that's not an Avatar thing.

In fact operational employees were rarely required to attend cross functional meetings and operational teams were less likely to hold weekly team meetings. They worked in close physical proximity, their work was quite localised and displayed greater awareness of what other team members were working on. Interestingly employee (E8) went on to say about team meetings *'We don't really feel like we've an awful lot to discuss when we go into these meetings'.* Others claimed to enjoy team meetings as they were the only way they got to know what was going on in the rest of the organisation. Regardless of the perception of them, meetings were not as fundamental a part of the operational work process as they were for generative work. In the area where I sat for the duration of the ethnography there were both operational and generative teams. The operational teams rarely left their desks and talked primarily to each other. Generative employees seemed to be always moving, on phones a lot and away from their desks attending meetings. Furthermore, when operational employees were in the coffee dock they were more likely to be taking a break than having a meeting. It was also more common to see teams of operational employees taking lunch breaks or tea breaks together at the same time each day, whereas many generative employees reported that lunch occurred at a different time every day and they often ate at their desks or had it at meetings. The team structure of operational work facilitated a stronger sense of genuine peer commitment and support than the reciprocity based networks. The benefits of team work and social ties have of course been well

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functionally on project teams. For example there were a team of generative project managers who worked on different projects.

[99] The superficial nature of short-term working relationships is dealt with at length in Sennett's 1998 book *'Corrosion of Character'*.

documented and will be further discussed in the next chapter. (Cohen and Bailey, 1997; Cordery, 2003; Edwards and Wright, 1998; Geary, 1993; Granovetter, 1973, 1985; Wall, 1986).

6.3.4: Desired Behavioural Traits: Seen but not heard.

The definitive work differences discussed thus far yielded distinct behavioural traits. The centrally driven cost reduction targets, the service level agreements, a more knowable work process and a more localised, team based work process meant that the behaviours required of an operational employee were the opposite of what was required for generative success. As stated, top management required input from generative employees in order to make informed capital investments so generative employees needed to be convincing, known and loud. However, given that the budget and performance targets shaping operational work came largely from Group and the benchmarking consultants, top management did not require input from operational employees in order to set operational targets. Local operational teams had little or no input into their team's targets as described by an operational LM2 (M8): *'I'm sure that a more detailed explanation would probably be given to my (LM1) manager but the information I'm getting is that the headcount is set for this, the budget has been set for this, and that the workload has been forecasted for the next couple of years'.*

Consequently top management desired operational employees to meet targets without raising problems, in other words operational employees were to be quiet and compliant. The fact that knowledge, judgement and flexibility were required for operational targets to be met amidst changing structures, technologies, products, services, processes, minimal training and depleting resources appeared to go unrecognised. Questioning was interpreted by management and generative peers as operational teams not 'getting it'. Generative networks were based on reciprocity and occasionally ignoring potential problems. However operational teams were less prepared to ignore problems and be falsely optimistic as they were the teams who were tasked with the ongoing delivery of a product or service. A generative LM1 (M16) described the common generative attitude toward operational teams stating:

> If you're more back-office [operational] I find the people tend to check themselves a bit more because they may not be as engaged in terms of really what's happening in the business. So they might say "Well maybe I need to run that past somebody else because they might know a bit more about something"...[...]...Not knocking the people on the other team. What I'm saying is they're probably looking at it from a different perspective. They're looking at it from a compliance perspective. So they need to check back against things whereas [Generative] people, we're just trying to move things along quickly for the business.

Senior management and many of those undertaking generative work did not appreciate anything other than operational compliance, as one employee mentioned: *'[Generative teams] have a "brilliant" proposition they want to sell and if we go "it's not technically feasible", they're disgusted'.* This created a level of resentment amongst operational teams who felt their contribution was not valued. For example the governance committee was made up primarily of generative LM1's which was often problematic for operational teams as was described by an LM1 (M5):

> A gripe that operations have had with a lot of what goes on within Avatar, in terms of marketing and the business, [they] would end up forcing a lot it down to us giving us unrealistic launch dates and sort of saying "Well look, we've committed to this date, we have to have this service launched by day X". We know ourselves, as engineers I mean "look, what you're asking is, well it's not impossible but you're going to put in a system that isn't really suitable for what you need". I mean that has happened on so many occasions...[...]... A lot of times what can happen is this momentum gets built up behind this project long before operations ever gets sight of it and then it's just this avalanche coming down.

Both directors and generative teams appeared to have little concern for the perspectives of operational teams or the ongoing quality of operational infrastructure and process. Operational issues did not appear to be a concern at governance meetings. Any time I observed operational concerns being raised they were shot down. For example I attended an all employee 'Ask the CEO' communication session. An operational LM2 calmly asked if the training budget could be reviewed and gave examples of the pressures the lack of training placed on his team. Before the CEO had a chance to respond the LM1 responsible for the training budget spoke up saying *'I'm sick of hearing people complaining about training'.* They then spoke aggressively, but offered little in the way of contradictory evidence, arguing that there was nothing wrong with the training budget and indicated it was the manager's job was to figure out how to cope with change as change was so endemic in the industry. Afterwards the CEO just moved on to the next question.

The invisibility of operational work became apparent during the course of the ethnography. Operational work was perceived to be about keeping the organisation going but not about moving it forward. Therefore corporate communications and announcements that celebrated work related achievements were geared towards generative work. When operations achieved their goals it was interpreted as them simply doing their job, but not as praise or news worth. This was often because praising them would involve acknowledging the hardships they faced. For example, an operational LM2 spoke about how he had tried to get some acknowledgement for his team, either vouchers or bonuses, as they had been particularly busy after the redundancies. However he had been refused and claimed he was told informally that if his team were rewarded, it could be interpreted by others as HR admitting they had made too many redundancies in that team. Operational achievements were less of a good news story, celebrating the launch of a new technology was viewed as more worthy than celebrating how an operational team met their SLAs despite losing a couple of team members to redundancy and without the training required to do their job. The lack of recognition was acknowledged by an operational LM1 (M5) who stated:

> In terms of my [teams] sometimes that really annoys them because the people that always get the pat on the back are the people that deliver all the new stuff. But we're stuck with it then afterwards. And if it breaks afterwards we're the ones that get trampled on and we don't necessarily get the credit. And that's hard from a recognition point of view that people see all these mails flying around after [Project X] saying "Well done Tom, well done Pat, well done Mary, well done" but [operations]?

If a generative employees was known to management it was most likely an indication that they had been successful on a project; however if an operational employee was known it was likely an indication of a problem. For example in the Technology function, when faults or tickets arose they were assigned to particular individuals. Tickets which had not been cleared within a desired timeframe appeared on a management report alongside the names of the operational employee tasked to clear it. This was described by an operational employee (E10) who stated:

> [Management] don't give a shit about me, seriously, they don't. As long as I'm out there doing it and getting things done that's all they care about. There wouldn't be any appreciation for what we do at all, in the slightest. They're just all in their fish bowl up there and they're looking over their shoulder and they're "Don't draw attention", that type of thing. There's a list comes out every day of faults, particular faults and who they're allotted to now I've been told "If you're

> name is on that list, you're being noticed. Keep your name off that list", I've been told "and no one will touch you, no one will go near you". Because if this list goes around, all the heads [of teams] know there's a particular fault and they're trying to get their [SLA] targets down.

In fact operational employees spoke about how doing their job effectively could result in fading into oblivion (E12):

> There's a guy on my team who sits beside me and he just feels like he needs to wear a sign to say "I'm here! Somebody acknowledge that I'm actually sitting here and doing work" because they [management] don't. And they don't say anything to him. Coming in and not saying "Good morning" or something like that, it kind of gets to him. But he says that "I might as well [leave] nobody's going to notice if I'm here or not" and I swear to god that guy comes in at half seven every morning and he doesn't leave here till half seven every night. And nobody would turn around and go 'Job well done, here's, you know, whatever". He's doing his job; he's going over and above his job for being here and taking on so much. He's taken on some stuff that one of the guys that left had done.

There appeared to be fewer mediums available to operational employees to make their contribution known or celebrated. The primary way for an operational worker to achieve status or acclaim was for them to suggest a change to an operational process that would contribute to the achievement of a strategic goal. However, given the resource pressures facing many operational teams there was not always the time available to engage in generative work. Whereas with generative work, it was generative employees' primary responsibility to contribute to change via the governance or release process. One operational employee (E13) spoke about how achieving operational targets was deemed a lesser contribution:

> Obviously if I saw a way to save the company 100 million I'd put my hand up straight away. But to be pressurised to always look for new ways to do stuff when 80% of your work is operational and you're just hitting targets...[...]... To actually be pushed to say, re-design a system which I feel they sometimes they actually are pushing people to re-design the whole thing, you're kind of saying "Well, sorry 80% of my day is spent making sure we hit targets".

The desired day to day behavioural traits of operational knowledge workers were to achieve targets without question. It was simple compliance. It is worth re-stating that operational employees were as qualified as generative employees and many even shared similar qualifications; for example there were accountants and engineers on operational and generative teams. In terms of 'explicit' knowledge the categories were equal. However, in terms of contribution, operational work was less about creating good

stories and more about achieving targets and it was deemed the poor cousin to generative work. Consequently, operational workers were to be seen but not heard.

6.3.5: Application of Knowledge: Merging the explicit and tacit

Operational work was supposed to be less about creative thought and more about implementing the processes required to keep the organisation going. However this did not render tacit knowledge impotent as *'even the most highly choreographed, intensely supervised labor processes require that individuals and groups develop capabilities to comprehend and cope with contingencies in the technical and social divisions of labor'* (McKinlay, 2005:243).

Adhering to known operational processes in predictable situations was largely about applying explicit, learned, embrained expertise. However operational teams were tasked with integrating new processes, products and services into an existing way of doing things; all amidst changing structures and resources. Operational interviewees felt that approximately half of their work involved figuring out how to process new scenarios that did not obviously fit into the existing processes and rules. [100] Operational employees had to use their tacit judgement to continuously re-orient their explicit, embrained expertise to apply the explicit processes to new scenarios.

The variable element of the tacit contribution was the previously mentioned *'durability'* of the solution created; in other words the extent to which individuals worked to identify and apply an effective, lasting solution to a problem. Arriving at a durable solution required a level of analysis, reflection and ability to understand connections and anticipate long-term consequences. This could not be overtly controlled or codified as the need to create a new and durable solution typically arose amidst new and unforeseen scenarios. The ability to arrive at a durable solution was related to the resources available, however it is also accurate to say that in some cases individuals did not display the ability or inclination to see past a *'quick fix'* solution.

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[100] For example, in HR every grievance that arose had to be handled differently and each year the performance management and salary review process brought its own complexities. In Finance the actual transactions that needed to be accounted for differed each month. In Sales, the activities a salesperson took to meet sales targets changed each sales period.

The ongoing change in operational work prompted another tacit requirement of operational employees what I term *'self-skilling'*. This can be understood as the actions an individual undertakes to acquire the knowledge and resources required to solve a problem. The extent to which individuals could identify and were willing to pursue the opportunities for self-skilling varied. Self-skilling involved acquiring knowledge through investigating existing organisational data sources, either encoded in KMS or embrained in others, in order to learn from embedded expertise. For example, some systems had up to 10,000 software codes stored in that employees could search though. Self-skilling was often required if an employee was to solve what could otherwise be considered a 'plausible failure'.

The extent to which individuals engaged in 'self-skilling' and learned from existing knowledge, but searching for and absorbing organisational knowledge certainly enhanced an operational employee's ability to perform in their role and to make that other tacit contribution namely durability of work. Although it was less valued than the generative contribution, the operational tacit contribution played a vital role as it was the glue that integrated and stabilised the new.

Ultimately the operational work process reflected the characteristics of Lam's *'professional bureaucracy'* insofar as the work was conducted by highly trained experts and was primarily about applying embrained expertise to adhere to processes and solve problems.[101] In Avatar's case the operational information shared was primarily related to performance outputs. Cross functional interaction was less of a feature of operational work than generative work and therefore operational work involved less contextual knowledge. Contextual knowledge was required primarily for operational line managers who had to ensure they prioritised work accurately in order to best meet performance targets. However this did not mean that the broader environment had no impact on operational work. Centrally and hierarchically driven cost reduction initiatives shaped the resources available to operational teams who had to apply their judgement to prioritise work in an almost JIT fashion and reach targets amidst changing

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[101] As previously described, professional bureaucracies tend to be *'Individualistic, functionally segmented and hierarchical. Individual experts have a high degree of autonomy and discretion in the application and acquisition of knowledge within their own specialist areas, but the sharing and dissemination of such knowledge across functional boundaries is limited'* (Lam, 2000:495).

scenarios and constantly depleting resources. This was all achieved through the force of hierarchy and bureaucracy controlling operational work.

6.3.6: Controlling Operational Work

The focus on output controls in knowledge management systems is noted by Alvesson and Thompson, (2005) who state *'More sophisticated IT systems facilitate rather than remove managerial power. This many once again be in the form of output controls rather than central direction, but increased capacity to financially monitor, control, and predict performance still constitutes hierarchical authority, even though it deviates from traditional forms of bureaucracy'* (Alvesson and Thompson, 2005:496). This is exactly what was occurring in Avatar.

The manner in which operational work was controlled reflected the more traditional notions of command and control through hierarchy and bureaucracy. Hierarchical, centrally driven, international benchmarking processes took precedence over lower, national level perspectives regarding what resources and performance targets should be assigned to operational work. The removed rationality of such decision making has been labelled a form of *'coercive comparison'* (Ferner and Edwards, 1995).[102] Operational teams had little or no input into their team's targets. The reporting functionalities within KMS provided managers and directors with the information regarding achievement of service level agreements and finance business partners ensured operational mangers adhered to budgets. Generally, directors kept operational work at a greater distance than generative work as they tended to view the worksteps as knowable and not requiring their input beyond setting targets. In fact the only time directors or more senior management expressed direct interest in operational work was when something went wrong. When I observed directors and senior mangers calling to operational teams it tended to be because there was a problem and when something was wrong the command hierarchy physically descended on operational teams. Unlike generative work the KMS systems ensured there was clear accountability if operational problems occurred as there was an extensive, electronic paper trail in place which meant

[102] The relationship between international benchmarking, hierarchical decision making and power has been documented by writers such as Boje, 1995; Ferner and Edwards, 1995; Hardy and Clegg, 1996; Martin and Beaumount, 1998.

mistakes in the process were attributed clearly to one individual. So there was clear employee accountability. LM1s, and sometimes directors, were informed if the problem was likely to have a high financial impact such as loss of revenue or consumer dissatisfaction. They then applied significant pressure, often calling to and standing around the relevant team's desks to get an understanding of the problem and implications as described by an employee (E14):

> I think there's a huge amount of processes, a huge amount of incident managers, there's a lot of layers there. What we have found is if there was a fault on [Technology X] for example, first of all you've an incident manager coming down and asking you what's the problem and you give a brief description. Usually the incident manager is a non technical person so you've to give it in layman's terms for want of a better word. OK, so they then compile something to send out to tell everybody "A, B, and C is faulty, it has this effect on customers, estimated time to fix it in two hours time, in hand, second line support, OK". We go along and fix it, and then you'll find maybe your own manager coming down and asking you well what's wrong with that. Again, the last person was non technical, you had to give an explanation. Then you might have [the LM1] coming down and saying what's the story? Or you might have [the director] ringing [the LM1] who rings another person who rings another person and then rings the guy again who is trying to fix it. Now there's one guy trying to fix it and there's a whole heap of people hanging out of him who are really contributing very little that I can see and it's more annoying than anything else. If they'd just back off, leave me alone I'll deal with it and when I have it fixed I'll talk to you, in the mean time you're losing money so will you just leave me alone.

The IT systems provided the predictability and quantification associated with bureaucracy (Alvesson and Thompson, 2005).[103] Operational employees interacted with the IT systems to demonstrate that they had completed certain tasks. The systems also attached tasks to individuals providing a trail of how work was progressing. This was reported regularly back to Group as described by an operational employee (E15) who stated:

> You have to nearly run everything you're doing by Group to get approval. A "please sir, can I go to the toilet" sort of thing...We've to run reports by Group, daily reports to Group and weekly reports to Group. I think [bureaucracy] is for accountability. So that if there was a problem or if anything went wrong [management] can go "Well, ok, it was approved at step A, step B was ok, Step C was this" but if there's a problem "OK, we're missing documentation at step C so we don't exactly know how they were going to do this and how this was done or

[103] Alvesson and Thompson, (2005:198) review accounts that highlight the persistence of bureaucracy and hierarchy in KIF's particularly within consulting firms. They look at works from Akehurst, (1994), and Covaleski et al (1998). These case studies highlight the focus on output, or 'contribution'.

> where should it have gone from there". I think it's just accountability and people can stand over and say "look, we approved it based on this. You go and do something and you didn't do it the way you said you were going to do it, so it's your fault".

The bureaucratic IT systems organising operational work in Avatar mirrored the characteristics of the 'high surveillance firm' (Procter and Ackroyd, 1998). However what the Avatar operational control mechanisms demonstrate, perhaps even more than generative work, was the lack of management concern for the individual worksteps, in other words, what people actually did. This undermines much of the knowledge management literature. The technology was used by senior management to keep operational work at arm's length. These IT systems provided the command hierarchy with the information and transparency regarding the extent to whether operational teams were achieving targets.

When discussing generative work I stated the message to employees was '*Employees will tell management what they are doing and management will decide if this contribution is worthwhile'*. With the operational work the message was '*Management does not need to hear what operational employees are doing as IT and financial reports track the contribution'*. In fact, senior managements' irreverence for the actual activities involved in operational knowledge work was matched only by their concern for controlling achievement of financial and performance targets. Whilst this might seem like an oxymoron, it is perfectly consistent with a 'contribution' based view of knowledge. For example at management meetings, operational work was never discussed in a 'how to do it' sense, conversations were primarily about progress against targets. This was also demonstrated in the way knowledge was stored in Avatar. Numerous operational teams set up systems to store knowledge. Such systems were typically initiated at the team level to make it easier for team members to share knowledge and subsequently meet targets. If such a system required funding they would have to make a business case to get the CAPEX.

Another factor contributing to the execution of operational work was the level of commitment within teams. Operational teams took collective responsibility for meeting targets and in that way displayed a higher level of commitment to achieving team goals than in the generative process where a more individualistic stance was evident. This notion of being committed to the team but not the organisation was widespread and will

be further discussed in the next chapter. However in terms of understanding control, this peer commitment cannot be understood in terms of self inflicted *'concertative'* control (Tompkins and Cheney, 1985) as operational employees were very much aware of the dominance of hierarchical and bureaucratic control structures and line managers pushed their teams to meet targets amidst depleting resources with a message of *'we have no choice'*. Neither was it motivation brought about by a level of team autonomy (Cohen and Bailey, 1997) as operational teams had minor 'workstep autonomy' only, and worked together to figure out how to complete the hierarchically driven and bureaucratically controlled targets. Individuals were supporting each other to meet hierarchical and bureaucratic demands.

Ultimately what the operational work process demonstrates is that where it was possible, senior management were keen to rely on traditional structures of hierarchy and bureaucracy. Directors and LM1's were happy to remove themselves from operational tasks when hierarchy and bureaucracy alone facilitated the control necessary to ensure achievement of goals.

6.4: CONCLUSION: MOVING AWAY FROM REIFIED NOTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

As discussed at the start of this chapter, it appears that much of the literature on the knowledge intensive firm and knowledge work operates on reified notions of knowledge positioning it as something removed from the business of making a profit. That other organisational goal, the pursuit of profit, is not something dealt with in any detail in writings about the knowledge based firm. Instead it is assumed that knowledge creation in itself is a source of competitive advantage from which profits will flow. Tracing knowledge work in Avatar provides a needed account of how knowledge work is organised in a knowledge intensive firm, and shows how knowledge work is directly shaped by the organisation financial goals.

The Avatar case directly challenges the notion that management places such a high value on knowledge and that they see their role as being to create empowering knowledge creating conditions from which they stand back to watch knowledge flourish and profits flow. Within Avatar, financial goals reached down to yield distinct

knowledge work processes. Management in Avatar wielded a firm hierarchical hand over knowledge work, ensuring knowledge was leveraged to extract a specific type of strategic contribution. This finding specifically attacks claims that knowledge creation is incompatible with hierarchy or the claim from a leading proponent of networks that *'Much of the observed behaviour in hierarchical firms seems unrelated to either top management directives or the logic of vertical integration'.* (Powell, 1990:299). In Avatar, the behaviours of lower levels reflected much of the dynamics occurring at higher levels particularly in relation to the storytelling, managing upwards, profiling and fake optimism. Top management established financial targets first and used financial regulations and budgeting processes to ensure the knowledge work processes were focused directly on the pursuit of these targets. The emergence of two categories of knowledge work in Avatar highlights exactly how the seemingly far removed centrally driven financial targets shaped the daily lives of knowledge workers. Generative work was about creating and delivering good news stories which were associated with a boost in shareholder value. However operational work treated only as a cost. In both categories of work top management cared little for explicit knowledge. What management, unofficially, valued most were the generative tacit skills of 'managing upwards' and 'profiling'. The tacit skills of operational work, namely 'durability' and 'self-skilling' were largely unappreciated. This was because, in contribution terms, operational work was the poor cousin to generative work.

The Avatar case also challenges the assumption that knowledge work is difficult to control. Management cleared up any ambiguity by requiring employees to convince management of their contribution either through interpersonal communications of generative work or informal reporting systems of operational work. This chapter also demonstrates how different forms of work organisation, namely hierarchy, bureaucracy, networks and teams can all merge to co-ordinate different parts of the work process. Furthermore different models of organisation structures, namely Lam's (2000) J-form and professional bureaucracy, can co-exist in one organisation and this co-existence was driven by financial goals.

Ultimately, analysis of knowledge work in Avatar affirms the dominance of a shareholder focused hierarchy and dispels claims of the centrality of knowledge. In fact management were so focused on contribution that they displayed a stark irreverence for

the detail of the knowledge generative and operational employees used to get the job done. It was through this irreverence that employees got a level of 'workstep autonomy'; this autonomy was only made possible because of managements' comfort that they had sufficient control over the endgame of contribution.

It has been claimed that '*The primary means of managerial control of knowledge work is the regulation of employees self rather than work flows or task*' (McKinlay, 2005:245). The dominant force of hierarchy and bureaucracy in Avatar raises questions about the claims that knowledge workers must succumb to a strong prescribed normative ideology. As indicated, within Avatar, there wasn't any great commitment or identity colonising trick behind the management control, it was simple compliance or 'flexibedience' in the face of an overt hierarchy and bureaucracy. The issue of employee subjectivity will be further explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Seven: Angry, Insecure and High Performing: The conflicted knowledge worker

"It's total shit in here, the best thing to do is to sit down and work"

7.0: INTRODUCTION TO THIS CHAPTER

The preceding three chapters explored the structures that detailed what employees were required to do and be in their working life. This chapter moves further into the employee perspective to explore how the three structures informed employees' subjective orientation to the organisation and their working life. The employee perspective has not been the primary focus thus far as the employees' perspective of each structure was not informed by one structure alone. It was the content within the structures and the connections and contradictions between them that informed employees' subjective orientation to the organisation and subsequent behaviours. Therefore it was necessary to set out the structures first in order to properly situate the employee perspective.[104] The Avatar case is particularly interesting as top management did not have a poor perception of employee performance. It was a 'successful' organisation that had achieved, if not surpassed, financial targets consistently for several years. Instead it was employees' negative subjective orientation, or low 'engagement' that they were trying to 'fix'.

In this chapter, perceptions of the financial structures will be discussed first to highlight how the pursuit of shareholder value dominated the employee perspective. In Avatar shareholder capitalism permeated all aspects of the employment experience. The discussion will then move on to the normative structures, which were largely rejected by employees. The employee view of each HR process is presented to show how deviations from the normative prescriptions were largely informed by the other two structures. Analysis of the normative structures also facilitates a discussion of current debates on the nature of careers and employment in contemporary

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[104] As stated in chapter one, this thesis focuses on the world of work and employees perspectives are explored solely in the context of their experiences at work. Employee perceptions are not analysed against any broader life variables such as family, age, gender or length of service. I have indicated in this chapter whether the quotes came from a generative or operational employee. This demonstrates the similarity of perspectives.

organisations. Finally, the structure of work is discussed. What the data reveals is that certain elements of the work process provided employees with the only source of agency from which they could derive a sense of self worth and purpose in their daily working lives.

By exploring how these structures are experienced in tandem, this chapter further addresses the contradictions and blindspots that appear in the literature discussed in chapter two. Particularly, the Avatar case sheds some light on a question often asked in the literature, namely how the negative consequences of prioritising the short-term financial interests of shareholders are experienced alongside management claims that it values knowledge work and is committed to employees (Hodson, 2001; Keep and Rainbird, 2000; Legge, 2005; Marchington and Grugulis, 2000; Sisson, 1993; Thompson, 2003). This chapter highlights how the different structures, whilst implemented alongside each other, could not be reconciled in the minds of employees. Employees felt they were powerless to shape the financial and normative structures and simply went through the motions of whatever financial ebb or normative flow was done onto them. This meant that work emerged as the only avenue available to employees to take a level of ownership of their working lives. In other words, the work was all they had.

This chapter provides fresh insights that demonstrate the dominant force of shareholder capitalism, the fallacy of best practice normative structures, the centrality of work and the vacuous, nature of writings that reify commitment, knowledge work and workers by positing them as something distinct from the capitalist context in which they operate.

7.1: FINANCIAL STRUCTURES OF SHAREHOLDER CAPITALISM: "It doesn't look good for employees"

One of the interview questions asked was *'What is it like to be here every day?'* Most employees responded by highlighting the prominence of the financial goals. In other words, employees framed their perception of their employment experience in the context of the financial structures. Despite the prominence of Avatar's instantly identifiable brand, their market leading range of innovative, high-technology products

and services and the strong normative internal rhetoric most echoed the sentiment of (E16), a generative employee who claimed the organisation was about *'Money, cost cutting, improving the share price. Very cynical of me but when a company's this big it's all about money'.* However reflecting on the interviews and employee behaviours indicates there was more than cynicism at play; there was a resigned acquiescence to the hierarchical structures that passed down the pressures of shareholder capitalism. Striking in the interviews was the consistency in employees' understanding of the Avatar goals and the role of directors. Despite employees being removed from the hierarchical decision making structures and their ongoing exposure to the compelling, normative, unitary rhetoric, employees emphasised that directors were there to prioritise the financial goals and satisfy Group. In contrast, employees understood themselves as a distinct organisation stakeholder, with distinct interests that were less powerful than other stakeholders, namely top management and shareholders. A common perception was articulated by operational employee (E13):

> I mean let's be honest, at the end of the day if a company's quoted on the stock exchange, it answers to shareholders and although Avatar can care for the environment and they can care for the employees and again do things to make the company generally better; at the end of the day the shareholder is king. And you can't forget that because they're the people providing the money for the company to continue in the future. So if the shareholders are feeding back to Avatar ...[...]...that their labour costs are too high or so forth and that they need to reduce operational expenditure; it's only a matter of time and unfortunately that is the nature of the beast...[...]...I must say the company did not communicate it that way. It's my take on the situation.

Another operational employee (E17), also remarked on the force of the broader business environment

> I suppose in this "day and age" with technology rapidly changing and the competition and the prices falling it doesn't look good for employees, because where the business is focussed is on competition. Whereas in the "old days" it was more focussed towards all the stakeholders including the employees but in this day and age it would appear very much business driven.

Interestingly all employees could rationally articulate the ideology of shareholder capitalism and discussed how this compelled top management to prioritise shareholder interests. However employees could not place a rational distance between themselves and how the prioritisation of short-term financial targets affected their working life. This meant the employee perspective was 'situated' insofar as

employees lamented the consequences of shareholder capitalism because they understood it resulted in losses for employees. More specifically, employees claimed that the pursuit of shareholder value translated into hierarchical decision making, diminished employee voice, management hypocrisy and constant, not just change, but upheaval. The ultimate consequence of all of this was a mass sense of anger and insecurity. This will be further discussed by exploring employee perceptions of the two financial goals.

7.1.1: Generating Revenue

As described in chapter four, the initiatives undertaken to achieve the generation of new revenue were: work plan alignment, implementation of Group mandated projects, the governance process for internal CAPEX allocations and re-organisations (re-orgs). The first three shaped the work process and therefore will be discussed later in this chapter.

The re-orgs were primarily designed to create the organisation structure that could best generate revenue through efficient delivery of ever evolving products and services to an ever evolving consumer market. As indicated, this trend of continuous organisation upheaval is a feature of multi-national market storytelling (Wittington and Mayer, 2002) as announcing a re-structure '*creates a promise of better things for the future*' (Glenn and Kristensen, 2006:1483). Some Avatar re-orgs were Group mandated and others were initiated at the local level. Whatever the case, they were launched by directors with the details worked out primarily by LM1s and HR, all within a tight timeframe of typically a couple of weeks, and without consultation in order to, as HR put it, '*minimise disruption*'. During re-orgs large chunks of the organisation were taken apart, new structures were created and individuals either had to apply for and be interviewed for roles, or they were simply allocated roles within the new structure. HR prepared the communications and new job specifications and communicated changes in strongly positive terms as operational employee (E18) stated *'They'd make up new roles and paint it up lovely and give it to you'*. The persistently optimistic tone in the re-org communications only served to stoke fires of frustration as these re-orgs were deemed to create what were termed *'win-lose'*

scenarios and each re-org provided much fodder for employees to discuss the 'fairness' of the new structure.

The Avatar re-orgs highlight the multi-faceted impact of change. There was what I term *'developmental change'* involving opportunities to learn new skills which was largely embraced by employees. However there was also *'role change'*, which is what the re-orgs created, and which affected an individual's role and status within the organisation structure. In Avatar an individual's role changed on average once a year. Frequent role change created what I term *'role insecurity'*. Role insecurity occurs when an individual's status and role in the organisation is made unstable without their actual job security being formally threatened. The Avatar re-orgs created a high level of role insecurity. Re-orgs also meant individuals were constantly changing manager which required them to make a positive impression on each new manager they acquired, heightening the need to manage upwards.

The sense of role insecurity created by re-orgs was exacerbated by how they exposed senior managements disregard for what people actually did every day. There were numerous incidents of teams being forgotten about in the re-orgs. New structures were announced and whole teams would vanish, only to reappear later when it was brought to managements' attention. One generative employee (E19) described their experience stating:

> I think we've been re-org'd five times in two years. I mean how can you have faith in people when they move you [so often]. We were taken out of Department A, apparently they had done this big analysis spent huge amounts of money on it and then at the end of it my department was actually forgotten about. Then I think they saw one or two words [in the job titles] that were similar to something that happened in Department B so they moved us in there. We lasted there under our boss for about two months and I think he just went, "In the name of God what are you doing here". Then we started getting shunted around again. We stayed in Department B [in a different team] but then ended up with somebody else. Then we went back into a different part of Department A and then we were gone out of there into [another part of Department A] and we'd a couple of changes in between. So I just feel if I was that incompetent [at decision making] I wouldn't have a job.

The lack of management concern for the work process and their focus on meeting the tight re-org implementation timelines resulted in confusion that created work intensification and inefficient ambiguity for employees. Another employee (E12) described how after one re-org:

> Nobody knew what anybody's job was, so nobody knew what anybody was doing. And we were down people, so people were requesting more stuff because they didn't know what the person before them had been requesting and asking us to do more stuff when there's less of us to do the work. It was a bit muddled, the way it went on. It's settled down now, but at first it was a bit confusing and we didn't know what was going on.

In some cases individuals reported that after re-orgs they ended up doing a lot of their old work in addition to their new role as employee (E20) stated:

> The minutia is what keeps the place ticking over and that wasn't taken into consideration at all. Now people are back doing what they used to do anyway because there's no one else to do it and they haven't thought about it that way. That can absolutely create resentment, that's saying to us you're making it up as you're going along, you really don't know what I do, do you? You haven't respected me enough to ask me what it is I do; how I contribute to the business.

Employees perceived that during re-orgs senior management demonstrated that their primary concern was to maintain hierarchical control to achieve short-term re-org implementation targets. Employees claimed this compromised the effective implementation of change. Employees claimed that management's definitive indication of re-organisation success was completing it within the desired timelines; they could then herald it as a success leaving lower levels to deal with the negative consequences of work intensification and process confusion. Role ambiguity and work overload are a classic cause of workplace stress, (Kahn et al, 1964) and in Avatar, the continuous organisation upheaval created high levels of role insecurity. This insecurity was significantly exacerbated by the cost cutting initiatives.

7.1.2: Cost Cutting

As described in chapter four, the initiatives undertaken to achieve the cost reduction targets that were informed by the Group led international cost benchmarking, redundancies, outsourcing, centralisation and ongoing piecemeal initiatives to reduce OPEX. The decisions relating to cost cutting were taken by Group and Avatar directors. Any lower level input came primarily from Avatar LM1s. Employees described this process as *'dictatorial' 'removed' 'hierarchical'* and a *'fait accompli'*.

The negative consequences of cost cutting were largely underplayed by top management even in the direst of situations. For example, redundancies were labelled an achievement, outsourcing was a chance for technical employees to further develop their careers and centralisation was an exciting meritocratic competition between subsidiaries of the Avatar family. A centralisation project involving job losses in Avatar Ireland was announced via email and one operational employee (E18) described their confusion stating:

> I remember the first email, "Great news!, Big news flash, Project [Centralisation]". I'm reading it and what it's saying to me is we're going to take jobs from here and put them over there but the way it's worded! It was worded in such a way that it looked great...[...]...In the mail that they sent around it was "Really exciting, the final choice was between two countries, but one country pipped the other one" but...that's where our jobs will be going.

Regardless of the consequences, senior management worked with HR to communicate cost cutting initiatives through branded optimistic presentations. This persistent merging of the financial and normative, done to allow directors to absolve themselves through *'interpretive choice'*, played a significant role in shaping employee perceptions. Many employees claimed management communications were about putting on a show and creating a positive *'spin'* not opening a dialogue with employees. Employees strongly resented the extent to which senior management completely denied any plurality of interests. Portraying all changes as exciting challenges rife with developmental change and opportunities was largely counterproductive. It was interpreted by employees as an indication that that not only did directors afford employees little consideration in their decision making, but they did not even respect employees enough to acknowledge the negative consequences of these decisions. Mainly employees called for more honesty in corporate communications on cost cutting and employee (E20) expressed a common sentiment:

> We're all grownups, we're all professionals. This isn't a charity, this is a business, they're going to make money, full stop. Guys do what you have to do but just talk to us like the professionals that we are and say you've got to make money. We know you're not here just to keep us in new shoes…[…]…Maybe it's to do with the Avatar brand, it's all "passion for our people, we're a thriving business and we're doing the right thing for everybody". I suppose it can seem a little coarse to come straight out and go "Look we need to up our profits".

Communications certainly did state that Avatar needed to raise profit levels in Ireland. However such statements were the smaller print set underneath optimistic, unitarist, branded headlines such as '*Re-shaping our future'* and '*Coming together to meet this challenge*'. These top down, optimistic communications suppressed the employee voice and during the ethnography I attended a number of senior management led communications during which employees were quiet and asked few if any questions. In subsequent interviews and team meetings employees would openly express their dissatisfaction with the content of the communications. However, most employees claimed the force of hierarchy meant it was futile to openly complain about centrally driven strategic objectives as described by an operational employee (E14):

> If [directors] were in charge of their own destiny the CEO in Ireland could make a decision, he could discuss it with his senior people and say what will run, what won't, what's good, what's bad. I think in Avatar, the Group CEO makes a decision at Group level and it's cascaded down. It has to be the same in all countries and I think the people here, the senior people are just saying "Yes we'll do that, yes we'll do that, yes we'll do that". I don't think they're really in a position to object and they're not in a powerful position really. I don't think they're in executive position let's say. They're just cascading a message, sometimes that message may or may not be nice, so I think that's a difference really, they're not in control.

Employees could clearly articulate how and why they were structurally removed from shaping the director decisions and their sense of powerlessness contributed to their *'flexibedience'*.

Employees also perceived that decisions on cost cutting and expenditure exposed a level of management hypocrisy. Employees expressed a high level of irritation with how top management routinely used costly, external consultants to inform decisions whereas they avoided the freely available input of lower level line management and employees. Employees also spoke about how senior management were content to tolerate some costs and they provided numerous examples of certain expenditure they deemed to be wasteful. For example during the ethnography I noticed that numerous household items were on desks such as plungers and screwdrivers. After seeing them all around the building for a couple of weeks I asked what they were about. A marketing team had secured CAPEX to purchase a set of household tools and develop promotional materials for all employees to promote awareness of a move to target small businesses in Ireland. This was done in the middle of a range of cost cutting

initiatives, such as the redundancy program, and communications which claimed the organisation did not have the operational budget to pay for a range of employee related costs. The fact that expenditure was approved for these items was considered such an irritant and waste that many refused to take them home. There was abundance of examples of budget categorisation. Furthermore, during the outsourcing project, employees were outsourced but the equipment these employees had worked on was retained as it could be counted as fixed asset thereby enhancing the overall value of the organisation, whereas employee costs were unrecoverable. Amidst cost cutting there were numerous glamorous, extravagant product launches with dancers and entertainers being paid to perform in the atrium and elaborate communication events and away days held. All the while individual jobs were being lost and employee related costs such as salaries, bonuses, promotions and training were being curtailed.

Whilst capital expenditure and even wastage appeared to be acceptable, operational employee costs were aggressively pursued for reduction. Employees perceived that management chose to attack employee related expenditure as it was an easier and higher profile target and attracted greater 'kudos' from Group. For example, the redundancy program was referred to as 'The CFO Project' with employees claiming it was pushed by the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) so they could further ingratiate themselves with Group and strengthen their case for a promotion; which did indeed come to pass. As one generative employee stated (E21):

> [The redundancy program] came from the benchmarking company and the CFO's desire to tell Group that he is very efficient...[...]...[The CFO] definitely got the kudos for all that. It looked good for him [to claim] "Yes I successfully managed a downsizing of the company and now it's working much more efficiently".

So the employee related cost cutting initiatives were deemed to be lazy, unimaginative and implemented to make management look good in the short-term, whilst forsaking the long-term work process efficiency and viability of the organisation as described by employee (E22):

> I suppose it's all part of the master plan to save a few bob. But ultimately you have to ask yourself, it might look better on the balance sheet in the short term but if you can't get things done and get things out onto the market quick enough then you're just shooting yourself in the foot long-term.

Ultimately, the cost cutting initiatives were considered to be what some termed *'low–return'* as they created work process inefficiency and insecurity, and for many the cost savings were questionable. For example, in order to deal with the work intensification created by the lack of resources, contractors were often retained for months or years and a contractor's annual charge could be significantly higher than the salary of their permanently employed peers, but contractors did not appear as fixed costs on the balance sheet. Many similar examples were provided about the redundancy program. For example project managers were targeted for redundancy as senior management decided that the project management tasks could be dispersed to generative employees. This created significant difficulty on releases as remaining employees claimed they simply did not have the authority, skill set nor time to serve as project managers, as one generative employee (E2) put it *'we were given all the responsibility and none of the power'*. Avatar directors eventually conceded their mistake and re-hired project managers on contract. The outsourcing itself was also highly contentious as it was expected to cost significantly more than expected. Furthermore, as indicated in chapter six, the outsourcing created significant costly, inflexibilities in the work process. Soon after the redundancies managers began to rehire and sure enough whilst I was in the HR department recruitment was active.

Other cost saving initiatives also failed including an attempt to move to cheaper stationery which had to be disposed of when the biros kept breaking and it was discovered the envelopes were see through. Also moving companies were called in to help move teams around during the frequent re-orgs and sometimes recalled soon after to re-move teams because of another re-org or a mistake. Nonetheless top management continued to celebrate their success in driving efficiency through reducing operational costs.

Ultimately top management ownership of decision making meant there was a high sense of insecurity and feeling amongst employees that Group and the directors could do anything at a moment's notice and that LM1's and HR would just say yes. Most employees stated that more redundancies, centralisations, outsourcing, even a complete subsidiary closure could be announced at any time. A common retort to cost cutting initiatives, expressed in interviews and in general conversation, was *'What next?'*.

7.1.3: Financial Structures: Shareholder Capitalism and the Insecure, Angry Knowledge Worker

In Avatar, the initiatives launched to achieve the centrally driven financial targets were unpalatable to many employees who saw themselves as a pawn to the short-term tactics top management enacted to demonstrate that they were aggressively pursuing the financial goals.

The hierarchically driven continuous upheaval resulted in a mass sense of job and role insecurity and inefficiencies in the work process. Furthermore, the persistent use of optimistic, branded, unitarist communications served to infuriate employees who interpreted them as an indication that HR and directors had no intention of acknowledging the consequences of their decisions on employees. This insecurity meant the dominant emotion coming through in the interviews from all employees was anger. The prominence of this anger will be further elaborated throughout this chapter, for the moment it is important to state that this anger was situated insofar as interviewees felt the pursuit of financial goals was primarily detrimental to employees.

In interviews, employees appeared keen to demonstrate they had a 'rational' or 'mature' understanding of the ideology of shareholder value and sought to convey that they didn't have unrealistic or unreasonable expectations of Avatar as an employer. They did not ideologically object to the pursuit of profit, they just resented what this meant for them in their position on the lowest rung of the hierarchy. In interviews employees often took time answering questions about the constant cost cutting and structural change, many sighed and looked away before answering as if trying to control their emotions. A handful cried when describing the personal consequences of some decisions and the sense of worthlessness and peer humiliation they experienced. A generative employee, a consistent high performer under the performance management process, and someone who embraced developmental change stated angrily during the interview, that we better stop talking about financial issues otherwise they would throw themselves over the balcony into the Atrium. I asked what they wanted from Avatar and E19 simply said *'I just want it to be steady'*. Another employee described how they wanted to walk out of a communication session when the HR director claimed that the recent cost cutting initiatives and

redundancies should be viewed as an achievement. The employee said they said nothing but wanted to shout out (E4):

> You are so out of touch, out of touch! You're meant to be in charge of the human beings in this company, do you know what I mean? You're actually meant to be in charge of the people, not the profit or the margin or whatever else, you're actually meant to be in charge of the actual human beings in the building and you're so out of touch!

Employees were unable to distance themselves emotionally from the decisions, but these emotions, as indicated in earlier quotes, were situated insofar as they felt employees were expected to unfairly shoulder the burden of the pressures of shareholder capitalism.

The impact of organisational financial flows goes completely unrecognised by many authors writing about knowledge workers for example, Alvession claims '*Personnel is the most significant – sometimes the only significant 'resource' of the company. Capital and equipment are normally of less importance'* (2004:141). In fact the pursuit of profit is largely absent from the knowledge work literature to a bewildering extent. The Avatar case strongly undermines such assumptions of knowledge workers being privileged, independent and secure and the notion that creative work requires security (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson and Willmott, 2001; Bell, 1980; Reed, 1996; Seely Brown and Duguid, 2000). The financial goals meant knowledge work in Avatar was undertaken amidst high levels of both job and role insecurity and low organisational commitment. However at no point was there acknowledgement from top management or HR that this insecurity existed, which exacerbated the sense of powerlessness and anger.

The dominant force of financial goals debunks notions of privileged, autonomous secure knowledge workers and instead supports the work of authors who claim work is becoming increasingly intensified and insecure (Procter and Ackroyd, 1998; Boxall, 1996; Burchell et al, 2002; Capelli, 1995; 1999; Gallie et al, 1998). Also, the Avatar case highlights how, as an analytical construct, 'security' at work should not be understood solely in terms of external labour markets and the extent to which an individual possesses a portfolio of knowledge. Instead, knowledge work should be considered in terms of the stability of both the internal and external market for this knowledge, as without a stable market the knowledge worker is rendered worthless.

During an interview an employee (E16) expressed a common sentiment:

> *Employee:* Avatar doesn't have any heart and soul and it's not really somewhere I want to be long term.
>
> *Me:* You say it doesn't have any 'heart and soul', so what's there in its place?
>
> *Employee:* Capitalism…isn't it everywhere?

This quote typifies the employee sentiment that the financial pressures of shareholder capitalism were passed down by Group to dominate the employment experience and employees bore the brunt of these pressures. At this point it is worthwhile looking at employee perceptions of the normative structures that were supposed to provide the 'heart and soul' that would smooth over the market rational elements of the workplace.

7.2: NORMATIVE STRUCTURES: "They don't eat their own dogfood"

As stated in chapter five, Avatar ticked all the boxes in terms of HR 'best practice'. Directors and HR cited a belief in the 'HR promise' namely that best practice HRM stimulates an increase in employee commitment, performance and company profits. As indicated in chapter five there are a handful of studies that claim to empirically support the HR promise however the methodological validity of some of these studies has been questioned (Bosalie et al, 2005; Boxall, 1996; Marchington and Grugulis, 2000; Purcell, 1999). Numerous authors have called for more institutionally embedded case studies detailing the perceptions of those who experience HRM practices as they are so often absent from the managerial, best practice literature (Edwards and Wright, 2001; Guest, 1999; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Korczynski, 2002; Legge, 2005:41; Marchington and Grugulis, 2000). This is what this section aims to offer.

Amongst employees there was remarkable similarity of perceptions and experiences of the Avatar normative structures. What the responses demonstrate is the degree of connectedness between perceptions of the HR practices and other organisation structures. Reified accounts of commitment and motivation that position them as a

sole consequence of HRM processes are too vacuous and removed to do justice to the complexity of the employment experience. This section will commence by looking at the overarching normative framework of 'brand essence' followed by an overview of each of the six HR touchpoints discussed in chapter three.

7.2.1: Brand Essence

Avatar's employer brand initiative, termed 'Brand Essence', called for employees to be 'passionate' 'innovative' and 'reliable'. Employer Branding' appears to be the normative evolution de jour promoted by known HRM 'think-tanks' such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the UK and numerous management consultants, and business schools. It is understood to be particularly suitable for an organisation such as Avatar that has such a strong brand presence in the external consumer market (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Linking an espoused ideal employee identity to the organisation brand meant unashamedly asking employees to adhere to an artificial, wholly rhetorical construct. Furthermore, it attempted to seduce employees, through the use of symbolism, imagery and rhetoric, into delivering extra functional, discretionary effort without offering anything in return. This is arguably normative control in the purest conceptual sense as it involved one party trying to persuade another that something is 'right' for no other reason than it says so. Within Avatar, employees conveyed a level of vitriol towards HR and senior management for promoting such optimistic sentiments alongside projects that threatened employee security. It was so removed from their working reality that it was seen as a HR vanity project as described by an operational employee (E3):

> I suppose they want to sell their brand to you so you can go and sell it on, they want you to understand what you're trying to achieve and what they're trying to achieve and how you fit in to that big plan. But drawing it up and saying this is what we do really well is bullshit...[...]...When they're ignoring I suppose some of the core issues...[...]...[The Brand Essence workshop] was about three hours long, and it was about three hours at some ridiculously busy time of the year as well and I thought "I don't need to be sitting here making Avatar feel good about itself"...[...]...I don't need some nice fancy thing that we're after spending a small fortune on so HR can feel good about themselves and say "Yes, we're ticking this [best practice] box"

Brand Essence was displayed on posters, emails and some presentations and although it was HR who launched Brand Essence in Avatar Ireland, most employees intuitively guessed it came from an external marketing agency. They were critical and irritated by the idea that the purveyors of Brand Essence believed they would be galvanised by it as operational employee (E11) stated:

> The purpose of it from high above would be, I suppose, to try and get their staff to be more motivated and efficient, but I think what it does in Ireland anyway is just it's annoying. I wouldn't say a single person is a percent more efficient.

Brand Essence was so irritating to employees that it was not a part of regular vernacular at meetings and many employees reported that managers stopped use it because as generative employee (E2) stated *'people start bitching about it for about half an hour every time somebody says it'*. Or as generative employee (E22) described how it had turned into a joke to the extent that: *'I think it's actually good in that it forms a common enemy, it has banter around it. A bad boss can do that as well, can get a whole team together to slag them behind their back...[...]...everyone clings together a bit better'*. I only observed it being used in meetings by directors and in official communications. It did not appear to get much use from lower levels of management who claimed in interviews they found it counter-productive as it generated so much vitriol from employees.[105] Discussing specifically how Brand Essence ran contrary to financial initiatives employee (E19) stated:

> It's very hard to swallow, extremely hard, they're telling you one day how important you are to them and the next day they're making more redundant. They're telling you there's not enough people to do the job, and they're agreeing that they're trying to do something about it. Then they're letting all these people go and they're not taking people on to replace them. It's just hypocrisy after hypocrisy; they don't eat their own dog food basically.

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[105] For example an LM3 (M3) stated: [Brand Essence] was universally slammed in the department I worked in. The key reason I can think of is that inherently I just think it's very patronising from a corporate perspective to dictate to people how they should feel as a company. I just feel that they're treating us a little bit like we're a bit immature or something. That's the overriding sense I get is that people are going "why are you telling me to be dependable, because if I wasn't dependable, I wouldn't be here or I wouldn't be doing the job I'm doing" and I don't think [Directors/HR] have really understood that that's the sense that people get. I think they just think it's a "Rah rah Avatar!" kind of thing. But I think the deeper reason is that people are just turned off and go "you're just really patronising me". And I sense that as well. I must say I was thinking it. But again you play the game, if that's what Avatar want you to do, you put it on the end of your e-mails and it's no skin off my nose but it aint' gonna motivate me or make me work any differently. I think they're a bit naive if they think it does.

In fact Brand Essence was something of a grenade that often prompted an explosive tirade of vitriol from employees about how the organisation did not live up to the espoused values. In interviews when I asked employees *'What do you think of Brand Essence?'* many were visibly irritated and I was on the receiving end of many eye rolls and looks of consternation that I could possibly be so clueless as to ask such an open question about Brand Essence. Interestingly, just as the directors got irritated when I raised the possibility that there was a contradiction between the financial and normative structures, employees got irritated when I asked a question that implied that I did not recognise the contradiction. Ultimately, perceptions of Brand Essence were informed not by the content alone, but by how it was wholly undermined by the consequences of the financial structures.

7.2.2: 'Together we are Resourcing': The Recruitment Deal

This section deals with internal movements within Avatar of which there were two types. The most common moves were involuntary, prompted by the re-orgs. There were also self-initiated moves which occurred when an individual applied for an internal vacancy. All opportunities for movement were market driven insofar as only those roles that were required to serve the external consumer market were created. Furthermore, the need to constrain OPEX meant that moves were rarely accompanied by an increase in remuneration and this flexibility was facilitated by the broad band career structure.

As employee (E23) stated: *'There's constantly changes, there's changes at management level all the time, there's changes at team levels all the time, there's a lot of people who leave and come, into the team. So its constant change, it never stops.* Most internal moves did not result in promotion up the career hierarchy or revision of remuneration. For example, during the ethnography I heard about an individual who got a new job that sounded like a promotion as it involved greater responsibility. I met her in the coffee shop and said congratulations. She responded *'Thanks but it's not like they are giving me more money'.* As indicated in chapter five, the employee survey revealed that only 25% of employees had a favourable perception of their

opportunity for promotion.[106] Instead of providing additional remuneration Avatar relied heavily on the attraction of 'developmental change' as a method of enticing employees into accepting additional responsibility without additional remuneration as one operational employee (E24) stated *'One way it is being sold is it will get you a lot more exposure to the business and different people in the business. If they give you the job it's well recognised that that's the main incentive'.*

Internal moves, both in re-orgs and internal vacancies had to be approved by LM1s and HR. This heightened the incentive for employees to manage upwards in their work so that LM1s would be aware of their contribution and think of them positively. However this was problematic for many as one employee (E4) stated:

> I don't have a lot of exposure to some of the other LM1s. I just would never work with them, I would never deal with them, I would barely talk to some of them ever...[...]...So how would they know everything about me or what job I do but yet they decide about my career development, they also they sit around and talk about our bonuses and how I'm rated...[...]...If I don't profile to these LM1's and be like "Hey I'm great, look at me, look at what I'm doing, oh how's your kid, how's your baby, how's your father" whatever, then I won't get a good review, I won't get a salary review I won't get a good career out of Avatar, I won't get a good bonus.

Another employee (E19) stated:

> I'm the worst in the world for promoting myself. I'm the worst in the world for letting my own personal things go to shit because I'm so busy with my job. I have to renew my insurance, I have to go downtown to do something and I won't take that hour out and it gets longer and longer away. I need a haircut. I think a lot of people are like that, so it's often the people who are the most dedicated at their jobs are not doing those types of things.

Decisions on internal moves also highlights the extent to which the notion of contribution replaced effort. The importance of making the 'right' type of contribution and the irrelevance of effort was strikingly evidenced by how some work, no matter what effort was involved, would not count as a worthy contribution. This was described by employee (E5):

> Unless you have been involved in something that's kind of high profile it's going to be very hard to make a good case. You know the right projects and the

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[106] This was most pertinent amongst the Technology function where employees were continuously developing their skills commensurate with the evolution of the technologies for example from engineer to senior engineer without being formally recognised.

> right 'good stories'. I would have been involved in Project X two years ago and it would have been a really high profile project. But in terms of its success as a product? Unofficially it hasn't been great to say the least. So while it's good to be associated with a certain story at a point in time I wouldn't be putting Project X down as a great success because it depends on the overall outcome. It's a long time ago now but it wouldn't necessarily have been something that at the end of the year you'd say "Well I worked really hard and I delivered" the bottom line is it's no longer a good story.[107]

Despite director and HR claims that Avatar was a meritocracy full of opportunity, the financial structures and budget constraints meant there were real structural limitations to internal moves and promotions. In addition, despite the abundance of meritocratic rhetoric and competency based behavioural interviewing, employees claimed it was the unofficial work process behaviours of managing upwards and profiling a good story of contribution that shaped decisions on internal moves.

The Avatar case sheds some light on current debates surrounding internal labour markets (ILM's) which are defined as an administrative unit *'within which the pricing and allocation of labor is governed by a set of administrative rules or procedures'* (Doeringer and Piore, 1971:2). Traditional ILM's are associated with Weberian notions of bureaucracy whereby organisations are structured along a stable, tightly defined hierarchy of roles that individuals progress through attracting additional remuneration along the way (Weber, 1974). In other words the focus was on internal equity rather than external market forces, and the nature external market forces of previous decades facilitated this (Benson, 1995; Capelli et al, 1997; Grimshaw and Rubery, 1998; Osterman, 1994). Much of the literature claims that external market changes have brought about a wholesale eradication of internal labour markets (Berg, 1981; Casey et al, 1992; Rubery, 1996). More tempered approaches call for further explorations on the extent to which organisations with market driven, flatter career structures have wholly disposed of internal rules and social factors (Osterman and Burton, 2005:441). Within Avatar the internal rules were driven largely by the market. Financial structures also established parameters on promotions and rewards.

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[107] In light of this quote, is worth re-visiting the point made in chapter six about employees having little interest in whether a project fails. The above quote does not mean that employees took greater ownership of project success, being agreeable within a project team was considerably more important for managing upwards. The above quote, and all the similar ones made, just highlights the importance of contribution and also how managing upwards and on a day to day basis was necessary to be selected to participate in the 'high profile' 'high status' projects that were deemed most likely to be a future success story.

However, the market also prompted the emergence of social norms namely subjective decision making due to the hierarchically driven, continuous movement of individuals amidst tight time frames. Employees felt this subjective space was being filled by the non-meritocratic behaviours of managing upwards and profiling.

So Avatar career paths did not reflect traditional notions of ILM's. However there was an active, market driven internal labour market in which hierarchy and short-term decision making stimulated the emergence of specific social norms and behaviours.

7.2.3: 'Together we are Changing': The Performance Deal

This involved the performance management or 'Performance Dialogue' (PD) process. As indicated in chapter five, there was a lack of enthusiasm about the PD process. HR struggled to get individuals, at all levels, to set objectives and review performance. PD's were eventually completed for all as the ratings were necessary to calculate the bonus payment. However HR, believing their own rhetoric, genuinely could not understand how PD was not embraced by the management and employee population. HR also claimed PD was essential to bringing about change as employees and line managers could have a new goal setting conversation and rewrite performance objectives each time something changed.

Most employees reported that PD was largely irrelevant, irritating and not conducive to their daily lives. Most had a negative perception of the process and not one claimed it was motivational. Nonetheless, as indicated in chapter five, the highest positive response in the employee survey related to the statement *'I know the results expected of me in my job'* to which 85% indicated that they more than agreed with that statement. However when it came to the PD process, most interviewees could only provide a vague account of how the system work, and there was considerable confusion around the rating scale and the twenty-two competencies. So despite the sophisticated nature of the Avatar on-line PD system, the extensive training on the process, the 'best practice' combination of the 'what', namely the performance objectives, and 'the how' namely the competency based behavioural objectives, and the fact that the entire process was linked to an annual bonus, the process failed to

have any meaningful impact. This was because contribution was largely managed through the command hierarchy in the work process.

Performance objectives were cascaded down the command hierarchy. Directors distributed their goals to LM1's and this continued down to employee level. The most common approach employees described was that managers would email their own objectives to each employee and employees would state how they would contribute their manager's objectives. Most employees did not have a problem with this hierarchical approach as they just wanted to do whatever it took to get objectives set with minimum effort. This was because they felt that they would not be held to these objectives at the end of the year. Generative employee (E25) expressed a common sentiment stating:

> Performance dialogue in here is total and utter bullshit, it's total and utter bullshit and always has been since I started here. I'll say this across three different departments, four different roles that I've had in here. Performance dialogue for me has been, the day before or a couple of days before it's due, you get pulled into a room with your manager, they fill it in for you, they say hit this, hit submit, then he'd approve it and it's done. Then you'd never hear anything about it again until the following time it's due and then they do the exact same thing.

An operational employee (18) talking about his team stated: *I'd say there's six lads downstairs and not one of them has a good thing to say about it, they hate it. It's so in your face again, and all the emails [reminders], "you didn't reply to this" "update your performance dialogue", the cringe when it comes around every year.* Generative employee (E5) summarised a common perspective that HR and senior management *'Pay lip service to this but in reality it's [ratings are] decided independent of anybody reading anybody's objectives and targets and achievements. I don't think any manager makes a [rating] decision based on the input on somebody's performance dialogue'.* The irrelevance of the PD process was driven by the force of the financial structures namely hierarchical decision making, continuous change and budget constraints. The change rendered annual goal setting a useless endeavour. For example, many generative employees only got assigned to projects when releases commenced. Likewise, operational employees could be charged with integrating any variety of new systems into existing processes and their work was also thought to be unpredictable. Continuous re-writing of performance objectives was

deemed to be impractical and unnecessary in the face of tight deadlines and tight resources. The most common approach, for both operational and generative employees, was to write annual objectives that were broad enough to absorb change. However this also meant they were too broad to be meaningful. So this 'best practice' performance management system was rendered irrelevant by change.

The later step of rating performance against objectives was also considered meaningless. This was largely a consequence of the budget constraints. Bonus budgets were managed via the hierarchical 'calibration process' which is claimed to be 'best practice' step in performance management systems (Bohlander and Snell, 2010; Grote, 2002, 2005; Lawler, 2003). As described in chapter five, the calibration process was when each function director met with their LM1s and HR business partner to review preliminary performance ratings to ensure the function stayed within their overall bonus budget. Before line mangers had final review meetings with employees, they submitted preliminary annual performance ratings for each employee to the LM1 team. During the 'calibration' meeting these preliminary ratings often got changed. Post calibration the LM1s informed lower line managers of the final ratings for their teams. Line mangers claimed the likelihood that a rating would change prevented them from having an ongoing dialogue with employees about how well they were doing as it often created a rating expectation they could not fulfil. All employees were aware of the calibration process. In fact line managers occasionally told employees that they wanted to give them a higher rating but they had been overruled in the calibration. Directors and HR fumed that line managers admitted as such.

The calibration process left HR in something of a 'catch 22' whereby they needed to retain control of bonus expenditure undermined the rhetorical underpinnings of meritocracy and continuous dialogue. In fact, the calibration was almost unspoken of by HR and directors who seemed uncomfortable discussing it as it so blatantly contradicted the rhetorical headline that accompanied all PD communications i.e. '*Performance Dialogue, it's in your hands'*. However in interviews with lower level line managers and employees the calibration of ratings was one of the first things brought up when discussing PD. Operational Employee (E27) summarised how the

hierarchical nature of the process exacerbated the need to manage upwards to convince management of their contribution:

> Effectively you're just given a score and that's that. You don't get to discuss it, and that pretty much takes the 'dialogue' part out of the 'performance dialogue'. It's just the way it is, you're handed a score, "There you are, now what do you think about that" At that stage it's already been decided, it's gone through two layers of management to agree...[...]...You have to actually grab the manager at some random date, in advance of the decisions being made. Which dates you're not told so you have to decide for yourself what's advance of it and go in and try and justify yourself a good score.

The need to control costs overrode the claimed importance of continuous feedback, and placed structural limits on the funds available to reward performance. The year of the ethnography was the first that HR did not strictly enforce adherence to prescribed 'normal distribution' curve; however the overall budget remained in place. In fact the CFO came up to the HR department one morning before 8am and sat along a HR administrator to check the distribution of ratings was consistent against previous prescribed distributions. Most employees expressed the sentiment that the calibration exercise rendered the entire PD process disingenuous as generative employee (E26) described:

> My experience is [PD is] very nice on the paper but it doesn't work that way. It's more, if you allow the phrase a 'one way' dialogue. You know both of you are sitting there, both of you are talking about the same stuff, but the information is just flowing from your manager to you. Because it doesn't matter what you say, they're not going to change the rating at that point. You already go into the meeting with your formal evaluation done [in the calibration meeting]. Whether you have the dialogue or not is pretty much irrelevant. And you know they say it's an opportunity to provide feedback. Feedback? What are you going to say "Well, you're rubbish as a manager".

Ultimately the financial structures meant that in practice PD could not live up to the optimistic normative, meritocratic dialogue rhetoric used to describe it. Instead the dominance of hierarchy in the process meant the informal behaviours enacted in the work structures were seen to be essential to securing a high rating and bonus. Managing upwards and profiling were required if an individual was to make managers aware of their contribution and retain their rating in the calibration meeting. Numerous examples were provided of ratings getting changed in the calibration meeting.

The financial structures played a considerable role in shaping employee experiences of performance management. Employees understood that their performance rating was allocated within the parameters of the financial structures. Furthermore the actual rating was understood to be a reflection of subjective behaviours emanating from the work process and not an accurate reflection of contribution.

In Avatar performance management was something done to satisfy HR rather than being a meaningful tool that, as much of the managerial literature would have us believe, stimulated focus and motivation in employees daily lives.

7.2.4: 'Together we are Developing': The Learning and Development Deal

Within the PD process all employees within Avatar where required to highlight three development activities they would undertake. As described in chapter five, the following learning and development (L&D) activities were undertaken:

- On-line e-learning
- Classroom learning
- Continuing education
- Avatar library
- Transfer / secondment

HR provided a range of on-line and classroom courses that were freely available for all employees. HR had purchased the course content outright so no additional charge was incurred when employees attended. According to training records, the most popular courses taken were 'non-technical' overviews of the technologies Avatar used, project management and how to use Excel. Behavioural competency training was not popular and in the interviews employees claimed these were irrelevant and existed to satisfy HR rather than meet any genuine need on the part of the individual. Whilst employees appreciated the availability and flexibility of the on-line courses most did not result in any recognised qualification. Conversely, the L&D activities that cost money and provided a level of qualification were significantly harder to come by as there was a budget in place. Employees had to make a case for external training or continuing education and be supported by their LM1 before HR and the

directors would sign off on the expenditure, if the budget was available. Often employees were competing for funds.

It was primarily in the Technology function, as previously indicated, that a lack of formal training was reported. This was understood as an indication of the force of cost constraints and top managements' reluctance to investment in the subsidiary as one operational employee (E14) commented *'If a company isn't investing in training its' staff you would say they're not in this for the long road. If you were going to employ a person for a good long time, you would invest in that person. It raises suspicions about out sourcing and all the rest of it'.*

Creating a 'learning organisation' has been cited as being fundamental to enabling continuous change and innovation (Marquardt and Reynolds, 1994). Learning organisations have been optimistically defined as *'Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together'* (Senge, 1990:14). For a more critical understanding see (Salaman, 2001). Despite Avatar's ambition to be a learning organisation, and that it was deemed to be one of the most technically innovative organisations in the world, only the minimum technical training was provided. Employees claimed that most substantial learning and development opportunities available in Avatar, came not via HR, but on the work through working with others and problem solving. The on-the-job learning opportunities were a result of developmental change via the continuous product, service and technical innovation. For generative employees the learning occurred within the project teams, figuring out how to develop a new product or service. For operational employees, it came from the willingness to work together and engage in the tacit act of 'self-skilling'. In Avatar the characteristics of the 'learning organisation' were situated in the work structures. However the work structures were not wholly organised around the empowered, communities of committed, networked peers that are supposedly required for the learning organisation. Work structures were hierarchical, bureaucratic, tightly controlled and based on making a specific contribution. However the minor elements of workstep autonomy devolved to employees facilitated the level of developmental collaboration necessary to deliver the innovation and creativity required.

So the financial structures set the L&D parameters, and actual learning and development occurred primarily in the work process. Once again the normative structures largely missed the mark. What the Avatar case ultimately highlights is that learning, innovation and change neither requires nor creates a wholly supportive learning, nurturing environment, but can occur amidst cost constraint, minimum training and insecurity.

7.2.5: 'Together we are Rewarding': The Reward and Recognition Deal

Avatar operated a total reward program in order to leverage the benefits managerial literature claims this model offers. A total rewards framework is supposed to bring together the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of reward and '*embraces everything that employees' value in the employment relationship'* (O'Neal, 1998:15). A total reward framework has been cited as a key tool to driving employee motivation (Armstrong, 2007; Cannell and Wood, 1992; CIPD, 2008; Kessler, 1994; O' Neal, 1998; Worldatwork, 2008). As indicated in chapter five, the employee engagement survey indicated that only 36% of employees felt their total reward package was fair compared to people in other organisations doing a similar role in Ireland. So employees were not happy with levels of remuneration in Avatar. The employee perception of the different aspects of the total rewards model is further explored in this section and the implications discussed after.

7.2.5.1: Base Salary

Salary reviews were formula driven and not for discussion. Each year employees were handed a letter with their old and new salary. As operational employee (E27) stated *'I think the problem with the salary review process is that it's not a review process. They don't even pretend they're taking your opinions or your work into account, they give you the result and that's it'.*

HR relied primarily on consultant led compensation surveys to establish median market salaries within the Irish hi-technology sector. Employees did not trust the benchmarking process as HR did not disclose what they benchmarked employees to. Most employees felt significantly underpaid and this was so widespread that it was one of the few employee grievances that HR and directors acknowledged, even if they did not agree this was the case. The feeling of being underpaid caused significant anger as one operational employee (E3) stated:

> This place can burn to the ground once I get paid at the end of the day or I develop myself. We're using each other, Avatar is using me for my expertise and my experience and the knowledge I have. I'm using Avatar to have a nice brand and get an awful lot of experience so I can jump ship in a year or two years time and go to something better and get a much better salary, than the pittance I'm getting paid at the moment.

A handful of employees described how the only way to get a raise beyond the one allocated in the salary increase matrix was to threaten to leave, as one generative employee (E25) stated *'I've stuck to my guns on that so many times and if you say that to them they will get you the money, there's plenty of money there, that's the way I look at it. They're making a million profit a day'.* Another generative employee (E28) who was also confident enough to make demands described how they bypassed their own line manager and put their salary claims to LM1s concluded *'It's a complete joke. Not everybody has copped it but the best trick is to go to the LM1 because you'll get zilch otherwise'.* An individual had to be prepared to persist with their claims. There were accounts of employees being given raises that were lower than the rate of inflation and were refused four to five times, before they threatened to leave and salaries were increased. However the strict budget meant that for every 'have' there had to be a 'have not'. Another generative employee (E4) on the same team as employee (E28) just quoted did not fare so well. They described a

conversation they had with their manager upon hearing they had received a low increase:

> I said to [my manager] "You obviously don't respect me as an employee, you obviously don't want me to stay here, you obviously want me to move if you're paying me that money, you obviously don't want me here, you don't see any future in me because you wouldn't pay me that money if you did want to keep me on". They were like "Look I really want you to stay here, I think you're great you've done a great job so far, we've all been really impressed but there's other people on the team that need to be addressed". Basically the other guy on the team made the threat, he said if he wasn't given a certain amount of money he was leaving, and so he got the money. There's a big pot of money, and I got none.

Most reported being dissatisfied to varying degrees but few were confident enough to engage in the managing upwards and almost threatening behaviours required to secure an increase beyond the one they were prescribed in the salary matrix. For example operational employee (E24) stated *'If you tried to [ask for a salary increase]here you'd be shot! There'd be a crack commando squad at the front door leading you out'.*

7.2.5.2: Variable Pay

Avatar operated an annual employee bonus plan which amounted to 10% of base salary when on target. This was the median bonus within the external market. The bonus was based on the PD rating and the distribution system meant some got considerably more and some less. An operational employee (E8) described how the lack of support for the PD rating process and the budget restrictions

> It works by budget only, instead of actually rewarding people's work, because, as you pointed out before, regardless of the fact that an awful lot of people left, took the voluntary redundancy, because they were so pissed off. Morale was really low for 6 to 8 months probably last year, and yet the company continued to perform extremely well. Why do we have to be limited in telling people that they're doing a good job? And rewarding them for that, It's really, it's really, really poor.

Many employees felt the value of the bonus, even the top bonus, was not enough to warrant altering behaviours and no-one perceived it to be a source of motivation. They appreciated the additional cash and felt it was important as a top up to the

median salary but employees largely felt the bonus did nothing to stimulate performance; one generative employee (E28) remarked:

> If you were to ask me does the 10% bonus and the way it's managed, or the 15% for higher management or 20%. Does it deliver results for Avatar Ireland over and above what you would get if you just paid 10% out or let's say 7% out and cut out the high ratings and the low ratings? I don't think it delivers anything over and above. I just don't see many people striving to get the number one [rating] or the number two in their review...[...]...I think Avatar may as well just pay out 10% flat for all that it brings in. I just don't see the value it adds. It's not [just] me personally; I can't tell you one person I see striving to get that A grade. Actually I don't know anyone I could say is over performing for PD, they're probably over performing because they are that type of person.

Although the bonus was tied to overall financial performance, and despite the extensive communications, very few employees could actually state what the formula was and the general sense was, and a common sentiment expressed was they would just wait and see if the bonus came in. The lack of employee identification with the achievement of broader organisations goals was fed in part by the manner in which Group mandated certain 'low-return' projects that diverted Irish CAPEX and resources away from products and services that might generate a return that would contribute to the achievement of bonus related financial targets. In the year of the ethnography Avatar did not reach all of their financial targets. The organisation was still in a strong profit making position but it was not strong enough and the bonus pool suffered. A generative employee (E25) offered a typical response to the low bonus payout:

> I find it absolutely silly to stand up in front of someone in Avatar, any customer, any employee in Avatar and say "Avatar isn't doing well financially". I mean how could you say that?...[…]…To stand up in front of someone that's relying on their bonus and to tell them "You worked your heart out but because Avatar isn't doing particularly well, we're only paying you this". Avatar's making money hand over fist.

7.2.5.3: Recognition Schemes

Avatar operated a discretionary voucher scheme and a series of 'hero awards'. Employees who had received the vouchers appreciated them. However many saw the hero awards as being non meritocratic as they primarily rewarded generative

employees who made the right type of contribution. During the period of the ethnography it was generative work that was celebrated. One operational employee (E10) described the generative emphasis of these awards stating:

> They have these hero awards....shite. First of all you have to be nominated by the manager and you have to have done something way out of the way. I've no idea what other people have done to get them but I don't care because it doesn't matter what I do, I wouldn't qualify for it anyway. Even if I did I wouldn't accept it. Because it's just another dressing up type of thing, it's putting a false gloss on the way things are done; it's completely, completely false. "Oh everyone is happy, this is great, or that girl is great, she must be doing great work or making a huge difference to Avatar or Group". She's just doing her job, not doing anything out of the way I wouldn't think. She probably took on a special [generative] project but was paid for it and had time allotted to it, it's her job.

This practice of recognising a certain type of contribution was something I experienced during the ethnography. Late in the ethnography I was asked by HR to assist with some aspects of an 'all-manager away day' which HR organised, and the directors hosted, to emphasise the importance of employee engagement and the people strategy. This was an off-site day held in a hotel. My input involved walking a group of managers to various conference rooms in the hotel to ensure they got to where they were supposed to be. At the end of the day myself and the other 'walkers' were called up on stage in front of approximately 200 managers and given a bottle of wine by the CEO as a thank you. Walking managers from room to room involved minimum effort, but we were making a contribution to a high profile event.

7.2.5.4: Health Care & Benefits

The employee perspective on health care and benefits demonstrated the importance employees placed on having a sense of security. Employees expressed strong appreciation that Avatar had recently moved to providing health insurance for all. They also appreciated the death and disability insurance arrangements that were in place. It is worth stating that Avatars arrangements were not significantly more generous than external market practice as benchmarked.

7.2.5.5: Total Reward Statements

As stated in chapter four HR issued total reward statements which presented a monetary value on a range of items. The aim of such statements is to highlight the total expenditure an organisation makes on behalf of the employee thereby heightening appreciation of this expenditure. Employees had no problem that they were provided with such information but resented the extent to which they were supposed to appreciate it. Particularly as not all used some of the 'rewards' that were quantified, such as the canteen, gym, bus, or car park, yet thousands of Euros, e.g. approximately €500 for the on-site gym, was added to their total compensation value. The common sentiment was that the excessive optimism in the total reward statements was insulting, particularly when, as operational employee (E12) stated *'All you want to see is more [cash] going to the bank'*. A generative employee (E19) described the common perception:

> They put so much weight on things having a bus service here which is good for some people, the gym, the nice building, which are all good things, it is nice. They paid us poor salaries in comparison to our peers and they even admitted to that. There was a major adjustment and then they started paying us the mean. At the end of the day people are trying to pay for their mortgages, they've got children, they've got crèches and things like that and [salary] is probably one of the most important things. You know telling us that we get t-shirts and free [Avatar products] for our friends as part of our overall package is just absolutely nonsense. Talk about not keeping it real, again it's insulting the intelligence of people with better things to be doing. Imagine [me] going home and telling my wife "I can't get a [raise], but if any of your mates need an [Avatar product]!" I mean for Christ's sake, just keep it real... Mind-bending stuff.

7.2.5.6: Best practice total rewards

The Avatar total reward approach embraced numerous 'best practice' attributes. For example the CIPD cites the characteristics of best practice total reward as being 'holistic, aligned to organisation strategy, integrated, strategic, people centred, customised, distinctive, evolutionary' (Thompson, 2002). It is claimed to enhance the psychological contract and it seems HR professionals have bought into these claims and there has been a shift towards this total reward approach in recent years (Armstrong and Murlis, 2007; Chien and Hsieh, 2006; CIPD, 2008).

The Avatar total rewards package was 'holistic' and 'integrated' in that it connected a range of financial and non-financial rewards and other HR practices. However this meant that any problem in one practice spilled over into another, for example the performance rating informed both the bonus and the salary review so the dissatisfaction with the PD process made its' way into two reward related processes. The reward practices were strongly 'aligned' with Avatar financial objectives and this resulted in cost suppression which served to highlight to employees the fallacy of unitary interests. It was 'people centred' in that it attempted to highlight the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. However employees felt this was inflated and patronising. It was 'customised' insofar as it offered some element of flexibility and this was appreciated for the minor level of autonomy it provided. It was 'distinctive' in that it incorporated the Avatar brand and was consistent in the use of unitary, optimistic meritocratic rhetoric. However this largely served to infuriate employees who believed such claims were blatantly undermined by the harder mechanics. It was 'evolutionary' in that it was regularly adjusted in order to make it more 'effective' and changes were widely and excitedly communicated by HR. However employees felt the changes never addressed their fundamental concerns with the package, primarily the salary levels.

Generally speaking the main problem with the reward elements of Avatar were driven by the force of the financial structures namely the financial objective of reducing the budget that funded employee costs; OPEX. Furthermore, the role managing upwards and profiling played in securing bonuses undermined the meritocratic 'reward for performance' rhetoric. The interaction between the normative and other structures, once again, overrode the promises of a normative practice.

What the employee response highlights is the centrality of pay to employees. There is an abundance of classic and contemporary literature citing the importance of pay for maintaining employees' positive orientation towards their employer (Behrend, 1957; Herzberg; 1966; Maslow, 1954; Mintzberg et al, 1998; Pfeffer, 1999; Rosseau and Ho, 2000). In Avatar employees felt the 'wage-effort' bargain was broken as they felt they did not have the capacity to shape their levels of reward. In fact the, what can be termed *'reward-contribution'* arrangements in Avatar were not a bargain as employees were so removed from reward related decisions that it became a stand-off

that most employees were not secure enough to engage in. In Avatar a 'reward-contribution struggle' was in play and it was largely won by HR thus heightening employees' sense of insecurity and anger

7.2.6 'Together we are Connecting': The Communications Deal

The range of communication mediums used in Avatar were outlined in chapter five. Communications and employee involvement are deemed to be an important element of high performance work systems (Dundon et al, 2004; Marchington and Wilkinson, 2000). They are also supposed to be a particularly important and effective mechanism for achieving competitive advantage via extracting a discretionary, innovative contribution from knowledge workers (Champy, 1996; Delbridge and Whitfield, 2001; Guirdham, 2005). However as indicated in chapter five, Avatar's approach to communications was largely top down. Nonetheless Avatar won numerous external HR awards for their internal communications materials which were described by external award judging panels as *'stunning'* and *'inspiring'*. Most striking in the communications was the combination of compelling imagery alongside unitarist, branded and optimistic rhetoric. As discussed in chapter four, directors clung to this optimism for absolution through 'interpretive choice'. This optimism was a key feature of all official communications no matter the material consequences of the decision being communicated. The primary employee response to the official Avatar communications was anger. The optimism was interpreted as an indication of the force of hierarchy and employees felt patronised and angrily resented the blatant disregard being shown for their harsher experiences. Employees also resented that money was invested in creating this overly optimistic scenario leading them to believe that investing in false impressions was more important to senior management than investing in employees. This ultimately created a chronic lack of trust in all management communications

For example, the 'Avatar Life' magazine was referred to as 'Avatar Lies', the email from the Group CEO detailing their globetrotting adventures was largely an irritant. Avatar TV attracted significant criticism for the costs involved. Corporate events were only well attended when managers requested employees to go. For example,

attendance at the 'Ask the CEO' or 'Webcasts' were typically between 20-40 people, some of whom were mangers, when hundreds of employees were available. Many employees claimed such communications sessions were pointless as they were full of *'propaganda'*. Employees also resented the falsely optimistic 'fun' element that was often incorporated into the communication sessions as one operational employee stated '*Sesame Street is what it's like at these events, they treat you like kids and they expect you to react like children as well. No more will I ever go to any of those'*. The theme that communications were insulting was prominent as employee (E19) stated:

> For professionals like me or relatively intelligent people it really is insulting...[...]...massively negative, it's like "where's my school uniform?" when I'm getting up in the morning. I'm a professional you know, I've been to college and I've done all these things and I've qualified and there's people even more qualified than me and they're suffering this.

The dominant sentiment expressed about the communications was that the optimist unitary tone ran contrary to the harsher pluralist consequences that employees experienced on a daily basis. Consequently corporate communications were perceived to be patronising, childlike, insulting, disrespectful and an indication of top management's lack of respect for what employee's actually went through.

The corporate communications actually provoked employees to seek a more pluralistic motivation behind the unitary tones of the most basic of communications. For example there was a mail sent around about a special offer on an Avatar product and a generative employee (E25) commented:

> The "fantastic" family and friends [Product X] offer? What that means is "we've a stock of [Product X] we can't shift to any other arse holes, so here they are to our staff, we'll off load them on our staff', who's falling for that? They're not doing me any favours. It's years old and we've a big stock of them somewhere and I'm looking at it thinking to myself "Would you ever just go way, do you think I'm that stupid, really?"...[...]...I think [the actual price] is cool, it's just sometimes when I look at things I kind of think to myself, there's nothing genuine behind that. I would prefer if someone would come out and say "We have a huge stock of [Product X] that we can't shift, we're discounting them and if you want to buy one, here they are". I mean that's honesty, not "We have this fantastic package you might want to avail of"...[...]...Sometimes I think they've lost sight a little bit in here and they treat people as if they're below average intelligence, and it doesn't work like that.

Despite the elaborate communication events there was little in the way of employee consultation or involvement, it was all about top-down, post-decision, information

sharing. This just compounded the sense of anger amongst employees who lamented there was no *'safe haven'* or value on the employee voice. As operational employee (E10) stated:

> [HR] are just there to cause problems and to keep us down I think. They do that by refusing to negotiate properly, just say no to everything. If HR say the employees are alright, [Group] are happy, and HR says they employees are happy. It's all brush strokes and cover ups. Avatar [Group] don't care, they're just looking at the money, the balance sheet and that's all they care about.

Once again the financial structures voided a normative practice. Instead it was the work structures that provided the primary avenue for employee involvement and voice. However, these processes were hierarchically controlled and discussions were confined to the achievement of management objectives. Ultimately despite the literature detailing how important employee involvement is for commitment and high performance there was no process for employees to input into management decision making. Hierarchal control was jealously guarded by HR and top management. It seemed the extensive resources invested in communications were about making top management and HR feel good, and not employees.

7.2.7: 'Together we are Caring': The Health and Wellbeing deal

This incorporated the following programs:

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Wellness checkpoint and fairs
- Community and Fun
- Flexible Working
- Leave
- Health and Safety

Employees were largely ambivalent about most of the 'health and wellbeing' programs with appreciation being expressed only for the slightly above market parental leave arrangements, and the minor flexibility around working hours.

Almost all mentioned the minor degree of flexibility around working hours. Most managers permitted employees to come in and leave at different times each day as long as the core hours were made up. However this was not that wide ranging as most

arrived in between 7.00am and 9.00am. It was the idea that no-one was watching the clock that was appreciated by employees. Also managers appeared to be flexible about occasionally providing time off as long as the hours were made up. Generative employee (E19) spoke about the appreciation for this minor flexibility around working hours stating: *'You just feel like you're your own person, it's empowering people to a degree; I think that's really important'.* It was the event based health and wellbeing activities, laden with the optimistic normative rhetoric that attracted a significant level of disdain with most employees, such as generative employee (E20), interpreting them as disingenuous:

> It's all kind of forced. Yes we've 'community and fun' and yes we will come together on this day and we will have fun on this day. I think you need people to just spontaneously be and allow them to be creative and innovative and excited about what they do, instead of being told to be excited about what they do. You're trying too hard [HR] folks, you're trying too hard.

The sentiment that these events were disingenuous was raised often, for example operational employee (E27) stated *'The overall ethos of HR doesn't have much to do with employee wellbeing, it's more about making sure [HR] don't break the rules'.*

7.2.8: Normative Structures and the Patronised Angry Knowledge Worker

The Avatar case sheds some interesting light on the debates on normative structures. It is particularly interesting as Avatar actually managed overcome the major design flaws cited in the literature as the reason HRM in many organisations fails to yield the benefits of 'HR promise' (Delaney et al, 1989; Huselid, 1995; Huselid and Becker, 1998; Osterman, 1994; Pfeffer, 1994) . The mechanics of the Avatar HR practices were tightly aligned with the organisation's financial and strategic goals. The design process typically involved HR working with directors and world leading consulting firms. There was a deliberate integrated, schematic consistency between the practices. They were consistent and complementary insofar as the output of one fed into another. They were consistently branded with meritocratic, unitary underpinnings and the business justification for all practices. The fact that, according to the management literature, Avatar got the design side 'right' which makes the negative response all the more telling.

Certainly the Avatar case illustrates the vacuous nature of 'best practice' and the futility of universal, reified notions of commitment. Avatar HR fell into this trap when designing the normative structures as they did everything other than try to understand what employees were experiencing every day. This is the trap of the HR promise i.e. that HR do not need to care about what employees think when, with the right practices, you can manage what they think. Consequently, HR in Avatar had no insight into the force of other workplace structures. For example during the ethnography I commented to a HR employee that the release management process was interesting, and they responded '*what's that*?'. I then casually asked other people in the HR function about release management. Most HR managers did not really know how it worked and most HR employees had not heard of it. Release management was fundamental to working life within Avatar yet it, and the work process in general, was deemed irrelevant to those designing the normative structures. They were so firmly attached to universal, functionalist, reified notions of commitment.

Ultimately, HR could not comprehend the extent to which the normative rhetoric was removed from employees' reality as they did not actually know what it was like to work in Avatar. For employees, the feeling was largely mutual, one generative employee (E25) commented *'[HR] are a bit of a mystical entity. I don't know anyone from HR, nobody and I've worked here for nearly six years. I know people from every other department and I know no-one from HR'.* Others, such as generative (E16) spoke about the removed corporate rhetoric saying *'[HR] is at too high a level, I don't think they really do anything to motivate me'.*

Employees spoke often about how the employee survey was an insufficient instrument for understanding the employee perspective and one generative employee (E20) described how, if HR listened, she would ask them to: *'Come and talk to us, don't send us out a little anonymous survey. Come down to the floor and sit with us and do a little bit of job swapping. You come down and do my job for a couple of days and then you can see'.* Reflecting on this degree of separation it is understandable how HR were so perplexed by the low engagement scores that they ascribed them to factors such as poor line management or a petty employee temperament.

HR's reluctance to acknowledge the role of the financial and work structures in shaping the employee experience and the workings of the normative structures greatly irritated employees. Employees' thoughts were instantly drawn to what was missing in the normative portrayal of Avatar life and they felt patronised by the idea that they were supposed to be so galvanised by the vacuous normative prescriptions. The unitary rhetoric was so removed from their experience that it just alerted them to the fact that their reality was far more pluralistic. In fact, the HR related practices that employees complained the least about were those that came without much rhetoric e.g. health insurance, life assurance and leave arrangements. So the more that HR focused on normative optimistic, unitary rhetoric the more they sowed the seeds of failure as they produced a 'rhetoric-reality stick' which employees used to beat them. In fact, in Avatar the rhetoric-reality gap strengthened employee protection of their subjectivity, as they were unwilling to expose their affective domain to an organisation that launched unashamedly contradictory initiatives.

In terms of the literature, the employee perspective reflected the critical academic viewpoint that corporate attempts to regulate employee subjectivity are unwelcome and intrusive. Critics of normative control herald it as being a sophisticated and manipulative form of tyranny in the workplace, a threat to both freedom and dignity due to its power to regulate subjectivity. Interestingly Avatar employees shared this viewpoint precisely because normative control is not all powerful. Employees were fully cognisant of the prescribed role of the normative structures and could deduce that senior management paid far more heed to the principles of shareholder capitalism than the values of Brand Essence, or the unitary meritocratic claims of the employment deal. The Avatar case also highlights how organisational attempts to inject an externally constructed belief system into working lives can be critically interpreted by employees as a disregard for their own judgement and professionalism. Employees, not realising how essentially clueless HR were about other structures, interpreted the persistent dissemination of unitary rhetoric as a patronising slur on their individual professionalism and intelligence.

The Avatar case study best supports the works of academics heralding the primacy of market rationalism insofar as the workings of the free market completely override any rhetorical claims of unitary interests and mutual commitment (Kunda and Ailon-

Souday, 2005). However, it appears that the more extreme market rational viewpoints, which claim that normative control no longer plays a role in organisations, underestimate the role normative structures in absolving top management through 'interpretive choice'. The seductive power of normative control for top management is far greater than its actual power. In Avatar, the only actors who claimed that normative structures were all powerful were HR and top management and this was a significant source of convenience. Going back to the question about how organisations reconcile short-termism and insecurity with claims of unitary interests and commitment, the answer, in this case, appears to be that they don't attempt to reconcile them at all. The financial and normative structures simply ploughed along forging their own paths within the organisation's walls. The normative structures were not all powerful, nor were they obsolete; they were just receiving continuous life support.

7.3: WORK STRUCTURES: 'I just like the fact that you have an impact on things'

The data discussed thus far demonstrates that employees largely felt angered, insecure and patronised by the financial structures and the normative structures. This section further details the employee perception of the third structure, that of work. The data reveals that 'work' was the only aspect of the employment experience employees had any positive orientation towards.

Interestingly, when discussing their work in interviews, employees tended to separate the elements of their role that involved individual, embodied, embrained knowledge from the parts that involved collective, or encoded, embedded knowledge. Of course all work was 'embedded' to an extent, as everything an individual was required to do was in some way derived from Avatar's financial and strategic goals; none of the work existed in a vacuum. Nonetheless, employees differentiated the aspects of their work they felt they had positive ownership of, from the unwelcome aspects they deemed out of their control. Also the individual elements of work provided employees with more scope to apply their own personal knowledge and to have a

positive impact, whereas the collective elements were deemed to be primarily about satisfying and acquiescing to others.

All employees claimed to 'like' the individual elements of their work and negative perceptions were attributed primarily to the collective elements. A typical example of this split is highlighted in the following two quotes from generative employee (E4):

> I love what I'm involved with and what I'm doing [in work]. I can't believe I'm doing stuff that is impacting all my friend's [technology] and how everybody uses this [technology]. And it's a big company, it's a big brand and other companies aren't spending millions on [technology x]. To step into this type of job and to be straight away spending three million on a Christmas [launch] is brilliant. It's like "Oh my god, I'm so lucky". I wouldn't question what I'm doing in terms of work and I don't think I would question anyone's working capabilities.

This employee, who had considerable work-step autonomy, also provided numerous examples of how the collective elements of their work required them to profile, maintain hard and soft networks, be falsely optimistic and hide bad news. Their enthusiasm for their work significantly waned when discussing the collective elements of their role, and (E4) went on to say:

> On a day to day basis I can't handle working with these people any more, I can't handle the atmosphere I'm working in and I would be great at being fake and that's what I have to be all the time, that's what I feel I have to be all the time. I go over to talk to someone and go "Oh my god did you hear..." and I hate giving out about people because I can't get rid of it. I went on holiday for two weeks, and literally for the first two to three days I was literally consumed with anger towards people in work and towards work in general. I can't stop thinking about how negative I feel about certain things in work that happened and it took me about two days on my holiday to get over that and be like, "I'm on holidays, it's a stupid job who cares".

The consequences of the different perspectives on the individual collective elements of work will be further unpicked in the following sections of this chapter.

7.3.1 Individual Elements of Knowledge Work

In Avatar employees' commitment to completing their work and meeting targets demonstrated how successful performance was not dependent on wider organisational commitment. On the contrary many employees claimed that the individual elements

of work were a source of mental relief, a form of escapism from the wider organisational context. For example as operational employee (E3) stated:

> I would say that right now my morale is extremely low but having said that I think I'm the kind of person that, like I work hard and I will continue to do that regardless, it's kind of like a personality flaw...[...]...You're under so much panic and stress and the only thing really keeping you going is actually coming in and working. It's like "OK it's total shit in here, the best thing to do is to sit down and work. It'll just take my mind off it, to everything else that's going on around". You know, it sounds like a mad thing to say but it's really true though, it's like "Ah, no, I can't deal with this, I'm just going to sit down and do work".

Most employees, when discussing their work were keen to explicitly state that they were not committed to Avatar. A common sentiment was summarised by generative employee (E19) who stated:

> I'm very dedicated not because of Avatar but because I love what I do. I don't know how not to do a good job, I couldn't get up in the morning because this place takes me away from my children for the majority of the day, for the majority of the week so at the very least I'm going to feel good about what I do. That's my attitude, that's just purely personal ok and it's not because I'm any hero or anything else, that's a personal thing.

An operational employee (E8) stated:

> We overshot our targets by a huge amount last year, we did extremely well on our small team we worked harder probably than we've ever worked, even though at a personal level, my morale was very low and I know that my colleague's morale and my line manager's morale was terribly low. But we had to keep going I mean we had our Key Performance Indicators, we had to keep working, I suppose we could have said "Well screw this we're going to cover these things badly" but you have pride in your work at the end of the day. We're very proud of how we do on our team and of how well we work and we hold that up. We're productive and we're a good team and we work hard despite rather than because of the way we're treated by the company.

These quotes represent the most common employee perspective on individual elements of work.[108] Low organisation commitment can be synonymous with 'high performance'. The idea that organisations compete with occupations for commitment has been documented (Causer and Jones, 1996; Raelin, 1985). However the Avatar

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[108] Many similar statements were made such as operational employee (E31] who stated 'I generally jump a mile when I see thing like (Brand Essence) like it just, I'd rather just come in, do what's asked and learn and do that bit extra as well. There were only two interviewees who professed to be in the wrong career and who got zero satisfaction from their work. Many employees spoke, in personal terms, of their desire to feel good about their work.

case uncovers something beyond the notion of professional pride. Employees' perception of their work was also a reflection of the financial and normative structures. Negative perceptions of the wider organisational context actually stimulated a positive orientation to the individual elements of the work process. The financial and normative structures made employees feel angry, insecure and patronised. Employees actively sought to find something in their working lives about which they could feel good and the overwhelmingly negative view of the other structures meant that work emerged as the primary structure from which a sense of self-worth could be derived.

The two positives employees identified in their individual work were 'workstep autonomy' and 'work quality'. Employees in Avatar clung onto their workstep autonomy as it represented an element of working life they felt they had some autonomous ownership of. Completing work tasks provided a sense of pride, autonomy and meaning that was not available in the wider unstable environment which continuously undermined employees' security and status. As one operational employee [E11] stated:

> I just like the fact that you have an impact on things, that you're able to make a difference. Not in the way of being a hero but make a difference into the business. Not that YOU make the difference because the changes that you make are very much dealt with by everybody. But it's nice to sit back and say "Well that's working because I made that change".

Employees understood their individual worksteps as being a consequence of Avatar's strategy of providing market leading high technology products and services. They could not do this exact work elsewhere. As operational employee (E30) stated *'If you're looking to work on the latest and best [Technology] come to Avatar'.* This leads onto the second explanation for employees' positive perception of the individualised elements of work namely their work provided opportunities to learn and produce work of high quality. Another operational employee (E29) offered a common sentiment stating:

> I'd like to master all the equipment I use and know it inside out and be really proficient at everything I do within my job. The job itself, the experience that you can gather it's not something that's taught directly at college, or anything like the way engineering's taught. [Using] the systems and all the experience that you get, it's valuable really. Just basically what motivates me is enjoying

> what I'm doing first of all and then gaining as much experience as I can possibly gain.

The importance employees' placed on work quality meant they resented initiatives that obstructed their individual work. Most notably, initiatives emanating from the financial structures, such as re-orgs and cost cutting, were seen as an obstruction and a cause of inefficient. The importance they placed on the quality of work also meant there was a particularly high level of disdain towards Group mandates to develop products and services that had little return on investment in the Irish market as it diverted CAPEX from potentially more successful local ideas. Work quality was one of the few elements of the employment experience employees appreciated and many felt they were more protective of it than senior management.

It was widely understood that the quality of individual work available in Avatar meant working in Avatar enhanced employability. However it must be pointed out that only the younger interviewees, most typically those under thirty years, attached significant importance to employability. Furthermore, the desire to enhance employability came about not because these young employees were seduced by the idea of having a marketised, mobile, boundaryless career; it was simply because the salaries in Avatar were positioned at market median. It was greater financial stability, not mobility that was desirable. A young operational employee (E11) expressed a common sentiment stating:

> Use Avatar as a spring board to go somewhere else and earn more money because basically it's not about your earnings [in Avatar]. You want to be earning a decent wage where you're secure in your life because you don't want to get to the age of 27, 28, as far as I'm concerned, and be on average earnings because it's at that stage when what I want is to be on a really good wage, have a house and settle down.

The Avatar case demonstrates how knowledge workers do not require a positive perception of the organisation in order to work hard. A negative perception of the organisation can actually galvanise employees into high performance and in pursuit of quality work so that they can maintain a sense of self-worth where no other source exists. Low organisation commitment can be synonymous with high performance. This was evident in equal measure for both generative and operational employees.

7.3.2: Collective Elements of Knowledge Work:

When discussing the collective elements of their work, employees spoke about the embrained, encoded and embedded work-steps. The embrained, encoded knowledge resided largely in the knowledge management systems. These were perceived to be extremely bureaucratic and a source of additional work-steps undertaken in order to facilitate management control. However they were also accepted as being a typical feature of working life in a large organisation and there was little in the way of a negative emotive affront to the bureaucratic embrained/encoded work rules of Avatar.

Employees offered two perspectives on the embedded, or behavioural, elements of the work process. The one aspect that employees professed to enjoy were the genuine interpersonal relationships. As generative employee (E19) commented *'[My team] don't know how to do a bad job, they want to do it, they're inspirational and I would say that I'm probably inspirational to them because I'm similar'*. The benefits of team work and social ties have been well documented (Cohen and Bailey, 1997; Cordery, 2003; Edwards and Wright, 1998; Geary, 1993; Granovetter, 1973, 1985; Wall, 1986). Critical interpretations of teamwork have also been offered (Barker, 1993; Sewell, 1998; Sinclair, 1992). However it is interesting to note that in Avatar such accolades were reserved primarily for more permanent work teams and not the temporary networked, project teams that were established during release management. This highlights the oft cited importance of long term, genuine ties in the workplace (Granovetter, 1973; 1985; Sennett, 1998). Interestingly the teams which had the closest bonds, operational teams, were less likely to engage in enforced team rituals, such as team meetings; they developed strong social and collaborative ties through working together.

However, the embedded collective elements of the work process were also the cause of some distress. The embedded elements, of generative work in particular, involved profiling, managing upwards and leveraging of hard and soft networks. These behaviours were deemed disingenuous and an impediment to the development of genuine social ties as one generative employee (E4) described:

> It's just frustrating that people are so into themselves about having to profile and be seen. But also then they don't want anyone else to do well so there's no team camaraderie at all. I suppose everyone is quite self absorbed in that sense.

> Fair enough people should think of themselves first in a job but I suppose I just don't like being competitive. I don't like it and it just drives me crazy and I have gotten upset about it as well because I just don't want to have to deal with that kind of crap.

These behaviours also reflected the 'darker side' of team work cited in the literature i.e. camouflaged coercion, false consensus, peer scrutiny etc. Employee distress was due to the understanding that these behaviours undermined their sense of self worth as they involved being false in order to convince others they were making a worthwhile contribution. It was also perceived as nurturing falseness, dishonesty and a lack of genuine concern for those at equivalent or lower levels. It was also a slight on autonomy and work quality as it meant supporting ideas for reciprocity as opposed to merit. In fact all but one employee in the interviews slammed the profiling and need to manage upwards.

The perspectives offered on the collective elements of the operational and generative labour process reveals an interesting split. On the one hand, operational employees were less likely to cite profiling and managing upwards as a problem within their teams. They simply tended to lament that they would have to engage in it, to an extent, if they wanted to be rewarded or promoted. On the other hand, the collective elements of the generative work were dominated by the behaviours of managing upwards and profiling.[109] The ultimate consequence was that generative employees displayed more anger and distress in interviews than operational employees. Whilst operational employees cited much of the same negative perceptions as generative employees they appeared to be less emotionally distressed. Operational workers had stronger genuine social ties and were less required to engage in the disingenuous behaviours of profiling and managing upwards. This created an interesting dichotomy whereby the work that was deemed to be the most innovative, of higher status and more reflective of contemporary seductive notions of the empowered, autonomous, enterprising self required the demonstration of disingenuous behaviours that were more detrimental to employees' sense of self worth.

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[109] Consequently those functions that engaged heavily in generative work e.g. marketing, were seen to be the most prominent profilers, most likely to manage upwards, most guilty of creating false impressions and the least meritocratic.

7.3.3: Work Structures and the High Performing Knowledge Worker:

The Avatar case is particularly interesting given the literature on knowledge work and commitment. As indicated in chapter two, it has been assumed that a positive orientation to the contextual setting is paramount to driving performance as knowledge workers are supposedly more privileged and mobile than their industrial predecessors. However the Avatar case reflects research conducted on other types of non knowledge work, which concluded there is no definitive correlation between organisational commitment and effort (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Mowday et al, 1982; Wallace, 1993; 1995). Furthermore, in Avatar, the negative perception of the organisation went hand in hand with high performance. The Avatar case demonstrates the 'multi-dimensionality' of commitment insofar as an individual can have different levels of commitment to different structures in the workplace (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Causer and Jones, 1996; Gordon et al, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1984; 1991; Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001; Raelin, 1986). Interestingly a positive affective commitment was not a prerequisite for a high level of contribution.

The Avatar data reflects some of the traditional notions of the 'professional-bureaucratic conflict' model of competing loyalties and goals (Blau and Scott, 1962; Scott, 1965). However, what was different for Avatar employees was that they did not have a reified or purist notion of their knowledge and skills as something that existed independently of the setting in which they applied it. Instead 'knowledge-context' conflict arose from the initiatives that undermined their security and self worth. The ongoing job and role insecurity created by the financial structures, the patronising rhetoric and market driven structural constraints of the normative structures and the disingenuous behaviours in the work structures led employees to reason that they were of no intrinsic value to the organisation. They informed their self understanding as an easily disposable commodity. This meant that work autonomy, work quality and supportive peer relationships were not just a source of commitment, but of solace from the level of anger and insecurity created by the financial, normative structures and disingenuous elements of the work structures.

Avatar employees demonstrated a level of commitment to the elements of their work that brought autonomy, work quality and genuinely supportive relationships. The role of such job characteristics in stimulating task commitment is recognised (Granovetter

1973; 1985; Hackman and Oldham, 1980; Newell et al, 2002). Furthermore, much of the management literature claims that profits flow from such work arrangements. The idea that knowledge flourishes in autonomous, supportive social groupings that focus on quality work is reflected in the writings on 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991). However, much of this literature discusses how such communities are best developed within flat, empowered, networked firms where knowledge is prioritised. However in knowledge was hierarchically driven and leveraged to achieve the financial priorities. Furthermore, numerous initiatives emanating from the financial structures, such as cost cutting, re-orgs, short-termism, hierarchy and bureaucracy, all got in the way of the elements of work employees found desirable, namely autonomous, supportive social groupings that focus on quality work. The case demonstrates how these desirable elements can be carved out, by employees, and can co-exists with hierarchy, bureaucracy, insecurity, anger and a prominent range of disingenuous behaviours.

7.4: ANGRY, INSECURE AND HIGH PERFORMING: THE CONFLICTED KNOWELDGE WORKER

Exploring employee perceptions of the three structures yields insights into how employees experience a variety of forces within the one workplace. One knowledge worker can be angry, insecure and high performing all at once. The emergence of this conflicted knowledge worker sheds some light on current debates on the typologies of subjectivity discussed in chapter two.

Writers looking at the impact of macro-economic liberal market structures on individual subjectivity discuss the phenomenon of 'reflexive modernization' and 'character corrosion'. The former claims macro level institutional change creates an ever increasing range of life options promoting greater self direction, choice and self empowerment (Beck and Giddens, 1994). On the other hand, the notion of 'character corrosion' offers a far gloomier picture of a fragmented, insecure self unable to create a stable life narrative amidst continuous short-termism and life upheaval (Sennett, 1998). This 'character corrosion' model best reflects how shareholder capitalism affected Avatar employees. In Avatar, the broader macro-economic pressures of

shareholder capitalism poured down into the workplace via the financial structures. These financial structures continuously undermined employees' sense of stability and self worth rendering them angry and insecure. These were not cool, reflexive employees who felt in control of their career destiny. Instead their career destiny was something that was largely done onto them and employees felt anything could happen to them at a moment's notice precisely because they had so little say in their job and role security. This constant upheaval and insecurity was experienced within the one organisation, not over the course of an unstable life or career. Avatar itself was something of a microcosm of society living out the negative consequences of liberal market shareholder capitalism where the constant upheaval destabilised self-worth and drove superficial short-term relationships; or as Sennett says *"No long term" is a principle which corrodes trust, loyalty, and mutual commitment'* (Sennett: 1998:24). Furthermore, employees' perception of the financial structures was informed, not just by the initiatives they generated, but by how they interacted with other structures. In terms of the normative structures, the manner in which financial priorities rode roughshod over the normative rhetoric demonstrated to employees the primacy of financial concerns. In terms of the work structures, the financially driven initiatives of cost cutting and constant structural change obstructed the aspects of work that employees appreciated, namely work quality and the development of supportive peer relationships. The manner in which the financial structures permeated all aspects of their working lives and held sway over the other two structures only heightened employees' sense of anger and insecurity.

Writers looking at the impact of normative structures on subjective orientations tend to expand on either the optimistic or critical themes. The optimistic, managerial writings claim that by subscribing to a prescribed, untarist normative ideology, employees can experience an identification with organisation goals thereby reducing inner conflict and taking a step toward self-actualisation, empowerment and fulfilment through hard work and career success (Burke and Cooper, 2004; Pascale, 1985; 1999; Peters, 2003). The critical perspective claims that employees who are subjected to such a normative ideology and who identify with organisation goals are experiencing a controlling and destructive form of identity colonisation and control (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002; Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992; Lair et al, 2005; Willmott, 1993). What the optimistic and critical perspectives have in common

is that they both claim normative structures do what they are supposed to do; namely they control employee beliefs, behaviours and their overall positive subjective commitment to organisation goals. However in Avatar, the normative structures actually had the opposite of the desired effect as the normative rhetoric was so undermined by the financial and work structures that they prompted employees to be protective of their subjectivity. The financially driven parameters within the normative practices meant employees were angered by the fact that although they worked for a financially successful organisation, their career development and financial reward was suppressed to the minimum of what was required to be competitive in the external market. The normative practices were further undermined by the work structures as it was the unofficial behaviours enacted in the work process that dictated how employees fared in the normative structures. Ultimately employees in Avatar were neither fulfilled nor colonised by the normative structures. Instead they were simply infuriated at what they perceived to be patronising attempts to get them to ignore the impact of other structures. The normative structures were deemed to be an insult.

Those looking at how undertaking knowledge work, in liberal market economies, shapes individual subjectivity describe an employee that is so conditioned by the ideology and workings of free markets, so assured of the value of their skill set that they feel like a rational, enterprising, entity in their own right. Knowledge workers are often portrayed as being committed to their professional skills over and above the organisation and are motivated by a commitment to their own career trajectory and professional skills (Alvesson, 2001; Causer and Jones, 1996; duGay and Salaman, 1990; 1992; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005; May et al, 2002; Peters, 2003; Rose, 1990; Ross, 2003). These writings, combined with assumptions on the primacy of knowledge within organisations, have led to images of a secure and privileged knowledge worker that is 'enterprising' (duGay and Salaman, 1992), 'portfolio' oriented (Handy, 1995) and has a 'boundaryless' career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). However, employees in Avatar did not see themselves as autonomous, empowered, rational, self-navigating, lone career rangers. The financial structures eroded any notion that their knowledge was of any intrinsic value to the organisation. Within the normative structures there were explicit limits regarding how far employees could progress their career and be rewarded for their contribution. Employees engaged in

many of the behaviours associated with the 'enterprising self' but this was because they were essential to navigating the forceful Avatar hierarchy. These behaviours were not the result of employees feeling they were in control of their career trajectory. Ultimately, employees' commitment to their work was not just about their professional status, it was also related to the fact that they saw work as the only avenue for leveraging autonomy and injecting meaning and self work in their daily working lives.

7.5: CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF A HOLISTIC VIEW

Much of the literature exploring how the contemporary knowledge workplace shapes subjectivity explores separately the three structures discussed in this thesis. Hopefully the data presented in this chapter demonstrates the fallacy of such a mono-structural view. Exploring one structure in isolation has facilitated the emergence of a range of contradictory and somewhat extreme subjective orientations being attributed to the contemporary knowledge worker. The different literatures portray the contemporary knowledge worker as being either empowered, insecure, fulfilled, brainwashed, committed or privileged. It appears that none of the existing sociological characterisations of subjectivity can fully explain this angry, insecure, high performing knowledge worker. For example, employee behaviours were not a result of a cognitive or emotional identification with the normatively prescribed member role (Kunda, 1992). Whilst employees enacted some of the characteristics associated with DuGay's (1996) 'enterprising self' it was not because of any identity colonising initiative. Employees were not in a prescribed state of deep acting (Hochschild, 1983). Neither were they experiencing the 'sociological ambivalence' that can emerge when faced with many structural contradictions (Merton, 1957). Employees in Avatar may have displayed elements of these dispositions in certain situations but they were not their definitive self-understanding.

However, the idea that Avatar employees acquiesced to a prescribed subjective conditioning does not do justice to the level of almost painful awareness they had of their structurally driven insecure status within the organisation. It was awareness, not normative conditioning, that informed their anger and insecurity that made them so

protective of their subjective orientation and resilient in the face of compelling normative prescriptions. Furthermore their overall subjective orientation was defined, not by one structure, but by the relationship between three structures, most notably the dominance of the financial structures over the normative and work structures. Employee anger and insecurity drove their positive orientation towards their work. Of course hierarchy and bureaucracy played a dominant role in controlling work and ensuring targets were met but employees positive orientation towards elements of their work, most notably those they felt they had some ownership of, can be better understood by their appreciation of having a sense of agency amidst the myriad of oppressive structures.[110]

Perhaps the novelty of the Avatar case lies not in the identification of a new extreme subjective orientation to add to the list, but in demonstrating how a myriad of structures can converge within the one workplace to create at once a sense of anger and insecurity on the one hand and work commitment and high performance on the other. Perhaps knowledge workers are not that special after all.

[110] Agency being the extent to which an individual feels they can or do make a difference (Giddens, 1984).

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.0: LEAVING AVATAR

In my final few weeks at Avatar I wrote a forty page document reporting my findings and recommendations. Prior to submitting the report, the initial plan was to meet with the HR director to discuss it; after which I would make a presentation to the team of directors. When I was conducting the interviews, I explained to all interviewees that the directors and HR were interested in further exploring the low employee engagement scores recorded in the employee survey. I informed them that I would be submitting a final report to HR and the directors and I often repeated at the end of the interview that their perspectives would be incorporated in the final report. Many junior line managers and employees claimed it was unlikely the directors would read it and they certainly didn't expect anything to change. A handful commented that, for my own sake, I shouldn't be too honest. However I was not an employee and had nothing to gain by 'managing upwards' or protecting my 'profile'. I felt it would be wholly unethical for me to be falsely optimistic as I would be doing so for no other reason than to have the directors 'like' me. Furthermore, given the interest that HR and the directors professed to have in employee engagement, I was sure the findings would get to them.

I submitted the report and a couple of weeks later I got a 6pm meeting with the HR director. The HR director stated that as she had been very busy she had only managed to briefly 'skim' through the report. She stated that she was sure she would get around to it eventually and would call me again if she wanted me to present it. As she claimed to be unaware of the content of the report we could not have a conversation about any part of it. I was given €300 in vouchers as a thank you gift and I left feeling somewhat bewildered. That was the last I heard from her.

The recommendations were nothing more radical than suggesting the directors take people issues more seriously, first by meeting with a team of employees four times a year to hear their views, and second, by being more open to discussing employee issues with line managers. A copy of these recommendations, made for directors only, are set

out in Appendix Two.[111] I cannot claim to understand the full reasoning behind the HR director's decision not to progress with my report or recommendations. Nor can I claim that my recommendations were capable of improving engagement. All I can say is that I felt they would have been a start to addressing the issues raised in the interviews and what I had observed. However what was telling about the HR director's response was how in keeping it was with the data gathered over the course of the ethnography. The HR director avoided acknowledging the difficulties that lower levels, from LM1s to employees, claimed they were experiencing. This avoidance, and opting not to let directors see the report, meant HR and directors could continue hiding behind the convenient notion that commitment could be generated through normative structures alone and consequently the other structures remained intact. Furthermore they could continue in their current approach of telling line managers to become better at convincing employees that Avatar was a great place to work. So directors' heads were kept firmly in the sand and the convenience of top management absolution through 'interpretive choice' remained intact.[112]

The HR employees that I met said they never heard the report mentioned after I left. Just as most interviewees predicted, no-one listened and nothing actually changed.

8.1: AVATAR AND THE LITERATURE

Numerous bodies of literature seek to explore structures and subjectivity within market listed, knowledge workplaces. Such works come primarily from political economy, human resources, sociology, and knowledge management literatures. Each body of work tends to explore one workplace structure in isolation. The political economy literature focuses primarily on the financial structures, the human resources and sociological work deal primarily with the normative structures, and the knowledge

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[111] Numerous more specific recommendations were made for HR and for each function. However these are not set included in the appendices are they were too specific to different functions to be meaningful for this thesis.

[112] As mentioned in chapter three I remained in contact with a number of HR managers and employees after I left. I was later told that the HR director asked each manager to review the report and to take out three 'action points' to reflect on. One HR manager mentioned that the HR director expressed scepticism that managing upwards and profiling were so endemic. This is despite practically all interviewees mentioning them. Another HR manager afterwards, claimed that they found my recommendations challenging and the idea of actually going out into the business and talking to employees was daunting to them. However they all felt nothing was done with the report.

management literature looks at how work should be organised. In addition to these somewhat siloed explorations, there is a lack of literature offering detailed explorations of how knowledge work is managed. This has led to a range of incompatible conclusions on what working life is like within listed, knowledge intensive organisations. I will revisit each of these bodies of literature and summarise how this thesis informs the debate in each case.

8.1.1: The Primacy of Shareholder Capitalism: Yes it is everywhere

The method of data gathering employed in this thesis is not consistent with the political economy approach. Nonetheless, the Avatar case highlights the strength of the political economy literature and the works of scholars who claim that macro-economic structures wield considerable influence on workplaces.

The Avatar case demonstrates how the financial pressures of shareholder capitalism were mediated through structures and social processes to dominate a workplace. If top management of market listed organisations are to convince investors to buy and retain their shares, then they must convince financial markets of the future value of the share price. This prompts two top management activities. First, they must actively promote their future financial targets and the strategies they will pursue to achieve them. Secondly, they must ensure achievement of financial targets, both to deliver shareholder return and to create confidence in the organisation's ability to achieve future targets.

In keeping with much of the political economy literature, this act of 'market storytelling' in Avatar encouraged top management to isolate themselves from lower levels so that decisions about future goals and strategies could be generated in a shareholder focused vacuum, unencumbered by the input of voices calling for other stakeholders to be considered. Market storytelling also prompted rigid, hierarchical, command and control structures so that top management could ensure that all promises were later delivered by the same stakeholders whose voices were isolated from decision making. This hierarchical control was legitimised by legally mandated international financial regulations. These regulations were used to co-ordinate the Group-subsidiary relationship as a system of financial flows whereby the subsidiary was required to be a well behaved 'boy-scout' in order to secure capital investment from the parent. This

'financialisation of organisation structures' provided mechanisms for Group to leverage control and pass down a range of initiatives that contributed to the achievement of financial targets. Group, recognising the indeterminate space between these structural transfers and the behaviours of directors at subsidiary level, created a multi-national community of senior managers from which they appointed directors to subsidiaries. For example, in Avatar Ireland the key positions of Chief Executive Officer and Chief Financial Officer, among others, were short-term Group appointees. Such role holders saw their future career within Group and therefore sought to court Groups favour by demonstrating their ability to achieve targets. Even Irish based directors acknowledged that Group appointed directors were less concerned with the interests of lower levels stakeholders than their Irish, less mobile, counterparts. In addition, all directors were financially incentivised to grow earnings per share.

The pursuit of financial targets translated into initiatives that resulted in losses for lower levels including first, job insecurity due to redundancies, outsourcing and centralisation, secondly, 'role insecurity' due to constant re-organisations, thirdly, work intensification due to lack of resources, fourthly, constant change and upheaval and finally, minimisation of labour related costs such as training, salaries and bonuses. The continuous stream of Group demands, the need to be successful in the local market, and the manner in which financial initiatives often resulted in losses for employees meant that what subsidiary directors required from lower levels was simple 'flexibedience'. Lower levels were to do what they were told, and what they were told to do changed regularly. In fact, Avatar was not just experiencing change; they were in a constant state of 'catch-up' and upheaval as they rushed to achieve short-term financial targets and complete projects amidst tight timelines.

Regardless of the material consequences of decisions, top management persistently denied plurality of interests and communicated all initiatives in strongly optimistic, unitary terms. It appeared this was done for two reasons. First, in order to maintain the legitimacy of the hierarchical decision making it was important for those at the top to always claim they were doing the 'right' thing. Secondly, by outlining only positive consequences of decisions, directors could claim that lower levels had an 'interpretive choice' regarding how they reacted to a situation. Consequently any adverse employee reaction could be attributed to a negative attitude thus absolving directors, at least in

their minds, of the material consequences of decisions. Any negative 'post-implementation' consequences of top management decisions were to be handled by lower level management.

Ultimately, the financial pressures of shareholder capitalism dominated top management decision making. In terms of the literature on knowledge intensive workplaces, the Avatar case supports those scholars who highlight the primacy of capital. In Avatar, the all consuming importance of the financial targets left no room for top management to afford substantial consideration of other stakeholders. However top management, recognising that lower levels needed to be managed in a coherent fashion, were happy to offload people management responsibility to the human resource department.

8.1.2: HR as a Vanity Project: Making top management, not employees, feel good

Whereas, the findings of this thesis were largely consistent with the previous body of literature, the Avatar case exposes gaps in the literature on HR and normative control. Existing management and critical literature cannot fully explain what was occurring within Avatar. Avatar implemented a range of 'best practice', award winning human resource practices; yet chronic employee dissatisfaction and anger prevailed; nonetheless employees still worked hard. Where the current literature on normative structures falls down is that it assumes the normative structures are capable of overriding other structures. Whereas, in Avatar employees experienced a variety of structures and were capable of deciding themselves which were the most pertinent in shaping their daily lives. The normative structures in Avatar were consistently undermined first, by the force of the financial structures and secondly, by the extent to which the normative structures were removed from the work structures. Employees' stark awareness of the contradictions meant they viewed the normative structures as patronising and this prompted them to be protective of their subjectivity.

In addition to the contradictions between the structures, numerous 'rhetoric-reality' gaps existed within the Avatar normative structures. Elaborate, high road, soft, unitary, meritocratic rhetoric and imagery was underpinned by a range of hard, market driven practices which ensured that people-related costs were kept to the minimum of what was necessary to compete in the market. The rhetoric-reality gaps within the practices

were numerous. For example, chapters four and five show how a layered 'command hierarchy' operated alongside a flatter 'career hierarchy' providing a high level of hierarchical control and functional flexibility. The rhetoric of the employer brand, people strategy and employment deal was undermined by the market driven parameters contained within the HR practices. Internal promotions were deemed to be limited and driven by non-meritocratic social processes. Objective setting and performance management were rendered irrelevant by constant change and the role of the hierarchy and non-meritocratic behaviours in rating allocations. Certain training was freely available, most notably behavioural training, whereas technical training that yielded a qualification was limited. A 'reward-contribution' struggle replaced the 'wage-effort' bargain as employees struggled to have any meaningful impact on their levels of remuneration. Employees interpreted the excessive optimism in corporate communications as being an indication that top management and HR were not interested in employee's version of events.

The combined effect of the rhetoric-reality gap was that HRM practices served to turn employees off rather than seduce them into developing an affective commitment to the organisation. This approach of implementing high road rhetoric alongside harder practices has been noted in the critical HR literature. However such literature claims that employees are taken in by the soft rhetoric and often fail to notice their harder reality. In fact these writings offer something akin to a 'false consciousness' argument claiming that HR actually shifts employee perceptions causing them to be committed whilst unaware of how poorly they are being treated. In Avatar, the rhetoric had largely the opposite effect; it served to highlight to employees the difference between the prescribed rhetoric and their harsher more pluralistic experiences.

All this begs the question of why the organisation persisted with disseminating such elaborate, high road normative rhetoric at all. In Avatar, the only people who claimed to be convinced by the high road rhetoric were top management and human resources and it appeared this belief was a source of significant convenience for a number of reasons. First, normative initiatives, such as Brand Essence, were announced to financial markets to create the impression that the organisation was globally aligned towards achievement of the business goals. Acknowledging a more pluralistic, complex and harsher truth was simply unbecoming of a market leading firm. Secondly, a belief

in the universal notion of best practice HR meant that people management was best left to the design specialists, HR. Believing and investing in the power of best practice HR facilitated top management abdication of responsibility of employee related issues leaving them free to pursue the financial goals. Thirdly, claiming the employment experience was as fulfilling as was normatively prescribed allowed directors to claim that lower levels had an 'interpretive choice' regarding how they viewed their employment experience. Interpretive choice, alongside the ardent claim that the organisation was a meritocracy, meant that any employee dissatisfaction could be apportioned to an individual having a bad attitude or unrealistic expectations. Therefore it became line managements' job to manage expectations, to convince employees that they deserved no more or less their current situation.

Ultimately, the normative structures made top management and HR feel good about themselves, and they sent a good story to financial markets. The only message they sent to employees was that their harsher 'reality' was not up for discussion. Employees felt top management were determined to persist with a falsely optimistic portrayal of the employment experience and it was pointless to voice objections. In this way the normative structures facilitated top management control, but not in the manner proclaimed in the managerial or critical literature. In Avatar, the normative structures did not create positive perceptions, but they certainly suppressed negative ones.

In Avatar the HR rhetoric-reality gap meant the high road gloss was overcome by the glare of the hard road practices. Employees primarily viewed HR as removed, hardnosed, cost controllers and dishonest peddlers of vanity projects and rhetorical smokescreens behind which top management could hide, isolating themselves from dissenting employee voices.

8.1.3: The Knowledge Contribution: Not that special after all

The Avatar case also exposes some weaknesses in the literature on knowledge work. Knowledge intensive organisations are typically portrayed as functioning according to a 'role of the dice' logic whereby top management's primary function is to facilitate knowledge creation in the hope that profit follows. Profit is positioned as a by-product of creating an organisation structure that allows secure, committed individuals to freely

roam organisational knowledge networks. In contrast to this literature, the Avatar case demonstrates how top management, in a successful, innovative, knowledge intensive organisation, designed explicit structures to ensure that knowledge was hierarchically leveraged to contribute to pre-defined financial targets. The emergence of the generative and operational categories of knowledge work in Avatar highlights how the seemingly far removed, centrally driven, financial targets can be passed down via budgets and work processes to dominate the daily lives and behaviours of knowledge workers. However, for both categories of work, top management demonstrated a stark irreverence for the specific worksteps involved in knowledge work. It was through this irreverence that employees got a level of what I term in chapter six as 'workstep autonomy'. Furthermore, this autonomy was only made possible because of managements' comfort that they had sufficient control over the endgame of contribution.

The Avatar case also challenges the assumption that knowledge work is difficult to control. Management in Avatar cleared up any ambiguity around the knowledge work process by requiring employees to convince them of their contribution either through the interpersonal communications associated with generative work or the informal reporting systems overseeing operational work. This created specific behaviours whereby generative employees were required to engage in the noisy behaviours of 'managing upwards' and 'profiling' and management, unofficially, placed a high value on these tacit behavioural skills. On the other hand, operational workers were required to be quiet and compliant as their contribution was deemed to be knowable via the IT systems that controlled this work. The tacit skills of operational work, namely work 'durability' and 'self-skilling' went largely unappreciated. This was because, in strategic contribution terms, operational work was the poor cousin to generative work.

The Avatar case also challenges the assumption that knowledge work is incompatible with hierarchy and bureaucracy. In Avatar, hierarchy and bureaucracy, underpinned by networks and teams, all merged to co-ordinate different parts of the work process. Furthermore different models of knowledge organisation structures, namely Lam's 'J-form' and 'professional bureaucracy', co-existed in one organisation and this co-existence was driven by financial goals.

Ultimately, analysis of knowledge work in Avatar affirms the dominance of financial goals and dispels the centrality of knowledge. Financial targets came first and knowledge creation was a means to a clear financial end; knowledge was never an end in itself.

8.1.4: Angry, Insecure and High Performing: The conflicted knowledge worker

The Avatar case introduces the angry, insecure, high-performing and ultimately conflicted knowledge worker. The prevalence of job insecurity and work intensification in neo-liberal economies has been documented in numerous quantitative studies. However, much of the existing HR and knowledge management literature persists in proclaiming the importance of providing knowledge workers with a secure, lucrative and fulfilling work environment. The Avatar case highlights how neither job nor role security, financial stability nor organisational commitment were required to become ones of the world's most financially successful and innovative organisations. Instead dogged prioritisation of financial concerns, centralising decision making, ensuring rigid hierarchical control, demanding a contribution and continually depleting resources was the route to high performance and organisational success.

What the Avatar case demonstrates is how employees' subjective orientation was defined, not by one structure, but by the relationship between the three structures, most notably the dominance of the financial structures over the normative and work structures. Furthermore it was not any purposeful colonisation of their affective domain that drove employee subjectivity, it was keen awareness. The pursuit of financial targets translated into initiatives that resulted in losses for employees including chronic job, role and career insecurity and median financial rewards. Employees experienced these to varying degrees; however all had an insight into how financial targets shaped the work environment in general.

Despite persistent top management booming, rhetorical claims to the contrary, employees in Avatar were painfully aware of their insecure status as an organisation cost to be minimised. In fact the rhetorical claims that employees were a valued, all important asset, only served to infuriate employees who interpreted them as an indication that, not only did top management afford employees little consideration in

their decision making, but they did not even respect employees enough to acknowledge the negative consequences of these decisions. The force of this market driven hierarchy also drove employees' positive perception of the elements of their work they felt they had some ownership of. Work was almost a form of escapism from goings on in the wider organisational context and provided the only avenue for employees to inject meaning and purpose into their daily working lives. This meant that employee frustration was exacerbated when the financial structures obstructed the elements of work that they appreciated. Continually depleting resources, outsourcing, centralisation, re-organisations, short-termism, all got in the way of the creation of autonomous, work focused, supportive social groupings.

Ultimately employees in Avatar were primarily angry and insecure but they worked hard. Their anger and insecurity was situated insofar as they felt employees, as a distinct category on the lowest rung of the hierarchy, bore the brunt of the initiatives undertaken in the pursuit of profit. It was employees' awareness of their powerless status and the contradictions between the structures that made them so protective of their subjective orientation.

What the Avatar case demonstrates is how vacuous, reified, universal notions of commitment and work as something distinct from the capitalist context in which they are situated are largely inappropriate for understanding the employment experience in shareholder driven organisations and actually do a considerable disservice to the harsh, pluralist realities experienced by employees.

8.2: REVISITING STRUCTURE AND SUBJECTIVITY

8.2.1: Structure and Subjectivity in Avatar

At the outset of this research, I did not have such a structured view of Avatar as I did not know how the organisation operated. The main factor leading me to my structured view of Avatar's world was the extent of powerlessness employees reported feeling, particularly in relation to the financial and normative structures. There was a sense that top management could undertake any initiative precisely because there were

hierarchically driven, structures which employees felt they could not shape. The force of these structures, and the initiatives they generated shaped employee subjectivity.

The structure-subjectivity relationship did not play out in an automatic, uniform way across the organisation. Instead, the indeterminate space created by each structure was different. In relation to the financial structures, the initiatives undertaken to achieve financial targets were designed in isolation by top management for example, redundancies, centralisation, re-organisations, and mandated projects. Employees did not shape the outcome insofar as they did not have any input as to whether these initiatives came to pass. This meant that the indeterminacy around the financial structures was primarily about employees' subjective interpretation of these decisions; it was a 'subjective indeterminacy'. Top management sought to fill this subjective indeterminacy with the normative structures but failed, however these initiatives still came to pass. Within the work and normative structures, there was a wider indeterminate space as employees were required to undertake certain actions for these structures to be enacted; it was an 'active indeterminacy'. In terms of the normative structures, the active indeterminacy was filled through hierarchy and market incentives, i.e. employees had to participate in the normative structures to secure jobs, training, pay raises and bonuses. In terms of the work structures, management sought to fill the active indeterminacy by controlling the endgame of contribution. The indeterminate space was also filled by employees themselves who sought to contribute and achieve work targets to derive a sense of a self worth and purpose.

In the case of Avatar there was little in the way of affective colonisation which further demonstrates the force of these market driven, hierarchical structures. Furthermore, it demonstrates how indeterminacy in the workplace emerges within a certain structural context; it is situated indeterminacy. This opens up the question of employee interests, namely what factors shaped the largely consistent employee reactions to these structures. Put simply, employees' anger and insecurity were a consequence of the chronic job, role and monetary insecurity and the lack of voice. Employees experienced these to varying degrees but most recognised they existed and this had material and symbolic implications. Most cited real material concerns regarding the value and security of their remuneration and their ability to meet personal financial commitments. The insecurity and the lack of voice also created a damaging sense of worthlessness.

Ultimately, employees desired material security and a secure sense of self worth. These were largely undermined by the financial and normative structures and the work structures emerged as the primary mechanism for enhancing it.

8.2.2: Avatar and the Wider Structure and Subjectivity Debate

It is worthwhile reflecting on how the Avatar case informs the wider ongoing debate on structure and subjectivity within industrial sociology. Conceptualisations of the post-industrial economy, knowledge work and normative control, discussed in chapter two, have facilitated the emergence of post-structural accounts of the work environment. Post-structuralists claim there is no definitive relationship between structure and subjectivity in the workplace and individual interpretations of working life varies significantly. However the Avatar case exposes how this ambivalence to the impact of capitalism and structures is flawed. In Avatar the financial pressures of shareholder capitalism permeated the organisation structuring social relations at all levels to define, and often undermine, the lives of those at work. In making this point, the Avatar case strongly supports the work of labour process writers who, since the 1970's, have produced robust case studies demonstrating how macro, capitalist social relations translate into workplace structures that transform labour power and shape the lives of professional, skilled knowledge workers (Thompson and Smith, 2001; 2009; Thompson, 2003).

The Avatar case also highlights the continued analytical richness of actor categories such as 'capital', 'management' and 'labour'. Within Avatar, these specific categories were well recognised by all level of stakeholders and had real implications. Top management and HR clearly identified employees as a homogenous group and made decisions about employees on these homogenous terms; for example around benefits, bonuses, training, headcount reduction, participation in decision making, information received, just to name a few. In fact, this homogenisation was required for decision making. Top management purposely avoided understanding the detail of employee needs so that they could make sweeping decisions. The fact that employees had such consistent views of structures and management decisions highlights the extent to which those structures and decisions similarly affected employees. In other words, these

structures and decisions were similarly perceived by employees precisely because employees had similar interests, namely, material security and a secure sense of self worth. The manner in which these interests were consistently undermined meant employees in Avatar experienced a 'degradation of worth'.

This is not to say that these interests were unique to employees, or that individuals did not have different interests based on their personal life situation. The point is, employees as a distinct category, were significantly more vulnerable to having their interests undermined than other stakeholders. It was this collective vulnerability that informed the employees' situated, embedded view that the structures culminated to undermine their interests; it was a starkly pluralistic environment. If I had failed to give the Avatar financial structures due attention, not only would this have resulted in an incomplete picture of what was taking place in Avatar, it would amount to a considerable disservice to the awareness employees had of the harsh realities they were aware they were facing. Ultimately, the Avatar case demonstrates the extent to which work and employees' perceptions of their working life are firmly embedded in capitalist processes; a point labour process theorists have been making for decades.

Within Avatar, the only stakeholders that refused to believe in conflict and pluralism, and who denied that employees had definitive interests were top management and HR. For these groups this perspective was a source of convenience and a justification for removed, hierarchical decision making. On the one hand they treated employees as a homogenous group to facilitate decision making and on the other the denied this group had distinct interests of their own. The fact that this denial of interests was so explicitly damaging for employees in Avatar, exposes how academic works from the critical and post structural space, that deny employees any distinct status, can actually legitimise and sanction this suppressive managerial regime. What better way to suppress the employee voice than to claim there is none or what better way to ignore employee interests than to claim they don't exist? In corroborating this perspective such works, which claim to depict the contemporary employment experience, are surely ethically questionable.

8.3: CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

8.3.1. Contribution to Knowledge

The contribution that this thesis makes to existing literature will be summarised by looking at the literature relating to each of the three structures.

This thesis supports the political economy accounts of the connection between macro-economic pressures and workplace outcomes. The dominant theme in political economy literature is that capital markets pull apart and polarise the interests of economic actors namely capital, management and labour. These accounts are demonstrate how liberal market pressures are likely to cause certain outcomes for workplace actors. This thesis moves on from the macro level focus to provide a mid-range, in-depth, qualitative account of how the financial pressures of shareholder capitalism are passed down via discursive and structural practices, and socialisation of top management. In terms of the discursive practices, the act of 'market storytelling' details how an organisation interacts with financial markets in order to shape their own financial targets. The organisation was not wholly responsive to capital markets; top management actively participated in creating their own financial pressures in the hope that they would be well received by capital market actors. In terms of structures this thesis demonstrates how budgets can be appropriated as a seemingly objective legal basis via which financial targets can be transferred. Budgets can also serve as a mechanism to communicate targets, and monitor and discipline performance. It is worthwhile considering how this international mechanism affects the role of national institutions; which are often positioned as a key variable in literature exploring the relationship between international pressures and firm level actors (see for example Hall and Soskice, 2001; Morgan and Kristensen, 2006). Specifically, it is worth considering that budgeting processes sit atop national level institutional arrangements. In this manner, budgeting processes provide top management with a seemingly objective, supranational, regulatory mechanism, which institutionalises a decision making distance between top management and local level actors. In other words, where budgeting processes are appropriated as the primary mechanism for parent-subsidiary interaction, the employee voice, whatever its institutional form, becomes further removed from the decision making process that shapes working lives. Finally, the manner in which the composition of the subsidiary team of directors shaped the actions of these directors

demonstrates the force of the socialisation. All directors participated in the same type of market incentive arrangements. However the local, non-expatriate directors demonstrated greater understanding and awareness of how pursuit of financial targets negatively impacted the job, role and financial security of lower levels. The expatriate directors were more likely to avoid acknowledging these negative consequences. Given that the expatriate directors held the key decision making roles, namely the roles of Chief and Executive Officer and Chief Financial Officer, the composition of the team of directors meant their actions were aligned with the financial interests of the parent. So the socialisation of top management can contribute to their willingness to prioritise financial targets and reluctance to engage in any active acknowledgement or alleviation of the consequences for lower levels.

In terms of the literature on normative structures, this thesis demonstrates the limits of existing accounts, particularly of the role of HRM. Avatar's business model was about developing high price, knowledge intensive, 'smart' products and services. Management and HR literature claim that organisations with this 'high road' business model can derive competitive benefits from adopting 'high-road', HR practices. The understanding is that knowledge results in profits and knowledge workers are more likely to offer up their high-road, valuable, tacit knowledge in organisations that provide high-road, empowering, lucrative and secure jobs. This, it is claimed, is the basis of cohesiveness and mutuality amongst economic actors in the knowledge economy. However this thesis demonstrates the impact of budgetary classification on an organisations willingness to invest in employees. Job and financial security results in high OPEX and high OPEX is not a good market story. In fact, it is difficult to see how employees can be treated as a valuable resource when, in the financial flows of the organisation, they are not an asset with a potential return on investment, they are an unrecoverable cost to be minimised. This structurally embedded clash of interests undermines the likelihood that mutual gains and reciprocity will emerge amongst economic actors. Aware of this clash of interests, many authors have queried how organisational claims that it values knowledge workers sit with increasing job and financial insecurity. What this thesis demonstrates is that 'high-road' rhetoric can be combined with 'low-road' HR processes with the contradiction between them seemingly explained away, by top management at least, by claims that the organisation is a meritocracy. This thesis also provides an alternative explanation for the functional role of 'high-road' HRM rhetoric. High road rhetoric can create the impression amongst

financial markets that the organisation is globally aligned towards achievement of the business goals. Optimistic rhetoric can also facilitate top management control, not in the manner proclaimed in literature, but by providing top management with a discursive shield which they can use to avoid acknowledging the negative consequences of some decisions for employees. The 'high road' rhetoric need not create a positive employee orientation to the organisation, but it can certainly suppress negative views by sending the message to employees that their harsher 'low-road' experience is not up for discussion. In other words, high road rhetoric can facilitate top management abdication of responsibility of employee related issues leaving them free to pursue the financial goals.

In terms of work structures, this thesis provides a detailed breakdown of knowledge work in one organisation. Furthermore it provides a range of analytical angles which can be used to avoid reified explorations of knowledge work and instead allow the researcher to arrive at a more holistic, structurally embedded understanding of knowledge work. The six analytical angles are:

i. Strategic contribution and budgetary source
ii. Steps in the work process
iii. The role of networks and teams
iv. The desired behavioural traits
v. The application of tacit and explicit knowledge
vi. The various ways in which the work is controlled

These six angles allow the researcher to uncover different aspects of knowledge work. By using these angles, this thesis indentifies two types of knowledge work, namely operational work, which is about keeping the organisation going, and generative work, which is about creating something new. In doing so this thesis moves on from knowledge based views of the firm by demonstrating how knowledge can be a means to a strategic and financial end, not an end in itself. Financial goals can reach right down into an organisation via legally mandated budgeting systems to mould knowledge work and extract a specific type of contribution from knowledge workers.

In addition to the aforementioned contributions, this thesis re-affirms the richness of traditional analytical concepts such as hierarchy, bureaucracy, pluralism, command and control, and capital-labour conflict. It also adds to these concepts by identifying a range of contemporary phenomena associated with shareholder capitalism and knowledge

work. These include market storytelling, financialisation of organisation structures, flexibedience, interpretive choice, dual hierarchies, HR as a vanity project, knowledge work as a contribution, managing upwards, profiling, self-skilling, durability of work, job and role insecurity and the emergence of the angry, insecure, high performing knowledge worker.

In light of these contributions, it is worthwhile reflecting on the implications for future research.

8.3.2: Future Research

This thesis brings together three bodies of literature to arrive at a more holistic understanding of knowledge work. In doing so, the findings of this thesis open up a range of novel research avenues for academics interested in understanding contemporary, knowledge intensive workplaces.

This thesis presents mechanisms that facilitate the transfer of macro-economic market pressures to the workplace. More research into the role of these mechanisms in other settings would be valuable. Perhaps the most pertinent question this thesis raises is whether budgets play such a dominant role in other organisations and in other, more co-ordinated, institutional settings. In addition to this, research into the role and impact of market storytelling and multi-national management communities in other organisations would also be valuable.

This thesis highlights the limits of existing accounts on the role and impact of normative structures and HRM. It demonstrates how a qualitative exploration of HRM that incorporates the views of a range of stakeholders can yield conclusions different to those studies that attempt to understand the role and impact of such practices by reading management texts and rhetoric. Further research exploring line managers and employees perceptions of HRM and HPWS would contribute to a more thorough understanding of the role such systems play. Also, it would be valuable to explore the extent to which high road rhetoric and low road practices are combined in other organisations. This thesis also raises questions about the nature of commitment. This thesis demonstrates that knowledge workers need not be committed to the organisation,

nor do they need to feel secure or engaged in order to maintain a high level of performance. More extensive explorations into what knowledge workers are committed to and what drives their performance would be valuable.

This thesis highlights the value in exploring how knowledge work is embedded within, and shaped by, the organisations strategic financial goals. Future research into knowledge work would benefit from moving away from reified notions of knowledge work as being primarily about knowledge creation and move towards exploring how knowledge work is embedded in organisational financial goals. The analytical angles identified in this thesis represent a potential starting point for such research. Explorations of knowledge work, using these angles, in other settings and could provide much needed insight into how different forms of knowledge co-ordination function and interact. This would facilitate greater understandings of how knowledge work is managed and enacted and therefore provide more robust images of the variables shaping the knowledge work experience.

8.4 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This thesis explored the impact of the liberal market model of capitalism that is oriented towards the pursuit of shareholder value. Whilst I was in Avatar the cracks in this model of capitalism began to appear with the start of the 2007 'credit crunch'. One year later the world was in a full blown, international financial crisis and financial capitalism in general was thrown into disrepute.[113] The problems created by the crisis continue to be played out at the macro level as regulators of economies and financial markets seek to come to terms with the depth of the collapse and how to generate growth. At the micro, organisational level, leading management thinkers who so famously heralded the efficiency gains of pursuing shareholder value are now downplaying their earlier optimism. The common claim is that shareholder value was never meant to be a management strategy, but only an outcome of 'good' management. Most notably Jack Welch, who coined the phrase 'shareholder value' in 1981 by stating that *'purpose of business is to increase shareholder value'* said in 2009 *'shareholder value is the*

[113] See Philips, (2008) for a discussion of the financial crisis. The uniqueness of this crisis has been called into question by Reinhart and Rogoff (2009).

dumbest idea in the world'. Indeed it may have been, but it is difficult to see from where the impetus for structural change could come. Furthermore, the notion that the 'market' is self-regulating, which Keynes proclaimed was so dangerous, has not been wholly undermined (Skidelsky, 2009*)*. More materially, the pursuit of profit, legal protection of shareholder interests and weak labour regulatory regimes all remain institutionally enshrined in liberal market economies. The route to competitiveness does not appear to have been dramatically altered. The impact of the crisis continues to be felt at the level of the workplace as organisations face increasing financial pressures. If shareholder capitalism is known to create financial pressures, the financial crisis has made financial pressures all the more pronounced making the findings of this thesis all the more pertinent. For example, since I left Avatar, although the organisation as a whole continues to make billions in annual profit, further redundancies and cost cutting measures have been implemented.

Whatever 'post-crisis' structures emerge, the Avatar case still demonstrates the value of undertaking a holistic analysis of the myriad of structures shaping the workplace. Workplace structures converge and interact and it is the interaction between structures, as much as the content within them, that shapes the workplace and informs social relations and subjective orientations. In Avatar, it was the domination of the financial structures over the normative and work structures that created the anger and insecurity. Indeed, the force of structure highlights how subjectivity is situated and contextual, and the context is shaped by the structures. Reified notions of work and subjectivity as something distinct from the capitalist context in which it is situated only serve to render invisible the forces that shape, and often undermine, an individual's sense of who they are at work.

A personal hope is that future research will further explore what employees are experiencing every day and how broader structural forces converge to bring this experience into being. Of course, such accounts become ever more meaningful when they can be compared with research detailing what employees want.

Only by exploring the structural parameters that individuals must work within to fulfil their needs can we get a sense of the role and impact of work. Doing so represents a real opportunity for academics to play a leading role in producing more honest and meaningful accounts of contemporary working life.

Appendix 1: Interview Guides

DIRECTOR INTERVIEW GUIDE

Estimated Duration 1 - 1.5hours

Points to make

- Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you are aware I am conducting research into work at Avatar Ireland.
- This research will be used to produce a report that will be submitted to the directors and HR. It will also be used for my PhD thesis and associated works.
- Please rest assured that all information provided will be anonymised and will not be traceable to the organisation.
- For my own purposes I wish to record the interviews in order to help me manage and analyse the data I receive. If at any time you would like me to stop recording please say so. If you like I can send you a copy of the transcription for your review. Please note that pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions.
- During this interview we will touch off a number of areas however it is informal and therefore you should feel free to provide as much detail or examples as you see fit when responding.
- I am asking for your perspective as a member of the director team in general however it would also be great if you want to provide examples relating to your experiences with your department.
- We have X amount of time scheduled, if we do not get through all the topics I would be happy to re-convene as soon as your schedule permits.
- Do you have any questions before we proceed?

DIRECTOR INTERVIEW DISCUSSION POINTS

Introductions

- Career history, current role and responsibilities.
- What is it like to be here everyday

Avatar's current business goals and work environment:

- What are they
- Strategies for achieving them
- Challenges/opportunities
- Change/flexibility

Relationship between Avatar Global and Avatar Ireland

- Setting of organisation performance targets
- Influence of Global: strategic / day to day
- Relationship with shareholders

- Competitiveness within the Global group

Goal setting and achievement

- Competing interests amongst stakeholders
- Short–term .v. long-term: goal setting, work organisation, conflict
- Consideration given to employees in goal setting and decision making
- Work organisation
- Work intensity
- Resistance

Organisation Culture and HR

- Aims, role and importance
- Key messages, values, beliefs and norms
- Description of current culture, any disconnect between optimum and actual.
- Obstacles to creating ideal culture
- Perception of each HR practice, your own and wider view
- Clash between prescribed cultural practices and organisation goals

Sentence completion

- Come to Avatar if your looking for…
- Don't come to Avatar if your looking for...
- If you want to succeed in Avatar my advice is...

HR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Estimated Duration: 1 - 1.5 Hours

Points to make

- Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you are aware I am conducting research into work at Avatar Ireland.
- This research will be used to produce a report that will be submitted to the directors and HR. It will also be used for my PhD thesis and associated works.
- Please rest assured that all information provided will be anonymised and will not be traceable to the organisation.
- For my own purposes I wish to record the interviews in order to help me manage and analyse the data I receive. If at any time you would like me to stop recording please say so. If you like I can send you a copy of the transcription for your review. Please note that pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions.
- During this interview we will touch off a number of areas however it is informal and therefore you should feel free to provide as much detail or examples as you see fit when responding.
- I am asking for your perspective as a member of the HR team however it would also be fine if you want to discuss your perspective as an employee.
- We have X amount of time scheduled, if we do not get through all the topics I would be happy to re-convene as soon as your schedule permits.
- Do you have any questions before we proceed?

HR INTERVIEW DISCUSSION POINTS

Introductions

- Career history, current role and responsibilities.
- What is it like to be here everyday

HR

- HR strategy and purpose/vision
- HR's key 'customers'
- What the organisation wants from HR
- What employees want from HR
- Challenges, obstacles
- Flexibility, work intensity

Corporate Culture

- Aims, role and importance
- HR processes for defining and managing culture
- Key messages, values, beliefs and norms
- Description of current culture, any disconnect between optimum and actual.
- Obstacles to creating ideal culture
- Perception of specific people management practices
- Clash between prescribed cultural practices and organisation goals
- Resistance
- Key messages, values, beliefs and norms

- Relationship between organisation goals and financial targets and the cultural messages
- Emphasis on individual potential, flexibility and empowerment in HR documentation

HR Practices

- Purpose, function and perceived contribution of your HR area
- How HR processes are formulated
- Balancing stakeholder needs
- Challenges, obstacles
- Negative reaction to HR practices
- Resistance in general

Sentence completion

- Come to Avatar if your looking for…
- Don't come to Avatar if your looking for...
- If you want to succeed in Avatar my advice is...

LINE MANAGER INTERVIEW GUIDE
Estimated duration: 1-1.5 hours.

Points to make

- Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you are aware I am conducting research into work at Avatar Ireland.
- This research will be used to produce a report that will be submitted to the directors and HR. It will also be used for my PhD thesis and associated works.
- Please rest assured that all information provided will be anonymised and will not be traceable to the organisation or to you.
- For my own purposes I wish to record the interviews in order to help me manage and analyse the data I receive. If at any time you would like me to stop recording please say so. If you like I can send you a copy of the transcription for your review. Please note that pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions.
- During this interview we will touch off a number of areas however it is informal and therefore you should feel free to provide as much detail or examples as you see fit when responding.
- I am asking for your perspective as a manager however it would also be fine if you want to discuss your perspective as an employee of the organisation.
- We have X amount of time scheduled, if we do not get through all the topics I would be happy to re-convene as soon as your schedule permits.
- Do you have any questions before we proceed?

LINE MANAGER INTERVIEW DISCUSSION POINTS

Introductions

- Career history, current role and responsibilities.
- What is it like to be here everyday

Avatar's current business goals and work environment:

- Business priorities / goals of Avatar Ireland and what does this mean for your work area?
- Avatar work environment and what factors have created this environment?
- Change / flexibility

Relationship between Avatar Global and Avatar Ireland

- Setting of organisation performance targets
- Role/influence of Global: strategic / day to day
- Relationship with shareholders
- Competitiveness within the Global group
- Employee perception of business strategy

Work Organisation

- How is work planned, scheduled, organised, monitored
- Work intensity
- Change / flexibility
- Your typical day

- Competing / contradictory goals
- Motivation tactics
- Types of conflict / resistance
- Mechanisms for employee feedback
- Challenges and benefits of being a people manager in Avatar

Corporate Culture / HR

- Aims, role and importance
- Key messages, values, beliefs and norms
- Description of current culture, any disconnect between optimum and actual
- Obstacles to creating ideal culture
- Alignment/clash between prescribed cultural practices and organisation goals
- Role and perception of HR
- Perception of each HR practice, you own and your teams
- Realising potential, employee development

Sentence completion

- Come to Avatar if you're looking for…
- Don't come to Avatar if you're looking for...
- If you want to succeed in Avatar my advice is...

EMPLOYEE INTERVIEW GUIDE
Estimated duration: 1-1.5 hours.

Points to make

- Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you are aware I am conducting research into work at Avatar Ireland.
- This research will be used to produce a report that will be submitted to the directors and HR. It will also be used for my PhD thesis and associated works.
- Please rest assured that all information provided will be anonymised and will not be traceable to the organisation or to you.
- For my own purposes I wish to record the interviews in order to help me manage and analyse the data I receive. If at any time you would like me to stop recording please say so. If you like I can send you a copy of the transcription for your review. Please note that pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions.
- During this interview we will touch off a number of areas however it is informal and therefore you should feel free to provide as much detail or examples as you see fit when responding.
- We have X amount of time scheduled, if we do not get through all the topics I would be happy to re-convene as soon as your schedule permits.
- Do you have any questions before we proceed?

EMPLOYEE INTERVIEW DISCUSSION POINTS

Introductions

- Career history, current role and responsibilities.
- What is it like to be here everyday

Work

- Average working day
- What it's like to work in Avatar, environment, likes, dislikes
- How work is communicated, planned, scheduled, organised, monitored
- Input, influence over work
- Predictability, change, flexibility
- Examples of dissatisfaction with decision and action taken
- Resistance
- Consistencies, conflict and contradictions experienced

Relationship between Avatar Global and Avatar Ireland

- Role/influence of Global
- Executive teams priorities
- Avatars business strategy, goals and what this means for you
- Competitiveness within the Global group

Corporate Culture / HR

- Aims, role and importance
- Key messages, values, beliefs and norms

- Consistencies/contradictions between prescribed HR practices, organisation goals and what it's like to be here everyday
- Role and perception of HR
- What employee wants from HR
- Perception of each HR practice
- Realising potential, employee development

Sentence completion

- Come to Avatar if you're looking for…
- Don't come to Avatar if you're looking for...
- If you want to succeed in Avatar my advice is...

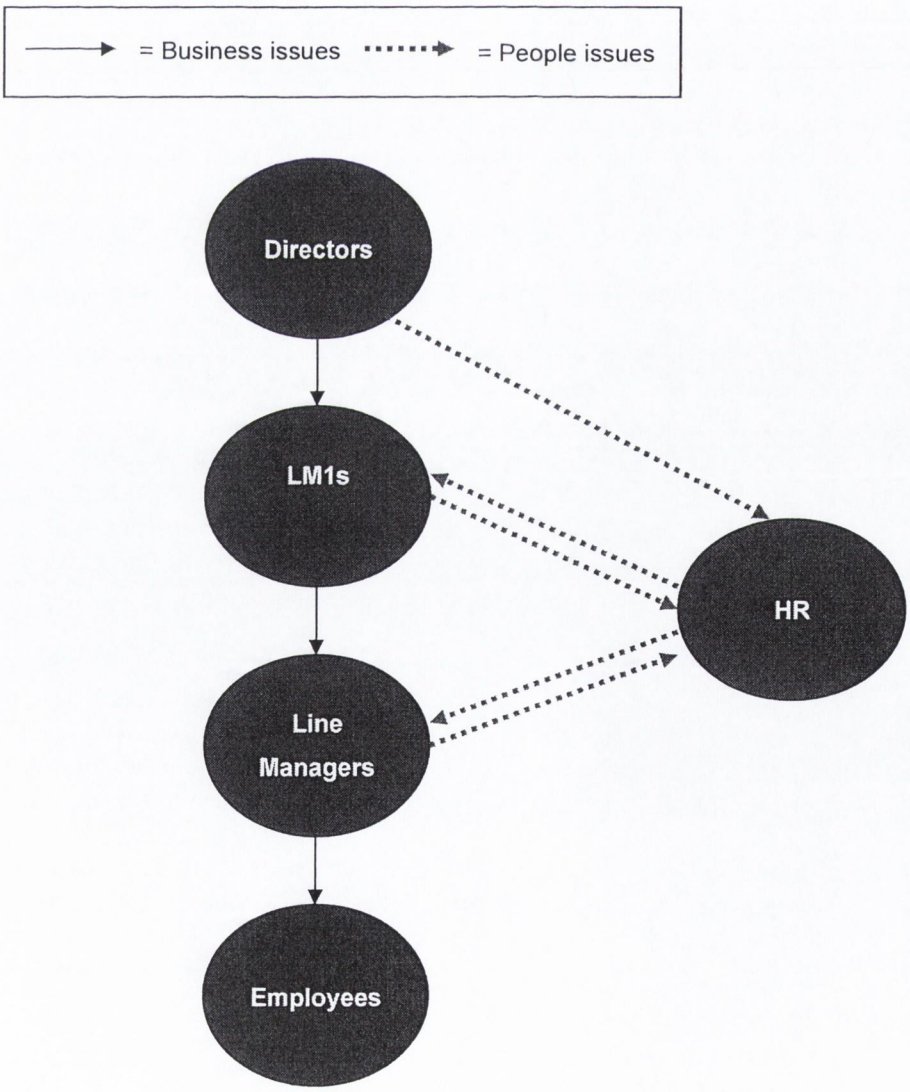
Appendix 2: Avatar Report Extract

SECTION 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.2: Recommendations for the Team of Directors

- Before going into detailed recommendations it is worth acknowledging that this report discusses a number of cultural issues that appear to be embedded in the organisation that would take time and energy to address in a meaningful manner.

- Currently the 'people issues' are fighting for relevance. Set out in the diagram below is an overview of the current business and people management processes. What this illustrates is the manner in which the focus of the team of directors appears to be on business delivery, with people issues being delegated to human resources and line managers.



- The directors need to consider the extent to which they wish to move away from this model or whether they are satisfied with the current culture, as described in the interviews, of task execution, lack of challenging discussion and suppression of people issues.

- Unless directors are willing to take grater ownership of the link between the business and people issues it is unlikely that the employment experience will change. Assuming the directors wish to address these issues set out below are two key recommendations for consideration.

First Recommendation: Engage with Employees

- The first recommendation relates to re-energising employees. It appears that not enough has been done to identify the actual employment benefits of [working in Avatar]. Therefore the first recommendation is for the directors to engage with a cross functional team of employees to define the actual optimum employment experience.

- For this initiative to succeed it cannot be viewed as something 'done onto' employees by the organisation or HR. Whilst there is certainly a key role for HR to play it would be strongly advisable for the directors to own the process with HR there to provide support as directed by the team. This would mean that HR do not act as team facilitators but attend only as observers and to provide information on current HR processes. HR could also take ownership of work arising from team meetings, such as meeting notes and drafting of documents. Employees need to feel like they own and shape the process. The roles of employees and executives should be to undertake brainstorming, with HR there as a resource for the team to use as they see fit.

- The purpose of such an exercise is not to replace existing people management tools such as Brand Essence or the Avatar people strategy. Rather directors could acknowledge that in their current form, these tools are not robust enough to be meaningful. This initiative represents an opportunity to breathe some real life into current tools as they could be used as a starting point for discussions.

- For example the Avatar people strategy could be positioned as something handed down from Group, which it is, and instead of trying to convince people that it is an accurate description of the organisation the 'director-employee team' could discuss how far removed the organisation is from reaching this state and the key challenges to getting there. So existing tools are not being shelved but made more real.

- Caution should be taken when launching this initiative to avoid overly positive 'spin' and promises of all satisfying outcomes. Rather it should be positioned as what it is, namely the directors wishing to engage with employees to identify and address the gaps to arriving at the optimum employment experience for both the organisation and employees.

- Once this optimum experience is defined it will only be of value if it is integrated into the directors' decision making process. This would mean that decisions made in relation to organisation changes, propositions, working process and Group mandates be considered in terms of their impact on the employment experience.

- The purpose of this recommendation is not to make decision making more cumbersome but to make it more effective. Nor does it imply that decisions be made on the basis of their popularity. Rather it should serve to better inform the directors of the costs and benefits of decisions and to help ensure effective allocation of resources.

- Once the employment experience consequences of decisions are understood directors will have a more realistic and accurate picture of the challenges surrounding decisions and the support that line managers will require for effective implementation.

- Furthermore, to ensure continuation of the process the 'director-employee team' should meet at least quarterly to undertake a diagnostic of whether the deal is being maintained and any apparent challenges.

Second Recommendation: Engage with Line Managers

- The second recommendation relates to line management behaviour and competence. The recommendation is for the directors to make people issues a more legitimate topic of conversation in discussions with their managers.

- A revised employment deal could serve as a basis for discussion with managers setting out the elements they feel they cannot control and the areas in which they need support. This requires directors signing up to investing more time for discussing people issues with managers and providing more hands on support when issues arise.

- Support may take the form of authorising any necessary changes to work or people management processes or coaching the manager as to how best to handle a situation. Until line managers feel that such discussions are important to the directors, and that acknowledging difficulties is not viewed as a failing on their part, it is unlikely that managers will ever initiate these discussions. Therefore it is critical that directors take ownership of the process.

- The alternative is for the directors to continue to make decisions in something of a 'positive' vacuum and to perpetuate the suppression of people issues and the current perplexity around employee discontentment.

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