

Why identity matters

Understanding identity, the benefits of managing it and how we can use it for ourselves



What do we mean by identity?

The concept of identity is becoming ever-more prevalent within conversations relating to personal and organisational development.

"In its most fundamental form, identity can be defined as the inner core or true self."

HBR, December, 2002: page 43

As consumers, it can be regarded as how we see ourselves (HBR, January, 2015: 90).

From an organisational perspective it can be defined as the sum of all of the ways a company chooses to identify itself to all of its publics, including the community, customers, employees, press (Margulies, W. 1977: 66).

These definitions highlight how identities can have both a private form and public projection. Such identities have inherent power through their ability to support personal and organisational change.

How identities can benefit organisations?

Organisations invest millions of dollars in developing their corporate identities. Do they receive payback? (HBR, 2003: page 13).

Research shows that such investments can herald commercial payback if handled well.

Within a merger, if both brand identities are fused with care, such as the case with JPMorgan Chase, three years post-merger the rate of return can exceed the market by 3% (HBR, September, 2011: page 26). Moreover, carefully managed identities can help to obtain financing, attract new customers whilst increasing corporation valuations by financial analysts (Margulies, W. 1977: 66).

Organisational identities can cultivate attachment with employees through considered employer branding (HBR, 2003: page 13), thereby developing employee loyalty.

Furthermore, through tapping into consumer social identities, organisations can influence purchasing behaviour. For

example, Toyota took market share from the Honda Civic through targeting the "environmental supporters", positioning the Prius model as the only sole hybrid car on the market.

Research shows that remarkably, it can take just 20 minutes of focused marketing effort to develop new social identities for consumers and cultivate attachment.

"It's surprisingly easy to make consumers switch identities and even to give them new ones. That presents marketers with a rich opportunity."

HBR, January, 2015: page 96

How can individuals use identities?

Research into personal identities unearths a more complex dynamic at play. As individuals we can choose to access and develop a multitude of possible selves.

Here possible selves can be

Why identity matters

defined as: a concept of ourselves in future states (Erikson, 2007: page 348), which can be defined by history and the present, but also future hopes and fears (HBR, 2002: page 43).

What this means is that we can choose to change who we are, both within our work and our life as a whole. Being able to develop numerous personal identities means we can operate within a range of spheres.

But research shows that this can take time, especially within the cultivation of work identities as a consequence of a career transition:

“Most career transitions take about three years. It is rarely a linear path: we take two steps forward and one step back, and where we end up often surprises us.”

Professor Herminia Ibarra (HBR, May, 2002: page 45)

When developing new personal identities our only limitations are our personal levels of inventiveness and our perceived social constraints (Markus, H. and Nurius, P. 1986: page 954).

How our personal identity can support reinvention

Despite these available possibilities, personal reinvention can be experienced as tricky and challenging. However, insight shows that the problem can lie in the method and not necessarily our lack of motivation:

“To launch ourselves anew, we need to get out of our heads. We need to act.”

Professor Herminia Ibarra (HBR, May, 2002: page 44)

Rather than over-thinking, we need to take small steps, to experiment, test and learn. Doing comes first and knowing later.

When developing our personal identities and encouraging personal reinvention, there are some useful steps to take:

1. **Crafting experiments** – our personal identity is defined by what we do, the activities that engage us. Try out new activities and roles on a small scale before making a major commitment to a different path
2. **Shifting connections** – our personal identity is also defined by the company we keep, our relationships and the groups to which we belong. Develop contacts that can open doors to new worlds and look for new reference groups to guide and benchmark progress
3. **Making sense** – our personal identity is also defined by the formative events in our lives and the stories that link who we were and who we will become. Find or create catalysts for change, and use

“When it comes to reinventing ourselves, the people who know us best are the ones most likely to hinder rather than help us.”

Professor Herminia Ibarra (HBR, May, 2002: page 44)

them as occasions to rework your life story

Top tip



Consider the stories that you tell to others that help to make sense of yourself

Reflect on the hoped for possible self that you wish to cultivate

Consider how you can adapt your stories to embrace this hoped for possible self: which stories you need to adapt and which to let go of to help you to evolve

What are my next steps?

Identify a hoped for possible self that you wish to cultivate.

Take small actions to experiment within that field and learn.

Make new connections that will encourage the fulfilment of that emerging identity.



About the writer

Cathy Brown
MSc, MBA

Cathy Brown is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, consultant and author. She runs Evolve Consulting Services Limited which works with individuals, teams and businesses to manage transition and change.

She works as a transition coach and a career counsellor with individuals and teams. She is also a guest lecturer at Nottingham University Business School. In addition, Cathy is a founding trustee of the Evolve Transition Trust, which supports disadvantaged people through life transitions.