

In search of culture-bound employee-corporation ties in an MNC

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper discusses the management of corporate identity in a multinational company. The case company faces challenges in its global operations on account of the different cultures. Specifically, the aim is *to identify the culturally significant attributes that tie employees to corporations*. Employee interviews give an internal perspective on corporate-identity management with regard to two research questions. First, on the individual level what factors tie employees to corporations? Second, what are the cultural characteristics influencing the employee-corporation relationship that MNCs need to consider in managing their corporate identity?

Design/methodology – An inductive, qualitative research approach was taken involving one multinational case company. In all, 232 semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with employees representing various organizational levels and departments, in four continents and ten countries: Chile, Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, France, Germany, the USA and Canada.

Findings –The researchers discovered two regionally distinctive categories of ties linking employees with corporations. It is proposed that employees bond with the company through experiencing “the corporation as an extension of the family” or seeing “the corporation as a means to personal development”.

Value – The formulation of useful theories requires a better understanding of cultural characteristics and their relatedness to corporate-identity management on a global scale. The contribution of this work to the theoretical development of these research fields lies in the width

and scope of the empirical data to an extent rarely seen in a single independent study. The proposed two regionally bound categories offer tools for better corporate-identity management.

Keywords - Corporate identity, employee-corporation tie, identification, culture, corporate-identity management in MNCs, case study

Introduction

In examining the role cultural characteristics play in employee-corporation ties, this paper discusses the management of corporate identity in an MNC. Inherent in the complex, heterogeneous multi-cultural business environment are challenges of the type addressed in this study. In spite of its importance there is surprisingly little empirical research on corporate-identity management (Cornelissen and Harris, 2001; Cornelissen and Elving, 2003), even though the theoretical concept of corporate identity has been the subject of lively discussion and debate over the years. There has been a rapid increase in interest however, and subsequently considerable expansion in the number of studies (Balmer and Wilson, 1998; Balmer, 2001; Cornelissen and Harris, 2001; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006) resulting in part to the diversification in the field (van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Balmer and Wilson, 1998; Balmer, 2001; van Riel, 1995; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002).

In managing the corporate identity the perceptions and attitudes of stakeholders towards a company need to be taken into account. Here, according to Hatch and Schultz (2008), companies need to consider *all* stakeholders, including their employees. It seems that the success and strength of the corporate identity depend greatly on employees (Hatch and Schultz, 1997), and their support and organizational identification are of prime importance to the organization as a whole (Kim, Chang and Ko, 2010). Employee identification with the corporate identity requires the alignment of cultural and organizational values. Thus far there are few studies covering this issue, and the aim in this one is to bridge the gap.

The existence of differences between cultures has been a subject for debate among scholars. It was supposedly Levitt (1983) who first proposed the idea of cultural homogenization. He claimed that globalization was transforming the world into a homo-cultural marketplace in which people shared the same needs and values, and could be influenced by similar communication appeals irrespective of the culture to which they belonged. He further envisioned the end of domestic territoriality and the disappearance of national tastes and modes of doing business. In accordance with these ideas, corporations should operate in the global world as if it were a single entity.

According to Holden (2004) on the other hand, cultural differences in the global marketplace remain, but should be seen not as a barrier but as a knowledge resource to be used in market interactions. A pervasive organizational culture may be problematic for a company, as Hatch and Schultz (2008) demonstrated in the case of British Airways (BA). Acting global from too narrow a cultural perspective is likely to create resistance among customers and employees. Centralized control lacks local sensitivity, and ignoring cultural influence may also result in declining profitability (Mooij, 2003).

There is thus a need to gain a deeper understanding of national, cultural characteristics in order to manage organizational convergence. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is *to identify the culturally significant attributes that tie employees to corporations*. Identification of the attributes is essential in managing a global corporate identity because it is via the employees that a consistent corporate identity in a multinational setting is created and sustained. Here cultural characteristics refer to differences between nationalities, and more specifically between employees in different countries. The use of a single-case study and of employee interviews brings an internal perspective. The case company, operating in multiple markets, faces challenges related to the different cultures involved. Two questions are addressed. First, on the individual level, what attributes tie employees to corporations? Second, what are the cultural characteristics

influencing the employee-corporation relationship that MNCs need to consider in managing their corporate identity?

The contribution of the study is twofold. In theoretical terms, the focus is on the internal aspect of corporate identity emphasizing the key role of employees in its management. This approach aims to further strengthen and direct the discussion towards the more fundamental issues in the field. Furthermore, in producing two categories of employee-corporation ties it complements the discussion on corporate-identity management in a multi-cultural context. For practitioners the implications lie in the more effective management of the corporate identity in providing a better understanding of the levels and types of ties that exist between employees and corporations. Let us first delve into the concept of corporate identity.

Corporate identity – an internal perspective

It is currently commonly agreed in the context of corporate identity that image cannot differ from reality (Abratt, 1989; Rindova and Schultz, 1998; Hatch and Schultz, 2008). Thus, corporate identity is fundamentally concerned with “what the organization is” (e.g., Olins, 1979; Bernstein, 1984; Dowling, 1986; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2007; van Riel, 1995; van Riel and Balmer, 1997). It could be defined as the sum of intangible and tangible assets that contribute to the uniqueness of the company (Bernstein, 1984; van Riel, 1995; Moigneon and Ramanantsoa, 1997; Markwick and Fill, 1997; Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Balmer, 2001). He and Balmer (2007) characterize corporate identity no more and no less as “the source and essence of a company”, and thus position the concept firmly in the strategic sphere of managerial interest.

Employees have assumed more importance in studies of corporate identity over the years. They have long been perceived as a key element in the management process (e.g., Kennedy, 1977; Dowling, 1986), but their more recent empowerment (e.g., Hatch and Schultz, 2008; Bartlett and Ghoshal, 2002; Stuart, 2002) has significantly enhanced their position and their role in the organization as a whole. Consequently, it could be argued that the values, beliefs and

Johanna Raitis & Ulla Hakala (2011), Work-in-process paper

feelings of employees carry notable weight in the formation and management of the corporate identity (cf. Foreman and Whetten, 2002; cf. Pratt and Foreman, 2000; cf. Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Recently the research has gone deeper (Balmer, 2008), and values held by the personnel, for instance, are considered to be the central elements reflecting the corporate identity (Balmer and Wilson, 1998; Balmer, 2001; Simões *et al.*, 2005; He and Balmer, 2007; Balmer, 2008). Thus employee contribution to the corporate identity via identification (cf. van Riel, 1995; cf. Balmer, 2008) could be seen as a key area of interest.

Here, too, we acknowledge the relevance of employees in its formation and management. It has become evident from earlier studies that successful management of the corporate identity requires successful management of the employees. Before discussing employee identification with the corporation, or corporate identity, in more detail we will first review some earlier studies on its management.

Corporate-identity management – a literature review

Research on corporate-identity management has been strongly influenced by the seminal work of Abratt from 1989. He introduced a conceptual framework for corporate-image management, in which the key factors were the corporate personality and identity. The influence of Abratt's (1989) paper is evident in later studies in which researchers focused on constructing linkages between various components or activities and investigated their relevance in corporate-identity or image-management processes (see e.g., Markwick and Fill, 1997; Stuart, 2002; Simoes *et al.*, 2005). Other studies, also aiming to contribute to the field, explored and determined the key elements or dimensions of corporate identity to which managers should pay attention (e.g., Cornelissen and Elving, 2003; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006).

The cornerstones in managing corporate identity include behavior (van Riel, 1995; Stuart, 2002; Cornelissen and Elving, 2003; Simoes *et al.*, 2005), symbolism or visual identity (van Riel,

1995; Stuart, 2002; Simoes *et al.*, 2005), communication (Abratt, 1989; van Riel, 1995; Markwick and Fill, 1997; Stuart, 2002; Cornelissen and Elving, 2003; Simoes *et al.*, 2005), strategy (Cornelissen and Elving, 2003), and structure (Abratt, 1989). According to Balmer (2002), however, as far as its management is concerned the elements of the corporate-identity mix need to be supplemented with environmental, stakeholder and reputational aspects.

The majority of studies thus far have discussed and proposed different frameworks for gaining an interdisciplinary perspective on and understanding of corporate-identity management, but the underlying dynamics of these models have been relatively neglected. Balmer (2002) suggests that the management of different stakeholder groups is worthy of managerial consideration. In the view of Markwick and Fill (1997), on the other hand, identity on the individual level concerns aspects of identification and recognition. All in all, researchers conclude that managing employee identification will lead to successful corporate-identity management. The next section reviews the construct of identification as a path to consistent corporate identity.

Employee identification – the route to a consistent corporate identity

Of growing interest in marketing, management and organizational research is the question of how individuals become identified with organizations (Cardador and Pratt 2006; Ravasi and van Rekom, 2003). This is attributable in part to the current, turbulent business environment in which individual-organizational relationships are in danger of being eroded, and tying an individual into the organization has become increasingly important (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). Yet, although the literature on identification in organizations is diverse and extensive (*ibid.*), there are relatively few core theories in the field (Cardador and Pratt, 2006).

By definition, identification occurs when members of an organization define themselves according to the same attributes as those they believe define the organization (e.g. Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Pratt, 1998; van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2006; Ashforth *et al.*,

2008). Thus, identification implies individual and organizational “oneness” (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) creating a sense of organizational membership (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Rousseau, 1998; van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2006). Similarly, Foreman and Whetten (2002) describe identification as an identity-comparison process, the resulting congruence or gap being an outcome of a comparison between identity perception and expectation. In any case, the significance of employee identification is directly linked to the employee’s level of involvement with the organization (van Dick, 2001; Foreman and Whetten, 2002). Consequently, strong identification is suggested to result in employee actions, behaviors and attitudes that, in general, translate into desirable outcomes (Stuart, 2002; Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Mael and Ashforth, 1992) from the corporate perspective. Finally, strong identification is considered to uphold a stable and consistent identity (Stuart, 2002).

According to Dutton *et al.* (1994), identification occurs via cognitive attachment. In other words, what the employees think of the organization (the perceived identity) and what they believe others think about it (the perceived image) shape the strength of employee identification (*ibid.*). As opposed to the cognitive approach Pratt (2000) stresses that promoting identification with an organization is more than just creating a link with the abstract entity. In fact, the best way is to link individuals to it by means of emotional bonds (Balmer, 2008; see also Herrbach, 2006). Thus, employee identification is most likely to occur when it is linked with motivational factors (Pratt, 2000) and prestige (Pratt, 1998), it is distinctive and of high saliency to the people involved (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003), and it supports their self-related needs thereby allowing them to think of themselves in a positive light (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Ashforth *et al.*, 2008).

The focus of this study is not on the process of identification as such (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008), but rather on the underlying attributes, corporate ties, that make people identify with a corporation in the first place. These fundamental attributes, reflecting the meaning of the company (Pratt, 2000) to the employees, are suggested to be the basis of and prerequisite for

Johanna Raitis & Ulla Hakala (2011), Work-in-process paper

strong identification. It is clear that identification can and should be managed, but without a thorough understanding of the underlying attributes among the different groups it is difficult (Cardador and Pratt, 2006). Previous studies have already demonstrated that the level of identification (Rousseau, 1998; Kreiner *et al.*, 2006) as well as its locus, e.g., occupation, profession, work group, organization (e.g. Mael and Ashforth, 1992; van Dick, 2001; van Knippenberg and van Schie, 2000; Ashforth *et al.*, 2008), can vary within organizational members. In her exceptional study involving an MNC, Reade (2001) also discovered that the factors promoting employee identification with the local subsidiary and the global corporation are different (Reade, 2001). In this study, the aim is to move toward a more “fine-grained” approach (see Cardador and Pratt, 2006), exploring the meaning – the importance – of a multinational company to employees representing various national cultures (Danesi and Perron, 1999).

Cultural values – tacit knowledge for managers

In order to find the attributes that tie employees to corporations in different countries we need to have an understanding of their culture. Culture, a multi-level concept that is crucial to the understanding of human behavior, has been defined in a number of ways. Here it is seen as the collective memory – the accumulation of shared meanings, rituals, norms, values and traditions – of group membership, as well as its manifestation. Families, professions, companies, regions, and nations all constitute groups (Mooij 2010), and accordingly we can refer to family cultures, organizational cultures, and national cultures. The organizational culture (see e.g., Larsson and Lubatkin, 2001; Hankinson and Hankinson, 1999; Deshpandé and Webster 1989) could be described as a driving force or pattern characterizing the way employees think, behave and interact within the group, and influencing their commitment, satisfaction and productivity. Understanding and accounting for employee behavior will contribute to the success of the

corporate identity. Furthermore, there is presumably a link between consistency in cultural values and a coherent corporate identity.

The different organizational cultures that are nested in different national cultures in an MNC are brought together to form a jointly determined culture, thereby placing considerable pressure on managers to comply with the varying beliefs, assumptions and values (see Larsson and Lubatkin, 2001; also Chernatony, 2007). Our interest in this study lies in the meanings *employees* associate with their workplace, the assumption being that there are differences in national cultures that influence the organizational cultures in the operating countries. Like Williams (1981¹), we understand culture to be located within identifiable boundaries, even though globalization is making this notion increasingly problematic. Figure 1 delineates the culturally polymorphic setting of the study and the case company. Aiming at similar organizational conditions, practices and corporate behavior in its units all around the world, the case company faces challenges on account of the different cultures.

“Take in Figure (No.1)”

Studies on culture have traditionally focused on differences in values between various groups. The assumption is that people have different cultures because their values are different. (Fontaine, 2007.) One of the most widely cited notions is Hofstede’s (1983) concept of culture and the four/five dimensions² of differences in the values of organizational employees. His research represents the classic approach to cross-cultural management based on differences in behavior. It has faced criticism however (e.g., Smith, 1996), and new approaches are called for (e.g., Holden, 2004).

¹ Cited in Barker (2005, 40). Original source: Williams, Raymond (1981) *Culture*. London: Fontana.

² Originally there were four dimensions [Individualism-Collectivism; Power distance; Uncertainty avoidance; and Masculinity-Femininity] but a fifth one, Long-term orientation, was added later (Darlington 1996, 35).

Holden (2004), in contrast, sees culture not as something one must get by with, but as a knowledge resource that could serve as input in management and marketing decisions. He refers to it as a system of meanings that marketing helps to create and maintain as a function of its relationship-management activities. It is tacit knowledge, comprising beliefs, mental models and perceptions that are taken for granted. Considering a foreign market through the prism of relationships, consisting of clusters of affinity, enables the specific nature of global markets to be taken into account. According to the knowledge-management approach, cross-cultural experience is fundamentally a never-ending learning experience (Fontaine, 2007). Dalton (2002) encourages global managers to learn as much as possible about the geography, religion, history, biography, politics, philosophy and sociology of a particular country in order to gain a deeper understanding of its value priorities. Cross-cultural awareness is considered to increase the ability of a multi-cultural team to perform successfully. According to Darlington (1996), it is essential for MNC managers to understand and adapt to cultural and national characteristics in order to establish and manage good relationships across different cultures.

Only a part of the values that drive behavior are visible. For instance, when people talk about changing values due to globalization, they are actually changes in cultural practice, i.e. in everyday manners. (Mooij 2010.) We name this the overt level of culture. However, solid comparison of national cultures and their differences requires us to look at the more profound, covert level: the value priorities, i.e. the most basic values and beliefs that underlie the surface (Figure 2). Understanding the covert level of culture is indeed the challenging part. According to Dalton (2002), it is at this higher end of the spectrum that global managers should apply their knowledge. Being strongly rooted in history, the underlying values remain stable through generations and appear to be resistant to change (Mooij 2003; Mooij 2010). Being immersed in a country's value priorities can teach a great deal about the role of work in the lives of its people, for instance.

“Take in Figure (No. 2)”

Hofstede (1991), among others, suggests that culture is learned, not inherited. If this is true it is possible to learn new cultural traits and to unlearn old ones. Moreover, it may be possible to integrate organizational cultures when generating strategic options. The better business managers are aware of their own deeply held values as well as of others' values, the better they can work with people from other cultures and achieve corporate goals. (Darlington, 1996; Trompenaars, 1993) Moreover, Bonthouse (1994) argues in proposing a business-intelligence model³ that the primary reasons for business failure include inadequate information about the business environment and a lack of understanding of foreign cultures.

Study design

This study is an example of inductive, qualitative research involving one multinational case company. A qualitative method was chosen as it is well suited to capturing contextual factors (e.g., Marschan-Piekkari *et al.*, 2004), gaining a holistic understanding (Miles and Huberman, 1994), and identifying new variables and relationships (e.g., Shah and Corley, 2006). The context in this study refers to the characteristics of the organizational setting (Rousseau, 1978) that may shape the responses of the interviewees in one way or another. In order to increase the credibility and authenticity of the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994) we limited the research to a single case in order to eliminate the range of variables inherent in different corporate settings. Furthermore, given that a single-case study is likely to catch the complexity of the case company (Stake, 1995) and that it is the people who make the company and not vice versa, a single-case approach

³ For more detail on Bonthouse's model of business intelligence systems [in which cultures and ideologies are considered critical in doing international business], see Bonthouse, J.M. (1994) “Culture – the missing intelligence variable”. *The Strategic Planning Society News*.

emphasizing the number of employees rather than the number of companies as study objects, seemed reasonable.

Single-case methodology is principally justifiable in situations in which the company represents a fairly typical case or when the researcher has the opportunity to study a phenomenon that has thus far been inaccessible to scientific investigation (Yin, 2003). The case company in this study is a large, multinational organization employing more than 14,000 people with operations in North America, South America, Europe, Australia, Africa, and the emerging market region of Asia. It is a high-technology engineering group with advanced B2B products. As a result of multiple acquisitions it has the most extensive product portfolio in the market and a world-leading position in selected areas. The company was selected based on its global presence, global business strategy and global corporate values that aim at similar organizational conditions, practices and corporate behavior in its units all around the world. Moreover, the unlimited access granted by all of the company units represented an intriguing opportunity from the scientific perspective.

For collecting the data face-to-face interviewing was applied on account of the flexibility and the potential to produce in-depth data (e.g., King, 1994). Furthermore, the respondents were expected to appreciate the confidentiality of a one-to-one discussion (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991). In total, 232 interviews were conducted for the purposes of this paper. The findings reported result from one interview question: the respondents were asked what the case company meant to them, i.e. what attributes they considered important in relation to the company. The data resulting from the discussions on other topics during the interviews will be used for subsequent papers focusing on different aspects. In order to capture the holistic aspect of the case company (Yin, 2003) the interviews were conducted in four continents and ten countries: Chile, Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, France, Germany, the USA and Canada, the respondents representing different departments, organizational levels and professional groups, both sexes (50 women, 182 men), and different age groups (varying from the early twenties to the late sixties).

The language used in the discussions was English, except in Latin America where an external interpreter was used if the interviewee wished it. These informants were offered a choice of language for reasons of courtesy and comfort (Welch & Piekkari, 2006), the assumption being that English-language skills in Latin America, especially among blue-collar workers, would not allow rich discussion. By eliminating the language handicap and conducting the interviews at the work site the aim was to encourage them to share their own authentic experiences (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Shah and Corley, 2006; Welch and Piekkari, 2006). All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. The interview process started in November 2006 and finished in November 2007. NVivo qualitative research software was used in the analysis for organizing and coding the interview data.

Emerging attributes of employee-corporation ties

The findings of the study evolved in two phases, in the first of which the researchers identified the key attributes emerging from the data by region. Searching for within-group similarities and intergroup differences is a recommended tactic for analyzing a vast amount of data in a qualitative study (Eisenhardt, 1989). The categorization of the geographical regions into North America, Latin America, Europe, and Australia in the early phase of the analysis was intended not to highlight the regional differences per se, but rather to facilitate the overall processing of the data. The regional structuring allowed the researchers to focus on one smaller and culturally more coherent set of data at a time. Overly extensive coding would have made it too fragmented. The findings did indicate, however, that there were similarities within regions and differences between them. In the following we present the key regional attributes tying employees to the company. Appendix 1 gives a more comprehensive view of the employee citations per country.

Latin America

The role of the company in the employees' lives overall turned out to be very significant in the region of Latin America, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Mexico. The company is
Johanna Raitis & Ulla Hakala (2011), Work-in-process paper

not regarded merely as an employer; it has a more central role as the employees' "second family" or "second home", "family provider" or even as their "life". Terms such as "love" indicating the deep attachment to and "we" describing the close relationship with the company were often used, as the following extracts show.

"It (the company) means everything because it helps me support my family. It's my second home." (Argentina, male, technician)

"[The company] is part of my life." (Brazil, male, foreign-trade supervisor)

"I love this company. Working at [the company] is good because it's a global company. I feel that all my colleagues think this and we have good team work." (Peru, male, mechanic)

The corporate values, including fairness, team work and open-mindedness were viewed as ideal family values that people should be striving towards in general, although it was pointed out that such values and principles might not be present in society as a whole. Consequently, a company living solidly by these values represents an ideal value-driven environment with which the employees can identify. Thus, the existence and enforcement of corporate values clearly strengthens employee attachment to the company in that they are perceived as being somewhat unique and something definitely worth striving for.

"When I joined the company, these values had a deep effect on me. They seemed serious. Especially since I had worked for other companies where you had to adapt to your boss, whatever values he might have. Here you are treated for what you are and know. They (the values) would help me personally. In other work places you have to adapt to your boss but here I can be myself." (Argentina, female, assistant)

“In terms of work in here, and in terms of fair play here is good. But that is not necessarily the case in the rest of the country. We (Chileans) are not particularly famous for fair play.” (Chile, male, technical mechanic)

“The politics in Mexico and in Latin America in general are such that when you have a job you cannot feel safe because people can kick you out very easily. So it [the company] has done a good job because they (employees) know that they have a certain security. They feel safe.” (Mexico, male, supervisor)

The opportunities for personal growth and professional learning were also recognized as key attributes of employee engagement. Personal growth, the dominant opportunity-related attribute, refers here to comprehensive personal development indicating the employees’ desire to grow with the company in terms of self-realization and overall self-enhancement. Furthermore, it emphasizes their aspirations for long-term commitment to the company.

“For me [the company] means a lot since it is a company that gives you the possibility for growth and advancement and it is also my daily task to develop in life.” (Argentina, male, assistant)

“It’s the company where I hope I can grow.” (Brazil, female, analyst)

“For people involved in the industry it’s a dream to work here. It’s international, allows you to learn day-by-day.” (Peru, female, order entry)

Professional learning, related more to occupation and position, was not mentioned as frequently. Nevertheless, its relevance should not be overlooked, and it should be incorporated into the personal-growth attribute. Overall, soft factors – focusing on the intangible elements of work – seem to prevail in the region.

North America

Johanna Raitis & Ulla Hakala (2011), Work-in-process paper

The attributes prevalent in North America, including the USA and Canada, are fundamentally different from those in Latin America. The predominant feature in Latin America is experiencing the work community as an extension of the family with a common purpose, whereas in North America the focus is more on individuals and on the opportunities the company can offer its employees. Accordingly, the dominant attributes were related to opportunities in which professional, occupational and personal learning as well as career advancement were of highest importance.

“This is [...] more than a good company it’s a great company. Opportunity for the younger people coming into the company is just tremendous. I mean the training opportunities, all of the support that [the company] has made available to everyone. There is not a reason in the world that a person couldn’t stay employed with this company for as long as they wanted and have a lot of benefits, educational primarily.”

(USA, male, technical support)

“Well, over the last four months that I have been here it’s been as I said a lot of learning. But I think it’s a great company. I think the people are very good which is what drew me to the organization. I think the industry is very interesting because it’s so technical. I have not been exposed in my career to the technology that this company has. Whether that be from the equipment itself and the locations or from the internal systems with people, soft and e-learning modules and things like that. There’s just a lot of information out there.” (USA, male, vice president)

“I find them large company, growing very fast and trying to grow with the growth in a sense of being one step ahead. Trying to keep the employees happy and pay them well, educate them well.” (Canada, male, sales assistant)

Corporate values were also highly regarded, but their function and purpose were viewed from a different perspective than in Latin America: they were perceived as a guarantee of equal treatment in pursuing one's interests, e.g., fairness in allocating educational or monetary benefits.

"Excellent. I have enjoyed my time here. They have been more than fair. Excellent benefits, take care of employees, always do the right thing." (USA, male, product-line manager)

"I think it's a great company. It's fair. The core values are talked about. I do believe that the company lives by them. It's a stable company, it's reliable, honest." (Canada, female, after-sales director)

Although what the company means to the employees appears to be based on what could be defined as hard factors (predominantly tangible, measurable factors), the affiliation encompasses strong feelings.

Australia

The attributes in Australia were primarily consistent with the ones that emerged in North America. The similarity of the responses in these two regions was particularly evident in that the respondents in Australia were also very focused on the individual perspective and on the opportunities the company could offer its employees. Furthermore, the opportunities mentioned included professional learning and career development, which also suggests employee engagement through hard, measurable factors.

"I think there's great opportunity for me here in [the company]. That's what I'm learning or picking up sort of thing. So [the company] all in all I think looks and sounds like a promising company from my view. Not being modest I agree I would like to move up the ladder. I think [the company] could actually offer that to me." (Australia, male, supervisor)

“I know what [the company] is and what it means to me. My goal now is to stay with [the company] and that’s it. It’s a stable company. I want to develop my career, I have got goals and I have visions. I want to be successful for the company.” (Australia, male, contracts manager)

The professionalism (e.g., product and service quality), size of the corporation and diversity in terms of product and service ranges were identified as important factors guaranteeing personal learning and advancement.

“For me [the company] is a quality product and quality service. I think being proud of working in a company like [the company] is a big plus. That’s a big help when you are out there trying to sell a product. All in all it’s satisfying.” (Australia, male, sales manager)

“Opportunity. Certainly a solid future just by the means of the size of the company. And just knowing that the company is global as well. It tells you professionalism and they have been at it a long time.” (Australia, male, customer-service-centre manager)

The distinctive feature in Australia, setting it somewhat apart from North America and obviously also from Latin America, is that in many instances the company was defined simply as “a source of employment”.

“ Basically it’s a place where I come to work. They offer me a job.” (Australia, male, electrician)

“I don’t know. That’s the company I work for. That supports my lifestyle pretty much at the moment yeah. That’s pretty much what [the company] means to me I suppose.”
(Australia, male, supervisor)

Obviously this simplistic standpoint could imply a less emotional affiliation. The relationship between corporation and employee is clearly built up on a different type of affiliation in North America and Australia than in the Latin American countries. The employees' more clinical attitude is evident in the terminology used: instead of talking about "we" as in Latin America, they talk about "the company" or even refer to it as "they".

Europe

The findings in Europe follow a similar course as in North America and Australia: what the company means to the respondents is clearly not as profound as in Latin America. Although there were similar tendencies in attributes however, there were some apparent differences. They did not include opportunities among the Europeans, for instance, which as described above were the central focus in North America and Australia. In fact, the attributes tying employees to the company in Europe were related to the general working environment, in particular professionalism, the corporate culture and the working conditions.

"[The company] itself I think it's a big group and they have the conditions of work and guidelines of a big group. I'm used to working in big groups so it's similar conditions of work."(France, female, assistant)

"When I think of [the company] I think global, well-established organization with very good motives and very good intentions." (France, male, product-line manager)

"I like the culture and I like [the company]." (Germany, male, salesman)

"I like to work for the company. Of course there are sometimes things I hate but normally it's nice to work for the company. Sometimes decisions are very slow. Sometimes it gives headaches of course because the bigger the company is the more inflexible the company is. But it is in many ways much more professional." (Germany, male, product-line manager)

Furthermore, the interview question often provoked descriptions of the basic characteristics of the company such as its size and the multiplicity of its divisions and products.

“It’s quite a large group with different departments. I only know the part that I am daily concerned. I don’t have a very detailed idea of the rest.” (France, male, after-sales manager)

“First a big organization, a big equipment supplier, service organization to the [industry] companies. Reputable name.” (France, male, area manager)

Without an in-depth cultural investigation it is rather difficult to determine whether employees really do see and relate to the company merely through its infrastructure, working conditions and other descriptive elements, or whether the single interview method was not efficient in getting the European participants to open up and reveal their fundamental feelings. However, it is evident that the company has to fit in with the strong cultural background of the people in Europe and not vice versa, as is the case in Latin America where it was seen to represent the ideal value-based environment. In other words, it could be stated that the respondents in Europe are strongly connected to a more fundamental cultural base, and that the company does not determine or describe the people as such but functions merely as a provider of a comfortable and supportive working environment.

Engaging employees enables the collection of tacit knowledge and can result in a more solid corporate identity. As discernible here, the regional attributes describe the diversity between the regions but also highlight the similarities within some of them. Previous studies have already shown that employees can identify with non-corporate identities (Balmer and Wilson, 1998), and moreover that every employee may have a unique perception of the corporate identity (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006). The attributes presented here support these earlier studies in their attempt to demonstrate the multivariate basis of corporate identity. The findings also complement

previous studies in terms of introducing the principal attributes that engage people with corporations.

A new viewpoint on cultural diversity

The emergent, regionally congruent attributes presented above led the researchers to discover and create two distinctive categories of ties that bind employees to corporations. This was an outcome of creative theorizing that was inspired by the empirical data (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). Emphasizing discovery rather than validation, flexibility and going back-and-forth between the data and the findings were also key aspects of the data-analysis process (Van Maanen *et al.*, 2007). It appears from the created categories that there are two fundamentally different types of employee-corporation ties within the regions included in the study. The following Figure (3) presents the categories and their defining attributes that portray the employees' sentiments towards the company and expected benefits from their employment.

“Take in Figure (No. 3)”

It is proposed in the model that employee-corporation ties may result from experiencing the “corporation as an extension of the family” or seeing the “corporation as an agent of personal development”. Employees in the former category share a profound feeling of emotional belongingness to and strong appreciation of the company: it is an intrinsic part of their everyday lives. In the latter category, on the other hand, the level of emotional attachment is lower and derived from different factors: employees see the company as offering a means to an end, and their attachment comes more from professional appreciation of the company or the position they are holding.

The value or benefits related to employment is also an explicit indicator in the categorization. Value in “the corporation as an extension of the family” category is identified as

personal growth, professional learning and feeling privileged to be part of the company. These attributes support also partly Reade's (2001) findings as she suggested that pride of being a member of a global organization appears to be the greatest enhancer of global identification. In any case, here the distributed value is comprehensively complementary, adding to the employee's personal growth, whereas in "the corporation as an agent to personal development" category the employment value is linked with the more narrow and specific aspect of personal learning. The indicative attributes describing the latter category are thus career development, professional advancement, personal learning, and feelings of respect towards the company.

Employee belongingness, or feelings about the company, could also be portrayed and determined from the terms the interviewees used. As opposed to Alvesson (2007) who stresses that vocabulary cannot mirror the world, the researchers argue that the discovered terms in use indicate very concretely the type of affiliation between the employee and the company. Mael and Ashforth (1992) have, for instance, proposed that organizational identification can be measured by the use of "we" or "they" when referring to the organization, where the former indicates strong identification and the latter does not. In "the corporation as an extension of the family" category, for instance, the terms commonly used by the employees in referring to the company and what it meant to them included "love", "we", and "family". In contrast, employees in "the corporation as an agent of personal development" category used terms such as "like", "they" and "team or company".

The different employee-corporation-tie categories presented above seem to be prevalent in particular geographical regions, and the countries within them. The prevailing region for "the corporation as an extension of the family" is Latin America, in which the identified attributes fit very consistently within the category in question. "The corporation as an agent of personal development" category is prevalent in North America, Australia and Europe, although there is variation within it. Variations related to the differences in the attributes are nevertheless minor,

and the fundamental character as portrayed in the category name is evident in all the prevalent countries.

Conclusions and implications

If corporate-identity management is to be effective it is necessary to know how deep cultural values account for employee engagement in corporations. Hence, the purpose of this study was *to identify the culturally significant attributes that tie employees to corporations*. According to the empirical results these factors seem to fall into two regionally bound categories.

In the first category, prevalent in Latin America, the corporation is seen as an extension of the family. The dominant attributes tying employees to it are soft and more emotional: feelings of belongingness, intense appreciation of the company and personal growth. Corporations in the second category, prevalent in North America, Australia and Europe, are seen as agents of personal development, and hard, instrumental factors are emphasized: career development, professional learning, and monetary benefits. For the employees the company is a means to an end.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of taking employees into account in corporate-identity management. However, the question of what ties employees to multinational corporations, and thus facilitates corporate-identity management through supportive employee behavior, has not previously been focused upon as extensively. With its rich empirical data and qualitative perspective this study adds significantly to the mostly quantitative-oriented research in the field. Moreover, exploring the link between cultural characteristics, employee identification and corporate-identity management anchors corporate identity solidly in the strategic sphere of management, away from abstract and purely image-related issues.

Before addressing the implications we should point out the following limitations. First, the fact that the research covered a single case could be seen as a constraint, and future studies could remedy this. Examining the phenomenon in other business contexts and testing the two categories on quantitative data would further support the results. Furthermore, including the Johanna Raitis & Ulla Hakala (2011), Work-in-process paper

continents of Asia and Africa, which were not represented in the empirical data, would further validate and extend the findings. More European countries could also be included. In terms of cultural differences, it should be kept in mind that individuals are influenced by cultures other than that of their apparent nationality. Many societies (e.g., organizations) contain a variety of sub-cultures, and there is always a chance that the individual view does not represent the national cultural perspective. The findings of this study are based on the idea that a person's nationality is a sufficient indicator of his or her culture.

The implications of the research lie in the understanding that people from different cultures are driven and motivated by different factors. This is also evident in the ways employees define the meaning of the company to them, and thus identify with it. Theories of cognitive organizational identification suggest that the more similar attributes an employee thinks he or she shares with the organization, the stronger the identification (Ashforth *et al.*, 1989; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). The findings of this study indicate, however, that a strong employee-corporation tie can also be based on emotions, as well as the *desire* for self-enhancement and similarity rather than actual current fit, as is notable in the Latin American region. Balmer (2008) calls this vicarious identification, meaning that employee bonds with the corporate culture may at first sight appear to be tenuous when in fact they are not. We also suggest – and as discernible from the results of this study – that employee-corporation ties in MNCs form in different ways and at different levels of intensity and that these ties appear to be regionally congruent.

Accordingly, in terms of organizational and management implications, the results of this research emphasize the importance of taking into consideration the cultural environment within which managerial decisions are meant to take effect. The focus in managing the corporate identity in an MNC should be on minimizing cross-cultural friction and leveraging the sharing of cultural knowledge. Understanding the deeply held values of foreign cultures increases the ability of an MNC to perform successfully.

To conclude, from both the theoretical and the managerial perspective, the study offers a realistic setting for contributing to research on corporate-identity management in multinational companies. The findings could easily be applied in other research fields such as cultural studies, and organization and management in general.

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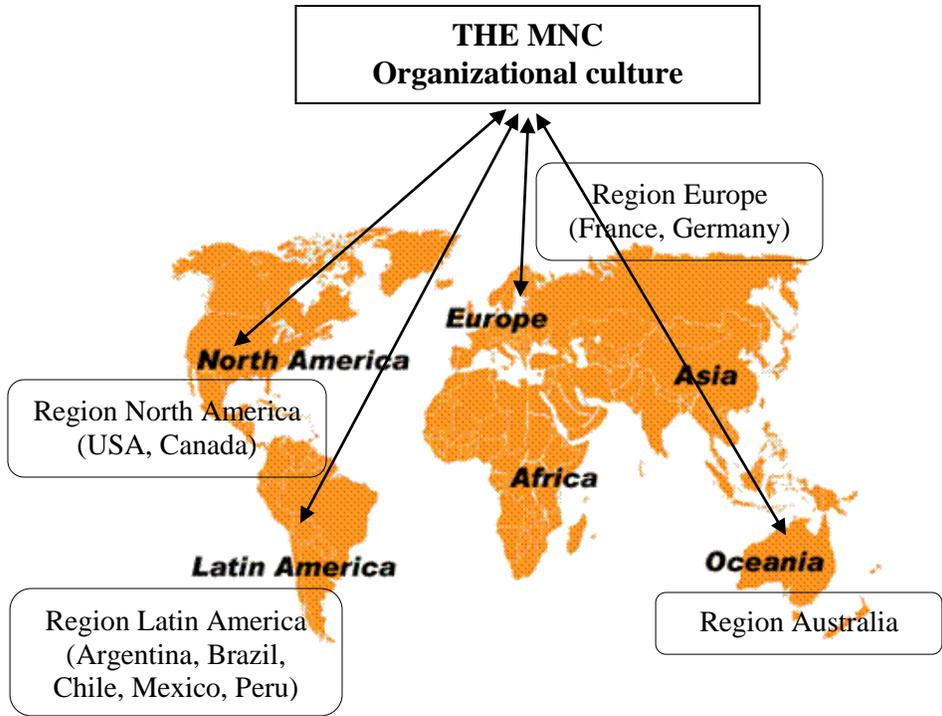


Figure 1. The culturally diverse setting of the case company

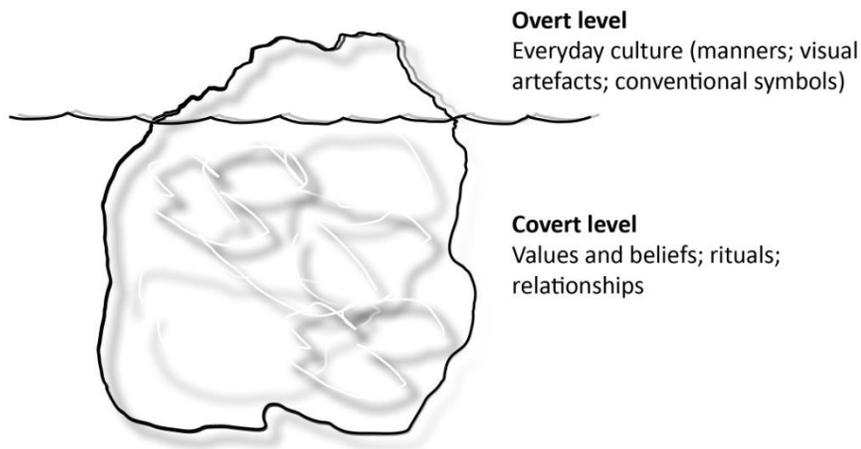


Figure 2. Two levels of culture

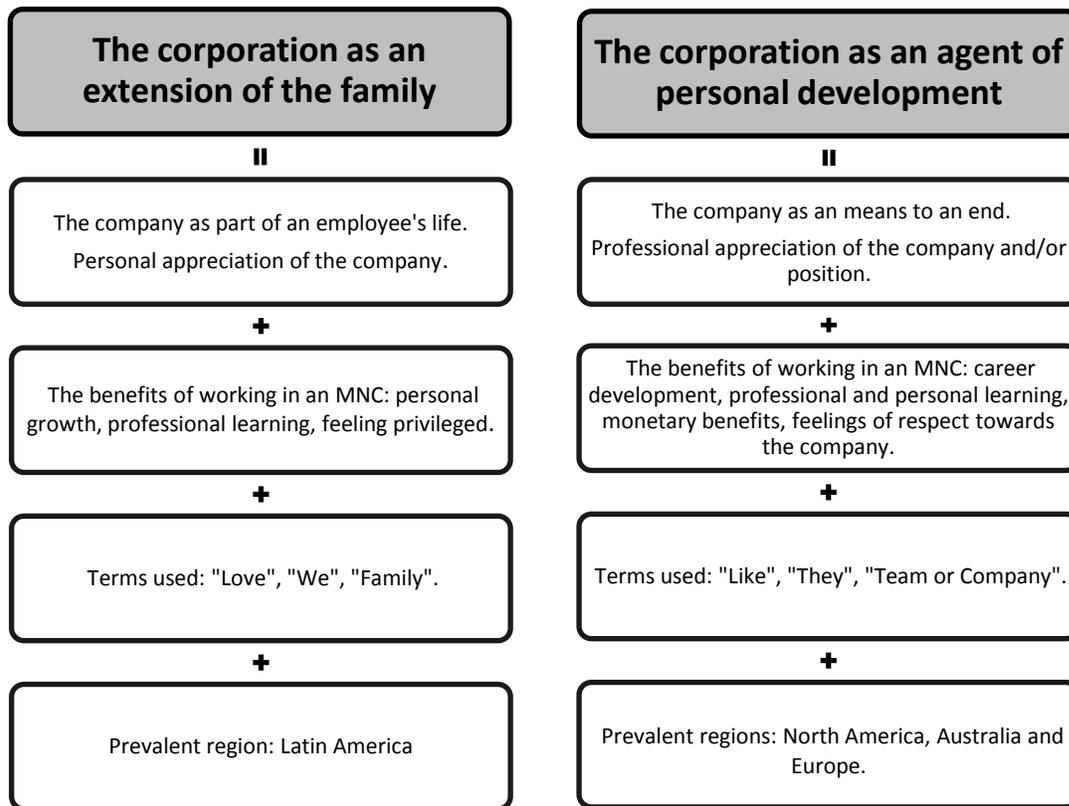


Figure 3. The two categories of employee-corporation ties and their underlying attributes