

Organizational Identification (OID) among Knowledge Workers in the Indian IT Industry

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This study extends our understanding of organizational identification (OID) first, amongst knowledge workers and second, in the Indian context. Using grounded theory approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with IT professionals across varied roles in the Indian IT industry. Variables like wellbeing, intrinsic motivation and innovative work behavior that had not been studied in relation to OID emerged from the study. This study established the role of context and the need for substantive theory to understand OID anchored in its own context. Further it developed a model of organizational identification in the context of knowledge workers in India. The model adds several new variables to the nomological network of OID.

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Introduction

Today's business environment is marked by the need for quicker turn-around time, increased connectivity, and stupendous pace of change. To help employees make sense of this environment, corporations spend billions of dollars training their employees on leading and managing in this uncertain environment. As companies in technology and services sectors move to flexible models of working, they are losing control in monitoring the employees work and will need to place greater trust in the common sense of purpose that keeps up the focus of the team (Steffens et al., 2016). The employee's sense of belongingness to the team's purpose is becoming even more critical than ever before.

Attrition is another significant business parameter that is reported along with the financial earnings every quarter by companies. In technology sectors, the impact of this runs deep as the cost of replacement is very high, given the war for talent, and the negative impact on customer satisfaction. Thus, the ability to prevent attrition is becoming crucial to remain

competitive. Hence the ability to increase the employee's identification with the organization has gained importance as it has been found to reduce chances of attrition (Cole & Bruch, 2006).

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NASSCOM (National Association of Software Services and Companies)¹ projects the Indian IT industry to grow to about \$350-400 billion by 2025. India is the recognized hub for software development for over 25 years now. Survey report by the Great Place to Work Institute showed across ninety eight firms the challenges of retention and attraction of employees was core to the IT industry in India. In another study by the Hay Group 2016 survey showed job engagement levels at an all-time low. Therefore the study of organizational identification seemed relevant to address the challenges of remaining competitive in the IT industry.

Literature Review

Organizational identification or the psychological connection (Dutton et al., 1994) between the individual and the organization, has dominated management literature for over three decades now (He & Brown, 2013). Organizational identification (OID) is a specific form of social identification, in which an individual iden-

tifies with a social entity, which in this case, is the organization. The individual then experiences the "success and failures of the group as one's own" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989: 21). Social identification has been defined as the "perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989:21).

Literature review suggested several antecedents of OID in the Western context. Lee Sang (1971) studied OID in the context of scientists in the Federal Public Health Services. This study supported March and Simon's (1958) group identification model and found the salience of perceived prestige of the profession, prestige within the organization, and relation with management as being strong antecedents of OID. OID has been found to be related to external perceptions like perceived organizational prestige and attractiveness of construed external image (Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000); perceived company characteristics (Bhattacharya et al., 2005) and organizational distinctiveness; organizational values, and attractiveness of perceived organizational identity (Reade, 2001; Raghuram, 2011; Jones & Volpe, 2011). The most referenced outcomes of OID were cooperation, effort, participation, turn-over intention (Cole & Bruch, 2006); extra role behaviors and cooperative behaviors (Dutton et al, 1994). In summary, closer examination of extant literature suggested that the most commonly referenced antecedents of OID were construed external image, perceived company characteristics, organization prestige and distinctiveness, and

¹ A trade association of the Indian IT Industry

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Need for the Study

A survey of the literature also showed that that most research conducted in the area of OID was in the Western context. There were very few studies in the non-Western context, particularly in the area of knowledge workers. Moreover, there is reason to believe that OID amongst knowledge workers in non-Western countries could be different in terms of conceptualization (Maneerat, Hale & Singhal, 2005) as well as its relationships with other variables (Yan, 2014). Since previous literature showed that studies of knowledge workers and their organizational identification (OID) in India remain limited (Raghuram, 2011), a need was felt to develop a substantive theory (Foley, Ngo & Loi, 2006; Ahlstrom, 2011) in this context.

The research objective for this study was to address the question “what are the variables associated with OID in the context of knowledge workers in the Indian IT Industry”?

Grounded Theory

The primary reason for qualitative research lies in the nature of the inquiry

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory approach was adopted in this study, given the paucity of research in OID amongst knowledge workers in India and the felt need to develop substantive theory in this area. Substantive theory might help explain the uniqueness of the phenomenon of OID in the context of knowledge workers in non-Western contexts. The techniques and framework of grounded theory approach using the tenets articulated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) will be woven from the beginning to the conclusion of the grounded theory approach.

Data Gathering

In-depth interview is a preferred method in this approach and can be seen adopted in several studies (Bansal & Agarwal, 2017). In-depth interviews were conducted for the study and each of these interviews was held face to face. All respondents were knowledge workers in the Indian IT industry in India. They were from across IT companies in Bangalore. All of them were professionals, with experience ranging from early to mid careers. The sample comprised 30% females and 70% males. Their tenures at their respective firms varied from six years to over fifteen years (6-15 years). Their roles ranged from Technical Architect (responsible for product architecture) to Accounts Manager and Account Lead (responsible for customer relationships). All interviews were conducted in the office locations, discussion rooms, meeting rooms and in the cubicles.

Table 1 Summary of Demographic Data

Name	Ethnicity	Gender	Organizational level	Professional Tenure in years	Work Roles
Participant 1	Indian	Male	Midlevel Manger	15 +	Account Lead
Participant 2	Indian	Female	Midlevel Manager	11	Account Lead
Participant 3	Indian	Male	Midlevel Manager	15+	Account Manager
Participant 4	Indian	Female	Junior Level	6 +	Tech lead
Participant 5	Indian	Male	Midlevel Manager	14	Architect
Participant 6	Indian	Male	Midlevel Manager	15+	Account Head
Participant 7	Indian	Male	Midlevel Manager	12	Tech lead
Participant 8	Indian	Female	Midlevel Manager	13	IT consultant
Participant 9	Indian	Male	Midlevel Manager	14+	Lead Consultant
Participant 10	Indian	Male	Midlevel Manager	12	Consultant
Participant 11	Indian	Male	Midlevel Manager	15+	Lead Architect
Participant 12	Indian	Female	Midlevel Manager	12	Client lead
Participant 13	Indian	Male	Midlevel Manager	15+	Testing Lead

Interview duration for each of the in-depth interviews lasted from 60-90 minutes. Immediately after the interview, each interview was transcribed. The nature of the interviews was both structured and unstructured. Each interviewee was asked to narrate and describe their experience of belongingness to the firm. The questions asked were: “What according to you fosters belongingness to your firm?” “What does this sense of attachment to the firm look like for you?” “Can you tell me more about what helped you feel connected with the firm?” “Can you share some anecdotes and examples and tell me more”? Using the constant comparison method, each interview was analyzed and questions were drawn out for the subsequent interviews rather than leaving the analysis to the end. Participants of the study voluntarily agreed to participate and were ensured confidentiality. All the interviews were conducted till theoretical saturation was attained (theoretical saturation refers to the stage in the interview process when no new information is attained or generated). The

total number of interviews to reach theoretical saturation was 13.

Theoretical sampling was adopted for the study. Theoretical sampling refers to sampling for concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Sampling, coding and analysis were interwoven throughout the process. During the interviews the respondents were encouraged to share their thoughts and express their ideas. The interviews started with respondents who voluntarily agreed to participate and then consciously interviews were conducted with respondents who had served both longer and shorter tenures with their firms. This approach was adopted to uncover the rich variations in the data as recommended by Strauss & Corbin (1990).

The interviews facilitated the discovery of both new and existing concepts. Accordingly, during the successive interviews, participants were asked to elaborate on conditions that led to these behaviors to check for both repeatability

and emergence of newer concepts. With each successive interview the concepts developed further in terms of their properties and dimensions, for example on properties like frequency, extent, duration, intensity (high, medium, low) till theoretical saturation was achieved, and were then grouped to form a higher order category. For example, while coding the concept of “Going the extra mile”; “Support for the organization”; “Willing to extend” appeared repeatedly in the narratives and illustrated theoretical saturation was attained. As next step concepts were then grouped to form higher order category called extra role behavior. The findings were shared with an expert panel that comprised senior professors and senior managers to both validate and seek their feedback. In this study those concepts that repeatedly appeared while coding were integrated into the study and became categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Transcription & Memo Writing

Data analysis began with the transcription of the interviews. After the data collection phase, each interview was transcribed verbatim. This was in keeping with Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Corbin and Strauss (2008) guidelines. Transcription was carried out immediately post the fieldwork so that the meanings ascribed to the data were captured and reflected in its true sense.

All interview transcripts are available with the first author. The transcripts were further analyzed and written as memos. A memo is a theoretical conceptual note

that identifies the concepts and labels it. Each memo was labeled with a conceptual name to describe the concept. Several memos had one or even two concepts linked to them. For example, memo 2 had the conceptual label of self-esteem and self-enhancement as the motives of organizational identification (Turner, 1967).

Theoretical Sensitivity

The researchers made an earnest attempt to embrace theoretical sensitivity in two ways. Firstly, extensive literature review on OID built familiarity with the domain of study before getting into the field to understand the possible associations of OID amongst knowledge workers in the Indian IT Industry. Secondly, during the memo writing phase, the researchers kept asking themselves “What is happening here?”; “What is actually being said?” while trying to make the connections between the concepts. The researchers read and re-read the transcripts several times over to bring about conceptual clarity.

Other Analytical Tools

Another technique was waving the red flag which involved looking out for words like “never”, or “always”. These words emerged in the interviews and the researchers gently nudged the participants back to sharing specific examples to illustrate the conditions that led to the event. For example one of the participants said: “I always enjoy working here”, the researcher was alert to probe gently and asked: “Can you tell me more

about what is it that makes you want to work here?" "Why do you say you enjoy working here?". These probe questions led to a nuanced understanding of the conditions that led to enjoyment at work.

"In-vivo codes" or participants' own language was captured and integrated to better understand the meanings attributed to the domain of inquiry. For example one of the in-vivo words was "cues". The word 'cues' was used to explain why identification occurs within the firm.

Words that indicate passage of time like 'since, when, then, if' were explored further, and follow up questions were asked to better understand the context and the event. For example, one participant shared: "I have been in this company since its inception and feel at home". This was probed further to better understand how the statement: "Being with the firm since its inception and feeling of belongingness" related to OID, and to understand the triggers of OID and its consequences. Usage of metaphors and similes was also analyzed. For example, the metaphor 'Home away from home' as seen from these statements given below:

"We keep very long hours at work ranging from 10 to 12...it's a home away from home" "My colleagues are my family" "I chat and eat with them and even meet them outside of work".

Constant Comparison

Constant comparison method allows incident comparisons to be made for simi-

larities and differences while similar concepts are grouped together. For example, memo 2 had the conceptual label of self-esteem and self-enhancement as the motives of organizational identification (Turner, 1967). This conceptual label again emerged in memo 7 with the same connotations as expressed in memo 2. Hence based on similarities across both the memos the conceptual labels were grouped together. Subsequent interviews probed this aspect to further develop the concept.

Coding

At the core of the grounded theory approach lies coding. In this study, open and axial coding techniques have been used. Similar concepts were grouped together to form categories or themes. Table 2 depicts the concepts that emerged from raw data, which were classified into higher order themes.

As illustrated in Table 2 similar concepts were grouped together to form higher order concepts called categories or themes. The data was closely studied in conjunction with the organizational identification literature. Sampling continued till theoretical saturation was achieved.

The seven themes that emerged from open coding were construed external image, perceived company characteristics, trust in management, relationship with colleagues, intrinsic motivation, innovative work behavior and wellbeing.

Table 2 Open Coding Illustration

Illustration	Concept	Themes
“My manager believes in me and gives me so many opportunities”	Supportive manager Trust in the manager	Trust in management
“People are like family to me, my son is in grade 11 and everyone is helping me find a suitable tutor and tuition for my son in the STEM stream”	Deep connects at work Pivotal role played by peers and colleagues	Relationship with colleagues
“My organization has a supportive culture, consistent values”	Firm culture Perceived culture of the org	Perceived company characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Innovative - Responsive - Industry leader - Caring - Compassionate - Socially responsible - Friendly - Progressive Firm culture, OID
“Belongingness owing to boss, colleagues, peers and ease of working here” ; I feel comfortable here”	Home away from home Feel secure and protected	
“The brand of my firm makes me feel sense of awe and achievement”	Reputed brand Pride in the brand	Construed External Image
“I am encouraged and supported to think outside the box”	New ideas/creativity	Innovative work behaviour
“The pay is not much but the opportunity to learn and grow as a professional”	Inherent drive Strong drive	Intrinsic motivation
“I feel cared for and respected”	Happiness satisfaction	Wellbeing

Several new antecedents and new outcomes emerged from the grounded research as being associated with organizational identification among knowledge workers in the Indian IT industry. New outcomes that emerged were wellbeing, innovative work behavior, and intrinsic motivation. Existing antecedents which were repeated in the grounded research were construed external image, perceived company characteristics, while existing outcomes were extra role behavior and retention. Antecedents of trust in

management and relationship with colleagues emerged as strong themes from the study, although we could find only one paper by George and Chattopadhyay (2005) to support this finding in our literature review.

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Axial Coding

Axial coding facilitates the understanding of the relationships and associations amongst the categories or themes. Axial coding follows the paradigm model which helps to draw out the relationship amongst the subcategories and categories through causal conditions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The causal conditions are the phenomenon, the context-intervening conditions, the action/interaction strategies followed by consequences.

Both open coding and axial coding were conducted alternately. During the open coding process several categories were grouped as interactions, strategies and other conditions that relate to the central domain of inquiry, OID. Axial coding was applied on the two categories - the causal factors of OID and the outcomes of OID. The category called causal factors of OID was analyzed first with the paradigm model, followed by the outcome factors of OID.

The paradigm model was applied keeping in mind the interview protocol questions “What according to you fosters belongingness to your firm?” “What does this sense of attachment to the firm look like for you?” “Can you tell me more about what helped you feel connected with the firm?” “Can you share some anecdotes and examples and tell me more?”

The next step in the model was to identify the causal conditions that led to OID. The interviews and narratives echoed the themes/ categories and sub categories shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Paradigm Model of the Causal Conditions that Led to the Development of OID

Causal conditions that led to the development of OID	Trust in the manager, supportive manager, culture of trust, culture of respect and feeling wanted, importance of connects, relationships with peers, colleagues and manager at work, personal bonds that extend beyond work, feelings of home, supportive and trusting culture, feeling a strong sense of pride with the brand of the organization, respect from others based on the brand name of the firm.
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Another component of the paradigm model was the context. The properties that related to the causal conditions of OID were further explored. Participants were asked to share how trust with peers, managers, and supervisors develops, and they shared varied responses:

“Long hours at work given the nature of the industry helped develop bonds at work “ “The importance of

teamwork was underscored as integral to team success” “Socializing with colleagues and friends after work hours led to getting to know them better at both a personal and professional level” “Sharing, listening to and being each other’s confidante developed bonds at work” “Mentoring and the availability of new and challenging roles, new opportunities helped them learn and grow as professionals”

Intervening conditions could be tenure at the firm, age and gender.

The causal conditions that led the participants to want to contribute to a bigger goal, and engage in productive and organizational beneficial tasks were probed further and were asked: "What would lead you to stretch beyond your goals, to want to give your 100%?" "Why would you want to see this firm grow?" These questions led to a number of responses like:

"I belong here, this is my firm"; "I feel good when I see my firm successful"; "It's a reflection of my skills and abilities"; "it's a part of me"; "When my family sees my company advertisement on the television and their hearts swell with pride I feel so good and cannot but keep smiling to myself and feel successful".

These responses further reinforced the importance of organizational identification and its roots to SIT theory.

These responses further reinforced the importance of organizational identification and its roots to SIT theory. Social identity theory states that prestige, distinctiveness lead to identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). One of the reasons for OID is driven by the need for enhancement of self-esteem. This was an overarching theme in the narratives. Extra role behaviors and supportive behaviors were positive outcomes associated with OID. The responses ranged from:

"I work voluntarily for long hours"; "I take on initiatives and stretch beyond work hours"; "I take on initiatives and stretch beyond work hours"; "I take on additional responsibilities at work"; "I like to stretch beyond work"; "It wants to make to do more much beyond my role definition"; "Going the extra mile"; "Support for the organization".

Respondents spoke about their love for their work, their deep sense of enjoyment that led to a state of flow as can be seen from this narrative:

"I have been working for more than 15 years now. I don't feel the Monday morning blues... I get restless till I don't reach work". "The work here is meaningful and though the pay is not much but the opportunity to learn and grow as a professional and to take on so much responsibility so early on is particularly exciting and challenging". "I just enjoy what I do."

They also spoke of wanting to try and do things in new and exciting ways, as can be seen from the statements:

"I am encouraged to try out new things"; "I just love that I have the opportunity to be creative"; "I love that I don't have to shy away from trying new things and have all the support to do so".

The other interesting theme that emerged was illustrated by:

"Working here just makes me feel so happy"; "I feel so good and contented"; "I feel cared for, respected and supported"; "I feel respected and I am

treated with dignity”; “I feel protected, can relax with a stable mind”; “I feel cared for and respected as a human being and that makes me feel good”.

Table 4 illustrates the consequences of the paradigm model

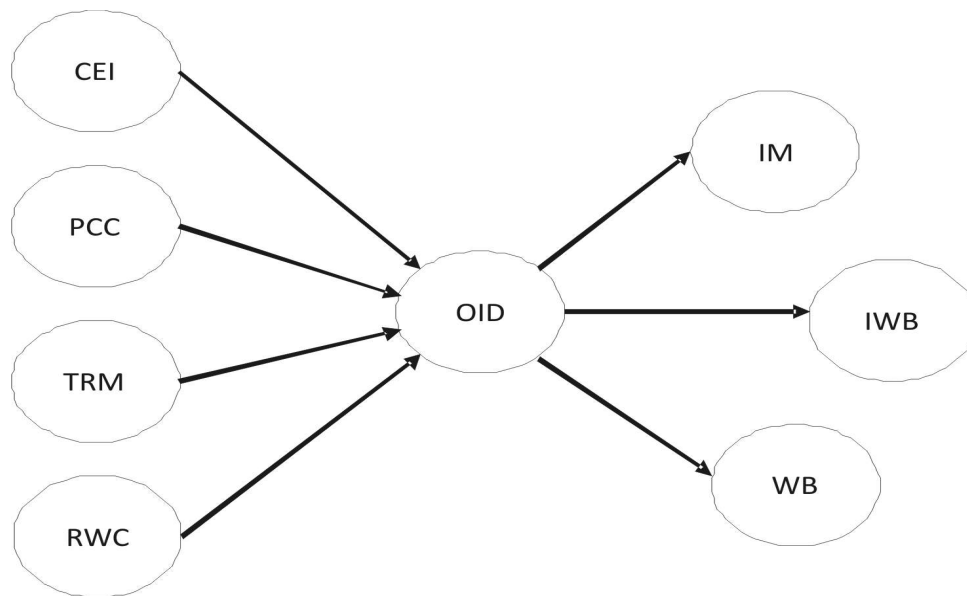
Table 4 Consequences of the Paradigm Model

<p>The question asked was:”What would this strong sense of belongingness do for the firm?” “What would it look like?” “Can you share example to help me understand?”</p>	<p>Extra role behaviors, extending beyond the call of duty, eating-breathing-living work, enjoy working here, opportunity to innovate, be creative, strong sense of wellbeing, feel happy and contented, come in everyday determined to give my best, just enjoy, being here and ask myself how can I make a difference everyday</p>
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Extended Conceptual Model

Combining the above analysis of our grounded research with the findings from the review of literature, an extended conceptual model is illustrated in Fig.1

Fig.1 Extended Conceptual Model



- CEI – Construed external image
- PCC – Perceived company characteristics
- TRM – Trust in management
- RWC – Relationship with colleagues
- OID – Organizational identification
- IM- Intrinsic motivation
- IWB – Innovative work behaviour
- WB- Wellbeing

The extended conceptual model showed the emergence of the four themes that cause organizational identification, namely, construed external image, perceived company characteristics, trust in management and relationship with colleagues. The outcomes of OID which emerged were seen as intrinsic motivation, innovative work behavior and wellbeing.

Construed External Image (CEI): CEI was a repeated theme across narrations. Prestige and pride can be seen from the statement: “When I reflect I feel so good that I am working in a well-known brand that everyone knows” (with a smile!).

Perceived Company Characteristics: Perceived company characteristics was reflected in the narration with the elements of culture like open, trusting environment were brought to the fore. This can be seen from the statements like: “Culture here is fair, open, trusting and no swooping down on my teams”.

Trust in Management: Trust in the manager and trust in the organization were reflected very strongly across the narratives. An example is the following from a respondent: “Communication by the leaders in my organization, what they do, what they say, which in turn builds trust and thereby I feel a sense of personal and emotional connect with my organization”.

Relationship with Colleagues: Relationship with colleagues emerged across all narratives. One participant

even called it the “Lifeblood of the organization”, “being “sacrosanct” and core and “fundamental” to business”, and as a feeling of “home away from home”.

Organizational Identification: In one narrative, development of organizational identification with the firm was described as: “being able to contribute in my organization, doing things that are relevant for the success of the firm is very important.”

Innovative Work Behavior: The outcome of identification was seen as being innovative and willing to explore and think outside the box. Some of these statements were: “I love to experiment and try out new things it keeps me creative.”

Intrinsic Motivation: Intrinsic motivation which emerged as a recurrent theme across the narrations with statements like: “I just enjoy being here”; “I get restless till I can get into work”; “I breathe and eat work”; “My family has given up on me now”.

Wellbeing: Wellbeing was also seen as an outcome of belongingness to the organization, as illustrated by phrases like: “Feeling happy at work”; “Feeling satisfied”.

Discussion

Our study reiterated and illustrated the need for building substantive theories to understand OID, anchored in its own context. This led to the emergence of the OID model in the Indian knowledge workers context, which addressed the call

from scholars to further work in the domain of OID in non-Western countries (Sun & Wang, 2009).

The powerful role of collectivism and paternalism in India can explain the emergence of two strong antecedents to OID, namely, trust in management and relationship with colleagues.

The powerful role of collectivism and paternalism in India can explain the emergence of two strong antecedents to OID, namely, trust in management and relationship with colleagues. A plausible reason for the emergence of the theme ‘trust in management’ could be the work culture that is unique to India. Sinha and Sinha (1990) asserted the important role of personalized relationships at work, which they believed transcended work boundaries. Sinha and Sinha (1990) in their paper on the role of social values in Indian organizations stated: “preference for personalized relationships and networking are parts of the collectivism of Indians” (Sinha & Sinha, 1990: 711). Studies have found a strong linkage between collectivism and group identification (Triandis, 1990). The salience of social identity theory and the strong preference for membership in groups like the organization was found in collectivist countries like China (Ngo, Loi, Foley, Zheng & Zhang, 2013). Bhagat et al. (2010) in their study in China highlighted the salience of interpersonal relations at work. Johnson and Jackson (2009) found in collectivist cultures, group values like consensus and generosity take prece-

dence over individual values like self-interest and personal achievements.

Relationship with colleagues also emerged as a significant theme. This theme was reflected in the narratives. Reason for this finding could be drawn from the collectivist orientation that characterizes India (Hofstede, 1981). Review of literature yielded only one paper that had studied trust in management and relationship with colleagues in the context of OID of contract workers (George & Chattopadhyay, 2005). These findings brought to the fore some differences in the predictors of OID in a non-Western context and our research suggests that trust in management and relationship with colleagues may be stronger antecedents to OID in paternalistic and collective cultures like India.

Two most important outcome themes that emerged from our study were intrinsic motivation and innovative work behavior. This was of particular significance in the context of knowledge workers. This study showed IWB as an important outcome of OID, which can be particularly relevant for the motivation of knowledge workers.

Well-being was another important outcome of OID and emerged as a strong and significant theme across the narratives. Theoretical meta-analytic reviews seem to suggest that there is a theoretical positive linkage between health and social identification (Steffens et al., 2016). Social identity theory which forms the theoretical foundation for OID further supports this linkage with leading of mean-

ingful and purposeful lives (Horton, et al., 2014) (cited in Steffens et al., 2016:5).

The Indian IT Industry is characterized by talent mobility, high rates of talent attrition and faces huge hurdles in talent retention. This study provides a framework to managers on talent management from the lens of organizational identification. For example, innovative work behavior could be driven throughout the organization through the development of communities of interest that work on new and emerging technology areas like Iot or internet of things, and which foster a sense of identification. Future studies could validate these findings and the OID model in both Western and non-Western countries and in the context of other knowledge intensive industries.

Conclusion

This model of organizational identification based on empirical findings has broad implications in the domain of OID and amongst knowledge workers. It can further deepen our understanding of OID in non –Western contexts like India. These insights could go a long way to embed OID as a significant strategy in the hands of managers to develop, nurture and retain talent. The variables and relationships revealed in this research can be quantitatively tested in different contexts to further extend the nomological network of OID.

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