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THE IDENTIFICATION OF
ORGANISATIONAL SUBCULTURES
IN AN
INTERNATIONAL ENERGY COMPANY

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Abstract

For more than half a century it has been hypothesised that organisational culture is a single, homogeneous and consistent phenomenon, which provides an overarching set of meanings shared by all organisational members. Increasingly, however, the efficacy of this approach has been tested as a small number of scholars have put forward an alternative hypothesis – that, like the societies they are part of, organisations are more likely characterised by pluralism, heterogeneity and ambiguity. The possibility of subcultures as the dominant expression of organisational culture has gained support as a means to understand and explain the cultural milieu of the highly complex organisations of the 21st century.

This research, an embedded single case study, examines the procurement directorate (PD) of a large, multinational energy company, to identify whether subcultures exist in this context, and if so, whether they can be defined using current theoretical concepts. Content analysis of the data shows that a number of unique subcultural groups do exist, which are delineated by a variety of unifying characteristics and physical manifestations of the group’s culture.

These distinct subcultures emerge as being influential in a variety of different ways: at the operating unit level through sustaining harmonious relationships with one another and supporting the day-to-day work of the directorate; and at the organisational level through fostering positive relationships between group members and ZAOC Norge and the overt support of important organisational meanings. The findings from this study suggest that subcultures are central to the cultural environment of the PD and
moreover contribute to the maintenance of the strong overarching organisational culture that exists at ZAOC Norge. However, with the lack of generalisability from a single case study, more research is required in both other procurement directorates and also alternative directorates of the petroleum industry. Further research would help to address the paucity of studies that exist within the industry and the lack of subcultural knowledge in this context.
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Glossary of terms

BP - British Petroleum
CEO – Chief operating officer
HSE - Health, safety and environment
MUHEC - Massey University Human Ethics Committee
NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NOK - Norwegian Kroner
NPD - Norwegian Petroleum Directorate
NS - North Sea
OCI - Organisational culture index
OCP - Organisational culture profile
PSAN - Petroleum Safety Authority Norway
PD - Procurement Directorate
UK - United Kingdom
ZAOC - ZA Oil Company (pseudonym for organisation)
Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iv
Glossary of terms ........................................................................................................... vi
List of tables .................................................................................................................. xi
List of figures ............................................................................................................... xii
Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Why organisational culture? ...................................................................................... 1
  1.2 Purpose .................................................................................................................... 2
    1.2.1 Research questions ............................................................................................ 4
    1.2.2 Analysis ............................................................................................................. 5
  1.3 Scope ....................................................................................................................... 5
  1.4 Rationale ................................................................................................................ 6
  1.5 The oil sector .......................................................................................................... 8
  1.6 ZOAC Norge – the organisational context ................................................................. 8
    1.6.1 The procurement directorate at ZAOC Norge. ..................................................... 9
  1.7 Organisation of thesis ............................................................................................. 10

Chapter 2: Literature review ............................................................................................ 13
  2.1 Organisational culture ........................................................................................... 13
    2.1.1 The symbolist paradigm ..................................................................................... 15
    2.1.2 The functionalist paradigm ................................................................................. 18
  2.2 Organisational subcultures ..................................................................................... 21
    2.2.1 Defining ‘organisational subcultures’ ................................................................. 23
      2.2.1.1 Unifying characteristics - demographic ....................................................... 24
        2.2.1.1.1 Gender. .................................................................................................. 25
        2.2.1.1.2 National culture ................................................................................... 27
        2.2.1.1.3 Occupational and professional characteristics ...................................... 29
    2.2.2 Organisational and inter-group relations .............................................................. 30
      2.2.2.1 The nature of overarching culture and subculture relationships ................ 30
      2.2.2.2 Inter-group relationships ............................................................................. 32
    2.2.3 Subcultural membership .................................................................................... 33
  2.3 Methodology .......................................................................................................... 35
    2.3.1 Epistemology and theoretical perspective .......................................................... 36
    2.3.2 Qualitative approaches ....................................................................................... 38
    2.3.3 Researching organisational subculture ............................................................... 39
2.3.4 The case study as a research methodology ........................................... 40
  2.3.4.1 Data sources ......................................................................................... 41
    2.3.4.1.1 The interview .................................................................................. 42
    2.3.4.1.2 Direct observation .......................................................................... 43
    2.3.4.1.3 Material manifestations ................................................................. 44
  2.3.4.2 Categorising the case study ................................................................. 45
  2.3.4.3 Limitations of case study method ....................................................... 46
  2.3.5 Data analysis .......................................................................................... 48
    2.3.5.1 Content analysis ................................................................................ 48
  2.4 Summary .................................................................................................... 50
Chapter 3: Methods ............................................................................................ 52
  3.1 The case study ............................................................................................ 52
    3.1.1 Rationale for selection of case study methodology ............................... 53
  3.2 Systematic use of the case study ............................................................... 54
    3.2.1 Designing the case study ..................................................................... 54
    3.2.2 The case study protocol ....................................................................... 55
      3.2.2.1 Ethical considerations .................................................................... 56
  3.3 Sources of data ......................................................................................... 57
    3.3.1 The interview ....................................................................................... 57
      3.3.1.1 Pilot test ......................................................................................... 57
    3.3.2 Direct observation ............................................................................... 58
    3.3.3 Material manifestations ....................................................................... 59
  3.4 Data collection ........................................................................................... 59
    3.4.1 Study participants ............................................................................... 61
  3.4 Content analysis ....................................................................................... 63
    3.4 Limitations ............................................................................................... 66
  3.5 Conclusions ............................................................................................... 69
Chapter 4: Results .............................................................................................. 70
  4.1 Organisational culture ............................................................................. 72
    4.1.1 Health, safety and environment (HSE) ................................................. 72
      4.1.1.1 Safety ............................................................................................... 73
      4.1.1.2 Health ............................................................................................. 74
    4.1.2 Organisational structure ....................................................................... 75
    4.1.3 Monetary and career issues ................................................................. 76
      4.1.3.1 Compensation and benefits ............................................................ 76
List of tables
Table 1 The study design integrating Yin’s (2009) components. ................................ 55
Table 2 Distribution by department of interview subjects............................................. 62
Table 3 Participant codes, department and demographic data...................................... 62
List of figures

Figure 1 Content analysis procedure (Mayring, 2000).................................65