Managing Corporate Identities in a Changing Environment: A Case Study of A Public Sector Shared Services Provider

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Abstract

Corporate identity development, as a management strategy, has evolved from the simple visual representation of an organisation to a more complex corporate strategy over the past thirty years. There is now considerable research to suggest that effective corporate identity management results in creating a positive corporate image and simultaneously helps organisational members to align their work with the organisation's vision and goals.

This paper focuses on the management of communication about corporate identity in one newly created Queensland-based public sector shared services provider within a larger public sector organisational structure. This case study employs qualitative interviews of senior managers and staff, secondary data, including website and published reports, to examine how the shared services provider manages its corporate identity by aligning its vision and organisational structure in a period of uncertainty about its possible future structure and operation. The findings of this pilot study suggest that managers and employees in this shared services provider find it difficult to juggle the complexity of multiple visions and requirements for action. This is the result of two key pressures reported by participants: the lack of a clear shared services provider identity; and the approach of senior managers who intentionally maintain a diffused corporate identity, rather than build a strong identity, to prepare employees for the possibility of future organisational change.

Introduction

Corporate identity management is becoming an increasingly important focus of marketing and organisational communication literature (Van Riel and Balmer, 1997, 350; Hatch and Schultz, 1997, 356; Ind, 1997, 42; Balmer, 2001, 249; Balmer, 2003, 33). This literature suggests that effective corporate identity management creates a positive corporate image and simultaneously helps organisational members to align their work with the organisation’s vision and goal (Balmer and Wilson, 1998, 12; Scott and Lane, 2000, 44). Organisations are starting to recognise that they face the challenge to understand and define the organisation for the purpose of helping staff with their own self-definitions as well as for the achievement of organisational goals.

This paper explores corporate identity as the planned and operational self-presentation about what the organisation is, what it does and how it does it, and how management and employees identify themselves in terms of Balmer and Soenen’s (1999, 82; 2003, 17) conceptualisation of the qualities or alternative faces of corporate identity. These range from the ‘Actual’ or current attributes of organisation; through the ‘Ideal’ or optimum positioning for marketing purposes, recognising both strengths and environmental constraints; through ‘Desired’ identity or the identity which the chief executive and board wish to acquire; to the ‘Communicated’ identity or how the
organisation is perceived by and communicates with its stakeholders; to the ‘Conceived’ identity or the image and representations as well as reputational profile it holds. This paper focuses primarily on the Actual, Desired and Communicated identity of the organisation under study; that is, its focus is on how employees understand their identity as it is shaped by the vision and structure of the organisation and what is communicated about it.

This paper reports a case study of the management of communication about corporate identity in one newly created Queensland-based public sector shared services provider within a larger public sector organisational structure. It examines how senior managers develop a shared vision of the organisation, and then, through this process, seek to establish and maintain trust through their organisational leadership, initiate and manage change processes, and motivate employees. This research reveals how organisational vision and structure impact on the development and adaptation of different and sometimes competing identities available to organisational members working in this large complex bureaucracy in a changing environment. It also reports how both the senior managers and employees in the case under study manage their identities by selecting and responding to the multiple visions of this complex organisation.

As part of a larger study across a group of public sector organisations, this paper examines the development of two critical aspects of an organisation: communicating the vision of the organisation as a soft framework, and organisational structural issues as a hard framework. The research questions are:

1. What is the corporate identity of the Queensland government shared service provider?
2. What are the senior manager and employee views on corporate identities in terms of vision and structure?
3. What management strategies were used to encourage staff to adopt the new corporate identities?
4. What are the current concerns in managing their corporate identities?

**Background to the case**

The case study organisation is a public sector shared service provider in Queensland. The organisation is a newly created provider within a large public sector organisational structure with an emerging and multi-layered corporate identity.

‘Shared services’ is a management concept to share human resources, knowledge and technology in the areas of supporting corporate functions such as human resources, finance and information technology while leveraging economies of scale and maintaining a strong focus on performance and service management (Gunn et al., 1993, 22; Kaplan and Norton, 2003, 14). This concept has been popular in the private sector since the 1990s, and the Australian government initiated the shared services concept in early 2000s as the continuation of financial and administrative reform, with the goal of increasing the organisation’s accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness with a customer focus (Hoque & Moll, 2001, 304).

The process of transitioning the Queensland public sector to a shared corporate service model, known as the Shared Service Initiative, commenced in 2003 and approximately 5,000 corporate service professions have been transitioned from multiple agencies to five new shared service providers.
supporting five clusters of 28 agencies (Queensland Government, 2002b). The case study organisation has been restructured in the existing department as a separate business entity under the Shared Service Initiative, and has become one of the shared service providers. As such, this business entity has established a distinct provider and client relationship under a operating level agreement.

As a starting point, recognising the structural arrangements of the Queensland case study, we have developed a list of the possible identities, and visualised the relationships between them, that employees and staff may commit to, based on various Queensland Government reports (2002b; 2005c). Figure 1 below demonstrates the six different possible visions that managers and employees of this new business unit can identify with:

- ‘Queensland Government’ identity;
- ‘Shared Services Provider’ identity (Vision for all five shared service providers under the Initiative in Queensland);
- ‘My Shared Services Provider (SSP1)’ identity (Vision for one shared service provider in which the employee is working);
- ‘Client Department’ identity (Client as well as Host Department for this case study); and
- ‘Service/Professional’ identity.

These identities match the structural arrangements of this government department and create challenges for staff as they make choices and allocate priorities to the various professional and organisational identities that compete for their loyalty.

![Figure 1](image-url)  
**Figure 1** Major corporate identities of the Queensland State Government Shared Services by vision and structure

**Researching corporate identity**

Qualitative research has been adopted for this case study. Adopting this view implies that the interpretive and constructivist methodology is appropriate for understanding corporate identity management in this public sector shared services provider. Communication scholars (Ind, 1997, 52; Balmer, 1998, 989; Balmer, 2001, 268; Bromley, 2001, 327) place significant value on the research paradigm of naturalism, ethnography and case study research especially for corporate identity theory building. Because the study of
corporate identity and reputation is considerably more complicated and difficult than one might suppose as it entails complex interactions of people, situations and options, case-study method has been the preferred method of inquiry for much of this work.

In this study, in-depth interviews have been employed to draw thick descriptions from top managers and employees and to explain how the corporate identity of the Shared Services Provider was developed and communicated, what intention for corporate identity was embedded in corporate strategies, and how managers and employees identify themselves. Secondary data analysis has been used to examine the development of corporate identity and the ‘communicated’ corporate identity from the Queensland government websites. These include data about the business plan, management framework and government analysis of the transitional issues in setting up the Shared Services Initiative implementation.

As a pilot case study, the total sample size for the interviews is fifteen, with three senior managers responsible as ‘definers’ of corporate identity direction and twelve employees as the ‘adopters’ of that identity. A written approval has been obtained from the case study organisation and a summary of the research plan, confidentiality agreement and a consent form has been forwarded to the interviewees suggested by management two weeks before the interviews. The semi-structured interviews for an average of one hour per interviewee, conducted during January 2006, were tape-recorded and transcribed prior to analysis. This research followed the steps of data analysis suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1995): developing the interview questions and organising data by the pre-determined interview questions and sub headings; emerging themes and comparative analysis of both management and employees, including tabulation of responses; and conclusions, based on interviews and secondary data.

What is corporate identity?
Corporate identity management has evolved from simple visual representation of the logo, symbols and livery of an organisation within the **graphic design paradigm** and focusing on the external audience (Van Riel, 1997, 340) to the more complex management of strategy, behaviour, and communication, based on long lasting organisational values (Van Riel, 1995, 30-31; Balmer, 1998, 964; Hatch and Schultz, 1997, 358).

This corporate identity concept has been extensively discussed in the corporate communication, marketing communication and strategy literature, while, in the organisational behaviour literature, the term ‘organisational identity’ has been defined as the set of constructs organisational members use to describe what is central, enduring and distinctive about their organisation (Albert and Whetten, 1985, 265). The current trend is an integrated multiple disciplines approach examining both members and corporate identity at the organisational level to understand the development of effective corporate strategies.

While there have been various foci for corporate identity research, Balmer and Soenen (1999, 80), more recently defined the corporate identity mix as **culture, structure, communication and strategy**, based on the triumvirate elements of Soul, Body and Voice, and introduced the new corporate identity management mix with three additional elements of **reputations, environment and stakeholders**. This evolution of the corporate
identity and management mix is evidence of its positioning as a strategic management tool in organisational thinking.

Effective communication of the core messages to stakeholders is considered a crucial element to enhance corporate identity, especially for organisations with multiple products and services and geographic diversification (De Hass, 1999, 234). Most of the corporate identity management literature positions vision, mission and values as the foundation of identity, and image and reputation as the key unifying directions of an organisation (Marwick and Fill, 1997; Morison, 1997, 160; Balmer and Soenen, 1999, 77; Christensen and Cheney, 2000, 248; Van Riel, 2000, 157).

Managing identities in complex organisational structures


In parallel with work on defining corporate identity and its elements, scholars have revealed the myth of one corporate identity and investigated the existence and tensions of multiple forms of identity at the individual, professional, departmental, divisional, organisational, geographical and national levels (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Balmer and Wilson, 1998; Gioia et al., 2000; Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Hogg and Terry, 2000). The underlying principle of the research is that multiple identities exist and can be managed through effective corporate identity strategies.

Further, organisations require simultaneous recognition and balancing of subgroup and organisational identities, and overemphasis on either one to the detriment of the other, with a strategy emphasising positive distinctiveness, is potentially damaging. Thus, maintaining and managing the relationship of complicated multiple identities with a certain degree of ambiguity can be an advantage, fitting in various situations and different audiences (Gioia et al., 2000; Pratt and Foreman, 2000). This is called ‘Diffused identity’ in this paper. Pratt and Foreman (2000, p. 26) provide a framework encompassing the management of multiple identities and their relationships. They argue that this requires ‘plurality’ and ‘synergy’ which allow compartmentalisation, deletion, integration, and aggregation of identities in large organisational structures.

On-going public sector management reform over the last decade has changed public sector values from traditional public administration and self-protective administrative sub-cultures, to functional rationality and cost effectiveness (Skalen, 2004, 251; Henderson, 2004, 248). Therefore, corporate identity management in the public sector needs more attention where these organisations with strong symbolic, communicative and behavioural identities and bureaucratic image strive to transform themselves into efficient and outcome driven cultures to match successful performance.
1. **What is the corporate identity of the Queensland government shared service provider?**

The corporate identity of the case study organisation is explained in terms of vision, structure and corporate identity mix of symbol, communication and behaviour (Ind, 1997; Van Riel, 1995). The case study organisation is called (Shared Service Provider 1) SSP1 in this paper. The SSP1 previously operated under the vision of the Client Department. Since the Initiative in 2003, the SSP1 has created its new vision closely aligned with the Shared Service Provider vision ‘Delivering high-quality, cost-effective corporate services across the Queensland Government’ (Queensland Government 2002a). The new SSP1 vision was developed mainly by the senior managers through a series of workshops and endorsed by the SSP1 governing board (Interview 13).

In terms of organisational structure, the strategic policy development functions of the previous directorate remained in the Client Department and the operational functions have been transitioned to the SSP1. For example, Financial Services has been split into two sections: policy development as the Purchaser and operational functions as the Provider.

![Diagram showing change of vision and organisational structure before and after the Initiative](image)

**Figure 2** Change of vision and organisational structure before and after the Initiative, based on an analysis of documentation from Queensland Government (2002a).

There was a significant change in the accounting and reporting structure. SSP1 is now required to produce its own financial statements within the Client Department annual report (Queensland Treasury, 2005). Therefore, SSP1 created its own Australian Business Number (ABN) and a separate company code in its accounting system. The cost centres were restructured from Divisions to Services in order to bill their services to the Client Department (Queensland Government, 2005a). The performance of SSP1 is now measured under the balanced scorecard of the Initiative as well as the existing Client Departmental reporting structure (Queensland Government, 2005b).
Under the Initiative guiding principles, SSPs are prevented from creating their own logo, but are encouraged to develop a name graphic, distinct typology letterhead, and presentation material (Queensland Government, 2000). Senior managers of SSP1 developed the name and announced this to employees (Interview 13). However, the SSP1 did not develop unique graphics, but continuously uses the Client Department symbol. Most of employees continue to perform the same tasks for the same customers as before the new structure. There was no physical movement of staff due to the difficulty in relocating more than 500 employees into a separate location within the Brisbane city area. Conversely, other providers from multiple departments were relocated into a number of locations throughout the Queensland (Queensland Government, 2002b).

The SSP1 does not have its own communication unit and uses the existing Client Department communication channel: for instance, intranet, email and publication. Day-to-day operational information is communicated at the branch and team meetings of SSP1. An additional communication structure from the Initiative has been set up (Queensland Government, 2005c). The Shared Service Initiative Office has its own communication unit to deliver common shared service providers' messages, which are communicated to the SSP1 by information sessions and promotional materials (Interview 13).

Both senior managers (Interview 13 and 14) and employees (Interview 3, 4, 5, 7 and 10) expressed that organisational behaviour has been gradually changing towards more performance-focused outcomes rather than processing-focused, mentioning the results from the annual staff survey, client surveys and organisational self-assessment focus groups adopting the Australian Business Excellence Framework. The corporate identity of SSP1 is currently transitioning from what Stuart (2003) and Van Riel (1995) have called a Machine and Monolithic model towards more a Professional and Endorsed structure under a new vision and structure. It focuses on more cost effective services to clients and a heightened identity and image as professionals with a subtle balance of connection with their SSP1 and the government department involved.

New layers of corporate identities such as ‘Shared Service Provider’, ‘My SSP’ and ‘Client’ have been embedded into the organisation. The formation of this relatively new set of corporate identities is in transition, subject to mooted upcoming changes within the Initiative and emerging government directions. The next section describes senior managers’ and employees’ views on their corporate identities in terms of vision and structure.

2. What are senior manager and employee views on corporate identities in terms of vision and structure?

The perception of corporate identity in terms of vision and structure was explored in the study, drawing on the perspectives of senior managers and employees. One question required interviewees to choose one of the following seven corporate identities: 1 Queensland Government, 2 Shared Service Provider, 3 My SSP1, 4 or 5 Client Department Identity, 6. Service/Professional and 7. Others; and to identify it as most or least important to them. 

Perception on current vision – ‘Out of Date’, ‘the Engine Room’ or ‘Do We Have one?’
The senior managers believe that SSP1 is achieving its vision, referring to the positive feedback from the recent customer and staff surveys conducted in 2004 and 2005 (Interview 13, 14 and 15). They commented that there was a mixed approach that most employees were really focused and committed to the new environment (Interview 13 and 14), but some still didn’t understand their new identity and what they do (Interview 15). However, the senior managers questioned the appropriateness of their vision developed in 2003, pointing out that the current SSP1 vision might be ‘out of date’ (Interview 13 and 14).

The majority of employees used positive adjectives in describing ‘My SSP1’ such as ‘efficient’, ‘very professional’, ‘highly intelligent’, ‘helpful’, ‘friendly’, ‘cool’, ‘engine room’, ‘hardworking’ and ‘focused’. Eight employees out of twelve responded that they were familiar with ‘My SSP1’ vision, with two having seen it by accident. Employees who were well aware of the Initiative and My SSP1 vision showed a strong belief in achieving the vision, expressing their confidence in a range from 70% to 100%. Employees believed that their senior managers had a strong belief in achieving their vision.

Employees identified the lack of internal communication and ownership in general and no buy-in from the Client Department as the major issues they faced. A number of employees felt that there was a weak corporate identity due to the lack of planning and marketing:

- *I think at the moment it is not very strong at all because there is a lack of communication to employees, to the general employees. A vision gives us direction but for that vision to be effective, people must know what the vision is and it must be a vision people can remember. …. I believe that a vision has to be formed by everybody to have ownership of it.* (Interview 1)
- *I haven’t seen the vision or anything like that, that’s why…… Ultimately we have to come up with what our objectives are and start marketing ourselves.* (Interview 2)

The interviews showed that both senior managers and employees generally have a positive perception of their corporate identity but raise questions about its profiling. While senior managers view the vision as out of date, employees pointed out the need for better internal and external communication of My SSP1 or Client Department visions.

**The most important corporate identity - ‘Client Department’ versus ‘My SSP1’**

Senior managers mentioned that the Client Department vision was the most important for the organisation (Interview 14 and 15) and that integration and alignment of the different visions and its communication were critical. They suggested that approach rather than promoting different visions (Interview 13, 14 and 15). However, they also indicated that currently no plans existed to improve this communication, but they indicated the need to address this issue in a formal way (Interview 13). Senior managers believed that their employees were not connected to ‘My SSP1’ vision, but rather to the ‘Client Department’ vision (Interview 14 and 15).

The majority of employees believed that all different visions at the work place helped them to understand ‘who we are’, what we do’ and ‘what we are aiming for’ as a unifying focal point. Employees perceived that managers were
communicating and promoting the ‘My SSP1’ vision most. However, mixed opinions existed on the question of ‘which vision senior managers should promote most’: ‘My SSP1’, ‘Client Department’ or ‘Service/Professional’.

Some staff indicated that they were indifferent to the various identities and were willing to use whatever they were told to. However, others, particularly professional staff such as accountants and IT specialists, indicated that they identified strongly with the identity frame that represented their chosen professional field.

Senior managers and employees were also asked about the most and least important identity for them and for others. Two of the senior managers mentioned the ‘Client Department’ identity as most important for them and for their employees (Interview 14 and 15), while one manager nominated ‘Service/Professional’ identity (Interview 13). Two managers believed that the ‘Shared Service Provider’ concept was the least important both for them and for their employees (Interview 13 and 14).

The employees had a mixed response also. Three employees nominated ‘Client Department’ identity as the most important for them while six employees selected ‘My SSP1’. Employees showed a mixed approach with four selecting ‘Queensland Government’ as least important. On the question of the least important identity to senior managers, four employees said that they didn’t know.

The four questions about the importance of seven different identities in the table below were asked to senior managers and employees. There was a discrepancy in the belief structure of the most important identity between the two groups within the sample interviewees, with ‘Client Department’ identity being most important for senior managers and ‘My SSP1’ identity for employees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Senior managers</th>
<th>Employees</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. What do you think is the most important identity to management?</td>
<td>4 4 6 6 3 7 3 4 4 7 2 1 3 4 3 3</td>
<td>4 4 6 3 1 4 3 4 4 6 5 3 6 3 5 6 3 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. What is the most important identity to you (Employees)?</td>
<td>4 4 6 3 1 4 6 3 4 4 6 5 3 6 3 5 6 3 1</td>
<td>2 2 1 5 6 7 1 2 7 1 7 5 6 2 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. What do you think is the least important identity to management?</td>
<td>2 2 1 5 6 7 1 2 7 1 7 5 6 2 7</td>
<td>2 2 1 5 5 4 1 1 2 2 4 1 1 1 7 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. What is the least important identity to you (Employees)?</td>
<td>2 2 1 5 5 4 1 1 2 2 4 1 1 1 7 4</td>
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Table 1 Summary of the most and least important corporate identity to senior managers and employees
(1) Queensland Government (2) Shared Service Provider (3) My SSP1 (4 or 5) Client Department Identity (6) Service/Professional (7) Others
The considerable variation in clustering of most and least important identity suggest the confusion and lack of focus generated by the opportunity to access multiple identities.

Several of the interviewees commented on the ways in which they negotiate several of the identities listed. The table above represents when some interviewees refused to prioritise and named up to 3 'most important identities. However, during the interviews, several employees acknowledged that they consciously shifted identity according to whom they were speaking and adjusted that identity accordingly.

With multiple identities to choose from, disagreement amongst senior managers about which identity should be the most salient, and acknowledged limited communication about the salience of the varying identities, it is hardly surprising that employees have such varying perspectives on their corporate identity.

**Current and desired corporate identity management strategies - ‘Evolving and diffused’ identity versus ‘Distinct’ identity**

The SSP1 focused on the ‘Shared Service Provider’ vision in the first two years to be a technically efficient shared service provider. For the twelve months prior to the study, senior managers started to realise the importance of the ‘Client Department’ specific needs, and indicated that they were currently taking on board that their existence is largely dependent on the client needs, according to one manager (Interview 13).

Senior managers, in their changing business environment, acknowledged the multiple layers of identity that have been constructed and the need for effective strategies to align the existing identities of ‘Queensland Government’, ‘Department’ and ‘Service/Professional’ identity with the new identities of ‘Shared Service Provider’, ‘My SSP1’ and ‘Client’.

Senior managers pointed out a need to promote the achievements of ‘My SSP1’, such as the successful introduction of effective business improvements, streamlining processes, effective cost management, and the building of a good relationship with the Client Department (Interview 13 and 15). However, the senior managers also indicated that they have intentionally built a diffused corporate identity rather than a strong identity, to prepare employees for the possibility of future organisational change (Interview 13).

As one example of the diffused corporate identity strategies, the generic description ‘Shared Service Directorate’ was used within the organisation rather than using the distinct SSP1 name. Effectively, the identity of SSP1 was silenced by the directives of senior staff. Employees experienced a lack of recognition for ‘My SSP1’ corporate identity both internally and externally, and consequently didn’t use the name outside:

> I do find now that because I’m getting sick of saying My SSP1 …I do sometimes say the Department. I know I shouldn’t. If it’s someone who would be familiar with the government I would say My SSP1. But if it’s just a friend I’d say the Department. ‘Do you prefer saying My SSP1?’ I do. (Interview 12)

> There’s a clear message out in the real world that we aren’t supposed to be so close under the Department and that we are supposed to be our own entity.’ ‘I must say when it’s an outsider, again I just tell them it’s the Department. People don’t know what My SSP1 is. (Interview 2)
Employees were also inclined to adopt the most meaningful vision and identity that aligned with their belief structures:

- **It might actually be the Department. For some reason, it just seems to have a clear defined goal and you know, you can see some sort of merit in what they’re doing, like something that’s worthwhile being achieved. (Interview 8)**

- **I just see myself as the Department. I never refer to myself as My SSP1, I’m just a part of the Department. I think because we’re all one and like, I’m very much against the “us and them” business and I just see us all as being one group of people. (Interview 6)**

One employee had an expectation that a commercial oriented business unit has a distinct corporate identity, giving an example of how, because it operates by self-generating revenue, it takes on a distinct name and reputation:

- **They have their own name and identify very strongly, and still part of the Department. Because they have to create their own profit to refinance themselves, so that I think they see themselves first, the Department is second. (Interview 3)**

A number of employees mentioned that the increased awareness of vision and corporate information would improve their belief in achieving the vision:

- **I think it’s a strong vision and I think if it has probably made us a little bit more aware, that’s being very positive. Now just being educated a little more, I do have a stronger awareness and belief. (Interview 11)**

Overall, the senior managers were comfortable with an evolving and diffused corporate identity, while employees were inclined to desire to adopt, and actually adopted a communicated and meaningful vision and corporate identity from their experience in the Department and public sector. The next section reports on the strategies used to develop the current identities assessed in the case organisation.

### 3. What management strategies were used to encourage staff to adopt the new corporate identities?

#### Government strategic direction

The Shared Service Initiative implemented extensive communication strategies to prepare employees and external target audience for the Shared Service Initiative. Formal business plans, fact sheet and information session were distributed to senior managers and employees prior to July 2003. The state government political direction, followed by extensive communication, was one of the most influential factors for the employees to adopt the new corporate identities, according to the interviewees.

#### New name and new entity

In 2003, the employees received a hard copy letter from the Department explaining they were transitioned to SSP1 (Interview 13). Further, SSP1 announced its new name and vision to internal and external stakeholders (Interview 13). SSP1 registered a separate Australian Business Number from the Department and produced a set of financial annual report. Direct evidence of the significance of the new name on employees is that a number of employees directly quoted the new name in answering the question about adjectives to describe 'My SSP1'.
Changes in systems, management and reporting processes

Finance and Human Resources systems were modified as a separate company and employees paid by the new company code. Employees work with other shared service providers in implementing systems and business process projects where all representatives from SSPs meet and discuss common solutions. SSP1 is required to report their performance against the Initiative Balanced Scorecard under Benefits, Customers, Improvement and Capability areas and benchmarked against other shared service providers (Queensland Government 2005b).

Therefore, the overall change from the Queensland Government direction, communication, new name, vision, structure, system, management and reporting processes influenced employees to adopt the new corporate identities. The next section reports on issues that have emerged as current concerns about managing corporate identities.

4. What are the current concerns in managing their corporate identities?

A number of concerns about managing corporate identities have been identified through this research: issues of confusion and timing; the pressures of change management; identity demarcation concerns; cultural conflict with competing visions; and unclear alignment of identities.

Confusion and timing
Senior managers identified that there was some confusion over identity amongst staff, and that there were some difficulties in trying to change identity. The time it takes to change identities also created more confusion. As the Shared Services Initiative continues, the SSP1 strives to find its own purpose and identity which is different from the initial vision, and this creates more confusion, according to interviewees.

*Image and identity are things that grow on you, and because they’re subject to interpretation, like a symbol is subject to interpretation or language is subject to interpretation. …for a period of time and quite a long time, confusion and that’s the weakness.* (Interview 13)

Pressures of change management
Senior managers also pointed out that there was a pressure not to brand the SSP1 as part of the large department, while other SSPs with multiple clients had a distinct corporate identity. The shared service initiative model is still under development and the current model is being constantly reviewed and modified (Interview 13 and 15). Both senior managers and employees emphasised the need for change management strategies for the SSP1.

Identity demarcation in business
One of the senior managers (Interview 15) expressed apprehension about the trade-offs for approaches using a whole of Government, Department, and SSP1 in business systems and management. How SSP1 effectively promotes the significance of its business and the protection of the differences are challenging issues to SSP1 according to senior managers. SSP1 required a clear boundary and shaped corporate identity to deal with a structural fit in a large public sector, according to one senior manager (Interview 15).

Cultural conflict of us or them
Other concerns were related to a negative cultural fit within the Client Department. One senior manager (Interview 14) pointed out that breaking up into us and them eventually generated duplicated work and a negative culture.
Several interviewees pointed out that this still existed after two years. Therefore, employees must juggle two different corporate identities ‘My SSP1’ or ‘Client Department’ in their behavioural decisions.

**Unclear Alignment**

The alignment of multiple visions and structures was also of concern. Managers mentioned that some employees were confused that the SSP1 was really separate from the Client Department and that the employees established barriers in the organisation. A senior manager (Interview 14) also acknowledged that they needed to find and promote a common thread for the multiple visions, structures and corporate identities:

*We’re trying to say we don’t promote different visions, try to integrate those visions. It’s moving away from being technically expert operators to being expert operators who really know the client needs. I suppose we did have some strategies in place about telling people what the shared service initiative was. We certainly had communication strategies about the SSP itself.* (Interview 13)

*The Department and the client is the critical part of the vision and our agenda really has to be to get alignment. So our position in My SSP is to negotiate with some of these other agencies and promote the requirements of our clients and recognise those.* (Interview 15)

Each of these issues highlights the significance of the negotiated reality that is corporate identity. Without clear, focussed communication, employees find it difficult to align their work practices with the organisation’s goals while managers feel the pressure of alignment with broader public sector goals and the on-going challenges of on-going modifications in direction.

**Conclusion**

This case shows the critical strategic role that vision and structure play in shaping corporate identities for this organisation. It also highlights the complexities of effectively managing these aspects of defining, organising and communicating what the organisation is, what it does and how it supports employees to align their work with the desired direction. The data demonstrated that without clear and effective communication, there is considerable potential for confusion, weak alignment and identity conflict as employees work their way through a multi-layered and multi-focussed set of identities.

It is important, for effective management, to monitor the playing out of corporate identity and to conduct periodic reviews of how corporate identities are travelling through symbol, communication, behaviour, culture, reputation, environment, and perception of multiple stakeholders, as a significant part of organisational performance measurement.

This qualitative study suggests there is considerable confusion amongst employees in this public sector organisation about which identities are most salient for the organisation, and senior managers appear to be using this ambiguity to manage the complexities of potential changes to vision and structure being mooted in the broader State government sector for the future. The question posed by this pilot study, and which will be followed up in the broader study is: what damage to employee and manager behaviour and effectiveness does this confused corporate identity, level of ambiguity, and lack of alignment cause?
References


