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The turn to work in organization and management theory: Some implications for strategic organization

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Over the past decade, the study of management and organization theory has experienced a significant ‘turn to work’. This turn to work has not, however, been a return to the study of the forms of work that have been the traditional focus of organizational scholars. Instead, the turn to work involves a widespread scholarly engagement with new forms of work that involve individuals and organizations purposefully and strategically expending effort to affect their social-symbolic context. For example, boundary work (Gieryn, 1983; Kreiner et al., 2009), identity work (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Watson, 2008) and institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010) have all become important areas of scholarship despite being largely unknown or unexplored just a few years ago.

Although the streams of research on various new forms of work are largely disconnected at present, we argue that together they represent an important trend in the study of management and organization with important ramifications for researchers interested in strategic organization. In this essay, we introduce the turn to work, explain what it is and why it has occurred, discuss its implications for the field of strategic organization and propose some new research directions for strategic organization that incorporate this turn to work.

The turn to work in the study of organization and management theory

Despite Barley and Kunda’s (2001) despair at the lack of attention to work in organization and management theory (OMT), 12 years after the publication of their paper the study of various forms of work has become a central preoccupation of a wide swathe of researchers in the field. To gain a better understanding of this turn to work, we sought to identify as many streams of research on work as we could. We began with a survey of the literature and then posted a request on the Academy of Management OMT Listserv for anyone who was working on a new form of work to...
contact us.\textsuperscript{1} We received more than 30 responses which, when combined with our review of the literature, allowed us to identify 15 distinct forms of work being researched in organization and management theory. We have summarized the results in Table 1.\textsuperscript{2}

The forms of work that we have identified have much in common. First, these forms of work all involve actors engaged in a purposeful effort—a ‘conscious, intended try’ as Hochschild (1979) put it—to manipulate some aspect of their social context. The aspect of the social context on which the actors focus is the ‘X’ in ‘X work’. What is notable about these ‘X’s’ is that they are all socially-symbolic in nature. Identity, emotion, institutions, ideas, aesthetics, values—all of these facets of an agent’s context are both social in the sense that they constitute and are constituted by sets of social relations, and symbolic in that they are phenomena constituted through language and other symbolic expression.

Thus, the forms of work we identify in Table 1 are all concerned with actors’ efforts to affect a social-symbolic aspect of their context. The study of these forms of work does not tend, however, to adopt a simplistic understanding of unconstrained agency, but rather tends to conceptualize agency as embedded, and in particular embedded in the very sets of social-symbolic structures it is aiming to affect (Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009). Watson’s (2008: 129) discussion of identity work, for instance, describes it as a set of ‘mutually constitutive processes’ that involve people both ‘striv[ing] to shape a relatively coherent . . . personal self-identity’ and ‘com[ing] to terms with . . . the various social-identities which pertain to them’.

Second, it is notable that the study of these forms of work includes a social-constructionist epistemology that highlights the role of actors in socially constructing elements of work and organizations that were previously seen as either ‘natural’ or beyond the control of individual actors. Emotion, for instance, is traditionally understood in psychology (where research on emotion is most prevalent) as either emanating from cognitive interpretations of situations or directly from events themselves, but not being the object of work done by interested actors. At most, such emotions might be understood as ‘expressed’ and distinct from ‘felt’ emotions, whereas a powerful aspect of Hochschild’s writing on emotion work is that it is people’s ‘real’, felt emotions that are worked on. Similarly, a part of the interest in institutional work is that it captures the intuition of a set of scholars that actors engage in a wide range of efforts to affect the institutions around them. Such an approach contrasts with more structural approaches to institutions that emphasize stability based on automatic social controls (Jepperson, 1991) and change based on exogenous shocks (Kondra and Hinings, 1998).

The societal roots of the turn to work

An important characteristic of the study of these forms of work in OMT is that they have emerged quite recently. A quick examination of the third column of Table 1 shows that many of the influential papers we point to have been published in the last decade with a majority published in the past five years. We suggest, therefore, that the turn to work stems from a set of forces that has only recently affected management researchers and resulted in an important shift in thinking about the role of agency.

At a societal level, the turn to work reflects the profound changes that have occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century and that have led to an increase in these forms of work and their salience, particularly with respect to changes in conceptions of identity and social structure. Beginning with the social and identity movements of the 1960s and 1970s, social change in the past decades has transformed people’s understandings of identity and society. While traditional notions of the
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type of work</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 Emotion work</td>
<td>‘making a conscious, intended try at altering feeling’ (Hochschild, 1979: 560)</td>
<td>Hochschild, 1979; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987</td>
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<td>2 Identity work</td>
<td>‘identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165)</td>
<td>Watson, 2008</td>
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<td>3 Narrative identity work</td>
<td>‘social efforts to craft self-narratives that meet a person’s identity aims’ (Ibarra and Barbulessi, 2010: 137)</td>
<td>Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Intersectional identity work</td>
<td>‘the on-going activity that individuals undertake in constructing an understanding of a mutually constituted self that is coherent, distinct and positively valued’ (Atewologun and Sealy, 2011: 4)</td>
<td>Atewologun and Sealy, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Institutional work</td>
<td>‘purposive action ... aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions’ (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006: 215)</td>
<td>Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006</td>
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<td>6 Boundary work</td>
<td>‘“strategic practical action” for the purpose of establishing epistemic authority [by] drawing and redrawing ... boundaries ... [through] expulsion, expansion, and protection of autonomy’ (Lamont and Molnar, 2002: 179)</td>
<td>Gieryn, 1983; Kreiner et al., 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Discursive work</td>
<td>Discursive activity carried out to influence processes of social construction</td>
<td>Lawrence et al., 1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Idea work</td>
<td>‘activities concerned with generating, selecting, realizing, nurturing, sharing, materializing, pitching and communicating ideas in organizations’ (Carlsen et al., 2012: 1)</td>
<td>Carlsen et al., 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Strategy work</td>
<td>The purposeful activities carried out by actors in the production of strategies</td>
<td>Whittington et al., 2006</td>
</tr>
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<td>10 Meaning work</td>
<td>‘the struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings’ (Benford and Snow, 2000: 613)</td>
<td>Benford and Snow, 2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 Practice work</td>
<td>‘efforts to affect the recognition and acceptance of sets of routines, rather than their simply engaging in those routines’ (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010: 190)</td>
<td>Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010</td>
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<td>12 Values work</td>
<td>The activities that are carried out by actors whereby values come to be practised in organizations</td>
<td>Gehman et al., in press</td>
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<tr>
<td>13 Interaction work</td>
<td>The purposeful reconfiguring of the interactions among members of a coalition</td>
<td>Perkmann and Schildt, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Aesthetic work</td>
<td>‘the employment of workers with certain embodied capacities and attributes that favourably appeal to customers and which are then organizationally mobilized, developed and commodified’ (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007: 104).</td>
<td>Warhurst and Nickson, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Cultural work</td>
<td>Action by actors to align themselves with prevailing societal preferences and tastes or attempts by actors to shape cultural tastes and preferences</td>
<td>Glynn, 2000; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
self and society focused on their static and unchanging nature, beginning in the 1960s there has been an explosion of discussion of how one can (and should) create and recreate oneself and one’s social context. Contemporary individuals, and especially youth, have become far more reflexive and ambitious in their efforts to reconstruct their identities and the social world around them, and much more accepting of others’ attempts to change. In the world of Lady GaGa, it is hard to make a case for unchanging, static identities handed to us by birth or environment; it is equally impossible to argue for the naturalness of the social world following the civil rights movement, the gay pride movement and women’s liberation.

Technological change has also played an important role in this. The same social media technologies that were instrumental in creating the Arab Spring are available to anyone with a computer and Internet access. The widespread ability to share experiences and mobilize makes the possibility of social change seem far more realistic and acts to diminish people’s willingness to simply live with social-symbolic structures as given. At the same time, it greatly diversifies conceptions of what it means to create social change, by including a far wider range of activities and targets for action.

The recency of scholars’ attention to these forms of work and its roots in social and technological change signals that something is going on ‘out there’ that requires revisions of long-held theoretical frameworks, some of which are anchored in century-old analyses of the industrial revolution. Over a decade ago, Barley and Kunda (2001: 76) argued strongly that more attention needed to be paid to work, because ‘eras of widespread change in the nature of work in society should lead to the emergence and diffusion of new organizational forms and institutions’. The turn to work therefore has important ramifications for thinking about strategic organization.

Strategic organization and the turn to work

The common themes that cut across these new forms of work bring with them significant implications for the study of strategic organization. The first theme emphasizes work as purposeful effort by actors to affect some social-symbolic aspect of their context, in ways both constrained and enabled by its context. This theme resonates with the emphasis in the field of strategic organization on the potential for actors to influence their own paths – to be strategic – but carries with it a conception of agency that is humbler and more nuanced than is often seen in the strategy literature. The second theme highlights the role of actors in socially constructing elements of work and organizations previously taken-for-granted as beyond actors’ control. This theme points to the potential for strategic action in domains not commonly explored in discussions of strategic organization.

Work and value

How organizations create value is a central concern for strategic organization. Research has focused in particular on how firms adapt to their environments, and how firms’ internal resources and capacities allow them to create value in distinctive ways. The turn to work extends and broadens these considerations by highlighting the fact that firms now operate in contexts populated by actors working to manipulate a wide range of the environment’s social-symbolic dimensions with direct implications for how firms produce economic value. These new forms of work directly impact the creation of value and so need to become central concerns in strategic organization. Most centrally, the idea of where value lies and how it is created must be revised based on ideas from the turn to work. An important implication for the field of strategic organization, therefore, is a greater
sensitivity to how these processes occur, the sorts of effects they have and how firms can participate in them. Consider, for example, institutional work. Institutional work can have a profound impact on the production of value in two ways. First, institutional work focused on changing the institutional context of a firm can create new business opportunities. For example, Intel worked to replace the traditional logic of its field with a new platform logic where it provided the platform on which others located their products. This successful institutional project led directly to long-term high levels of profitability for Intel. Second, institutional work can be a business. Professional lobbyists spend much of their time performing institutional work, and understanding how they create value for their customers is greatly facilitated by adopting an institutional work lens. A work lens also has important ramifications inside organizations. Organizational units such as Public Relations, Legal and Human Resources, for example, have typically been marginalized in the study of strategic organization, with the idea that strategy emanates either top-down, from the top management team (Hambrick and Mason, 1984), or bottom-up through rank-and-file adaptation and innovation (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). In contrast, the turn to work suggests that understanding organizational units that focus on social-symbolic features of the firm’s context will be a central issue for strategic organization, especially in terms of how they interact with and affect other units in the firm. So, although streams of research have emerged on the legal organization, political strategy and corporate reputation management, such research needs to be integrated with and made central to core strategic organization concerns.

**Work and workers**

One of the powerful effects of adopting a ‘work lens’ is a shift in focus from the outcomes of action to the actors involved and the action itself. One stream of literature within which there has been greater attention to the strategic action of organizational actors is in the growing literature on strategy as practice, which explores strategy as sets of organizational and field-level routines such as strategic retreats, the creation of strategic plans, etc. The concepts of work and practice are related but distinct, and so it is important to clarify the relationship between the strategy as practice literature and the turn to work. The concept of practice refers to shared routines (Whittington, 2006) or ‘recognized forms of activity’ (Barnes, 2001: 19); practices are not simply what people do, but the socially legitimate routines in any given community. (Barnes, 2001; Schatzki, 2001). Thus, strategy as practice is the study of strategy as recognized forms of activity in and around organizations. In contrast to a strategy as practice approach, the forms of work that are focused on in the streams of research we are highlighting here are not concerned simply with the day-to-day work in organizations, but with goal-directed effort on the part of an actor (individual or collective) to manipulate some aspect of their social-symbolic context. Values work, for instance, undoubtedly involves recognizable sets of practices, but what makes it values work is its focus on affecting organizational values by ‘dealing with pockets of concern, knotting local concerns into action networks, performing values practices, and circulating values discourse’ (Gehman et al., in press). Perhaps most pointedly in this regard is ‘practice work’, which involves ‘efforts to affect the recognition and acceptance of sets of routines, rather than . . . simply engaging in those routines’ (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010: 190). Examining strategic organization through a ‘work lens’ would, therefore, lead to examining a variety of kinds of work – emotion, values, institutional, identity, etc. – in terms of how they are connected to an organization’s strategies and how organizational actors shape and are shaped by
those strategies, regardless of whether or not they are understood by the actors themselves as part of how the organization ‘does’ strategy.

This suggests that the turn to work and research on strategy as practice share some overlapping interests but what is included in the overlap would depend on the specific forms of work in which one was interested. For example, a study of identity work in strategic organization would likely highlight some kinds of strategy as practice, where the practices involve the shaping or managing of organizational and individual identities, but it would very likely also highlight a great deal of organizational activity not usually considered by those focusing on strategy as practice, such as the identity work of organizational actors involved in the day-to-day labour of the organization (e.g. customer service agents engaged in identity work as they deal with front-line customers).

More generally, a turn to work in the study of strategic organization raises the profiles of action, intention and outcomes in organizations. It leads us to consider what organizational actors are doing, why they are doing it and with what consequences. Unlike traditional strategy research, it does not presuppose success or competitive advantage as the only interesting outcomes, but suggests a range of important consequences, and especially highlights the lived experience of organizational actors and its relationship to the strategic concerns, relationships and activities of the organizations in which they work.

Moreover, a turn to work potentially reverses the direction from which we enter our research. Traditional strategy and organizational research might start from a comparative organizational puzzle (e.g. some firms make more money than others, even in the same industry) and try to explain it based on actors’ decisions and behaviours. In contrast, a turn to work suggests the value of starting from a puzzle rooted in the work of actors (e.g. members of some organizations work harder at instilling a strong set of values in their organization than members of other organizations), and then try to understand its relationship to strategy and organization. Thus, a focus on work broadens our discussions of the relationship between strategy and action to all the kinds of work – effortful, goal-directed action – that are driven by actors’ desires to manage themselves and the world around them. The questions a work lens brings to strategic organization have less to do with why some set of structures looks like it does, than why, when and how different kinds of organizational actors engage in different kinds of work and how that work intersects with the strategies and structures of their organizations.

Conclusions: New research directions in strategic organization

Embracing the turn to work in strategic organization opens up an exciting new range of opportunities. First, integrating the examination of how, when and why actors engage in action such as identity work, boundary work and institutional work can significantly enrich our understanding of strategic organization both by extending our understanding of the motivations that underpin different organizational strategies beyond traditional concerns with economic gain or social influence (e.g. the enhancement or defence of identity), and providing a more nuanced understanding of the means through which organizational strategies are realized (e.g. the construction or disruption of boundaries, the transformation of institutions, the expression of emotion).

Second, by bringing a strategic organization perspective to these new forms of work, researchers have the potential to provide new ways of thinking and new tools for analysis to this growing stream of research. This is an opportunity to save researchers in these areas from ‘reinventing the wheel’; in many cases, significant insights have already been gained in strategic organization that can be directly applied to the questions raised by researchers in these areas. The field of strategic organization can bring new theoretical ideas to the conversations going on around these topics.
Finally, engaging with this stream of research provides the opportunity to broaden the scholarly community of strategic organization. Many of the streams of research we have explored are a part of the field of strategic organization, but they are not connected to the discussion happening in strategic organization in an explicit way. By working with existing groups of scholars, we can contribute to the growing literatures on various forms of work, developing distinctive insights rooted in strategic organization and relevant to these new areas of scholarship.

Notes

1. We would like to sincerely thank the members of the Academy of Management OMT Listserv for their willingness to share their ideas on these new forms of work.
2. We have not included all submissions from the OMT list or all of the times in the OMT literature reference was made to a kind of work. In particular, we restricted our list to forms of work aimed at affecting the social-symbolic context, rather than, for instance, characteristics of work (e.g. ‘dirty work’) or more traditional types of work (e.g. ‘professional work’).

References


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