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Doing engagement: presentation in everyday work of independent professionals

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Doing engagement: presentation in everyday work of independent professionals

Abstract

Organisations are captivated by the idea of engagement and associated positive outcomes. However, results are mixed, questioning the relevance of engagement for organisations, workers, and work. This qualitative multiple-case study aims at understanding why and how independent professionals (IPros) engage and disengage with their work. The study shed light on the use of everyday professional identity presentation in negotiating the contradicting nature of IPros' work. Shifting focus from studying engagement as a work-related psychological state to understanding engaging through interactionist lenses, we identified three interrelated micro-processes of doing engagement and their respective actions, providing insights into how engagement is performed in everyday work. The study further illuminates the processual logic of doing engagement by placing practices and routines within different types of interactions, emphasising divergent interests. Implications for human resource management (HRM) practice are also discussed.

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Introduction

Organisations are captivated by the idea of engaged workers, with substantial evidence to suggest that engagement improves organisational outcomes such as profitability and productivity and workers' wellbeing (Bailey, 2022; Bakker and Albrecht, 2018). Engagement often refers to the commitment of employees to their work and organisation (Saks, 2006), presented as a positive, stable, noncontextual, work-related psychological state (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008), and identified as a crucial outcome indicator of sustainable work (Gaude et al., 2021). However, more than thirty years since the hype emerged, engagement is still "a contested and evolving construct" (Bailey, 2022, p. 4), and a call remains for being "more contextually and critically minded when researching/practising engagement" (Fletcher et al., 2020, p. 40)

Research on engagement as a psychological state provides a broad understanding of the construct antecedents and outcomes (Bailey et al., 2017; Rich, Lepine and Crawford, 2010; Saks, 2019). However, to progress the discussion, we should better understand how people engage and why, particularly in a changing and ambiguous world (Sambrook, 2021; Shuck, Kim and Fletcher, 2021). Continuously reflecting on a body of knowledge "can substantially contribute to theory development by exposing and espousing an emergent perspective" (Post et al., 2020, p. 358). Hence, we directed our focus to the underlying social processes of doing engagement, adopting alternative assumptions to the ones currently dominating the literature, bringing our research closer to the complex and dynamic nature of working life (Fletcher et al., 2020). Also, we chose to focus this study on independent professionals (IPros), described broadly as self-directed professionals who add value to client organisations (Bryant and McKeown, 2016). By focusing on this group, we challenge the assumption that engagement is explained through reciprocity to focus on engaging in the context of diverging interests (Arrowsmith and Parker, 2013; Sambrook, 2021; Valentin, 2014).

Our insights make three key contributions to current human resource management (HRM) discussions on engagement and IPros through the concept of identity work by suggesting an empirically derived model of doing engagement. First, illuminating doing engagement provides a theoretical contribution to understanding engaging in everyday work by defining three strategies: engaging, disengaging, and protecting. The study offers classifications of actions under each category, cross-coded with impression management classifications (Goffman, 1959). The classification is a helpful theoretical contribution (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2021) to illustrate how doing engagement hangs together and (re) produces. The second contribution relates to having IPros as the participants by extending the current understanding of the contradictory context of IPros' work and how they use engaging strategies in everyday work to maintain their professional identity and secure the next contract. Finally, the study offers a practical contribution by exploring the role of HRM in work interactions as the primary touchpoint with IPros.

This paper outlines the theoretical background and then introduces the research design and methods choices. We present the findings describing doing engagement as a form of IPros' everyday identity work. Finally, we discuss our findings, offering a processual model of doing engagement as a theoretical contribution with practical implications and future research agenda.

Engagement

Engagement in a work context is understood from several theoretical perspectives. Kahn's (1990) theory of work-related personal engagement focuses on understanding engagement as a process of identity work, referencing multiple sociological and psychological theories to explain the phenomenon. Following an ethnographic study, engagement was defined as "simultaneous employment and expression of a person's preferred self, in task behaviours that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive and emotional) and active, full role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 700). Essentially, personal engagement represents the holistic effort (physical, cognitive, and emotional) that people invest toward and away from their preferred work role. The concept of driving personal energies into role behaviours suggests that people differ on the energy level they direct to their work (for example, Newton et al., 2020; Rich et al., 2010). The psychological conditions for engagement, such as safety, availability, and meaningfulness, are directly and significantly influenced by the quality of the relationships people have at work, such as with their supervisors, colleagues, or customers (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014). However, contrary to engagement through the employment of energy, the concept of expression of self through interacting with others was mostly ignored in later engagement studies (Francis & Keegan, 2018; Kahn & Heaphy, 2014; Sonnentag & Fay, 2017).

While Kahn was often attributed with introducing work-related engagement, the conceptualisation of personal engagement is not often used (Bailey et al., 2017). Seemingly developed as unrelated to personal engagement, engagement as the opposite of burnout originated from burnout research that emerged in clinical psychology in the 1970s (Schaufeli, Leiter and Maslach, 2010). While burnout studies focused on health interventions addressing stressors, later studies explored "what factors in the workplace are likely to enhance employees' engagement" (Maslach and Leiter, 2008, p. 499). The engagement-burnout perspective has been the foundation for the organisational psychology dominating view of work engagement (Bailey et al., 2017; Fletcher et al., 2020) as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption" (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008, p. 187). In contrast to personal engagement, the work engagement core assumption considers engagement as a "persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behaviour" (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004, p. 295).

Employee engagement empirical research often takes a nonproblematic quantitative approach to explain the link between HRM practices, engagement, and employees' behaviours (Alfes, Shantz and Alahakone, 2016; Conway et al., 2016; Holland, Cooper and Sheehan, 2017; Shantz, Alfes and Whiley, 2016). This more recent perspective considers employee engagement as a management practice, fostering the relationship between employees and their organisations (Truss et al., 2013). The perspective draws on previous conceptions and is usually explained through the social exchange theory (Saks, 2006) and influenced by work engagement, consultancy and policy work (Harter and Schmidt, 2002; MacLeod and Clarke, 2009). Employee engagement is underpinned by the claim that organisations that optimise the work environment foster engaged employees (Bakker and Albrecht, 2018), and failing to do so might promote disengaged employees, those that are "putting time – but not energy or passion" or even "potentially undermine what their engaged co-workers accomplish" (Harter et al., 2020, p. 186). However, a recent meta-analysis study suggests that while interventions might positively affect engagement, their long-term sustainability is unclear (Knight, Patterson and Dawson, 2019), supporting ongoing concerns about the dominating approach taken to engagement (Fletcher et al., 2020; Lemmon et al., 2018; Purcell, 2014; Sambrook, 2021).

These different interpretations of engagement are also apparent in how scholars suggest approaching future developments. Some argue that with so many definitions of engagement, it cannot be referred to as one construct, and better clarity is necessary when discussing engagement in organisations (Shuck et al., 2017). However, others suggest that engagement can be studied as an umbrella term, referring to the same work-related phenomenon but approached with a holistic or critical perspective (Sambrook, 2021). Influenced by the concept of engagement as personal enactment in everyday work (Kahn, 1990), we ask why and how participants engage and disengage in their everyday work? To do that, we need to know more about the meanings people attribute to (dis)engaging in the context of their work, the practices enacted when (dis)engaging and how these enactments play out.

Independent Professionals and Engagement

In this study, we use the term independent professional (IPro) as coined by McKeown and Cochrane (2017). IPros are highly skilled individuals (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019), self-employed (Bögenhold & Klinglmaier, 2016) without employees (Boeri et al., 2020), and hired through direct contracting (Cappelli & Keller, 2013). Understanding doing engagement in the context of nontraditional work in general and Independent Professionals (IPros) in specific is beneficial in this study for three main reasons. First, when IPros are contracted for work they choose and are available and capable of performing, they report higher engagement levels and lower stress than employed professionals (Hessels et al., 2017; Warr, 2018). These initial studies suggest that IPros are more engaged than employed professionals because they have greater autonomy over what they do and how. Focusing on IPros (dis)engaging might provide greater opportunities to understand the phenomenon through everyday work experiences. Second, the scarcity of studies on nontraditional work arrangements also suggests no clear understanding of the conditions surrounding engagement and particularly access to resources (Pichault & McKeown, 2019). Shuck et al. (2016) argue that when workers have better access to resources, they are more likely to become engaged, giving them additional power to gain further resources. Lemmon et al. (2018) similarly assert that ignoring the work context and who controls it ignores how certain groups gain and maintain the engagement experience. The third reason for understanding engagement through a nontraditional work context is to challenge the assumption of reciprocity. The current literature suggests that optimising the work environment fosters engagement (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). However, studies of IPros' engagement suggest that IPros' relationships with work and their clients challenge reciprocity as understood within the engagement literature by highlighting the outsider nature of IPros' identity (Bryant & McKeown, 2016) and the transactional nature of the relationship (McKeown & Pichault, 2021). Further study of IPros' engagement can provide an opportunity to challenge reciprocity as the underlying explanation of engagement by further exploring why people in nontraditional work arrangements engage or disengage (Sambrook, 2021).

Interactionism, identity work and engagement

In contrast to the current debates, our interest in how engagement happens in everyday life is originated from the philosophical thinking that "privileges process over end-states, becoming over being" (Nayak & Chia, 2011, p. 283). Process studies focus on activity, temporality, and flow to address questions about how and why social phenomena emerge, develop, grow, or terminate (Langley et al., 2013). While research on social processes is not new, traditional social constructionist approaches, such as ethnography, do not specifically consider how constructions are formed (Langley & Tsoukas, 2016). Hence, adopting a process perspective

in conjunction with a social constructionist perspective enabled us to design the study and collect data that included activity data—what people do in everyday work—and the meanings they make of their actions and experiences.

Exploring engagement as a social process requires a theoretical framework sensitive to situations, subjective context, and temporality. We initially considered referring to the personal engagement theory, which is similarly concerned with the moments and actions of engaging and disengaging (Kahn, 1990). Through the analysis, we found Kahn's engagement theory to have some explanatory power of the findings concerning the meaning of engagement and the choices people make before engaging or disengaging. However, the theory was found limited in explaining how engaging and disengaging happen during work situations and why. Maintaining social constructionism and process perspectives, we referred to one of Kahn's sources of inspiration. We adopted Goffman's (1959; 1967; 1983) interactionist lenses, grappling with what people do to (re)construct their everyday reality so they can carry on with living their lives using dramaturgy and impression management. Goffman's interactionist lenses as a theoretical and analytical framework supported in-depth interpretations of participants' social life as they managed their everyday presentation of their professional identity, offering a different conception of *doing engagement* as an everyday practice of identity work. Considering the multiple definitions for identity work (Alvesson, 2010; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Snow and Anderson, 1987; Watson, 2008)x), we refer to it as it “denotes the many ways in which people create, adapt, signify, claim and reject identities from available resources” (Brown, 2017, p. 298). People's identities, such as professional identities referred to in this study, are subject to change, meaning that individuals and others can work on these identities (Brown, 2017; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

Identity work is often derived from talk such as discourse, narrative, and dialogues. Another way to understand identity work is through people's actions in social interactions, which include talk, feelings and doing (Brown, 2017; Caza, Vough and Puranik, 2018). The specific use of Goffman's theory of social interactions as a framework for exploring identity work is uncommon in management literature. However, it can be insightful and pertinent in understanding work in and around organisations (Brown, 2022; Down and Reveley, 2009; Manning, 2008). Goffman (1959) describes this form of identity work using dramaturgy:

The way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they hold of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them (p. xi)

The practices and routines underlying performances – how people present themselves in these situations, maintain a certain level of control, and impress others – are most suitable to understand identity work through participants' everyday work. In the context of IPros, where participants' ways of working are mostly hybrid or distributed, social interactions play a crucial role in shaping and maintaining their professional identity. As Goffman's (1959) theory suggests, impression management during interactions can either affirm or disrupt the association between participants' desired self-image (that is, professional identity) and the public image projected to others. Specifically, the concept of dramaturgy highlights how people use interactions to "dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure" (Goffman, 1959, p. 29). In presenting their professional identity, IPros are projecting the desired public image that "incorporates and exemplifies the officially accredited values of the society" (Goffman, 1959, p. 35). Therefore, understanding

the nuances of participants' actions during interactions using dramaturgy and impression management allows for interpretations of their everyday engagement.

Methodology

The current study is designed as a qualitative multiple-case study (Stake, 2006) to gain depth and richness of understanding meanings, combined with analysis of interactions (Goffman, 1959) in understanding microsocial processes of doing engagement. In collecting the data, we adopted an interview–diary–interview approach (Radcliffe, 2019), addressing quantity, variety and quality considerations in answering the study's questions. Interviews are one of the most common approaches for collecting data in qualitative studies. Additionally, qualitative diaries are particularly useful in a case study to help understand the complexity and interplay between context and experiences by offering immediacy and in-depth details and offsetting problems with retrospective accounts (Radcliffe, 2013, 2019). Qualitative diaries are still scarce in management studies because of various challenges, mostly related to the effort and discipline involved with recording entries and managing the process of data collection (Radcliffe, 2019). Our study's primary approach to address these challenges was to develop an appropriate tool for data collection (Do and Yamagata-Lynch, 2017) and design a highly involved process (Cao and Henderson, 2021). In total, participants provided eighty detailed diary entries, used in the analysis ranging from 3 to 20 entries per person, over a four to six weeks. While the diaries were not explicitly designed with COVID-19 in mind, a day after the data collection started, large parts of New Zealand entered a third lockdown lasting 107 days. Since participants continued to work, albeit from home, a digital diary allowed minimum interruptions in data collection, getting even closer to participants' lived experiences and confirming the value of diaries in remote and distributed work settings. We also used semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2018) transcribed by the first author. Each case included two interviews, each lasting around an hour. The quality of the interview process noted "flickers of transformation" (Way, Zwier and Tracy, 2015, p. 2), where participants got a new understanding through the participation process. Follow-up questions in the second interview allowed for "member checking" (Stake, 2006, p. 37), in which participants reflected on meanings brought by other participants. This technique provided new insights and is classified as a form of triangulation (Yardley, 2015). A diary provided almost real-time rich and diverse writing of work situations, while interviews provided context and further participants' interpretations.

We used abductive logic in our analysis (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007), placing this study within the existing engagement body of literature, approaching data analysis inductively and reflexively and considering the analysis insights within broader and sometimes contradicting perspectives and theories. First, we analysed the cases for meanings of being an IPro and of doing engagement. A case included all empirical data collected from the same person. Each case was coded inductively and categorised and aligned with research questions. Next, we organised each case for the different activities, moving to the analysis of interactions, with a specific focus on what people do (think, feel, behave) during work situations. We used a technique of comparative analysis (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Thornberg, 2012), comparing activities across and within cases. We identified themes and patterns of engaging, disengaging, and protecting, as well as classifications of interaction types. We also cross-coded our data using practices and routines of impression management (Goffman, 1959). We found that different practices performed in the study were underpinned by different logics of the interaction order (Goffman, 1983).

The study cases

We purposefully selected 12 cases for this multiple-case study. We published invitations through LinkedIn posts, followed by snowball sampling. Potential participants were expected to meet the criteria of working as an IPro at the time of the study and agreeing to the time commitment (around 10 hours over three months). We included the cases that provided the most variety for intensive study (Stake, 2006). Table 1 includes details of the cases. The differences in the employment context, contracting type, and industries were valuable for the variety of work interactions in this study. Other characteristics of diversity were also present: age (35-65), gender (60% females, 40% males) and ethnicity (75% NZ/European, 25% other).

Table 1: Key characteristics of participants

Nickname	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Industry	Type of contracting
Craig	Male	35-44	NZ European	Business, Human Resource and Marketing Professional	One main Client, medium term, daily rate
Magen	Female	55-64	NZ European	Business, Human Resource and Marketing Professional	One main Client, long term renewed contract
Jason	Male	55-64	Asian	Business, Human Resource and Marketing Professional	One main Client, medium term, daily rate
Zara	Female	45-54	NZ European	Business, Human Resource and Marketing Professional	Concurrent clients (1 - 3), Statement of Work
Natalie	Female	45-54	NZ European	Design, Engineering, Science and Transport Professionals	Concurrent clients (1 - 3), Statement of Work
Michael	Male	55-64	Other	ICT Professionals	Concurrent clients (4 - 6), Statement of Work
Claire	Female	55-64	NZ European	Education Professionals	One main Client, long term renewed contract, daily rate
Kim	Female	35-44	NZ European	ICT Professionals	Sub-Contractor, Concurrent clients (4 - 6), Statement of Work
Hayden	Male	35-44	NZ European	ICT Professionals	One main Client, long term renewed contract, daily rate
Jane	Female	45-55	NZ European	Arts and Media professionals	Concurrent clients (1 - 3), Statement of Work
Kate	Female	45-55	NZ European	ICT professionals	One main Client, medium term, daily rate.
Sam	Male	45-55	African	ICT professionals	Sub-Contractor, hourly rate Sub-Contractor, one client, Statement of Work Concurrent clients (1 - 3) short term Statement of Work

Findings

Negotiating autonomy and precarity

All participants considered their work arrangement a choice, having autonomy in directing work, career, and income. Most participants highlighted schedule flexibility as an example of autonomy, "I like having the freedom to say I'm going to be away for a week and not have to worry about my annual leave balance" (Claire, Int01)¹. However, while contracting allowed participants to set the terms, the nature of the work itself was not always within their control. For example, being deadline driven, "a world of clear starts and hard stops" (Craig, Diary), requiring to "wait for approval before moving on" (Hayden, Diary), or dealing with fluctuation in demand "sometimes you do more and you get too busy and sometimes you do less and you are not busy enough" (Michael, Int01). For some, the client organisation policies and ways of

¹ Cases' citation format: Pseudonym name, source. Source is referenced as Int01= first interview, Int02=second interview, Diary=a diary entry

working seemed to dictate what and how they performed their work; as Craig described, "I am taking place in a very rigid and hierarchical (and egoic) organisation with plenty of time to sit about, ruminate, bitch and undermine" (Diary).

We suggest that the nature of IPros work means that autonomy is often conditioned on the clients' expectations and participants' ability to negotiate their value contribution. Regardless of their specific work or financial position, all participants considered their work precarious, captured as conflicting between income security and having autonomy. Kate, working as an IPro continuously for many years, reflected on her work contradiction: "But ironically, the one fear I have always is, I'll never get another job again" (Kate, Int01). Participants attempted to reduce the precarity of their work by focusing on securing the next contract, either through extending or renewing their existing contract (Magen, Int02), being offered more work from existing clients (Claire, Int01; Kim, Int01) or getting new clients (Michael, Int01; Sam, Int01; Jane, Int01). Creating the opportunities for the next contract came from what participants described as the "network" (Jane, Int01), relying on their public image, "being on your own is about you, and it's about the perception in the market of who you are" (Michael, Int01).

Independent professional identity

Our analysis indicates that the participants took a strategic approach to craft their professional identity "to be mobilized for the accomplishment of a personal or collective objective" (Alvesson, 2010, p. 212), bringing this identity to the "front" (Goffman, 1959, p. 22) into social interactions where this identity can be presented. Participants' interpretation of their professional identity consists of two themes, credible and trustworthy, serving their conflicting context. Credibility emerged as the notion of having specialised knowledge and relevant experience that can be used to add value to clients. Being an IPro allowed for greater opportunities to impress credibility. Zara explained, "I think it was proving to myself and getting that recognition of what I bring to the table" (Int01). Credibility is having the knowledge "I worked damn hard for that and studied everything, so there is not anything that I do not feel like I have not covered in this field" (Jane, Int01), and experience "It comes with a certain level of maturity" (Jason, Int02). Credibility is also associated with the advantage of an impartial view, where the quality of the work is not negatively affected by the organisational internal processes and policies. "Because I'm not seen as one of the staff so they could tell me things... I am seeing as completely independent. Which I am." (Claire, Int01).

Additionally, all participants identify trustworthiness as another critical part of their professional identity. Participants can always be trusted to perform to clients' satisfaction by being reliable and hard-working. Several participants mentioned being helpful as a facet of being trustworthy. For example, responding to all clients' expectations, "You know he is paying for the hours I am working. If he wants me to rework, then I would" (Claire, Int01). Kate even reflected that those expectations of being helpful are becoming the norm, "I think it becomes expected of me to say yes to a request. Because people want the job done in a relatively short amount of time" (Int01). While helpful is what might separate IPros from employees, it might cause challenges as it blurs role boundaries and expectations. The nature of contracting is that it is designed to answer a particular need for the client, yet, when help is offered and accepted, it might overstep other people's jobs from within the client organisation (Natalie, Diary), creating additional workload that impacts original commitments (Zoe, Int02), set unrealistic expectations (Claire, Diary) or waste time (Kim, Int01).

Being credible and trustworthy can create a conflict between "being true to self, versus over adaptation" (Alvesson, 2010, p. 199), as responding to autonomy served by credibility and

income security served by trustworthiness. Most participants highlighted the client environment as the grounds for increasing or easing this conflict and being able to adapt. Independent professionals take a strategic approach to their professional identity, aiming at impressing credibility, and trustworthiness, navigating contradicting contexts of autonomy and precarity. Within this context, doing engagement was emerging as a way in which participants managed their professional identity impressions.

The meaning of doing engagement

Considering the aim of this study of understanding (dis)engaging and capturing the concept as experienced in everyday life rather than as defined by others, participants were not given an existing definition. However, we assumed that engaging would have an everyday meaning, implying a bond, commitment, or involvement with something or someone. In the management literature, (dis)engagement has been described as having these relationships toward one's work (Bakker et al., 2008), the organisation (Saks, 2006), or the role (Kahn, 1990). Since participants' work is in and around organisations, we expected these conceptions to emerge from the data. Findings suggest a more complex and nuanced understanding of the main topic of this study. As described below in Table 2, findings suggest doing engagement is understood by participants as three everyday processes: engaging, disengaging, and protecting.

Table 2: The meanings of doing engagement

Engaging The deliberate actions taken before and during a work situation to achieve task performance and relationship trust	• Doing the work - "Engaging is basically, is sort of getting into that work mode and doing the work" (Sam, Int02) • Having a challenge- "a lot of jobs that will be achievable today. This will be good!" (Hayden, diary) • Getting and maintaining flow - "it's good when the story just kind of pores out, you know, it's just coming and you know you've got all the pieces in place" (Jane, Int01) • Internally motivated - "engaging for me is kind of living my work...engaging is deeper, it is me wanting to add value" (Jane, Int01) • Making a difference - "Its about making a difference...I care about what I am doing" (Zara, Int01) • Exceeding others' expectations - "Going above and beyond...I feel happy and comfortable to work additional hours and late to achieve a significant output" (Kim, Int01) • Working with others- "A group of like minded individuals that need to pull their resources together to make things happen" (Jason, Int01) • Forming meaningful relationship - "I'd rather work for a year and a half with the client over a range of issues and really help make a difference (Michael, Int01)
Protecting The deliberate actions taken as respond to interruptions during a work situation to sustain task performance and relationship trust and avoid removing self	• Arguing - "And she said 'you don't know what you are talking about' so she was not engaged" (Jason, Int01) • Uncompromising – "90% of the time when I ask a question, I already know the answer...and if you don't know something that you ought to know...I'm not going to happy (Jason, Int01) • Moral grounds – "'If I write a good chunk of something and they are saying that they wrote it, I don't think it is ethical'" (Natalie, Int02) • Criticising others – "the client – who is inclined to move from helplessness, to being demanding, to controlling, to expressing concern about being out of control (Chris, Diary)
Disengaging The deliberate actions taken to remove self from a work situation when unable to achieve task performance or relationship trust	• Not doing the work - "Today I absolutely cannot be bothered" (Craig, Diary) • Resenting- "a sense of resistance, or resentment of things that I have to do to earn money" (Craig, Int02) • Not caring about the work – "I don't want to be here, you know I don't give a shit" (Hayden, diary) • Leaving temporarily – "on team meeting in the morning and you just had to call time out, and walkaway outside and you got exhausted" (Kim, Int01) • Not being present or focused – "I was just disengaged during that meeting because the purpose and the value of the meeting really wasn't for me" (Kim, Int01)

The concept of engaging was described in two complementary ways: engaging with task and engaging with others. Engaging with tasks referred to investing and directing energy, such as working hard, being focused and seeking and giving meaning. Engaging with task as understood by participants can be explained to some extent through existing psychological conceptions of task engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001; Kahn, 1990). It is important to note that the focus on doing engagement, rather than a psychological state, activities such as giving meaning, preparing, or even performing, might have been considered in prior engagement research as resources (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004), psychological conditions (May, Gilson and Harter, 2004), or outcomes (Rich, Lepine and Crawford, 2010).

Engaging with others was a common interpretation in participants' data, but it is rarely considered in existing literature (Kahn and Heaphy, 2014). Engaging with others was understood as the actions taken to stage relationships of trust with paying clients, decision-makers in client organisations' representatives, colleagues and client's team members. We expected to find references to engaging with client organisations or professional bodies. However, the participants distinguished engaging with others as forming trusted relationships with other individuals within these organisations. Engaging with others is "caring about my colleagues" (Craig, Int02), "where I am helping them to do whatever they want to do" (Hayden, Int01) and being in a "trusted position". Our finding suggests that engaging with tasks and others were often presented together, emphasising that participants were required to present their task performance to gain trust and sustain outcomes.

Contrary to engaging, disengaging is the deliberate actions taken to remove oneself from situations, tasks or interactions, which means task performance and relationship trust cannot be achieved. Disengaging is doing something not related while in a meeting (Kim, Int01), stopping a workshop midway (Zara, Int01), avoiding or delaying unwanted interactions (Natalie, Diary) or on rare occasions ending a contract (Jason, Int01). Participants initially responded to the direct question of what engaging and disengaging mean as two opposites. However, through a closer analysis of what people do, we identified a theme that is associated with the fluctuating nature of engagement in existing literature (Breevaart, Bakker and Demerouti, 2014; Ferreira et al., 2019; Sonnentag et al., 2021). In this theme, participants were attempting to protect the situation and bring it back on track "so you try to do your best" (Jason, Int02), even when "there are a lot of idiots in high places" (Kate, int01). Goffman defined these actions as "techniques employed to safeguard the impression fostered by an individual during his presence before others" (Goffman, 1959, p. 14). Participants described protecting as a response to a surprise during the interaction, "we hadn't had the information beforehand to understand it and look through it" (Magen, Diary). Protecting might be necessary but not always desired as it can waste time. IPros focus on credibility and wasting time diverted effort from doing their work "I've only got x number of hours during the week. If I do that to get this, it takes away from that, and this is where I'm engaging with my work" (Jane, Int01).

Based on participants' interpretations, we defined doing engagement into three categories:

Engaging: The deliberate actions taken before and during a situation to achieve task performance and relationship trust.

Disengaging: The deliberate actions taken to remove self from a situation when unable to achieve task performance or relationship trust; *and*

Protecting: The actions taken as a response to interruptions during a situation to sustain task performance and relationship trust and avoid removing self.

Our findings, as discussed so far, suggest engaging can be defined as the actions intended at task performance and relationship trust, resulting in participants impressing their professional identity of being credible and trustworthy. However, there are occasions where participants must protect the situation or even disengage to maintain their professional identity.

Doing engagement activities

Interactions were the most common work situations described by participants, allowing for engaging with tasks and with others to be simultaneously present. In Table 3, we provide a summary of practices and routines identified while analysing participants' descriptions of various interactions as captured in their diaries and interviews. Once we classified the different actions, we cross-referenced these with Goffman's building blocks of impression management (Goffman, 1959).

Table 3: Doing engagement practices and routines

Category	Practices	Description	Examples (Participants data)	Examples (Goffman, 1959, 1967)
Engaging	Foreseeing	The actions taken prior to interactions to reduce risk of interruptions such as planning, knowing the performance and rehearsing, reflecting, setting the stage, learning the audience, doing the work	“what is happening before a workshop is a lot of stuff goes through my mind of anticipating what’s going to happen.? (Zara, Int01) “with the connection [to purpose] comes focus and a desire to progress, from here I can begin to decide on what tasks will support me in making progress” (Michael, Int01)	Circumspection “exercise foresight and design in determining in advance how best to stage a show” (1959, p.217) Realigning actions , e.g. “putting out feelers” (1959, p.191)
	Ushering	The actions taken prior and at the beginning of interactions to establish early trust such as clarifying expectations with other team members and key individuals in the audience, placing each in most appropriate role	“He had been pre warned what I was going to do. I’d also called the CEO and had a pre call with him as well so I have done a bit of prep up.” (Michael, Int02) “I thought I don’t know what’s in their minds, but they didn’t have a good experience, and neither did I , so I wanted to set up my intent as the start” (Magen, Diary)	Regions “the utility of control over backstage” (1959, p.134), “front region control” (1959, p.137). Tact of tact “audience contributes in a significant way to the maintenance of a show” (1959, p.234)
	Mastering	The actions taken during interactions to maintain progress and effectively handle interruptions such as, focusing, handling conflicts, keeping others focus, managing negative feelings, doing the role	“one technique I realise now that I use is to try and get some sort of person to person connection for everyone in the room, by reflecting their language,and quoting back and linking” (Craig, diary)	Dramaturgical discipline “affectively dissociated from his presentation in a way that laves him free to cope with dramaturgical contingencies as they arise” (1959, p.215)
	Act tactfully	Behaving in accordance with what is believed to be the norms, values, etiquettes	“The etiquette of the meeting would be ”Ok, you write down what it is ...and then give me a call and we can talk it through” knowing full well that I’m going to have to do it (Kate, interview02) “No, not really annoyed because I understand where the customer is coming from” (Sam, Int02)	Expressive control “an impression that is compatible and consistent with the over-all definition of the situation that is being fostered” (1959, p.51) Tact “save the definition of the situation projected by another” (1959, p.14)
	Act sincerely	Behaving in accordance with what is believed to be true	“I spoke from my heart for about fifteen minutes and you know what the number of people came up to me and said that was a fantastic speech (Jason, interview01)	Sincere “believe in the impression fostered by their own performance” (1959, p.17).

Doing engagement: presentation in everyday work of independent professionals

Category	Practices	Description	Examples (Participants data)	Examples (Goffman, 1959, 1967)
Protecting	Defending	The actions taken to protecting situation from interruptions through uncompromising or over adapting such as arguing, keeping to original agenda, disarming tensions, changing the agenda	• “If you say something, where is it black on white, show me. Always the truth” (Jason, Int01) • “And I said ‘every single one of them that I have written I have been an author’, I would think it is not transparent otherwise” (Natalie, Int01) • “So you know what I did? I held the piece of paper of my speech...so, I tore it up and the audience ‘Yay’” (Jason, Int01)	Corrective actions “challenge, offer, acceptance, and thanks” (1967, p.22) Dramaturgical loyalty “prevent the performers from becoming so sympathetically attached to the audience” (1959, p. 212)
	Deflecting	The actions taken to redirect the interruptions back to the audience or outside of the situation including dismissing, asking for help, communicating outside of audience noticing, gossiping	• “and why did she think is was not a good idea to tell us? I can’t imagine” (Claire, Int02) • “I actually sent a message during the meeting to the enterprise architect saying ‘no, I am going to cry’” (Kate, Int01)	Treatment of the absent “derogate the audience in a way that is inconsistent with the face to face treatment” (1959, p.170), Performer collusion “any collusive communication which is carefully conveyed in such a away as to cause no threat to the illusion that is being fostered for the audience” (1959, p.176)
Disengaging		The actions taken to remove self from situations such as avoiding, procrastinating, leaving, detaching	“You know my contribution was very light, very low and you know, as it was I did a few other things on my laptop during that meeting (Kim, interview01)	Avoidance “The surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face is to avoid contacts in which these threats are likely to occur” (1967, p.15)

Interactions are situational. The practices and routines identified in this section are typical of many interactions, forming the building blocks. However, professional identity was enacted through selected practices and routines used in the specific situation. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that “atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied” (p.221). Following this argument, we present doing engagement analysis using an in-depth description of Zara’s (Int01) workshop facilitation, aiming to demonstrate how the engagement practices and routines described in Table 3 can be used as an analytical tool and offer the readers a closer look at the evolving understanding of doing engagement.

Facilitating a workshop (Zara, Int01)

Zara was an expert contracted to work with a large organisation as part of a change programme described as large and complex, with “hundreds of people working on this program” (Zara, Int01). Within this complex structure, Zara described one workshop that did not go according to plan. This interaction was a formal working group session. Zara was expected to facilitate the interaction to achieve business outcomes. It was an important meeting: “it’s the first step, and I’ve been working with this organisation for months” (Zara, Int01). The stakes were high, and achieving the outcomes was critical for Zara to maintain credibility with her client. There was a certain imbalance of power in this meeting. Zara was responsible for facilitating a successful event, but the client team had overall control over most characteristics, such as who should attend.

Engaging practices

Foreseeing the challenge, Zara was entering this workshop well prepared from a task perspective: “So, I have my agenda, so I have my list planned out like to the minute. We will do this in minute one, there is a minute two, so it is all planned. I spent two days designing my board” (Zara, Int01). Zara did not foresee any interruptions since “people are used to the way I’m working, and I have quite a nice reputation with their people looking forward to coming to my workshop ... [and] ... nobody contacted me ahead of time” (Zara, Int01). While informing the audience of the purpose, no further work was done to usher the audience before the meeting. Zara was asked at the last minute to invite a senior expert from the business and a general manager to see how the team was doing, to which she respectfully agreed. In this format, Zara was expected, in retrospect, not just to facilitate the session in a familiar and friendly environment but also to impress senior members of the client organisation with the value of her work.

Protecting practices

The workshop started with an immediate interruption when the expert invited wanted to change the agenda to his own needs by asking everyone to introduce themselves to him. Zara was trying to maintain control by persisting, uncompromising on her pre-planned agenda. However, this had the opposite effect with interruption prolonged, “and he spoke for seven minutes about himself, about how wonderful he was” (Zara, Int01). Mastering a workshop requires maintaining focus and tact of proper behaviour. However, Zara was going into a backstage conversation, deflecting the situation, which, in this case, was by using text messages on her phone. Further steps Zara was taking to persist with the original agenda continued the interruption and allowed no flexibility when the technology planned for the workshop did not work: “Nobody could log into the board” (Zara, Int01).

Once it was clear that the workshop was not going to plan, Zara tried to conclude the interaction. However, though she was in the role of directing the performance, the audience took over. A further interruption from the general manager, who had “been on this call multitasking because I can see them multitasking because they're like going like this [looking sideways]” (Zara, Int01), asking for clarification on the objectives of the meeting. Zara lost her self-control, becoming frustrated, but kept arguing about the workshop's purpose in front of the rest of the team: “At one point, I went like this [head down], and then I thought I cannot do that because people can see me, so I just made it look like I was just scratching my head” (Zara, Int01). That could have been an undeclared signal to which few other participants responded, attempting to provide support to save the performance and Zara's feelings, all arguing for the workshop to continue despite the interruptions and resistance. Others engaged in backstage communication via text to support Zara. Zara felt challenged. All her work and the team's work were challenged.

Disengaging practices

Trying to save face for future interactions, Zara thanked the person for his contribution and shut the meeting down. An unsuccessful meeting requires a significant effort to reconstruct trust. The general manager apologised, but Zara did not feel that the general manager was sincere, describing their behaviour as “inappropriate. It was not aligned to the team” (Zara, Int01). She also rejected the expert's invitation to receive “some feedback on this session” (Zara, Int01).

The analysis of Zara's experience demonstrates Zara's engaging through her preparations. In the meeting, she diverted to using protecting practices that were not effective, requiring her to disengage by ending the meeting without achieving the outcomes and possibly misrepresenting her professional identity.

Interaction types

Interactions can be experienced as successful, “having turned the resource of greatest concern into a raving and enthusiastic advocate for what we've done” (Craig, Diary), or unsuccessful, as in Zara's case. Many other interactions do not fit in these extremes and usually require some work to maintain control. While findings offered a catalogue of doing engagement actions, we further suggest the interaction context should also be considered when choosing engaging actions, specifically as it relates to the level of control others (e.g., clients) exert around and during interactions. Goffman (1967) suggested that how people act should be assessed based on individuals' subjective assessment of the impact, with some oriented toward these high-impact interactions, “where the action is” (p.197). In this study, we assessed for each interaction the potential impact based on the level of performer control through the setup of the interaction and the role the participants were expected to perform. Based on these characteristics, the most common types of interactions identified were, influencing, collaborating, and presenting/ teaching. Influencing interactions are formal meetings (e.g., board or executive meetings, sponsor project meetings). This type is common among participants in roles such as project managers (e.g., Jason, Kim) and management consultants (e.g., Michael). While participants were responsible for achieving interaction outcomes through influencing others, the formal authority of content, timing and space was with members of the client organisation (e.g., chair). For example, Michael described his role in a board committee meeting, “Things had to be said, or I wasn't doing the job I was being paid for” (Michael, Int02). These interactions can be political and hard to control once interrupted, requiring significant preparation and staging. Collaborating type is when the expectation is to

engage as part of successful team performance. This form of engaging with others is presented in all participants' data and is most typical with experts embedded as part of a team in the client organisation (for example., Craig, Claire, Natalie, Zara, Kate). Participants described themselves in these interactions as "like to give knowledge away" (Kim, Int01), "exchange ideas" (Michael, Int01), "be an ally" (Jane, Diary) and "listening to people to hear their perspective" (Zara, Int01). In some situations, such as Zara's example, participants were expected to step into a "director" role (Goffman, 1959, p. 96), being part of the performance and orchestrating others' participation.

Finally, presenting or teaching interactions are similar in that the performer has the formal control of staging, managing, and ending the interactions. In presentations, the performer has limited interaction with the audience. In contrast, in a teaching setting, the performer has complete control, having prior knowledge of the audience and the responsibility to handle their involvement. These were more specialised interactions usually staged with professionals who formally had teaching (e.g., Magen, Kim) or public speaking assignments (e.g., Jane, Michael, Jason). Participants suggested that a particular challenge in these sessions is to balance task performance and facilitate trust, suggesting talking from the heart (Jason, Int01) or getting into the flow (Michael, Int01) as the way of achieving both. Goffman describes this challenge as the "dilemma of expression versus action" (Goffman, 1959, p. 32). Analysis of participants' performances suggested that practices' effectiveness was often related to the level of control participants could and did exert to manage their professional identity presentation and the potential impact on their image resulting from successful and unsuccessful interactions. The level of control depended on the interaction aim, such as presentation or facilitation, the role participants played, and the level of mastery in doing engagement.

Discussion, contribution and future research

Processual model of doing engagement

Fundamentally IPros enter interactions with the intent that engaging actions will achieve relationship trust and task performance. Mastering engaging actions leads to successful interactions in which participants maintain their public image of being credible and trustworthy. When interaction outcomes are threatened, other actions might be triggered to protect their public image. While we presented the findings of professional identity and doing engagement as separate concepts, they are interlinking through the doing engagement processual model presented in Figure 1.

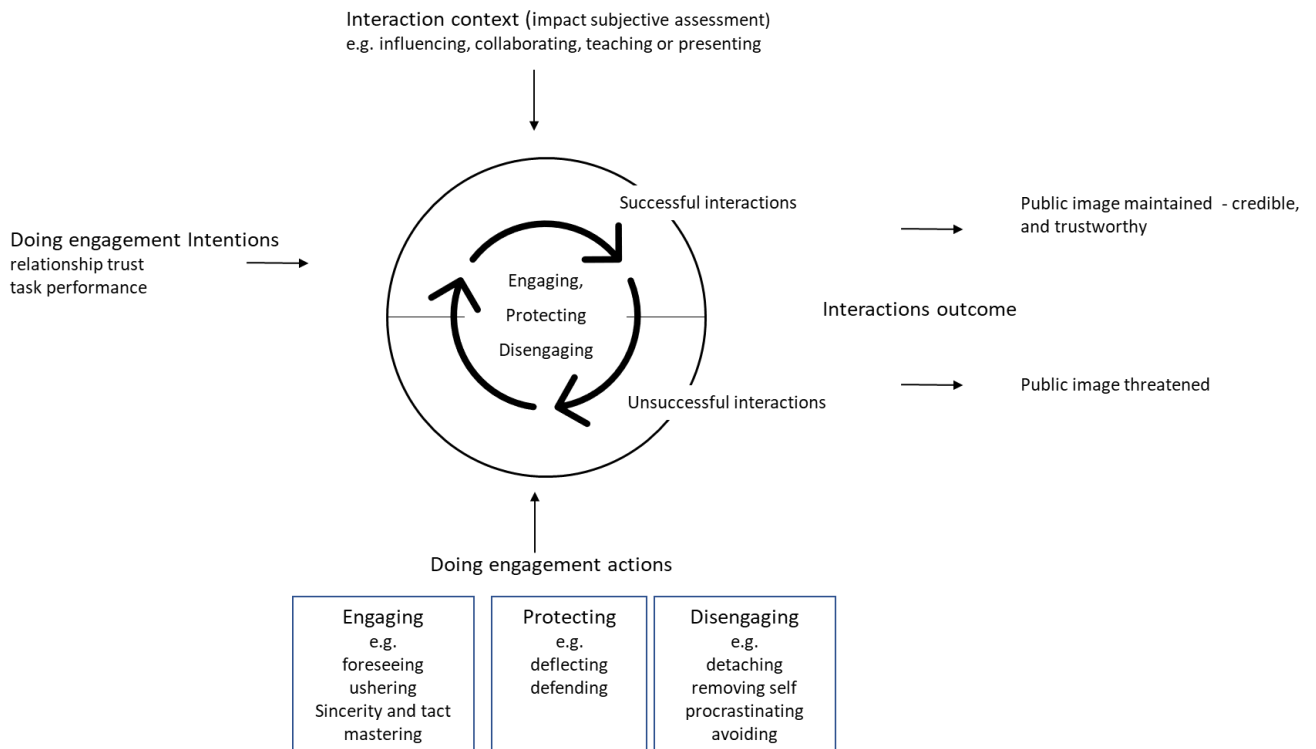


Figure 1: Doing engagement processual model

The current study findings suggest that the nature of IPros' work means that their autonomy is often conditioned by their clients' expectations and ability to negotiate their value contributions. Similar findings were reported in Pichault et al.'s (2020) study on IPros' professional identity conducted in Australia. This conflicting context may be more salient than other contextual considerations, such as the local labour market and employment laws. We also suggest that the contradicting context of autonomy and precariousness drive IPros' identity tensions, which are also becoming more salient for other professionals in traditional employment. Autonomy, expressed through work flexibility, is reported to become a standard expectation with all workers post-COVID-19 (Gaude et al., 2021; Green et al., 2021). In addition, as clarified by the International Labour Office (2016), precariousness is not a characteristic of standard or nonstandard work but, rather, the many types of insecurities facing workers. The constant concern of participants with securing the next contract indicates earning insecurity. Earning insecurity is, arguably, similar to employment insecurity in a market that experiences concerns over restructuring and redundancies (Newman & Freilekhman, 2020). Maintaining autonomy in a precarious environment is a significant concern for workers and should be considered regardless of employment status.

Crafting an ideal professional identity produced a synthesis between credibility and trustworthiness. According to Alvesson (2010), this synthesis is achieved by relating the authentic self and the ability to adapt to professional expectations. In other words, adopting a professional identity that conveys credibility and trustworthiness requires negotiation of personal choices and considerations of external expectations from clients, colleagues, and other stakeholders (Stets & Burke, 2000). However, despite efforts to present a consistent professional identity, individuals may find it challenging to control how others perceive their performance (Jenkins, 2000). It is important to note that taking a strategic approach to

constructing identity does not necessarily mean that people have total control over their professional images, as people may not always act rationally or effectively in presenting their identities (Alvesson, 2010). Goffman (1959) emphasises that managing one's emotions and unintentional behaviours during interactions with others is a critical part of impression management to ensure that the desired identity is presented and understood by others. Overall, greater awareness and capability in effectively managing and presenting one's professional identity appear crucial for success in today's precarious work environment.

Achieving interaction outcomes depends on the performer mastering the performance and the other participants supporting it, as well as the characteristics of the interaction itself. In this process, individuals manage the desired impression of their professional identity. Further, the model suggests that the "reality" of individuals' identities is constructed through these everyday interactions. At this level, the underlying assumption is that self and others' conceptions are constructed through interactions rather than psychological or structural processes. Goffman (1959) viewed the self as an outcome of the interaction:

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a scene that comes off and is not a cause of it." (Goffman, 1959, p. 252)

Goffman argued that this public image created through the performance becomes the self and presented consistently enough times, it becomes "the real reality" (Goffman, 1959, p. 17). However, the findings around IPros' professional identity suggested that participants entered an interaction with an already constructed professional identity, setting the tone for what they did during interactions. The participants took a strategic approach (Alvesson, 2010) to construct their identity as independent professionals, emphasising credibility and trustworthiness. This identity construction served to understand the intent of constructing task performance and relationship trust.

Finally, we found that it was not always the case that participants could perform in such a way that their public image reflected their professional identity, considering the number of interrupted and unsuccessful interactions. Jenkins (2000) argues that individuals have some control over how others perceive them. However, not all interactions can be controlled, and not all interactions maintain the desired public image. Unsuccessful interactions might negatively impact the public image, threatening the sense of order and security people gain through the practices of doing engagement. Hence, the identity work process is an everyday process of negotiation between the desired self-image and the perceived public image.

Theoretical contribution

Our study contributes to knowledge of engagement and identity work in three key ways. First, studying interactions allowed for definitions and categorisation of engaging, protecting, and disengaging, as the deliberate actions taken in and around interactions aimed at relationship trust and task performance. Defining doing engagement in this way provides for a new perspective within the engagement literature. Doring engagement supports the notion of engaging as a performing and relational concept (Kahn, 1992; Kahn and Heaphy, 2014) as simultaneous occurrences within social interactions. The definitions also provide a new angle to understanding identity work. While identity is mostly ignored in engagement literature (Sonnentag and Fay, 2017), our study findings suggest that doing engagement through interaction leaves a certain impression on others, emphasising that this impression is the product of the interaction. This impression of professional identity created through the

performance becomes the person's identity, and if presented consistently enough times, it becomes "the real reality" (Goffman, 1959, p. 17).

Second, doing engagement practices, identified as the building blocks common across different interactions, provides an analytical tool for understanding doing engagement in other contexts. Each interaction can be messy. However, interactions are "in fact orderly, and that this orderliness is predicated on a large base of shared cognitive presuppositions, if not normative ones, and self-sustained restraint" (Goffman, 1983, p. 5). This orderliness allowed for the identification of the building blocks as shared and used throughout the different situations presented in the participants' everyday work. Finally, one of the common critiques of Goffman's attempt to define the universal building blocks of interactions was that he seemed to ignore concerns of macro social issues such as context and power that might also impact the interaction success and the actions participants are taking (Giddens, 1988). Our classification of interaction types seems to be a valuable contribution to Goffman's theory (Strong, 1988), bringing macro considerations such as the distribution of power and authority into the interaction level analysis. Our findings reflect the need to consider the interaction context, suggesting that while all participants might use the practices of doing engagement, their effectiveness is better understood within the context of the interaction type.

Practical implications

The findings of this research have implications for practice. It is in the interest of contracting managers and human resources practitioners in organisations to better understand how IPros' work, so all can achieve their intended outcomes. For HR departments, IPros are mostly invisible. However, IPros play various roles, in some cases embedded within blended teams, maintain valuable institutional knowledge, and are relied on for critical business operations, decision making or project delivery. We argue that HR departments can no longer ignore IPros. Policies and practices should be considered to benefit trusted relationships and support their contribution. In hybrid, remote work and distributed organisations, work is primarily visible through staged interactions. This study emphasizes the critical role of interactions in the effective achievement of task performance and relationship trust for IPros. It also highlights the challenges of achieving interaction outcomes when organisational culture allows for meetings to happen without mutual intent of success, accommodating and encouraging interruptions, making it difficult for interactions to be controlled and managed.

One might argue that handling interactions effectively is broader than the scope of this study. Nevertheless, even in the context of IPros' work, proper etiquette and practices should be adapted and made visible to client participants and contracted professionals. This approach would reduce or eliminate interruptions, and better support the performance. Finally, contracting managers and HR practitioners might consider the implications of the importance and relevance of areas such as mastering public image, impression management, and sincerity in performances when navigating autonomous and precarious work arrangements.

Future research

We suggest future research to develop further the categorisation of engaging, disengaging, and protecting by exploring the classification of practices and routines under each category. It is also relevant to extend the types of interactions and explore the sequencing of practices and routines within these different types. The study of interactions is broad and can be done using different epistemological perspectives. Goffman approach to studying interactions is sociological rather than psychological, using dramaturgy focusing on the performance rather

than the performer. Other methods that might be relevant in this research direction are ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Garfinkel, 1996; Turowetz and Warfield, 2021).

Using dramaturgy in engagement research is uniquely positioned to have a greater focus on emotions. We encourage future studies to take a more deliberate approach to explore the management of emotion before, during and after interactions to understand controlling emotions as a practice of doing engagement (Smith, 2021). Future research using dramaturgy could also explore the transferable elements of the proposed model, exploring everyday experiences of doing engagement and impression management as case studies working with different organisational and work contexts.

Conclusion

Engagement, on its multiple interpretations, is mostly studied as a psychological state resulting from optimised work design and reciprocal relationships between employees and the organisations they work for. However, we wondered, in a world of IPros' work that is more precious and autonomous, do we know how engagement happens? What surfaced from our in-depth qualitative study is a complex multi-layered experience of being an independent professional doing engagement as everyday activities.

We contribute to the study of engagement by understanding it through an interactionist lens, moving from a work-related psychological state to doing engagement as a micro-social process. Second, we demonstrated how doing engagement hangs together through its different actions and within interactions context, illuminating the processual logic of doing engagement as a form of identity work. Third, we highlighted the contradicting nature of being an IPro requiring engaging in everyday work to maintain a public image and secure the next contract.

The immediate outcomes of mastering work interactions can benefit everyone involved. However, the study highlights doing engagement as situational. While the building blocks of social life can be identified and studied, how people use and experience these are personal and subjective. Tracking engagement through generic surveys or one size fits all policies does not make a difference to what people do in everyday work. We hope that the details provided in this study, staying honest to participants' data, would allow for increased awareness, reflections, and deliberate actions in future engagement studies.

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