

## **FINDING CONTINUITY:**

### **THE IDENTITY STRUGGLES OF A SERIAL ACQUIRER**

#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the connection between employee emotions and concerns over organizational identity, asking how acquiring organizations can signal continuity following acquisitions. The paper focuses on the acquiring company, presenting data collected from a 30-year-old company, which, during its life course, has undergone both a change from family ownership to investor ownership and rapid growth through a series of acquisitions. During this turmoil, the organizational identity and strategy have changed, causing structural and emotional disorder. In this paper, post-acquisition change is recognized as a potential identity threat, often leading employees to adopt protectionist attitudes. Nevertheless, based on literature and the findings, it is possible for companies to encourage organizational identification. Building on these notions, this paper suggests how organizations can increase perceptions of continuity when undergoing constant change.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Organizational identity refers to the features of the organization that can be considered central, distinctive and enduring (Albert and Whetten 1985; Ashforth and Mael 1996) – the collective understanding of who *we* are (Raitis 2015). Such anthropomorphism, reflecting who we are rather than what the company is, enables the organization to develop a kind of personality, which facilitates a more memorable, engaging and motivating identity (Ashforth et al. 2020). In effect, attributing human features to an organization allows it to become more familiar, tangible and understandable, something real, which can be known and thus identified with (Ashforth and Mael 1996). This power stems from the fact that organizations are inherently human entities and thus reflect human processes of thought and behaviour (Ashkanasy et al. 2017). The attempt to build a shared identity among the involved employees is also a crucial part of post-acquisition integration (Dao and Bauer 2020).

However, when an acquisition prompts major organizational restructuring, organizational identity may become threatened (e.g. Menges and Kilduff 2015; Raitis et al. 2017). More particularly, when integration changes the identity of the pre-acquisition organization or its sub-groups, employees tend to react with insecurity and resistance (Dao and Bauer 2020). In general, such threat perceptions arise when employees perceive the acquisition as potentially making things worse for them. This can occur, for example, through potential downsizing threatening unemployment or the loss of colleagues, or a reallocation of resources threatening development opportunities or prompting relocation (Biggane et al. 2017). Change seems to attack how the accustomed identity is to endure, raising worries over the continuity of what is central and distinctive about it. These worries are likely heightened when an organization undergoes a series of potentially threatening events, as is the case for serial acquirers – organizations that acquire several companies over a limited period. Thus, this paper addresses the question, *how can acquiring organizations signal continuity following acquisitions?*

Because emotions can reveal what the members of an organization consider important (cf. Humphrey et al. 2015), this paper argues that emotional identification is a key element in achieving the objective of continuity (cf. Raitis et al. 2017). In exploring the existing literature, this paper therefore focuses on features that offer employees the chance to perceive change as affirmative and engage in change-congruent behaviour. In doing so, this paper aims to bridge the long-lasting focus on detecting and dissolving identity threats with active attempts to encourage identification. This approach answers the call for considering the interconnections between group emotions and social identity (Ashkanasy et al. 2017).

## **2 IDENTITY FOLLOWING ACQUISITIONS**

### **2.1 Identity and identification**

Identity refers to the meanings given to the self. Thus, it structures and feeds the self-concept, anchoring the self to wider social spheres (Gecas 1982). Consequently, work-related identity refers to the construction of the self in the work domain (Dutton et al. 2010). Organizational identity reflects employees' shared perceptions of the organization (Ashforth and Mael 1996). This paper focuses on the collective organizational identity, reflecting the need of all social actors to harbour a sense of self, to portray a fundamental image of who *we* are. What makes the organizational identity distinctive is what members perceive as separating it from other organizations. The central attributes of an organization become visible, for example, through values, practices and offerings. In identifying the central attributes, an organization's history is important, as it enables the evaluation of the congruency of the organization's actions to its identity. What makes the identity enduring is continuation over time – or a perception thereof (Gioia et al. 2013).

A sense of who *we* are at the base of organizational identity helps employees think, feel and act in ways that correlate with the identity, because it accentuates a sense of a collective self. Whereas many organizational characteristics that are central, distinctive and enduring could be described in terms of *what* (e.g. established, bureaucratic), considering the attributes of who gives them much more life and meaning (e.g. old, slow). Because of the strength in such an anthropomorphism, organizations may want to utilize one of three available strategies to promote this sense of *who* in the organization. First, they can *say it* by explicitly promoting what is human-like in the organization and speaking with the voice of the organization. Second, they can *show it* by acting in ways that promote the human-like attributes of the organization, in effect, walking the talk. Third, they can *stage it* by setting up opportunities for members to engage with the human-like attributes of the organization (Ashforth et al. 2020).

Organizational identification refers to the perception of belonging to or being one with an organization (Mael and Ashforth 1992), and thereby defining oneself in terms of the organization. In effect, based on social identity theory, organizational identification refers to a shared identity within an organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989). The stronger the identification, the greater the tendency to adopt the attributes that define the organization to define the self. Thus, organizational identification reflects a psychological attachment to the organization (Dutton et al. 1994). Identifying as a collective *we* is socially comforting and enables employees to make sense of the company. Thus, employees are willing to identify with an organization that they consider relatable. This identification includes the recognition of cues regarding the attributes of the organization, the perception of the cues' centrality and the projection of the cues from the self (Ashforth et al. 2020). Seeing as human behaviour, and thereby organizational behaviour, stems from two sources, cognition and affect (Ashkanasy et al. 2017), organizational identification can also be seen as stemming from either a cognitive or an emotional origin. The difference lies between the difference in perceiving (cognitive) and

feeling (affective, emotional) oneness (Johnson et al. 2012). In this paper, the focus is on the emotional level.

## **2.2 Emotions and identity**

Emotional identification with an organization refers to the members' emotional attachment to the organization and the emotions that arise as a consequence of the organization and membership therein (Raitis et al. 2017). Identity and identification is enduring because members create an emotional bond to the collective and to the mutual benefits it offers. Identification creates feelings of attachment, which turn into positive behaviour such as loyalty (Huy 1999). Due to the need to establish belongingness and the resulting tendency to form social attachments (Baumeister and Leary 1995), emotional attachment also correlates with the strength of organizational identification (Pratt 2000). In contrast, a lack of such emotional attachment is detrimental to well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995).

As a majority of the identity literature to date has focused on threats to identity (Raitis et al. 2017), many negative emotions have been found to have a relationship with identity. For example, jealousy prompted by perceived favouritism can thwart employees' sense of identity (Andiappan and Dufour 2020). Similarly, *schadenfreude* (epicaricacy) can strengthen identification with the in-group (Li et al. 2019), lowering the willingness to identify with a new entity. In contrast, systemic shame is a source of disciplinary power, directing behaviour towards praiseworthy behaviour in order to maintain group membership (Creed et al. 2014). Moreover, a sense of loss and grief can thwart identity transition altogether (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014).

A more recent research stream focuses on positive identity, highlighting understanding positive identity construction beyond the responses to identity threats (Dutton et al. 2010). For example,

a shared identity can encourage positive behaviour such as trust formation and cooperation. In addition, identification increases affective attachment to the group (Williams 2001). Identification also increases commitment and engages employees in organizational citizenship behaviour (Cardon et al. 2017). A positive organizational identity encourages employees to behave in ways that stimulate positive organizational outcomes. Constructing a positive identity can also drive institutional change (Dutton et al. 2010).

A change in identity can trigger strong emotional reactions, which influence the way we behave during and perceive the change (Huy 1999). Change receptiveness refers to attitudes set between passive acceptance and active endorsement, whereas change resistance varies between inactive withdrawal and active resistance (Huy 1999; Oreg et al. 2018). Negative emotions are likely to lead to change resistance, whereas positive emotions enable change receptiveness (cf. Lazarus 1993; Oreg et al. 2018; Harikkala-Laihinén 2019). During change, employees' behavioural responses are often directly linked to their emotional responses. A change triggers a cognitive appraisal of its favourability for the self and for the work group one identifies with, leading to neutral, positive, negative, or mixed perceptions. This evaluation then leads to the corresponding behaviour, moderated by the perceived implications of potential behavioural patterns (Smollan 2006).

### **2.3 Identity following an acquisition**

An acquisition prompts the re-categorization of previously separate groups into a new joint group. As the new group maintains features and attributes of the former group, it can be seen as a continuation of the old group. However, it is essentially a new group, as it includes new members. Thus, a post-acquisition identity harbours features of both old and new, making the context particularly interesting (van Knippenberg et al. 2002). In settings where one group is focal and others are adjoining, adjoining group members will anchor their perceptions to the

focal parts if the focal group is considered to be within meaningful group boundaries. However, in these situations, strengthening group identity can make the boundaries between groups more rigid (Kahn et al. 2018). This is visible, for example, in the dual organizational identification with the core company and its local subsidiary seen in multinational corporations (Smale et al. 2015). Following an acquisition, the separate organizational groups may experience in-group bias, thwarting them from adapting to a new identity (van Leeuwen et al. 2003; cf. Menges and Kilduff 2015). Overall, when the post-acquisition identity is seen as a continuation of the pre-acquisition identity, identification becomes easier. At the same time, continuity of the pre-acquisition identity may increase in-group bias, effecting perceived deviance in the out-group, often reflecting the acquisition partner (van Leeuwen et al. 2003).

A change in identity occurs through identity transitions, where a period of liminality represents a dynamic shift from who I was to who am I becoming. The failure to make this transition results in becoming consumed by a sense of loss and an inability to let go of the old self (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014). In the worst-case scenario, letting go of the established identity attributes feels similar to death or nothingness (Huy 1999). Liminality involves three phases: separation from the old identity, transition to the intermediate state of making sense of the attributes of the new identity and reincorporation to establish a new sense of identity (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014). Considering post-acquisition integration as a human change process includes the realization that all human change includes a psychological process of unlearning and relearning; the cognitive rebuilding and restructuring of ideas, perceptions and emotions. In order to be able to unlearn, in effect in order to be ready and motivated for change, disconfirmation of hopes or expectations is often the first step. For such disconfirmation to prompt change, it must trigger anxiety in terms of achieving future goals and thereby a wish to change in order to perform better. This is extremely difficult, as a willingness to change is related to a realization of imperfection, and even to a potential loss of self-esteem and identity.

Therefore, the creation of psychological safety is essential. Balancing the disconfirmation with psychological safety allows individuals to accept the need to change. For example, group work, practice opportunities, establishing steps and objectives, coaching and creating a positive vision can help establish psychological safety around change (Schein 1996).

Nevertheless, organizational evolution can prompt employees' identity claim modification. While the central features of the identity may be maintained over time, it can adapt to new contexts and demands (Fisher et al. 2016). Beyond seeing organizational identity as enduring, it could therefore be claimed that organizational identity is dynamic (Gioia et al. 2013). For identity change to be successful, employees must be given the chance to reflect on the past and develop a new sense of the future. In effect, time for a mourning period over the old identity may be necessary. This allows an emotional release of the old identity to happen and renews receptivity to the new identity. A new beginning can only be successful if the employees are able to see the change as justified (Huy 1999).

### **3 METHOD**

#### **3.1 A brief history of Sigma**

Sigma was established in Finland approximately 30 years ago (to protect Sigma's anonymity, the exact years of operation are not revealed) and operates in the high-tech industry. In the beginning, the company was owned by a sole entrepreneur and employed a team of approximately ten employees. After the first decade or so, essentially through a transfer to the next generation, the company became a growth-oriented family business. Both organic growth and growth through acquisitions occurred, but the acquired companies were not integrated. Instead, they were left essentially as stand-alone companies under Sigma's umbrella. During



the next decade, Sigma grew from a small local player to a medium-sized multi-regional company, employing some 120 workers.

Sigma's newfound growth orientation meant that after some time, resources for growth became scarce. Thus, the company was sold to corporate investors a few years before its 30th birthday. After the change in ownership, transformation was fast. New companies were bought again and Sigma grew to employ some 300 workers. The corporate investor ownership also meant changes in the management of the company. The former family members soon left Sigma, and new management started to drive the unification of the company, essentially integrating all of the previously bought firms into Sigma along with newer purchases. While this turmoil was ongoing, research cooperation was established in autumn 2019 to explore Sigma's identity throughout the years.

### **3.2 Data collection and analysis**

Data collection at Sigma occurred through semi-structured interviews focusing on features of the company that the employees saw as central, their experience of the working atmosphere at Sigma and the changes the employees considered significant in Sigma's life cycle. The purpose of the interviews was to reveal in-depth information regarding the company context and employee perceptions (cf. Saldaña 2011). The semi-structured nature of the interviews ensured the comparability and value of the interviews (cf. Tolley et al. 2016). For example, the interviews posed general questions regarding the nature of Sigma as an employer, Sigma's meaning to the interviewee personally and the interviewee's perception of Sigma's purpose. The interview topics and questions were kept relatively loose to allow the interviewees freedom in their responses.

As significant change events during Sigma's life cycle were expected to have influenced employees' identity perceptions, the interviews utilised the critical incident technique (CIT). The CIT allows the systematic collection of observed significant incidents. Following the key steps of the CIT as described by Flanagan (1954), the interviewees were asked to identify significant events over the company's life cycle and place them on a company timeline. The interviewee was then asked to identify the most significant event, and describe how that event came to be, who was involved, how the event influenced Sigma and their job at Sigma, and other relevant information that might increase the understanding of the event. A similar approach has previously been successfully adopted by Durand (2016) to explore managerial emotions following acquisitions.

The interviewees, 24 altogether, were chosen to represent myriad functions, hierarchical levels, employment lengths and locations at Sigma (Table 4.1). To protect the anonymity of the company and the interviewees, the locations are not revealed. Nevertheless, recent acquisitions and those belonging to former umbrella companies that were recently integrated are highlighted. The interviews lasted approximately between 30–60 minutes and were audio-recorded to enable transcription. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face at the interviewees' offices, but due to long distances, two were conducted over Microsoft Teams. All of the interviews were conducted in Finnish, the mother tongue of both the interviewer and the interviewees.

***Insert Table Virhe. Tiedostossa ei ole määritetyn tyylisiä tekstiä..1 Sigma interviews here***

The analysis of the interview findings was aided by QSR NVivo software. First, careful notes taken during the interviews were read thoroughly to gain an understanding of the whole. Based on this reading, very few theory-led categories were used, as more meaningful categories seemed to arise from the data. Nevertheless, theory-led headings of life cycle, identity,

management, employer and emotions were used to categorize the emergent themes. The interview transcriptions produced several sub-categories, of which the need for development, leadership, atmosphere, Sigma's character, communication, turmoil and the future were most significant. To highlight the significant events the interviewees identified, the timelines they produced were combined and an image of significant periods at Sigma, as defined by the identified events, was formulated.

## **4 IDENTITY TURMOIL AT SIGMA**

### **4.1 Sigma's life cycle**

Based on the interviewee-drawn timelines and corresponding discussions, Sigma's life cycle so far has had three significant phases: founding, family growth and a fresh start (Figure 4.1). Whereas the founding era lasted approximately a decade, the family growth era was somewhat longer, ending in the ownership change some four years ago.

*Insert Figure Virhe. Tiedostossa ei ole määritetyn tyylistä tekstiä..1 Sigma's life cycle here*

The very beginning of Sigma was under the umbrella of another company. Nevertheless, Sigma had a stand-alone role. The founder, Robert (the names of individuals have been changed to protect their anonymity), was an energetic manager who had an authoritative manner. He also portrayed the time, the early 1990s, in the organizational culture through rough humour and the old-time use of verbal force. Eventually an outside sales director replaced Robert, but did not last very long at the company. The first significant change occurred when ownership transferred to the founder's daughter Mary, whose husband James became the next CEO. The new owners were perceived as grounded family-focused people, with earned authority.

*When James came in, we clearly became our own company, we were Sigma. And we started to take the company in what I thought was the right direction, we started to develop. Before, the previous management did not have such a strong focus, but then the focus of what we are doing became much clearer.*

*(Sales, >10 years at the company)*

During its very first years, Sigma's offering was directed at both corporate and private customers, serving both at the same premises. However, during the family growth era, the focus became corporate and public sector customers, and the consumer market was slowly ended. At the same time, marketing efforts were increased. The first acquisitions and the growth orientation of Sigma was personified by James. The interviewees described Sigma at the time as a quilt of companies, all under the same name, but all slightly different and in their own geographical location. At this time, the founding location was clearly the most central one.

Overall, James was seen as a caring, good insightful manager, who had the best interests of the company and its employees at heart. He was seen to lead by example and the interviewees perceived that during this era, the employees were taken into consideration, that they were heard. During the family growth era, Sigma felt like a small close-knit community. This established an emotional bond to the company as well as to colleagues. The entrepreneurial spirit of the owning family rubbed off on the employees, and reciprocity between the owners wanting to do their best for the employees and the employees wanting to do their best for the owners existed. The owners were always present, working alongside the employees, and the hierarchy was very low. The employees were trusted and had a sense of autonomy in their work. The next significant era at Sigma only started when the company was sold to a corporate investor.

*In the beginning it was quite a shock, somehow frightening, because I immediately thought OK, now my job is gone.*

*(Finance, 3–5 years at the company)*

The change in ownership was seen as the biggest single event by most interviewees due to the subsequent changes it prompted, for example, in management and the structure of the organization. It increased Sigma's resources and brightened the future in terms of investment opportunities. Nevertheless, particularly James leaving the company was a heavy blow to many who had been with Sigma for years. For some, Sigma had been the first and only employer of their lives, and the good atmosphere of the family growth era had correlated very strongly with James's presence at the company. The employees did understand that after investing everything – at least figuratively speaking – in Sigma for so long, James deserved a break and a new start of his own. Nevertheless, the change felt very personal.

*This year we have suffered two great losses when both Mary and James have left us. This has been mentally really tough for me. They were both such great leaders, such wonderful people. Before I felt like I was working for them, it was more personal. - - It feels somehow like ... like in two years, their entire life's work has gone up in flames. And it feels awful, so awful.*

*(Finance, >10 years at the company)*

Whereas the previous CEO James had a rather personal leadership style, the new CEO Michael was perceived as more of a generalist. Having no legacy at Sigma, he was possibly more perceptive of the bigger picture and did not have a location-based bias. Michael's different history put him in a better position to unite Sigma. The process of integrating all of the

previously separate companies fully into Sigma was personified somewhat in Michael and in a few members of the new top-management team. The integration included a change in the organizational structure and a unification of systems and procedures. The purpose of the change was to create unity among the different locations, leading to the adoption of cross-location teams as the basis of different functions at Sigma. Besides creating internal unity, this renewal was seen as a way to increase the power of Sigma as a national-level player.

*Our procedures have changed, and we have grown from garage nerds to a proper business that needs to be taken seriously, also in terms of our offering.*

*(Sales, 3–5 years at the company)*

One significant change, along with integration, was to create a new look for Sigma. In effect, this meant a facelift to the logo, the creation of cartoon characters based on some of the employees to use in internal and external communications, and a switch to a unified office look in every location. In some locations, this meant a physical move to new offices, which was seen mostly as a positive development in terms of building unity. Nevertheless, for some, the switch to a flexi-office with no assigned desk was difficult, increasing distance working.

*Everyone called the old offices the Funhouse. Upstairs, if you let a pencil go at one end, it would roll to the other end. There are still offices there, it hasn't been demolished or anything. It was just so funny, and we didn't have a fully open plan. Everyone had his or her own place, I liked that much better.*

*(Production, logistics, 3–5 years at the company)*

While progress was perceived to be happening, the road ahead seemed long to most interviewees. Overall, many interviewees experienced a sense of turmoil, of rapid change at an uncontrollable pace. Some interviewees described the current situation as akin to working at a start-up. In addition, many perceived some change resistance, for example, vocal preferences for the old systems, thus making the fresh start era feel rather heavy. The employees also perceived that management was not listening to their concerns adequately and that the new organizational structure was leading the company into separate silos.

Nevertheless, this current era was underlined by the knowledge that a corporate investor would not remain the owner forever. Thus, a new change in ownership was looming somewhere on the horizon. While most interviewees saw the future of Sigma as positive, this change in ownership caused some worries. Many considered that the best-case scenario would be a new era of family growth, whereas the worst would be amalgamation with a big faceless group and a slow fading away. Particularly the personality of customer services was raised as a determinant of the brightness of the future, as a personalized service was seen as a way to distinguish Sigma from its competitors.

#### **4.2 Areas in need of attention**

Many described the current leadership at Sigma as well meaning, but somewhat detached from the everyday work. The interviewed management-level personnel all mentioned their own willingness to learn and improve Sigma, but simultaneously saw many areas of development. Planning well enough and finishing one change before introducing another were mentioned as potential corrections. The justification for the changes was also lacking, particularly on the grass roots level. Dividing the changes into smaller, more digestible bits and making the process more concrete were suggested as corrections. Every interviewee also mentioned their

appreciation of their immediate supervisor. Particularly the coaching style of management introduced in the fresh start era was mentioned as a good endeavour.

*A good supervisor trusts you and doesn't try to micromanage. So that we can do our job in peace, with no one meddling, and we have the authority to make decisions about our job, that is very important in my opinion. That we ask, if there are any problems, and get help from the supervisor if we need it.*

*(Production, logistics, 1–2 years at the company)*

HRM at Sigma was mainly praised, apart from some individual layoffs that were perceived as mishandled. Particularly the well-being efforts, including supporting recreational sports activities, were commended. Nevertheless, the function was relatively new, and was also being developed during the fresh start era, making it a novelty. While everyday work in HR seemed to function well, some uncertainty as to the purpose of the function remained.

*My role in HR is somewhat difficult, because in a sense I can never really be part of the group. It is part of my job, that I cannot have a personal opinion. In HR, you can't play both sides, say one thing as a person and another with the voice of the company, that would become impossible. - - In the beginning, this position raised some doubts because it was new.*

*(Human Resources, 1–2 years at the company)*

Similarly, top management remained quite distant for many, particularly for the employees who had been at Sigma under the previous owners and who worked very closely with them. The hierarchy seemed much higher to some than others, and the decisions made about some of the



process renewals were perceived as detached from what the job actually meant, making it impossible to follow the new rules.

*Before when I was working with James, who was our CEO, we worked closely together, it was very clear. Now maybe the addition of the middle people, the business area managers, we work with them much more than with top management.*

*(Sales, >10 years at the company)*

*Michael seems a bit passive. But then again, I don't know what Michael's job description is, what he is supposed to do in this company. I don't know what he is supposed to be involved in.*

*(Production, logistics, 3–5 years at the company)*

Some interviewees also felt that the new team structure and product catalogue ate away from the previous strength of personalized customer service. This was a negative development, as personalized service and relationship-building were seen as a key way in which to lower the importance of product prices in the customer relationship. Flexibility and being able to offer exactly what the customer needs were seen as the cornerstone of the success in the family growth era.

*The customers are saying we are bigger, we are less flexible, it feels like we no longer take care of them. These kinds of things. This is the last message you ever want to receive from customers.*

*(Sales, 6–10 years at the company)*

Communication raised many opinions. On the one hand, the interviewees felt that communication was on good grounds, and that effective virtual communication was enough for the most part. On the other hand, some called for more face-to-face meetings and clearer signals that the unification of Sigma meant that everyone was equally valuable. Particularly knowing one's colleagues across location borders was seen as a key towards good cooperation. Despite the integration endeavour, most interviewees still saw signs of the Sigma-quilt that predated the new ownership. Silos were also perceived as team boundaries became stronger. For many, it seemed that the geographical location or one's team was the first, and Sigma as a whole only the second point of identification. For some acquired employees, the former company still felt like a family. The unification was not progressing as planned and the renewal of processes was perceived as very confusing. Even though the unification was seen as a way to ensure the same quality across location borders, most interviewees reported the need for more clarity and organization in realizing the change. However, in terms of identity, this was not seen solely as a problem.

*It is somehow healthy also, it creates a sense of togetherness, as long as it does not feed unhealthy competition. I am sure there are still sub-cultures, and I think it would be better if they are not fully extinguished.*

*(Development Manager, 1–2 years at the company)*

Many expressed the view that the history of Sigma should also be better known to newer employees and particularly the new top-management team. This was seen as a way to understand Sigma better, and seemed important to both older and newer employees. However, part of the importance of the history was slightly divisive. Whereas the former central location employees were experiencing a strong sense of loss, the umbrella location employees experienced a sense of inferiority. In general, the interviewees were calling out to be heard, as

decision-making was perceived as distant. Recognizing the employees who were going above and beyond their job description was also called for. Whereas some interviewees saw the values of Sigma in their work, others were describing actions as violating the values. Particularly courage as a value seemed to be forgotten in many interviewees' opinions, and mistakes were stigmatized. Overall, the employees seemed largely divided.

### **4.3 The changing and enduring attributes of Sigma**

Beyond the pay check, the interviewees were highly motivated by interesting versatile work tasks and the good atmosphere. Many also saw change and development opportunities as motivating. Sigma and belonging to Sigma were extremely valuable to most interviewees, particularly those who had stayed with the company for many years. The meaning of Sigma was more than an employer; it was a community. At best, Sigma was experienced as another family. This strong emotional attachment meant that when Sigma changed significantly, negative emotions such as grief emerged. Indeed, many changes were perceived at Sigma.

*We are, all the time, living a revolution.*

*(Production Manager, 1–2 years at the company)*

The atmosphere had always felt very open to the interviewees, but that openness started to decrease during the fresh start era. For example, the communication lags that often accompany large-scale growth were visible. In addition, whereas some also saw the value “by way of joy” adopted in practice, others felt it represented mere words, not action. The growth brought with it decreased contacts, which increased perceptions of distance. In addition, the willingness to take risks seemed to decrease. Nevertheless, many experienced the new organizational structure as bringing clarity to job descriptions and responsibilities. This, along with the renewal and unification of systems and procedures was seen as an inherent part of growth, enabling

cooperation across locations and functions. Still, the strong team- and function-based organizational structure also brought about a juxtaposition. In part, the changes were so vast that many were experiencing them as turmoil.

*It's because I'm living in between, having seen the old, which I thought was so wonderful, and now I am in the midst of chaos. - - But now things are starting to work out bit by bit.*

*(Finance, 3–5 years at the company)*

During their employment, many interviewees had also noticed changes in themselves. For example, employees noted an increase in precision and that they were consciously adopting an attitude of calmness. Those in managerial positions perceived improvements in their supervisory capacity, partly due to Sigma's investment in a coaching style of leadership in the fresh start era. Due to growth, their job tasks also changed, either becoming more focused or shifting to new positions within the company. Some employees perceived an increase in creative and analytical work following the changes, which was welcomed. Many also reported increases in social and communication skills due to learning at work. Learning the ways of Sigma seemed to unite many of these experiences.

*I think that according to Sigma's culture, I probably am a lot more relaxed than before, and I don't stress so much about certain things I used to stress about. It has been good for me, as even though I've never been burnt out, I've maybe been close a few times, when things have been tough. - - Here, I think it's because of the people that we have such a good group of people, that's what makes it enjoyable.*

*(Production Manager, 1–2 years at the company)*

Since the founding era and particularly during the family growth era, interviewees experienced a sense of *entrepreneurial spirit* at the core of Sigma. To some extent, this was also perceived as enduring, although the fresh start did dilute it somewhat. The entrepreneurial spirit was seen in the eagerness to take up tasks, the sense of autonomy and ambition. Being reliable, supporting longevity and inventiveness also reflected this spirit, whereas the continuous change in the field heightened its importance. This attribute was also reflected in the interviewees' perceptions of the purpose of Sigma as being profitable and as enabling meaningful work.

Another key feature of Sigma was *expertise*. This reflected one of the core values of Sigma mentioned during the interviews to be "the most skilled mate in town". Being customer-centric and flexible were particularly important to many interviewees. Tackling work with a hands-on attitude and being easily approachable stemmed from this objective, as did the wish for continuous development and learning. The use of modern tools and systems supported this attribute. Many interviewees also saw this as part of the purpose of Sigma – to help customers be successful and to make work easier for the customers.

*Quirkiness* and a start-up spirit were also mentioned by several interviewees; that Sigma dared to be a bit different, that it had a bit more personality. Being easy-going, social and positive were at the core of what Sigma membership meant to the interviewees. Openness, youthfulness, energy and eagerness characterized Sigma, and were visible, for example, in the adoption of the cartoon characters and the facelift given to the brand. Then again, this did not materialize into being too posh, but at the same time, Sigma remained unpretentious and authentic. This also echoed the wish to encounter customers on a personal level. This attribute was reflected in the interviewees' perception of the purpose of Sigma as being a renewing force in the field.

Although these three attributes – entrepreneurial spirit, expertise and quirkiness – were seen as central, distinctive and enduring, many interviewees expressed worries over their discontinuity. Sigma in the fresh start era was seen as more cautious and even as faceless. The humour and positive atmosphere that the employees appreciated were felt to have somewhat decreased.

#### **4.4 Discussion**

##### *4.4.1 Identity and identification at Sigma*

It was clear that Sigma's identity was connected to the interviewees' self-concept, as they considered Sigma through their own experience and perception (cf. Gecas 1982; Dutton et al. 2010). On a collective level, Sigma had triggered a sense of who *we* are (cf. Ashforth and Mael 1996; Raitis 2015). The employees considered entrepreneurial spirit, expertise and quirkiness as the central, distinctive and enduring features of Sigma, reflecting Sigma's organizational identity (cf. Albert and Whetten 1985). The organization's history (cf. Gioia et al. 2013) was particularly visible in the entrepreneurial spirit and quirkiness attributes, as well as in the interconnections seen between Sigma's values and identity. The enduring nature of these attributes, while somewhat questioned in the current fresh start era, seemed a matter of perception rather than of immutability (cf. Gioia et al. 2013).

Based on the value placed on Sigma membership and the many notions of its family atmosphere, the interviewees experienced identification with and belongingness to Sigma (cf. Ashforth and Mael 1989; Mael and Ashforth 1992). One clear example of defining the self in terms of the organization's attributes (cf. Dutton et al. 1994) is the quotation mentioning the changes in the self according to Sigma's culture. It was clear from the interviewees' choice of words, such as "I feel", that the identity of Sigma and the employees' identification did connote a strong emotional aspect in addition to the more cognitive evaluation (cf. Johnson et al. 2012).

Similarly, the choice of words such as “we are” highlights how the perception of the self as belonging to a group triggers certain attitudes and behaviours (van Knippenberg et al. 2002).

The use of language, particularly in the formation of value statements such as “by way of joy” and “the most skilled mate in town” helped the employees to anchor their identity perceptions (cf. Pettigrew 1979) and promoted the human-like attributes of Sigma (Ashforth et al. 2020). Still, at the same time, it highlighted potential contradictions, as in the case of courage versus cautiousness. Nevertheless, the strong sense of *who we are* did help employees think, feel and act in ways that were congruent with Sigma’s identity. Sigma was connected with attributes such as relaxed, energetic, quirky, skilled and so forth, making the identity perception much more tangible and meaningful. In many ways, walking the talk was also visible, as the employees did recognize these attributes in everyday work. Similarly, particularly some marketing efforts such as relaxed quirky customer events helped employees engage with the attributes (cf. Ashforth et al. 2020).

The division between the spheres of identification, either a location, a team, or Sigma as a whole, signals that what employees saw as the focal part gained much of their attachment (cf. Smale et al. 2015; Kahn et al. 2018). While some saw this as a potential problem, others experienced a mixture of identities as enrichening. The decisive factor seemed to be whether the in-group identification caused a strong bias against out-groups and prevented identification with the whole (cf. van Leeuwen et al. 2003; Menges and Kilduff 2015). The wish for continuity between pre- and post-acquisition organizational identity was clear at Sigma (cf. van Knippenberg et al. 2002; van Leeuwen et al. 2003). Thus, when changes in Sigma challenged the central, distinctive and enduring attributes, emotional confusion emerged.

#### *4.4.2 Emotions reflecting Sigma's identity*

The employees' emotional attachment to Sigma was clear. Many described Sigma as another family and detailed their emotions reflecting Sigma membership (cf. Raitis et al. 2017). The employees had clearly built a strong emotional bond with Sigma, which, on the one hand, helped Sigma's identity become enduring, triggering positive perceptions and loyalty (cf. Huy 1999), but, on the other hand, caused many negative perceptions when Sigma's identity was threatened. Indeed, it was clear that the stronger the emotional bond the employees seemed to harbour for Sigma, the stronger their identification with Sigma (cf. Pratt 2000). The very few employees who did not signal an emotional attachment to Sigma did seem to portray poorer work-related well-being (cf. Baumeister and Leary 1995), while at the same time, those who seemed to portray the strongest emotional attachment to Sigma seemed to also suffer the most when Sigma was perceived as changing.

During the turmoil of the fresh start era, Sigma employees experienced jealousy over perceived favouritism (cf. Andiappan and Dufour 2020), and portrayed a sense of loss and of grief that were clearly hindering their identity transition (cf. Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014). Nevertheless, Sigma's identity was also seen as encouraging trust and cooperation, and clearly it encouraged attachment (cf. Williams 2001). Employees' identification with Sigma increased their commitment to the company and helped them act according to the norms of the company (cf. Cardon et al. 2017). Overall, while Sigma's identity mainly seemed to be positive (cf. Dutton et al. 2010), there were clear signals of a lowering of well-being, raising questions about the compatibility of the changes with Sigma's identity. Whereas many interviewees were in positive spirits, highly negative emotions also emerged (Figure 4.2).

***Insert Figure Virhe. Tiedostossa ei ole määritetyn tyylistä tekstiä..2 Emotions at Sigma here***



The employees' reactions were also clearly connected to how they perceived the change and behaved during the change (cf. Huy 1999; Smollan 2006; Oreg et al. 2018). A majority of the interviewees had a weak positive perception of the changes, accepting them but not really working towards them. Although they portrayed change receptiveness, they were not highly engaged in efforts to realize the change. The employees who saw change as highly positive and exciting were more willing to also act in ways that promoted change. The employees who saw change as slightly negative withdrew from efforts, whereas those who saw change as highly negative resisted it actively. However, it is important to note that active change resistance here refers to a more affective than behavioural process. The employees who experienced change at Sigma as highly negative mentally resisted the perceived change in Sigma's identity, but did not engage in any behaviour undermining the change efforts. Nevertheless, it also seemed possible to promote change to those who saw it as an identity threat.

#### *4.4.3 Building a new identity at Sigma*

Based on the employee experiences, Sigma's source of problems was in not recognizing the perceived majority of the change. Even though many years had passed since some of the employees were acquired, and others had never been acquired, essentially the unification of the fresh start era started an integration period, triggering highly emotional experiences (cf. Harikkala-Laihinén 2019). Although for many the unification of Sigma occurred not as a pure post-acquisition integration but as an organizational change process even years later, every employee experienced the change as essentially creating a new group, with features adopted from the old (cf. van Knippenberg et al. 2002). The necessity of building an image of *who we are* (e.g. Gioia et al. 2013) was clearly felt by the employees, who reported feelings of confusion when Sigma's identity was changing. This also highlighted the role of an organizational identity as a source of social comfort and sensemaking (cf. Ashforth et al. 2020). Based on the employees' feelings of confusion and turmoil – an identity transition –, a sense of who Sigma

members were becoming was evident. It was equally perceptible that for some, the sense of loss was overwhelming (cf. Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014), signalling that a badly managed identity transition period generates feelings of emptiness (cf. Huy 1999).

Sigma seemed firmly in the stage of liminality: the period of transition between an old and a new identity. Separation from the old identity had begun with the perceived changes, and the intermediate state of trying to make sense of what the new identity entailed was ongoing. What employees seemed to struggle with was with the reincorporation of Sigma's attributes into a new identity (cf. Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014). It was evident that the change at Sigma triggered a psychological process of unlearning and relearning, with a crucial emotional element of recreating the bond to a changed organization. Whereas disconfirmation had occurred through the perceived changes at Sigma, the future goals seemed too distant to motivate change. Thus, the danger of being stuck in a state of anxiety seemed plausible for many employees. As long as the old identity seemed more compelling, and could not be reconciled with the new, the willingness to change remains low. The only way to get around this dilemma seemed to be the creation of psychological safety in the new Sigma. Whereas a coaching management style was adopted to this end and the team structure offered chances of group work, no intermediate steps or objectives were introduced, and the employees did not have the opportunity to practice what the new Sigma meant. A positive vision did not emerge, meaning that psychological safety was not established as strongly as it could have been (cf. Schein 1996).

Organizational transformation could have been supported through designed efforts at creating shared meaning in the new Sigma (cf. Huy 1999; Harikkala-Laihinén 2019). At Sigma, the change was clearly directed by top management, meaning that employees only had the opportunity to influence the journey. However, what Sigma employees missed was the link

between the change objectives and their application in everyday work. In effect, the employees were not clearly invited to participate in planning the changes, which triggered perceptions that the changes were incongruent with some work tasks. At Sigma, the change processes seemed to necessitate inviting employees to participate to reach the set objectives (cf. Abildgaard et al. 2018). Identity lingering seemed evident; many employees spoke of the good old times. Similarly, the constant turmoil meant that some employees did not have time to perceive what their role in the new Sigma meant. Thus, rites of passage, such as new orientation workshops for all employees, could have helped to encourage change acceptance and complete the identity transition (cf. Wittman 2019).

Another key opportunity Sigma seemed to miss was to encourage identity claim modification instead of a full identity transition. The new top management could have familiarized themselves with the history of Sigma in all the locations and across functions in order to recognize what corresponded in the central, distinctive and enduring features in all of them. Based on these discoveries, the old identity could have been maintained at the core of the new, even though it would have been adapted to a novel context with different demands (cf. Fisher et al. 2016). Indeed, the similarity between what the interviewees considered important and positive about Sigma reflects a high level of synchrony, indicating that unity could have been found and communicated. This reflects the dynamic nature of the enduring attributes over time (cf. Gioia et al. 2013).

Whereas Sigma management had the best of intentions in driving change, the necessity of letting the employees reflect on the past and offer them the basis to build an image of the future was not handled as well as it could have been. Apart from the means suggested above, because the employees did not have the chance to mourn for what was lost in the unification, the new identity never became as compelling as it could have become. In effect, many employees could

not experience an emotional release that would have increased their receptivity to a new identity. Furthermore, the employees explicitly mentioned the low level of justification regarding the changes, indicating that without extra effort, a new beginning was likely to fail (Huy 1999).

## 5 CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how acquiring organizations can signal continuity following acquisitions. The process of doing so was discovered to be inherently human, including both cognitive and emotional features (cf. Ashkanasy et al. 2017), but is crucial in terms of building a shared identity (cf. Dao and Bauer 2020). Thus, when integration triggers perceptions of identity threats (cf. Menges and Kilduff 2015; Biggane et al. 2017; Raitis et al. 2017), insecurity and resistance emerge (cf. Dao and Bauer 2020). This highlights the need to emphasize the central, distinctive and enduring attributes of the organization (e.g. Ashforth and Mael 1996); in effect, the continuity of identity (cf. van Knippenberg et al. 2002).

Based on the literature review and the illustrative case example, there are several things organizations can do to ensure identity continuity following major restructuring. First, it is essential to recognize that a change in identity has been triggered. Even if the change seems minor, it may be perceived as major. Similarly, even if the change itself is positive, it may cause identity struggles, which are negative. Second, when identity change occurs, it is crucial that the change is seen all the way through so that the employees do not remain in a stage of liminality. Third, active efforts aimed at building shared meaning help employees identify with the new organization. Particularly socialization efforts are important in easing identity transition. Fourth, building the new identity based on already shared perceptions of what is central, distinctive and enduring helps highlight the continuity of the identity even when faced

with adaptation to a new context. Finally, allowing the employees to mourn for perceived losses regarding their identity is essential in creating receptiveness to the new identity.

This paper has shown how identification can be encouraged through active efforts even when identity threats occur. In identifying the means discussed above, this paper has also shed light on how collective emotions are reflected in social identity. At Sigma, employee emotions clearly revealed the most important and valued parts of the organization (cf. Humphrey et al. 2015), indicating the importance of an emotional attachment to the organization (cf. Raitis et al. 2017). Moreover, this paper has shown how identity change triggers slightly different change attitudes than the previous literature details. Whereas the previous organizational change literature (e.g. Waddell and Sohal 1998; Dhingra and Punia 2016; Oreg et al. 2018) highlights active change resistance and the anxiety, stress and anger it creates, highly negative attitudes regarding identity change do not necessarily activate employees against change per se. Instead, they cause the employees to repel the features of the new identity that seem to threaten the old identity and thereby the employees' self-conception. This means that the employees who struggle with identity-related change should not be perceived as actively change resistant, but as requiring the opportunity to mourn for the loss of their old identity in order to enable them to transition to the new.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

*Table Virhe. Tiedostossa ei ole määritetyn tyylistä tekstiä..2*

*Sigma interviews*

<b>Function</b>	<b>Employment years</b>	<b>Acquisition/integration</b>	<b>Duration</b>
Development Manager	1-2	integrated	42 min
Finance	>10	-	62 min
Finance	3-5	-	57 min
Human Resources	3-5	integrated	67 min
Human Resources	1-2	2018	53 min
Human Resources	1-2	-	62 min
Marketing	6-10	2017	40 min
Marketing	>10	2018	65 min
Production Manager	3-5	2016	55 min
Production Manager	3-5	2017	42 min
Production Manager	1-2	integrated	54 min
Production, expert services	>10	2018	51 min
Production, logistics	3-5	-	55 min
Production, logistics	1-2	-	55 min
Production, logistics	1-2	integrated	43 min
Production, projects	<1	-	60 min
Production, support	1-2	integrated	39 min
Production, support	<1	-	39 min
Sales	>10	-	58 min
Sales	>10	-	58 min
Sales	6-10	integrated	29 min
Sales	6-10	2014	56 min
Sales	3-5	integrated	54 min
Sales	1-2	-	54 min

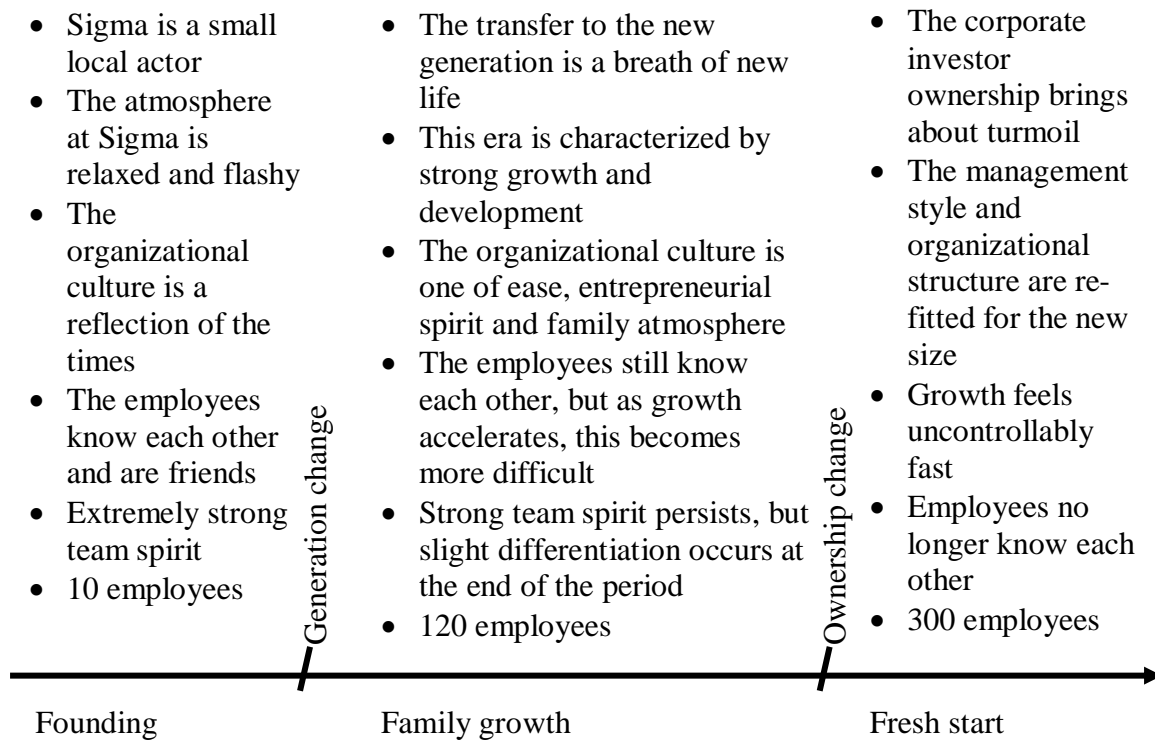


Figure Virhe. Tiedostossa ei ole määritetyn tyylistä tekstiä..3

Sigma's life cycle

		Valence	
		Positive	Negative
Intensity	Strong	Change proactive (4)	Change repelling (6)
	Weak	Change accepting (11)	Change withdrawing (3)
		Change receptiveness	Change resistance

**Attitude towards change**

Figure Virhe. Tiedostossa ei ole määritetyn tyylistä tekstiä..4

Emotions at Sigma