



Ethical Issues Related to Career Pressures and Identity Struggles

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Abstract: *There are many ethical issues and dilemmas that arise in the business world related to pressures from our professions and the struggle with finding our own sense of identity. This paper will explore the ethical challenges that are faced by individuals when they become overwhelmed by the expectations of their career, whether it be strict corporate culture, burnout from long hours, or unrealistic expectations. All while people try their best to meet the expectations of their career, some lose their sense of identity. They struggle with balancing their professional and personal lives, letting the business take priority over themselves, giving in to workplace norms, and overall changing who they are to fit their role for the career they're in. This ultimately has a negative impact on the mental health of employees and is bad for both the employee and the business in the long run.*

Keywords: *Ethical issues, Personal Identity, Professional Identity, Corporate Ethics, Imposter Syndrome, Career Advancement, Employee Morale*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, many people suffer from issues related to overwhelming career expectations and the struggle with finding your own identity. Business has become so fast paced and competitive from the corporate level all the way down to among employees where the desire for advancement and success can often come at the expense of your personal identity or welfare. As individuals strive to meet the increasing demands of their career, they may be forced to conform to workplace norms, choose between accomplishing career objectives or maintaining their personal values, or to suppress aspects of themselves. Pressures from one's career raise concerns about mental health and the balance between one's professional and personal lives but also introduce significant ethical dilemmas. There is a rising tension between growing your professional career and maintaining your identity and diversity, issues regarding corporate culture, gender dominated fields, profit vs welfare, and allowing your career path to change who you are. This paper will explore the ethical issues related to career pressures and the struggle for maintaining one's personal identity, the impact that corporate culture has on the mental well-being of its employees, and the ethics of prioritizing organizational productivity at the cost integrity of one's identity.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE WORKPLACE NORMS AND THE IMPACT ON SELF-IDENTITY

Many businesses both on the corporate and small business level have established workplace norms and a specific culture around the workplace. Certain industries may impose specific expectations on appropriate attire, behavior, or communication that may have an impact on the individuality of one's identity. Compliance with workplace norms can cause a struggle with people trying to maintain a sense of authenticity and keeping a sense of professionalism at work. A simple but commonplace workplace norm is dress code. Dress codes are a simple but effective way of promoting a sense of professionalism and coherence among a group, but it can come at the cost of being a hindrance to individual expression and the potential to discriminate against marginalized groups. It is believed that encouraging a work environment where employees can express themselves freely will promote a more productive work environment. According to an article based on authenticity in the workplace,

“At the individual level, numerous studies have found that “being able to express oneself and one's identity fully at work is positively related to job satisfaction, work engagement, organizational commitment and well-being” (Ramarajan, 2021, p. 2). Employees who feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to the office each day simply enjoy their work more and are more invested in their employer's success.” (Westover, 2024)

Employees who are pressured into suppressing aspects of themselves at work and those who can express their identity freely show a correlation with higher levels of satisfaction and a positive effect on mental health. Higher satisfaction leads to employees taking pride in their work which causes them to become

more invested and increase productivity in the workplace. When employees feel the need to suppress aspects of themselves, this can lead to increased stress, disengagement, and burnout. It is essential to find a balance between the expectations of professionalism and the ability to allow others to express their identity freely, fostering an inclusive work environment can lead to greater employee potential and productivity.

“Perceptions of (in) appropriateness are informed by prevailing norms and expectations concerning emotional expressions, which are referred to as display rules... Such rules determine what is considered appropriate in terms of the valence of the emotion(s) displayed (positive or negative) as well as other aspects of the display (e.g., its intensity and duration), usually with reference to specific discrete emotions.” (Cheshin, 2020)

This article focuses on what is called “display rules”, or how employees should express themselves in the workplace. Display rules are the organization’s way of dictating what is deemed as an acceptable expression of emotion in a professional setting. These kinds of pressures to comply with organizational norms may lead employees to suppress their authenticity, which will cause them to disconnect from their personal identity. Over time, this suppression of personal identity can also impact emotional well-being and overall job satisfaction. Essential workplace norms like these can have a direct impact on how employees may suppress the way that they express themselves while at work, which will further impact their sense of self.

3. CAREER EXPECTATIONS AND PRESSURES VS. MENTAL HEALTH

The expectations set on employees by businesses and employers have put an increasing level of strain on the mental health of individuals in a variety of fields. In the form of quotas, productivity, output, and several other factors measuring efficiency or effectiveness, many careers may lead to burnout and various personal sacrifices, both minor and significant that may impact the self-identity or mental welfare of employees. An article from the Queensland University of Technology regarding issues in the emerging ICT workforce states,

“Social factors include social expectations and stereotypes and challenges such as balancing the demands of participation in one life domain (such as caring responsibilities) with the demands in another domain (such as work or study). Structural factors include (1) ICT occupational culture centered on long work hours and individually focused behavior; (2) lack of role models; (3) lack of informal networks; (4) lack of mentors; and (5) institutional structures such as organizational hierarchies and the impact of globalization. Ahuja (2002) proposes that many of these factors also influence persistence and advancement in an ICT career.” (Tsakissiris and Grant-Smith, 2021, 22)

People entering the workforce find themselves being pressured by others’ expectations socially by their peers and structurally by the demands of their employers. Social pressure can even indirectly impact individuals when they compare themselves to others in similar positions. They’ll criticize their own performance because it is not up to the standard of another worker’s. This can also come in the form of a kind of competition as to who can outperform the other in an attempt to raise their own personal status. Corporate expectations for a long time have often come in the form of long hours, constant availability of employees, and excessive workloads. Although many companies may treat their employees well and do a good job managing and overseeing them, it is not uncommon for some practices to prioritize the company over the individual. These pressures placed on individuals make it difficult to balance their professional and personal lives which takes a toll on their mental state and may impact their identity. Different people may react in different ways, but it would be common to experience higher stress or anxiety from these external pressures.

“With result-oriented cultural norms, job demands not only trigger anxiety, but the lack of job resources also likely promotes anxiety. Job resources refer to assets to which employees have access for completing their work effectively such as money, staff, software, materials, or collective knowledge (Richter & Hacker, 1998). When employees face constraints on job resources, employees experience elevated levels of anxiety (Demerouti et al., 2001; Fox et al., 1993; Karasek, 1979).” (Yip, et al., 2020)

Research in Organizational Behavior cites result-oriented norms as a key contributor to heightened anxiety in the workplace. High job demands are often placed upon employees, yet they are met with an insufficiency in resources to meet these expectations. Employees are expected to perform and be

productive without the proper support and are left in a constant state of pressure and stress. Being overwhelmed by your professional life can lead to neglect of your personal identity, this could come in the form of isolation, lack of self-expression and growth.

“Conversely, in the absence of a strong work-life balance, students are at an increased risk for burnout, or a syndrome marked by emotional exhaustion, reduced performance and accomplishment, and a loss of identity or ambitions.” (Fournier, 2022)

This is why it is important to balance your professional and personal sides so that you avoid the risk of burning yourself out and can retain satisfaction in your work. Without a clear boundary between both aspects of your life, individuals may feel that productivity is a constant expectation, which can disrupt their sense of work-life balance and well-being. This can make individuals feel like their identity does not hold as much priority as their career, or that if they don't constantly give their career 100% effort that they'll be failing what is expected of them. This overemphasis on their career is what commonly leads to employee burnout and overall dissatisfaction.

4. ETHICAL ISSUES WITHIN GENDER-DOMINATED FIELDS

There are a variety of professions in which the demographic of employees is dominated by one gender or the other. The dominance of one gender over the other often leads to ethical issues that can disrupt or otherwise impact the workplace. As a result, these imbalances can promote an unhealthy work environment leading to higher stress, lower job satisfaction, and higher turnover rates. According to the (Ryan, 2022) article

“Despite much progress in the past 50 years, workplace gender inequality remains a persistent problem. Worldwide, women only occupy about 37 per cent of leadership roles (World Economic Forum, 2022), the pay gap sits at approximately 20 per cent (International Labour Organization, 2022), and women remain concentrated in low-status, low-paid jobs (UN Women, 2022).”

In the corporate world, women are underrepresented in leadership positions, and those who do hold these roles often receive less compensation than their male counterparts. As a result of this discrimination, women may feel discouraged towards pursuing upper-level positions. The persistence of gender biases for hiring and promotion continues to hinder the progress toward equality among genders in leadership roles. One of the more common ethical issues related to career inequality is regarding maternity leave.

“Maeve Bradley, who had worked at the American bank's offices in Belfast as an assistant vice-president of derivatives since March 2021, took maternity leave in 2023 and said she was devastated to be offered a different role on her return. The person covering her leave was given the promotion Bradley had anticipated.” (O'Carroll, 2025)

Bradley was a loyal employee of Citibank and had worked in the financial sector for 13 years. She was told that prior to her leave, she would be moved to a higher position upon her return. Despite all the hard work she had endured, she was overlooked for a well-deserved promotion due to the fact that she had been on maternity leave. She was instead offered an alternative role at the company which led to her filing a formal grievance and pursuing legal proceedings regarding sex discrimination. Citibank settled with Bradley but made no admission of liability for the discrimination she endured. This case highlights the concern over sex discrimination against women in traditionally male dominated fields. Societal expectations and the struggle to balance professional and personal responsibilities may disproportionately impact women, further inhibiting their opportunities for career advancement. Challenges like this raise awareness about the need to create a work environment that promotes inclusion and fairness for all individuals regardless of gender or other characteristics.

5. PERSONAL IDENTITY AND OPPORTUNITY FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Many people believe that there is a relationship between an individual's personal identity and their opportunity to advance in their career or profession. This often leads to employees losing their sense of authenticity as they try to adapt or “fit in” to the roles that would allow them to progress in their career. Individuals may suppress unique cultural aspects, personal traits, or beliefs to align with professional expectations, often believing that authenticity could undermine their opportunity for advancement. Whether it be conforming to the corporate culture of the workplace or making compromises in terms of

the ethics of business practices, an individual's personal identity can be significantly impacted by the pressure to climb the corporate ladder. Your personal identity will greatly influence the opportunities presented to you in your career path and determine whether management views you as an eligible candidate for an elevated position. Potential employers and management will evaluate your personal brand. A personal brand is how you present yourself and reflects the uniqueness of your skill set, experiences, values, and what you bring to the table. Your brand is an extension of yourself. An author at Inspire Culture states,

“Personal branding and career advancement go hand-in-hand. A strong personal brand sets you apart from the competition, positions you as an expert in your field, and increases your visibility to potential employers or clients. It allows you to demonstrate the value you bring, making you a more desirable candidate for job opportunities or promotions.” (Inspire Culture 2023)

This perspective emphasizes that career advancement is not solely dependent on an applicant's credentials, but also on how they communicate and present themselves both personally and professionally. It is imperative that both employees and job seekers maintain a positive personal brand. Having a strong personal brand or self-image is how individuals can distinguish themselves from other candidates in the modern competitive market. Many candidates may share qualifications and experience, so it is important to highlight yourself through your brand to show why you stand out among your peers. Making yourself a more desirable choice for a promotion or position is essential for career advancement. A direct connection to your personal brand for most people today is their social media presence. An article from Insight Magazine claims,

“In fact, 96 percent of recruiters and companies use social media to vet candidates according to the 2016 Recruiter Nation survey by Jobvite, which also points out that 55 percent of recruiters have had to reconsider candidates based on what was found on their social media profiles.” (Lilly 2017)

An online presence leaves behind a digital footprint that provides insight into your personal identity and values. If an employer views your online profile and discovers something that could negatively impact the company's image, this could result in being passed up for promotion, denied a position, or even grounds for termination. A positive digital footprint can convey notions of expertise, reliability, and compatibility with a company's culture, further making a candidate stand out to an employer. Additionally, a favorable online presence can be beneficial for networking and meeting new people that can open new opportunities for growth. Controversial or otherwise inappropriate conduct online can indicate a lack of professionalism which will negatively impact career advancement and reputation. Over the last decade, social media has increasingly integrated into society, becoming a more relevant part of everyday life and a key consideration for management decisions. Maintaining a professional and ethical online identity has never been more important. Ultimately, the way an individual expresses their personal identity, whether in the workplace or through their online presence, is essential in opening opportunities for career advancement.

6. ETHICAL ISSUES OF CORPORATE VALUES VS. PERSONAL VALUES

An individual's personal identity is shaped by the mixture of a person's values, culture, beliefs and morals. Similarly, corporations have their own established set of values and standards they believe to be necessary for the business to function. However, the demands of a career and corporate expectations can create an opportunity for these values to clash and potentially force individuals to choose between maintaining a sense of integrity or conforming to the expectations of their management. The collision of personal and corporate values causes individuals to experience internal conflict, leading to stress, anxiety, and a decrease in job satisfaction. In some cases, this tension may cause employees to question their long-term presence within an organization and express feelings of self-doubt. This internal conflict can cause a sense of disconnection, as individuals struggle with aligning their personal values with the expectations of the company. Over time, if this disconnect is unresolved, this dissonance can disrupt employee engagement, making it difficult to remain invested in their own work. An article from Harvard Business Review highlights a student's personal experience regarding the clashing of values,

“One company I worked in while studying for an MBA at Harvard was an electric appliance wholesaler managed by its founder, Mr. Vito Porto, autocratically and whimsically. Whenever an employee dared to have even a slightly different opinion to Mr. Porto's, his standard reply was: “I have spoken” and that was the end of the matter.” (Vlachoutsicos, 2013)

This is an example illustrating how employees' values and perspectives can often be overshadowed by authoritative leadership or a rigid corporate culture. The stubborn response, "I have spoken", immediately and effectively shuts down any difference in opinion and establishes a conformance requirement. When an organization neglects any dissenting opinions, this creates ethical strain among employees leading to issues like distrust, dissatisfaction, and decreased morale. This feeling of distrust may discourage employees from voicing their own opinions about unethical practices or different approaches to situations, creating a deeper conflict between personal integrity and professional expectations. Having a management that expects conformity to all business decisions promotes an unhealthy work environment where employees may compromise their values for success or job security, leading to long-term disengagement and the loss of organizational integrity. An article on the conflict between personal and company values references the difference between healthy vs. unhealthy conflict,

"Most of the big organizations promote a culture where employees are allowed to have a healthy conflict. This means there is willingness to disagree among employees around important issues, ensuring that all decisions are made with transparency and after listening to all stakeholders." (Stapleton, 2018)

When an organization fosters an environment where differing opinions are tolerated, this encourages positive decision-making, enhances transparency, and makes employees feel like their perspectives are valued. When employees feel like their voice is heard and their opinions are respected, this builds trust within the organization and helps with better communication. Management that values the opinions of its employees increases engagement and morale in the organization. This improves workplace cohesion as diverse perspectives lead to innovative solutions and higher productivity.

7. SHIFTING IDENTITIES AND STRUGGLING WITH IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

Many people may decide their career path solely based on how financially stable their choice will enable them to be. With the ever-growing disparity between income and the cost of living, many people focus on how they can afford to pay the bills rather than finding a profession they actually enjoy. The prioritization of financial security over personal fulfillment leads to individuals suppressing their true interests and values, resulting in a persistent sense of dissatisfaction from their work. This has led to a myriad of people being locked into a professional life that is not a right match for them and thus leads to a decline in mental health or other expressions of self-doubt, some of which can be related to Imposter Syndrome. An article from the University of Arizona SALT Center, (Lutovsky, 2023), *Imposter Syndrome* is defined as:

"Imposter syndrome is a psychological phenomenon in which individuals feel undeserving of their accomplishments, and attribute success to uncontrollable factors, such as luck or the generosity of others. Rather than seeing oneself as able or intelligent enough to earn success, individuals who experience imposter syndrome fear that they will be discovered as an imposter."

This psychological phenomenon directly impacts on the mental health of individuals who are stuck in occupations that are not the best suited for the kind of person they are or those who have a career that does not reflect their own personal identity. People who suffer from this phenomenon suffer from additional stress as they doubt their accomplishments, concern themselves with negative thoughts about their work ethic, and constantly compare their efficiency and skills to others. This syndrome is centered around self-doubt and inadequacy which may cause an individual to question their identity or even cause a shift in their behavior. When a person feels disconnected from their work or believes they are not the right fit for their career path, this is when self-doubt begins to take hold. Self-doubt can be a more serious issue in fields where performance is constantly evaluated, or competition occurs. Competitiveness in the workplace can add further pressure to exceed expectations, and the struggle to meet these demands can foster feelings of fraudulence or inadequacy. This doubt may cause an internal conflict for an individual between their actual self and how they perceive themselves. According to Tilburg University (Heby, 3):

"Persons with a strong sense of who they are may be to some extent protected against the impact of the imposter syndrome. Two aspects of social identity important for how people define themselves, are organizational identity (an identity that comprises central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics that define the organization, Albert & Whetten, 1985) and gender identity (which in its most basic variants classifies individuals as being either male or female, Hornsey, 2008)."

Imposter Syndrome can pose more of a threat to those who possess a weaker sense of self-identity or lack confidence in themselves. It is important to put emphasis on finding a strong connection between your profession and your personal identity, as this will contribute to positive mental health and increased job satisfaction. This is why those who choose career paths that mirror their identity aren't usually afflicted by this common phenomenon. When individuals choose careers that align with their values and interests, they are more likely to experience a greater sense of purpose and belonging in their professional life. The alignment of personal identity with one's career path creates a strong foundation for self-assurance and can help promote a sense of authenticity in one's work. This can help boost confidence and create and protect against the insecurities that fuel imposter syndrome.

8. ETHICS OF CORPORATIONS AND PROFIT OVER EMPLOYEE WELFARE

The success of a corporation or business can come at the expense of the employee. Unfortunately, it is quite common, particularly for larger corporations that generate such high revenues, for the profit and success of the company to take priority over the well-being of its employees. This constant pursuit of profit often leads to a workplace culture where employees are undervalued and overworked by their employer. This has a direct correlation to overall job dissatisfaction and a decline in the mental health of employees that will ironically undermine the goal of productivity. Two common practices of corporations aiming to drive their revenues up are labor exploitation and cost-cutting. The exploitation of labor is shown when organizations demand excessive work hours of its employees or when employees are given difficult or additional responsibilities with insufficient or improper compensation. A few years ago, Amazon was cited by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), for the failure to provide its warehouse employees with a safe work environment.

"Amazon's operating methods are creating hazardous work conditions and processes, leading to serious worker injuries," explained Assistant Secretary for Occupational Safety and Health Doug Parker. "They need to take these injuries seriously and implement a company-wide strategy to protect their employees from these well-known and preventable hazards." (U.S. Department of Labor & OSHA, 2023)

The article reveals that Amazon exposed its workers to a higher risk of work-related injuries all stemming from heavy lifting and long work hours. These findings prompted further investigations into other Amazon facilities including locations in Florida, Illinois, and New York which according to OSHA, there were similar violations found. These violations indicate a pattern of employer negligence, where Amazon failed to uphold a standard of safety and responsibility to its employees. Cutting costs decreases expenses and helps to raise profits and can come in many different forms including outsourcing and reducing benefits. Outsourcing is the act of lowering labor costs by laying off domestic workers and relocating positions to places where labor wages are lower. This is a common practice and one of ethical considerations because it is an understandable action, but it comes at the cost of the employee. Outsourcing can lead to job insecurity and negatively impact trust in the company and decrease loyalty of employees. Outsourcing and the exploitation of labor can go hand in hand when the jobs are relocated to places with little to no labor laws protecting workers. As written in (Green America, 2024):

"Most likely shadowy factories in faraway places like China or Bangladesh, where exploited workers are packed into small spaces with their machinery, breathing in dust-filled air and working 14- to 18-hour days for poverty-level wages." (Green America, 2024)

This can be considered the biggest consequence of outsourcing. Organizations are able to drive wage and operating expenses down by moving parts of the business to other countries, but the reason that the costs are able to be cut down so much is because the employees are taken advantage of and are put into abusive work environments often with unsafe conditions. Cost-cutting can also impact on the benefits and compensation of employees. When a company is under financial strain, this may lead to decisions such as the reduction of benefits like healthcare coverage, vacations, and opportunities for wage raises. These decisions can cause tension between leadership and the employee causing distrust or making employees feel undervalued or unappreciated. This breach of trust can negatively impact employee morale and company loyalty, leading to an increase in turnover and reducing productivity. Cost-cutting strategies may be effective in the short term, but in the long run, these decisions can negatively impact on the company's reputation and sustainability.

9. CONCLUSION

Career pressures and identity struggles cause a myriad of ethical issues to arise in the workplace. These ethical challenges often force individuals to choose between preserving their personal integrity or adapting to career expectations. This has a strong impact on mental health, job satisfaction, and overall employee welfare. A pressing issue in this discussion is the impact of personal identity on career advancement. The modern professional environment has become increasingly competitive, which can cause individuals to suppress aspects of themselves or even conform to become more successful or efficient. This pressure to adapt leads to individuals compromising their personal identity, creating ethical tension between their authenticity and professional success. This lapse in authenticity and disconnection with personal values can lead to feelings of imposter syndrome, where individuals become troubled by feelings of self-doubt and anxiety. The alignment of an individual's career and their personal values and strengths is critical for maintaining a sense of purpose and promoting long-term satisfaction. When employees preserve their authenticity, they are more likely to be engaged in their work and be more productive. A prominent ethical dilemma in the business world is the ethics of corporate values versus employee welfare. Many corporations place profit as their first priority leading to financial success coming at the cost of the employee. This can be shown through unethical practices such as labor exploitation, hazardous working conditions, and aggressive cost-cutting strategies that only provide short term results. These strategies cause distrust, lower morale, and reduce employee engagement. Maintaining a strong sense of personal identity in the workplace is essential for the well-being of the individual but also contributes to a healthier and more ethical environment within an organization. As the business world evolves, promoting authenticity, inclusion, and employee welfare is key to reaching long-term success and sustainability.

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