What does my job say about me?

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We have more freedom than ever to define our own identities, but what other people think of us isn't entirely under our own control

Who are we? And who gets to decide?

"Me!" many of us in the liberal, secular West would no doubt claim. Certainly, we have more freedom to define ourselves through "self-work" than we have ever enjoyed before. But this is not solely the prerogative of the individual. Our selves are a project that involves external actors – from parents and educators to employers, and ultimately including cultural norms and societal contracts.

In *Constructing Organizational Life*, Tom Lawrence and I define self-work as "the purposeful, reflexive efforts of individuals, collective actors, and networks of actors to shape an individual's self". This can range from choosing to engage with brands to convey certain values, to leading large-scale public campaigns aimed at shifting societal consensus on key matters like the nature of gender or whether two people

of the same sex can be married.

Do employers like beards?

One of the key arenas in which self-work takes place in modern society is the workplace, with employers one of the key agents. For example, when I worked at IBM in the 1980s, male staff weren't allowed to have beards or moustaches. This was a form of self-work by IBM that reflected certain entrenched societal attitudes about the meaning of beards – Margaret Thatcher wouldn't allow her ministers to have beards, either.

Men being clean shaven is meant to stand as a representation of certain values – cleanliness, diligence, professionalism – thought to be absent in bearded men; they remain associated with the untrustworthy groups of hippies and intellectuals, and more recently, the hipster and footballers.

> Millennials or Generation Z increasingly define themselves in ways outside of the sphere of work altogether

The last British Prime Minister with any form of facial hair was the moustached Harold Macmillan (1957–63), while the last full beard left Downing Street in 1902 (Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, in case you were wondering). In the US, you have to go all the way back to William Howard Taft (1909–13) for a moustache and Benjamin Harrison (1889–93) for a beard. The complete absence of women in these lists before Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, and the paucity thereafter, is also evidence of an unfortunate kind of self-work.

This sort of self-work might be formally carried out by the organisation itself, as it was in my case (also think of female airline employees being compelled to wear makeup, skirts and heels), or it might be that employees internalise the value of shaving regularly through the unspoken code of the workplace. Who would want to be the only hirsute member of a team of slick-chinned smooth operators? On the other hand, we might expect a Shoreditch-based digital startup to be replete with beards, representing a break with staid corporate convention.

Younger people are not their job

The rising tide of entrepreneurship potentially signals a shift in organisations' role as executors of self-work: once upon a time we might have seen the most talented businesspeople aspire to become employees in large companies for life, with the company name an essential part of who they were to themselves and the world.

In a world where people may want more freedom and the ability to move between organisations more freely (even if this isn't always possible due to external factors such as pandemics or recessions), this role is less certain. And this all takes place in a wider context in which Millennials or Generation Z increasingly define themselves in ways outside of the sphere of work altogether.

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Employers, then, will have to be alive to this in order to retain their influence as agents of self-work. This can range from fostering a culture of intrapreneurship, to offering a better work-life balance (certainly the outbreak of COVID-19 will have led many to review working-from-home policies), to the provision of gender-neutral facilities for a more diverse workforce, with the necessary HR policies that follow.

As these examples illustrate, the self-work carried out by organisations is a part of a wider and complex cycle of social-symbolic work, in a reciprocal and sometimes resistant relationship with individual and societal efforts.

The question of who decides who we are, then, is a complex one, in a state of constant flux. The only thing of which we can be certain is that there is no simple answer, with the terms and definitions the subject of an ongoing set of negotiations that will continue throughout our lives.

This article draws on findings from Constructing Organizational Life: How Social-Symbolic Work Shapes Selves, Organizations*, and Institutions by Thomas B. Lawrence (Saïd Business School, University of Oxford) and Nelson Phillips (Imperial Business School).*

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About Nelson Phillips

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Nelson Phillips was Professor of Innovation & Strategy, Co-Director of the Centre for Responsible Leadership, and the Associate Dean of External Relations at Imperial Business School until 2021. His research interests cut across strategy, innovation and leadership, and he has published widely for both academics and practitioners.