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**Collaborative IT Offshoring Relationships and Professional Role Identities: Reflections from a
Field Study**

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Abstract

While IT offshoring has generated heated debates both in scholarly circles and in the popular press, its impact on professional role identities and career experiences of situated individuals in both onshore and offshore locations has received much less attention. In this paper, we present a qualitative case study featuring a large global German technology firm and examine the multiple ways in which working within a collaborative offshoring arrangement has influenced the reconfiguration of German and Indian respondents' professional role identities. In light of these changes, the findings also highlight how emerging offshoring practices led to an ongoing reassessment of our respondents' career aspirations and strategies. In particular, our study draws attention to the often complex means deployed by individuals working in an offshoring environment to further their career prospects. From a practitioner perspective, we suggest several steps managers can take to help employees overcome the anxiety and insecurities which inevitably seem to accompany the offshoring phenomenon.

Key words: IT offshoring, professional role identity, careers

Introduction

The offshoring of information technology (IT) work from a developed to a developing country affects the working lives of individuals in both countries (Arora & Gambardella, 2005; Friedman, 2005). Broadly, offshoring refers to the transfer or migration of some or all of a company's work to a provider in an offshore location (Harrison & McMillan, 2006; Levina & Vaast, 2008). Such a provider can be a subsidiary unit of a global multi-national company (MNC) or a 'standalone' company headquartered in the offshore location (Stack & Downing, 2005). While macro-level perspectives on IT offshoring have generated heated debates both in scholarly circles and in the popular press, the impact of IT offshoring on the professional role identities and career experiences of situated individuals in both onshore and offshore locations has received much less attention (Upadhyia & Vasavi, 2006). Put differently, empirical research on IT offshoring over the last decade or so has clearly outlined the socio-economic consequences of offshoring for particular industries and countries. However, at a much more micro-level, there is a dearth of field studies reporting on how professional role identities of individuals evolve and change within particular IT offshoring environments, and how such a process may affect such individuals' long-held views about their own careers.

Potentially, such field studies serve three main purposes. Firstly, they provide a ring-side view of the IT offshoring phenomenon, which can then be drawn on by practitioners, both onshore and offshore, to refine relevant organizational practices and policies. Secondly, they contribute to the literature on professional role identity, which very rarely takes into account macro level globalization-driven antecedents such as offshoring. Lastly, they may provide some useful insights into how organizations, in particular large MNCs, may better manage employees' career aspirations and fears of an interconnected global-work force.

In this article, we argue that emerging offshoring work arrangements have a significant influence on employees' work roles and require employees to adapt and reorient their professional role identities. We develop our arguments through a qualitative study that demonstrates how working within a

collaborative offshoring set-up has affected the professional role identities of German and Indian IT developers in a large German technology firm. The rest of the article is organized as follows.

As a starting point for our inquiry, we highlight and synthesize relevant insights from the offshoring literature and from the professional role identity literature. We then present our research methods and results. In the light of our results, we present a discussion of the impacts of IT offshoring arrangements on individuals' professional role identities and on their career development strategies. We then note some practical implications emerging from our study and draw out implications for future research.

A Macro-level Perspective of Offshoring

As noted above, the effects of offshoring have been discussed extensively at industry and country levels. It has been argued that offshoring creates advantages for industries and countries in the entire global system, as it allows for goods and services to be produced more efficiently (Aspray, Mayadas, & Vardi, 2006). However, firms may face hidden costs, for example through additional coordination needs and the risk of losing important business skills (Bidanda, Arisoy, & Schumann, 2006). Some recent work has argued that offshoring leads to an overall increase of employment in the country of origin (Mankiw & Swagel, 2006), whilst others have proclaimed that it leads to job losses in these countries, particularly of jobs requiring limited specialization and skill (Harrison & McMillan, 2006). On the other hand, cost savings from offshoring can be funnelled into new business areas leading to creation of new jobs (Harrison & McMillan, 2006).

Offshoring is also seen to change the nature of jobs and careers in onshore countries. With the offshoring of routine and relatively less complex lower-end tasks, onshore tasks are thought to become increasingly strategic and high-end, incorporating new tasks, such as international project management and coordination (Penn, 1990; United Nations, 2005). Accordingly, it has been suggested that education systems in onshore countries may have to increasingly focus on developing individuals' high-end technological skills, as well as the skills of international communication, logistics, and systems

integration (Bidanda et al., 2006). In the context of offshore locations, which in the main include emerging economies such as India, China, Philippines, Vietnam, Poland etc., offshoring is seen to have created attractive and novel career opportunities for individuals in these countries (Friedman, 2005). According to recent estimates, India alone, best-known for its IT offshoring capabilities, accounts for about two-thirds of the global offshoring market (NASSCOM, 2007). Indeed, the rapid growth of companies in the offshoring sector is seen as a major highlight of these countries' recent macro-economic successes. Although the initial promise of offshore locations stemmed largely from the cost benefits they offered for the undertaking of routine tasks, recent reports indicate that many offshore locations are also likely to emerge as important destinations for more fundamental research and development work (Dossani & Kenney, 2007).

Despite the extensive review of the offshoring phenomenon which the above macro perspective provides, it stops short of empirically examining how offshoring arrangements are experienced at a micro level, namely by situated individuals in onshore and offshore locations. However, it is reasonable to expect that the implications of offshoring for availability of jobs and perceptions of job security will be experienced first-hand by individuals working within an offshoring milieu. For instance, onshore employees may benefit from more efficient production, but may also have to meet coordination needs, safeguard their core competences, and worry about job security and careers. Offshore employees, in turn, may have to cope with the professional frustrations of settling for relatively unchallenging tasks in the short run and may also have to learn to manage the conflicts arising out of the status differences between onshore and offshore teams (Ravishankar, Cohen, & El-Sawad, 2010). For employees who previously worked in a job with no offshore components, offshoring will most likely lead to work role transitions, such as changes in job content or status (Nicholson, 1984, p.173), which in turn may profoundly impact their sense of how they see themselves in their professional roles. In other words, offshoring practices can affect employees' professional role identities both in the short and in the long term. Of course, employees who start their professional careers in an offshoring set-up are not likely to experience major changes to

their work roles, but may nonetheless have to adjust their professional role identities and associated career expectations to the new demands of offshoring practices.

Identity and Professional Role Identity

Identity comprises a relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978). In this article, we focus on the development of ‘professional role identity’ (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007), which has been defined as the socially constructed definition of ‘self-in-role’ (Ashforth, 2001; p.27) in a professional context. The concept of professional role identity is based on the assumption that professional identity and roles evolve interactively and are therefore two sides of the same coin (Ashforth & Saks, 1995; Ibarra, 1999). Individuals are seen to construct their professional role identities by enacting a particular role. The role emerges as a negotiated understanding between individuals, however, within the constraints of certain pre-specified role characteristics (Chreim et al., 2007). In this paper we use the term ‘professional role identity’ broadly but consistently, in the spirit of its conceptualizations noted above.

Whilst the effect of offshoring on professional role identity has not been investigated, there is some evidence in the literature which shows how changes to such self-definitions can result from both micro-level and macro-level factors. For example, Nicholson (1984) concentrated on the micro-level when describing contingencies of how people adjust to changes in their work roles, including discretion and novelty of the role, the role incumbent’s motivational orientations (desire for control or feedback), and prior occupational socialization in high versus low discretion roles. Chreim et al. (2007) combine the micro and macro levels of analysis in their study on physicians by demonstrating the influences of institutional factors, (e.g. support of the regional health authorities), organizational dynamics (e.g. changes in physical structures), and individual dynamics (e.g. personal life changes) on the physicians’ reconstruction of their professional role identity. One important observation Chreim and colleagues made (and which we draw on in this article) is that the influence of macro-level factors on professional role

identity has rarely been investigated (2007, p.1517). They explain that macro-level research tends to be based on institutional theory and regards professional roles as fixed within institutionalized systems, whilst micro-level studies tend to focus on how individuals construct their professional identities in an organizational context, but do not pay much attention to institutional influences. For instance, studies of micro level processes have shown that individuals adjust to new work roles by experimenting with provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999), through interrelated identity and work learning cycles (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), or by constructing narratives (Ibarra & Barbulascu, 2010; LaPointe, 2010).

In short, drawing on our review above, we present a qualitative study that examines the effects of IT offshoring, which can be seen as a particular macro-level expression of globalization, on situated individuals' professional role identities, which can be seen as a particular micro-level construct. In doing so, we integrate insights from both the macro-level IT offshoring research and from the micro-level views of professional role identity.

Methods

Research Setting and Respondents

Our study was part of a larger research project investigating respondents' attitudes towards offshoring. The fieldwork was conducted in a large German technology company, which outsources parts of its IT development to its Indian subsidiary. Its main espoused reasons for moving work offshore are cost savings and a shortage of qualified software engineers in Germany. We regard this as a common offshoring arrangement, and German companies are increasing the extent of offshoring their software operations to India, even in face of the recent economic crisis (Mueller, 2009). The company develops and produces automotive technology as its core business, and has close to 300,000 employees worldwide. In India, the company set up production plants as early as the 1950s, and has built up software development sites rapidly since the early 1990s, with an explicit aim of further offshoring in the future. The company now has over 18,000 employees in India.

Access was gained through contacts in the firm who had contributed to some of our previous research projects. They helped us identify German and Indian respondents, following the criteria that they needed to have had first-hand experience of working with each other as part of an offshoring arrangement. Qualitative fieldwork was then conducted at two sites of this firm. We interviewed 30 German employees at headquarters in Stuttgart (Germany) and 20 Indian employees in Bangalore (India). Both the German respondents and the Indian respondents were involved in collaborative software developments projects within the automotive sector, which required them to interact extensively with their Indian and German colleagues respectively. The respondents included software engineers, project leaders, project managers and HR administrators.

The German respondents had varying levels of experience in working with Indian offshore colleagues, ranging from one year to a maximum of ten years. This variation was closely linked to the different lengths of time that their departments had offshored operations to India. Apart from one, the German respondents were all male, like the vast majority of employees of this industry in Germany. The experience of the Indian respondents in the company ranged from three years to 15 years. Of the Indian respondents there were 15 men and five women.

Data Collection and Analysis

Indian respondents were interviewed by the second author in Summer 2007, whilst the Germans were interviewed by the first author in Autumn 2008. The interview questions centered around perceived offshoring consequences, including the effects on employees' tasks, jobs, careers, and the working relationship between German and Indian colleagues. All the interviews were face-to-face encounters except for seven telephone interviews with German respondents. The interviews took place mostly in the office and partly in informal settings such as the office cafeteria. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, except for five interviews with Indian respondents who did not consent to the recording. Notes relating to the unrecorded interviews were made immediately after their completion.

Drawing both on our broad expectations and on the empirical material we had collected, we conducted an initial template analysis (King, 2004) about the likely consequences of offshoring for individuals' professional selves and careers. This preliminary analysis was therefore both a literature-led as well as an inductive process. Through this process, we identified several key issues, which permeated our data. For example, recurring issues on the German side included a perceived shift towards less technical and more conceptual tasks, and the need to develop international team working skills. On the Indian side, respondents felt strongly about not receiving more challenging tasks from the German side, and also expressed their unhappiness about being treated as vendors by German counterparts, when on paper they were promised to be accorded the status of colleagues. A careful comparative analysis of the key issues raised by both groups of respondents led us to identify three overarching themes, embedded into which were accounts of evolving professional role identities and career narratives.

Results

The three prominent themes which emerged in the interviews with our German and Indian respondents were related to how the collaborative offshoring relationship had influenced a) the characteristics of tasks undertaken b) international team working requirements and c) perceptions of job security. As noted above, embedded within these themes were accounts of how the respondents' views of themselves as professionals had evolved and changed with the emergence of offshoring arrangements. Further, these changes also seemed to have a tangible link to respondents' long-held perceptions about their careers and to the strategies they adopted to improve their career prospects.

Consequences for Task Characteristics

German respondents explained that the transfer of tasks to India meant that fewer lower-end technical tasks such as software coding were conducted in Germany. With the availability of a large number of Indian colleagues for such tasks, it was felt that the German side could focus increasingly on tasks requiring conceptualization skills or project coordination skills. In one department which developed platform software solutions for customers, respondents felt they were losing many software coding and

development tasks to India, and had to focus increasingly on coordinating the collaboration with their Indian counterparts. Their focus had shifted to activities such as allocating work packages, writing software specifications, reviewing results, and conducting coordination meetings.

Moreover, several German respondents were fearful that with growing Indian skills, the German management may have to increasingly transfer complex, and demanding high-end tasks to India in order keep the Indian workforce motivated. They felt that in the future German and Indian teams may end up competing for the same projects. In response to questions about how they evaluated the change in roles which had come about with offshoring, respondents noted that the movement towards conceptual tasks was an opportunity to grow professionally as engineers, which would also open up attractive new career prospects. According to a software engineer:

...we can concentrate on conceptual work, developing test concepts, plan tests, I'd like to call it test philosophy. There is the chance that you can offshore standard tasks or that you have more time for those tasks that go into more detail, require more experience.

The movement of only standard coding tasks to India was not something the Indian employees enjoyed entirely. Respondents were frustrated that they were mostly assigned software coding tasks and did not get enough opportunities to work on conceptual tasks. In their view, software coding was a very routine and 'mind-numbing' technical task and ran counter to what they saw as true professional competence and growth. As a software engineer explained:

When I started working, I felt that I was ready to do some exciting and interesting work. So it has been a bit of a let-down...that I do some standard, routine stuff. So coming to terms with it over the years has not been easy because you feel that you are not doing what a real professional in the industry should be doing. But I have consoled myself by looking around and it seems that almost everyone in India is doing the same. So in some ways I have redefined in my own head the work of a professional in the offshoring industry. You could say that I do not have grand visions anymore!!

Interestingly, for a few respondents on the German side being a professional engineer meant doing technical tasks. These respondents were reluctant to identify with purely conceptual work and they complained about the loss of the technical aspect of their work, such as coding and laboratory testing. As one manager put it:

I told my people: 'You have to say goodbye to operating the machine. Other people will do that for us. ... You would think that employees always strive for superior things, and if the thinking and acting part of their work increases – shouldn't they be glad?...That's not the case with these employees...They are in love with the 'I can operate the machine'. Therefore it is incredibly hard for them to detach themselves from it.

It was obvious that these Germans struggled to identify with the changing nature of their tasks and professional roles particularly since these changes seemed to clash fundamentally with their beliefs about what constitutes a desirable career development path. Similarly, the new focus on coordinating tasks was viewed mostly negatively. These tasks were often seen as an additional workload, or as too far removed from core engineering tasks:

Well, our problem is that regarding tasks, we are pushed into a corner where we coordinate, check specifications, write a little bit. We do not create anything anymore. If you were doing a craft: We are not building anything anymore. No one over here writes a line of code any more or goes deeply into testing... That does frustrate us. It [the new task] is interesting, but occasionally you also want to see what it is that you are coordinating, or also do it yourself. This separation of different aspects is quite limiting.

The new coordinating tasks required engineers to develop new skills, such as allocating work packages and designing work plans. In line with the negative evaluations of coordinating tasks, such coordinating skills were often not regarded as challenging or desirable, whilst traditional, technical skills were often still seen to be core to the job:

That's not a challenge for me, to coordinate five, six, seven Indian work colleagues here. To assess who has to do what and how you have to re-work a plan because there is a new problem. I have studied electronic engineering, and now I could have just as well studied something else, to conduct these tasks here now, because the technical aspects, they are gone.

From the interviews with Indian respondents, it was evident that they rated project coordination tasks very highly, even though not many of the German respondents did. From their point of view, the fact that most of the project coordination was undertaken by their German counterparts was in some ways a reflection of the higher status of the Germans in the offshoring relationship. An Indian project manager explained:

As much as we like doing coding, testing etc., I know that almost all of us love being given the responsibility of managing and coordinating large projects. Now, a majority of the coordination is done from the German side. Sometimes, many of us secretly wish that we get to do it as well. I mean, it looks really great on your CV if you do such things and you get the heady feeling that you are not just technically good, but also a skilled professional manager. But it does not happen often because they (Germans) are HQ and we are only an offshore unit.

One particularly intriguing aspect of the data was the admission by a few German respondents that Germans sometimes resorted to underhand means to avoid the transfer of technical tasks to India and to ensure that they stayed in Germany. These included an open refusal to transfer tasks, if possible, or transferring them without providing sufficient support. This inevitably led to poor Indian performance, which in turn provided a good argument for maintaining tasks in Germany:

Maybe you have noticed that he [the Indian colleague] hasn't really understood, but you do not tell him. Then he will take forever. You get no output, and in the end you do it yourself. That's the solution: 'I'll just do it myself then, even if I work overtime.' Then you will be able to say afterwards: 'This doesn't work, does it?'

Another way of withholding a task was to specify it in a way that made it impossible for Indians to accept the task:

... in some cases, people refuse to collaborate with India. You can do that in a very subtle way, of course. Today, we don't have anyone any more who says: 'I don't work with India, I don't want that.' But there are many possibilities to avoid it or to make sure that it does not happen. That is relatively easy. First of all ... just by means of the task description, you can work towards getting the answer from India: 'We don't have anyone who can do this.' There are many possibilities. It's easy.

Interestingly, Indian respondents not only seemed to be aware of some of these tactics used by German colleagues, but also seemed to have devised a non-confrontational way of dealing with and rationalizing the Germans' behaviour. As a software engineer put it:

After a few years of working in this company I realized that the most important part of maintaining a professional approach in this industry is to not complain too much. Once in a while I see that a German colleague is being very nasty and unfriendly. Although I used to get upset initially, now I act as though I did not notice the nastiness at all. That's what being a professional is all about. Besides, you have to understand that they may have a genuine reason to feel worried with all these tasks being transferred to India.

International Team Working Requirements

Through offshoring, international team working had become a work role requirement for all German respondents. They described this requirement in a consistent manner, as involving communicating in English, dealing with cultural differences in communication styles and work practices, conducting international team building, for example, through team workshops, as well as extensive and continuous knowledge transfer and mentoring. Some respondents complained that they had to identify knowledge and skill gaps even when Indians did not communicate these openly, write software specifications tailored to the Indian knowledge background, and provide continuous assistance in response to queries.

On the whole, German respondents provided mixed evaluations of the new requirement of international team working. Many stated that it made the job more interesting and had made them more aware and appreciative of Indian culture. For example, several respondents mentioned they had been inspired by the Indians' greater enthusiasm at work:

... I also think it [working internationally] is good fun. ... I am for example entirely impressed by how disciplined they are and how eager to learn, and that they simply rejoice when receiving further training.

Some mentioned that getting to know the Indian colleagues personally, particularly on visits to India, had made them more interested in intercultural encounters. Equally, there were others, particularly older German respondents, who expressed their reservations about speaking in English and about working in cross-cultural settings.

In order to adjust to international team working requirements, respondents had to develop particular skills. Most respondents stated that they had to develop their English language, intercultural communication and team working skills. They explained that they had made an effort to enhance their skills, with the help of more experienced colleagues, by attending formal training events, or through interactions with Indian colleagues. Some of them noted that they had put in extra efforts to build personal relationships and a shared team identity, for example through initiating social events and team workshops. Some had also set up training events for Indian colleagues:

Until one or two years ago, we had quite big problems in the collaboration, and then they identified the knowhow on the Indian side as a great problem. Then at that time, Mr. ... flew over and conducted a week long training event. That had an incredibly positive effect on the collaboration...

Conversely, employees who did not enjoy intercultural encounters were seen to limit their communication and interaction with Indian colleagues, even though it could have led to a weaker shared team identity and problems for knowhow transfer. One German respondent further explained that he had initially been very reluctant to work with India, but his boss had pushed him, by promising that he would

be admitted to a fast track management development programme if he led a German-Indian project to success. With this career incentive, the respondent had developed a liking and appreciation of international team working.

In the case of the Indian respondents, there was a general consensus that the opportunity to collaborate with German colleagues and the opportunity to visit and work in Germany on work assignments was a major highlight of their professional life. According to a software engineer:

One of the things you look for when you work in the offshoring industry is the chance to go abroad to the HQ or to a client location. It makes you feel important and wanted. I'd say it boosts your value as a professional. At least, that's how I felt when I got the chance to spend 6 weeks in Germany in 2005. Physically meeting German colleagues and putting a face to a name you were familiar with before is one of the most exciting bits of working in international teams.

While most of the German and Indian respondents claimed that international team working processes had benefited them immensely and had had a positive impact on their work roles, one issue that emerged in both the German and Indian interviews highlighted the precariousness of the offshoring relationship. In the experience of the Indian respondents, the German counterparts were always in a more powerful position and this led to unfair treatment of Indian teams in some cases:

One of the things about some of the German project teams we collaborate with is that they are very nice to us if they want to get some work done from us. They invoke the company's name and say we are all one large family and that we should share a bit of the work load etc etc. But if they commit an error and the customer is unhappy they almost always blame us. We are asked to fix the problem. If we protest, we end up receiving threatening messages about how we are only a vendor and not really a part of the larger company and that we better fix the problem soon.

A software engineer who was at the receiving end of one such experience noted that:

After having been made to take the blame for a mistake committed by a German colleague, I felt disgusted. The experience showed me how this industry works and how helpless a software guy like me is

despite all the glamour of a high paying job. But not creating an issue out of the Germans' mistakes is important for most of us. Because managers think it is professional to not create an issue and the more professional we are, the better it is for our career growth!

Indeed, in our interviews with German employees, it emerged that a minority of Germans preferred not to treat Indians as members of the same team, but rather as mere suppliers or vendors. This would allow them to criticize Indian performance and stipulate results without having to provide extensive support and sharing responsibility for the international team's performance: *'In the sense of: they have to deliver, and if it does not work, then it's India again who delivers bad quality'.*

Accordingly, a number of Germans were seen to be overly critical of the Indians' work, using them as scapegoats: *'There is criticism concerning efficiency, there is criticism concerning quality. However, in a way only if you are looking for a scapegoat. ... If it comes to problems, you start to point a finger'.*

In an extreme case, some Germans were even seen to have rejoiced when Indian colleagues performed poorly:

...and then you are always glad if the Indian colleagues have made a mistake, because then you can say: 'Look, they have made a mistake, again.' You have one more reason against having to work with them.

Perceptions of Job Security

About half of the German respondents expressed concern that the transfer of tasks to India threatened German jobs, as described by this manager: *'my people had fundamental fears: '... How much more will disappear? ... Will I still have my work the way I liked doing it?'*

However, the other half of German respondents did not perceive a threat to German jobs. Some respondents even mentioned that additional projects could be gained by the price advantage that offshoring created:

I do believe that in sum, this contributes to preserving jobs. I think that the cost pressure... hardly leaves us any alternative. ... I do think that it secures jobs over here. Not exactly the same tasks, ... but in sum, we are better off.

The perceptions seemed to depend partly on the economic situation and recent growth in workforce within the particular organizational department, as well as on the availability of interesting, alternative tasks. In those departments where a greater number of interesting, new tasks were obtainable, the effects of offshoring on job security were judged more positively. In addition, respondents who had more experience in collaborating with Indians tended to be more optimistic about job security, as they were aware of the high turnover levels in India and, in consequence, of the great difficulties in building equal knowhow levels in India.

On the whole, most German respondents who believed that the transfer of tasks to India threatened German jobs accepted it nevertheless, and focussed on their new tasks. This was either because they thought that offshoring was financially necessary, or that they had to accept management decisions. However, a few of the respondents reported that certain attempts to avoid transferring tasks resulted from a fear of transferring German jobs in the process. Some respondents also suggested that Germans who felt threatened in their jobs would inhibit knowledge transfer in order to maintain a superior knowledge base in Germany, and thereby secure German jobs.

I am aware that once ... people's substance is threatened, this will influence the decision to support this transfer [of knowledge]... there must be someone who receives the knowhow, but there also has to be someone who hands it over, and a forced hand-over of knowhow does not work, I believe.

The question of job security manifested itself slightly differently in the interviews with the Indian respondents. To many of them, the rapid growth of the IT offshoring industry was highly comforting because it meant that they did not have to be worried about being unemployed in the near future. As a software engineer with four years of experience put it:

One of my biggest fears when I started work was about losing my job. If you know the Indian context well, people will really start looking down at you if you are unemployed. They will say ‘Oh, he claims to be a software engineer. But he does not have a job. What a waste!’. But the offshoring industry is booming now. So it is a great time to be a software professional. I am a hardworking and reasonably intelligent person. But the respect for the offshoring industry in the Indian society has given my image a real boost. I am enjoying my professional status now!

However, some of the Indian respondents felt that because they were not doing anything particularly skilful and innovative, they may not be needed by the industry in 15 years’ time and that it was a worrying thing.

*See, we need to convince the Germans that we can handle complex tasks. Otherwise, we will not learn new technologies and cutting-edge stuff. So in a decade or so people like myself could become redundant. The company may want to hire someone fresh from college who will do the same tasks that I do at one-third the cost to the company. So, I may not be very insecure **now** about retaining my job, but I am concerned about the quality of tasks that I undertake on a day in and day out basis.*

Discussion

Offshoring, Professional Role Identity, and Careers

The results section above demonstrates the multiple ways in which the offshoring arrangements have influenced the professional role identities of our German and Indian respondents. Firstly, the ongoing transfer of lower-end technical tasks such as software coding to India forced a refinement and reconstruction of role identities on both the German and Indian sides. While some German respondents constructed a ‘positive narrative’ around the transfer process seeing in it an opportunity for career growth (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), others viewed it with great trepidation since it challenged their view of themselves as ‘*professional engineers-doing-technical-tasks*’. The offshoring arrangements seem to have compelled this latter category of German respondents to fundamentally revisit their role identities and to imbibe a more managerial view of their work roles. Of

course, these adjustments were by no means smooth and straightforward. As our interviews showed, a range of clever techniques were employed by some German respondents to sabotage the effective transfer of tasks to India. On the one hand, these underhand methods can be understood as attempts, however feeble, to safeguard their own career interests and prospects (Cohen & El-Sawad, 2007; Ravishankar et al., 2010). More fundamentally, it also perhaps offers a poignant insight into the struggles faced by situated individuals in coming to terms with the institutional demands on them to alter their professional role identities (Goffman, 1963).

From the viewpoint of Indian respondents, the availability of only lower-end tasks was a disappointing and ultimately disillusioning aspect of their role at work. Most of the Indian respondents expected significant opportunities to coordinate projects and to engage intimately with high-end conceptual tasks. To the extent that these role-expectations were integral to their conceptions of the ideal professional self-at-work the availability of only lower-end tasks appeared to be a glaring incongruence, which needed resolution (Pratt et al., 2006). Our respondents appeared to achieve this by recalibrating their role-expectations to better reflect the relatively modest opportunities for challenging tasks provided by the extant offshoring arrangements. As a software engineer put it: *“So in some ways I have redefined in my own head the work of a professional in the offshoring industry”*. If these adjustments on the Indian side appear too seamless to be true, they perhaps also need to be seen in the broader context of the power and status asymmetries between the German headquarters (HQ) and the Indian subsidiary (Levina & Vaast, 2008). Given that the German HQ was clearly the more powerful entity at the time of our study, it made little strategic sense for individuals in the subsidiary unit to raise difficult questions about the nature of tasks being offshored. Rather, lowering the expectations from their roles may have been perceived as a useful position to adopt, since it contributed to the maintaining of the necessary order in the relationship.

Here, a comment (although slightly speculative) can be made about the relatively high initial role-expectations of the Indian respondents. Most of the Indian respondents in our study had graduated with high grades from prestigious undergraduate engineering universities. This may have contributed to a

feeling that they were entitled to glittering careers comprising of serious intellectual challenges. Seen from this perspective, the lower-end technical tasks would have almost certainly created a conflict with the initial high expectations (Ravishankar et al., 2010; Upadhya & Vasavi, 2006).

Secondly, the obligations of working closely with each other meant that at least some part of the German and Indian respondents' role awareness and identities evolved alongside the emerging normative expectations of collaborative offshoring arrangements. For instance, it became clear to respondents on both sides that working effectively within international teams, developing intercultural sensitivities and English language skills were beginning to emerge as core and central components of their professional roles. To most respondents, these expectations served as acceptable images of their future professional selves and they accordingly made the necessary adjustments. However, as their roles and career prospects were becoming increasingly intertwined with the work carried out by their Indian colleagues, some German respondents appeared to be threatened by these new demands placed on them. As highlighted in the interviews, they sought to create an unapproved distance from their Indian counterparts by treating them as external vendors and refusing to even grant them the status of colleagues. In some ways, these respondents refused to give themselves up fully to the international team-working imperative of offshoring. These expressions of alienation suggest that the offshoring set-up seems to seriously challenge individuals' deep beliefs about some of the enduring attributes of their professional roles and identities.

From the point of view of the Indian respondents, working with German colleagues on collaborative projects was a very desirable and highly regarded component of their professional role. In fact, as most Indian respondents reported, it enhanced their image and status as professionals. However, their view of their roles as 'high-status professionals' was periodically challenged by the deferential stance they had to employ towards German colleagues, even when by all accounts errors were made by the German side. For the Indian respondents, then, although ongoing interactions with the German side gave a boost to their professional image it also introduced a certain fragility into the arrangements, which dented the otherwise positive evaluations of their 'professional selves'. The submissive attitudes also had

an important career dimension, since Indian respondents strongly believed that by not creating a big fuss about the apparently unjust arrangements they would come across as true professionals and would be rewarded with faster career progress.

On a related note, we can understand both the relatively speedy adaptation to these emerging arrangements by some German respondents and the resistance offered by others as signs of deep concern for their career prospects. Those who welcomed the opportunity to work with Indian colleagues and therefore immersed themselves fully into the collaborative work processes were hoping, and in some cases were clearly told by their managers that working effectively as part of such collaborative teams would put their careers on the ‘fast-track’. Promises of career incentives clearly trumped any reservations these respondents may have had about working closely with Indian colleagues. Somewhat paradoxically, those who resisted the spirit of collaborative work by trying to project the Indian side as incompetent and unreliable also seemed to be acting out of great concern for their careers and future employment prospects. In this case, respondents seemed to be fearful of what the emerging offshoring trends might bring to their careers in the future and in this context, they viewed their efforts to discredit the Indian side as a strategic ploy to protect the threat to their careers from offshoring. We also found some evidence to suggest that this split among the German respondents reflected an age-related ‘generation gap’, an area which requires further exploring.

Lastly, the dynamics of the offshoring phenomenon led both the German and Indian respondents to view their professional selves as fundamentally precarious. Some respondents on both sides felt ‘insecure’ about their jobs and careers. That said, the essential nature of the insecurities on the two sides were slightly different. The insecurities on the German side mostly stemmed from the growing importance of the Indian subsidiary unit and their likely implications for German jobs and careers. On the Indian side, however, respondents were not worried so much about losing their jobs in the immediate future as they were about the lack of opportunities for skilful and innovative work within their current roles. In other words, their anxieties mainly concerned the gap between their basic mental formulations of

what a professional-role entails and what was immediately accessible to them in the current offshoring environment.

In summary, our study demonstrates the role played by emerging work arrangements within offshoring settings in shaping and re-shaping professional role identities of situated individuals. It also highlights crucial ways in which offshoring practices are forcing individuals to revisit their career strategies. In particular, our study highlights the often complex means deployed by individuals in this sector in their attempts to further their career prospects.

Interestingly, our respondents' experiences reflect many of the macro level offshoring debates highlighted in the initial sections of the paper. It has been argued that the offshoring phenomenon creates higher level jobs onshore, requiring new skills such as project management and intercultural communication (United Nations, 2005), which are similar to those described by our respondents. Moreover, the controversy about positive and negative effects on onshore employment (Harrison & McMillan, 2006; Mankiw & Swagel, 2006) has its parallel in the contrasting perspectives of German employees on their job security. With regard to the distribution of tasks between onshore and offshore locations, however, our study seems to cast doubts on some of the observations made in earlier research. For instance, it has been suggested that offshoring leads to a polarization of required skills, with lower end tasks moving offshore and the level of onshore tasks being raised (e.g. Penn, 1990). These suggestions commonly refer to offshoring of production or call centers, which typically end in lower end tasks for the offshore entity. In contrast, we examined offshoring in the context of the IT industry, operating with highly qualified engineers both onshore and offshore. In this particular context, offshoring has created an ongoing competition and tension between onshore and offshore employees for the most challenging tasks, rather than a simple polarization of skills between onshore and offshore employees. Further, our data suggest that this has led to adjustments in career expectations and to the deployment of novel strategies to further career prospects by employees both onshore and offshore, a nuance which has escaped attention in much of the macro-level offshoring debates.

Implications for Practitioners

Our study suggests that offshoring can pose important challenges to professional role identities and career expectations of employees in the IT industry. We believe that managers have a number of means to support the reconfiguration of employees' role identities and career strategies, and thereby to overcome the resistance and feelings of resignation that can impede the success of the offshoring arrangement.

With onshore employees, managers can encourage open and open-ended discussions about any reservations that employees may have against offshoring. If those affected are allowed to have some participation in the distribution of tasks between onshore and offshore colleagues, they are likely to be more willing to identify with the required role changes. Such participation should be combined with an explicit strategy for managing career prospects and job security. Linking promotions to successful offshoring projects may be a particularly effective method in this respect.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in this environment for senior managers is to distribute tasks in a manner that satisfies the aspirations of both onshore and offshore professionals. We would argue that those responsible for the transfer should consider not offshoring technical tasks if this means onshore colleagues will be left with mostly coordinating tasks. As much as possible in the given circumstances, they should avoid pushing employees who see themselves as technical experts into merely conceptual tasks. Our results suggest that, ideally, technical, conceptual, and coordinating tasks should be spread across the different locations according to individual propensities. But this might create a new catalog of coordination difficulties for managers. Also, individuals' preferences for a particular type of task may indeed change over time due to factors in the external environment such as for instance, the inclusion of non-technical skills into engineering curricula in universities (Bidanda et al., 2006). Moreover, firms can do their bit to encourage an interest in new kinds of tasks, and in the development of new skills. Apart from specific skills training, managers and HR professionals can foster employees' intercultural interest

through frequent personal exchange between onshore and offshore colleagues, through team building events, and an exchange of best practice between more and less experienced departments. Such social exchange may help create shared professional norms and role expectations, within the wider IT offshoring community.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The qualitative methodology of this study allowed us to gain in-depth views on effects that offshoring can have on professional role identities, but only within a particular company and industry. We do, however, assume that our results are transferable to similar contexts, in particular to other Western firms transferring software development to India. The IT industry is probably the most typical example of highly skilled work being offshored. It is likely, however, that employees in other industries which are transferring higher-end tasks to India, or to other emerging economies, will experience similar effects on task characteristics, perceived job security and team working, leading to similar developments of professional role identity. A systematic comparison of different industries and countries is required to investigate the transferability of our findings.

Another strength of our study is that it yielded results through a highly inductive process. Respondents were probed on their views regarding effects of offshoring on their tasks, job security, careers, and relationships within the international team. Nevertheless, they were given the freedom to talk about any aspects that they regarded as important. This inductive approach did not yield reports on the most central aspects of a person's identity, such as self-concepts and values that are relevant outside the work environment. By contrast, West, Nicholson, and Arnold's (1987) quantitative survey on identity changes as outcomes of work role transitions operationalizes value change on a broader level, in terms of 'what is important to me in life', and it includes attitudes, career goals, and personality as other items of personal change which are relevant beyond the work context. In our respondent group, such aspects of identity may have been relevant, even if they were not mentioned. Future research could therefore probe respondents to a greater extent in order to tap such aspects.

Future research could also investigate in more depth how perceptions of offshoring consequences are socially constructed. For example, we have revealed a parallel between the loud rhetoric of public debates and respondents' experiences of offshoring consequences, but we did not examine whether the public debates had a causal effect on individuals' perceptions. It is possible that discussions in the public media or even economic discussions influenced the way employees made sense of their role changes, for example when judging whether offshoring created a threat to their jobs. At the same time, however, it is likely that respondents developed their views on offshoring consequences through personal experience and discussions with colleagues. We obtained some reports on such socialization processes, for example on how other colleagues or superiors had coached respondents how to interact effectively with onshore and offshore colleagues, thus helping their skill development. However, we did not examine the process of social construction in its own right. Studies of this process could make use of respondents' narratives to explain how roles and identity are understood and develop over time. In interviews, respondents could be asked to describe how they became aware of any changes, which would stimulate reports on consecutive events of social construction.

Without giving up the benefits of a qualitative approach, future research could hence broaden and deepen our findings. Researchers could draw on other firms, industries and country contexts to investigate how working in an offshoring arrangement affects professional role development in terms of other central identity aspects. Further, they could scrutinize the process by which professional role identity is socially constructed in an offshoring context.

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