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Interdepartmental conflict, work identity and organisational trust in temporary employment service organisations

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Orientation: Work identity (WI) is developed and influenced by various factors in the workplace, which could include interdepartmental conflict (IC) and organisational trust (OT).

Research purpose: To explore the effect that IC has on WI and the mediating role OT plays in the relationship between IC and WI within a temporary service organisation.

Motivation for the study: There is a lack of empirical research examining the relationships that interdepartmental conflict has with work identity and organisational trust.

Research approach/design and method: A quantitative, cross-sectional field survey was used to gather data. Applying a stratified sampling technique, the population of $N = 952$ yielded a response rate of 31.6%, amounting to $n = 302$. SmartPLS software was used to analyse the data and conceptual model using the partial least squares (PLS) technique.

Main findings: The results revealed a weak relationship between interdepartmental conflict and WI, as well as a significant negative relationship between IC and OT. The results also showed a positive relationship between OT and WI. The mediation analysis results indicated that OT significantly and positively mediates the relationship between IC and WI.

Practical/managerial implications: Leadership in organisations needs to be aware of the valuable impact of WI on organisational outcomes, and that it is negatively affected by IC and positively influenced by OT.

Contribution/value-add: No previous WI studies could be found that tested the mediating role of OT in the relationship between IC and WI. Although studies have looked at WI, IC and OT in various settings and along with other variables, none have considered the interrelationship among these three variables.

Keywords: workplace identity; interdepartmental conflict; trust; temporary employment service organisation.

Introduction

Research on work identity (WI) has garnered great interest (Miscenko & Day, 2016); however, very few studies have focused on the effects that employee interactions have on its formation (Horton et al., 2013). Employee interactions could be influenced by interdepartmental conflict (IC) and organisational trust (OT). Work identity deals with the question 'Who am I at work?' and is central to how people define themselves on a personal and collective level (Kirpal, 2004; Nordhall et al., 2025; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) and is regarded as important for organisations, as it is known to predict work engagement (Bester, 2012), which is significantly correlated to work performance (Tian et al., 2019). Within temporary employment services (TES) organisations, which involve high service levels and collaboration across multiple functional (interdepartmental) departments to deliver on service outcomes, the role of OT and WI becomes very important. Previous research has largely neglected to investigate trust relationships at the co-worker level (Han & Harms, 2009). As workplace interactions define a large part of the social work environment (Schneider, 1987), they also play an important role in the way employees think, feel and behave (Kahn, 2007). Most researchers agree that any social workplace interactions contribute towards the development of WI (Buche, 2003; Ibarra, 2003; Mpangeva & De Braine, 2024; Toivanen, 2021). Positive interactions between workers set a social atmosphere in which employees are more actively involved, leading to more productive outcomes (Ali et al., 2018). In contrast, high levels of conflict cause an unstable work environment that restrains organisational productivity (Ahamefula, 2014). Trust remains key in any successful relationship (Trussell, 2015) and underpins the outcomes

of employee interactions (Rahayuningsih, 2019), which, as suggested above, play a key role in employee work satisfaction (Lee & Teo, 2005) and the building of healthy work identities (Meadows & De Braine, 2022). When conflict between members occurs, trust has the ability either to alleviate or to exacerbate the level of conflict (Elgoibar et al., 2021; Schoorman et al., 2007).

Evidence shows that effective interaction between members of different functional departments remains a key challenge for most organisations (Hogg & Van Knippenberg, 2003), specifically when there is interference between individuals or groups in attempts to achieve organisational goals (Robey, 1984). Although previous studies on WI have shown that job demands, such as job overload (De Braine, 2012) and job resources, such as organisational support (which includes relationships with supervisors and colleagues, flow of communication and support and role clarity) and team climate predict WI (De Braine, 2012; Van Rensburg, 2020), none have examined the employee interactions of IC and OT on WI in a TES organisation. This study, through the use of a cross-sectional survey approach, attempts to address this void, specifically the effect that IC has on WI and the mediating role OT plays in this relationship.

Literature review

Interdepartmental conflict and work identity

Organisational conflict remains a persistent phenomenon in all organisations (Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Nicotera & Jameson, 2021). One form of organisational conflict is IC. Interdepartmental conflict often arises from high task interdependency among different functional departments (Robey et al., 1989). Interdepartmental conflict is a form of intergroup conflict. Intergroup conflict is defined as 'the perceived incompatibility of goals or values between two or more individuals, which emerges because these individuals classify themselves as members of different social groups' (Böhm et al., 2020, p. 950). Different departments can be categorised as different social groups within an organisation. According to social identity theory, membership of a social group, such as work team, provides members with a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Zhu, 2013) with its own distinctive values and norms that set the group apart from other groups (Horton et al., 2013), which often leads to the defence of the group's identity (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999). Conflict between interdepartmental teams can most likely occur when there is any disagreement or misalignment of goals between the groups (Kazimoto, 2013). Mismanaged conflict is known to result in mistrust among group members, affects effective decision-making (Horton et al., 2013) and can increase the experience of stress (Ahamefula, 2014), thus inadvertently affecting positive workplace relations. Mistrust between interdepartmental teams has been shown to increase frustration and conflict (Seavey, 2010), which can be regarded as work demands on employees.

Against this background, it is concluded that the quality of interdepartmental team interactions determines the quality of an individual's working environment, thus affecting them physically and psychologically.

Work identity is defined as 'a self-concept constituted of a constellation of organisational, occupational and other identities that shape the roles individuals adopt and the corresponding ways they behave when performing their work' (Walsh & Gordon, 2007, p. 49). It is also regarded as a perception of a person's work role based on their work self-concept (Sulphey, 2020). Work identity has a significant impact on employee commitment, loyalty and stability and intergroup relations (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and is cited as the 'root construct for many organisational outcomes' (Albert et al., 2000, p. 13) and is related to work engagement (Bothma, 2011), decent work (Mpangeva & De Braine, 2024), organisational culture (Chulu, 2023), PSYCAP (Van Rensburg, 2020) and many other behaviours and outcomes (Dirks & De Jong, 2022).

The interaction between WI and the work environment is reciprocal (Miscenko & Day, 2016). Work identity is affected by workplace relationships (Gewirtz & Parett, 2021; Toivanen, 2021). Saayman and Crafford (2011) revealed that tensions and work demands encourage employees to negotiate their work identities. So, when conflict between interdepartmental teams is followed by open and cooperative interactions, WI is expected to be higher. These situations forge positive relations between interacting members, leading to a positive work environment. On the other hand, ongoing disagreements and poor relations between members are perceived as a negative work environment, and WI is expected to be lower:

H1: Interdepartmental conflict is significantly related to WI.

Interdepartmental conflict and organisational trust

Organisational trust refers to 'the degree of trust between units of an organisation' (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996, p. 302). It is also defined as 'positive expectations individuals have about the intent and behaviours of multiple organisational members based on organisational roles, relationships, experiences, and interdependencies' (Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000, p. 35). Trust is cited as a multi-dimensional construct and a critical component in intergroup relations and conflict (Kappmeier, 2016). When interactions between interdepartmental employees take place, a number of interrelated psychological conditions are at play, in a process that can be described as the willingness of a member (the trustor) to accept specific conditions (the risk) when another member (the trustee) becomes involved (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). Normally, the trustor has a positive expectation that the trustee can be trusted (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). However, with the specific task outcome in mind, the trustor will identify the level of risk involved should the task not be completed in time or within specification. This leads to mistrust. A study of nurses found that mistrust between interdepartmental teams increased frustration and resulted in higher levels of conflict (Seavey, 2010). Trust researchers agree that OT relies on the

principles of competence, openness and reliability (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Cummings & Bromiley, 1996).

Employees are more likely go the extra mile when they feel trusted (Du Plessis et al., 2015). Trust has been shown to be related to individual performance and organisational citizenship behaviour (Colquitt et al., 2007; Legood et al., 2020).

High levels of trust increase employee commitment, alleviate conflict and improve work performance (Schoorman et al., 1996), while low levels of trust increase turnover intention and hamper organisational growth, service delivery and profits (Davis et al., 2000). Functional departments are interlinked and dependent on one another to complete job tasks successfully (Wisner & Stanley, 2008), which often involves risk-taking (Mayer et al., 1995). In this regard, Mayer and Gavin (2005) explained, 'trust is a generalised intention to take the risk, whereas the outcome is actually risk taking' (p. 874).

H2: Interdepartmental conflict is significantly related to organisational trust.

Organisational trust and work identity

Trust refers to the common belief that (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996):

> [*A*]nother group or individual makes good-faith efforts based on commitments made, is honest in whatever agreements preceded to these commitments and does not take excessive advantage of another when such an opportunity is available. (p. 303)

Previous identity research found that WI is derived from self-perception based on interaction between employees (Buche, 2003). In a TES environment, successful task completion requires various functional teams to have high levels of trust in one another (with reference to ability, benevolence and integrity as according to the Model of Trust, Mayer et al., 1995). Therefore, it is assumed that negative interactions because of a lack of trustworthiness negatively affect employees' work performance and WI. High levels of trust between interdepartmental teams in a TES organisation are therefore important to enhance WI, productivity and, ultimately, organisational outcomes. Organisational trust can be argued as a form of organisational support, enabling people to work well with one another, thus enhancing WI. Consequently, organisational support predicts WI (De Braine & Roodt, 2011; Van Rensburg, 2020; Van Tonder, 2018).

H3: Organisational trust is significantly related to work identity.

Interdepartmental conflict, organisational trust and work identity

Organisational trust is a form of organisational support. It is an important element in relationships (Schoorman et al., 2007); therefore, we can assume that it would mediate the relationship between IC and WI. Trust plays a crucial role in workplace relationships, particularly when conflicts of interest arise (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Kappmeier, 2016) and ICs occur (Bloch, 1985). Furthermore, task and relationship conflict are affected by trust (Montani et al., 2025). Trust builds strong workplace relationships (Sunil & Sumitha, 2023). Healthy workplace relationships, in the form of collegial or supervisory support, enhance WI (Mpangeva & De Braine, 2024). It is therefore posited that where interaction between interdepartmental teams is based on a can-do (ability) and will-do (benevolence) attitude from trust, there will be lower levels of IC. When work is completed in a climate of mistrust between interdepartmental teams, the probability for IC becomes higher, thus affecting WI.

H4: Organisational trust mediates the relationship between IC and WI.

Research design

Research approach and method

A quantitative research approach was followed, and a cross-sectional field design was used, whereby a survey was used to collect the data. In order to yield the highest possible response, instead of a web-based survey, a 'traditional' paper-and-pen survey was used. The primary data sources for this study were two national TES organisations, with 544 and 408 employees (a total pool of 952 potential respondents). The survey yielded a 31.7% response rate ($N = 302$).

Respondents within the two TES organisations represented most racial groups within the South African population. As displayed in Table 1, the sample contained slightly more female participants (56.3%). The majority of participants (51.1%) held a post-secondary-school qualification and more than 2 years' work experience (84.7%).

Measuring instruments

The scales used were (1) Work-based Identity Questionnaire (WI-28), (2) Organisational Trust Inventory – Short Form (OTI-SF) and (3) the Interdepartmental Conflict Scale (Conf 1–5). All three scales used in this study were measured on a 7-point intensity response scale. Participants were requested to select the one option that best described their own situation and feelings.

The Work-based Identity Questionnaire (WI-28) was used to assess the WI of the participants. The scale was developed by Roodt et al. (2009) to measure facets of WI, including occupational identity, professional identity, career identity, job involvement, person–organisation fit, work centrality and organisational identification. The inventory consists of 28 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 (*to no degree*) to 7 (*to a large degree*). A Cronbach's alpha (CA) of 0.95 has been reported for the reliability of this scale (De Braine & Roodt, 2011). Organisational trust was measured by the shortened version of the Organisational Trust Inventory – Short Form (OTI-SF), which was developed by Bromiley and Cummings (1995) and comprises 12 items. The Bentler comparative fit index indicated that the instrument was reliable and yielded a CA of 0.98 (Bromiley & Cummings, 1995).

The Interdepartmental Conflict Scale, developed by Jaworski and Kohli (1993), was chosen specifically, as similar types of instruments are scarce. The questionnaire consists of seven questions to determine the level of conflict and was thus used to test the level of conflict between the functional departments. Jaworski and Kohli (1993) reported an internal reliability consistency of $\alpha = 0.87$.

Research procedure

Respondents were informed of the study through an email that included the objectives, the importance of the study and that participation would be voluntary. Employees had the option of printing a paper-based survey, completing it and returning it by email directly to the researcher. Alternatively, the survey could be completed digitally in a fillable PDF file and returned to the researcher. Instructions for completing the form were clearly stipulated on the front page. Because of its length, participants had the option to complete the questionnaire in their own time. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. The returned questionnaires were anonymised and stored in a password-protected folder accessible only to the researchers.

Data analysis

In our research, we utilised SmartPLS software to analyse the data and conceptual model using the partial least squares (PLS) technique. We opted for this approach because of its widespread use and acceptance in management-related fields. The decision to use this method was based on its suitability for predicting the dependent variable through path analytical modelling and its flexibility in conducting reflective or formative modelling of latent variables without stringent sample size constraints. SmartPLS was employed to validate the instrument and test the hypotheses through the measurement and structural models, while descriptive data statistics were conducted using SPSS 24. A two-stage hierarchical model was implemented to evaluate the measurement and structural models, which followed the methodology outlined by Ringle et al. (2015). In the first stage, SmartPLS 4.1.0 was used to confirm the outer loading of the items, ensuring that they were accurately measuring the constructs. After this, we assessed the reliability and convergent validity of the instrument using statistical measures such as CA, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). Furthermore, Fornell-Larcker and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) were conducted to evaluate the discriminant validity of the constructs. Additionally, our analysis included direct and indirect effects, using a bootstrapping approach with a substantial sample size of 5000, ensuring the robustness and reliability of the results. In this study, 0.05 was used to determine the statistical significance of the relationships in our model.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg, Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management (IPPM) Research Ethics Committee (REC) (Ref. No. IPPM-2017-116[M]).

Results

Descriptive statistics

The item descriptive statistics of each of the scales' total scores are shown in Table 2.

Measurement model

In structural equation modelling (SEM), it is crucial to comprehend the relative importance of indicators to their constructs (Hair et al., 2021) to evaluate the model's fitness. The measurement model offers global fit indices to confirm that the latent variables or indicators meet the requirements for testing the proposed hypotheses. All variables in this study are measured reflectively, and the model's fitness was assessed using fit indices such as AVE, CR and CA. Despite the established reliability of the instruments in previous

TABLE 1: Biographical and demographic profile of respondents ($N = 302$).

Item	Category	f†	%
Gender	Male	132	43.7
	Female	170	56.3
Racial classification	African people	112	37.1
	White people	85	28.1
	Coloured people	74	24.5
	Asian people	14	4.6
	Indian people	17	5.6
Geographic area	Eastern Cape	36	11.9
	Northern Cape	2	0.7
	Western Cape	97	32.1
	KwaZulu-Natal	40	13.2
	Limpopo	3	1.0
	Mpumalanga	2	0.7
	Free State	4	1.3
	North West	1	0.3
	Gauteng	117	38.7
Functional department	Growth and Sales	8	2.6
	Operations	174	57.6
	Procurement	5	1.7
	Key Account Management	7	2.3
	Human Resources and Industrial Relations	22	7.3
	Payroll and Admin	46	15.2
	Resource Centre	31	10.3
	Credit Control	4	1.3
	Support Services Centre	1	0.3
	Other	4	1.3
Work experience (years)	0–1	46	15.2
	2–5	146	48.3
	6–10	67	22.2
	> 10	43	14.2
Education	Grade 12 or lower	148	49.0
	Post-school certificate	55	18.2
	National Diploma	65	21.5
	Bachelor's degree or equivalent or higher	34	11.3

†, f = respondents.

TABLE 2: Summary of the item descriptive statistics of the scales' total scores ($N = 302$).

Constructs	Mean	SD	Skewness	Minimum	Maximum
Work-based identity	5.56	1.28	-0.89	4.94	6.44
Trust	4.34	1.59	-0.36	3.31	5.17
Conflict	3.96	1.69	-0.11	3.23	5.23

SD, standard deviation.

studies, it is essential to re-evaluate their dependability as they are investigated in different contexts and environments. The three constructs, namely WI, OT and IC, were each subjected to an initial assessment of their validity and reliability. During this process, items that failed to meet the predetermined benchmark and standard fit indices were excluded from the model. A modified version of the model was used for hypothesis testing.

Items' consistency, reliability and validity

The reliability of the constructs was assessed using both CA and CR. These measures indicate how effectively a set of observed variables reflects a single underlying construct. Composite reliability is generally considered a better measure of internal consistency than Cronbach's alpha because it incorporates the standardised loadings of the observed variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The interpretation of the CR score and CA is similar. Hair et al. (2011) and Litwin (1995) recommend a value higher than 0.7 for both CA and CR to ensure reliability. Both measures (CA and CR) exhibit values of 0.70 and above, meeting the threshold for satisfactory reliability (Table 3).

Convergent and discriminant validity tests were utilised to assess the validity of the constructs. The average variance extracted (AVE) test establishes convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). According to Barclay et al. (1995) and Hair et al. (2011), the latent variables should account for at least 50% of the variance in the observable variable. This implies that the AVE value of the construct should exceed 0.5, as displayed in Table 3.

Discriminant validity is important to ensure that each observable variable in a construct has a stronger correlation with the latent variable it is intended to measure than with any other construct. Henseler et al. (2015) recommend using the HTMT ratio when assessing a construct's discriminant validity. An HTMT value of less than 0.90 is considered appropriate (see Table 4).

After assessing the measurement model, all standardised fit indices, such as outer loading, AVE, CA, composite reliability index and HTMT, were satisfactory. However, manifest items with outer loadings of less than 0.5 were removed from the model before hypothesis testing. These items included WI_1, WI_2, WI_3, WI_5, WI_6, WI_7, WI_8, WI_9, WI_12, WI_16, WI_17, WI_19, WI_24, WI_25, WI_27, WI_28 for work identity; OT_4, OT_5, OT_6, OT_10 and OT_12 for organisational trust and IC_1, IC_4, IC_5 and IC_7 for interdepartmental conflict. This resulted in using a respecified model consisting only of the satisfactory items for the structural model.

Hypothesis testing (structural model assessment)

The structural model evaluates the relationship between exogenous and endogenous latent variables by analysing the R2 and *p*-value, representing the coefficient of determination and significance level (Hair et al., 2012). It also considers the β value, indicating the path coefficients of the model (Chin, 1998). The R2 reflects the extent to which endogenous latent variables are explained (Akter et al., 2011), while β shows the impact of factors on endogenous latent variables (Lleras, 2005). The structural model assesses relationships using β values, *t*-values, path coefficients and *p*-values. A high β value indicates a strong influence of the predictor (exogenous) latent variable on the dependent (endogenous) latent variable (Hair et al., 2012). The significance of the β value is determined using the *t*-value test, which should be

TABLE 3: Item consistency, reliability and validity.

Endogenous and exogenous variables	Manifest items or indicator	Outer loading	CA	CR	AVE
WI	WI_4	0.56	-	-	-
	WI_10	0.75	-	-	-
	WI_11	0.70	-	-	-
	WI_13	0.58	-	-	-
	WI_14	0.71	-	-	-
	WI_15	0.65	0.89	0.91	0.55
	WI_18	0.66	-	-	-
	WI_20	0.53	-	-	-
	WI_21	0.75	-	-	-
	WI_22	0.72	-	-	-
	WI_23	0.64	-	-	-
	WI_26	0.71	-	-	-
OT	OT_1	0.76	-	-	-
	OT_2	0.80	-	-	-
	OT_3	0.82	-	-	-
	OT_7	0.83	0.91	0.93	0.66
	OT_8	0.85	-	-	-
	OT_9	0.83	-	-	-
	OT_11	0.74	-	-	-
IC	IC_2	0.80	-	-	-
	IC_3	0.82	0.78	0.82	0.61
	IC_6	0.72	-	-	-

WI, work identity; OT, organisational trust; IC, interdepartmental conflict; CA, Cronbach's alpha; CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted.

TABLE 4: Discriminant validity – heterotrait-monotrait.

Construct	Interdepartmental conflict	Organisational trust	Work identity
Interdepartmental conflict	-	-	-
Organisational trust	0.48	-	-
Work identity	0.32	0.473	-

TABLE 5: Hypothesis testing and causal relationship.

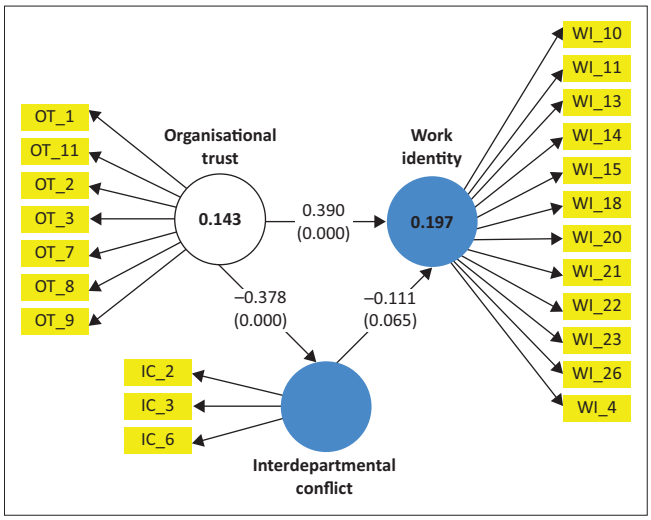
Hypothesis	Relationship	β	*t*-statistics	*p*-value	Remark
H1	IC↔WI	-0.11	1.85	0.065	Rejected
H2	IC↔OT	-0.38	7.67	0.000	Accepted
H3	OT↔WI	0.39	7.48	0.000	Accepted
H4	IC↔OT↔WI	-0.15	5.17	0.000	Accepted

WI, work identity; OT, organisational trust; IC, interdepartmental conflict.

greater than 1.96 (Hair et al., 2017, as cited in Adegbite & Govender, 2022; Adegbite & Hoole, 2024). This study utilised a nonparametric bootstrapping technique, and the *t*-values and *p*-values at the 0.05 significance level were calculated using 5000 bootstrapping samples.

Table 5 shows the study's findings on the strength and direction of the model's relationships (direct and indirect). The study investigated four hypotheses (H1–H4). The first hypothesis (H1) proposed that IC is significantly related to WI. The structural equation model analysis revealed a weak relationship between IC and WI (IC↔ WI: $\beta = -0.111$, $t = 1.846$, $p = 0.065$). The statistical analysis of hypothesis one reveals that the *p*-value of 0.065 is approaching the threshold for statistical significance. It is crucial to conduct further exploration because the *t*-statistic value is less than 1.96, indicating the absence of a significant relationship. H1 is rejected, and the null hypothesis is accepted based on the above. The statistical analysis from hypothesis H1 indicates that as IC decreases, there is a potential for an increase in WI. However, it is important to note that the *p*-value and *t*-statistics do not provide strong evidence to guarantee this relationship.

The findings from the model indicate a significant negative relationship (*IC↔OT:* $\beta = -0.378$, $t = 7.669$, $p = 0.000$) between IC and OT. This means that for each unit decrease in IC, OT increases by 38.5%, with a standard deviation (SD)of 0.05, while accounting for other variables in the model. The study findings showed a positive causal relationship between organisational trust and work identity, with a significant correlation (OT↔WI: $\beta = 0.390$, $t = 7.482$, $p = 0.000$). This suggests that increased OT is associated with a 40% increase in WI; therefore, H3 is accepted. The study investigated the role of OT as a mediator in the connection between IC and WI in hypothesis four (H4). The aim was to examine the behaviour of the variables when a mediator is introduced. The mediation analysis results indicate that OT significantly and positively mediates the relationship between IC and WI (IC↔OT↔WI: $\beta = -0.147$, $t = 5.171$, $p = 0.000$). This suggests that OT notably impacts IC, resulting in a positive relationship with WI. Based on the above parameters, hypothesis four is accepted. It is important to note that there is no significant direct relationship between IC and WI, as tested in hypothesis one. However, introducing a mediator



WI, work identity; OT, organisational trust; IC, interdepartmental conflict.

FIGURE 1: Structural model assessment.

strengthens the relationship, indicating a significant correlation. Subsequently, out of the four hypotheses (H1–H4) tested, hypotheses H2 to H4 were accepted, while hypothesis H1 was rejected.

Discussion

This research study aimed to test how IC affects WI. In particular, the aim was to investigate the mediating role that OT has in the relationship between IC and WI. The structural equation model analysis revealed a weak relationship between IC and WI. H1 is therefore rejected. It could be assumed that although a weak relationship exists, it is not robust and suggests that other variables may influence WI.

The findings indicate a significant negative relationship between IC and OT; thus, H2 is accepted. This outcome corresponds well with previous studies in which trust was found to be a controlling factor in intergroup conflict and that a higher level of trust enhances positive relationships in employees and group cooperation (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Kappmeier, 2016). The model of trust of Mayer et al. (1995) explains that when the perceived level of risk is low, it increases the trust between the trustor and trustee. High levels of trust between interdepartmental teams in a TES organisation are therefore important to enhance WI, productivity and, ultimately, organisational outcomes. This finding was consistent with previous studies that found that high levels of trust increase work performance, work satisfaction, sales, service levels, organisational productivity and profits (Davis et al., 2000; Lee & Teo, 2005; Rowland, 2012; Schoorman et al., 2007). This can only be accomplished if there is trust and constructive conflict handling in organisations (Elgoibar et al., 2021).

H3 was also accepted. Increased OT is associated with a 40% increase in WI. As OT is an outcome of healthy workplace interactions (Fischer & Walker, 2022), it would lead to higher levels of work identification. High OT is a form of organisational support that can strengthen WI. Organisational support is known to enhance WI (Clayton & De Braine, 2023).

The analysis revealed that OT does serve as a mediator between IC and WI, supporting H4. Mediation was expected, as trust between individuals or groups is known to enhance positive relations (Heyns & Rothmann, 2015; Mayer et al., 1995). Organisational trust can be seen as a form of organisational support. Organisational support encourages work identification (Clayton & De Braine, 2023). In this regard, Cummings and Bromiley (1996) posited that trust is centrally important in all organisational interactions. The perceived level of conflict between interdepartmental teams is mediated by the level of trust that exists between the teams, thus affecting WI.

Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to the literature on WI, with the link between IC and the mediating role played by OT. Previous research suggests that high levels of conflict are detrimental to team performance (Horton et al., 2013; Jehn, 1994). Given that workplace interactions play an important role in the way employees think, feel and behave (Kahn, 2007), understanding the effect that IC has on WI is important. Our results indicate that OT can alleviate or aggravate the effects that IC has on WI. This study is the first to investigate this relationship, as well as the role played by OT. Therefore, these results contribute to WI research.

Practical implications for management and human resource management

In order for TES organisations to improve their productivity levels, a key focus should be on how functional departments interact, the quality of these interactions and the role of OT and WI in this. Management should focus on creating work environments that support employee collaboration and constructive conflict management processes for the further enhancement and development of healthy work identities in an organisation. This study, similar to many others, reinforces the important role that trust plays in the workplace. Trust generally develops slowly, and when trust relations are damaged, they take time to be restored (Fukuyama, 1995). Trust plays a key role in effecting healthy work identities that, in turn, lead to more positive organisational outcomes such as employee commitment and loyalty (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Limitations of the study

The present study had some limitations. The length of the survey could have caused a reluctance to participate and thus limited the response rate. Given the length of the survey, respondents may have experienced a lack of focus or, in some instances, have rushed to complete it.

Suggestions for future research

Identity research is an important concept to study in the ever-changing world of work (Miscenko & Day, 2016; Sulphey, 2019). Therefore, it will be valuable to study how WI is affected during times of organisational change, in pre-change and post-change. A longitudinal study is recommended. Organisational conflict and trust are broad constructs, and future research focusing on other facets and how these affect WI will make useful contributions.

Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of IC and OT in understanding WI. As indicated earlier, TES organisations play an important role in South Africa, and close to 1 million temporary employees are employed through such firms (Bhorat et al., 2016). The fact that they operate using a large number of functional departments requires more investigation into factors, such as IC and OT, that allow higher levels of work identification.

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Louis van Tonder: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Data curation, Resources, Writing – review & editing. Roslyn T. De Braine: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Visualisation, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. Waliu M. Adegbite: Data curation, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Roslyn T. De Braine, upon reasonable request. The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because of the restrictions imposed as a result of privacy and ethics.

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