

## The organizational lunch break: a case-study

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In this paper, a first report of a study in progress, we wish to inform and discuss a trivial daily event of organizational life, hitherto widely ignored in management & organization discourse: the organizational lunch break. We will present the rationale for the study, propose relevant theory, detail the methodologies employed and provide initial observations from our emerging data.

### WHAT IS THE ISSUE

The organizational lunch is the key daily habitual food event in any organization. The lunch period: its food practices, procedural routines and relational opportunities, as a structural institutional episode, is both a reflector and activator of an organization's culture and its community of practice (Altman & Baruch, 2010). The attitudes and sentiments that lunch evokes, the time and effort people invest in purposeful (and incidental) engagement and the consequences actors derive from these; all point to the organizational lunch perceived and actual importance. Lunch has also a performative quality (Goffman, 1963, 2005), which together with its actionable aspects adds up to its construal as a career moderator (Schein, 2006), power brokering agency (Crozier, 1964, 1971) and sense making enabler (Lüthmann, ) in the lives of an organization's stakeholders, in particular its employees.

### AIMS

We wished to conduct an in-depth study of lunch behavior in one organization, so as to gain understanding of the complexities and intricacies of this daily organizational event in a specified environment. We chose a large multinational, though limiting our study to a single geography (the Parisian metropolitan area), mainly the company's headquarters; because we had reasons to believe that this particular organization promises to provide a fertile ground for our investigations.

The company (referred hereafter as 'the company') is a quintessential French multinational of fast moving consumer goods. Undertaking its own research & development, production and marketing, it is a world leader in many markets. The company employs over 50,000 people worldwide and has been continuously top ranked as 'best employer' in various surveys in different countries. Its lunch conventions, the focus of our study (i.e.: space, outlay, procedures and conduct) modeled on its Parisian headquarters, are replicated in nearly all of its locations world-wide.

We were made aware of the company's lunch conventions through anecdotal evidence from people working in and with the company. For example, inter-company lunch appointments at the company's in-house canteen (see following) constitute an important part of executives' everyday routines, with one's diary sometimes filled with three months length of lunch appointments. Or the common, habitual, daily communication texted or posed among company employees: 'let's make lunch?' ['make' rather than 'have']. Or, one's discomfort about not having a partner for lunch and being seen lunching alone (a designated one-seat row of tables at the company's canteen became known as 'the wall of shame'). And indeed the emphasis placed on a swift integration into the lunch routine, as evidenced by both newcomers to the company as well as by their concerned induction mentors.

## THEORY

Appropriately for an exploratory study, our theoretical positioning and subsequent data gathering and analysis are premised on three theories of increasing complexity and detail. They offer alternative theoretical frameworks and should help us in explicating the lunch phenomenon in its organizational context. First, with recourse to Edgar Schein's *career anchors* conceptualization; second, by reference to Michel Crozier's *strategic analysis theory* and finally through application of Niklas Luhmann's *social systems theory*.

Schein's introspective examination of one's self-concept, reflecting their basic values, motives and needs with regards to their career orientation, typically yields an emphasis on a career strategy that enables "the one element in a person's self-concept that he or she will not give up even in the face of difficult choices" (Schein, 2006: 5). When attempting jobs that do not 'feel right' or do not work out, people often refer to 'being pulled back' to something that fits better hence the metaphor of *career anchor*. As a driver of behavior, the generalized self-concept is likely to manifest in enactment of a daily habitual routine that would tally with one's overall career orientation, such as lunch. Thus for example, we propose that a person with an **entrepreneurial** *career anchor* may conduct themselves differently over lunch - as expressed by their planning and expectations prior to lunch, and their behavior (interpersonal interactions, performative conduct and possibly even food choice) during lunch, compared to someone with **life style** as their *career anchor*.

Crozier's position on power (Crozier, 1960; Crozier & Friedberg, 1973), which predates Foucault's, puts power and power struggle at the centre stage of organizational life - its dynamo driving relationships based on interdependency and the manipulation of uncertainty, with the sole purpose of bettering individual fortunes, often at the expense of others, through the development of appropriate strategies. Whereas Schein's model posits only individuals' strategies, Crozier's theory presents a matrix of actors interlocked in strategic 'power games' whereby everyone attempts to progress towards one's objectives, build up one's resources

master one's constraints, risk one's stakes with the highest probability of success. These zero-sum games define an organization. Lunch, as a regular feature of organizational life becomes entangled in the power structure, and as a daily event it provides repeated opportunities to engage in power gaming. To unearth the logic of an organizational lunch provides therefore the student of organizations with the opportunity to unlock the workings of the organization itself. Thus for example, the degree to which one is included/excluded in lunch events may serve as a reflector (indicator) of one's success in progressing up the organization's echelons. Lunch defines winners and losers. The losers - those not invited for lunch or whose invitations are declined, are on their way out. The winners, whose company at lunch is courted, and are seen lunching regularly with their superiors, are on their way up.

Crozier's theory adds complexity to our lunch investigation. If we were to position Schein's model as unidimensional, Crozier's is a two dimensional matrix. Lühmann, our third referent adds a complexity of a higher order. Lühmann's contribution to our understanding how organizations work emanates from his articulation of closed systems and their self-reproduction (autopoiesis). Interposing with the material world, without which systems could not exist, and with individuals (themselves autopoietic psychic and biological systems closed to each other but co-existing in structural coupling), constituting the system's substrate; these closed autopoietic systems interact with elements of the environment, which nevertheless do not become part of the systems. That occurs through re-entry at the instance of each operation by self-reference which includes auto-reference and other references (Seidl). It occurs also by structural coupling and interpenetration. These may appear to individuals (through attribution) as their actions and/or effect of their actions and decisions.

Thus, to simplify (when it comes to Lühmann, 'simplification' is almost always a necessity), the lunch social system differentiated itself from the company system in order to reduce the complexity of everyday organizational life. Any organization is a complexity, not easily comprehended and arguably an axiomatic mystery. Perhaps more so in our case, since the company is structured rather atypically to large organizations, with no formally scripted job descriptions, with complex lines of reporting, and by-design ambiguous job assignments, so as to provide scope for initiative and encourage competitiveness and intrapreneurship.

It took the shape of a differentiated system of lunch to reduce the complexity of the company system. The differentiation marked a distinction and an indication. The lunch social system is constituted of all communications about lunch; or rather, those deemed relevant as such by the lunch system, constructed from the selections of informations, utterances, perceptions and insights (as derived from selected individuals in their environment, constituted but not limited to mostly but not only, among junior and mid-level managerial staff in the company's Paris area - see Methodology).

In Lühmann's terms, lunch is an autopoietic closed system of communication about lunch, which constructs itself from a posteriori (never a priori) decisions about lunch, that construct decisions about lunch from earlier decisions about lunch; as well as from elements constructed from the interpenetrating systems in their environments, as to what it (the lunch system) decides is

relevant to lunch. Decisions such as who lunches regularly, who does not voluntarily lunch, who is not invited to lunch, who invites whom, who accepts an invitation or declines - are building blocks in this communication system. So are decisions about lunch spaces, about food and drink choices, about lunch duration, etc...thus building expectations about behaviour into the system. Lunch must constantly perpetuate itself since its elements are temporalized events of communication that disappear as soon as the communication is received, opening the opportunity for another communication, ad infinitum. If and when communications about lunch stop, lunch will merge back into its environment (the company), even though people will, of course, continue to have lunch.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We employ a three-pronged research strategy. First, we conducted a secondary data analysis of documentation aimed at validating the centrality of lunch in the company's culture. Second we wished to learn about individuals' lunch strategies through interviews and diary monitoring of lunch appointments of a selected sample of volunteers. Third, through targeted participant observation we hoped to gain an insight into the venues, procedures and agents where the lunch activity unfolds.

### **Secondary data analysis**

The first objective was to validate our anecdotal evidence that lunch plays an important part in the company's culture. We obtained scripts from a large data base of middle to senior level executives in the company who underwent training. The scripts - individuals' reflections on how to succeed in the company were not framed about lunch behavior in any way. Using content analysis we counted the number of times that lunch was mentioned in those scripts, and we found that about 20% of the data base contained reference to lunch. As an incidental unobtrusive measure we believe that to be a significant validation on the presence of lunch in the company's executives everyday lives.

### **Learning about individuals' habitual lunch behavior and lunch strategies**

Having gained the approval of the company's directorate, a senior HR executive agreed to act as our project coordinator, identifying 8 people in the company, men and women, who subsequently volunteered to take part in the study. All are senior executives (levels N-2 and N-3) of various functions, mostly with a long service in the company, aged 40-55. In addition we engaged 4 former students, men and women in their early 20s, mostly recent hires who have been working in the company for up to 2 years, employed at entry positions.

Participants were first interviewed about their career to date, and some of them completed a questionnaire that identified their career anchors. Then questions concentrated about their lunch behavior, perceptions and attitudes. Following the interview participants were asked to fill a weekly questionnaire online, about their weekly luncheons. Questions asked included who

initiated the lunch and who participated in it, what were its objectives (if any), where did the lunch take place and for how long, and what food and drink was consumed.

Every week participants underwent a brief telephone interview and were asked in detail about one of their past week's luncheons. Questions included specific expectations concerning the lunch, describing its atmosphere and context, details about the lunch invitation, role and position of the participants and what they expect will happen following the lunch. Other questions concerned their understanding of the normative conduct during lunch and incidental observations.

The qualitative data collected was analyzed with the help of a relevant software (QDA Miner) in order to categorize the emerging data in an inductive way. A tree structure thus emerged generating 5 principal categories: organizational culture, procedures, norms, individual strategies, utility.

### **Targeted participant observation**

Through invitations by the study participants and relevant others, the researchers were able to take part in a number of lunch events in three locations in the Paris region, including the company's headquarters, encompassing all three lunch venues (see following). Data was recorded as field notes immediately after the lunch has taken place, noting the spatial organization, atmosphere, conversation topics, food on display and consumed, and any relevant observations.

## **EMERGING FINDINGS**

### **Emerging categories**

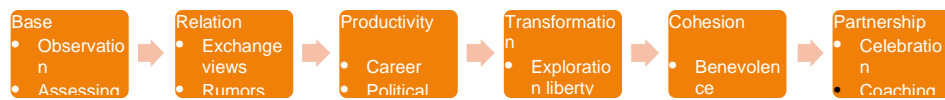
#### **1. Spaces**

There are three principal spaces in which lunch and lunch related activities take place on company premises. There is the canteen - the principal space for lunching, which operates a cafeteria style self-service. The canteen can accommodate....people seated around tables for two. These tables that can be put side by side to form larger tables. The canteen operates in two shifts...Meals are subsidized and paid by a personal lunch credit card, which can be topped up at designated machines. The canteen is replicated on all office premises of the company, worldwide.

Then there is the club - a senior managers restaurant of high refine (equivalent to a 2 Michelin star restaurant?). It operates an advance reserve system and payment is made against one's dedicated budget. The club is replicated in major subsidiaries of the company.

Last, there is the caf  t  ria to where people retreat after lunch for a hot beverage, usually a coffee, served bar-style, and the etiquette is to sip it standing up.

## 2. Contents categories



The qualitative data analysis of the weekly interviews suggest an initial organization of the data in 6 major categories.

### Level 1: Basics

The first “basics” category gathers all the ideas that came up suggesting either materialistic or physical preoccupation, or the question of time. This first level is basic and concerns also information and observation. A limiting aspect can be found such as vigilance???. The quest for repose for some is also to be found in opposition to the difficulty in revitalizing after long work hours. Numerous norms (what is right or wrong to do) can be found at that level.

### Level 2: Relational

This level gathers attitude, behaviors, values, action that deal with relational aspects and networking. It is one of the most prolific themes generated.

### Level 3: Productivity

The lunch provides also an occasion and opportunity to engage in work related productive activities. Emerging themes include careers, political games, problem solving etc. The possibility to show up and meet relevant persons can help in getting job related things done, and on a wider note, is highly relevant to career improvement.

### Level 4: Transformation

This level is connected with a mental orientation; lunch provides an additional perspective due to the possibility of exploration, mental activity such as decoding events and in-depth reflection thus it serves more than a 'mechanical' activity of food intake and as a consequence it offers a space for transformation, aiding in the building of an evolving community.

### Level 5: Cohesion????

This levels concerns internal cohesion and the quality that people develop to ensure this such as benevolence and transparency. This supposes a spiritual orientation that helps to transcend the self enhancement towards a concern for others. Only 3 ideas were mentioned.

### Level 6: Partnership????

This level deals with a concern with people who are not directly connected or with the symbolic part played by lunch like the celebration.

#### Kate's case

Kate was hired recently; she worked for 25 years in a close sector for a company which at the beginning was similar to the company's values currently. She lives a big cultural change, and notes the importance given to lunch and the cafeteria in the culture of this new company.

The people here have not experienced any merger, they benefit from a pure culture, without mixing. People are proud of their corporate culture. This culture is made of flexibility.

With regard to career anchors, Kate has the following anchor: technique and challenges.

Lunch is a time that can be used to many aims:

- show that we accept the rule of the game "to have lunch at least with another person"
- establish links with people who are in charge of strategic responsibility for the position you hold,
- coach people that you protect,
- monitor the missteps of the new to help them readjust in a better integration into the business.

Generally regarding the invitations, she makes a list to her assistant of 15 people around whom she wants to have lunch, for a fortnight. On this list of 15 people, some come up regularly. Her Assistant checks their availability and sends invitations on her behalf to the person on an Outlook agenda.

"Among the 15 people there are 3 targets:

1. my 5 counterparts which constitute the Managing Committee of my boss, that is, people of the same hierarchical level as me;
- 2 my direct collaborators (I meet them regularly and therefore less frequently at lunch)
- 3 « maintenance of my network of direct business"

Lunch is also a continuation of the work, and even if the interaction is more relaxed and more informal, there is a need for concentration:

"Just now I go down to lunch with one of my assistants, we'll talk about work, plenty of subjects and I must remain concentrated, it is almost a working meeting."

#### Artemisia's case

Artemisia is a former student, now a graduate of Master 2 HR responsible for training. She has as career's anchor: autonomy and a intermediate seniority (7 years of experience in this

company). Her profession led her to systematically meet the newcomers. She monitors their successful integration. When she organized a lunch, she meets people in the corridors, or not far from her office which is a place of passage. She made them in advance a proposal. They only if the person agrees, she shall proceed to the invitation. She books her lunches usually one or two months in advance because her schedule is filled until then.

The company culture is not obvious to understand for the newcomers who are subject to continuous judgments, to a kind of confrontation. Therefore to help them to decode the culture she advises the newcomers on the points to which attention must be paid.

The company focuses on the oral dimension, and communication is a true issue "during any contact, coffee, presentation, lunch, everyone is trying to judge us".

Artemisia is able to observe the mapping of those who eat breakfast together and to detect if certain matches are likely to have a careerist object: get mobility for a junior marketing product manager to a Latin American country.

"Lunch is like a very sharp assessment, we will be able to observe the person from another cultural and personal angle; It is possible to provoke discussions where people can be a little uncomfortable to know how they will react even though it is a time when it is normally relaxed. »

Activity during lunches and very often also during coffee is sometimes more significant of the actual place of the decision than the official meetings.

"People spend a lot of time in meetings. In 60-70% of cases, decisions are not made at the meetings but by two people who meet quietly in the cafe or in a hallway quickly; then we arrive at a meeting knowing already what will happen because the decision was made in a moment that is not official."

## **1. DIFFERENT LUNCH STRATEGIES**

### **1. Lunch as repose**

Julia, a HR manager, spent all her career in the company, where she reached a senior position in a relatively young age.

Julia enjoys her lunch breaks. For her the 'break' is important. She likes the opportunity to relax and meet people to talk about things other than work. She does not appreciate it when colleagues drag her into work conversations, whether personal or professional.

Julia regrets those times she misses the lunch break, because time shortage compels her to take a tray to her office and eat on her own while completing reports or finalizing a presentation.

### **1. Lunch as strategy**

Michel is a senior logistics director, who has held important positions in different geographies. He is entitled to lunch at the club and has a dedicated budget for that purpose.



Michel enjoys lunching. He likes to note who dines with whom, who comes and goes, who is on their way up.... With the people he invites for lunch he typically discusses operational details following from important decisions. He finds the muted and relaxed atmosphere in the club a good environment for these discussions.

#### **1. Lunch as reconnaissance**

John, an 'old timer', is a senior manager engaged in developing corporate HR policies. He frequents the canteen where he appreciates meeting people of all functions, seniority and ages and learn what they are doing. He is happy to act as confidant, if asked to do so, during these encounters. He also lunches regularly with his team.

#### **1. Lunch as networking**

Paul, recently graduated, is in his second year with the company, as yet on a temporary contract. He was advised to have lunch with as many relevant people as possible in order to make himself known. Relevant people are those within his field of competence, and those who may have a say about his gaining a permanent contract. He is making these lunches in the canteen on a regular basis.

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