

POLITICS IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS: DISCURSIVE CONTROL AND STRUGGLE THROUGH THE LENS OF HEGEMONY

AUTHORS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The transformation of professional service firms (PSFs) has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly as these organizations navigate tensions between traditional professional values and emerging managerial controls. While prior studies have mapped these shifts using frameworks such as archetypes, logics, and dyads, these accounts tend to understate the internal politics and related discursive struggles through which change is constructed, resisted, and reconfigured. This paper addresses that gap by introducing a discourse-theoretical perspective grounded in Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) theory of hegemony. Drawing on an ethnographic study of a UK law firm, we examine how firm leaders sought to stabilize a managerial framing of professional success through certain metrics and rankings, and how professionals responded by reinterpreting or challenging these framings in ways that reasserted professional values. The analysis reframes PSFs as arenas of ongoing struggle over the meanings and measures of success. In doing so, the paper highlights the discursive struggles that underlie hegemonic projects of organizational transformation in PSFs and calls for renewed attention to how hybrid forms are enacted and contested in professional contexts.



KEYWORDS

- Hegemony
- Professional service firms
- Internal politics
- Organizational transformation

RESEARCH RELEVANCE

- Leaders of professional firms increasingly rely on rankings, dashboards, and performance targets to steer change. This paper shows why those initiatives often stay contested: the struggle is not simply over adopting metrics, but over how metrics are used to define "success" and what that definition implies for autonomy, collegial governance, and professional identity.
- Using an ethnographic study of a UK law firm, we explain how leaders attempted to fix success through a chain of equivalence linking external benchmarks, financial measures, and growth narratives, and how partners destabilized that settlement through counter-articulations that defended partnership values.
- The paper reframes hybrid professional organizations as arenas where meanings and measures are only ever temporarily settled, with direct implications for how change and leadership actually work in professional contexts.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Allan, S., Thomas, P., & Faulconbridge, J. (Accepted/In press). Politics in professional service firms: discursive control and struggle through the lens of hegemony. *Journal of Professions and Organization*.
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"In professional service firms, ongoing waves of managerial and organizational change have increasingly centred on how 'success' is defined and measured. This study shows why such change often remains contested even when performance measures are formally accepted."

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