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Kim, Kyoungmi, Almond, Phil, Edwards, Tony, Kern, Philipp and Tregaskis, Olga (2026) Constructing “one firm”: discursive identity work and power in a global professional service firm. Journal of Professions and Organization, 13 (3).

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*Journal of Professions and Organization*, 2026, 13, 1–18
https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/joag007
Published: 2 April 2026
**Scholarly article**

OXFORD

# Constructing "one firm": discursive identity work and power in a global professional service firm

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**Professional service firms (PSFs) have long pursued a one-firm model promising borderless collaboration and consistent quality. Yet integration typically relies on standardized practices, while those expected to enact them value local autonomy and context-sensitive judgment. Prior research has examined this challenge largely through structural and institutional lenses, showing how dispersed ownership, consensus-based governance, and cross-jurisdictional heterogeneity constrain standardization and coordination across offices. However, less is known about the discursive work by which professionals make sense of—and account for—the integration–autonomy tension in situated accounts. We address this gap by analyzing thirty-one semi-structured interviews with professionals across roles and offices in a global, confederated PSF network through the lens of discursive identity work. We identify three recurring discursive practices—constructing mediated authority, enacting stewardship-and-innovation, and relational positioning—through which participants produce locally grounded framings of the one-firm mandate. Rather than straightforward endorsement or resistance, these practices sustain an ambivalence about integration's compatibility with professional discretion, configuring commitment, discretion, and entitlement across roles and network positions. This paper contributes to one-firm scholarship by showing how professionals enact "one firm" in talk through the discursive repertoires these practices mobilize. On this basis, we reframe the model's apparent incompleteness as ongoing discursive negotiation rather than an implementation deficit. The paper also contributes to PSF power research by specifying how these same accounts reproduce, qualify, and sometimes reconfigure center–periphery relations, with hierarchy emerging as a provisional accomplishment rather than a settled property of formal structure alone.**

**Keywords** professional service firms, global integration, one-firm model, discursive identity work, power relations, discourse analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

Professional service firms (PSFs) have long promoted a one-firm model—a promise of borderless collaboration, consistent quality, and a unified culture across jurisdictions (Boussebaa and Morgan 2015). Yet this ideal confronts a persistent integration–autonomy tension: global integration commonly relies on standardized, codified practices, while the professionals expected to enact them value local autonomy and context-sensitive judgment (Muzio and Faulconbridge 2013). Recent developments have further sharpened this tension. The shift to remote and hybrid work has weakened office-based routines that once facilitated coordination and increased reliance on codified templates (Empson 2021; Leonardi et al. 2024). Geopolitical and regulatory fragmentation can also disrupt internal knowledge flows and complicate claims to unified processes across jurisdictions (Hoofnagle et al. 2019; Zhang 2023). Together, these pressures heighten the challenge of sustaining the one-firm model while preserving professional discretion.

PSFs also vary in legal and governance form. Accordingly, how the integration–autonomy tension is lived and managed depends on how authority, responsibility, and autonomy are organized within a given PSF configuration—an issue that is especially pronounced in federated or confederated networks where influence is often indirect and compliance cannot be assumed. Prior research has addressed these challenges largely at the macro level by examining governance-related constraints rooted in dispersed ownership and consensus-based decision-making (Greenwood and Empson 2003; Greenwood et al. 2010), persistent cross-jurisdictional variation in global PSFs (Boussebaa et al. 2012; Muzio and Faulconbridge 2013), and the negotiated character of integration initiatives (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2016). What remains underexplored is how professionals make the integration–autonomy tension intelligible and accountable in situated talk. By "accountable" we mean the interactional work through which speakers warrant their stances to an immediate recipient (here, the interviewer), grounding them in recognizable organizational and professional discourses.

This gap matters because, in many confederated or partnership-inflected networks—the form on which this study focuses—the viability of one-firm integration may depend in part on the discursive work through which integration demands are rendered compatible with locally anchored standards of professional standing (expertise, discretion, and peer/client accountability). Overlooking these processes risks treating integration as a structural given, obscuring how professionals claim or disclaim agency, allocate responsibility, and manage accountability as they interpret, justify, qualify, and contest firm-wide initiatives. The discursive latitude available for framing integration is also often unevenly distributed. What can plausibly be claimed depends on professionals' role position and network standing, with implications for power relations (Kim and Angouri 2019). In global PSFs, such asymmetries become especially visible when templates travel from dominant offices and are framed as universal, whereas other offices are more likely to be called upon to establish whether, how, and on what terms they apply under local conditions (Boussebaa 2015a; Sayed and Agndal 2020).

We approach these dynamics through discursive identity work (Brown 2022), combined with positioning theory and a Foucauldian reading of power, to examine how professionals claim authority and expertise, allocate responsibility, and legitimize or qualify local discretion in relation to firm-wide integration demands. From this perspective, integration is not simply implemented. It is made workable in professionals' accounts as they navigate firm-wide aspirations and locally anchored professional standing, framing coordination as doable in role-specific ways and answerable under partnership-inflected constraints rather than as a question of implementation success. Accordingly, this study asks: How do professionals construct locally grounded accounts of the one-firm mandate, and with what implications for center–periphery relations within a global, confederated professional service firm? We analyze thirty-one semi-structured interviews across multiple offices and roles in a global PSF, using a discourse-analytic approach combining positioning analysis with a power-sensitive reading of accountability in talk.

Our analysis identifies three recurring discursive practices—constructing mediated authority, enacting stewardship-and-innovation, and relational positioning—through which participants produce locally grounded framings of the one-firm mandate while positioning themselves and others within center–periphery relations. Together, these practices show that integration is neither straightforwardly endorsed nor openly resisted. Instead, participants sustain a workable ambivalence through which commitment, discretion, and entitlement are configured in relation to role and network position, so that the mandate—and responses to it—can be accounted for in talk. These accounts also shape center–periphery relations by delimiting who can credibly claim authority, expertise, and entitlement within the network, making hierarchy speakable and negotiable within a collegial, partnership-inflected form of organizing.

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This article makes two contributions to research on global PSFs. First, it advances one-firm scholarship by showing how professionals enact "one firm" in talk through discursive practices that make stances toward the mandate—whether endorsement, qualification, or delimitation—accountable under partnership-inflected constraints on authority. On this basis, we reframe the model's apparent incompleteness as ongoing discursive negotiation rather than an implementation deficit. Second, it refines understandings of power in global PSFs by specifying how center–periphery relations are enacted through the same discursive work that accounts for and qualifies integration. Tracing how participants allocate responsibility, authorize expertise, and position offices in relation to one another, we show how center–periphery ordering is reproduced, qualified, and sometimes contested, with hierarchy emerging as a provisional accomplishment rather than a settled property of formal structure alone.

The article proceeds as follows. We first discuss literature on the one-firm model and intra-firm power relations in PSFs, and the identity work through which such dynamics are enacted and contested in talk. We then introduce our research context, data, and discourse-analytic approach before presenting our analysis. We conclude by discussing implications for research on global PSFs and for leaders managing integration initiatives.

## The one-firm model in professional service firms

The one-firm model has emerged as a prominent organizational blueprint for PSFs (Maister 1993; Segal-Horn and Dean 2009). It envisions a unified global partnership that operates as a single economic entity with shared profits, standardized practices, and fluid movement of professionals across offices. Its appeal spans multiple stakeholder groups: multinational clients seek consistent quality and seamless cross-jurisdictional service; professionals pursue prestigious international assignments and global career trajectories; and firm leaders seek economies of scale and scope amid intensifying market competition (Boussebaa and Morgan 2015). Research shows, however, that these aspirations rarely fully materialize. Local offices often retain "shadow" routines, cultural divisions endure, and integration rhetoric alone proves insufficient to transform entrenched practices (Muzio and Faulconbridge 2013). Klimkeit and Reihlen (2016), for example document cases in which partners publicly endorse global integration while simultaneously engaging in contradictory practices that undermine these espoused values.

Scholars have accounted for this gap between aspiration and enactment through three main lenses that reflect PSFs' distinctive characteristics. Structural analyses emphasize how partnership governance, dispersed ownership, professional autonomy, and knowledge-intensive work constrain centralized coordination, leaving integration fragile (Rose and Hinings 1999; Greenwood and Empson 2003; Greenwood et al. 2010). Institutional perspectives show how national professional jurisdictions and local market conditions generate persistent heterogeneity, prompting offices to develop hybrid practices that maintain superficial compliance with global standards while safeguarding local autonomy (Boussebaa et al. 2012; Muzio and Faulconbridge 2013). Cultural analyses highlight tensions between proclaimed global values and embedded local norms, showing that integration initiatives often culminate in negotiated orders rather than genuine convergence (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2016). Together, these streams underscore the structural and contextual forces that make the one-firm model difficult to achieve in practice and illuminate asymmetries across offices within global PSFs.

What is less well specified is how professionals, in situated interview talk, make their stances toward integration demands accountable—and how these accounts reproduce, qualify, or reconfigure center–periphery relations within the firm. The key issue is not simply whether professionals accept or resist standardization, but how they frame integration as more or less compatible with professionalism, locally anchored credibility, and partnership norms, thereby positioning themselves and others relative to the center and to peer offices. We address this gap by analyzing interview talk as discursive identity work, combining positioning theory with critical discourse analysis to examine how professionals in a global PSF enact the one-firm mandate in locally grounded accounts as they allocate responsibility and negotiate standing across the transnational network.

Such positioning is power-laden (Brown 2022). Organizational arrangements and role expectations circumscribe the boundaries of discursive agency, shaping which interpretations can be advanced with authority and which require more extensive justificatory work (Hardy and Phillips 2004; see also Berti and Simpson 2021). The next section discusses these intra-firm power dynamics. We then draw on identity work scholarship to frame our analysis of how professionals enact the one-firm mandate through discursive identity work in their accounts.

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## Center–periphery relations in global PSFs

Despite the collegial ethos that PSFs often espouse, many global PSFs are characterized by center–periphery inequalities. Offices in major financial and client hubs often exercise disproportionate influence over strategic committees, attract mobile talent, and command premium fees, while smaller or less central offices adapt to templates and priorities defined elsewhere (Greenwood and Empson 2003; Sayed and Agndal 2020). Although partnership governance formally disperses decision-making, influence frequently concentrates where key client relationships and high-value work are located (Boussebaa 2015b). As a result, control is not exercised solely through a single headquarters chain but is often coordinated through influential offices and intermediary roles that translate and circulate global priorities across the network (Boussebaa 2015a).

Prior research shows that centers sustain influence through a combination of technocratic and socio-ideological mechanisms. On the technocratic side, devices such as performance metrics, proposal templates, and "best practice" manuals standardize work and position particular routines as network-wide benchmarks, making local variation visible and potentially deficient (Boussebaa 2017). On the socio-ideological side, aspirational narratives of global professionalism and network membership invite peripheral offices to align with these standards, even when doing so reproduces unequal voice and recognition (Alvesson and Kärreman 2004; Sayed and Agndal 2020). Together, these mechanisms help explain how integration programs can proceed and how centers sustain asymmetric influence despite the autonomy typically ascribed to local offices.

Yet this literature has tended to pay less systematic attention to how power is accomplished in talk in the context of global PSF networks. We still know relatively little about how professionals, in situated accounts, make hierarchy speakable and negotiable as they invoke organizational and professional discourses to claim expertise, allocate responsibility, and position offices in relation to the center and to peers. Addressing this gap, we shift attention from where power is presumed to reside to how center–periphery relations are enacted through identity work in talk—an approach we elaborate in the next section.

## Discursive identity work in one-firm integration accounts

Identity work refers to how individuals craft a sense of self that is recognizable and legitimate in relation to situational demands (Brown 2022). It involves engaging with available social identities, such as occupational and organizational roles, through talk (and related practices), shaping self-understandings in relation to how others define them (Watson 2008). Identity work is thus simultaneously enabled and constrained by the cultural and institutional resources available in a given context. Research on professional identity in the professions literature is useful in this context because it clarifies the conditions under which particular identity claims are likely to be sustained as legitimate. Abbott (1988) theorizes professions as an interdependent system in which occupational groups' claims to expert work are grounded in jurisdictional contests. These contests shape the legitimacy resources attached to professional standing and which expertise claims are treated as authoritative. Ahuja et al. (2017) show how shifts in professional practice can destabilize such legitimacy foundations. In their study, architects' identity is organized around the primacy of design esthetics, yet contemporary work demands collaboration and managerial/bureaucratic coordination, producing an "identity paradox" with consequences for identity work. This resonates with one-firm integration, where efforts to standardize and coordinate across offices may similarly unsettle established bases of professional credibility and standing, prompting heightened identity work. In this context, we examine how professionals mobilize discursive resources to enact the integration mandate and advance identity claims in situated accounts, within the bounds of what is credible and "sayable" given profession- and firm-level conditions (Abbott 1988).

These constraints and resources are particularly visible in PSFs. Partnership governance disperses authority; expertise is shaped by local regulatory regimes; and professional mobility, often coupled with portable client relationships, can make alternatives to uniform compliance more credible (Greenwood and Empson 2003; von Nordenflycht 2010; Muzio and Faulconbridge 2013). These conditions expand the bases of legitimacy that professionals can invoke when justifying how work should be organized. Such bases may include expertise- and credential-based claims (Abbott 1988), locally salient evaluative criteria tied to client-facing expectations (Rivera 2012), and firm-level narratives of belonging and shared purpose (Empson et al. 2023). Importantly, these resources are not simply possessed. They are mobilized in discourse to ascribe entitlements and obligations, allocate responsibilities, and position actors in relation to one another (Davies and Harré 1990).

Studies of PSFs show that professionals selectively appropriate and recombine available resources to craft

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hybrid identities that resonate with multiple audiences. For example, partners in global law firms weave global aspirations and local professional norms to secure legitimacy across constituencies (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2008). Consultants similarly invoke global professionalism and mobility while retaining local client credibility (Boussebaa et al. 2012), and accountants in emerging markets blend standardized expertise with nationally resonant symbols to project dual global–local credibility (Cooper et al. 1998). Such constructions matter for organizing because they shape how professionals align with, adapt, or distance themselves from managerial initiatives, making identity work integral to the enactment of control and coordination (Kärreman and Alvesson 2001; Brown 2022). More broadly, research on identity, control, and collective action suggests that sustaining coordinated activity depends in part on continuing work to produce identities that make collective aims meaningful and legitimate (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; Afshari 2023). Here, we foreground discursive identity work in accounts as the interactional means through which such legitimacy is sustained and stances toward integration demands are rendered answerable to an immediate recipient, while relevant audiences are invoked in situated interaction to warrant those stances.

Where professional, commercial, and managerial logics intersect, identity claims also become political. They involve struggles over meaning and position, and therefore over who may decide, lead, adapt, or refuse (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Thomas and Davies 2005; Greenwood et al. 2011). In global PSFs, integration initiatives can intensify these struggles by placing cross-border standardization alongside locally anchored professional discretion, creating occasions for actors to advance claims to authority, stewardship, or autonomy (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2008). Through such positioning, professionals can reproduce and, at times, rework status and influence as they are understood and negotiated, in ways that are not fully captured by formal organizational charts.

Building on this, our study examines how professionals enact "one firm" through discursive identity work in situated accounts, positioning themselves and others in ways that reproduce, qualify, and at times reconfigure center–periphery relations within the PSF network.

## Data and methods

We draw on thirty-one semi-structured interviews with professionals at Globex (pseudonym). Our analysis focuses on how speakers make the integration initiative intelligible and accountable in interview talk, navigating the tension between firm-wide standardization and locally anchored professional discretion. Combining critical discourse analysis with positioning theory, we examine how participants make "one firm" intelligible and accountable in interview talk, positioning themselves and others and warranting stances toward the integration mandate. This section outlines the research context, followed by the data and analytical approach.

### Research context

Globex is a confederated professional service firm comprising over 200 legally independent member entities. Participants commonly portrayed Globex as "a network of affiliated firms" and as "a global partnership," highlighting partnership and collegiality norms—alongside dispersed authority and local autonomy—as central to how the firm operates.

Within its global mobility practice, which supports clients with internationally mobile workforces, the firm launched a network-wide initiative (hereafter, the "business development initiative") aimed at strengthening coordination through standardizing key business development practices. Although framed internally as "business development," participants repeatedly described the program in one-firm terms (e.g., "the idea is to sell 'one firm', not to sell capabilities in a single territory," "there is an emphasis on 'one firm'"). They described it as an effort to align pricing guidance, proposal templates, and client relationship metrics across offices. We therefore treat the initiative as a vehicle for one-firm integration.

Although the initiative was led by global mobility leadership, implementation relied on business development champions embedded in national markets, tasked with advancing network-wide priorities. Given that one-firm integration was not readily imposable by formal mandate within this structure, progress depended on uptake by member offices—foregrounding the enduring PSF tension between professional autonomy and organizational integration. As the rollout was ongoing at the time of the interviews, participants' accounts show them negotiating what "one firm" meant in practice and positioning themselves in relation to competing organizational demands. This makes the initiative a valuable setting for examining how discursive identity work organizes the relationship between one-firm aspirations and locally grounded enactments of integration.

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## Data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews as part of a larger project examining employees' experiences of emerging global norms and practices (see Edwards et al. 2025). The semi-structured format supported both participant-led narration and systematic coverage of core topics across interviews. The interview guide covered: (1) participants' knowledge of specific global initiatives or policies; (2) their role in developing, implementing, or experiencing those initiatives; and (3) how initiatives emerged, were communicated, and shaped day-to-day work across settings. This approach allowed us to examine how participants produced situated accounts of the business development initiative and how they oriented to one-firm rhetoric when describing their work, roles, and relations with other offices.

We adopted a purposive snowball sampling approach (Patton 2002) to capture variation by hierarchy and geography. We began with UK-based senior associates and managers, whose accounts of client delivery, staffing, and informal networking provided initial insight into locally salient expectations and working assumptions. Through participant referrals, we then interviewed global mobility leaders associated with the firm-wide business development initiative and business development champions tasked with promoting it across offices. Table 1 summarizes the sample.

**Table 1** Overview of interview participants by role level, function, and location.

| Interviewee no. | Role level | Function/Role category | Location |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Senior Associate | Assurance | UK |
| 2 | Senior Associate | Strategic account management | UK |
| 3 | Senior Manager | Risk assurance | UK |
| 4 | Senior Manager | Risk assurance | UK |
| 5 | Director | People and organization | UK |
| 6 | Partner | Global mobility leader 1 | UK |
| 7 | Director | Global mobility leader 2 | USA |
| 8 | Senior Associate | Transactional services | UK |
| 9 | Chief of Staff | Global mobility leader 3 | UK |
| 10 | Senior Manager | Global mobility leader 4 | Spain |
| 11 | Director | Consumer finance | USA |
| 12 | Senior Manager | Global mobility leader 5 | UK |
| 13 | Senior Manager | Business development champion | Kazakhstan |
| 14 | Senior Manager | Business development champion | France |
| 15 | Senior Manager | Business development champion | Australia |
| 16 | Senior Manager | Business development champion | Malaysia |
| 17 | Senior Manager | Business development champion | China |
| 18 | Senior Manager | People and organization | UK |
| 19 | Senior Manager | Business development champion | Singapore |
| 20 | Senior Manager | Business development champion | India |
| 21 | Senior Manager | Advisory learning and development | USA |
| 22 | Senior Manager | Business development champion | Japan |
| 23 | Partner | People and organization | Switzerland |
| 24 | Manager | Business development champion | Ireland |
| 25 | Head | Global mobility/technology and Innovation | UK |
| 26 | Head | Risk and actuarial | Portugal |
| 27 | Coordinator | Human capital | Portugal |
| 28 | Senior Manager | Business development champion | Sweden |
| 29 | Senior Manager | Business development champion | Russia |
| 30 | Partner | Audit | Portugal |
| 31 | Partner | Human capital | France |
| 32 | Head | Human capital | UK |

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Our core analytic dataset comprises interviews with global mobility leaders and business development champions who were locally hired and embedded in national contexts, as these roles were directly implicated in articulating and implementing the initiative. Interviews with participants from adjacent practices provided contextual depth for understanding how integration was discussed at practice boundaries. Supplementary interviews included participants with varied employment backgrounds, but these characteristics were not central to our analysis.

We interviewed a small number of partners. While partner interviews provided contextual insight into partnership norms and local autonomy, we treat Int. 23 as a telling case (Mitchell 1984: 239) because the interviewee explicitly questioned the integration initiative and offered a clear account of how partnership norms can be invoked to distance local practice from integration efforts while maintaining collegiality.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min and was conducted by two researchers, allowing time for reflection and follow-up probing. One paired interview (Int. 9–10) was conducted due to the participants' complementary roles within global mobility and to scheduling constraints. The paired format offered a useful window into how two leaders jointly accounted for one-firm integration. We remained attentive to potential power dynamics within the pair that could shape what was expressed.

To reach a geographically dispersed sample, we combined in-person and online interviews. Where feasible, we conducted face-to-face interviews to build rapport (Opdenakker 2006); otherwise, we used video conferencing platforms, attending to pacing and interactional cues to ensure quality virtual interviewing (Oliffe et al. 2021). All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with pseudonyms used throughout transcripts and analysis.

## Analytical approach

We treat the research interview as a situated interaction in which interviewees construct accounts and identities for and with the interviewer, rather than as a neutral window onto pre-existing selves (Atkinson and Silverman 1997). Accordingly, we view interviews as sites of identity work in which participants manage impressions (Goffman 1959) and position themselves and others, presenting recognizable and legitimate selves (cf. Kim and Angouri 2023). In Whittle and Reissner's (2025) terms, this places our analysis within the "performer" epistemological mode, focusing on what interviewees are doing with their talk rather than on what they are reporting. Our claims concern discursive practices observable in interview talk, rather than organizational behavior outside the interaction.

To examine these performances, our analysis combined positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992, 2003), and a power/knowledge lens (Foucault 1980). Positioning theory provides the interactional analytics—how speakers allocate rights, duties, and storylines in situated talk. Fairclough's three-dimensional framework extends the analysis from textual features to discursive practice (how participants draw on and recontextualize available discourses) and to social practice (how the conditions under which certain accounts become possible and credible connect to broader institutional arrangements). A Foucauldian lens sensitizes the analysis to how performative resources may be unevenly distributed across positions, and to the discursive labor required to sustain particular claims across roles and network locations. Identifying recurrent practices across interviews does not necessarily imply a single shared strategy. Rather, it indicates that participants draw on and variably configure culturally available discursive resources circulating within the professional and organizational field (Fairclough 2003), mobilizing recognizable repertoires whose deployment varies with interactional context, role, and network position. This analytic framework extends performer-mode analysis by also attending to what Whittle and Reissner (2025) term the "power effect" mode—claims about the broader discursive conditions that shape what can be credibly performed, by whom, and with what authority.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the lead author open-coded each transcript to map: (1) how participants narrated the business development initiative and its uptake; (2) the role identities and responsibilities they claimed or attributed; and (3) the organizational and market contexts they invoked. We sought rigor through continual documentation of analytic decisions and systematic searches for disconfirming evidence. Co-authors, who had conducted the interviews, reviewed developing interpretations, enriching sense-making without pursuing statistical inter-coder agreement, in line with interpretivist standards of rigor (Barbour 2001; Greckhamer and Cilesiz 2014).

Second, drawing on positioning theory, we traced how speakers allocated rights and duties and invoked storylines that rendered particular interpretations of the initiative legitimate, while framing claims to

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authority, discretion, and responsibility. We attended to linguistic features indexing stance and accountability, including deontic modality, evaluative framing, and attribution. This yielded recurrent positionings (e.g. brokered authority, culturally attuned stewardship, and local gatekeeping) through which participants located themselves and others within the transnational network.

Third, guided by Fairclough's (1992, 2003) three-dimensional framework, we analyzed: (1) textual features such as metaphors, modality markers, and lexical choices through which alignment, obligation, and constraint were enacted; (2) discursive practice—how the corporate one-firm mandate was framed and recontextualized into locally grounded narratives; and (3) social practice—how these patterns participated in constituting regimes of legitimacy around authority, appropriate conduct, and credible expertise within the network (attending to power/knowledge dynamics in a Foucauldian sense). Comparing patterns across roles and offices allowed us to trace how discursive repertoires were differentially mobilized by actors in different network positions and market locations.

Across these stages, we identified three recurring discursive practices through which participants performed identity work in their accounts of the one-firm initiative: constructing mediated authority, enacting stewardship-and-innovation, and relational positioning within the network. The first two became especially salient in our initial readings as ways participants made the integration–autonomy tension narratable in their accounts. A subsequent, more explicitly power-oriented reading sharpened the third, foregrounding how hierarchy and standing were enacted in talk within a partnership-inflected, confederated network. In what follows, we examine how participants mobilize these practices to render one-firm integration intelligible and accountable, and to position themselves and others across roles and offices within the network.

## Constructing "one firm" through discursive identity work

We organize the findings around three discursive practices—constructing mediated authority, enacting stewardship-and-innovation, and relational positioning—through which participants produce locally grounded accounts of the business development initiative in one-firm terms. Together, these practices show how what counts as "one firm" is accomplished through the identity positions claimed in talk—brokers, stewards, innovators, and variously positioned network actors—while simultaneously reproducing and, at times, contesting power relations within the firm.

### Constructing mediated authority: external attribution, partnership constraints, and broker identity

Global mobility leaders consistently frame the business development initiative through ventriloquization, channeling the voices of clients and market forces to present integration as an inherited imperative rather than an internally generated strategy. For example, global mobility leader 2 remarks: "The client is hiring Globex. They don't care whether we are in South Africa or Singapore. They see Globex as one firm and they expect us to work together." Here, the leader invokes "the client" in generic, singular form rather than naming any specific organization, abstracting the demand away from a particular business relationship and toward a generalized market logic. In the subsequent clauses, the repetitive use of "they" positions clients as external arbiters whose expectations dictate organizational action, while "we" aligns the speaker with Globex consultants as a collective responding to those demands. Through this external attribution, agency for integration is attributed to impersonal market forces, recasting leadership authority as responsive rather than directive and constructing integration as market-compelled obligation rather than strategic choice. Global mobility leader 1 echoes this external attribution, while sharpening it through a "weakest link" risk frame:

> What we have is you go to a big corporate entity, and they say we want a single provider for all of these services globally and they say, and we recognize, you're only as strong as your weakest link.

The repeated use of "they say" attributes authorship of the integration agenda to external corporate clients, while "we recognize" functions as organizational acquiescence, validating client judgment and positioning leadership as responding to an external evaluation. The proverb "only as strong as your weakest link" is noteworthy. It not only naturalizes organizational interdependence through a chain metaphor but also implicitly positions well-resourced offices as guardians of the chain and smaller units as potential vulnerabilities. In this way, the account reframes integration as risk management, recasting organizational authority as necessity grounded in market expectations.

Having framed integration as market-driven, leaders often invoke the network's partnership structure to

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delimit their authority to "soft" influence. Global mobility leader 1 exemplifies this pivot:

> We've been very conscious that we can't do a top-down instruction and leadership. So, there will be a tone from the top, but then we will give regional leaders and territory leaders opportunities.

The statement disavows a top-down command logic ("can't do top-down") yet re-inscribes hierarchy through "tone from the top," preserving vertical authority while recoding it as guidance rather than directive control. Lexical choices such as "give" and "opportunities" further presuppose an asymmetrical distribution of discretion, positioning central leaders as benefactors and regional counterparts as beneficiaries.

Global mobility leader 3, in turn, articulates the practical limits of this soft influence: "Bear in mind, if they turn round and say no on this, there is really nothing I can do." This acknowledgment delineates the boundaries of authority when territorial autonomy is invoked, positioning leaders as structurally constrained rather than held responsible for implementation outcomes. Echoing these limits, global mobility leader 5 enacts a broker identity that privileges market responsiveness over organizational standardization:

> If Japanese multinationals don't want a PowerPoint presentation, four people in shiny suits, and a relentless pursuit of them with ideas, then I don't want Japan to change the way they deliver.

Here, deviation from global templates is framed as client sensitivity rather than noncompliance, mediating authority through external attribution and positioning the speaker as a commercially attuned broker rather than a top-down enforcer. Notably, the first-person phrasing "I don't want Japan to change" simultaneously claims decision-making authority over whether local deviation is warranted, though that claim is made speakable only by grounding it in client need rather than personal preference. Through this broker positioning, "one firm" is constructed as coordinated market responsiveness—an integration model whose terms are set by client relationships rather than centrally imposed templates.

Through these interconnected discursive repertoires—external attribution, partnership constraints, and broker positioning—leaders frame the initiative as justified while mediating their authority over its implementation, casting "one firm" as something brokered rather than commanded.

## Enacting stewardship-and-innovation: legitimizing local autonomy and network-wide value

Where mediated authority frames integration as a market-driven necessity, champions' accounts foreground local credibility, recasting discretion as stewardship and, at times, innovation. Territorial business development champions also invoke client voices, but in ways that qualify standardization in locally grounded terms, framing discretion as responsible client-facing judgment. Whereas leaders often mobilize corporate-wide client expectations to support integration, territorial champions draw on locally situated client expectations to justify discretion.

A champion in the French office, for instance, explains limited uptake of a technology platform: "With the French clients you get a lot of people who are not interested in technology, this is not the French culture, we are not really IT geeks at all in France." A champion based in Japan uses similar cultural reasoning to account for resistance to LinkedIn: "Because of the Japanese culture, it makes sense if we were dealing with foreign-based companies, but not with the Japanese."

Across these framings, constraints are externalized and deviation is treated as necessitated rather than chosen. Using collectivizing constructions ("French clients," "the Japanese"), participants treat heterogeneous preferences as culturally coherent categories, shifting individual dispositions into national-cultural terms. This move recasts deviation from standardized practices as prudent stewardship rather than obstinacy. In doing so, champions position themselves not as rule-breakers but as culturally attuned stewards who safeguard local credibility and client relationships. This stance parallels leaders' market-facing framing, but it is redeployed to warrant local discretion rather than to secure compliance with standardization. Through this stewardship positioning, "one firm" is constructed differently from in mediated authority accounts: as a framework where local adaptation is a condition of credibility rather than an obstacle to integration.

Beyond national-cultural framings, other champions legitimize autonomy by rescaling expertise as a locally grounded capability tied to fast-changing market conditions. Rather than directly contesting the one-firm mandate, they construct domains of specialized knowledge oriented to emergent client needs. For example, a champion in the China office notes that "more and more Chinese companies are now investing abroad […] we have built a specialist team for them." Similarly, a

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champion based in India frames demand as recent and accelerating: "in the last three or four years […] we have seen they need more assistance as they are creating presence in new countries." First-person plurals ("we have built," "we have seen") construct a local collective, while temporal markers ("more and more," "in the last three or four years") portray these markets as dynamic, casting some standardized practices as less well suited. Here, autonomy is presented as an operational necessity, grounded in locally specific client needs and capability. Alongside the earlier collectivizing framings, these claims construct a parallel sphere of practice in which local expertise becomes self-evidently indispensable. Autonomy is warranted through redefining where legitimate expertise—and, by implication, influence—can plausibly reside.

Some champions extend this move by framing local offices as sources of innovation with network-wide relevance. A champion based in Russia characterizes their office as "a local firm with global capabilities," arguing that:

> There is not just one correct way of doing things that should be applied across the globe, I think it's kind of vice versa. So, if a particular local firm has a particularly good idea, it means that this material would be evaluated and valued across the network and used by other countries.

The rejection of a single "correct" practice and the phrase "vice versa" call into question the assumption that best practices flow unidirectionally from global cores, positioning innovation as able to emerge from any network node. Through the conditional formulation ("if a particular local firm…"), the account foregrounds a meritocratic logic in which local innovations gain legitimacy through wider uptake across "other countries."

A champion in the Australian office echoes and complicates this bidirectional ideal: "Information flows both ways, and it's meant to flow both ways. If we are doing something significantly different in Australia, I feed that back to 'global mobility leader 1' and 'global mobility leader 5', and vice versa." Here, the formulation "meant to" presents reciprocity as an organizational norm. Yet the phrase "feed that back" casts global leaders as the routing point through whom local knowledge passes before wider circulation, subtly re-inscribing hierarchy even while endorsing bidirectionality. Across these innovation accounts, "one firm" is reconstructed as a multidirectional network where any node may originate practice for wider adoption.

Collectively, these stewardship-and-innovation accounts reposition discretion as an organizational asset rather than a liability, legitimizing local deviation on the grounds of client advocacy, cultural fit, locally grounded expertise, and claims to network-wide value. The resources available for making these claims vary with roles and network positions, setting up the relational positioning dynamics we examine next.

## Relational positioning: enacting hierarchy within the network

Building on the practices identified above, we examine how participants position themselves and others relationally, making hierarchy speakable within an ostensibly collegial network. Across accounts, actors locate themselves in relation to "the center" and to peer offices, invoking different rights, responsibilities, and resources as they narrate the initiative.

Global mobility leaders based in central offices deploy military metaphors to frame strategic direction setting. Global mobility leader 2, for instance, describes the launch of the champion network created for the initiative:

> So that was one of the first initiatives that we undertook, how do we create the army that will go out and fight the battle to expand our, power, seems the wrong word, but you know, our success.

The martial lexicon ("create the army," "fight the battle") projects a command structure, positioning the speaker as a strategic architect capable of mobilizing organizational resources. Yet the mid-sentence self-repair from "power" to "success" simultaneously distances the speaker from an overt claim to authority, mitigating the tension between hierarchical imagery and partnership-inflected egalitarianism. Global mobility leader 5 similarly navigates this tension:

> If you've got the foot soldiers, which I hesitate to use that term in reference to myself, but it's true. So, if you've got a couple of us who share those thoughts of why aren't we engaging with Asia more […] we should bring someone in there to lead that team who says, 'Right, come on, guys, let's go out there and get them.' One of the key things that we enabled was that we've got an international network of 8,000 mobility specialists, there're maybe seven or eight people in our team, it takes an awful lot for seven people to lead or engage 8,000. So what we agreed was that we needed a filter in between. So that's

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> where we decided to create a network of business development champions.

Here, the self-designation as "foot soldiers" performs collegial alignment, positioning the speaker among peers rather than above them. The accompanying metacommentary ("I hesitate… but it's true") registers the term's awkward fit, acknowledging that such leveling language sits uneasily with the speaker's organizational role. This ambivalence sustains collegial rhetoric while making hierarchy legitimate as a practical necessity. The numerical disparity ("seven or eight people" versus "8,000 mobility specialists") provides grounds for construing hierarchy as a logistical response to scale. The proposed "filter in between" casts champions as buffering infrastructure—a hybrid position subordinate to central strategists, peer with local specialists, and leading day-to-day mobilization. Through these mobilization accounts, "one firm" is constructed as a coordination project that requires hierarchical architecture yet must be narrated as collegial initiative and logistical necessity to remain legitimate within the partnership form.

This champion tier then becomes a key site where delegated authority, stewardship, and center–periphery alignment are enacted and negotiated in accounts. From within this intermediary role, the champion in Australia constructs their office as both conduit and custodian:

> We come to market as one firm but it's a network of affiliated firms, but you are only as good as your weakest link. And we do approach clients on a global basis. So I think it's been good because we have been able to in a way coach and develop some of the smaller countries within the region as part of this network.

The "weakest link" metaphor frames interdependence in terms of collective vulnerability, echoing the risk framing mobilized in leaders' accounts. Yet rather than positioning weaker offices simply as liabilities, the speaker reframes asymmetry as protective stewardship, where stronger offices intervene to "coach and develop" for collective benefit. This phrasing recasts what might otherwise read as hierarchical oversight as benevolent mentorship, positioning the Australian office as a regional custodian responsible for supporting "smaller countries" within the network. The interviewee elaborates on this intermediary positioning:

> So I think we are seen as an extension of [global mobility leader 1] and his central team definitely, as a piece of connectivity between our local countries and the central team.

Here, "extension" signals delegated authority, positioning the Australian unit as one that channels rather than originates strategic direction. "Piece of connectivity," by contrast, reframes delegated authority as infrastructure —essential linkage rather than overt control—softening the vertical implications of the first term through an emphasis on relational function. Through this layered positioning, the interviewee constructs themselves as an insider to the center and a broker/supporter to the periphery, capable of directing smaller offices through borrowed authority while maintaining the rhetoric of network collegiality. This identity work reproduces inter-office hierarchy without abandoning partnership discourse, making hierarchy palatable through the language of support, connection, and shared purpose.

Conversely, a champion in the Kazakhstan office performs peripheral positioning through an account that foregrounds distance and belated inclusion:

> We are connected with the network, but Kazakhstan is, geographically, very far from everyone. We are not that big in terms of global move […] for us being connected to something big is great. So, I think that move and ideas and just noise started in the big parts of the world where our firm has historically big global mobility practices and of course they being ahead of trends started to think about new initiatives and we were just invited to participate later.

The temporal and agentive contrast between "they […] started to think" and "we were just invited" positions the Kazakhstan office as a later entrant rather than an initiator, with the center cast as both originator and gatekeeper. The phrase "of course" treats this ordering as taken-for-granted organizational common sense, while the positive evaluation (""being connected to something big is great") performs alignment. The speaker then pivots:

> Especially us, Kazakhstan being the biggest amongst other Eurasian countries and as to date we are the biggest and we are the oldest practice in the Eurasia region […] we have now been selected as a business development champion for the Eurasia region and try to accommodate the global trends into this region as well.

The transition from "far" and "not that big" to "biggest" and "oldest" marks a repositioning from peripheral follower to regional exemplar. Yet this authority is framed as delegated: "we have now been selected" locates legitimacy in endorsement rather than origination. Regional leadership is thus accomplished as

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delegated stewardship—a mid-tier identity combining downstream authority with upstream dependence. From this position, "one firm" is constructed as aspirational membership—something to be included in and benefit from—with the center retaining definitional authority over what participation entails.

The contrast between the two champions is suggestive. Whereas the Australia-based champion's account moves quickly to claims of "extension" status and "coaching" others, the Kazakhstan-based champion establishes peripheral distance and appreciation for inclusion before claiming regional authority. This sequencing yields legitimacy that remains conditional on central endorsement. The Kazakhstan office emerges as a conduit for "accommodating global trends"—a formulation foregrounding local uptake rather than strategic origination—balancing regional leadership with continued alignment to the center. Integration is correspondingly framed as a project in which peripheral offices contribute by accommodating global trends locally rather than by shaping the terms of integration itself.

By contrast, a partner based in Switzerland frames their practice as outside the champion infrastructure:

> If your question is if I have business development people in my groups, let's say in my 200 people then the answer is no. Basically many of us do business development and it's the partner's responsibility to win new work.

This emphatic formulation ("the answer is no") invokes partnership norms in which originating work is cast as core partner responsibility—"the partner's responsibility to win new work"—rather than the domain of centrally appointed intermediaries. By grounding the stance in established professional expectations, the partner frames local autonomy as continuity with partnership tradition rather than as a direct challenge to the initiative. The partner then reframes the center as an optional resource:

> [Global mobility leader 1] is not leading the Swiss business development. We do that ourselves here, but [global mobility leader 1] and his team are available when needed […] It comes out of the global pot, so it's free.

The negation ("not leading"), paired with "we do that ourselves," asserts local jurisdiction, while "available when needed" and "free" recast the center as an on-demand service rather than an authority. Engagement is framed as a pragmatic choice rather than an obligation, positioning Switzerland as self-sufficient and drawing on central resources when useful. In contrast to Kazakhstan's appreciative inclusion or Australia's "extension" framing, this talk manages center–periphery relations by construing the relationship in terms of availability rather than obligation. Through this jurisdictional assertion, "one firm" is constructed as optional, centrally funded support—available when beneficial—without becoming authoritative over local practice.

Taken together, these accounts show how hierarchy is produced, managed, and renegotiated through relational positioning in talk. Military metaphors, "weakest link" interdependence narratives, spatial distance, and service framings offer different repertoires for locating self and others in relation to the network. These repertoires do not only locate actors; they also define what "one firm" is taken to require and who can set its terms. Rather than yielding a single shared interpretation, relational positioning generates multiple, positionally inflected versions of what "one firm" can credibly mean—from coordination project to aspirational membership to elective resource network—each constituted through identity work that locates self and others. We return to the implications of these positionings for one-firm integration and center–periphery relations in the discussion.

## DISCUSSION

Our analysis identifies three recurring discursive practices—constructing mediated authority, enacting stewardship-and-innovation, and relational positioning—through which participants construct locally grounded framings of the one-firm mandate and position themselves and others within center–periphery relations. We discuss implications for scholarship on one-firm integration in PSFs and for understanding how center–periphery power relations are enacted through the same discursive work.

### The discursive enactment of one-firm integration in PSFs

Structural and institutional accounts of one-firm implementation in PSFs document persistent barriers to global integration, including governance constraints that are often pronounced in partnership-based and networked forms, alongside more general challenges such as jurisdictional heterogeneity (Greenwood et al. 2010; Muzio and Faulconbridge 2013). We complement this work by analyzing interview talk through the lens of discursive identity work. Specifically, we identify the practices and repertoires through which

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participants render the one-firm mandate negotiable and reframe its apparent "unfinished" quality as ongoing discursive negotiation rather than an implementation deficit. In partnership-inflected contexts where influence must be justified as collegial and persuasive rather than imposed, these repertoires matter because they provide the grounds on which stances toward the integration mandate can be accounted for.

The three practices show how the integration–autonomy tension is managed as an accountability dilemma rather than a simple compliance problem. Central actors construct mediated authority by ventriloquizing client and market expectations, framing integration as externally compelled and presenting coordination demands as legitimate while avoiding a top-down stance in a partnership-based setting. Territorial actors enact stewardship-and-innovation narratives, casting discretion as responsible client-facing judgment rather than resistance to integration and, at times, as value creation for the wider network. In these accounts, autonomy is aligned with, rather than opposed to, the vocabulary of justification associated with "one firm"—client obligation, collective quality/credibility, and quality- and risk-oriented stewardship. Through relational positioning, participants affirm network membership while delimiting its reach, mobilizing repertoires of coaching-and-development stewardship, delegated legitimacy, and jurisdictional autonomy. Rather than straightforward endorsement or resistance, these practices sustain an ambivalence about integration's compatibility with professional discretion, configuring commitment, discretion, and entitlement differently across roles and network positions.

Across these distinctive practices, certain repertoires recur. The "weakest link" formulation, for instance, serves both as a rationale for coordination and as a ground for coaching-and-development stewardship. Likewise, client ventriloquization is mobilized both to justify integration in leaders' accounts and to qualify it in champions' narratives. This recurrence suggests a shared but unevenly available pool of justificatory resources that participants mobilize differently across roles and network positions, illuminating how discursive agency is situated (Hardy and Phillips 2004) in navigating the integration–autonomy tension. Participants can reframe integration and negotiate responsibility and entitlement in their accounts, but the plausibility of these moves varies with role expectations and network position. The Australia-based champion moves quickly to "extension" status and stewardship over smaller offices, drawing on proximity to the center and regional scale as readily available grounds for this positioning. By contrast, the Kazakhstan-based champion establishes distance and then inclusion before claiming regional authority, framing that authority as endorsed ("selected") rather than self-originated. The Swiss partner invokes partnership norms and office self-sufficiency to assert jurisdictional autonomy with minimal preparatory work ("the answer is no"). We return to the implications of this asymmetry for power below.

Our contribution is therefore not simply to note role-consistent patterning, but to show how professionals enact "one firm" in situated accounts. Integration is not only a matter of structural arrangements. It is also constituted in talk, in the specific moves through which participants reframe external demands, render local discretion defensible within the mandate's justificatory vocabulary, and calibrate the reach and obligations of network membership. These moves make participants' stances toward integration answerable, while keeping integration's scope and implications open to ongoing negotiation.

One further implication concerns variation. Local context—including, at times, national-cultural formulations—functions in our data not as an explanatory variable but as a justificatory resource that makes claims about discretion and expertise plausible, including claims about client obligations. This suggests that what "one firm" can credibly mean may vary across country contexts, not only because institutional and market conditions differ, but because those conditions furnish different justificatory resources for negotiating the integration mandate. Future research could examine how such repertoires vary with regulatory regimes, client mix, and network centrality, and with what implications for integration and center–periphery relations.

## Discursive center–periphery positioning in PSFs

The discursive work that makes one-firm integration accountable also (re)produces and, at times, qualifies hierarchy and standing across the network. While prior research documents structural center–periphery inequalities in global PSFs, our analysis specifies how hierarchical order is reproduced and softened as professionals allocate responsibility, authorize expertise, and position offices in relation to one another in their accounts. Central leaders disclaim "top-down" control yet invoke a "tone from the top"; champions endorse bidirectional learning yet describe "feeding back" ideas to central leaders, tacitly re-inscribing the center as conduit and evaluator. This is analytically significant because hierarchy is reinstated through the very

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repertoire mobilized to qualify it: reciprocity is endorsed in principle, yet the routing of knowledge and the location of evaluative authority remain centered. By showing how guidance, reciprocity, and expertise are mobilized to both disavow and reassert hierarchy, we extend PSF power scholarship (Boussebaa 2015a, 2015b) by making visible how center–periphery ordering is discursively maintained—sometimes provisionally reconfigured—in talk, not only through formal arrangements.

Participants' accounts complicate a center–periphery binary. Rather than a sharp divide between commanding center and compliant periphery, the practices we identify reveal graduated positions in which entitlement and obligation are distributed unevenly but not dichotomously. Central actors with positional privilege adopt mediated authority stances that soften command. Territorial actors, meanwhile, ground claims to expertise in client proximity and locally anchored professional judgment, and in some cases assert network-wide value—positioning local discretion as a contribution to, rather than a departure from, the collective project.

Critically, however, access to justificatory resources—and the discursive labor required to mobilize them—is uneven across roles and network positions. This asymmetry is itself an effect of power. It shapes whose claims about standards, autonomy, and expertise can be advanced with minimal justificatory work, and whose claims require extended accounting. Yet because these claims must be continually sustained, "center" and "periphery" are not fixed office attributes but positions repeatedly enacted and occasionally renegotiated through struggles over expertise, entitlement, and obligation.

Taken together, these findings show that the governance arrangement in our confederated network is not merely a structural backdrop but is enacted in participants' accounts, through which participants specify standards, delimit discretion, and allocate responsibility. Authority is performed through patterned justificatory linkages that align standards with client expectations, frame quality and credibility in risk terms, and cast autonomy as stewardship. These linkages organize the terms on which expertise counts as authoritative and entitlement as legitimate, positioning some actors as needing development, others as developing others, and still others as entitled to self-govern local practice. Accountability talk around the integration mandate is therefore also ordering talk. The same repertoires that warrant positions on coordination—endorsement, qualification, or delimitation—distribute entitlements and obligations across offices, enacting center–periphery relations as a provisional accomplishment of situated discursive practice rather than a settled property of structure alone.

## Practical implications

Our analysis suggests that the integration–autonomy tension, as participants narrate it, is not a problem to be resolved but a condition to be navigated. The workable ambivalence we identify—through which commitment, discretion, and entitlement are configured rather than fixed—carries three implications for how organizations might approach integration in practice.

First, the discursive patterns we identify suggest that local reinterpretation may function as a resource rather than as deviance. Participants make the mandate credible by recontextualizing it into locally resonant rationales grounded in client expectations, market conditions, and professional norms, and by framing discretion as network-relevant value rather than local preference. Recognition mechanisms oriented solely toward compliance with central templates may inadvertently reduce the discursive space through which local actors can account for contributions in ways that travel across the network. This pattern points to the value of creating cross-office forums where effective local variations are surfaced and of maintaining knowledge repositories that document context-specific solutions alongside the conditions under which they travel. Evaluation systems that recognize cross-office referrals, locally adapted tools, and peer mentoring as integration-relevant contributions could make visible the brokerage work participants already claim as valuable, positioning integration less as compliance and more as mutual learning.

Second, participants' accounts suggest that one-firm rhetoric becomes more workable when mandates coordinate action while preserving space for locally grounded judgment. In participants' talk, coordination demands are treated as legitimate when they leave room to meet local expectations of professional credibility, client obligation, and collegial governance. Mandates that foreclose such grounding risk narrowing the repertoires through which the integration mandate and responses to it can be accounted for and professional standing is secured. This implies that anchoring integration in a small set of non-negotiables, while inviting offices to document how shared goals are met in locally credible ways, may sustain rather than undermine coherence. Periodic cross-office review oriented toward learning and calibration—surfacing which forms of variation are justified by local conditions and which introduce avoidable risk—would be more

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consistent with the justificatory norms our participants invoke than treating divergence as a default failure.

Third, our findings suggest that intermediary roles (e.g. champion networks) warrant attention as consequential sites of positioning and ordering, not just as coordination mechanisms. Our analysis shows how the champion tier can become a locus through which hierarchy is reproduced: through coaching framings that cast some offices as developing others, delegated-authority constructions that locate legitimacy in central endorsement, and stewardship narratives that position well-resourced offices as regional guardians. Rotating champion roles across offices could help ensure that regional coordination is not persistently anchored in the same network locations. Equally important is attending to how champion functions are described—coaching, filtering, extending—since our analysis indicates that how intermediary work is talked about shapes the identity positions available to those who occupy these roles and to those they coordinate. The language through which intermediary roles are constituted can reproduce hierarchy or open space for offices to be recognized as contributors rather than permanent beneficiaries. Reflexive attention to this framing is therefore itself a practical intervention.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how professionals produce locally grounded accounts of a one-firm mandate and what those accounts imply for center–periphery relations in a confederated PSF network. The analysis shows that participants do not treat integration as a straightforward compliance question. Instead, they navigate the integration–autonomy tension by producing accounts that endorse, qualify, or delimit coordination, configuring what counts as reasonable integration in relation to role expectations and network location. Seen in this light, the model's apparent incompleteness is not only a matter of uneven implementation. It is also sustained through ongoing discursive negotiation, as participants account for the mandate—and their responses to it—in talk.

A discursive lens is productive for understanding how "one firm" is sustained as a continuing organizational project in our confederated PSF network. It foregrounds how the tension is not only a structural feature but also something participants continually make sense of and render accountable in situated accounts. Our discourse-analytic framework—treating accounts as identity work and combining positioning theory with a critical discourse analytic reading—helped us examine how participants locate themselves and others, legitimize discretion and/or coordination, and make claims to authority and expertise plausible under partnership-inflected constraints. This analytic combination also sharpened our view of power by tracing how center–periphery relations are enacted in participants' accounts as they claim authority indirectly, attribute (or challenge) expertise, and allocate responsibilities in ways that reaffirm centrality, soften it, or occasionally contest it. On this reading, center–periphery positioning is an ongoing discursive accomplishment, with hierarchy produced and revised in talk rather than determined by formal arrangements alone.

Future research could extend this account by moving beyond retrospective interviews to examine how such discursive work is accomplished in everyday coordination. Interactional and ethnographic studies could examine how participants build or contest shared understandings in real time, how role- and location-linked entitlements are negotiated as situations unfold, and how the practical meaning of "one firm" changes as markets, technologies, and institutional conditions evolve.

## FUNDING

We are grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK (ES/N007883/1) for funding the research that led to this article.

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